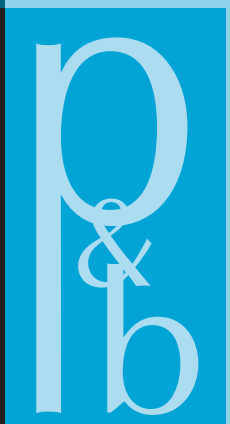
# Email Pragmatics and Second Language Learners

EDITED BY

Maria Economidou-Kogetsidis
Milica Savić
Nicola Halenko



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# Email Pragmatics and Second Language Learners

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**Volume 328**

Email Pragmatics and Second Language Learners
Edited by Maria Economidou-Kogetsidis, Milica Savić and Nicola Halenko

# Email Pragmatics and Second Language Learners

*Edited by*

Maria Economidou-Kogetsidis
University of Nicosia

Milica Savić
University of Stavanger

Nicola Halenko
University of Central Lancashire

John Benjamins Publishing Company
Amsterdam / Philadelphia

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# Second language email pragmatics
## Introduction

Nicola Halenko, Milica Savić and Maria Economidou-Kogetsidis
University of Central Lancashire / University of Stavanger / University of Nicosia

In the past two decades, email communication has been studied extensively from a number of perspectives. Linguistically focused studies of emails have transitioned from attempts to identify and describe "a unified grammar of email" (Baron 1998: 144) to a recognition of the socially situated nature of email communication. This movement away from attempting to establish email communication norms to exploring how different cultural and contextual features shape email communication has also characterised computer-mediated-communication (CMC) research more generally (Androutsopoulos 2006). Indeed, studies of CMC in general, and email communication in particular, have identified that varying discourse practices are influenced by a variety of social and contextual factors (e.g., Androutsopoulos 2006; Bou-Franch 2011; Graham 2007; McKeown and Zhang 2015; Merrison, Wilson, Davies and Haugh 2012). This change of perspective, reflecting a view of email communication as dynamic and open for negotiation and co-construction in any given context, has opened a number of research avenues, many of which are still not thoroughly explored.

Email is currently the oldest mode of computer-mediated communication. It is one of the most popular communication media given its high transmission speed and its less intrusive nature compared to other modes of CMC. Unlike instant messages, which are often the preferred medium for private correspondence and are more about contact than content, email appears to support longer distance relationships and it is used more for information purposes (Longmate and Barber 2002, cited in Economidou-Kogetsidis 2018: 491) in academic and other institutional settings among colleagues, as well as between students and faculty (Félix-Brasdefer 2012: 223). This volume closely examines the pragmatics of email as a medium in relation to second/foreign language (L2) learners. Despite a growing number of recent empirical studies dealing with email pragmatics in the L2 context (e.g.,

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Economidou-Kogetsidis 2018; Nguyen 2018; Savić 2018), the present volume is, to the best of our knowledge, the first edited collection which focuses exclusively on how language learners from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds use the medium of email to communicate in a second, foreign or a common (English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)) language (but see Chen, Rau and Rau 2016 for a volume dedicated to Email discourse among Chinese using English as a Lingua Franca). The present volume is therefore dedicated to furthering the study of the growing field of L2 email communication research and addresses a range of topics that have so far received comparatively scant attention. It broadly aims to take the reader from a consideration of L2 learners' perceptions of the email medium (Ren and Liu), over pragmatic development as reflected in email writing (Chen and Liu; Halenko and Winder; Nguyen and Pham; Usó-Juan), to relational practices in emails in a variety of academic contexts (Bella; Economidou-Kogetsidis; Savić and Đorđević; Schauer).

Email writing is challenging for L2 learners on a number of levels. One of the main issues is how to express their intended meaning through a language they may not have mastered fully. Learners may encounter difficulties both when choosing appropriate L2 linguistic resources to express their communicative intent and when attempting to adjust the linguistic resources they have in their repertoire to specific contextual demands. On the one hand, empirical research has shown inappropriate choices regarding either communicative intent or linguistic resources can result in negative evaluations of the email senders' personality (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2016; Hendriks 2010), their competence, academic potential and the lecturers' motivation to work with them (Bolkan and Holmgren 2012), as well as their credibility and the lecturers' readiness to grant the request (Stephens, Houser and Cowan 2009). Reasons for the somewhat negative evaluations of student email requests have been found to lie in insufficient or inappropriate mitigation, overly direct wording of requests, failure to acknowledge the imposition involved in granting the request, failure to provide institutional explanations for requesting, inappropriate address forms, unreasonable time frames or an emphasis on students' personal wants and needs (e.g., Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, 2016; Savić 2018). On the other hand, Savić (2018), for instance, found lecturers' evaluations of L2 emails to be divided. Lecturers who did not express negative evaluations commented on the lack of intentionality to be impolite or inappropriate on the part of the L2 users, and the complexity of academic communication through this specific medium in an L2. Either way, these studies demonstrate that power-asymmetrical communicative situations, such as those in which students write to university lecturers, place considerable demands on L2 users. In the absence of established conventions for linguistic behaviour in email communication (Biesenbach-Lucas 2006) and a lack of (meaningful) focus on email writing in EFL

textbooks, learners are often left to rely on guesswork to work the pragmatics out for themselves.

L2 users' (sometimes inappropriate) choices regarding their email discourse may stem from sources other than limited L2 proficiency, and may include transfer from L1, as well as various forms of agency, such as a choice not to conform to perceived L2 norms, or an attempt to position themselves or construct their identity through the use of L2. The influence of the instant messaging culture of the "Millennial Generation" (Howe and Strauss 2000), a CMC generation generally characterised by an increased use of and familiarity with digital communications, media, and technologies (Prensky 2001), may also play a role. These explanations for L2 learners' discursive choices have hardly been investigated in relation to email communication and are therefore the focus of some of the chapters in the present volume. For example, a growing area of email pragmatics studies is an examination of learners' perceptions of using various language forms in specific contexts to simultaneously perform transactional functions (making a request or a complaint) and relational functions (establishing or maintaining social relationships with the addressee). With only a handful of perception studies (Bolkan and Holmgren 2012; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, 2016; Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996; Hendriks 2010; Savić 2018), and virtually all of them (except Economidou-Kogetsidis 2016; Lewin-Jones and Mason 2014) focusing on lecturer perceptions, this is a generally under-researched area, which Ren and Liu address in their study. Another under-explored area featured in this volume is pragmatic development as reflected in email writing, and the processes involved in developing email literacy (Chen 2006; Chen 2015; Chen and Liu present volume; Halenko and Winder present volume; Nguyen and Pham present volume; Usó-Juan present volume).

The subtle interplay between language development and identity construction (Chen 2006), as well as agentive language use, especially in ELF email communication between multilingual English users, represent research areas that have not been systematically explored in L2 email communication studies. The "enormous functional and formal flexibility" of ELF (House 2010: 363) coupled with highly contextually situated academic email communication (e.g., Merrison, Wilson, Davies and Haugh 2012; Savić 2018) offers a fertile ground for investigation. For instance, highly proficient Norwegian users of English have been found to appropriate and modify their English discourse in accordance with their L1 pragmatic tendencies, thus displaying agency through "maintain[ing] some of the communicative preferences into which they were socialized" (House 2012: 285) and forming a localised pragmatic norm (House 2010), also recognised as legitimate by some of their native and non-native English-speaking lecturers (Savić 2018). Several investigations in the present volume are situated in ELF contexts (Economidou-Kogetsidis; Savić and Đorđević; Schauer), and they can indeed be utilised as a springboard for a more

systematic approach to investigating the interplay of L1 transfer and language user agency, namely, for studying L2 users' informed choices based on the language resources they have at their disposal, their interpretation of the contextual variables, their understandings of broader cultural values underlying target pragmatic behaviours (Yates 2010), and the identity they want to construct in communication. Identity construction by L1 and L2 users of Greek in academic communication and their entitlement to perform a request and negotiate their relationship with their lecturers is explored in this volume by Bella, who opens up relevant future research directions focusing on L2 users' perceived entitlement, rights and obligations, as well as issues of ideology and power in academic communication.

Against the backdrop of the challenges and choices faced by L2 learners and their email practices, the current volume presents a series of empirical studies offering new insights into this growing research field and offers new or extended avenues of email research. The first part of the volume deals with learners' email literacy and pragmatic development in their email writing based on elicited (Chen and Liu; Nguyen and Pham; Usó-Juan) or naturally-occurring data (Halenko and Winder). It includes cross-sectional (Nguyen and Pham), longitudinal (Halenko and Winder) as well as developmental studies that examine the affordances of pragmatic instruction (Chen and Liu; Usó-Juan). The studies in the second part of the volume deal with relational practices in email communication in relation mainly to email production, and analyse elicited (Ren and Liu) or natural data (Bella; Economidou-Kogetsidis; Savić and Đorđević; Schauer) across a range of academic contexts. The section below offers a brief overview and highlights the unique contribution of each of the chapters in the volume.

## Volume Part I: Email literacy and pragmatic development

Whilst a considerable body of research exists on spoken pragmatic data, we know much less about pragmatic development and literacy in email interaction. Since academic institutions now largely rely on email as the main source for disseminating information to students, the research community is now playing catch up to understand the intricacies of staff-student communication via this medium. The studies in the first part of the volume aim to contribute to this knowledge gap.

In the first chapter, Chen and Liu explore the affordances of reformulations of learner emails and native speaker models for fostering L2 learners' email literacy. Designed within the framework of sociocultural theory, this study focuses on two high-intermediate EFL learners' collaborative work on email writing and analysis tasks, followed by an individual email writing task. Overall, the study reveals positive results of this three-stage writing process. The discussions during collaborative

writing were found to contribute to a successful resolution of pragmatics-related episodes. While individually written emails incorporated many features of the reformulation and native speaker model noticed during the collaborative task analysis, the reformulation seemed to have influenced individual emails more substantially than the native speaker model. Chen and Liu's chapter contributes to instructional pragmatics and their study's unique contribution is the emphasis on task-based language learning and the importance of noticing within email literacy development, and hence in L2 pragmatic development more generally.

In Chapter 2, Nguyen and Pham examine complaints in elicited emails written by two groups of Vietnamese EFL learners of different proficiency levels. The focus of the study is two-fold: (a) on the strategies employed in direct and indirect complaints realised by the two groups in emails to familiar and unfamiliar addressees (i.e. a friend and a service provider), and (b) on the cognitive processes the learners engaged in during the email writing task at two different levels of proficiency. While the two groups were found to resort to similar framing moves and to similar pragmatic strategies for complaint realisation overall, the higher proficiency group employed a wider range of linguistic resources. In terms of cognitive processing, both groups tended to engage in execution more than in other types of processes, and to focus attention on language correctness rather than pragmatic appropriateness. The authors argue that L2 learners are in need of pragmatic instruction and training in order to carry out the email-writing task more effectively and to pay attention to the necessary features when reviewing and evaluating their emails. Nguyen and Pham's chapter is a much-needed contribution to the scarcity of L2 pragmatic studies, and email pragmatic studies that specifically focus on the speech act of complaining. A methodological contribution that Nguyen and Pham's study makes concerns its use of think-aloud protocols in order to examine L2 learners' thought processes for planning, executing and evaluating their emails. To date, only a limited number of studies have attempted to analyse learners' cognitive processes using retrospective or introspective verbal reports, and even fewer studies (e.g., Lin and Wang 2020) have examined cognitive processes in relation to learners' email performance.

The next chapter (Chapter 3) by Usó-Juan makes a unique contribution to the field of instructional pragmatics and serves to ascertain the positive role of metapragmatic instruction in improving and retaining learners' ability to mitigate requests when writing an email to an authority figure (i.e. university professor). Applying the theoretical framework of form-function-context mapping (Taguchi 2011), Usó-Juan's study involves a group of Spanish EFL university students and uses a pre-test/post-test/delayed post-test design to investigate the long-term effect of metapragmatic instruction on learners' ability to externally and internally modify their email requests, following a six-hour instructional intervention. Since L1 speakers of English tend to use lexical and syntactic modifiers frequently but EFL

learners find their use challenging, these were the chosen pragmatic targets. The study confirmed instructional benefits even after two months, as demonstrated by the increased frequency and range of modification devices employed in the emails. Learners also reported increased levels of confidence to mitigate their email requests. Usó-Juan's chapter furthers our understanding of the effects of pedagogical pragmatic intervention and provides additional qualitative insights by examining learners' enhanced self-reported confidence in using email for communication with faculty members.

