



## The Comparison between Native Speakers of Indonesian and *BIPA* Learners in Producing Email Requests

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### Abstract

This study examined a comparison between Native Speakers (NS) of Indonesian and Indonesian language as a foreign language (*Bahasa Indonesia untuk Penutur Asing - BIPA*) learners in making email requests. In particular, this study analysed the different aspects of pragmatics of variations in structure and politeness in emails. This study involved nine NS of Indonesian who were studying master's level programs at the University of Melbourne, and eighteen *BIPA* learners who took the subject Indonesian 4 in Semester 2, 2018 at the University of Melbourne. Participants wrote an email request based on a given scenario, which was requesting leave in the context of a workplace in Indonesia. The data were obtained by providing participants a description of the scenario, which prompted them to write an email request asking permission to take time off work. However, participants had freedom in terms of the style and structure of the email. In general, this study aimed to examine how their pragmatics varies, especially in terms of structure and politeness.

### Keywords

Email request, Indonesian language as a foreign language, L2-acquisition, pragmatics

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## Introduction

Email is the most commonly used medium of communication in the workplace. Email is usually used to notify others of important work-related information either between superiors and employees or among colleagues. However, for Non-Native Speakers (NNS) in contexts of intercultural communication, producing emails is quite challenging. Linguistic and cultural differences, such as the required levels and markers of politeness, are sometimes matters that need to be considered when working in multicultural workplaces. For example, in terms of structure, emails written in Indonesian and English contexts differ significantly. Furthermore, regarding politeness, people in Indonesia and Australia follow different rules in using forms of address both in speaking and in writing, including email. For example, in Indonesia it is typical to use the forms of address "*Bapak/Pak*" for men and "*Ibu/Bu*" for women who have a higher age and/or social status or who are of equal status but situated in a formal context such as the workplace. However, in Australia, it is very common for colleagues to simply call each other directly by the given name. Romero, Holmes, Thy, and Steinberg (2016) state that in the workplace in the Australian context, social distance has a weaker effect because hierarchy is less prominent. Thus, it is very important for those working in multicultural environments to develop knowledge of pragmatics in email writing.

To date, many researchers have discussed topics related to pragmatics in email. These studies have varied in focus, such as the teaching of producing email requests (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2015; Nguyen, et al., 2015), the development of learners' pragmatics in email writing (Alcón-Soler, 2017; Chen, 2015), analysis of email writing errors of NNS (Burgucu-Tazegul, Han, & Engin, 2016; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011), analysis of politeness in email writing (Alcón-Soler, 2013; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Kim & Lee, 2017; Savić, 2018), analysis of structure and politeness in email (Paramasivam & Subramaniam, 2018), and the effects of study abroad experiences on email writing (Alcón-Soler, 2015). In general, most of the studies on pragmatics in email writing are the ones that focus on analysis of interlanguage pragmatics. However, few studies have analyzed a comparison between NS and NNS in producing emails.

Several studies that developed comparisons between NS and NNS in producing emails have had limited focuses, such as politeness level analysis (Alcón-Soler, 2013) or the influence of hierarchical systems on politeness levels (Zhu, 2017), email structure analysis (Deveci & Hmida, 2017) and comparison between email writing in elicited and spontaneous situations (Chen, Yang, & Qian, 2015; Franch & Lorenzo-Dus, 2008). Regarding the level of politeness, Alcón-Soler (2013) conducted a study of comparing 145 email requests written by British English Speakers with 150 email requests written by international students. The analysis in this study focuses on the use of mitigation in writing email requests due to the existence of social distance. The results of this study indicate that NS are better at using their pragmalinguistic knowledge than international students. This is in line with the study by Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) who found that pragmatic failures produced by NNS were caused by inadequate politeness due to their lack of pragmalinguistic knowledge. However, as far as pragmatic failures relating to forms of address, a study by Alcón-Soler (2013) found



