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## Investigating Kurdish EFL Students' Pragmatic Competence: The Case of Requesting

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| Article Info                                |                | <b>Abstract:</b><br><br>Language use has been considered very pivotal basically due to the relevance of communication to man. Pragmatic competence is therefore a serious necessity to be able to appropriately navigate this communication process. Previous researchers have given little attention to investigating pragmatic competence in English as foreign language countries such as Kurdistan. Few researches in this area tend to neglect the essence of communicating in the target language, by translating the instrument of data collection to the first language of the participants. This tended to hide the communication of the learners in the target language. This marks the point of departure of the present study. The study intended to find the prevalent request strategy by the Kurdish EFL learners. The study also aimed at finding the level of use of modification device by the students. Again, the influence of gender was considered. Discourse Completion Task (DCT) was used to collect the data. It was analysed using percentage, following the request strategy classification by Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989). Findings reveal that the pragmatic competence of the students is low, given their inability to appropriately modify their request. The finding also indicates that gender does not make any significant difference. |
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| Pragmatic competence, request, EFL, Kurdish |                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
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### 1.1 Introduction

Language learning has far grown beyond the mastery of linguistic structures. It has also transcended the ability to merely produce the linguistic elements. Pragmatic competence as a new interest in language learning and research is concerned with the appropriateness of the language use in specific contexts as fitting to the interlocutors. The appropriateness in the language use is culturally dependent, and so the second or foreign language learner is not only faced with the challenge of learning the linguistic structures, but also having the cultural awareness needed to communicate effectively in the language. EFL presents a special case because of its cultural variableness. It is therefore needed that the EFL learner has to learn language use in different contexts with different speakers (Panahzadeh & Asadi, 2019). Two knowledge forms are required for this: sociolinguistic knowledge and functional knowledge (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). While the sociolinguistic knowledge relates to the cultural conventions that satisfy certain

utterances in certain contexts to be appropriate, functional knowledge relates to the performative roles of the linguistic elements.

Pragmatic competence is the “bridge” that links the classroom L2 learning with the real world use of the language, and crossing this bridge seems to be the most difficult particularly for EFL learners (Borovina, 2017). Despite the perceived difficulty, EFL learners need to gain this competence in order to perform the language functions as required in diverse social contexts. Unfortunately, this very essential aspect of language learning appears to be neglected by both teachers and learners. There is therefore need to raise awareness of the teachers and learners in this regard.

Austin (1962) posits that words are used to do things and the resources (the words) used in doing these things are referred to as speech acts. The speech acts are divided into locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. The locutionary act is the description of the particular linguistic element produced by an individual in a speech; the illocutionary act is what the speaker intends to achieve by the particular words uttered, and the perlocutionary act is the action done by the hearer as a result of the speech uttered by the speaker (Yazdanfar & Bonyadi, 2016). The field of pragmatics is however majorly preoccupied with the illocutionary act as it is the performative that defines the contextual functionality of a language. Searle (1975) groups the speech acts (illocutionary act) into six: Representative- description of state of affairs (eg, stating, confessing, asserting etc), Directive- getting someone do something usually to the gain of the speaker (eg, requesting, warning, forbidding, etc); Question- to get someone provide the needed information (eg, asking, inquiring, etc), Commisives- committing the speaker to future action (eg, promising, vowing, pledging, betting etc); Expressive- expresses the speaker’s attitudes and emotions (eg, congratulating, apologizing, thanking etc); and lastly, Declaration- to change the reality of an entity through a proposition (eg, naming, appointing, resigning, etc).

Requesting being the predilection of this paper falls under the speech act of directives. Request as a speech act means asking politely something needed by the speaker (Balci, 2009). Its imposition on the interlocutor makes it a face threatening act (Mcmyler, 2017; Alzebaree & Yavuz, 2017). The ability of the speaker to mitigate this threat through diverse request strategies makes the speech act successful. The interpersonal nature of people in every speech community makes request one of the most frequently used speech acts. Nobody is an island and there is no one that is above requesting. Students request from their teachers and fellow students; employees request from their employers and vice versa; even people in the seat of power make requests. For a speaker to make a request, certain linguistic structures such as declaratives, interrogatives, imperatives are usually employed in order to achieve different purposes of making the speech; but the speaker’s ability to use indirectness and politeness is what determines the success of the speech act and as well indicates the pragmatic competence of the speaker (Alzebaree & Yavuz, 2017).

