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Ritual frame indicating expressions used in requests in intercultural communication

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Abstract: The aim of this research was to identify whether the ritual frame indicating expression (RFIE) *please* was used by Thai intermediate-level learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) in requests in intercultural communication, as well as to determine whether the Thai intermediate-level EFL learners used any RFIEs in requests in intercultural communication. Dyadic and multiparty academic discussions between Thai university students and American university lecturers were collected, as well as those between university students who spoke English as their first language (L1) and the American university lecturers to enable a comparison. The results revealed that the RFIE *please* was used at a low frequency by a limited number of Thai university students, indicating that the requestive *please* cannot be considered an RFIE that the Thai student participants used in requests in intercultural communication. Moreover, the Thai university students used three RFIEs, namely “teacher”, “ajarn”, and the modal verb “can”. The Thai university students mainly used these three RFIEs due to politeness norms in Thai culture, which led to these three RFIEs being used extensively with speech-act heaviness. Accordingly, over-politeness was identified in the use of these three RFIEs in intercultural communication.

Keywords: ritual frame indicating expression; intercultural communication; requests; please; Thai EFL learners

1 Introduction

Recent studies of requests made by speakers of English as their first language (henceforth L1) (Isentyeva et al. 2023; Murphy and De Felice 2019) that incorporated “ritual frame indicating expressions” (henceforth RFIEs) (Kádár and House 2020a: 142; Kádár and House 2021a: 79), specifically *please*, have shed light on the use of

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politeness markers. Although requests made by learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) have been examined extensively within the fields of interlanguage pragmatics and politeness over the past two decades (Idris and Ismail 2023; Pang et al. 2023), whether EFL learners use the RFIE *please* to make requests in intercultural communication, and whether there are any RFIEs that EFL learners use to make requests in such situations remain unknown. Following the study of the RFIE *please* in the English and Chinese languages, Thai EFL learners' use of the English requestive *please* in intercultural communication was studied further in this research to provide an extensive understanding of whether Thai EFL learners used the requestive *please* as an RFIE in intercultural communication. In addition, RFIEs are not “a stand-alone concept”, but include various expressions such as “address”, “honorifics”, and “so-called ‘politeness markers’” (Kádár and House 2020a: 144). Accordingly, an investigation of any other RFIEs that the Thai EFL learners used in requests in intercultural communication is essential.

Therefore, the aim of this research was to identify whether Thai EFL learners used the RFIE *please* in requests in intercultural communication, as well as to identify whether Thai EFL learners used any RFIEs in requests in intercultural communication. The research findings shed further light on RFIEs by examining the use of the RFIE *please* and other RFIEs in intercultural communication by EFL learners from a specific linguacultural background. The two research questions (RQs) are listed below:

RQ1: Do Thai EFL learners use the RFIE *please* in requests in intercultural communication?

RQ2: Which RFIEs do Thai EFL learners use in requests in intercultural communication?

In the remainder of this paper, Section 2 provides a comprehensive review of the relevant literature. Section 3 presents the methodology for this research, and Sections 4 and 5 present the results and a discussion, followed by the conclusion in Section 6.

2 Literature review

2.1 The RFIE *please* in requests

The concept of RFIEs was proposed as an innovation in politeness markers. The change from considering *please* to be a politeness marker to considering it to be an

RFIE is based on the extent to which the requestive *please* in different linguacultures reflects an indication of individualistic politeness or whether its use is simply habitual, which is also known as conventionalization (Kádár and House 2020a, 2021a; Li and Ji 2023; Rygg and Johansen 2023). Kádár and House (2020a, 2021a, 2021b) illustrated that both the English and the Chinese forms of *please* were used frequently in several standard situations in each linguaculture, as different interactants used *please* in requests to display their awareness of the standard situations. In these cases, using *please* to show politeness was not a priority – instead, the interactants used *please* out of habit based on the conventions of their linguistic-cultural backgrounds. For example, a teacher, whose social power and social distance was higher than that of the students, used the RFIE *please* out of convention while in fact demanding that the students observed the rules in the classroom, as in “quiet, please” (Kádár and House 2020a: 154). In such cases, the interactants did not use the RFIE *please* to express individualistic politeness, but to follow conventional practice in different standard situations. Standard situations refer to “any situation where right and obligations prevail” (Kádár and House 2020a: 143), while a ritual frame is “a cluster of standard situations in which right and obligations prevail” (Kádár and House 2020a: 143). In other words, a ritual frame is communally oriented in different types of standard situations. Each interactant in any ritual frame overtly understands their rights and obligations, which results in pragmatic salience (Kádár and House 2021b). When different interactants in a standard situation in which conventionalization is a priority use a particular expression extensively to make requests, this expression may be considered an RFIE rather than a politeness marker.

