



## Exploring Syntactic Derivation: Analysis of Clause Projections in Undergraduate Students' Requests

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### Abstract

*Students' request clauses are widely studied pragmatically. However, limited syntactic analysis has been observed. The present study utilized a descriptive qualitative research design to syntactically analyze the maximal projections and recursions of thirty-two (32) request clauses sent by undergraduate students to their professors. The clauses included in this study are all written in English. The analyzed clauses of students often use the Tense Phrase (TP) and the Complementizer Phrase (CP) to project their requests. Furthermore, the paper's request clauses usually merge an Infinitival Tense Phrase with a Finite Tense Phrase. This made TP the most recurring projection. Conversely, CP did not recur frequently, as it is commonly used as a projection through Tense-to-Complement (T-to-C) Movement. It is concluded that students utilize this principle when framing an indirect request. Meanwhile, they use TP as the head projection of their requests when constructing a direct request. Moreover, both syntactic strategies are initiated using modal verbs. Therefore, it is inferred that the request clauses of the students use modal verbs as the head act of their requests. Finally, a comparative study between various contexts of request is recommended to have a holistic understanding of the syntactic features present in request clauses.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background of the Study

Syntactic studies related to English for academic purposes have been widely explored. Maamuujav et al. (2021) described a high-quality academic statement as one that is longer and varied. Specifically, they utilize greater clausal subordination and complex syntactic structures. These include the utilization of finite adverbial clauses, WH complement clauses, verb + that-clauses, and clausal coordinating conjunctions (Ahmad et al., 2024; Ahmad et al., 2023). This is agreed by the paper of Zhou et al. (2023), which concluded that academic discourse has a degree of sophistication and elaboration of grammatical principles. This specialized form of English includes request clauses, which have also gained various research interests. On and Meir (2022) compared the request clauses in English and Hebrew. Their paper revealed that English speakers prefer to structure their request clauses as an interrogative statement while Hebrew speakers frame their requests in declarative form. Moreover, a comparison of different English speakers revealed that Indonesian English speakers dominantly use interrogative structure in framing their requests, while Australian English speakers often use a declarative form (Akmal et al., 2022).

### **1.2.Clause Construction of Academic Requests**

Various studies have proven that variation of clause types exists in framing request statements. Interestingly, in an academic context, learners are fond of expressing their requests using varied linguistic symbols (Malmir & Taji, 2021). Specifically, undergraduate students use direct strategies such as hedged performatives, unhedged performatives, and mood derivable. They also use indirect strategies such as query preparation and scope stating (dela Cruz-Rudio, 2025; Shafran & Stavans, 2023). Moreover, it was documented that the request clauses of students are structured in simple, complex, and compound clauses (Shafran & Stavans, 2023). This is aligned with Malmir and Taji's (2021) paper, which specified that students tend to structure their requests in sentential and clausal forms instead of phrasal and lexical forms. Elaborately, the syntactic complexity of request clauses is claimed to be progressing from simple to complex as an interlocutor develops his/her fluency in a language (Routarinne & Ahlholm, 2021). Consequently, the language proficiency of an interlocutor limits him/her in choosing appropriate lexicon that will represent their request. As a result, they tend to overgeneralize and be affected by their first language (Al Rahbi et al., 2023).

### **1.3.Request Clauses in EFL and ESL**

It was proven in various related literature above that language proficiency affects how one composes his/her request clause (Routarinne & Ahlholm, 2021; Al Rahbi et al., 2023). In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speakers and English as a Second Language (ESL) speakers, it is said that both categories of English speakers have a preference of framing their requests indirectly (Shafran & Stavans, 2023). However, ESL speakers tend to utilize more linguistic features, which indicates the richness of their requests compared to EFL speakers (Shafran & Stavans, 2023; Phi, 2023). Moreover, it was indicated in the paper of Zhang and Tong (2025) that ESL speakers struggle in operationalizing their requests by overly using direct and imperative expressions. This shows a dominant preference for active verb voice, which affirms the results of Kranich et al.'s (2021) paper that ESL speakers use both direct and indirect strategies in framing their requests. Namely, they use imperatives for direct requests and query preparatory for indirect requests. Meanwhile, EFL speakers tend to integrate the cultural implications of their native language in expressing their requests. Therefore, this suggests insufficient pragmatic competence of EFL speakers in framing their requests (Phi, 2023). This extends the conclusions of Qin (2023), who argues the importance of practical and interactive feedback provision for EFL speakers to raise their pragmatic awareness in constructing request clauses. Finally, EFL speakers were found to be using varied forms of modifiers (e.g., lexical downgraders, syntactic downgraders, grounders) to lessen the imposition of their requests (Poulos & Smits, 2023).