varied results amongst both British English Speakers and international students. Similar to the study by Alcón-Soler (2013), Biesenbach-Lucas (2005) conducted a study comparing email writing by American NS of English and international students. The results showed that the strategies used by the NS in writing emails seemed to show greater initiative compared to the international students. The comparative studies above examining NS and international students illustrate that in general, the socio-pragmatic abilities of NS tend to be better than international students. Deveci and Hmida (2017) conducted a study comparing NS of English and Arabic learners of English in producing email requests addressed to a professor. The focus of their study was to find out what differences exist between NS and NNS in terms of use of structure and pragmatic strategies in writing email requests. The results of this study indicated that except for the expression of gratitude, overall the emails written by NNS did not meet satisfy criteria for good structure and were considered having failed in this regard. The results of the Deveci and Hmida (2017) study support another study by Burgucu-Tazegul, Han, and Engin (2016) who found that the structure of emails written by NNS showed greater directness due to inappropriate greetings and closing statements. Thus, it can be concluded that in general, email structures generated by NS tend to be more pragmatically appropriate compared to those written by NNS.

From the literature review above, it is evident that most studies which analyse comparisons of emails written by NS and NNS usually focus on English as the target language. However, there are also comparative pragmatics studies written in other languages, such as Russian (Krulatz, 2012), Spanish (Bou-Franch, 2011) and Slovenian (Orthaber, 2017). On the other hand, there is no existing research comparatively examining email writing in Indonesian by NS and NNS of Indonesian in Indonesian settings. However, that is not to say that there is no research on Indonesian pragmatics at all. Studies investigating Indonesian pragmatics have been done by scholars, but are still limited (e.g., Ariputra, Rohmadi, & Sumarwati, 2018; Hassall, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2013, 2015; Primantari & Wijana, 2016; Suharsono, 2015). Research comparing speech acts involving requests by NS of Indonesian and Australian learners of Indonesian has been conducted by Hassal (2013). He found that Australian learners of Indonesian used the 'Want' statement more often in producing requests. In addition, learners from Australia were also found to have reduced L1 transfer problems in line with their improvement in their target language proficiency.

Similar to the study by Hassal (2013), Primantari and Wijana (2017) conducted an analysis comparing NS of Indonesian and *BIPA* learners from Korea in producing speech acts in Indonesian. They found that the lack of pragmatics in the speech acts produced by NNS was due to the weakness of their language proficiency. In addition, cultural differences and frequent exposure to informal Indonesian were also non-linguistic factors that influenced *BIPA* learners' pragmatics in producing speech acts. Therefore, given the limited available research on pragmatics in Indonesian, I was drawn to research speech acts in Indonesian pragmatics. However, the focus in this study was on request emails produced by NS of Indonesian and *BIPA* learners. An analysis of email requests was chosen because email has become a regular tool for communication in the modern age, especially in the education or workplace setting. In addition, this study also provided an overview about the aspects of



structure and culture that which can inform effective email writing in Indonesian. Finally, this research mirrored the research by Hassal (2003) which focuses on comparing NS and *BIPA* learners' requests in Indonesian. However, in this study I used an email request addressed to someone of a higher status in the workplace hierarchy as the focus of this study. To fulfill the objective of this study, I developed two research questions as follows:

1. How does the usage of structure differ between NS and *BIPA* learners in writing an email request in an Indonesian context?
2. How does politeness differ between NS and *BIPA* learners in writing an email request in an Indonesian context?

## **Methodology**

### ***Participants***

A total of eighteen students of *BIPA* learners in *Indonesian 4* subject, and nine NS who were master students at the University of Melbourne involved in this study. Regarding the proficiency of the *BIPA* learners, the *Indonesian 4* class is considered as intermediate level. Most of the students have studied Indonesian at high school. Moreover, to enter the *Indonesian 4* subject students must first take a placement test. Furthermore, when filling out the questionnaire, most of the students in the *Indonesian 4* claimed that they have received instructions in writing emails in Indonesian class. Meanwhile, the NS of Indonesian were master students studying various majors. In general, the NS all had some measure of work experience, so they were familiar with email writing in the context of Indonesian workplaces.