Basically, there are two strategies of performing a speech act, direct and indirect strategies (Alzebaree & Yavuz, 2017, Masoud, 2016; Yazdanfar & Bonyadi, 2016 ). While direct strategies are often explicit, impolite and face threatening; the indirect strategies on the other hand are implicitly, politely conveyed and mitigates the threat posed by the speech act. Strategies for request are basically classified into four by Trosborg in Alzebaree and Yavuz (2017): direct, conventionally indirect (hearer-based); conventionally indirect (speaker-based), and indirect.

The direct category has such request strategies as obligation (eg You have to lend me your pen); performative (eg I would like to ask you to give me your notebook), and imperative (eg Lend me your pen, (please). The conventionally indirect (hearer-based) category contains such request strategies as ability (eg, could you lend me your pen?), willingness (eg, would you lend me your pen?); permission (eg, May I borrow your pen?), suggestory formula (eg How about lending me your pen?). As for the conventionally

indirect (speaker-based) category, the request strategies therein are wishes (eg, I would like to borrow your pen); desires/needs (eg, I want/need to borrow your notebook). And lastly, the indirect category has the request strategy of using hints (eg, I have to copy some notes and I don't have a pen) (Alzebaree & Yavuz, 2017).

The most reckoned with in literature in request classification is that by Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989). Panahzadeh and Asadi (2019) adapted Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper thus:

| Main Category  |   |                           | Subcategory |                             |
|----------------|---|---------------------------|-------------|-----------------------------|
| Most direct    | 1 | Direct                    | 1           | Mood derivable (Imperative) |
|                |   |                           | 2           | Explicit performative       |
|                |   |                           |             | Hedged                      |
|                |   |                           | 3           | performative                |
|                |   |                           | 4           | Locution Derivable          |
| Least indirect | 2 | Conventional indirect     | 5           | Want statement              |
|                |   |                           |             | Suggestory                  |
|                |   |                           | 6           | formula                     |
| Least direct   | 3 | Non-conventional indirect | 7           | Query preparatory           |
|                |   |                           | 8           | Strong hint                 |
|                |   |                           | 9           | Mild hint                   |

*Source: Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper's (1989) classification of request strategies*

In the mood derivable, the illocutionary force is fixed on the mood of the locution (Wibowo & Cempaka, 2020). That is, the grammatical mood of the locution is what that makes it a request, for example give me your pen. In explicit performative, the illocutionary intent is explicitly stated, for example I am asking you to lend me your pen. The hedged performative uses modal verbs to modify the force of the illocutionary intent, for instance, I would like to ask you to lend me your pen. The locution derivable directly derives the illocutionary intent from the semantic meaning of the locution (Wibowo & Cempaka, 2020), for example lend me your pen. In the want statement, the speaker expresses his/her desire in the locution, and which informs the request being made, eg I would like you to give me your pen. As for suggestory formula, the utterances contain a suggestion to do something, eg How about giving me your pen to write the note? Then, the query preparatory asks questions relating to the ability of meeting up with the request, eg could you clean up the mess in the kitchen? Strong and mild hints are very indirect and do not show a sign of request in the lexical, grammatical or semantic combination of the locution, for instances, we have left the kitchen in a right mess (strong hint). We don't want any crowding ( as a mild hint in requesting to move the car) (Daskalovska, et al., 2016).

Irrespective of the request strategy one chooses, there are modification devices that could be used to mitigate any threat posed by the request and in some cases to further aggravate the request (Borovina, 2017). The essence of these modifications is usually to achieve politeness which entails considering the feeling of others in order to make them comfortable in the communication process (Yazdanfar & Bonyadi, 2016). The modification devices are classified into external and internal devices (Borovina, 2017; Yazdanfar & Bonyadi, 2016 ). The external devices are additional clause(s) to the head act, while the internal devices are usually part of the head act. Yazdanfar and Bonyadi (2016) citing Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) identify the following external modifiers: 1. Getting a pre-commitment: for example, " Will you do me a favour? Could you perhaps lend me your notes for a few days?" ( Blum-Kulka & Olshtain ,1984, p.205). 2. Grounder: for instance, "Judith, I missed class yesterday, could I borrow your notes ?" (P.205) 3. Sweetener: For instance, "You have a very beautiful handwriting, would it be possible to borrow your notes

for a few days?" (p.205) 4. Disarmer: for example, " I hope you don't think I'm being forward, but is there any chance of a lift home?" (p. 205). 5. Cost minimizer: for instance, " Pardon me, but could you give me a lift, if you 're going my way, as I just missed the bus and there isn't another one for an hour." (p. 205)