### **1.4.Request Strategies in Syntax and Pragmatics**

It is claimed that there is no interface between syntax and pragmatics. However, each constituent of a syntactic structure contributes to the contextual information that helps convey meaning. Therefore, it is argued that syntax needs to be considered in analyzing a discourse using a pragmatic lens (Wiltschko, 2022). This aligns with the idea that different speakers of English consider the syntactic "appropriateness" of their requests in various social contexts (Esquivel, 2024). This argument is evident in various related studies as they document the pragmatic strategies applied by English speakers in constructing their request clauses in an academic setting. Elaborately, dela Cruz-Rudio (2025) discovered that students tend to associate some politeness markers of their first language (L1) in constructing English requests.

Aside from this, students also maximize the use of different syntactic modifiers (e.g., modals, tenses, clause forces) to amplify the politeness of their requests (Oktavia et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2022). These help them lessen the imposition of their requests (AlAfnan & dela Cruz-Rudio, 2023).

Operationalizing this concept, it was noted that university students frequently use direct requests having ‘mood derivable’ and ‘want statement’ as their most preferred strategy (Ilyas et al., 2025). Moreover, it was documented by Netra et al. (2024) that students use query-preparatory and suggestory formulae as their indirect request strategies. Comparing ESL and EFL undergraduate students, it was found that both speakers have a preference for constructing their academic requests using conventionally indirect strategies (Alshraah & Daradkeh, 2021; Saud, 2024; Bilal & Sana, 2024). The results presented prove the interaction between syntax and pragmatics. Therefore, compelling pragmatic analysis demands deep syntactic knowledge and consideration (Muis et al., 2022).

### **1.5. Research Gap**

The related studies synthesized above reveal that the request clauses of various English speakers are widely studied. The existing studies prove that the syntactic understanding of these clauses amplifies their pragmatic implications (Wiltschko, 2022). However, most of the reviewed literature dwelt on the pragmatic strategies applied by students. Elaborately, the paper of Saud (2024) focused on comparing the politeness strategies applied by EFL and ESL speakers in constructing their requests. Moreover, AlAfnan and dela Cruz-Rudio’s (2023) paper compared the politeness strategies applied by Filipino and Malaysian students. Therefore, the reviewed related literature evidences the need for a study that focuses on the syntactic derivation of students’ request clauses. To address this gap, the present study has analyzed the clause projections in undergraduate students’ request clauses.

The present study has contributed to the existing knowledge related to student requests as it highlights the common syntactic structure of these clauses. Furthermore, this paper could help better understand their pragmatic implications by unraveling the syntactic derivation of the pragmatic strategies applied in various request clauses. Moreover, this paper is found to be significant for language and communication researchers, professors, and students. First, the present study is significant to language and communication researchers since it extends the existing knowledge related to request clauses. Second, this paper may serve as a guide for students in effectively constructing their requests. Finally, this study raises awareness of how requests are framed. Therefore, this could help teachers and professors perceive politeness, rudeness, urgency, and respect.

### **1.6. Statement of the Problem**

This study analyzed the common clause projections employed by undergraduate students in constructing request clauses addressed to their professors. Specifically, it answered the following questions:

1. What maximal projections are present in undergraduate students’ request clauses?
2. Which maximal projections recur most frequently in undergraduate students’ request clauses?

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Considering the earlier-mentioned variables and objectives, the present study is guided by the theoretical framework discussed below:

### **2.1. Minimalist Program**

This model of grammar analysis was introduced by Noam Chomsky. Its primary objective is to simplify the analysis of a language's grammar, shifting from the traditional descriptive rules to a minimalist explanation of grammatical principles. Chomsky (1993), as documented by Radford (2009), introduced the minimalist program's (MP) two core principles: the headedness and binarity principles. The *headedness principle* states that every nonterminal node in a syntactic structure is the projection of a head word. On the other hand, the *binarity principle* specifies that every syntactic structure must be analyzed in binary branching. These principles guide the core operations of MP, which are merger and movement. *Merger* is an operation that combines words and phrases into a larger unit (clauses), while *movement* allows elements to shift positions in compliance with the syntactic requirements.