### ***Data collection***

The scenario used for eliciting the writing on an email in this study was adapted from a similar task in an assignment in the IPC subject at the University of Melbourne. Participants were asked to write an email requesting to take leave in an Indonesian workplace setting. The following are the writing instructions given to the participants:

#### ***Write a request email for the following scenario:***

*You are working in one of the companies in Jakarta, Indonesia. It's Thursday afternoon. You just found out that your cousin, who lives in Paris, will be in Jakarta on Monday and Tuesday. You grew up with your cousin and haven't seen her in years, and you would really like to take Monday and Tuesday off to spend time with her. You need to ask your team leader, Michael Ewing, for time off.*

Furthermore, each participant was given a demographic questionnaire to collect data about gender, native language, and experience of instruction in email writing, and the length of time studying Indonesian. The collection of data relating to the *BIPA* learners was conducted prior to commencing normal learning activities in the *Indonesian 4* class. They wrote an email



manually (handwriting on paper), and most of them completed the email in a duration of less than 20 minutes. Meanwhile, the NS wrote an email using electronic media, through an email application or *What's App*. I asked them to use electronic media due to limited time to meet them individually.

### ***Procedures***

Before I asked all participants to write an email, I explained the objective of the study both to NS and *BIPA* learner participants. The purpose of the study was to examine the email request in Indonesian created by NS and *BIPA* learners. Then, I also explained to the participants that they should address an email in the Indonesian context based on their knowledge without looking at any sources. Secondly, I provided the participants of *BIPA* learners the demographic questionnaire and the form contained writing instruction in their last meeting of *Indonesia 4* class. Meanwhile, for NS participants, I gave the instructions to nine Indonesian master students through *What's App*. During the email writing process, I assisted the participants and responded to the following question regarding email writing or other questions. Lastly, then all data were collected and transcribed into a structural framework so that I can easily analyze the data, especially the data analysis regarding the email structure.

### ***Data analysis***

The research design used in this study analyzing email requests can be categorized as a case study (Paramasivam & Subramaniam, 2018). The analysis in this study used a qualitative and discourse analysis. Firstly, to analyze the email structure, I used 'moves' in email requests by Ho (2011) as a guide to analyzing the email structure (for a more detailed description of the 15 moves identified in email requests see Ho, 2011). However, for this study I had adjusted the categories into nine moves. These adjustments have been made due to the simpler request scenario. Another reason is because the participants of *BIPA* learners in this study were categorized as the learners in the intermediate level, and so some of the more complex moves were not relevant. In addition, I added the move category of 'Greeting and Well-wishing' into the catalogue. The nine moves I adopted from Ho (2011) are as follows.

**Table 1.** *The moves in writing email request*

Moves	Example
Addressing	Dear Dr. Ewing
Greeting and/or Well-wishing	I hope you are doing well.
Acknowledging	I have had a very pleasant time in my first few months working at the company.
Background information	I am writing this email regarding a family matter that has come up.
Requesting	I want to ask permission to take leave on Monday and Tuesday.
Elaborating	I just received information that my cousin from Paris will be visiting Jakarta on Monday and Tuesday. I haven't seen him for a couple of years so there will be a family meeting on those two days.



Expressing ideas/ solution	I will try to complete some work this weekend.
Gratitude for requested help	Thank you
Closing	Best regards,
Signing off	Andika

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In addition, for the second analysis, related to politeness, I used a model of a (in) directness strategy by Hassal (2011) as a guide in this study. He divided the level of (in) directness into three levels, which are direct, conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect. However, in this study I condensed these into two levels, namely direct (e.g., ‘I want to ask the day off’) and conventionally indirect (e.g. ‘Can I ask for day off?’). In addition, forms of address used in Indonesian were analyzed in this study.

## Findings

### *The structure of the email*

A total of eighteen emails by *BIPA* learners and nine emails by NS were analysed in terms of structure and politeness. Firstly, with regard to structure, I used analysis of moves in email requests by Ho (2011) that I have adjusted. The results showed that most NS and *BIPA* learners included the standard elements of email structure, such as addressing, background information, requesting, and gratitude for requested help, closing, and signing off. However, a small number of participants did not include elements of gratitude expression, closing, and signing off. Furthermore, surprisingly the data showed that *BIPA* learners were more likely to write greeting and/or well-wishing and elaboration in their emails. Meanwhile, another interesting finding about the data was that NS were more likely to include a move of proposing an idea/solution. The details of the results of the comparative data analysis between NS and *BIPA* learners in writing email requests can be seen in table 2 below.