Finally, Halenko and Winder (Chapter 4) depart from examining elicited data to focus on naturally-occurring emails. Unlike the other studies of the present volume, this is a longitudinal study which contributes to a shortage of email investigations in the study abroad (SA) context. More specifically, Halenko and Winder's study tracks the influence of a SA stay over one academic year on the email writing of Chinese novice L2 users as they interact with expert L1 users. Their findings reveal that novice request emails differ considerably from their L1 expert peers' emails in terms of how politeness is projected, and the linguistic choices made to realise requests. In addition, the authors note that the SA stay had minimal impact on novice request emails between the beginning and end of their year abroad. Long term exposure to emails and increased experience in email writing did not seem to advance the learners' pragmatic development or reduce their non-target-like features which were found in the first half of their SA sojourn. The study demonstrates that L2 learners are underprepared to interact via this medium during study abroad and L2 learners appear to largely rely on their L1 systems to see them through. This study's findings have pedagogical implications and signify the importance of and the need for providing explicit pragmatic email instruction when preparing learners for a SA experience.

## Volume Part II: Relational practices in email communication

The second part of the volume consists of five chapters which focus on relational practices in email communication (Ren and Liu; Economidou-Kogetsidis; Schauer; Bella; Savić and Đorđević). These studies are unique in their individual foci and demonstrate that successful emails must attend to a range of variables which can be contextually, socially and culturally tricky to manage.

The chapter by Ren and Liu (Chapter 5) investigates Chinese graduate students' production and perception of phatic communion (also known as small talk) in L2 English gratitude emails. One of the unique contributions of this chapter is the authors' investigation of both production and perception of the email users, as perception studies of this kind are scarce – yet a consideration of how interlocutors project

and receive information communicated via email is crucial to understanding which pragmatic aspects L2 learners perform successfully and where the pragmatic challenges might lie. The study's examination of email phatic communication as an interactional rather than a transactional goal of the email is an additional contribution that this chapter makes to the investigation of email pragmatics, as very few L2 pragmatics studies today have focused on such conventionalised, affect-oriented utterances which aim to establish, maintain, and enhance interpersonal relationships between interlocutors (Taguchi 2018).

Basing their findings on elicited email data from different proficiency groups, the authors note that phatic communion was generally realised by expectations of future meetings, expressing wishes and promises of hard work. The findings of this study indicated that proficiency did not appear to affect the Chinese students' employment of phatic communication in their L2 English gratitude emails since results were similar across the low and high proficiency groups. One of the key findings of the study is that the phatic utterances produced by Chinese EFL learners tend to directly incorporate L1 pragmatic norms. The authors therefore argue that phatic communion might be a more culture-specific phenomenon which may require higher pragmatic competence to be performed appropriately in an L2, and it might be more challenging for foreign (rather than second) language learners (Ren 2013). Mirroring other studies in this volume (e.g., Bella, Economidou-Kogetsidis; Halenko and Winder), L1 transfer (mainly sociopragmatic transfer) accounts for many of the findings of Ren and Liu's investigation. Results from the perception survey revealed more mixed results between proficiency levels indicating that a more refined picture may be achieved by complementing production studies with a perception dimension. This chapter points towards the role of identity construction and the legitimacy of using L1 pragmatic norms, as L2 learners/email writers may consciously choose their pragmatic strategies in order to maintain their L1 socio-cultural identity in certain situations.

Economidou-Kogetsidis' study (Chapter 6) takes a comparative look at Greek university students' authentic emails to lecturers written in their L1 Greek and L2 English in an attempt to reveal the L1-specific pragmatic behaviours reflected in L2 emails. The data is examined with regard to three specific elements: the forms of address, request strategies and substrategies, and softening devices. Despite the students' advanced English language proficiency, they tended to rely heavily on L1 culturally-loaded strategies and politeness conventions in their L2 emails. This was clearly demonstrated by a prevalence of formal address forms, a preference for direct request forms, and softening devices that closely mirrored those employed in Greek emails to lecturers. The study thus contributes to our understanding of the complexity of L1 influences on the pragmatic choices in L2 student-lecturer email communication, as well as highlighting the importance of recognising the

diverse cultural and social norms that underlie email communication and pragmatic choices that multilingual users of English make. As this study is set in an ELF context where both faculty members and students are proficient bi/multilingual users of English, this chapter further touches on whether the expectation exists among such L2 learners to actually employ target or native language norms in ELF email interaction.

Also concerned with student-lecturer interaction in an ELF setting, Schauer's study (Chapter 7) analyses greetings and leave takings in emails written by German university students in their mother tongue and L2 English. Learners largely adopted a formal style whether writing emails in English or German, and both sets of data were generally framed with greetings and leave takes. Observing the data qualitatively, whilst the German emails contained a wide range of types of greetings and leave takes, the L2 data showed much less variation, i.e., the L2 English emails typically relied on a single preferred opening and relatively fewer leave takes. Schauer notes little evidence of pragmatic failure overall but does reveal some evidence of L1 transfer in the L2 data with the selection of appropriate address terms. The results of this study emphasise the importance of micro-analysing individual students' contributions in a corpus, as this can provide valuable insights into an individual's language use over time and can reveal the impact individual students' routine preferences can have on group scores.

Moving to the L1 Greek context, Bella's investigation (Chapter 8) draws on a corpus of L1 and L2 Greek university students' request emails to faculty; thus, her study is the only one in this volume which targets an L2 other than English. The study concentrates on the overall structure of email requests and the sociopragmatic means employed by the email writers to achieve the lecturer's compliance in a specific situation. Bella notes interesting outcomes in relation to how the two groups differ in their identity construction, perception of the teacher-student relationship and entitlement to performing the request. As such, this chapter makes a new contribution to the field as it explores further the notions of entitlement, identity construction and perception of the hierarchical relationship between students and faculty in email in academic contexts. Since few pragmatics studies have adopted this investigative focus, particularly in terms of discussing the notion of entitlement, this study is likely to lead the way for further investigations of this kind. The study also offers implications for future research aiming to focus on deep-rooted and context-specific cultural assumptions of ideology, rights, and obligations.

Staying within the academic institutional context but also focusing on interactions between university staff members, Savić and Đorđević's study (Chapter 9) investigates relational practices in developing email conversations between interactants performing various institutional roles at a Norwegian university. This chapter examines how relationships between interactants (that perform different

institutional roles) are negotiated as email conversations unfold, and it focuses on the influence of three variables: conversational progression, institutional roles, and social distance. Longer conversations between university staff members or staff and students are analysed in terms of the opening and closing sequences, and other relational moves. The study revealed that the openings and closings in the conversations between faculty members tended to orient to familiarity to a greater extent than in most other institutional role dyads, while the widest variety and the highest frequency of relational moves outside the framing moves were identified in faculty–PhD fellow conversations. This study extends our understanding of email communication in academic settings by going beyond the examination of students-faculty emails to the examination of conversations between other interactants within the academic setting (i.e. faculty members, faculty-PhD fellow conversations and administrative staff - administrative staff conversations). It also further contributes to the field by offering detailed statistical analyses of longer email exchanges within the unfolding conversation, rather than by focusing solely on self-contained emails.

## Concluding remarks

Overall, the present volume addresses email communication in different contexts (EFL/SA/ELF) and includes a variety of topics related to email production and perception of L2 learners, development of email literacy, relational practices in email communication, and influential effects of first language and culture in L2 email communication. Even though many of the studies included in the volume follow a very similar data coding and analysis, and not all of them utilise authentic email data (but instead use elicited data collected with a similar elicitation tool (i.e. a/an (electronic) discourse completion task – (DCT)), the strength of this volume lies in including contributions that examine various email topics and functions (requests, complaints, gratitude), learners from different language and cultural backgrounds (e.g., Chinese, German, Greek, Spanish, Vietnamese) and different proficiency levels, as well as different methodologies (qualitative/quantitative/mixed).

Regarding the use of the DCT in some of the chapters in this volume, it is to be noted that elicited email data can still be informative and valid. Despite the various criticisms posed against the DCT as an elicitation instrument unable to capture the features of spoken language and natural interaction (Golato 2003; Ogiermann and Bella 2020; Rose 1992), the (e-)DCT is a much more suitable instrument for the collection of email data. Due to its written mode, the DCT, if well designed, has the potential to yield data closer to naturally occurring data than is the case with spoken interaction. This is especially the case when emails are examined as

self-contained messages rather than as longer exchanges. At the same time, unlike naturally occurring emails, emails elicited through the use of a properly designed e-DCT can achieve control of the social variables involved, and can thus "provide useful information about speakers' pragmalinguistic knowledge of the strategies and linguistic forms" (Kasper and Rose 2002: 96) by which email communicative acts can be produced and understood.

As a concluding note to this introduction, we believe this volume will appeal to researchers, graduate students and experienced language teachers. The focus on how L2 users produce, interpret and engage with the processes of email writing, and how they intentionally or unintentionally position themselves through their use of L2 will be of interest to teacher education programmes and to the wider research community. Across the chapters, a multitude of language and cultural backgrounds of the learners, different proficiency levels, and varied research designs provide important new insights into the dynamic and complex interplay between cultural, interlanguage, and medium-specific factors shaping L2 email discourse.

The field of email pragmatics is still relatively new and there are numerous unanswered questions regarding the reasons for L2 learners' choices of pragmatic options to convey relational functions and the ways in which different cultural and contextual features shape email communication. Each chapter in this volume provides valuable suggestions for further research directions. The role of transfer and its interplay with learner agency and identity construction, the use of translanguaging, the co-construction of language use in the email medium in ELF communication, are only some of the issues that are still largely unexplored and pending further research.

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PART I

# Email literacy and pragmatic development

CHAPTER 1

# Reformulation on Chinese EFL learners' email literacy

## A preliminary exploration

Yuan-shan Chen and Chin-Ting Liu[1]
National Chin-Yi University of Technology

This study explored the effect of reformulation on Chinese EFL learners' email pragmatic performance. Two high-intermediate learners of English collaboratively wrote an email (pretest), compared their original email to a reformulated version of it and to a native speaker model in the noticing stage, and revised the pretest email individually (posttest). The results indicated that (a) most of the problems found in pragmatic-related episodes in the pretest were appropriately resolved based on peer discussion; (b) the participants predominantly noticed pragmalinguistic features in the noticing stage; and (c) in the posttest, the number of changes matching the reformulation was higher than the number of those matching the native speaker model. This study closes by providing pedagogical implications for language teachers.

**Keywords**: reformulation, pragmatic-related episodes, Chinese learners

## 1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, researchers of second language (L2) acquisition have progressively shifted their perspectives from viewing learners as autonomous individuals to recognising the contribution of social and environmental factors in L2 acquisition. Two influential notions from the movement include Vygotsky's *Sociocultural Theory* and the *Noticing Hypothesis*. The *Sociocultural Theory* of L2 acquisition, developed from the works of Russian psychologist L. Vygotsky, emphasises the role of social interaction in language learning. One core concept associated with the theory is known as the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD) (Vygotsky 1978), a potential area of development that is achievable under the guidance of and in collaboration with a more capable individual. When the ZPD is interpreted in

1. Chin-Ting Liu is the corresponding author.

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an L2 learning setting, it implies that a learner can acquire the L2 effectively with scaffolded assistance from a more proficient language user so long as the language skills of concern lie within the learner's ZPD. The original Vygotskyan idea of the ZPD, which can be referred to as *expert–novice scaffolding*, occurs when the teacher instructs learners in the classroom, when a more-proficient individual helps less-proficient learners, and even when learners consult grammar books or dictionaries (Cook 2008). Donato (1994) further extended the notion of *expert–novice scaffolding* to *novice–novice scaffolding* by demonstrating that peer collaboration could also facilitate L2 learning. This type of *scaffolding* mostly occurs when learners work in pairs or groups to carry out a given task by pooling linguistic resources. On the other hand, the *Noticing Hypothesis*, proposed by Schmidt (1990, 2001), claims that consciously noticing the target-like form in the comprehensible input (Krashen 1982) is a prerequisite for learners to convert input to intake. Therefore, for the acquisition of L2 pragmatics to occur, learners must pay attention to the gaps in the linguistic forms, functional meanings and relevant contextual features between their current interlanguage and the input they perceive (Schmidt 1993). In fact, the *Sociocultural Theory* and *Noticing Hypothesis* collectively exert influence on how language teachers provide feedback to language learners. One salient example is the use of reformulation in a writing task.

