

Non-native EFL Learners' Pragmatic Competence in Email Production/Communication and their Perceptions of e-(im)politeness (Case Study)

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Abstract:

This study focuses on analyzing EFL students' emails to their university lecturer to see whether they have pragmatic competence, an awareness of the politeness conventions, and email etiquette that needs to be followed. The results confirm that even reasonably proficient L2 learners frequently lack basic pragmatic awareness in L2; they occasionally perform requests or other forms of speech, such as apologies, refusals, and the like improperly or otherwise to native speakers. Consequently, when these students encounter the target language community, their use of language can easily lead to pragmatic failure and cross-cultural misconceptions about the force expressed differently from the desired one. Explained further, if a grammatically skilled non-native speaker appears to manifest certain proficiency and fluency in the target language, a native speaker may accord his/her pragmatic failure to impoliteness or unfriendliness, rather than to any linguistic deficiency.

Keywords:CMC, politeness, pragmatic competence, writing proficiency.



1. Introduction

In our society, communication has come to be known as a means through which individuals exchange information, and within this process, politeness and creativity are two crucial elements. While Inga Hilbig explains that, "politeness is one of the most important components in communication, without which the communication among people would be impossible" (2008, p. 01), Zhu and Yuxiao Bao (2010, p. 848) see that, "politeness is a kind of social phenomenon, an approach used in order to maintain the harmonious interpersonal relationship, and a kind of conventional behavior that everyone must follow no matter what his culture is".

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With the advancement in technology, a new type of interaction has arisen, namely computer-mediated communication (CMC), in other words ever since research on CMC caught the attention of linguists and scholars, the growing importance of e-mail use

for pedagogical and advising purposes was already attested. A cluster of research about CMC up to the present time has emphasized the formality and informality along with the linguistic features of electronic communication. Nonetheless, comparably not much publication has tackled the characteristics of private email exchanges in academic settings, especially in Algeria's higher education context.

In this study, only one particular type of email exchange composed by Algerians, namely EFL university students at Tahri Mohamed University, Bechar was analyzed. The study aimed to aid students in recognizing the significance of email language that university students should use, especially when they submit their assignments for approval and grading. This research was implemented on the basis that many students at the university level do not take into consideration the format and language use in their email which results in a breakdown of communication between students and their university professors, and eventually fails to achieve the targeted purpose/endeavor of the email.

The study aims to describe different politeness strategies and discourse styles demonstrated in the students' e-mails by analyzing the e-mail's general textual features and netiquette, formality and informality, openings and endings, and the linguistic realizations of politeness. It, therefore, aims at answering the following questions:

- a. Do EFL learners display formality in their email formulation?
- b. To what extent do EFL learners exhibit politeness in email interactions with faculty members when they turn in assignments?
- c. To which extent do EFL learners master netiquette?

2. Literature Review

Pragmatic competence, widely defined as the capacity to use language effectively in a social setting, has become a topic of study in a variety of disciplines, namely linguistics, applied linguistics, anthropology, sociology, psychology, communication research, and cross-cultural studies. Within applied linguistics and second language acquisition (SLA) fields of study, research on pragmatic competence has been driven by several fundamental questions, to name a few, What does becoming pragmatically competent in a

second language (L2) mean? How can pragmatic competence be examined and its development interpreted among L2 learners? How can research findings on pragmatic competence enhance teaching and assessment? The center of pragmatics research in SLA according to these questions is the combination of the following elements, construct definition, empirical methods, and application of research findings to practice (Taguchi, 2009, p. 01).

In the age of computer-mediated communication, email has become a common tool of communication between friends, university students, and their instructors or professors in academic contexts. Instead of making face-to-face contact. Nowadays, Danielewicz-Betz (2013, p. 04) regarded that email appears to be one of the main modes of student-faculty communication, as it represents the most adequate instrument of communication with professors and students.

Because email is free or low-cost, it is rapidly being utilized to replace postal letters. While Chen (2001, p. 01) affirmed that the goal of emails that professors receive from students usually revolves around the following themes: making requests for appointments, seeking advice, asking for scores or course information, or simply asking advice for their study or personal matters. Consequently, to her, email is used to replace telephone calls and postal letters, as it incorporates qualities of both spoken and written language. Danielewicz-Betz (2013, p. 04) on the other hand believed that student faculty interaction tackles conversations and discussions related to course work and assignments, thesis writing progress, job search and professional development issues, as well as informal and social exchanges of information.