MP uses the categories Complementizer Phrase (CP), Tense Phrase (TP), and Verb Phrase (VP) as the primary projections of clauses. In addition, MP also assumes that other word-level categories, such as Noun Phrase (NP), Determiner Phrase (DP), Adjectival Phrase (AdjP), Adverbial Phrase (AdvP), Prepositional Phrase (PP), and Quantifier Phrase (QP), may also have a projection along with CP, TP, and VP. Finally, MP also introduces the concept of *recursion*, which is the ability of a syntactic structure to embed a maximal projection within another of the same type.

Overall, the theoretical framework discussed above aligns with the primary objectives of the present study, which is to analyze the syntactic derivation of undergraduate students' request clauses. Categorically, the maximal projections of their request clauses were analyzed applying the headedness principle of MP. On the other hand, the recursions that occurred at their requests were documented using MP's binarity principle. Finally, the discussion of the paper's findings was guided by the core operations (merge and move) of MP.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

This section of the present study discusses the methodology that guided the researcher to fill the research gap established in the earlier section. Specifically, this section discusses the paper's research design, sampling technique, data gathering procedure, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

### **3.1. Research Design**

This study employed a descriptive-qualitative research design to analyze the maximal projections of the undergraduate students' request clauses. This research design was also utilized to determine the recursions of the same clauses. Koh and Owen (2000) defined *descriptive research* as an attempt to provide an understanding of a variable's status through an in-depth analysis and observation. On the other hand, Aspers and Corte (2019) described *qualitative research* as an explanation of a phenomenon that resulted from a constant "oscillation" among theory, evidence, and analysis. This means that the mentioned research design is suitable for the overall objective of the present study, which is to analyze the maximal projections of the request clauses from undergraduate students. Categorically, the descriptive design of this paper drives the analysis of the request clauses' maximal projections and recursions. Finally, the qualitative design of the present study ensures that it is guided by Chomsky's (2015) Minimalist Program.

### 3.2. Sampling Technique

The present study utilized purposive sampling in identifying the appropriate corpus for the general objective of this paper. Ames et al. (2019) described it as a qualitative sampling technique that gives the researcher the prerogative to choose the samples that will be included in the research corpus. Consequently, this technique increases the reliability of the paper's result since it allows the researcher to match the research corpus and the paper's objectives. With this, the present study analyzed the request clauses of undergraduate students. The inclusion of request clauses as part of the corpus of this study was considered a set of criteria. First, the student must have given his/her consent to have his/her request included in the corpus. Second, the request clause must be addressed to their professor(s). Third, the request clauses included in this study must be written in English to avoid the danger of mistranslation. Through these criteria, it is ensured that the analyses of the request clauses included in this study have provided a dependable result that bridged the gap established in the previous portions of this paper. Overall, the corpus of this study consists of 32 request clauses from undergraduate students in the Philippines.

### 3.3. Data Gathering Procedure

The corpus of this study was collected from different professors teaching in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in the Philippines. As mentioned, the purposive sampling technique was used in choosing the request clauses analyzed in this study. The inclusion of the request clauses went through two (2) stages: consent generation and data evaluation. During the *consent generation*, the researcher communicated with several professors to ask for students' requests addressed to them. Before the request clauses were forwarded to the researcher, the undergraduate students were first given a consent letter asking for their permission to include their requests in this study. After getting their consent, 50 request clauses were deliberated in the *data evaluation*. During this stage, the researcher considered the inclusion criteria in evaluating the request clauses of the students. The researcher omitted those requests that are code-mixed and written in Filipino. After the evaluation, a total of 32 request clauses were officially included in the research corpus. These request clauses were analyzed using a tree diagram guided by Chomsky's (2015) Minimalist Program.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

The research corpus was treated in two phases: the data preparation phase and the data analysis phase. The *data preparation phase* is the corpus treatment's portion where request clauses were extracted from the request messages of the undergraduate students. Specifically, all adjuncts and other kinds of clauses were excluded from the analysis of the corpus. The request clauses of the students were transferred to a Microsoft Word document to initiate the final phase of the corpus treatment.

To operationalize the Minimalist Program in this study, the researcher used *tree diagramming* during the *data analysis phase* of the research corpus. According to Uspayanti et al. (2025), a tree diagram is a visual representation of sentence structure. This helps the researcher to have an overview of the relationship between the constituents that build a clause. Elaborately, this allows the researcher to see the maximal projections that appeared in the



request clauses. Furthermore, this can also illustrate the hierarchy between these projections, which enables the researcher to see the recursions in each request clause.