Reformulation is a strategy used to provide writing feedback to intermediate and advanced L2 learners. Cohen (1983) developed this strategy from Levenston (1978) and defined it as "having a native writer of the target language rewrite the learner's essay, preserving all the learner's ideas, making it sound as nativelike as possible" (p. 6). The traditional approach in L2 writing instruction may be discouraging to learners, for the written text is usually covered with overwhelming teacher corrections. The reformulation strategy, on the other hand, provides a personalised native-speaker revision without any marks on the written text, making learners feel less face-threatened and more comfortable because the work is still perceived as their own. In addition, teacher corrections tend to concentrate on surface-level problems such as vocabulary, grammar and mechanics. Reformulation, a form of written recast, goes beyond "surface features of the text only" (Thornbury 1997), provides both positive and negative evidence of language input (Nassaji 2007), and prompts learners to focus on higher-level phenomena such as stylistics, cohesion and coherence (Cohen 1982, 1989). In other words, learners may find that reformulation contains not only "an erroneous form being replaced by a correct one" but also "a less appropriate form being replaced by a more appropriate one within the given context" (Cohen 1989: 1).

By its very definition, reformulation is generally employed in a multistage L2 writing task. First, learners work in pairs to respond to a writing prompt, which may be a series of comic strips, a designated situation, or a dictogloss (the pretest

stage). Next, the written text is reformulated by a native speaker of the target language to make it more nativelike without changing the learners' original intentions. However, one disadvantage of reformulation is that it might not be representative of desirable L1 writing. Therefore, some studies may provide a native speaker model as a complement to this strategy because the addition of a model texts offers learners a sample of native writing at both the sentential and discoursal levels (Allwright, Woodley and Allwright 1988; Hanaoka 2007; Yang and Zhang 2010). After that, learners are asked to compare the original draft and the reformulation/native speaker model collaboratively (the noticing stage) by noticing the differences between these two versions. Finally, they are asked to rewrite the original text individually (the posttest stage) by making any necessary changes based on what has been learnt in the noticing stage.

Drawing on Swain and Lapkin (2002), Cook (2008) claims that the reformulation strategy embodies *expert–novice* and *novice–novice* scaffolding. *Expert–novice scaffolding* is represented by having the native speaker revise learners' written output. In contrast, *novice–novice scaffolding* is incorporated by having learners discuss the reformulation collaboratively. In addition, by having a chance to carefully compare the differences between the original writing and the reformulated texts (or a native speaker model), the learners are able to bring the linguistic input from native speakers and their own linguistic output into focal attention so that felicitous L2 learning conditions are properly constructed. In other words, instead of serving as a norm for learners to imitate, the native speaker writings help learners to raise their awareness of linguistic variations, notice the diversity of linguistic usages, and provide options to voice their social identity. Although reformulation has been repeatedly reported to facilitate the improvement of L2 writing, previous studies mainly focus on the grammatical and lexical aspects (Kim and Bowles 2019; Swain and Lapkin 2002; Tocalli-Beller and Swain 2005, among others). Studies documenting how reformulation might improve L2 learners' pragmatic knowledge are still lacking, so the investigation deserves detailed attention. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the effects of reformulation on the development of L2 email literacy by administrating a multistage task. These stages included a pretest, a noticing session and a posttest. Email was the genre selected for this study because writing email requests requires high pragmatic competence (Chen 2015a, 2015b; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, 2015, 2018). Three research questions are to be answered:

1. What do learners focus on when working collaboratively on an email task?
2. What do learners notice while comparing the email they write in the pretest to a native speaker's reformulation of it and a native speaker model?
3. What are the effects of noticing on the learners' posttest performances?

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Participants

One female and one male fourth-year undergraduate student from an institute in southern Taiwan were invited to participate in a multistage email task. They grew up in a Mandarin-speaking environment with Taiwan Mandarin as their first language. The male student had earned a score of 825 on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), and the female student, a score of 755; therefore, they were regarded as high-intermediate learners of English. The participants actively registered to participate in the study and individually signed a consent form after the second author announced the information in class. The two participants were classmates and had known each other for almost four years at the time the experiment was carried out. The close friendship between the two participants was favourable, for familiarity between participants is preferred in the employment of pair work (Storch 2008). According to their self-reports, they had not received any prior formal instruction on email writing or email etiquette. Additionally, they seldom sent emails (in English or Chinese) in their daily lives because they mainly used a common instant messaging software application to contact their friends, relatives and even professors.

Two native speakers of English were invited to participate in this study. The first native speaker was in his 50s and was invited to provide a native speaker model for an internship advertisement (see Appendix A). He had a B.A. degree in creative writing and had been teaching English as a foreign language and for academic purposes for more than 30 years. The second native speaker was invited to reformulate the pretest of the participants. He spoke both Mandarin Chinese and English as first languages. He was in his late 20s and was a Ph.D. student in social sciences in Taiwan.

### 2.2 Instrument

The instrument of the study was an internship advertisement (see Appendix A). The advertisement presented detailed information of the job description, qualifications, working hours, application procedures, etc. The participants were required to write an email to the personnel manager to express interest in this vacancy. However, there was a schedule conflict because they had been assigned by the university to attend an international tennis tournament held in Thailand. Therefore, they had to inquire whether some flexibility could be allowed in the working schedule. This was a +PDR situation (high power, distance and ranking of imposition), for the

learners were writing to an unknown authority figure (the personnel manager of the publisher) and the request for schedule flexibility was highly imposing. This situation approximated the participants' real-life experiences as much as possible because situational familiarity would affect their pragmatic performances (Chen, Chen and Chang 2010).

## 2.3 Procedures

The procedures of the experiment are shown in Figure 1.

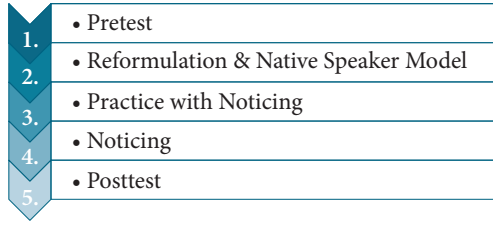


**Figure 1.** The experimental procedures of the study

In the pretest, the two participants were instructed to discuss and collaboratively compose an email in response to the internship advertisement with a minimum of 150 English words, within 60 minutes and without checking any references. Their discussions could be in either Chinese or English and were audio recorded. After the email was completed, it was sent to a native speaker for reformulation. Another native speaker of English was invited to construct a native speaker model based on the same internship advertisement. The recorded discussions were sent to an assistant for word-for-word transcriptions.

The noticing session was conducted six days after the pretest. Before the noticing session started, the participants practised first. They were given a sheet showing two paragraphs excerpted from the examples in Cohen (1989). The first paragraph was an original text written by a Hebrew-speaking high school student, and the second paragraph was the same text reformulated by a native speaker of English. The participants were encouraged and guided to list the differences they noticed, and they discussed the potential reasons why those changes were made. The practice session lasted for about 10 minutes, and the noticing session began immediately after the practice. In the noticing session, the participants first received the internship advertisement and their original draft. Afterwards, they were asked to compare the original draft and the reformulation of it (around 11 minutes), and subsequently to compare the draft to the native speaker model (around 10 minutes). As in the

pretest, the noticing session was audio recorded and sent to the same assistant for transcription.

Finally, the posttest was administered to the participants in the morning after the noticing session. The time lapse between these two stages was around 12 hours. In this stage, the internship advertisement and the co-constructed email from the pretest were displayed on a computer screen. Each participant was asked to revise the email individually within 60 minutes based on his/her perceptions of a good email, without consulting any resources.

## 2.4 Data analysis

To answer the first research question, we analysed the pair talks in terms of *pragmatic-related episodes* (PREs) (Chen 2016; Kim and Taguchi 2016; Taguchi and Kim 2016), defined as "any discussions on, questions about, or corrections of pragmatic-related language production" (Kim and Taguchi 2015: 664). PREs were further categorised into *pragmalinguistics* and *sociopragmatics*. Pragmalinguistics refers to the "knowledge of forms and strategies to convey particular illocutions" (Mirzaei, Roohani and Esmaeili 2012: 80), while sociopragmatics refers to "associations between form selection and contextual features such as situation, age, gender, occupation, role, relationship, imposition of a particular speech act etc." (McConachy 2019: 168). Consequently, episodes relating to pragmalinguistics include features such as *amplifiers, grounders, hedges, embedded questions, subjectivisers, downtoners*, and *progressive and past tense forms*. On the other hand, episodes relating to sociopragmatics involve discussions about the social relationship and distance between the email sender and recipient as well as the degree of imposition of the target request. Discussions pertaining to creating, maintaining, and shaping the identities of the characters were also coded as sociopragmatics (Van Compernolle 2011). PREs were also coded for whether the participants resolved the problems they encountered. When the participants successfully resolved a problem, the episode was coded as *appropriately resolved*. When the participants came up with an inappropriate solution, the episode was coded as *inappropriately resolved*. When the participants failed to come up with a solution, the episode was coded as *unresolved* (Kim 2008). The two authors of this study coded the transcriptions separately and discussed the results afterwards. When disagreements occurred, we discussed the divergences, reached consensus and finalised the coding together. One note is appropriate here. As the current study focused on EFL learners' pragmatic performances, we followed the convention of the appropriateness judgement proposed by Liu (2007). Specifically, when an appropriate solution for a PRE was provided by the participants, the episode was coded as *appropriately resolved* even if there were

grammatical issues, such as incorrect verb forms or subject– verb agreement, in the writing. Therefore, if the participants decided to use the expression *I were wondering* after a discussion, this instance would be counted as *appropriately resolved*, even though there was an obvious issue of subject–verb agreement. On the other hand, a decision to use the expression 'Mr. John' would be coded as *inappropriately resolved* because the family name, instead of the given name, should be used.

To answer the second research question, we first analysed the pair talks in the noticing session the same way as we did in the pretest stage. Next, we compared the number of changes noticed by the participants to the total number of changes made in the reformulation. Finally, we documented what had been observed in the native speaker model by the participants.

To answer the third research question, we compared the total number of changes in the posttest to that in the pretest. Some of the changes matched exactly the reformulation or the native speaker model. Others were coded as acceptable changes if they were similar to the reformulated texts or model texts, or if the changes became appropriate in the posttest.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Research question 1

To answer the first research question ("What do learners focus on when working collaboratively on an email task?"), the numbers of PREs in the pair talk were calculated and are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Distribution of PREs in the pretest session with percentages in parentheses

| Types | Appropriately resolved | Inappropriately resolved | Unresolved | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pragmalinguistics | 8 (80) | 2 (20) | 0 (0) | 10 |
| *amplifier* | *2* | *1* | – | *3* |
| *grounder* | *3* | – | – | *3* |
| *hedge* | *1* | – | – | *1* |
| *embedded question* | *1* | – | – | *1* |
| *subjectiviser* | *1* | – | – | *1* |
| *form of address* | – | *1* | – | *1* |
| Sociopragmatics | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 0 |
| **Total episodes** | **8 (80)** | **2 (20)** | **0 (0)** | **10** |

The participants formulated a total of 10 PREs, wherein they focused entirely on pragmalinguistics (10 out of 10 PREs) and paid no attention to sociopragmatics (0 out of 10 PREs). The participants in the present study were able to resolve eight out of 10 problems in PREs through metapragmatic discussion.

Among the 10 discussions centering on pragmalinguistics, three discussions were about *amplifiers* and another three were about *grounders*. The remaining four discussions pertained to *hedge, embedded question, subjectiviser* and *form of address*, respectively. In Excerpts 1 to 6, one example of each pragmalinguistic subcategory is shown. The complete pretest email composed by the participants appears in Appendix B.