Nonetheless, it is vital to recognize that email may also be used to disrupt people's relationships, especially in educational settings; email can possibly harm the connection between professors and students if students do not practice proper email etiquette and social interactional norms. As a result, while making demands to university lecturers or professors, students must exercise caution rather than just hitting the "send" email button, because email might be disrespectful (Graham, 2007 as cited in Trang, 2019, p. 85).

2.1. Email as an Asynchronous Tool of Communication

Due to the lack of immediate response from the recipient, e-mail is recognized as an asynchronous online communication platform. The reception of a response email is usually bound to particular factors naming for instance; the computer feature, and its ability to notify the recipient of a

newly arrived e-mail; the frequency of consulting e-mails by the users; and other factors, such as the availability of a computer and access to internet. Accordingly, the length of the time delay between the moment of sending a message and receiving a response is always deemed as uncertainty (Cyrstal, 2001, p. 126).

This condition, however, gives privileges to its users. It grants users sufficient time to formulate messages regardless of any constraint. Additionally, e-mail permits the establishment of considerably polite written communication; in other words, being a text-based and asynchronous communication platform prioritizes the focus on performance cues and the capacity to arrange, create, and modify communication. This enhanced range of capabilities allows the targeted inter actants to create more cautiously thought-out messages (Duthler, 2006, p. 505). With consideration to other cultures, Murphy and Levy (2006, p. 02) highlighted the necessity of politeness in email communication; they, therefore, believe that emails allow users to build considerably polite sentences as the time they are allotted permits the choice of the appropriate style of writing for their messages.

2.2. Openings and Closings in Email Communication

The most prominent structural elements of emails according to Sabater, Turney and Fleta among others (2008, p. 76) are salutations and closing remarks. These remarks assure more polite messages for both the sender and eventually the recipient when s/he responds (Parviz & Ali, 2012, p. 127). Kankaanranta (2005, p. 359) therefore alleged that salutations allow the social relationship between the sender and the recipient to be maintained. The following list of opening salutations is the most commonly used in email communication (Pratama, 2019, pp.42-43).

- a. Very formal ones such as Dear Sir/Madam, Dear Mr/Mrs/Prof/Dr+surname,
- b. Less formal but still professional, such as Dear colleagues or Dear+surname,
- c. Informal ones, which include terms such as Hello guys, or simply Hi.

2.3. Features of Email Communication

It is unquestionably a historical quantum leap in communication if the receiver had the ability to see a message received immediately after it is composed, therefore the email setting is a novel phenomenon, for it allows for near-instant textual communication. However, aside from its technical feature, it is questionable whether one can regard

email as something entirely new, i.e., as a whole new mode of communication distinct from any other modes (Dürscheid & Frehner, 2013, p. 42). A cluster of features is believed to be typical of email communication. In that, while Dürscheid and Frehner (2013, p. 42) set forms of lexical abbreviation (e.g., cu 'see you') and syntactic reduction (e.g., Exams over?), nonstandard punctuation, and emulated prosody as conventional characteristics for emails, Crystal (2001, p. 136) and Thurlow (2001, p. 288) agreed that email users tend to employ lower-case spelling where capitalization is necessary because the lower-case default mentality is easier and more efficient.

With consideration to lexical reduction, Crystal (2001, p. 134) illustrated that the use of acronyms is very frequent and is no longer restricted to words or short phrases, but can be sentence-length e.g. AYSOS *Are you stupid or something*. Homophones, consonant spellings, the omission of apostrophes, and ad hoc abbreviations are also used; however, Letter and number homophones are comparably frequent.

Frehner (2008, p. 63-69) explains that reductions occur on the syntactic level as well. Subject deletions, copula deletion and omitted articles and conjunctions, and omitted punctuation marks are among the most frequent syntactic omissions. Prosody may also be another feature of email, whereby capitalizing or repeating letters of a word is one technique, reduplicating words or else putting them between asterisks or underlined spaces is also possible. Maintaining emphasis or indicating loudness, silence, rising intonation, or even emotion can also be exerted through the creative use of punctuation. Dürscheid and Frehner (2013, p. 44) asserted that emoticons are also one of the features associated with email; and that they are commonly used to turn a complaint into a usual plea or to display playfulness or sarcasm.

2.4. Previous Studies

Many researchers have claimed that emails act as a substitute to letters in the last century; nonetheless, Chen (2006, p. 40) emphasized the fact that particular constituents of the journalistic style can also be established in institutional/formal email conversations. In this regard, openings (or salutations, greetings) and closings (or signatures, farewells) are not obligatory components in email communication (Crystal, 2006). Research on the same issue exhibits considerable diversity in the usage of opening and closing sequences. For instance, while Gains' (1998, p. 86) study revealed that 92% of the emails had no opening in institutional settings, Lan's study

(2000, p. 03) revealed that 54% of the emails in her corpus lacked an opening. Contrary to the previous studies, Murphy and Levy (2006, p. 04) argued that the use of greetings and closings in email exchanges among Australian and Korean academics is a way to show politeness and formality.