**Table 2.** *Comparison between NS and BIPA learners in terms of structure of email*

Moves	NS (N=9) n (%)	<i>BIPA</i> learners (N=18) n (%)
Addressing	9 (100%)	18 (100%)
Greeting and/or Wishing	1 (11.11%)	8 (44.44%)
Acknowledging	1 (11.11%)	0
Background information	9 (100%)	18 (100%)
Requesting	9 (100%)	18 (100%)
Elaborating	2 (22.22%)	16 (88.88%)
Expressing Ideas/ solution	6 (66.66%)	7 (38.88%)
Gratitude for requested help	9 (100%)	15 (83.33%)
Closing	7 (77.77%)	17 (94.44%)
Signing off	8 (88.88%)	17 (94.44%)



Furthermore, after a closer look into the data, there were some differences in the ordering of structural elements between emails written by NS and *BIPA* learners. NS were more likely to write a request segment first, followed by background information. Whereas *BIPA* learners tended to write background information first which was then followed by the request. Thus, in general in this comparative study, I conclude that there are two types of email structure used by NS and *BIPA* learners. Table 3 below is a comparison of NS and *BIPA* learners in terms of the email structure.

**Table 3.** *The comparison between NS and BIPA learners in terms of email structure*

Structure	NS (N=9) n (%)	<i>BIPA</i> Learners(N=18) n (%)
<b>Structure 1</b> Addressing, Background Information, Requesting, Gratitude for request help, closing, signing off.	0	13 (72.22%)
<b>Structure 2</b> Addressing, Requesting, Background Information, Gratitude for request help, closing, signing off.	9 (100%)	5 (27.77%)

From the data above, it can be seen that 13 (72.22%) of *BIPA* learners used Structure 1, that is providing background information first before making the request. While the remainder, 5 (27.77%) of NNS used the second structure, that is conveying a request first, then followed by background information. On the other hand, all NS used Structure 2. Here is one example of emails written using Structure 1 by *BIPA* learners and Structure 2 by NS.

**(1) Structure 1 by *BIPA* learners**

<i>Addressing</i>	: Selamat siang Michael Ewing	<i>Good Afternoon Michael Ewing</i>
<i>Background Information</i>	: Siang jni, saya mendengar sepupu saya akan datang ke Jakarta pada hari Senin dan Selasa. Sepupu saya tinggal di ibu kota Perancis, sehingga saya tidak melihat dia selama beberapa tahun. Saya tumbuh bersama sepupu saya	<i>This afternoon, I have heard my cousin will come to Jakarta on Monday and Tuesday. My cousin lives in the capital city of France, so I haven't seen him for several years. I grew up with my cousin</i>
<i>Requesting</i>	: Sehingga saya akan sangat menghargai kalau Anda mengizinkan saya untuk cuti kerja pada hari Senin dan Selasa pada minggu depan. Jadi saya bisa bertemu dengan dia.	<i>So, I would really appreciate if you allow me to take time off from work on Mondays and Tuesdays next week. So, I can meet him.</i>
<i>Gratitude for request help</i>	: Terima kasih untuk pertimbanganmu.	<i>Thank you for your consideration.</i>
<i>Closing</i>	: Salam,	<i>Regards,</i>
<i>Signing off.</i>	: Sarah O'Brien	<i>Sarah O'Brien</i>



**(2) Structure 2 by NS**

<i>Addressing</i>	: Selamat siang Pak Ewing,	<i>Good Afternoon Mr. Ewing</i>
<i>Requesting</i>	: Bersama dengan email ini, saya hendak mengajukan permohonan cuti untuk hari Senin, 8 Oktober 2018 sampai Selasa, 9 Oktober 2018	<i>Along with this email, I would like to ask for leave for Monday, October 8, 2018 until Tuesday, October 9, 2018</i>
<i>Background Information</i>	: karena ada urusan keluarga mendadak.	<i>Because there is a sudden family matter.</i>
<i>[Expressing idea/ solution]</i>	: Apabila ada pekerjaan yang harus saya selesaikan untuk hari Senin dan Selasa, saya akan ambil jam lembur untuk menyelesaikannya di hari Sabtu dan Minggu.	<i>If there are jobs that I have to complete on Monday and Tuesday, I will take overtime to finish on Saturday and Sunday.</i>
<i>Gratitude for request help</i>	: Terima kasih atas perhatiannya.	<i>Thank you for your attention.</i>
<i>Closing</i>	: Salam,	<i>Regards,</i>
<i>Signing off.</i>	: Iqbal Adam	<i>Iqbal Adam</i>