**Excerpt 1.** Use of amplifier "especially"

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| A: | 1 | I majored in foreign language in Taiwan University … |
| B: | 2 | and especially … |
| A: | 3 | 等一下哦。… I can speak … eight different language<br>[*Wait a minute.* … I can speak … eight different language] |
| B: | 4 | I can speak … 你剛剛說什麼?<br>[I can speak… *What did you say?*] |
| A: | 5 | eight … 不要好了。太多了。five …<br>[eight… *No. Too many.* … five] |
| B: | 6 | five language |
| A: | 7 | five different language … especially … |
| B: | 8 | 要s。<br>[*S is needed.*] |
| A: | 9 | Especially in English 這樣。<br>[Especially in English *Like this*.] |

**Excerpt 2.** Use of grounder

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| B: | 10 | 就寒假期間因為她已經期待這個很久所以為了這個他都沒有安排打工。<br>[*Because she has expected for this for the winter vacation for a long time, she did not plan to have any part-time jobs.*] |
| A: | 11 | 好，… for this internship …<br>[*OK*, … for this internship …] |
| B: | 12 | 我原本想說 In order to … attend this internship，推掉所有打工。<br>[*Originally, I thought to use* In order to… attend this internship, *to reject the part-time jobs.*] |
| A: | 13 | In order to … |
| B: | 14 | attend this internship … |

**Excerpt 3.** Use of hedge "unfortunately"

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| A: | 15 | 第二段，遺憾的是… |
| | | [*In the second paragraph, it is regret to…*] |
| B: | 16 | Unfortunately, u-n-f-o-r-t-u-n-a-t-e-l-y |
| A: | 17 | Unfortunately, I receive… |
| B: | 18 | I was a… assigned… 被指派… |
| | | [I was a… assigned… *was assigned…*] |

**Excerpt 4.** Use of embedded question

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| A: | 19 | Can I… 就我們可不可以請假或者是其他… |
| | | [Can I… *Can we call some days off or other…*] |
| B: | 20 | I was wondering if I can… |
| A: | 21 | 好。 |
| | | [*OK.*] |
| B: | 22 | If I can… |

**Excerpt 5.** Use of subjectiviser

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| B: | 23 | 我覺得最後一句可以寫說 I am going to be the best… 那個 |
| | | [*I think that the last sentence could be* I am going to be the best… *that*] |
| A: | 24 | 人選 |
| | | [*Candidate*] |
| B: | 25 | 最佳人選，I believe |
| | | [*The best candidate*, I believe] |
| A: | 26 | I believe… |
| B: | 27 | I'm going to be the most suitable… |

**Excerpt 6.** Use of the inappropriate form of address

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| B: | 28 | Dear … 他叫什麼? |
| | | [Dear … *What is his name?*] |
| A: | 29 | Mr. John 吧。 |
| | | [*I guess he is* Mr. John.] |

As shown in Excerpt (1), the participants tried to emphasise that, among the five foreign languages the applicant was capable of, English was the best, and they agreed to use the amplifier *especially*. The final sentences they wrote were "*I major in foreign language in the Taiwan University*", "*I can speak five different languages, especially in English*". In Excerpt (2), the learners decided to provide an explanation to demonstrate how eager they were to be granted the internship opportunity

(line 12). The actual sentences they produced were "*In order to attend this internship, I reject all of my part time job in my winter vacation*". Excerpt (3) showed that the participants used the hedge *unfortunately* when they intended to express regret (lines 16 to 17). In Excerpt (4), the learners tried to propose a solution to the schedule conflict, and they put the request in the embedded clause by using "*I was wondering if I can…*" (line 20). Finally, in Excerpt (5), instead of directly expressing that the email writer was the best candidate, the participants added the subjectiviser *I believe* at the beginning of the sentence to increase the degree of politeness (lines 25 to 26). The instance in Excerpt (6) showed that the learners were aware of using an appropriate greeting *Dear…* in the email. Additionally, they used the appropriate title *Mr*. to address the email recipient. However, they were not aware of the fact that the family name, rather than the given name *John*, should be used when the distance between the writer and the interlocutor is high, so the episode was coded as *inappropriately resolved*.

Besides Excerpt (6), there was one additional problem involving pragmalinguistics that the participants failed to resolve based on peer discussion. The instance is shown in Excerpt (7).

**Excerpt 7.** Inappropriately resolved problem relating to pragmalinguistics

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| A: | 30 | 然後再說我真的 … 我真的很想要這份工作。I very desire 渴望<br>[*Then we express that I really … I would really like to get the job*. I very desire *desire*] |
| B: | 31 | desire… |
| A: | 32 | 好，就 desire。To 還是 for 啊<br>[*Ok, use* desire. To *or* for?] |

In Excerpt (7), the participants finally wrote "*I am very desire to get the chance for this internship*". Here we interpreted the use of the amplifier *very* to be pragmalinguistic, rather than a simple grammatical issue, since the participants wanted to emphasise how much the student writer wanted this opportunity to work as an intern. Such emphasis is evidenced by their verbal protocol "*Then we express that I really … I would really like to get the job…*".

### 3.2 Research question 2

To answer the second research question ("What do learners notice while comparing the email they write in the pretest to a native speaker's reformulation of it and a native speaker model"), the pair talks constructed by the participants in the noticing stage were analysed. The reformulated version of the pretest email writing and the native speaker model appear in Appendices C and D, respectively.

Table 2 presents the number of reformulated items noticed and unnoticed by the participants when they compared the differences between the original email in the pretest and the reformulated email.

**Table 2.** Number of pragmalinguistic/sociopragmatic reformulations noticed and unnoticed by the participants with percentages in parentheses

| Types | Reformulated | Noticed | Unnoticed |
|---|---|---|---|
| Pragmalinguistics | 8 | 4 (50) | 4 (50) |
| *downtoner* | *1* | *1* | *0* |
| *progressive* | *1* | *0* | *1* |
| *past tense* | *5* | *2* | *3* |
| *form of address* | *1* | *1* | *0* |
| Sociopragmatics | 0 | 0 (0) | 0 (0) |
| **Total episodes** | **8** | **4 (50)** | **4 (50)** |

In the reformulation, the native speaker provided eight pragmatic-related changes, all involving pragmalinguistics. The absence of reformulations involving sociopragmatics is understandable, for the very definition of reformulation is the preservation of all the learner's ideas while making the writing sound as nativelike as possible. Among the eight changes involving pragmalinguistics, the participants noticed half of the total reformulated items. Excerpts 8 to 11 demonstrate the four pair talks formulated by the participants when they noticed changes related to pragmalinguistics.

**Excerpt 8.** Noticing the changes in reformulation: Pragmalinguistics 1

A: 33 對，還有一個。If we could find。我們如果可以找到其他共同方式變成說不要…比較親民吧。
[*Yes, there is another one*. If we could find. *If we could figure it out collaboratively, not just… I guess it's with more human touch.*]
B: 34 可以協調。
[*It's negotiable.*]
A: 35 對。可以協調的模式。
[*Yes. It's negotiable.*]

**Excerpt 9.** Noticing the changes in reformulation: Pragmalinguistics 2

A: 36 我覺得我們最後一句話 I'm going to be，他用的I would be 感覺比較強調。
[*I think for the last sentence* I'm going to be, *he uses* I would be. *It's more affirmative.*]
B: 37 就感覺 I would be 是我一定會
[*It sounds like* I would be *indicates I will definitely do it.*]

**Excerpt 10.** Noticing the changes in reformulation: Pragmalinguistics 3

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| B: | 38 | 然後他用 allow me。 |
| | | [*Then he uses* allow me.] |
| A: | 39 | 對，讓我。 |
| | | [*Yes*, allow me.] |
| B: | 40 | 比較好。 |
| | | [*It's better*.] |

**Excerpt 11.** Noticing the changes in reformulation: Pragmalinguistics 4

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| B: | 41 | 他把 John 也改掉欸。 |
| | | [John *is being replaced*.] |
| A: | 42 | 應該是 John 是那個吧…。 |
| | | [*I guess because* John *is*….] |
| B: | 43 | 他是直接把它去掉 |
| | | [*He directly deletes it*.] |
| A: | 44 | 他是直接變成…。 |
| | | [*He directly changes it into*….] |
| B: | 45 | 可能這比較正式吧。 |
| | | [*I guess this might be more formal*.] |

According to Excerpts (8) and (9), the participants learned from the reformulation that the native speaker changed their sentences into past tense (i.e. *If we could find* and *I would be*), although the reasons they provided might not necessarily be correct. Excerpt (10) indicated that the learners noticed that the downtoner *allow me* was a better way to express a request. Excerpt (11) showed that the participants noticed that the given name *John* was changed into the family name by the native speaker and believed that it would become more formal.

To examine what the participants noticed while they compared the email they wrote in the pretest to a native speaker model, their peer discussions in the noticing stage were analysed. The results showed that the participants formulated only lexis-related episodes (e.g., word choice) and form-related episodes (e.g., grammatical issues), and paid little attention to pragmatics.

### 3.3 Research question 3

To answer the third research question ("What are the effects of noticing on the learners' posttest performances"), we counted the total number of changes in the posttest and further categorised the changes into three types: *changes matching the reformulation, changes matching the native speaker model* and *acceptable changes*, as shown in Tables 3 and 4.

**Table 3.** Relationship between the first participant's noticing in the noticing stage and the changes involving pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics in the posttest revision (with percentages shown in parentheses)

| Types | Total number of changes | Matching the reformulation | Matching the model | Acceptable |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pragmalinguistics | 8 | 4 | 2 | 2 |
| *downtoner* | *2* | *1* | *1* | *0* |
| *hedge* | *1* | *0* | *0* | *1* |
| *progressive* | *1* | *0* | *0* | *1* |
| *past tense* | *1* | *1* | *0* | *0* |
| *subjectiviser* | *1* | *0* | *1* | *0* |
| *understater* | *1* | *1* | *0* | *0* |
| *form of address* | *1* | *1* | *0* | *0* |
| Sociopragmatics | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| **Total episodes** | **8** | **4 (50)** | **2 (25)** | **2 (25)** |

**Table 4.** Relationship between the second participant's noticing at the noticing stage and the changes involving pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics in the posttest revision (with percentages shown in parentheses)

| Types | Total number of changes | Matching the reformulation | Matching the model | Acceptable |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pragmalinguistics | 11 | 5 | 3 | 3 |
| *downtoner* | *3* | *1* | *1* | *1* |
| *hedge* | *1* | *0* | *0* | *1* |
| *progressive* | *1* | *0* | *0* | *1* |
| *past tense* | *3* | *2* | *1* | *0* |
| *subjectiviser* | *1* | *0* | *1* | *0* |
| *understater* | *1* | *1* | *0* | *0* |
| *form of address* | *1* | *1* | *0* | *0* |
| Sociopragmatics | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| **Total episodes** | **11** | **5 (45.4)** | **3 (27.3)** | **3 (27.3)** |

Although the participants revised the email individually, the final outputs manifested similar patterns. First, the participants made changes only to pragmalinguistics. This is reasonable because discussions pertaining to sociopragmatics were absent in the noticing session. Second, the changes to pragmalinguistics were made within the same subcategories (i.e. *downtoner, hedge, progressive, past tense, subjectiviser, understater* and *form of address*). Third, for both participants, changes that matched the reformulation outnumbered changes that matched the native speaker model. Finally, the participants utilised more types of pragmalinguistic strategies in the posttest revisions than in the pretest email. That is, both participants used four additional strategies in the posttest email, including *downtoner, progressive, past tense* and *understater*.

Table 5 further illustrates the effect of noticing the changes in the reformulation on the learners' revisions in the posttest stage. In the pretest stage, the learners used the progressive form to express the idea that the email writer was the most suitable candidate for the internship vacancy. In the noticing stage, they noticed that the progressive form was changed into the modal verb phrase *I would be*. In the posttest stage, they both revised the sentence in accordance with the reformulation.

**Table 5.** Effect of noticing the reformulation in posttest

**A. Text Written at Pretest Stage:**
Participants: I believe I am going to be the most suitable person for this internship.
Reformulation: I believe I would be a most suitable internship candidate.

**B. Discussion at Noticing Stage:**
A: 46 我覺得我們最後一句話 I'm going to be，他用的I would be 感覺比較強調。
[*I think for the last sentence* I'm going to be, *he uses* I would be. *It's more affirmative*.]
B: 47 就感覺 I would be 是我一定會
[*It sounds like* I would be indicates *I will definitely to do it*.]

**C. Text Revised at Posttest Stage:**
A: I believe I would be the most suitable candidate for this internship.
B: I believe I would be the most suitable internship candidate.

Table 6 illustrates an instance of the effect of reading the native speaker model on the learners' revisions in the posttest stage. In the noticing stage, the learners noticed that the native speaker model used the downtoner followed by the direct request "*please let me know*" to inquire about the results. In the posttest stage, both learners added a sentence inquiring about the results by using "*please let me know*".

**Table 6.** Effect of reading the native speaker model on posttest

**A. Text from Native Speaker Model:**
Please let me know at your earliest convenience whether my application would still be considered in light of my commitment in January.

**B. Discussion at Noticing Stage:**
A: 48 他有想到什麼補救措施他都直接寫上去了，不像我們還問說有什麼補救措施。然後他最後一段還有表明說你要讓我知道說我可不可以 … 就是你有沒有接受我。就是 please let me know…。
[*The writer directly offered a way to make up the absence. Unlike us, we asked for an alternative. Additionally, at the last paragraph, the writer expressed that he/she would like the email recipient to inform him/her if he/she could… if the proposal was acceptable. That is*, please let me know….]