Kádár and House (2020a, 2021a) found that the uses of the respective English and Chinese RFIEs meaning *please* in different standard situations (House 1989) across both linguacultures expressed different degrees of politeness in requests. Compared to the Chinese RFIE/qǐng/meaning *please*, the English RFIE *please* had a loose relationship with politeness in requests, since it was “frequently used in ancillary functions” (Kádár and House 2021a: 99). The Chinese RFIE/qǐng/and its variants, such as *could you please*, were “more speech act-heavy” and “tend[ed] to be deferential in style” due to the “historical origin as an honorific” of the Chinese RFIE/qǐng/(Kádár and House 2021a: 99).

The current study draws on academic discussions between Thai EFL learners and non-Thai university lecturers for the examination of RFIEs. Academic discussions were chosen for the study of requests for the following reasons: First, it is common for university lecturers and their students in Thailand to have discussions about how to complete different assignments based on the syllabus (Pan 2024b). The lecturers can assign individual or group work. To complete an assignment, the students and the lecturers discuss each other’s ideas until they reach a consensus.

This communication can occur in class or after class according to each lecturer's availability. Since the Thai language is dominant in daily communication in Thailand, an academic discussion between the Thai EFL learners and a non-Thai lecturer is the most frequently occurring type of intercultural communication in which Thai EFL learners use English as a lingua franca (ELF). Second, the academic discussions that occur in institutional discourse are regarded as a standard situation (Pan 2024b). On one hand, Thai EFL learners and non-Thai university lecturers have discrepancies in terms of social power and social distance, and academic discussions have power salience. The level of imposition was therefore assumed to be high (Çetinavcı 2020; Pan 2024b). On the other hand, both Thai EFL learners and non-Thai university lecturers in academic discussions must exchange ideas continuously to solve different on-going problems (Meston et al. 2022; Pan 2024b). In an academic discussion, a non-Thai lecturer must understand the on-going situation of the assignment. Therefore, the lecturer has the right and obligation to request different information regarding the assignment. At the same time, the lecturer has the obligation to answer any question posed by the Thai EFL learners clearly to ensure that they follow the lecturer's requirements for completing the remainder of the assignment. By contrast, the Thai EFL learners have the right and obligation to request any information regarding the assignment, including whether the on-going situation of the assignment meets the lecturer's requirements, the problems that they are encountering in the procedure, and whether the lecturer has any suggestions about the assignment. Thus, requests for different purposes occur naturally during such discussions (Çetinavcı 2020; Shimamoto 2022). In addition, since non-Thai lecturers have higher social status compared to Thai EFL learners, Thai EFL learners must make use of linguistic cues in requests to manifest politeness, resulting in the lowest level of imposition when making requests.

2.2 Requests made by Thai EFL learners

The studies of politeness in requests made by EFL learners from different linguistic-cultural backgrounds have always received attention because "a request is one of the most frequently used speech acts in a person's daily life" (Idris and Ismail 2023: 981). Several studies have found that EFL learners tended to use directness more often than indirectness in requests (Alfghe and Mohammadzadeh 2021; AlShraah et al. 2023), whereas a few studies have found that EFL learners used indirectness more often (Çetinavcı 2020; Shafran and Stavans 2023). One main reason for the differences in the findings was the participants' different levels of English proficiency in various studies. In general, participants with "a higher proficiency level" tended to use "conventionally indirect and non-conventionally indirect strategies" to express

politeness when making requests (AlShraah et al. 2023: 61). Furthermore, EFL learners generally used indirectness in combination with other types of linguistic cues, including honorifics and external modifications, more frequently when they interacted with people who had higher social power, greater social distance, or levels of imposition (Çetinavcı 2020; Izadi 2022).

Politeness is a significant component of the Thai culture (Prombut 2020; Tawilapakul 2022), in which maintaining social harmony and harmonious interpersonal relationships are of the utmost importance (Pan 2022; Pathanasin and Eschstruth 2022; Tawilapakul 2022). “[F]ace is an important concept in interpersonal relationships” in order to achieve harmony (Pan 2024a: 229). Indirectness in Thai communication is ubiquitous in order to grant face to others or to prevent them from losing face (Pan 2024a; Prombut 2020). Indirectness is also displayed in requests that Thai EFL learners make.