In her study about email communication between unequals, namely students and professors, Bou-Franch (2011, p. 1781) concluded that while greetings are predominant in such exchanges, closings “included eight times more thanking movements than emails sent down”. With that being said, it is worth noting that impolite behavior may come from a lack of openings or closings given the asymmetric nature of correspondence between lecturers and learners,

Three distinct criteria may be used to determine the existence or lack of politeness in emails in terms of formality and directness. This includes greetings, closings and requests. The extent to which an email is formal is influenced by power, social distance and the weight of imposition between participants (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Peterson, Hohensee, & Xia, 2018).

It is usually perceived that the higher in status the receiver of the email is, the more likely the sender is required to be formal. For instance, a college student who wishes to send an email to his/her professor who has more authority or social position than him/her and has a distant connection with him/her, or a recent graduate who looks for a job and sends an application email to a company's HRD Manager. Thus, professional emails typically include more polite language and specific aspects that suggest politeness. Less formal messages, on the other hand, employ punctuation to show emotion and an increasing usage of acronyms (AlAli & Sahawneh, 2008, p. 40).

Sabater, Turney, and Montero-Fleta emphasized four pre-determined features which contributed mainly to interpersonal goals: (1) openings and closings, (2) contractions, (3) “politeness indicators,” and (4) “non-standard linguistic features” in their analysis of a corpus of one-on-one and group emails by native and non-native speakers. The study found out that all categories occurred in the corpus while the latter two were less frequent, but many of their uses resembled non-electronic business letter norms. Authors suggested that the findings “demonstrate the emergence of a new style in writing for even the most important, confidential and formal purposes which seems to be forming a new sub-genre of letter-writing” (2008, p. 71). In agreement with Droz and Jacobs (2019), they further maintained that

instead of representing a “chameleon genre”, email interaction demonstrates its proper evolving features and pragmatic norms, which possibly encourage more informal features, namely with particular recipients, meanwhile keeping interpersonal discourse.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were seventy-two (72) Algerian EFL learners at the Department of Letters and Foreign Languages, the English Section, at Tahri Mohamed University. Namely, third-year students enrolled in the academic year 2020-2021. These students were asked to submit an assignment in the Culture and Civilization module during the first semester of the year.

3.2. Methods

The data in the present study represent a subset of a larger data corpus consisting of student email messages. It is worth noting here that: First, the power dimension across messages is stable, that is to say, the professor (the email recipient) is in the position of relative authority over the student (the email sender) in view of their institutional relationship. Second, the social distance dimension is relatively unstable and can be characterized as high since students and the professor under study have not had typically frequent and regular interactions via email except for classroom encounters, in other words, it is their first time submitting an assignment via a computer-mediated tool. Additionally, students had few encounters with the professor under study. Seventy-two (72) email messages from students were received around the period between 18 to 23 January 2021, which was set as a deadline for students. The email messages were screen shot, saved in a separate file, then manually analyzed for two main features, namely the pragmatic features, and the structural features.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of the written email messages from students might be summarized into two elements. The pragmatic features that characterize each message which in its own right is divided into the in/formality of greetings and salutations within the emails, farewell formula, the incorporation of subject lines and self-introduction, the integration of emoticons, and finally the frequency of verbal politeness markers within each message. The second section contains a thematic analysis of the structural features incorporated in students' emails. This includes punctuation, capitalization, the use of

contractions, the use of abbreviations, lexical reduction with its different types (letter and number homophones, consonant spelling, the omission of apostrophes), and syntactic reduction with its different instances (subject deletion, auxiliary verb deletion, copula deletion, articles omission, and conjunctions omission).

4.1. Email Messages' Characteristics According to their Pragmatic Features

After calculating the email messages, it was found that amongst the 72 received emails, 66.67% (48) belongs to females whereas 33.33% (24) were sent by males. While 49 incorporated a body to their emails, 23 of them preferred to attach the file of the assignment with nobody. It is also worth mentioning here that only 33 of the total number of students created and sent emails with their true names while 39 of them delivered their assignments with anonymous or ambiguous pseudo names. In the same respect, the self-introduction which is the first feature investigated within the pragmatic features was exhibited in 22 of the received emails while 50 students preferred not to introduce their names and group to the professor (recipient of the assignment). Although subject lines are necessary to any email, the results showed that only 50 of the students within the seventy-two (72) participants exerted them while 22 students did not bother to include a subject line to their email communication. It is also worth noting here that within the 49 emails whose owners integrated a body, only 17 of the participants are concerned with the remaining features, namely the degree of in/formality of greetings and closings, the use of farewell formula and emoticons, and finally the frequency of verbal politeness markers.