Internal modifiers are grammatical elements in form of lexical and syntactic devices used by the speaker to ameliorate the force of the request (Borovina, 2017). Borovina identifies five of these devices: 1. Conditional clause: The speaker uses this to distance him/herself from the request, for example, I'd appreciate if you could help me with your notebook. 2. Politeness marker: With this, the speaker introduces an optional element in the request in order to gain the mutual cooperation of the hearer, for instance, Can you please repeat the question? 3. Past tense modals: This is using such modal auxiliary verbs as could or would to make the request look polite (Schauer, 2009), for example, Would you like to attend my birthday party? 4. Marked modality: This entails using might and may to make the request more tentative (Schauer, 2009), for instance, May I borrow your pen please? 5. Consultative device: The speaker uses this device to engage the hearer in the request, for example, " Would you mind to give me one chewing gum" (Borovina, 2017, p.79).

Several researchers have made attempts to investigate the pragmatic competence of EFL learners. Panahzadeh and Asadi (2019) made an investigation into Iranian high school students' use of request speech act. The study found answers to two research questions: first, what is the most frequent request speech act strategy used by Iranian high school students? Second, how effective are the mainstream high school textbooks in teaching pragmatic appropriacy? The study used Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT) to collect data on 78 male and 64 female high school students who spoke three languages: Turkish, Kurdish and Persian languages. However, the questionnaire was translated into Persian language in order to control the effect of literacy in English. After analysis of the data, the outcome of the study revealed that the female EFL learners used conventionally indirect strategies more than their male counterparts. On the whole, the study found out that majority of the individuals could not make appropriate request, especially considering the social status of the interlocutors. The study is quite related to the present one, especially because it also involves the Kurdish EFL learners, but the fact that the language used in the questionnaire is Persian makes it inappropriate to examine the internal and external request modifiers. Although there may be a few basic pragmatic principles that are universal across languages, yet there are differences that exist at specific language levels (Kasper & Schimdt, 1996). Consequently, in assessing the pragmatic competence of advanced EFL learners who can at least decode the target language, it is more appropriate to use the target language in eliciting data from the participants to avoid negative transfer.

Borovina (2017) explored the development of pragmatic competence in the interlanguage of Croatian learners of English as a foreign language at three proficiency levels (beginner, intermediate and advanced). In order to achieve this, the study set out two questions in line with the objectives of the study thus: 1. What types of internal and external modification devices are used most frequently by Croatian learners of English as a foreign language at three levels of proficiency (beginner, intermediate and advanced). 2. Is there evidence of pragmlinguistic development? The participants of the study included 60 EFL learners from elementary and secondary schools from two Croatian countries. The instrument for data collection was questionnaire with ten scenarios described in Croatian. After analysis of the data collected, the result of the study revealed that the participants rarely used request modifications, thereby signaling poor pragmatic competence of the EFL learners. Again, it showed that there is no evidence of pragmlinguistic development.

Masoud (2016) investigated the relationship between EFL learners' critical thinking and their indirect request strategy. The questions that the study tried answering are 1. Is there any significant relationship between EFL learners' critical thinking and their indirect request strategy use? 2. Does critical thinking

significantly predict EFL learners' indirect request strategy use? One hundred Iranian EFL learners participated in the study. Pearson product-moment correlation and linear regression analyses were done on the data collected. The findings from the study showed that critical thinking strongly correlated with indirect request strategy, and that critical thinking is a predictor of indirect request strategy. Daskalovska et al (2016) examined the request strategies by EFL learners in the Republic of Macedonia. The outcome showed that the EFL learners frequently use query preparatories which belong to the group of conventional indirect strategy, in both formal and informal situations.