**C. Text Revised at Posttest Stage:**
A: Please let me know the result as early as possible.
B: Please let me know the result.

## 4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of reformulation on developing L2 learners' email literacy. Following a pretest–noticing–posttest design, we created an internship advertisement that appealed to the participants' real-life experiences and invited two adult EFL learners to collaboratively compose an email as the pretest. In the noticing stage, the participants discussed and compared their pretest email with a reformulated version of it and with a native speaker model. After that, they were invited to revise their pretest email individually. The first research question asked what learners focused on when working collaboratively on an email task. The results showed that the learners in our study paid more attention to pragmalinguistic features and less to sociopragmatic features. Next, the attention was shifted to what the learners noticed when they compared the email they wrote in the pretest to a native speaker's reformulation of it and a native speaker model. The results showed that the learners noticed half of the pragmalinguistic changes in the reformulation. Additionally, no sociopragmatic changes were available in the reformulation. When the learners read the native speaker model, they focused on lexis- and form-related issues, but not the pragmatic-related ones. Finally, we explored the effects of noticing on the learners' posttest performances. The results showed that each individual learner made around 10 changes that improved the email in the posttest. In addition, more changes matched the reformulation than the native speaker model.

The current findings, showing that the learners predominantly focused on pragmalinguistics, seem to coincide with previous research (Kim and Taguchi 2015, 2016; Taguchi and Kim 2016), which also reported that the learners mostly focus on pragmalinguistics. Kim and Taguchi (2015, 2016) examined the impacts of task complexity on request-making expressions when Korean learners of English completed a discourse completion task (DCT) collaboratively. In their study, PREs were subcategorised into sociopragmatic factors (i.e. *context*, or the relationship between interlocutors and the ranking of imposition of the request) and pragmalinguistic forms (i.e. *preparatory, grounder, head acts, hedges* and *amplifiers*). In the 2015 study, seventy-three Korean junior high school students were assigned to one simple task group (with more detailed task instructions), one complex task group (with less detailed task instructions) and one control group (without collaborative tasks). The two treatment groups had to respond to request situations in the pre- and posttests in pairs. They found that the average PREs targeting *context*, or sociopragmatics, were 4.76 for the simple task group and 7.42 for the complex task group, whereas the PREs targeting pragmalinguistic forms were 11.56 for the simple task group and 13.74 for the complex task group. In the 2016 study, on the contrary, the PREs targeting *contexts* (2.68 for the simple task group and 4.17 for the complex task group) outnumbered the PREs targeting pragmalinguistics (2.32 for the simple task

group and 2.67 for the complex task group). However, a closer look indicates that this difference occurred because in the 2016 study, only the request head acts were calculated, and none of the other pragmalinguistic forms were taken into consideration. Taguchi and Kim (2016) investigated the effects of peer collaboration on the acquisition of request forms. Seventy-four junior high school students were divided into a collaborative group, an individual group and a control group. The findings again demonstrated that the learners produced more pragmalinguistic PREs than sociopragmatic PREs when they were completing a discourse completion task with request situations. The collaborative group produced an average of 16.32 PREs in total, with 11.56 PREs targeting pragmalinguistics and only 4.76 targeting sociopragmatics. The same held true for the individual group, who produced an average of 11.60 episodes in total, with only 4.04 episodes targeting sociopragmatics and the remaining 7.56 episodes targeting pragmalinguistics. From the previous research and the current study, it appears that there is a tendency for L2 learners to produce more PREs targeting pragmalinguistics than those targeting sociopragmatics, regardless of task complexity (simple vs. complex), group patterns (individuals vs. pairs), or task types (email vs. DCT). In short, based on the literature and the current findings, it appears that L2 learners may need explicit guidance for them to notice sociopragmatic features and hence to acquire them.

Although the general PRE patterns found in this study agree with the ones found in the literature (i.e. more pragmalinguistic features than sociopragmatic ones), one interesting yet unexpected finding from the study was that the learners produced pragmalinguistic PREs only in the pretest and noticing stages in the current study. In fact, there were some potential sociopragmatic instances in the pretest and the noticing stages; however, we did not count them because there were no explicit discussions between contextual factors and the choices of the language usages. Excerpts (12) and (13) are two of those cases.

**Excerpt 12.** Potential instance of sociopragmatic discussion at pretest

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| B: | 49 | 署名<br>[*Signature*] |
| A: | 50 | your… your… |
| B: | 51 | Sincerely |
| A: | 52 | S-i-n-c-e-r-e-l-y 然後逗點嗎?<br>[S-i-n-c-e-r-e-l-y *Then a comma?*] |

**Excerpt 13.** Potential instance of noticing sociopragmatics in the native speaker model

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| A: | 53 | 最後面也是。我們(署名的)格式沒有很明確。Sincerely 這些。名字、職級、科系、學校(之前都沒有寫到)。<br>[*The last part is the same. The format (for the signature) is not clear. Like sincerely, name, job rank, department, school (are not included in the pretest writing).*] |

As shown in Excerpt (12), the participants agreed to use the phrase *your sincerely* as the closing of the email, which might imply that they were aware of the distance between the email recipient and the writer. However, without the participants' explicit remarks, it was hard to justify it. In Excerpt (13), although the learner understood the importance of providing sufficient information about the writer's identity to the email recipient at the end of the letter, no discussion was formulated. That is, the statement was from one of the participants, and the other participant did not add, comment or provide any feedback on this subject. In short, while it was effective to investigate EFL learners' email pragmatic performances by analysing the PREs in their pair talks, special attention should be given when one wishes to subcategorise any PREs into either pragmalinguistics or sociopragmatics in the future.

This study also examined the extent to which the learners resolved the PREs. Table 1 shows that there were no unresolved PREs, probably because the learners were of high-intermediate proficiency or because they were "willing to offer and engage with each other's ideas" (Storch 2002: 128) to solve the problems they encountered. Eight PREs were appropriately resolved, with only two inappropriately-resolved cases targeting pragmalinguistics. The first one was the wrong use of the amplifier *"very"*. In Excerpt (7), Learner A expressed "I very desire" to show eagerness for this job opportunity. As stated in the earlier section, this amplifier is redundant and ungrammatical because "desire" does not require an amplifier and also the placement of the amplifier in this sentence is inaccurate (c.f., Eisenstein and Bodman 1986). The expression "I very desire" seems to be direct transfer from the Chinese utterance "我很渴望" (*wo hen ke wang*). The other inappropriately-resolved item was the address form employed by the learners, "Dear Mr. John". This construction implies that the learners recognised the high power-distance relationship and the need for addressing an authority figure in a formal manner. However, the "dear + title + first name" construction is unacceptable in English, though it may not seem to cause offense. In fact, such a construction has been identified by researchers as one of the common pragmatic infelicities found in L2 learners' email correspondence (Chen 2015a; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, 2018). Another issue worth noting is the correlation between the employment of address forms and the degree of email directness. In Economidou-Kogetsidis (2018), there was a strong association between direct request strategies and formal address forms. She explained that it was caused by "pragmalinguistic transfer from Greek and the phenomenon of directness and formality expressing negative politeness." (p. 507). However, the present study showed the reverse, for the learners used the conventionally indirect request strategy (i.e. I was wondering if S VP) and the formal form of address (i.e. Dear Mr. John). Although the relationship between the degree of email directness and formality of address forms seems to vary across cultures, we believe that future studies focusing on different cultural backgrounds and recruiting more participants will be informative.

Furthermore, the findings showed that the learners exhibited progress in the posttest. This is evident from the expansion of the pragmalinguistic devices used in the participants' posttest revisions. In the pretest email, the participants used only six pragmalinguistic devices, namely, *amplifier, grounder, hedge, embedded question, subjectiviser* and *form of address* (c.f. Table 1). In the posttest revision, each of the participants used additional four pragmalinguistic items (i.e. *downtoner, progressive, past tense* and *understater*), three of which matched the reformulation (c.f. Tables 3 & 4). It seems that the reformulation exerted more influence on the learners' email performances than did the model text. Such a finding differs from that in Yang and Zhang's (2010) study, which documented 10 university students' (five pairs) performances on a three-stage writing task (composing–comparing–posttest). In their study, the number of changes which matched the reformulation ($N = 37$) was almost the same as the number matching the native speaker model ($N = 36$), indicating that the reformulation and the native speaker model had similar effects on L2 learners' writing performance. However, it should be borne in mind that our study had only one pair of participants, so it is risky to jump to the conclusion that reformulation, rather than the native speaker model, is more effective for the development of L2 learners' email literacy. In fact, L2 learners' accommodation or resistance to the native speaker norm may relate to their subjectivity (Ishihara 2008; Ishihara and Tarone 2009) or social identity. Learners generally emulate perceived L2 norms, but "they also have limits that bar wholesale adoption of the target pragmatics" (Bardovi-Harlig 2017: 229). The other issue worth further investigation is whether reformulation and native speaker models have differential effects on various aspects of language learning. The participants in Yang and Zhang's study focused primarily on vocabulary and grammar across the three stages, while our study analysed the learner production in terms of pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics. More research is therefore called for to determine the effects of reformulation and the native speaker model.

While the reformulated and model texts provided expert–novice scaffolding to the learners, the dyadic interactions offered novice–novice scaffolded assistance. Both types of scaffolding were beneficial to learner progress in the posttest. Swain and Watanabe (2013) argued that when confronted with a complex language problem, learners may try to solve it together by creating *collaborative dialogue*, which helps "refine their knowledge or come to a new or deeper understanding of a phenomenon" and therefore serves as "a source of language learning and development" (p. 3). A large body of research has demonstrated that peer collaboration has a positive impact on language learning (e.g., Hanjani and Li 2014; Li 2013; Wigglesworth and Storch 2009, to name just a few). Unfortunately, these studies have paid attention primarily to vocabulary and grammar. To date, only a handful

of studies have been conducted to examine the learning of L2 pragmatics from a sociocultural perspective (Alcón Soler 2002; Chen 2016; Takimoto 2012; Kim and Taguchi 2015, 2016; Taguchi and Kim 2016). However, the majority of these studies examine the effects of peer collaboration not alone, but in combination with instructional approaches or task complexity. Chen's (2016) study is the only exception. She examined the effect of peer collaboration on a multiple-choice discourse completion task (MDCT), divided into two isomorphic versions, each consisting of six apology and six request items with similar distributions of power, distance and ranking of imposition. Twenty intermediate Chinese learners of English were asked to complete one version independently, and then the other version in pairs. The results showed that collaborative work led to better task performance than did individual work. The analysis of the learners' metapragmatic discussions was segmented into PREs, showing that they focused on politeness, repair, interlocutor relationship, tone of voice, relevance, clarity and clarification when negotiating the correct answer collaboratively. The interviews also indicated that the majority of the learners showed a positive attitude toward collaborative work.

## 5. Pedagogical implications and conclusion

The overarching research question of the present study was whether reformulation, together with a native speaker model, would enhance L2 learners' email literacy. The findings of this case study indicated that the answer was affirmative. Three pedagogical suggestions are provided to language teachers. First, the key to successful employment of this reformulation strategy lies in the extent to which learners notice the differences between their drafts and the reformulated/model texts. Prior to the actual implementation of this feedback strategy, language teachers may provide a training session to make learners become "monitor users", or conscious learners who would welcome explicit comparisons. Such comparisons may cover a wide variety of linguistic (e.g., lexical choice, syntactic structures), discourse (e.g., stylistics, logical sequencing) (Cohen 1983; Qi and Lapkin 2001), pragmatic (e.g., pragmalinguistics, sociopragmatics), or even mechanics (e.g., punctuation) features. Second, the quality of noticing is important, too. When learners notice a particular item, they are encouraged to formulate a hypothesis about this item, arrive at the target rule, apply the target rule to interpret this item, spend time to process the changed item, and expend cognitive effort to understand the corrected item (Kim and Bowles 2019). The learners' demonstration of understanding in addition to simple noticing would consolidate the new knowledge and pave the way for acquisition. Finally, collaborative dialogue is best created when dyadic interaction is

of "moderate to high equality and moderate to high mutuality". Equality refers to "an equal degree of control over the direction of a task", whereas mutuality refers to "the level of engagement with each other's contributions" (Storch 2002: 127). In the collaborative pattern of interaction, both learners are experts and novices at the same time and transfer knowledge to each other. The co-constructed knowledge may later be internalised by both members of the dyad.