Given the fact that merely 17 of the participants under investigation displayed these aforementioned pragmatic features. Four (04) of the participants incorporated both greetings and closings to their emails, twelve (12) of them exerted only greetings and one (01) participant used closings only. The following table illustrates the frequency of greetings and closings per email along with the forms that the participants employed in their email communication.

Table 2:

The Level of Formality and Informality in Students' Emails

Greetings/ Forms of Address	Frequency	Closings	Frequency
Dear + title (e.g., Prof./Mrs.)	(f=01)	Yours sincerely	(f=00)
Hello + title+ surname	(f=01)	Respectfully	(f=00)
Hi + title + surname	(f=00)	Have a good/nice day	(f=04)
Hello + title	(f=04)	Have a nice weekend	(f=01)
Hi + title	(f=03)	No closing	(f=12)
Good day + title	(f=01)		
Hello/Hi	(f=03)		
Good evening + title	(f=02)		
Greetings teacher	(f=01)		
No greeting	(f=01)		

Besides the usage of greetings and closings within emails, the participants exerted a certain degree of small talk's use. To be more precise, seven (07) participants of the overall corpus have seen the use of expressions such as, *I hope you are/doing well/great/good* necessary to introduce their communication. Six of the participants in fact initiated this expression while the remainder used the following expression: *I hope that this email finds you well*. To be more precise, six (6) per 17 of the participants used the first expression, only one employed the latter while the remainder of the participants did not consider farewell expressions important to integrate.

The use of emoticons has less likely occurred within the students' emails; this includes five (05) participants only, in which four females and one (01) male participant of the corpus employed them. Verbal politeness markers, on the other hand, received scarce to no attention in the participants' communication.

4.2. Email Messages' Characteristics According to their Structural Features

Parallel to the pragmatic features detected in the email communications in this study, the structural features were uncovered solely in 17 of the messages given the fact that only 17 of the corpus under study integrated a

body to their emails. The syntactic features under investigation include punctuation, capitalization, the use of contractions, the use of abbreviations, and finally lexical reduction in addition to syntactic omission that will be illustrated in a table. With respect to punctuation, while five (05) of the participants did not incorporate any punctuation marks to their messages, nine (09) of the participants exerted minor punctuation mistakes and the remainder of the participants, precisely, three (03) incorporated correct punctuation to their email messages. The following examples represent some of the punctuation mistakes that the participants have fallen into; this includes instances where punctuation is due and the misuse of punctuation marks:

- a. *here is the assignment you Have asked us to do*
- b. *i hope that you are doing well, so this is the exercise you asked us.*
- c. *good day ms this is your student NAME delivering my answer of civ assignment.*

Capitalization on the other hand received less attention, in which 15 of the participant either fell into capitalizing wrong words or chose not to capitalize at all. The following examples embody these instances,

- a. *hello ms hope you are doing great here is the assignment.*
- b. *Have a Good Day.*
- c. *Hello, Ms, name*
- d. *Hi Ms hope you're doing well, this is the task you asked us to do it; have a nice day.*
- e. *here is the assignment you Have asked us to do.*
- f. *good day ms this is your student NAME delivering my answer of civ assignment.*

Whilst five (05) out of seventeen (17) of the senders preferred to use contractions in their message, three (03) of the same corpus exerted the use of two main abbreviations in their email communications, namely Ms. and CIV. The examples below display the use of contractions in students' emails:

- a. *it's me Name.*
- b. *i'm your student Name*
- c. *it's in PDF and Docx Format.*
- d. *it's Name*
- e. *hope you're doing well..*

The analysis of lexical reduction includes letter and number homophones, consonant spelling and the omission of apostrophes, while syntactic omission focuses primarily on subject deletion, auxiliary verb deletion, copula deletion,

articles omission, and conjunctions omission. After the email communication were analyzed in terms of the two aforementioned features, it was found that only two participants used homophones in their emails, and more precisely one of these two exerted the use of homophones twice in one email as shown below:

- a. *From the 2nd group.*
- b. *From group 04.*
- c. *I picked the question 04 to answer.*

Consonant spelling (words spelled out without their vowels) and the omission of apostrophes in emails were less likely to happen. As for the syntactic omission, none of the auxiliary verb deletion, copula deletion, articles omission, and conjunctions omission were undertaken in the students' messages; however, subject deletion was marked in two of the received emails as the following examples illustrate:

- a. *hello ms hope you are doing great.*
- b. *Hi Ms hope you're doing well.*

4.3. Discussion

Based on the above results, it was evident that within the corpus, 49 of the emails under investigation incorporated a text body while 23 had solely the file of the assignment attached or the questions of the assignment answered directly in form of an email. This simply shows that students are more into directness and did not see that following the netiquette is necessary when submitting their assignments. Furthermore, although submitting an assignment to a faculty member requires email addresses that comprise full names of the concerned students, 39 of the participants under study preferred to surpass the obvious approach and use anonymous or ambiguous pseudo names. This in fact had the professor guess the student's name on her own, or look for their names either in the body if incorporated or within the attached file after it being opened.