On another dimension, Mahmood (2016) did an evaluation of writing skills of EFL learners in Kurdistan region of Iraq by using error analysis. The study aimed at identifying, describing and analyzing errors, their causes and sources. Cambridge standard writing test was used as a tool to achieve this. The participants in the study were third year undergraduate students at English department from two universities in Kurdistan. The outcome of the study revealed that Kurdish EFL learners have grave challenges resulting in error writing. This was basically because of weaknesses in spelling, vocabulary and punctuation and grammar in particular. An identified source of these errors is negative transfer. There is a strong influence of L1 on their L2 learning. However, effective communication can be made even with error in grammar, but when this happens at the pragmatic level, it could not be same. It is therefore important to find out the level of pragmatic competence of Kurdish EFL learners. Mehrpour, Ahmadi and Sabourianzadeh (2016) examined pragmatic transfer through a cross-linguistic comparison of refusal speech act, using evidence from trilingual EFL learners in English, Farsi and Kurdish. The outcome showed that pragmatic transfer takes place in choice and content of semantic formulae. Sociocultural disparities were also found in the three languages especially as regards refusal speech act. Nevertheless, in spite of these differences, transfer of refusal occurs mostly from Kurdish L1 to L2 or L3. Although the present study does not intend to make comparison with other L1 speakers, it is imperative to examine whether this transfer exists in request speech act.

Consequently, as stated earlier, request is about the most frequently used speech act by all language users and learners, so considering request speech act is a clear way of revealing the pragmatic competence of Kurdish EFL learners. And as verifiable in literature, previous researchers have either considered request strategy or modification devices in requesting. This paper presents a more comprehensive approach, as it is concerned with both strategies and modification devices in request speech act. Again, the factor of gender is considered in this study to check whether Kurdish EFL learners' pragmatic competence is influenced by their gender. Also, many of the previous researchers translated their instruments for data collection into the participants' L1. This paper considers that as way of prompting negative transfer from L1 to the target language. In order to avoid the literacy problem of the participants' ability to read or write in English, this study only EFL university students in the city of Sulimany, Kurdistan, which are considered to be advanced and should be able to read and write in English. The outcome of this study would further advance the need to teach pragmatic competence by engaging in activities in the classroom that will create pragmatic awareness on the EFL learners.

The general purpose of this study is to investigate the pragmatic competence of Kurdish EFL learners, using request speech act as a case. In order to achieve this purpose, this study set to answer three questions thus: 1. What is the prevalent request strategy among the Kurdish EFL learners? 2. What modification devices are frequently employed by the Kurdish EFL learners? 3. How does gender influence the request strategy and modification devices of the Kurdish EFL learners?

## 2.0 Methods

The study type is descriptive survey. This research type is quite relevant because it helps to ascertain the present feature(s) of the subjects (Nassaji 2015). The population of the study included 125 students in the Department of English in the Institute of Technology, Sulimany city in Kurdistan. Due to EFL difficulty for many of the students, only 400 students who are assumed to have really advanced in the use of English are used for the study. 45 students who were present at the time of administering the DCT, were selected using purposive sampling technique. The instrument used for the study is Discourse Completion Task (DCT) on request adapted from Borovina (2017). There are ten scenarios in the discourse, and the conversation ranges from request between the interlocutor and the friends/classmate, and with the teacher. In terms of level of imposition of the various tasks, situations 2, 4, 6, 8, 9, and 10 are of high imposition; while situations 1, 3, 5 and 7 are of low imposition.

As for the analysis, frequency and percentage was used to answer research questions 1 and 2, which sought to know the request strategies and the modification devices deployed respectively. As for research question 3 which is transformed into a hypothesis thus: 'There is no significant difference on the participants' pragmatic competence based on gender', Independent sample t-test was used to test the hypothesis.