Previous research found that Thai EFL learners tended to use indirect interrogatives in requests, such as *can I ask* (Pan 2022). Thai EFL learners also used indirect interrogatives when making requests online, such as *would you mind* (Pathanasin and Eschstruth 2022), and tended to use honorifics to instigate requests, particularly when they intended to address requests to people with higher social status, such as lecturers and parents (Prombut 2020). These formal forms of address reflect their respect for elders “to conform to the social norms of Thai culture” (Pathanasin and Eschstruth 2022: 199). Following the formal address, the Thai EFL learners used indirect strategies to make requests, followed by certain external modifications in some instances, such as providing a reason (Ambele and Boonsuk 2018).

Despite the results illustrated above, studies of Thai EFL learners’ requests in intercultural communication have several flaws. First, the use of discourse completion tests (DCTs) has become controversial in the studies of requests (Ackermann 2023). Although a “DCT was used most frequently” in previous research (Pang et al. 2023: 45), the elicited data “tend[ed] to document ideal situations rather than real ones” (Çetinavcı 2020: 286). Conflicting findings have been observed when using DCTs in different studies (Alfge and Mohammadzadeh 2021; AlShraah et al. 2023). These conflicting findings may have been due to the reliability of the data elicited via the DCTs, as several researchers used a written DCT rather than allowing the participants to reply orally (Pan 2023; Pang et al. 2023). Similar to the studies of general EFL learners’ requests worldwide, many studies of Thai EFL learners’ requests have only used DCTs to elicit the data (Prombut 2020). Since little research has included naturally occurring data, the ways in which Thai EFL learners make use of different linguistic cues in requests in intercultural communication remain unknown. Moreover, cultural factors, such as social norms, have an impact on EFL learners from different linguacultural backgrounds in terms of their use of direct or

indirect requests with different linguistic cues (McConachy and Spencer-Oatey 2021; Spencer-Oatey and Kádár 2021). The influence of cultural factors was also found in the use of RFIEs. According to Kádár and House (2020b), L1 English speakers considered L1 Chinese speakers' use of the RFIE *please* in several standard situations to be over-politeness. This different understanding was caused by the different social norms and social values regarding politeness in interpersonal relationships in interactions (Kádár and House 2020b; Spencer-Oatey and Kádár 2021).

Accordingly, the RFIEs that Thai EFL learners used in academic discussions in ELF were investigated in this research. In this regard, the present study informs both the study of requests and the study of the RFIEs that Thai EFL learners use in intercultural communication. Thai EFL learners may employ a variety of linguistic cues as different request strategies in order to maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships and to show politeness to their lecturers. Whether the frequent use of a certain linguistic cue is due to individual politeness or due to convention increases the understanding of EFL learners' use of RFIEs in requests in intercultural communication. Furthermore, since these linguistic cues in Thai EFL learners' requests were produced in intercultural communications in which different interactants had different linguacultural backgrounds, the linguistic cues that the Thai EFL learners used in requests may have resulted in inappropriateness (Kádár and House 2020b; Kecskés 2022; Pan 2024a). Hence, the examination of Thai EFL learners' use of RFIEs in intercultural communication is essential. Drawing on the series of studies of the RFIE *please* by Kádár and House reviewed above, Thai EFL learners' use of the RFIE *please* in intercultural communication was examined first in this research, followed by the examination of the use of any other RFIEs that these learners used in intercultural communication.

3 Methodology

3.1 Participants and data collection

The current study involved 32 Thai EFL university students, as well as 30 non-Thai university students whose L1 was English, including 18 American, 7 Australian, and 5 British students. Moreover, six American university lecturers participated in the research. Hence, 68 participants were involved in this research in total, of which 43 were males (63 %) and 25 were females (37 %). However, gender was not considered as a variable in this study. All the Thai student participants, whose ages ranged from 18 to 23, were in year one to year three and were studying at the same university in Bangkok, Thailand, during the data collection. All the non-Thai student participants, whose ages ranged from 19 to 22, were in year two to year four and were studying at

four different universities in Bangkok, Thailand, during the data collection; 16 of them were full-time students and 14 were exchange students. All the participants involved in this research consented to the research process prior to the data collection.

All the Thai student participants had studied EFL for between 13 and 16 years. None of the participants had studied English in an English-speaking country at the time of the data collection. All the participants had an intermediate level of English proficiency based on their recent, valid scores for international English examinations, such as the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe 2020). Intermediate-level Thai EFL university students were selected because the intermediate level is the generally required level of English proficiency for Thai university students (Pan 2022).

Following Kádár and House (2020a), data from both dyadic and multiparty communications were collected. Each Thai student participant was requested to record an academic discussion with a non-Thai lecturer in a dyadic intercultural communication situation, and to record an academic group discussion with a non-Thai lecturer in a multiparty intercultural communication situation. The student participants had been allocated to groups of four to five participants prior to the data collection. The researcher collected 32 dyadic intercultural communications (7 h of audio recordings) and 5 multiparty intercultural communications (2 h of audio recordings).