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## **Appendix A.** Internship advertisement

Book publishing editorial internship

Waldorf Publishing (Taiwan)
Posted: September 10th, 2019
Come join our Winter 2020 Editorial Team! Since 2010, *Waldorf Publishing* has been offering summer internships worldwide for college students who have a passion for editorial work. The intern hired for this position will need to be able to work directly with book manuscripts, and do proofreading as well as editing.
The candidate must have the following qualifications:

- Be proficient in English and have impeccable grammar skills
- Be able to use MS Word track changes
- Online outreach and promotion using blogs, Facebook, Instagram LinkedIn, Twitter, etc.
- Commitment to working from **1/13 to 2/15**, 9:00–17:00, Monday to Friday

Wage: Contingent on qualifications. NT$ 200–250/hr
Workplace: No. 22, Sec. 2, Sanmin Rd., Central Dist., Taichung City 400, Taiwan
Please send your resume and certificate of English proficiency to Mr. John McCarthy via email: John@waldorf.com.tw before October 30th.

(You saw the above advertisement for interns on internships.com. You think that your qualifications are very suitable for the company's needs, so you are eager to get this internship. However, you have been assigned to travel to Thailand to participate in the 2020 Asian College Tennis Championships on 1/13–1/17. Write an email of at least 150 words to express your interest in this job and ask the company if you can take time off during the internship or explore flexible solutions to the conflict.)

## **Appendix B.** The pretest email written by the participants

Dear Mr. John,

My name is Alicia, I am very interested in this internship. I have been heard this internship for a long time and try my best to grab this chance.

I major in foreign Language in the Taiwan University. I can speak five different languages, especially in English. Because we need to hand in our assignment by MS Word, I am very familiar in this software. In my leisure time, I usually post my daily life on Instagram to share my emotion to my friends. I spend a lot of time on my Instagram, so I have up to 500k fans. In order to attend this internship, I reject all of my part time job in my winter vacation.

Unfortunately, I was assigned to join the 2020 Asian College Tennis Championships by my school. I was wondering if I can take some days off or have any other options to make the things better. I am very desire to get the chance for this internship. I believe I am going to be the most suitable person for this internship.

Sincerely,
Alicia

## **Appendix C.** The pretest email reformulated by a native speaker

Dear Mr. McCarthy,

My name is Alicia. I have been interested in this internship for a long time and was hoping to take advantage of this opportunity.

I am a student in the Department of Foreign Language at the R.O.C. Naval Academy. I can speak five languages, and I am proficient in English. Because we need to hand in our assignments by MS Word, I am very familiar with this software. In my leisure time, I usually post on Instagram to share my experiences with my 500k followers. I would really like to get this internship so I have already quit my part time jobs over winter vacation.

Unfortunately, I was previously selected by my school to compete in the 2020 Asian College Tennis Championships, held from **1/13–1/17**. I was wondering if you'd be willing to let me take these few days off or if we could find other suitable options that would allow me to make it up to you. I believe I would be a most suitable internship candidate.

Sincerely,
Alicia

## **Appendix D.** The native speaker model email

Sender: Ling Chiang

Receiver: John McCarthy

Subject: Winter Internship

Date: Oct. 2, 2019

Mr. McCarthy,

I am writing to enquire about the Book Publishing Editorial Internship advertised on internships.com. I am quite interested in the position and would like to discuss whether the schedule might allow for a little flexibility.

I am currently a student in the Applied Foreign Language department of the R.O.C. Naval Academy. The internship holds strong appeal for me; having long been an avid reader and collector of books, I dream of entering into the publishing business. Of the four qualifications listed in the advertisement, I easily meet the first three, but I was wondering if some flexibility could be allowed regarding the fourth. I am afraid that from January 13 to January 17, I am scheduled to represent my school in an international tennis tournament overseas.

Might it be possible for me to make up for the missed time in the other weeks of the internship? Alternatively, I could work remotely while I am away. I know this is a bit of an imposition, and I regret having to make this request, but I find myself torn between a school commitment and the fulfillment of a personal dream.

Please let me know at your earliest convenience whether my application would still be considered in light of my commitment in January. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Ling Chiang
Student
Applied Foreign Language Department
R.O.C. Naval Academy

CHAPTER 2

# L2 emails of complaints

## Strategy use by low and high proficiency learners of English as a foreign language

Thi Thuy Minh Nguyen and Thi Thanh Thuy Pham
University of Otago / Vietnam National University Hanoi

In this chapter, we analysed the emails of complaints written by 48 low- and high-proficiency Vietnamese EFL learners when communicating with different audiences. The emails were elicited by means of a computerised discourse completion task developed by an international testing organisation. To understand the cognitive processes involved in the learners' production of complaints, we also analysed think-aloud protocols provided by 8 learners randomly selected from the above pool. Our findings indicate some effect of proficiency on the learners' pragmatic performance and decision-making processes. However, our findings also show that regardless of proficiency levels, the learners tended to neglect important writing processes. The findings suggest that the learners require pragmatic instruction as well as training in writing processes in order to carry out the email-writing task more effectively.

**Keywords**: Vietnamese EFL learners, complaints, computerised DCT, think-aloud protocols, proficiency

### 1. Introduction

The widespread use of emails in business and academic settings in the last few decades has given rise to a growing research interest in the pragmatics of email discourse (e.g., Bjørge 2007; Bou-Franch 2011; Chen, Rau and Rau 2016; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, 2016, 2018). In second language (L2) pragmatics research, an increasing interest has been given to the investigation of L2 email communication in institutional settings where a higher-status recipient is involved such as emails written to professors by L2 university students, presumably because of the potentially greater social consequences involved. Writing status-unequal emails requires not only reasonably developed linguistic competence but also

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pragmatic sophistication and critical language awareness of how discourse shapes and is shaped by power and social relationships in the target culture (Chen 2006). Understanding the difficulties faced by L2 learners, therefore, may assist teachers in supporting their students to communicate via emails more successfully.

A generalisation emerging from the above body of research is that despite the commonality of email communication nowadays, L2 students do not necessarily use it with ease. Their emails to professors, for example, may often lack status-congruent appropriateness, and hence can be regarded as disrespectful and inconsiderate by professors (Biesenbach-Lucas 2006, 2007; Chen et al. 2016; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, 2016; Félix-Brasdefer 2012). An important reason for the challenge faced by learners is the lack of "generally agreed upon conventions for institutional email communication" for students to observe (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007: 62). As a hybrid form of communication that resembles both speech and writing, email discourse may afford a vast stylistic diversity, depending on specific communicative contexts and writer-recipient relationships (Herring, Stein and Virtanen 2013). Further, although communication addressing professors is generally expected to display status congruent appropriateness, norms of appropriateness may vary from one culture to another (Bjørge 2007; Formentelli, and Hajek 2016; Merrison, Wilson, Davies and Haugh 2012), potentially causing students difficulties in making linguistic and stylistic choices that are socio-culturally appropriate for specific student-professor relationships (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2016; Nguyen 2018). Especially, low-proficiency students may find email interaction particularly challenging because of their limited pragmalinguistic competence and unfamiliarity with norms of politeness in the target language (TL) (e.g., see Chen 2006; Rau and Rau 2016). All these issues have indicated the importance of developing pragmatic competence and email literacy for students to carry out effective email communication in the L2 (Chen 2006).

Notwithstanding the great attention to L2 students' email practices in recent years, research on the development of these practices across proficiency levels, however, is relatively scarce (e.g., Chen 2006; Liu and Ren 2016; Rau and Rau 2016). Liu and Ren (2016), comparing apologies in emails written to peers by L2 learners at two different proficiency levels, found that the higher-proficiency learners employed more upgraders to intensify the force of their apologies, demonstrating a higher level of pragmalinguistic competence than their low-proficiency peers. However, in terms of the learners' sociopragmatic competence, only limited proficiency effect was found. Based on a corpus of emails collected from a L2 student over a period of two and a half years, Chen (2006) revealed that as the student gained better understanding of the email medium, the institutional roles, rights and obligations, as well as culture-specific norms of politeness, she produced more status-congruent emails to her professors over time. However, the study also revealed that despite the student's

overall progress, certain culture-specific appropriateness rules remained challenging for her. Similarly, Rau and Rau (2016) found limited gains over time in L2 students' use of terms of address in emails to professors, suggesting that the development of the L2 email literacy is not an easy process, and perhaps simple exposure to email discourse is insufficient for learning tacit rules of etiquette. These findings seem to corroborate previous studies of L2 oral speech act performance which show that although an increase in the proficiency level may lead to more appropriate speech act use (e.g., Al-Gahtani and Roever 2015; Félix-Brasdefer 2007; Hendriks 2008), the correlation between one's general proficiency and pragmatic competence is not always linear and even high-proficiency learners can still experience considerable difficulty in learning L2 pragmatics (e.g., Dalmau and Curell 2007; Nguyen 2008). Obviously, in order to contribute further insights into developmental issues in L2 pragmatics, this line of research needs to be continued in the future.

It is also noteworthy that despite the fact that L2 users may write emails for various social purposes, the current research tends to focus predominantly on L2 email requests to professors (e.g., Alcón-Soler 2015; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Félix-Brasdefer 2012; Nguyen 2018), possibly because these are likely the most common types of emails written by students in educational contexts. However, such a narrow focus has led to a neglect of L2 users' email practices in other equally important interactional settings such as social situations outside academia or workplace interaction, where L2 users may need to perform a broader range of communicative functions (e.g., repairing misunderstanding, complaining, apologising and so on) than requesting. The recent edited volume by Chen et al. (2016) on email discourse among Chinese learners of L2 English is the only exception, which indicates an urgent need for further research to expand the range of target discourses and interactional contexts in order to provide a more comprehensive overview of L2 email practices.

To extend the above line of research, this chapter addresses pragmatic development in emails of complaints by two different proficiency groups of Vietnamese learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) as they perform email writing tasks in two non-institutional settings representing varying writer-recipient relationships. The study reported in the chapter is part of a larger-scale project in which we explored how L2 university students tapped into their pragmatic knowledge to complete a situational writing task (see Nguyen and Marwan 2018). The task required the students to write two emails to express their reaction to a negative customer service experience. The first email was intended for a friend who was also affected by the unsatisfactory service, while the second email was intended for the service provider, who was deemed accountable for the negative situation. The students were expected to adopt different registers when engaging in email communication with the different audiences (see further details in Data Collection).

Our focus on complaints in this chapter stems from the fact that although it is a fundamental act that may pose great challenges to interpersonal communication due to its face-threatening nature, complaining is relatively under-researched in L2 pragmatics studies (e.g., see Chen, Chen and Chang 2011; Yuan and Zhang 2018), and thus deserves further research attention. The two emails represent two types of complaints: direct and indirect. Direct complaints are understood as negative judgements targeted at the recipient who is held accountable for the substance of the complaint (e.g., complaining to customer services about bad quality services) (Olshtain and Weinbach 1993). Indirect complaints, or trouble sharing, involves expressing negative judgements about an undesirable situation to a third party who is not deemed responsible for the situation (e.g., complaining about one's teacher to one's classmate) (Boxer 1993). While direct complaints are mainly produced to confront a problem with an intention to get it resolved (Brown and Levinson 1987), indirect complaints are commonly used for venting and obtaining agreement (Boxer 1993). Because direct complaints and indirect complaints are two distinct acts, they tend to elicit very different responses. In making direct complaints, for instance, one may not only want to pass a negative evaluation but also make a request for repair (Márquez-Reiter 2005), and thus expect, at minimum, an acknowledgement of the problem and some remedial act by the party deemed accountable (Boxer 1993). Indirect complaints, on the other hand, are essentially 'griping' and 'grumbling" and are often given in anticipation of the addressee's display of understanding and similar attitudes (Boxer 1993). As such, we can expect that the two acts can be realised in linguistically different ways. For instance, previous studies on direct complaints have shown that this act is typically performed by means of such strategies as expressions of annoyance towards the addressee or disapproval of his or her action, accusations, threats, questioning the addressee about the offense, requests for repair (by getting the addressee to make up for the offense or prevent it from happening in the future) and justifications for the requests (Chen et al. 2011; Trosborg 1995). In contrast, indirect complaints, similarly to trouble talk, are typically realised by such discourse moves as setting the background and recounting the negative incident, expressing negative evaluation and reflection on the possible solution (Kozlova 2004).