## 3.0 Findings

**Research Question 1: What is the prevalent request strategy among the Kurdish EFL learners?**

**Table 1: Overall Request Strategies Used by the Participants**

|                  | Mood derivable | Explicit performance | Hedged performative | Locution derivable | Want statement | Suggestory formula | Query preparatory | Strong hint | Mild hint |
|------------------|----------------|----------------------|---------------------|--------------------|----------------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------|-----------|
| Situation 1      | 48.9           | 2.2                  | 4.4                 | -                  | 2.2            | -                  | 35.6              | 2.2         | -         |
| Situation 2      | 31.1           | 2.2                  | 8.9                 | -                  | 2.2            | 2.2                | 46.7              | -           | 2.2       |
| Situation 3      | 35.6           | -                    | 6.7                 | -                  | 22.2           | 2.2                | 24.4              | -           | 2.2       |
| Situation 4      | 40             | -                    | 2.2                 | -                  | -              | 2.2                | 51.1              | -           | -         |
| Situation 5      | 11.1           | -                    | 6.7                 | 2.2                | -              | -                  | 75.6              | -           | 2.2       |
| Situation 6      | 6.7            | -                    | 17.8                | -                  | 2.2            | 2.2                | 64.4              | -           | -         |
| Situation 7      | 48.9           | 6.7                  | 2.2                 | -                  | 15.6           | 2.2                | 20                | -           | -         |
| Situation 8      | 8.9            | -                    | 4.4                 | -                  | 8.9            | 2.2                | 51.1              | 2.2         | -         |
| Situation 9      | 4.4            | 4.4                  | 2.2                 | -                  | 53.3           | -                  | 22.2              | -           | -         |
| Situation 10     | 37.8           | -                    | -                   | -                  | 2.2            | -                  | 40.0              | -           | -         |
| Grand Percentage | 27             | 1.6                  | 5.6                 | 0.2                | 10.8           | 1.3                | 43.1              | 0.4         | 0.7       |

Table 1 displays the overall usage in terms of percentage, the request strategies used for in all the situations. In situation 1, the result states that mood derivable is the most used request strategy with 48.9%. The next is query preparatory, with 35.6 %. Hedged performative has 4.4%. Explicit performance, want statement, strong hint all have 2.2% for each. Locution derivable, suggestory formula, and mild hint were not used at all by the participants in this situation. As for situation two, the result indicates that the request strategy mostly used is query preparatory, with 46.7%. This is followed by mood derivable with 31.1 %. The least used strategies are hedged performative, Suggestory formula and mild hint, having 2.2% for each. Locution derivable and strong hint were not used at all in this situation. In situation 3, the most

frequent request strategy by the participants is mood derivable with 35.6%. Query preparatory is second with 24.4 %. Suggestory formula and mild hint are the least used strategies with 2.2 % for each; while explicit performance, locution derivable and strong hint were not used at all. As for situation 4, the request strategy mostly used by the participants is query preparatory, with 51.1%. Mood derivable is second with 40% while hedged performative and suggestory formula have 2.2 % each. Explicit performance, locution derivable, want statement and strong hint were not used at all. In situation 5, query preparatory again has the highest percentage with 75.6 %, and mood derivable is second with 11.1%. Hedged performative, locution derivable and mild hint have 6.7%, 2.2 %, 2.2% respectively. Explicit performance, want statement, suggestory formula and strong hint were not used as strategies in making request by the participants.

Similarly, in situation 6, the result shows that the most frequently used request strategy is query preparatory having 64.4 %, hedged performative is second with 17.8%; mood derivable is third, with 6.7%. Both want statement and suggestory formula have 2.2% each. Meanwhile, explicit performance, locution derivable, strong hint and mild hint were not used at all by the participants in that situation. In situation 7, the result reveals that mood derivable is the most frequently used request strategy with 48.9%. This is seconded by query preparatory which has 20%. Want statement is third with 15.6%. Explicit performance is next with 6.7%, while hedged performative and suggestory formula have 2.2% each. Locution derivable, strong and mild hints were not used by the participants in this situation. Also, in situation 8, query preparatory has the highest percent with 51.1%. Mood derivable and want statement both have 8.9% each. Hedged performative has 4.4%; while want statement and strong hint have 2.2% respectively. Explicit performance, locution derivable, and mild hint were not used in this situation. In situation 9, the result indicates that the most preferred request strategy by the participants is want statement, having 53.3%. The second is query preparatory, with 22.2%. Both mood derivable and explicit performance have 4.4% each; while hedged performative has 2.2%. Locution derivable, suggestory formula, strong and mild hints were not used. Lastly, in situation 10, it is found out that the participants mostly used query preparatory request strategy with the percentage of 40%. This is seconded by mood derivable with 37.8%; while want statement has 2.2 %. Explicit performance, hedged performative, locution derivable, suggestory formula, strong and mild hints were not used.