***The politeness of the email***

Regarding the levels of politeness, I analyzed the request move segment using the (in) directness level model by Hassal (2011). The results of the analysis of the level of (in) directness comparing NS and *BIPA* learners can be seen in table 4 below.

**Table 4.** *In(directness) in request moves*

<b>In(directness)</b>	<b>NS (N=9) n (%)</b>	<b><i>BIPA</i> Learners (N=18) n (%)</b>
Direct	8 (88.88%)	8 (44.44%)
Conventionally indirect	1 (11.11%)	10 (55.55%)

Analysis of the data showed that *BIPA* learners used the conventionally indirect pattern more often in making requests. A total of 10 (55.55%) of *BIPA* learners used a conventionally indirect strategy in their request. Meanwhile, the data shows that only 1 of the NS (11.11%) used an indirect strategy in producing email requests. Thus, it can be concluded that NS tend to be more direct in making email requests. However, this does not necessarily mean that the NS were not polite, as this directness was phrased using more refined word choices, like ‘*Saya bermaksud meminta ijin*’ (I am intending to ask permission). Here are several examples of (in) directness emails by NS and *BIPA* learners.



**(1) Direct pattern by native speakers.** The NS of Indonesian produce a large proportion of direct requests. This is due to the email pattern that Indonesian people usually use when they write an email request. Examples of direct requests made by NS are as follows:

- a) *Sehubungan dengan surat ini, saya ingin menyampaikan permohonan izin cuti selama dua hari minggu depan.* (Regarding to this letter, I would like to request two days off next week.)
- b) *Saya ingin mengajukan cuti untuk hari Senin dan Selasa depan.* (I would like to ask the day off for Monday and Tuesday.)
- c) *Dengan email ini saya bermaksud mengajukan cuti kerja selama dua hari untuk hari Senin dan Selasa.* (In this email, I would like to request two days off on Monday and Tuesday.)

In the example above, most NS started the request with the *Dengan email ini* 'In this email' and followed by the direct request. The requests made by NS are categorised as direct requests, however, in Indonesian those direct requests are still considered polite since participants use polite word choice. In this case, word choice plays a vital role in determining the politeness of a request.

**(2) Conventionally indirect pattern by BIPA learners.** BIPA learners tend to produce conventionally indirect requests. This contains indirect formulas that are conventionalised in the language as a means of requesting (Hassal, 2003). In this request type, Most BIPA learners use a relevant modal verb to request permission. Examples are these:

- a) *Apakah [saya bisa minta izin] pada hari Senin dan Selasa di minggu depan?*  
(Can I ask to take day off on Monday and Tuesday next week?)
- b) *Boleh saya tidak menghadiri pekerjaan pada baik hari Senin dan Selasa?*  
(May I not attend the work both on Monday and Tuesday?)
- c) *Saya ingin tahu apakah saya bisa mengambil cuti dari pekerjaan supaya saya bisa pergi sekeliling Jakarta dengan sepupu saya?*  
(I want to know whether I can take day off from work so that I can travel around Jakarta with my cousin?)

The example from BIPA learners above, they prefer to use modal verbs to perform the request. Modal verbs that they tended to use are either *bisa* 'can' or *boleh* 'may'. The use of modal verbs in students' requests is assumed that they perform transfer of English formula 'Can I.' to Indonesian.

### **Forms of address**

One of the strongest markers for showing politeness in the Indonesian context is the use of forms of address. In an Indonesian email, usually the openers '*Yang terhormat*' (Honorable) and '*Bapak*' (Mister/Sir) are used in addressing a male superior. In addition, the respectful second person pronoun '*Anda*' is used to show respect for people of a higher status rather than '*kamu*' which is used with those of equal or lower status. In table 5 below are the results of the analysis of the move of addressing comparing NS and BIPA learners.