To make the situations comparable, each non-Thai participant was requested to record a dyadic academic discussion with a non-Thai university lecturer and a multiparty academic group discussion with a non-Thai lecturer. English was used as the language in both types of the aforementioned communications. The researcher collected 30 dyadic L1 English communications (7.5 h of audio recordings) and 5 multiparty L1 English communications (2 h of audio recordings). The data in this research were considered to be naturally occurring data because all the communications occurred naturally and the participants were only requested to record them.

Once all the recordings had been submitted to the researcher, the student participants were asked to complete a follow-up online survey in English consisting of two questions to elicit their views regarding politeness in communication. The first question was, “Do you think you were polite in each discussion?”. The second question was, “In what ways did you attempt to be polite?”. All the non-Thai lecturers were also asked two questions in the follow-up online survey. The first question was, “Do you think the students were polite in each discussion?”. The second question was, “In what ways did they attempt to be polite?”.

3.2 Data analysis

The ELAN MacOS Version 2023 was used to transcribe the spoken data (ELAN 2023). It is a program that provides researchers with different annotation tiers for audio or video recordings based on the Extensible Markup Language (XML) format. Two corpora were built for the present research, namely the Intercultural Communication Corpus (ICC) and the English Communication Corpus (ECC). The ICC contained 62,914 tokens and the ECC contained 79,286 tokens.

A mixed-method approach combining both quantitative and qualitative analyses was adopted in this study. Following Kádár and House (2020a, 2021a), the bottom-up approach was used to examine whether the Thai EFL learners used the RFIE *please* in requests in intercultural communication. The bottom-up approach allowed for the identification of the RFIE *please* in the different given contexts. First, the word *please*, as well as its variants including *can/could you please*, *if you please*, and any other variants in which *please* was used in requests, were retrieved using AntConc (2023). According to Kádár and House (2020a), an RFIE should be above 2.5 % of the raw frequency (RF) in order to be considered an RFIE in a standard situation. Two raters who studied requests in politeness and RFIEs examined each instance to determine whether the use of *please* was to make a request (the inter-rater reliability was 0.992). In addition, the number of student participants who used the requestive *please* was calculated because it is assumed that an RFIE that is simply used out of habit will be produced by the majority of the interactants (Kádár and House 2020a, 2021a). Moreover, the students' and lecturers' responses to the interview questions could reveal the perspectives of politeness directly from the participants with different linguacultural backgrounds.

The bottom-up approach was also used to determine whether the Thai EFL learners used any RFIEs in requests in intercultural communication. This research followed the direct and indirect strategies used in previous studies of requests. AntConc was used to retrieve the frequently used keywords when making requests, as shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Examples of direct and indirect strategies in requests (adapted from previous research).

Strategies	Sub-categories	Examples
Direct	–	You must/have to
Indirect	Conventional indirect	Can you; could you; would you; May I; how about
	Unconventional indirect	I need to; I have to; I would like to

The steps in determining whether the Thai EFL learners used any RFIEs when making requests in intercultural communication were the same as those used to determine the use of the RFIE *please* presented above. It should be noted that the ECC was mainly used to compare the different understandings of the use of any RFIE from the linguacultural perspective following Kádár and House’s (2020a, 2021a) recent studies of RFIEs. Hence, it was not considered the norm for the use of any of the RFIEs in this research.

4 Results

4.1 The disappearance of *please*

Table 2 below presents the RFs for the use of *please* in requests in both the ICC and the ECC.

There were nine instances of the use of the requestive *please* by the Thai participants and eight instances of use by the English L1 student participants. All the instances of the use of the requestive *please* were in requestive interrogatives that started with “can” or “could”. No use of *please* as a single requestive word was found in either corpus. As shown in Table 2, compared to the English L1 student participants, the Thai participants only used the requestive *please* in the requestive interrogatives that collocated with “can”, as the three examples below demonstrate:

- (1) P09 (00:06:34)
<Dyadic P09 key=“request”>
Teacher can you repeat again please?
- (2) P15 (00:21:45)
<Multi P15 key=“request”>
Can I ask please uh if we need to delete uh delete this formula?

Table 2: The use of *please* in requests in both the ICC and the ECC.

English	RFs in Dyadic		RFs in Multiparty		All		Threshold	
	ICC	ECC	ICC	ECC	ICC	ECC	ICC	ECC
<i>Can...please</i>	2	1	7	3	9	4	1	1
<i>Could...please</i>	0	0	0	4	0	4	1	1
All	2	1	7	7	9	8	1	1

(3) P28 (00:17:28)

<Multi P15 key="request">

Ajarn, can I please ask if um we should give more example in the middle?