On the whole, the grand percentage shows the total percentage of each of the request strategies, as used by the participants. It shows that query preparatory has the highest percentage, with 43.1%. Mood derivable is second with 27%. Want statement has 10.8%, hedged performative has 5.6%, explicit performance has 1.6%, suggestory formula has 1.3%, mild hint is 0.7%, strong hint is 0.4%, while the least is locution derivable with 0.2%. Although, the use of query preparatory request strategy more than others implies that the participants are more prone to using conventional indirect request strategy according to Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989), however, this good development is marred by the use of 'can' by majority of the participants instead of 'could'. Then the use of mood derivable, which is usually very direct, as the second most request strategy suggests that the learners may not be good in making their request polite especially in high imposition scenarios.

Research question 2: What modification devices are frequently employed by the Kurdish EFL learners?

**Table 2: The Overall Request Modification Strategies Used by the Participants**

|                  | Pre-commitment % | Grounder % | Sweetener % | Disarmer % | Cost Minimiser % | Conditional Clause % | Politeness marker % | Past tense modals % | Marked Modality % | Consultative Device % | None % |
|------------------|------------------|------------|-------------|------------|------------------|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|--------|
| Situation 1      | -                | -          | -           | -          | -                | -                    | 33                  | 4.4                 | -                 | -                     | 57.8   |
| Situation 2      | -                | -          | -           | -          | 4.4              | -                    | 60                  | 2.2                 | -                 | -                     | 31.1   |
| Situation 3      | 6.7              | -          | -           | -          | -                | -                    | 8.9                 | 11.1                | -                 | -                     | 73.3   |
| Situation 4      | 2.2              | -          | -           | -          | 2.2              | -                    | 44.4                | 2.2                 | -                 | -                     | 46.7   |
| Situation 5      | -                | -          | -           | -          | 15.6             | -                    | 51.1                | 6.7                 | -                 | -                     | 26.7   |
| Situation 6      | 4.4              | -          | -           | -          | -                | -                    | 20.0                | 13.3                | -                 | -                     | 60.0   |
| Situation 7      | 2.2              | -          | -           | -          | -                | -                    | 13.3                | 4.4                 | -                 | -                     | 77.8   |
| Situation 8      | -                | -          | -           | -          | -                | -                    | 44.4                | 2.2                 | -                 | -                     | 44.4   |
| Situation 9      | -                | -          | -           | -          | 4.4              | -                    | 11.1                | 8.9                 | -                 | -                     | 68.9   |
| Situation 10     | -                | -          | -           | -          | 6.7              | 4.4                  | 37.8                | -                   | -                 | -                     | 37.8   |
| Grand Percentage | 1.6              | -          | -           | -          | 3.3              | 0.4                  | 32.3                | 5.5                 | -                 | -                     | 52.5   |

Table 2 above shows the percentage use of different modification strategies by the participants. In situation 1, only 33% and 4.4% used politeness marker and past tense modal respectively. 57.8% of the participants did not use modification strategy at all. In situation 2, 4.4% used cost minimiser, 60% used politeness marker, 2.2% used past tense modal; while 31.1% did not use any modification strategy. As for situation 3, 6.7% used the modification strategy of getting pre-commitment from the requestee, as a modification device, 8.9% of them used politeness marker which basically uses 'please'; 11.1% of them used past tense modal, which mainly uses 'could' or 'would'. However, 73.3% of the participants did not use any modification device at all. In situation 4, only 2.2% of the participants used the device of getting pre-commitment from the interlocutor, 2.2% used the device of cost minimiser; 4.4% and 2.2% used politeness marker and past tense modal respectively. But a larger percentage of 46.7% did not use request modification strategy at all. Also, in situation 5, 15.6% used cost minimiser to modify their request strategy, 51.1% and 6.7% used politeness marker and past tense modal respectively; while, 26.7% of them used no modification device.