From the perspective of Anglo-Saxon culture, because a direct complaint involves an open confrontation by expressing the complainer's displeasure and dissatisfaction towards the recipient's undesirable act, it can threaten the recipient's positive face (Brown and Levinson 1987). An indirect complaint, on the one hand, is done to seek a sense of commonality and hence may in fact serve to promote solidarity and strengthen social bonds (Boxer 1993). However, indirect complaints may also be face-damaging. In giving negative evaluations, the complainer may risk presenting himself or herself as critical or lacking in empathy (Kozlova 2004),

thus damaging his or her own positive face. At the same time, since the complainer may expect the addressee to display some emotional alignment (Boxer 1993), this may threat the addressee's negative face, too (Brown and Levinson 1987). As such, the performance of both acts requires a great amount of face-work (solidarity and deference politeness strategies) to minimise the potential offense to the addressee (Chen et al. 2011; Vásquez 2009). When considered from the perspective of the Vietnamese culture, where values such as respectfulness, empathy and harmony are highly regarded (Nguyen and Ho 2013), the act of complaining may also create tension and disrupt social equilibrium, and hence may be regarded as non-cooperative and disaffiliative. Because of their group orientation, the Vietnamese tend to refrain from conflict by mitigating negative emotions and avoiding direct confrontations in social interactions (Vo 2018). This holds especially true where unequal power relationships are involved due to an emphasis on social rankings and respect to authority in the Vietnamese culture (Nguyen and Ho 2013). Even in the context of customer service encounters, where customers may assume that they are entitled to make the complaint and that customer services have to deal with it because of their ascribed roles (Orthaber and Márquez-Reiter 2011), the act of complaining may still be considered highly conflictive and needs to be handled carefully. Indirect complaints, though not targeting the recipient, are not common among unfamiliar interlocutors and are often softened by the speaker to mitigate its potential negative effect (Sophana 2004).

Another aim of our study is to explore the thought processes involved in L2 learners' pragmatic decision-making as they plan, execute and evaluate their emails of complaints. To date, although L2 pragmatics research has generated useful information on learners' pragmatic performance, only a limited number of studies have included "an analysis of the cognitive processes and perceptions" underlying L2 learners' pragmatic behavior (Félix-Brasdefer 2008: 195). Employing retrospective interviews (e.g., Félix-Brasdefer 2008; Hassall 2008; Ren 2014) or combining both retrospective interviews (i.e. stimulated recall) and introspective verbal reports (i.e. concurrent think-aloud protocols) (e.g., Woodfield 2010), these studies have revealed a number of decision-making stages in which L2 learners generally engage. These stages include orientation to the context of communication, planning, execution (which may involve search, retrieval and selection of linguistic form), review and evaluation of the speech. It has also been found that although L2 users generally consult their pragmatic knowledge (e.g., attention to politeness) before execution of a speech act, in many cases their incomplete pragmatic knowledge in the L2 and linguistic difficulty may lead to pragmatic misfire (Félix-Brasdefer 2008; Hassall 2008). Finally, it has been shown that as learners' general proficiency increases, they also tend to attend more often to pragmatics than to linguistic planning and report less pragmatic difficulty accordingly (Hassall 2008; Ren 2014).

Although useful methodologies in researching mental processes involved in L2 pragmatic performance, retrospective and introspective verbal reports have been rarely used in L2 pragmatics research, as indicated earlier. Especially, introspective data are used in only a few studies (e.g., Woodfield 2008, 2010). This is in stark contrast to mainstream second language acquisition research, which has relied extensively on think-aloud protocols to gain insights into the minds of learners (see Bowles 2010; Camp 2003 for a review of these studies). The advantages of introspective reports lie in the fact that since they collect internal thoughts as these occur in real time rather than relying on learners' short-term memories, which may be subject to decay over time, introspective reports can accurately reflect thought processes (Ericsson and Simon 1993). The scarcity of introspective report data in L2 pragmatics research has necessitated the need for future studies to rely more on this methodology as a means of gathering information on pragmatic decision-making and processing issues that production data alone cannot offer. As such, in the current study we employed introspective data in combination with email data in order to gain insights into the thought processes behind the learners' email performance and the effect of proficiency on the learners' engagement in these processes.

## 2. The study

### 2.1 Research questions

In light of the above literature review, we seek to answer two overarching research questions:

1. What pragmatic strategies did the learners of high- and low-proficiency groups employ to carry out the acts of direct and indirect complaints in emails?
2. What cognitive processes did the learners of high- and low-proficiency levels engage in when performing the email writing task?

### 2.2 Participants

A total of 48 Vietnamese university students, aged between 18 and 23, from two proficiency levels, low ($N = 24$) and high ($N = 24$), voluntarily participated (with consent) in the study. The students were randomly drawn, using the stratified random sampling method, from a larger pool who were recruited for the larger-scale project (see Nguyen and Marwan 2018). The learners' proficiency levels were determined by the computer-based Aptis General test, an international standardised English proficiency test developed and administered by the British Council (see

O'Sullivan and Dunlea 2015 for further information on the test). Based on their overall numerical scores, the students were allocated to CEFR B1 and CEFR B2 levels (see Dunn 2019 for the scoring report). The low-proficiency group gained an overall mean score of 110 out of 200 (*SD* = 11.9) for the four language skills and 32.9 out of 50 (*SD* = 6.58) for grammar and vocabulary. The corresponding overall mean scores for the high-proficiency group were 152.6 out of 200 (*SD* = 9.6) for the four language skills and 41.8 out of 50 (*SD* = 4.6) for grammar and vocabulary. At the time of data collection, the students were enrolled in different fields of study, ranging from English linguistics, information and technology, law, medicine to sciences, but they all learned English as a subject matter in their university courses of study. There was an equal number of males and females in each proficiency group (*N* = 12 for each gender).

## 2.3 Data collection

### 2.3.1 *The computerised discourse completion task*

The email data were collected by means of the Aptis General writing test. The email writing task that the students completed for the test took the form of a written discourse completion task comprising a situational scenario that students acted out as they would in a real-life situation. That is, they were asked to imagine that they were new members of a book club who were affected by a recent change in the club's policy, a role that they were likely to already assume in the real life. Students were then prompted to write emails to specific audiences to express their feelings about the situation and suggest possible action regarding the situation. In the first question, students were required to write a 50-word email to a fellow member of the book club, who was also affected by the situation. In the second question, they were asked to write a 150-word email to the Customer Service Team, who was deemed accountable for the situation. Students completed the email writing task online in a computer lab. They were recommended to spend 10 minutes on the first email and 20 minutes on the second (see Appendix 1).

Clearly, the questions required the students to carry out two different language functions. The first question involved making an indirect complaint (Boxer 1993), while the second question involved making a direct complaint (Olshtain and Weinbach 1993). Another difference between the two questions was related to the social distance and relative power status between the writer and the recipient (a friend versus the unfamiliar, higher-status service provider). To perform well in the writing task, students needed to be able to assess relevant contextual factors (e.g., the writer – recipient role relationship, rights and obligations), and make choices in language use accordingly for expressing their intended meaning. In this

paper, social distance is defined as the degree of familiarity between two interlocutors, often assessed based on the frequency of interaction and mutual knowledge (Brown and Levinson 1987). It is assumed that the degree of familiarity is high between the writer and his or her friend, and low between the writer and the customer service team members, with whom the writer may not frequently communicate. The relative status or power is understood as the extent to which one can impose his or her own plan or control the behavior of another (Brown and Levinson 1987). In today's market economy, customers have gained more power than ever before. However, it is service providers that can control access to services and thus the customer – service provider relationship may be said to be one of unequal status. In the situation under inquiry, the club has more control over whether to offer free books monthly or to accelerate their delivery services and thus can be said to be in a more powerful position, although the club members have the legitimate rights to complain about the service that they deem unsatisfactory. Note, however, that the participants' perceptions of the above power difference could be different. Without examining the participants' perceptions, the findings of this study should be treated with caution.

Each student wrote two emails, but 4 emails from the low-proficiency group (2 × Email 1 and 2 × Email 2) were missing, so the total number of emails included for data analysis was 92.

### 2.3.2 *The think-aloud protocol (TAP)*

To gain insights into the types of information to which the participants attended while producing the speech act sets of direct and indirect complaints, a think-aloud task was employed (Gass and Mackey 2000). With their consent, eight students (four – 2 males and 2 females – from each proficiency group) were randomly drawn from the pool of 48 participants, using the stratified random sampling method, to conduct the task (see Nguyen and Marwan 2018). Despite being a useful method to tap into informants' thinking, the TAP is, nevertheless, not without problems (Ericsson and Simon 1980). For example, it has been argued that not all thought processes may be available for verbal reports. While processes that require some degree of effort such as word searching, guessing the meaning of a new word or pragmatics-related decisions can generally be verbalised, low-attention, automatised processes are less verbalisable. Further, although some coaching may help informants verbalise their thoughts more effectively, over-demonstration or asking probing questions may be counter-productive as this may lead informants to say what they think the researcher wants them to say rather than saying their actual thoughts. Therefore, in order to minimise the potential limitations, the TAP was conducted following Brown and Roger's (2002) guidelines, as follows:

1. All the students received training prior to the TAP data collection in one-on-one training sessions, in which they learned about the TAP requirements and procedures, and were demonstrated how to verbalise their thoughts. The students were told to think aloud in the language they felt most comfortable speaking. With the exception of two high-proficiency learners who provided TAP completely in English, the remainder of the participants thought aloud mostly in their L1 but switched to L2 occasionally. The TAP sessions were conducted on an individual basis.
2. The students then engaged in two warm-up activities to become familiar with the TAP procedures and the process of being audio-recorded (Woodfield 2008). The first activity was solving a math problem, and the second an anagram, both taken from Brown and Rodgers (2002).
3. In the next step, the participants practised TAP with an email writing task that was similar to the one they would use during data collection. The question was taken from a retired set of Aptis writing test material.
4. During the procedure, when the students remained silent for more than 5 seconds, they would be reminded (with the researcher's raising a board saying "Think aloud") to keep saying their thoughts out loud but were not prompted what to say.
5. At the end of each practice activity, the students were given feedback on how effectively they had conducted the TAP, and had their further questions or concerns addressed. To avoid leading them, the feedback was generic and non-directive (e.g. "Don't forget to think aloud when you read the prompt question" rather than "Here you should say out loud what you think about the writer-recipient relationship").
6. The students repeated the same procedures for data collection. That is, they engaged in saying out loud their decision-making thoughts while formulating their responses to a new email writing task which also involved the production of direct and indirect complaints (see Appendix 1). Data collection took approximately one hour for each student, and all the TAP sessions were audio-recorded for later analysis.

## 2.4 Data analysis

### 2.4.1 *Email data*

To answer the first research question, "What pragmatic strategies did the learners of high- and low-proficiency groups employ to carry out the acts of direct and indirect complaints in emails?", data were coded using pre-determined categories adapted from prior research (e.g., Chen, 2015; Chen et al. 2011; House and Kasper

1981; Kozlova 2004; Nguyen 2018; Olshtain and Weinbach 1993). Specifically, the emails were manually coded into two major moves: (1) framing moves, i.e., sequences contributing to the layout of the emails such as greetings, self-introduction, statement of purpose of the email, pre-closing and closing; and (2) content moves, i.e., sequences comprising the core elements of the message including realisation strategies and modification devices (see Chen 2015; Nguyen 2018). See Appendix 2 for the framing moves occurring in both types of emails (direct and indirect complaints), Appendix 3 for pragmatic strategies for realising direct complaints, and Appendix 4 for strategies for realising indirect complaints. Appendix 5 presents modification devices occurring in both types of emails.

In coding the emails, both authors coded 30% of the data independently and then came together to compare their coding. All the discrepancies were discussed, and consensus was obtained before the remainder of the data was coded by the first author. To ensure consistency, the coding of the entire set of data was repeated by the first author after one month. The intra-rater agreement rate was achieved at 95%.

Two statistical procedures were used. First, to test the differences between the two groups with respect to the frequencies with which they employed the framing moves and realisation strategies (i.e. categorical data), Chi-square tests of independence were conducted. Where the expected counts in each cell were smaller than 5, Fisher's Exact tests were used instead. Second, a series of Mann Whitney U tests were run to test the differences between the two groups in terms of their production of modification per strategy (i.e. continuous data). Mann Whitney U was used because of the lack of normality of data distribution.