As examples (1) and (3) above show, the Thai participants began requests by using an honorific, such as “teacher” in (1) and “ajarn” in (3). The word “ajarn”/aa-jaan/is a transliterated word from the Thai language, meaning “university lecturers”. It is generally used by Thai students when interacting with university lecturers in English (Huttayavilaiphan 2022; Pan 2022). A total of six out of nine instances (67 %) included the same or similar honorifics as the ones demonstrated in examples (1) and (3) above. This shows that the Thai students tended to use honorifics in requests in intercultural communication (Ambele and Boonsuk 2018; Pan 2022; Prombut 2020). Following the honorifics, the Thai participants used “can I” or “can you” to lead the requestive interrogatives as a conventionally indirect strategy (Çetinavcı 2020; Oktavia et al. 2023). As the three examples demonstrate, the Thai participants inserted the requestive *please* in different positions, including at the end of the interrogative in (1), after “can I ask” in (2), and after “can I” to produce the expression “can I please” in (3). The positions of the requestive *please* differed from those in the L1 English student participants’ utterances, in which the expressions “can I please” and “can you please” were used, as demonstrated in examples (4) and (5) below:

(4) P39 (00:08:37)

<Multi P39 key="request">

Can I please ask whether this paragraph should be deleted?

(5) P52 (00:16:26)

<Multi P52 key="request">

Can you please give us some more advice?

We haven’t got a clue.

As both examples demonstrate, the English L1 university student participants did not use any honorifics to initiate their requests. By contrast, they used a conventional indirectness strategy by saying “can I please” or “can you please”. In addition, certain external modifications were found following the requestive interrogatives used by the English L1 university student participants, such as “we haven’t got a clue” in example (5), whereas the Thai participants rarely used external modifications.

Moreover, no Thai participant used “could...please” in requests, while four instances were found in the ECC, as the two examples below demonstrate:

(6) P46 (00:26:18)

<Multi P46 key="request">

Could you please allow me to have a look?

- (7) P58 (00:12:35)
 <Multi P58 key="request">
Could I please discuss about it with my mate later?

As these examples show, the L1 English university student participants used “could you please” and “could I please” as requestive interrogatives. The same requestive pattern was also found in previous research on their use by L1 English speakers (House 1989; Islentyeva et al. 2023).

Based on the threshold proposed by Kádár and House (2020a), namely that an RFIE should be above 2.5 % of the RFs, the use of the requestive *please* satisfied this condition in both corpora, as illustrated in Table 2. However, it was noted that only five Thai participants (16 %) and three L1 English participants (10 %) used the requestive *please* in both dyadic and multiparty academic discussions, indicating that the requestive *please* was not used frequently by the younger generation of university students in intercultural academic discussions that were conducted in English with English-speaking university lecturers. Unlike several previous studies in which the single requestive *please* was found (Islentyeva et al. 2023; Kádár and House 2020a, 2021a; Murphy and De Felice 2019), there was no use of the single requestive *please* by either the student participants or the lecturers in the present research. This divergent finding may have been due to the different backgrounds of the participants, as well as differences in the experimental settings. In contrast to the use of existing corpora, such as the British National Corpus 2014 (Islentyeva et al. 2023), this research used data obtained from university students, and the type of communication was institutional discourse. Therefore, the results above reflect that neither the L1 English university students nor the Thai intermediate-level EFL learners used the word *please* to make requests in academic discussions. Although both the Thai and the L1 English participants used the word *please* in requestive interrogatives in combination with the words “can” and “could”, the frequency of the use of these requestive interrogatives including the word *please* was low. In addition, the number of participants who used the requestive interrogatives with the word *please* was limited. Furthermore, the student participants’ responses to the interview questions did not mention the use of the requestive *please* although they did mention other linguistic cues, as will be discussed in the following sections. Under these circumstances, despite the satisfaction with the threshold from the quantitative perspective, based on the close examination of the use of *please* by the Thai participants, the word *please* was not considered to be an RFIE in intercultural communication.

4.2 RFIEs in intercultural communication

Based on Table 1 (see Section 3.2), all utterances regarding both direct and indirect request strategies illustrated by the Thai and the L1 English participants were

initially confirmed by both raters. AntConc was subsequently used to sort the frequency list of the individual words that the participants used in relation to requests. This step was implemented to follow Kádár and House’s (2020a, 2021a) study of RFIEs based on the single word *please*. The threshold for the potential RFIEs (2.5 %) was considered first. Potential RFIEs that did not reach this threshold were excluded. Moreover, Kádár and House (2020a: 144) stated that any expression that indicated awareness of the “context of situation and the interpersonal relationships in the context” can be considered an RFIE, including honorifics. Thus, three individual words that had the potential to be RFIEs that the Thai intermediate-level EFL learners used in academic discussions were found, as illustrated in Table 3 below.