Similarly, in situation 6, 4.4% of the participants used the device of getting a pre-commitment, 20% and 13.3% used politeness marker and past tense modal respectively. 60% of them however did not use any modification device. As for situation 7, 2.2% used the device of getting a pre-commitment to modify their request, 13.3% and 4.4% used politeness marker and past tense modal respectively; while a greater percentage of 77.8% of them did not employ any modification device. In situation 8, 44.4% used politeness marker, 2.2% used past tense modal, and another 4.4% did not use any modification device. As for situation 9, 4.4% used cost minimiser, 11.1% and 8.9% used politeness marker and past tense modal respectively. Again, a higher percentage of 68.9% did not use any modification device. Lastly, in situation 10 there is 6.7% for cost minimiser, conditional clause, which is mainly the use of 'if' for the first time was used by 4.4% of the participants, 37.8% of the participants used politeness marker, while another 37.8% did not use any device to modify their request.

The grand percentage explains the overall percentage of each of the modification devices used in the Discourse Completion Task. It is revealed that non-usage of any modification device by the participants carries the highest percentage with 52.5%. This implies that the pragmatic competence of majority of the

participants is quite at a low ebb. Next is politeness marker with 32.5%; past tense modal has 5.5%. The request modification device of pre-commitment has 1.6%, while conditional clause has 0.4%. It is revealed that the participants did not use some of the modification devices like grounder, sweetner, disarmer, marked modality and consultative. This again indicates poor knowledge of the participants regarding these devices. It is therefore found that politeness marker is the most prevalent modification strategy used. This implies that Kurdish culture encourages politeness. However, the poor expression of the participants in terms of grammar could not allow them use the politeness marker 'please' rightly as an internal modification device.

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference on the pragmatic competence of the participants based on gender

**Table 3: t-test summary table**

| Source of Variation | N  | Mean    | SD      | df     | t-value | Sig  |
|---------------------|----|---------|---------|--------|---------|------|
| Male                | 19 | 91.6316 | 6.28234 | 41     | .373    | .711 |
| Female              | 26 | 90.7083 | 9.22416 | 40.210 |         |      |

Table 3 reveals the independent t-test result on the test of the hypothesis. It indicates the male participants were 19 with the mean of 91.632 and standard deviation of 6.3. The female participants were 26 in number with the mean and standard deviation of 90.708 and 9.2 respectively. The t-value is 0.373 while the significant value is 0.711. Since the significant value (0.711) is greater than the alpha level of significant difference which is 0.05, it can be rightly be said that there is no significant difference on the pragmatic performance of the participants based on gender. It means that the null hypothesis is accepted.

#### 4.0 Discussion

In answering the first research question, the study found out that the most prevalent request strategy deployed by the participants is query preparatory, which is a conventionally indirect request strategy. This is in synergy with the finding of Panahzadeh and Asadi (2019). Although, the mentioned particularly found out that the female students are more prone to using the conventionally indirect strategy, it is not same with the present study. However, it is observed that the category used mainly by the participants is the use of 'can', instead of 'could'. Consider the excerpts from the participants' answers on the scenario where they requested their classmate to lend them glue: "can you give me your glue tempo, please". Some participants did not use the politeness marker and simply said "can you give me glue?".

Worse still, this is not different in situation 2, where they were to request that their teacher postpone a written exam. Obviously, this is a high imposition request, yet, the participants still used 'can', as seen in some excerpts below: "Excuse me teacher, can you postpone the written exam?" Another person merely said, "can you postpone the exam?" It is therefore concluded that this is an indication of poor pragmatic competence. This finding is similar to the finding of Wachukwu (2017) that the use of the present form of the modal auxiliary 'can', instead of the past form 'could', indicated that they are poor in their pragmatic competence. Wibowo and Cempaka (2020) also agree that the use of the past auxiliary modal 'could' for the query preparatory request strategy is a sign of competence. One noticeable element in the pragmatic expression of the participants is negative transfer. In Kurdish, there is no clear difference between the two auxiliaries 'can' and 'could'. It is therefore no surprise that the participants majorly interchange the two. Mehrpour, Ahmadi and Sabourianzadeh (2016) earlier made this observation when investigating the pragmatic competence of the Kurdish EFL learners using refusal speech act. This calls for an integrated

approach to teaching EFL as demonstrated in communicative language teaching. This approach does not only teach grammar for mastery but also for communication.