## **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents the general results, conclusions, and recommendations that the researcher arrived at after the data analysis as guided by Chomsky's (2015) Minimalist Program. The analysis revealed that the thirty-two (32) request clauses of undergraduate students are often projected either as a Tense Phrase (TP) and a Complementizer Phrase (CP). Furthermore, the treatment of data also revealed that the most recurring maximal projection is a Tense Phrase followed by a Verb Phrase (VP). It is also observed that CP did not recur often, although it was remarkably projected in the request clauses.

### **4.1. Research Question 1: Maximal Projections in Undergraduate Students' Request Clauses**

The scrutiny of several undergraduate students' request clauses revealed that they often choose to construct their requests using Tense Phrases (TP). As stated in the Minimalist Program (MP) of Chomsky (2015), TP is headed by a tense-marking constituent. This means that it specifies the time when an action commences. Therefore, these results show that students tend to frame their requests, aiming to carefully ask their addressee (professors) to act as specified in the students' requests (Woods, 2021). This is further elaborated in the table below.

***Table 1. Maximal Projections Present in the Request Clauses***

<b>Maximal Projections</b>	<b>Frequency (out of 32)</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Tense Phrase (TP)	32	100%
Complementizer Phrase (CP)	31	96.87%
Verb Phrase (VP)	28	87.50%
Determiner Phrase (DP)	28	87.50%
Noun Phrase (NP)	25	78.12%
Adverb Phrase (AdvP)	21	65.62%
Adjective Phrase (AdjP)	20	62.50%
Prepositional Phrase (PP)	18	56.25%

As presented in the table above, the projection of Tense Phrase (TP) appeared in all (32) request clauses included in this study. This is followed by Complementizer Phrase (CP), which was projected in thirty-one (31) requests. Moreover, Verb Phrase (VP) is projected in twenty-eight (28) requests. The analysis of the study's limited corpus revealed that undergraduate students use a combination of Finite TPs and Infinitival TPs in constructing their request clauses. This is shown in the bracketed request clause below.

**Student 10:** [*TP I [T' would like [TP [P to [VP ask if [TP I [T' can still take the quiz]]]]]]]]]*

**Student 11:** [*TP I [T' would like [TP [P to [VP request [TP [P to [VP open the worksheet]]]]]]]]]*

The clauses above confirm that several undergraduate students' requests included in this study are structured using a combination of Finite TP and Infinitival TP. Elaborately, this request clause exemplifies that the Finite TP, "I would like", was used to initiate a query

preparatory, which is an indirect politeness strategy. This agrees with the paper of Nugroho et al. (2021), which revealed that students tend to use the modals “could” and “would” as one of their primary syntactic tools to initiate a polite request. Furthermore, it is inferred that Finite TPs are used by undergraduate students to highlight the possibility of an action being done by their professors (dela Cruz-Rudio, 2025). On the other hand, it is evident that Infinitival TPs such as “to ask” and “to request” were utilized by the students to support the tense marked by their Finite TP (Ryan, 2022). Moreover, the students’ request clauses also show compliance with the merger operation of MP as their TPs commonly embed VPs. This is reflected in the bracketed requests below.

**Student 27:** [TP I [T' was [VP wondering if I could still [VP take the long quiz today]]]]

**Student 31:** [TP I [T' would like to respectfully [VP ask if the assessments [TP could [T' be [VP reopened today]]]]]]

The request clauses above show that TP typically contains VP as its verbal component. As documented by Radford (2009), Chomsky (1993) states that the binary merger operation of MP requires VPs to be merged with a tense-marking constituent. Applying this to the students’ request clauses included in this study, it is evident that their VPs are merged with TPs, which marks the tense of their verbs. Finally, the CPs that act as the head projection of the students’ request clauses were observed to have been structured under the MP’s principle of Tense-to-Complement (T-to-C) Movement. According to Kim (2022), this principle applies when a clause is framed as a yes-or-no question. Specifically, this happens when a tense-marking constituent is moved to the complementizer slot to create a question. This phenomenon is identical to the students’ request clauses affirmed by the bracketed clauses below.

**Student 3:** [CP May [I have a consultation tomorrow after the quiz]]

**Student 6:** [CP May [I ask if we can have access to the presentation you have used]]

As reflected in the request clauses above, the modal verb “may” is commonly used as a tense-marking constituent in a declarative clause force. However, since the limited dataset reveals that the request clauses of the students are frequently framed within an interrogative clause force, this modal is moved to the slot of a complementizer to achieve such clause force. Therefore, it can be claimed that students utilize the principle of T-to-C movement to initiate an indirect request framed as an interrogative clause (Chapwanya & Nel, 2024; Oktavia et al., 2023).