The word “teacher” was used in 52 instances, 33 instances (63 %) of which were in relation to requests made by the Thai participants. As illustrated in the previous section, the Thai student participants tended to use “teacher” first before asking for something from the lecturer. This honorific reveals the Thai students’ respect for the university lecturers according to the social norms in Thai culture (Pan 2024a; Tawilapakul 2022). This view was also revealed in the Thai student participants’ responses to the interview questions, as the three examples below demonstrate:

- (8) *I always like, uh, call “teacher” because it is polite.* (P02)
- (9) *My teacher in school taught me to respect old people. So, uh, I must call them like “teacher,” like “father,” to show my respect.* (P10)
- (10) *I think when I speak English, I still need to think [in] Thai first. And, when we, uh, use Thai, we have to call like “Mr.” or “teacher,” because it is to show my respect to them.* (P17)

The examples of the Thai student participants’ responses reflect that the use of the honorific “teacher” prior to making requests was largely influenced by Thai culture

Table 3: Use of *teacher*, *ajarn*, and *can* in requests in both the ICC and the ECC.

English	RFs in Dyadic		RFs in Multiparty		All		Threshold	
	ICC	ECC	ICC	ECC	ICC	ECC	ICC	ECC
<i>Teacher</i>	14	0	19	0	33	0	1	1
<i>Ajarn</i>	16	0	25	0	41	0	1	1
<i>Can</i>	34	25	43	46	77	71	2	2

and social norms, as younger generations are expected to respect their elders (Huttayavilaiphan 2022; Pan 2024a). Since university lecturers have higher social status than their students, and the students' requests are assumed to impose on the lecturers' personal space (Çetinavcı 2020), the Thai student participants used the honorific "teacher" before making requests to show their respect, and to mitigate the degree of imposition when requesting (Ackermann 2023).

Similar to the use of the honorific "teacher", the word "ajarn", which is a Thai word meaning "university lecturers", was also used frequently in the Thai student participants' requests. The word "ajarn" was used in 58 instances, 41 (71 %) of which were in relation to the Thai participants' requests. Both the honorifics "teacher" and "ajarn" were used not only before the requestive interrogatives shown in examples (1) and (3) in the previous section, but also before a few instances of direct or unconventionally indirect requests, as shown in examples (11) and (12) below:

- (11) P02 (00:35:41)
 <Multi P02 key="request">
Teacher, I wanna ask should I use more uh academic language.
- (12) P10 (00:20:57)
 <Multi P10 key="request">
Ajarn, I would like to correct it and show you next time.

In contrast to the situation in the ECC in which no use of either honorific was found at the beginning of the requests that the L1 English student participants made, the Thai participants tended to insert honorifics at the beginning of requests. The RFs for the use of "teacher" and "ajarn" in relation to the requests made by the Thai student participants in both dyadic and multiparty academic discussions reached the threshold proposed by Kádár and House (2020a), namely that an RFIE should be above 2.5 % of the RFs, as illustrated in Table 3. In addition, a total of 21 Thai student participants (66 %) used either "teacher", "ajarn", or both when making requests to the university lecturers, indicating that a relatively high number of the Thai participants involved in this research used these honorifics when making requests. Based on all of the analyses above, the Thai student participants' use of the words "teacher" and "ajarn" in relation to requests in academic discussions, means that these two words can be considered RFIEs.

Moreover, as Table 3 illustrates, the modal verb "can" was used frequently in requests in both corpora. The Thai student participants used the modal verb "can" frequently in both dyadic and multiparty academic discussions. There were 31 out of 34 uses of "can" (91 %) by Thai student participants in dyadic academic discussions, and 38 out of 43 uses of "can" (88 %) in multiparty academic discussions, as shown in examples (13) and (14) below.

- (13) P03 (00:08:46)
 <Dyadic P03 key="request">
Uh teacher can you tell us uh what did you mean?
- (14) P23 (00:17:18)
 <Multi P23 key="request">
Teacher can I ask you about this [this uh this part?
We are not understand.