Similarly, the outcome of the study shows that majority of the participants could not use any modification device. This too is lack of pragmatic competence. The modification device is a sign of pragmatic competence because it helps to reduce the imposition in the request (Borovina, 2017). But the grand percentage of 52.5% for non-usage of any modification in all the situations of the DCT is an indication that the subjects are lagging behind in pragmatic competence. This perhaps could be as a result of their lack of grammatical competence. The modification devices are usually grammatical elements (Borovina, 2017), and it needs one to have good knowledge of grammar to use them appropriately. Unfortunately, some of the expressions of the participants on the tasks reveal a very poor grammatical competence. Consider the excerpts on the task that demanded to request that their teacher postpones an oral exam: "please teacher can you rate oral exam". Another person in same situation said " we want to postpone an oral exam". Another said "Teacher can you after oral exam". All these are few of the numerous instances of poor grammar on the side of the participants. The implication is that grammatical competence is essential in having a pragmatic competence. Researchers such as Alemi and Khanlarzadeh (2016); Ashoorpour and Azari (2014) are all in agreement with this opinion. On the contrary, Safa (2013) and Karagoz (2016) are of the opinion that such relationship is not significant.

Again, the outcome of this study reveals that there is no significant difference on the pragmatic competence of the participants based on gender. This is in concordance with the findings of Mushtaq and Maryam (2021); Albakri and Seng (2019) who all opine that gender is not a significant factor in the acquisition of pragmatic competence. However, the outcome negates the view of Domakani, Mirzaei and Zeraatpisheh (2014) who conclude that gender is a significant factor in acquisition of pragmatic competence. Nonetheless, it is noticeable that Domakani, Mirzaei and Zeraatpisheh (2014) investigated the mediating role of emotional intelligence, which is not within the realm of the present study. This could be the reason for the point of departure.

The findings of the present study is significant in giving more prominence to pragmatics by EFL teachers in Kurdistan. Researchers such as Achike (2020) and Tulgar (2016) have all emphasised on the need for pragmatics to be explicitly taught in the ESL/EFL classroom. This is what communicative language teaching is all about- an integrated approach that does not treat an aspect of language in isolation, but rather as working collectively to enhance communication.

## 5.0 Conclusion

The major outcomes of the study are that Kurdish undergraduate students mainly use query preparatory in the request strategy, but mostly use 'can' instead of 'could' which is more polite, especially in high imposition situations. Also the finding reveals that majority of the students do not know how to use modification devices, mainly because their grammatical knowledge is low. The implication of these findings is that there is need for awareness creation through classroom instruction in order to increase their pragmatic competence. This finding is quite significant as it would give an insight to restructuring EFL curriculum in Kurdistan. The outcome also confirms that gender does not make a significant difference in the pragmatic competence of the EFL learners. The implication of this is that teachers should give EFL learners equal opportunities in learning pragmatic competence, regardless of gender. Although this study has filled some research gaps, yet further gaps have been created. Future researcher should attempt testing the grammatical competence of the students separately, and then correlate it with their pragmatic competence. Again, using students only from one school is not enough to generalise this study. Future researchers can expand the population base by including other schools.

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## Appendix

### A Questionnaire on Investigating Kurdish EFL Students' Pragmatic Competence in Requesting.

**Instructions:** Imagine that you are in the English class and you have to speak only English. There are 10 situations below in which you want to ask your friends or teacher to do something for you. Read the situations below and write what you would say in each situation in the spaces provided. If you don't know what you would say, simply write " I don't know". Also, kindly tick your gender appropriately; be rest assured the information provided will be kept confidential and will not be used against you.

Male

☐

Female

☐

1. You want to ask your classmate to lend you his or her glue. What would you say?

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2. You want to ask your teacher whether he/she could postpone a written exam. What would you say?

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3. You want to invite your classmate to your birthday party. What would you say?

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4. You want to ask your classmate to give you his/her notebook. What would you say?

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5. You want to ask your teacher to repeat his/her question. What would you say?

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6. You want to ask your classmate if he/she could you with Maths. What would you say?

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7. You want to invite your classmate to sit with you in your desk. What would you say?

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8. You want to ask your teacher whether he/she can postpone an oral exam. What would you say?

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9. You want to ask your teacher if you could volunteer for an oral exam. What would you say?

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10. You want ask your classmate to clean the blackboard instead of you. What would you say?

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Adapted from Borovina, D.S. (2017). Croatian EFL learners' interlanguage requests: A focus on request modification. PART 1: ARTICLES, 14 (1) pp75-93