#### 4.2. Research Question 2: Recursions in Undergraduate Students' Request Clauses

The recursion count in the undergraduate students’ request clauses is dominantly leaning towards TP. This entails the idea that indirect requests often contain TP recursions, as this allows the students to maximize different strategies to lighten the impact of their requests. These results align with the conclusions that AlAfnan and dela Cruz-Rudio (2023) arrived at in their paper. Specifically, they concluded that the use of modals as a tense-marking constituent in a tense is a “mitigation marker” that lessens the level of imposition. This can be seen in the table below.

***Table 2. Frequency of Recursions in the Request Clauses***

Maximal Projections	Frequency	Percentage
Tense Phrase (TP)	50	32.05%
Verb Phrase (VP)	47	30.12%
Noun Phrase (NP)	16	10.25%
Adjective Phrase (AdjP)	13	8.33%
Determiner Phrase (DP)	10	6.41%
Complementizer Phrase (CP)	9	5.76%
Prepositional Phrase (PP)	7	4.48%
Adverb Phrase (AdvP)	4	2.56%
Total:	156	100%

The table above presents the collective count of the recursions that occurred in the request clauses included in this study. Dominantly, TP has recurred most often with a frequency of fifty (50). Expectedly, this was followed by VP, which recurred forty-seven (47) times. These numbers confirm that the binary merger of Chomsky's (2015) Minimalist Program requires VPs to be merged with TPs, as these phrases mark the tense of a verb. Furthermore, these figures are congruent with the earlier observation that the request clauses in this paper tend to combine Finite TPs and Infinitival TPs in their requests. However, hierarchically, it is seen that their requests often embed Infinitival TPs within their Finite TPs. This can be affirmed through the bracketed request clauses below.

***Student 4:*** [TP I [T' was [VP hoping it might be possible [TP [P to [VP reopen the quiz tab so I can still take it]]]]]]

***Student 19:*** [TP I [T' would [VP like [TP [P to [VP inquire about the FA2 and FA3 in Analytical Geometry]]]]]]

It is exemplified in the request clauses above that the students' Infinitival TPs, such as "to reopen" and "to inquire", are embedded within the head projection of the whole clause, which are their Finite TPs, such as "I was hoping" and "I would like". This confirms the results documented in AlShraah et al.'s (2023) paper, which revealed that one of the students' direct request strategies is the use of "hedged performative". This strategy uses verbs and modal verbs to express an intention. This means that the undergraduate students tend to utilize Finite TPs to mitigate the impact of their Infinitival TPs, which represents their main request.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

This study, as guided by Chomsky's (2015) Minimalist Program, analyzed the request clauses of thirty-two (32) undergraduate students. Specifically, the present study focused on the documentation of maximal projections and recursions present in their requests. The request clauses analyzed revealed that the most widely used maximal projections are TP and CP. Within the paper's limited samples, it is concluded that the students tend to use TP as the head projection of their request clauses whenever they are sending a direct request (AlShraah et al., 2023). This follows a combination of Finite TP and Infinitival TP, which made TP the most recurring maximal projection. Categorically, the students' Finite TPs usually contain the modal "would". This serves as a mitigating constituent that is intended to lessen the imposition of the requests that are represented by their Infinitival TPs. This suggests that the analyzed request clauses use Infinitival TPs as a complement to Finite TPs.



Moreover, it is noticeable that CP did not recur often because it is frequently used under the principle of T-to-C Movement. It is inferred that several undergraduate students in this study use CP as the head projection of their request clauses whenever they convey an indirect request. This is due to the observation that the students tend to frame their requests in an interrogative clause force to extend a polite approach to their requests. Since modals are frequently used as a constituent that represents both projections, it is concluded that analyzed request clauses of undergraduate students use modals as the head act of their requests (Chapwanya & Nel, 2024).

It is specified in the previous sections that the present study is limited to the context of requests being addressed to the undergraduate students' professors. With this, a comparative study with various contexts of requests is recommended for exploration, as it opens a holistic understanding of request-clause construction. Moreover, an application of the Minimalist Program analyzing request clauses in different languages would also expand the knowledge documented in this study. Finally, future researchers may consider having a larger and more diverse research corpus exploring other syntactic principles such as clause force, Wh-movement, and preposing condition.

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