Compared to examples (1) and (3), the main difference was the disappearance of the requestive *please* in the two examples above, in which the honorific “teacher” and the modal verb “can” were used at the beginning of the requestive interrogatives. Furthermore, an external modification was used in (14) in an attempt to support the request. The use of the honorific and the external modification may have been intended to mitigate the potential imposition on others (Ackermann 2023; Pathanasin and Eschstruth 2022). The frequency of the Thai student participants’ use of “can” in requests was similar to that of the L1 English participants, as Table 3 illustrates. In addition, a total of 30 Thai student participants (94 %) used “can” to make requests, thus indicating the Thai student participants’ ubiquitous use of “can” in requests in academic discussions. This may indicate that the Thai student participants’ use of “can” was habitual rather than demonstrating individualistic politeness. Furthermore, in the responses to the interviews, 21 of the 32 (66 %) Thai student participants mentioned that they had shown politeness to the lecturers because they asked questions politely and indirectly, as the two original responses below illustrate:

- (15) *I think I am polite because I just use questions to ask [the] teacher, and I don’t try to directly argue with teacher. (P09)*
- (16) *I use questions and try to be like indirect to ask questions to teachers. I think this is the way to show politeness. (P24)*

As the responses reveal, the Thai student participants’ frequent uses of “can” to begin the requestive interrogatives showed that they were aware that they had used indirect requestive interrogatives to demonstrate discursive politeness to the lecturers (Huttayavilaiphan 2022; Kecskés 2022; Spencer-Oatey and Kádár 2021). Both of the examples above reflect that the Thai students used indirectness to show politeness to the lecturers. Accordingly, it was concluded that the Thai EFL participants’ uses of “can” in requests in the academic discussions with power salience could be regarded as RFIEs.

5 Discussion

This research was an attempt to further investigate the RFIEs used by EFL learners in a specific type of intercultural communication. The term RFIE is a comparatively new term that Kádár and House (2020a, 2020b, 2021a) proposed in the field of politeness studies in recent years. The requestive *please*, which was considered a politeness marker in earlier research, was found to be an RFIE in many standard situations in which its use was due to conventionalization rather than to express individual politeness. In contrast to these studies of the requestive *please*, the present research found that the Thai university student participants with intermediate-level English proficiency rarely used the requestive *please* in requests in academic discussions in which the requestees were university lecturers who had higher social status than the student participants. Hence, this “internal modifier” that was traditionally used to express politeness, either to show individual politeness or out of habit, appears to have been abandoned by the younger generation (Ackermann 2023: 363). Based on the Thai participants’ responses to the interviews shown in (8) to (10) above, the use of indirectness meant that “please-less requests were already polite” (Murphy and De Felice 2019: 78). This is in line with the L1 English university student participants’ responses to the interviews, as demonstrated in the two examples below:

- (17) *I’m sure I’ve been polite to the lecturers since I used soft tones and interrogatives.* (P46)
- (18) *Oh I’ve always asked questions to them, and um yeah, I don’t like demand something when I talk to teachers, but I’ve tried to ask for permission.* (P51)

None of the student participants involved in this research mentioned the use of *please* to express politeness, whereas they were aware that the use of indirectness and interrogatives was a way of showing politeness to their university lecturers, as stated directly in the interview responses. In this regard, the younger generation may not consider the requestive *please* to be essential for expressing politeness when making requests in their L1 or in intercultural communication.

The use of requestive interrogatives beginning with the modal verb “can” when the Thai student participants made requests to their university lecturers in the academic discussions, revealed that indirectness was a manifestation of politeness (Pan 2022, 2024b). As demonstrated by (13) and (14), the requests in the academic discussions made by the Thai student participants had potential high-level imposition on the lecturers (Çetinaıvı 2020). Both student participants in (13) and (14)

requested for the lecturer to further explain the information that either had already been stated by the lecturer or they did not understand. Hence, these requests imposed on the lecturers' time and energy (Izadi 2022; Pan 2024a). However, students have the right and obligation to fully understand the lecturers' requirements of the assignments. Under these circumstances, they chose to use the modal verb "can" to make indirect requests to show politeness and avoid arguing with the lecturers, as the interview responses demonstrated by (15) and (16). Based on the results illustrated above, as well as the impact of Thai culture, the use of "can" that preceded the Thai EFL participants' indirect requests is denoted as an RFIE to indicate their awareness of showing politeness, in that indirect requests show their respect for their lecturers. Accordingly, the observation that only the Thai EFL participants used "can" may not indicate the lower social status of the Thai EFL participants compared to the lecturers.