**Table 5.** Comparison of addressing moves of NS and BIPA learners

	NS (N=9) n (%)	Learners (N=18) n (%)
<i>Bapak/Pak + Yang terhormat</i>	4 (44.44%)	13 (72.22%)
<i>Bapak/Pak</i>	4 (44.44%)	3 (16.66%)
Without <i>Bapak/Pak</i>	1 (11.11%)	2 (11.11%)

From the data above it can be seen that most of *BIPA* learners already have good knowledge about appropriate forms of address in writing an email in an Indonesian context. Only 2 (11.11%) of *BIPA* learners students used the addressee's name directly in the addressing segment. In addition, it is very surprising that there was 1 (11.11%) NS who also only used the addressee's name in addressing. Therefore, it can be concluded that both NS and *BIPA* learners understand the culturally appropriate level of politeness in terms of addressing.

### Discussion

This study aimed to analyze the differences between NS and *BIPA* learners of an intermediate level in writing email requests. In particular, the analysis is focused on the differences in use of structure and politeness between NS and *BIPA* learners in producing email requests. The results of the analysis led to the finding that both NS and *BIPA* learners included the standard elements of structure for email requests, such as addressing, background information, requesting, and gratitude for requested help, closing, and signing off. This finding confirms Zhu's (2017) study which found that both NS and NNS had similar capabilities in the use of moves in email requests. In addition, in terms of form of address, both groups of participants tended to use polite forms of address in Indonesian. This finding refutes the study done by Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) which found that NNS failed in terms of politeness and pragmatics. Thus, it can be concluded that *BIPA* learners of Indonesian already had good pragmatic knowledge like NS, although there were still some grammatical errors in *BIPA* learners' emails.

On the other hand, there are significant differences in several aspects. Firstly, NS tended to provide a solution in the form of an offer to complete the task before leave or even express willingness to be contacted during leave. This is in line with the findings of Biesenbach-Lucas (2015) which found that NS use more initiative when making requests. Meanwhile, in this study, *BIPA* learners were more likely to include a greeting and/or well-wishing segment as well as providing elaboration. I assume that the inclusion of greeting and/or well-wishing is a result of transfer from English email-writing. It is unclear to what extent the inclusion of elaboration was due to this being a routine speech act as part of request-making, or simply due to translation from the scenario text.

Furthermore, in terms of structure, *BIPA* learners were more likely to write background information first, followed by a request. Conversely, NS were more likely to make the request move first, and then follow with background information. In the context of an email request in Indonesian, normally the request is made first, then followed by the



background information. Furthermore, in accordance with (in) directness, *BIPA* learners were more likely to use a conventional indirect strategy, whereas NS were more likely to use a direct strategy. This finding confirms the theory that in unequal communication, Western culture tends more towards the use of indirect requests (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006). This strategy is considered as providing a choice for the recipient as to whether they will grant the request or not (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009). However, the indirectness produced by NS does not mean that their level of politeness was lower; rather the concept of politeness in writing emails in Indonesian is different from English contexts. In the context of Indonesian, the forms of address and word choices are the most important elements that determine the level of politeness.

### Conclusion

This study showed that *BIPA* learners of the intermediate level were able to write emails using moves that were as good as the NS of Indonesian. However, *BIPA* learners were still strongly influenced by email-writing strategies used in their first language, such as the use of greeting and/or well-wishing. However, there are still some errors related to grammar aspects in the emails produced by the *BIPA* learners. Grammar errors are a result of their intermediate proficiency in Indonesian. Finally, this study provides an overview of the differences between NS and *BIPA* learners in writing email requests in Indonesian. In addition, the results of this study can be used as learning materials that are useful for teaching pragmatics to *BIPA* learners, especially in the context of writing emails in the workplace. Some important aspects of email-writing that can be taught to *BIPA* learners in writing emails are, 1) the structure, which is a request first before the background information, 2) directness, it is better to use direct sentences but phrased with polite word choices, 3) form of address, it is better to use ‘*Yang terhormat*’ and ‘*Bapak/Ibu*’ 4) greeting and/or well-wishing; in Indonesian emails the greeting and/or well-wishing are unnecessary.

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