In the same concern and with consideration to the pragmatic features, introducing oneself in emails was overlooked by 50 students and represented solely in the remainder of email messages. Similarly, subject lines which seem automatic in emails are overlooked by the same number of students although if incorporated, it would have been easier for the professor to filter her email messages easily. Within the 49 email messages that contained a body to them, only 17 of these messages are concerned with the remainder of the pragmatic features along with the structural features under study. With

respect to greetings and closings, while 04 of the participants incorporated both greetings and closings to their emails, 12 exerted greetings only in their messages and 01 participant emphasized closings solely given the fact that 55 of the emails have incorporated none. This lack or imbalance in the distribution of openings and closings is justified by Bou-Franch (2011, p. 1781) as an impolite behavior given the asymmetric nature of correspondence between lecturers and learners. Additionally, it is to note that the level of formality in the students' greetings and closings was completely absent given the fact that within greetings, there was one formal instance (Dear + title) as for the closings, informality of the expressions was the most dominant.

While Dürscheid and Frehner (2013, p. 44) see that greetings and some form of the farewell formula are mandatory elements of a non-electronic letter, these features are not continuously exhibited in emails. The possibilities may vary, in that they might/ might not incorporate a greeting, they might begin in an elliptical way without necessarily introducing the reference object, rather plainly following what has already been communicated in a previous email; however, the emails analyzed for this study represent first-time interactions on the topic and they are not part of an email discourse chain..

With consideration to phatic communication, the targeted students often used expressions that ranged between "I hope you are doing great", "I hope you are doing well/ good" and "I hope this email finds you well" in the first paragraph of their emails. This way of writing is considered a usual conventional phatic communication because it bears a characteristic of a conversation rather than transactions or interactions.

Although the weight of imposition between the faculty members and students is highly marked by researchers in the field, scarce attention was paid to the verbal politeness markers. On the contrary to this, the use of emoticons was present in five (5) of the emails received in which four were displayed by females.

With consideration of the structural features of the emails under analysis, both capitalization and punctuation received less to no attention in students' emails. Contractions were also employed by (05) of the participants under investigation in which they mainly revolved around two fundamental abbreviations, namely Ms. and CIV. This may be due to the informal nature of emails. From a second language perspective, perhaps students used the informal style, for that it helped them express themselves in English more

easily and fluently. From an interpersonal perspective, the informal style functions as an in-group identity marker to carry a strategic purpose of maintaining solidarity with the professor. In the same respect, the greater use of contractions by non-native participants may reflect real stylistic differences for this informality marker.

With careful review of the lexical reduction and syntactic omission in the e-mail messages, these two features received less to no application at all, in that homophones occurred in two instances while subject deletion was marked in two of the received emails. The remainder of the structural features that have already been mentioned were not present in any of the students' messages.

5. Conclusion

Based on the results attained from the qualitative analysis of students' emails, it can be concluded that the messages illustrate the students' unawareness of the sociolinguistic rules linking the linguistic forms with contextual variables which were clearly evidenced in the 'Opening' and the 'Closing' moves given the unequal power of the interactants, the infrequent contact, and the low affective involvement. In the same respect, although communicating with authority figures requires certain conventional norms to be respected, the email messages under study displayed informality and directness. Furthermore, the lexical choice practices used to realize the 'Opening' move exhibit a lack of control over the address term system in English while the closings incorporated to the emails are mostly informal in nature.

It is noted that the targeted learners have a module named "written expression" within the curriculum whereby the formatting of emails and personal letters are taught; however, the extreme informality and writing inconsistencies in the email productions of the EFL students under study display the opposite and emphasize that they either see that politeness is not necessary in email communication or that it is the nature of email communication/assignment that made them overlook the weight of imposition in the communication. Therefore, the importance of integrating pragmatic competence into the EFL curriculum is highly recommended along with politeness markers' use. Moreover, students should master the use of email communication and its conventions so that their emails would not be taken as impolite by faculty members.

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