Unlike the L1 English student participants, the Thai student participants used honorifics when making requests. As shown in Table 3, the honorific "ajarn" was used more often than was the honorific "teacher". The extensive use of honorifics in the requests that the Thai participants made reflects Thai linguacultural convention that the forms of address, the terms of address, or honorifics, are extremely important in the maintenance of interpersonal relationships in communication (Pathanasin and Eschstruth 2022; Tawilapakul 2022). According to recent studies of RFIEs, RFIEs that have the same literal meanings in different languages have different degrees of being "speech act-heavy" (Kádár and House 2021a: 99; Li and Ji 2023: 464). For example, the English RFIE *please* has a looser relationship with politeness, whereas the Chinese RFIE/qǐng/has more speech-act heaviness. As in Chinese culture, politeness is regarded as the most important factor in Thai culture, and is conveyed via many social behaviors, including verbal communication, showing respect for elders, and avoiding imposing on others' space (Spencer-Oatey and Kádár 2021). The influence of Thai culture on the use of the honorifics "teacher" and "ajarn", as well as the modal verb "can", was revealed by the Thai student participants' responses to the interviews, as demonstrated in (8) to (10). Moreover, the modal verb "can" was also used extensively by the L1 English university student participants when making requests, which is in line with the findings of previous research that involved different L1 English participants (Isentyeva et al. 2023). Therefore, the requestive interrogatives led by the modal verb "can" for the purpose of making requests appeared to be substitutes for the use of the requestive *please* in requests, and was a new RFIE in requests in both L1 English and in intercultural communication. Compared to the L1 English student participants, the use of the honorifics "teacher", "ajarn", and the modal verb "can" in requests made by the Thai student participants displayed more speech-act heaviness.

It is interesting that the responses to the interviews with the six university lecturers regarding the politeness expressed by the Thai student participants revealed the issue of over-politeness, as the two responses below demonstrate:

- (19) *Well, I believe Thai students are too polite sometimes. Actually, there's no need to call me "ajarn" all the time, but they still do. (P63)*
- (20) *I appreciate Thai students' politeness. It's a good thing, but they could have been more direct sometimes, even with requests. They've brought this Thai politeness and it's a bit too much indeed. (P65)*

Although over-politeness has not been discussed frequently in the studies of EFL learners' expressions of politeness, previous research has noted the phenomenon of over-politeness in intercultural communication (Kecskés 2022; Spencer-Oatey and Kádár 2021). First, from the university lecturers' perspectives, the Thai student participants used honorifics too frequently. As shown in the response in (19), the honorific "ajarn" does not need to be used all the time. Second, as shown in the response in (20), the Thai student participants could actually use a direct strategy to ask the lecturers questions. The American university lecturers appeared to prefer directness to indirectness during discussions. In this regard, Thai EFL learners can be guided to become aware that the use of direct strategies in requests is allowed in intercultural communication.

The issue of over-politeness that was revealed in the interview responses reflected the influence of the different cultural factors in the East and West (Huttayavilaiphan 2022; Spencer-Oatey and Kádár 2021). While the Thai student participants attempted to use formal terms of address and indirectness to mitigate the imposition entailed in requests (Ackermann 2023), the American university lecturers expected the students to address them less formally and to ask them questions directly. This discrepancy indicates the differences in the speech-act heaviness of "teacher", "ajarn", and the modal verb "can". In other words, due to the cultural differences, RFIEs that are speech-act heavy should be used less often in intercultural communication, because their excessive use may lead to the perception of over-politeness. Hence, Thai EFL learners should increase their intercultural awareness when using ELF to make requests.

6 Conclusions

Based on the findings of this research, certain RFIEs were found in requests in intercultural communication, such as "teacher", "ajarn", and "can", while other RFIEs that are used in different L1 communications were not, such as the RFIE *please*.

Theoretically, the RFIEs that are used in requests in intercultural communication may be influenced by the interactants’ L1s. In addition, the RFIEs that were used in requests in intercultural communication demonstrated discrepancies in their speech-act heaviness due to the influence of the EFL learners’ linguacultural backgrounds. Moreover, the rare use of the RFIE *please* by the younger generation indicated that the use of certain RFIEs is changing over time. Conversely, over-politeness was noted when the Thai student participants used the RFIEs with their lecturers who had higher social status in academic discussions. Hence, in pedagogical terms, the pervasive use of certain RFIEs in intercultural communication should be avoided to maintain the smoothness of the interactions.

Furthermore, naturally occurring data were used in this study. Actual requests produced by Thai EFL learners could therefore be seen in this research. This directly reflected their use of RFIEs in the academic discussions that frequently occur in institutional discourse. As there are few existing spoken corpora of Thai EFL learners’ use of English, this research only used academic discussions as the data for the analysis. Hence, to expand on the studies of the RFIEs used by EFL learners in intercultural communication, future research may consider using a variety of spoken genres to confirm the findings of this research.

Appendix: Conventions of the transcription used in this research

All participants’ names are pseudonyms.

<>	XML format for decoding information
[Repetition of the same word
key =	Marking the speech act: request
(00:00:00)	The start time of the example

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