### 2.4.2 *TAP data*

To answer the second research question, "What cognitive processes did the learners of high- and low-proficiency levels engage in when performing the email writing task?", the think-aloud data were analysed using Content Analysis (Weber 1990) – a methodology that "uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text" (Woodfield 2008: 50). Following Woodfield's (2008: 51) recommendations, we first divided the transcripts into sense units, or stretches of language that contain identifiable mental processes. We then coded the identified processes into different categories, using the taxonomies developed by Cohen and Olshtain (1993) and Woodfield (2008) (see Appendix 6). After agreeing on the coding categories, the TAP data was coded by the second author and subsequently cross-checked by the first author. Cases of discrepancies were then discussed to reach agreement. To test the differences in the frequencies with which the two proficiency groups reported various types of cognitive processes (i.e. categorical data), Chi-square tests of independence were carried out. Where the expected counts were smaller than 5, violating the assumption of the Chi-square test, Fisher's Exact test was used instead.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Research question 1: What pragmatic strategies did the low- and high-proficiency learners employ to carry out the acts of direct and indirect complaints in emails?

#### 3.1.1 *Framing moves*

With regards to Email 1 (writing to a friend), Table 1 shows that both learner groups produced more opening/greeting moves than the other framing moves. On average, approximately 90% (20/22) of emails written by the low-proficiency group contained an opening/greeting and the corresponding figure for the high-proficiency group was 95% (23/24). In comparison, pre-closings and closings were produced much less often. Pre-closings occurred in 9/22 (45%) emails written by the low-proficiency group and in 6/24 (25%) emails by the high-proficiency group, while closings occurred in 8/22 (36%) emails by the former and in 12/24 (50%) emails by the latter. Table 1 also indicates that many email messages excluded either openings or closings (59% for the low-proficiency group and 50% for their higher-proficiency peers), which is a feature of informality. Self-introduction occurred in only 2 out of 22 emails written by the low-proficiency learners and in 1 out of 24 emails by the high-proficiency learners. This is expected because Email 1 is addressed to a familiar recipient. Compared to self-introduction, statements of purpose were produced more often (15/22 or 68% of emails by the low-proficiency group and 15/24 or 62% of emails by the high-proficiency group

**Table 1.** Framing moves across levels – Email 1 and Email 2

| | Email 1 | | Email 2 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Proficiency level** | **Low** | **High** | **Low** | **High** |
| Greeting | 20/22 | 23/24 | 18/22 | 23/24 |
| • Formal | 0 | 0 | 15 | 21 |
| • Informal | 20 | 23 | 3 | 2 |
| Pre-close | 9/22 | 6/24 | 13/22 | 16/24 |
| • Formal | 2 | 1 | 10 | 13 |
| • Informal | 7 | 5 | 3 | 3 |
| Closing | 8/22 | 12/24 | 9/22 | 16/24 |
| • Formal | 0 | 2 | 6 | 12 |
| • Informal | 8 | 10 | 3 | 4 |
| Completion with both opening & closing | 9/22 | 12/24 | 9/22 | 16/24 |
| Omission of opening or closing | 13/22 | 12/24 | 13/22 | 8/24 |
| Self-introduction | 2/22 | 1/24 | 6/22 | 5/24 |
| Statement of purpose | 15/22 | 15/24 | 11/22 | 14/24 |

containing this move). In general, Table 1 indicates similar tendencies in how the two learner groups framed their first email. This was confirmed by the result of Fisher's Exact test which revealed no statistically significant difference between the two groups ($p = .76$).

The tendencies to produce more openings than the other framing moves continued to be observed in the learners' second email (writing to Customer Service) (Table 1). For example, while openings occurred in 18/22 (82%) emails by the lower-proficiency group and 23/24 (95%) emails by the higher-proficiency group, pre-closings and closings respectively occurred in only 13/22 (59%) and 9/22 (41%) emails by the former group and 16/24 (67%) emails written by the latter group. Statements of purpose continued to occur in the majority of emails (50% and 58% respectively for the low- and high-proficiency groups) while self-introduction continued to be under-represented with 6 occurrences in the low-proficiency learners' data and 5 occurrences in the high-proficiency learners' data. Again, both groups displayed quite similar tendencies in using framing moves. Although the emails produced by the higher-proficiency groups appeared to contain more features of formality (e.g. a greater number of emails containing closings or both openings and closings), this was not confirmed by the Fisher's Exact test ($p = .89$).

A series of Fisher's Exact tests also confirmed that both groups produced significantly more formal openings, pre-closings and closings in Email 2 and a correspondingly greater number of informal openings, pre-closings and closings in Email 1. Specifically, the results for the low-proficiency group were $p < .001$ for openings, pre-closings, and closings. For the high-proficiency group, these results were $p < .001$ for openings; $p = .011$ for pre-closings; and $p = .006$ for closings. However, neither group produced significantly more completed emails containing both openings and closings in the formal setting (communication with Customer Services) than in the informal setting (communication with the friend).

When it came to the specific linguistic realisations of the openings, pre-closings and closings produced by the two groups, both similarities and differences were observed. In terms of opening moves, both groups tended to employ a greater stylistic variety of greeting formulas in Email 1 (informal) (e.g. "Dear"/"Hello"/"Hi"/"Hey" + First Name) while their Email 2 messages (formal) contained mainly epistolary greeting formulas (e.g. "Dear" + Title). The lower-proficiency learners also used more informal formulas (e.g. "Hey guys", "Hi") in Email 2 than did their higher proficiency peers.

Concerning pre-closings, the main strategies utilised by the learners from both groups included appealing for action (e.g., "I look forward to hearing from you"), thanking and leave-taking (e.g., "good-bye"). However, the higher-proficiency learners seemed to display a clearer preference for a formal style in Email 2 and a friendly style in Email 1 (e.g., using "appeals for action" without politeness marker

"please" in Email 1 but adding "please" in Email 2). In contrast, the low-proficiency learners seemed to make a less clear distinction between Email 1 and Email 2: while their emails addressing a friend may contain features of formality (e.g., "I look forward to hearing from you"), their emails addressing an unknown, higher-power audience may contain features of informality (e.g., "Thanks!").

Finally, while both groups seemed to use a wide variety of closing formulas in the two emails (e.g., "Love"/"Best"/"Best wishes" + Signature; "Yours sincerely"/"Yours faithfully"/"Sincerely"/"Faithfully"/"Regards" + Signature), the lower-proficiency group was also observed to employ idiosyncratic expressions such as "Lovely" + Signature or "Your best" + Signature. This kind of expressions was absent in the data of the higher-proficiency group.

### 3.1.2 *Realisation strategies*

With regards to linguistic strategies for carrying out indirect complaints, both groups tended to show a strong preference for "expressions of negative emotions" over other strategies. This strategy was used in 38% of emails by the low-proficiency group and 46% of emails by the high-proficiency group. The second preferred strategies by the two groups was "reference to the offensive act", which occurred in 32% and 27% of emails written by the low- and high-proficiency groups, respectively. This was followed by "solicitation of future action/alternative plans", which was used in 22% of emails by the low-proficiency group and 19% of emails by their higher-proficiency counterparts. In comparison, the learners seemed to produce "statements of the possible solution/hopes and wishes" much less frequently (4% of the time by the low-proficiency group and 8% of the time by the high-proficiency group). In general, as with the framing moves, the two groups seemed to display a great deal of similarities in their choice of pragmatic strategies for carrying out the act of indirect complaints (Table 2). This was confirmed by the result of Fisher's Exact test, which indicated no statistically significant difference between the two groups ($p = .59$). This suggests very little effect of general language proficiency on the learners' patterns of strategy use.

**Table 2.** Strategies for realising indirect complaints (Email 1)

| | **Low-proficiency** | **High-proficiency** |
|---|---|---|
| Beyond level of reproach | 2 (4%) | 0 (0%) |
| Negative emotion | 18 (38%) | 24 (46%) |
| Reference to offensive act | 15 (32%) | 14 (27%) |
| Statement of possible solution/hopes & wishes | 2 (4%) | 4 (8%) |
| Future action/alternative plans | 10 (22%) | 10 (19%) |
| **Total strategies** | **47 (100%)** | **52 (100%)** |

When it came to the linguistic realisation of the act of direct complaints, a great deal of similarities was also found between the two groups (Table 3). For example, both groups showed the strongest preference for "requests for repair" (43% of the time by the lower-proficiency group and 49% of the time by the higher-proficiency group). This was followed by the preference for "expressions of negative emotions" (30% and 28% of the time respectively by the lower- and higher-proficiency groups), and "statements of the offensive act" (15% of the time by the low- and 17% of the time by the high-proficiency group). In contrast, the two remaining strategies were rarely used (Table 3). Fisher's Exact test confirmed no statistical difference in the frequencies with which the two groups employed strategies for realising direct complaints ($p = .72$). Both groups also produced more strategies in Email 2 than in Email 1, presumably because they were asked to write more in Email 2 than in Email 1. Again, as with indirect complaints, this seems to suggest a lack of effect of general language proficiency for strategy use in realising direct complaints.

**Table 3.** Strategies for realising direct complaints (Email 2)

| | **Low-proficiency** | **High-proficiency** |
|---|---|---|
| Negative emotion | 16 (30%) | 18 (28%) |
| Statement of offensive act | 8 (15%) | 11 (17%) |
| Interrogation | 3 (5%) | 1 (2%) |
| Request for repair | 23 (43%) | 32 (49%) |
| Consequence | 4 (7%) | 3 (4%) |
| **Total strategies** | **54 (100%)** | **65 (100%)** |

A further analysis of the range of linguistic devices employed by the learners to express their pragmatic meanings in the two emails was conducted to gain insights into the qualitative differences in their language use. The results indicate that in general the learners seemed to employ quite similar linguistic structures for expressing their negative emotions (e.g., "I (am) feel" + intensifier + adjective or "It (that) is" + intensifier + adjective) and making reference to the offensive act (e.g., "They (you)" + verb). However, the higher-proficiency group tended to make use of a much broader range of grammatical constructions to suggest possible solutions and future actions (Email 1 – Table 4) and to make requests for remedial acts (Email 2– Table 5). The number in brackets indicates the number of students using each expression.

**Table 4.** Linguistic realisations for selected strategies in Email 1 (indirect complaint)

| Low-proficiency | High-proficiency |
|---|---|
| **Statement of possible solutions** | |
| (Maybe) they should (2) | I (would) think they should (2) |
| I hope they will/can (2) | I suggest that they should (1) |
| | If I were customer service, I would (1) |
| **Future actions/alternative plans** | |
| (I think) I/we should (3) | (Maybe) we can … (1) |
| I can (will) … (4) | Will you …? (1) |
| | I believe that it will be … (1) |
| Could you …? (1) | (I bet) I should … (1) |
| Let's … (1) | (I think) I will (can) (3) |
| Please + verb (2) | Would it be possible …? (1) |
| How about..? (1) | It's time for + V-ing (1) |

**Table 5.** Linguistic realisations for requests of repair in Email 2 (direct complaint)

| Low-proficiency | High-proficiency |
|---|---|
| | (I think) you should … (9) |
| (Maybe) you should … (2) | You need to … (1) |
| (I think) you/we should … (7) | You have to … (1) |
| I suggest that you should … (1) | I (would) think you must … (1) |
| (I hope) you can … (4) | I (strongly) recommend/suggest that you … (3) |
| (I hope) you could (1) | Noun phrase that should be given consideration is… (1) |
| Could you …? (1) | Noun phrase + can be suggested (1) |
| Please + imperative (2) | (I hope) noun phrase + can/will be done (2) |
| I would like you to … (1) | Can you …? (2) |
| I will … (1) | Why don't you …? (1) |
| (I think) the solution may be …(1) | Please + imperative (1) |
| It would be/is … if you … (2) | I hope you will … (3) |
| | I do not hope that… (1) |
| | You can … (1) |
| | (If you need help) I/we can (will) (2) |
| | What I would like you to do (now) is … (2) |
| | I would like to have … (2) |
| | It is advisable that you should (1) |
| | It should be advisable for you that … (1) |
| | I need you to … (1) |
| | Can I …? (1) |

### 3.1.3 *Modification*

Email 2 represented a higher-imposition scenario due to the confrontational nature of the direct complaint, as well as a higher degree of social distance and power difference in the writer-recipient relationship, hence requiring heavier mitigation than Email 1. Comparing the two groups in their use of modification in the two emails, it was apparent that the higher-proficiency group produced a greater amount of mitigation, especially internal devices in Email 2 than did their lower-proficiency peers (see Table 6).

**Table 6.** The two groups' use of modification devices in Email 1 & Email 2

| | Email 1 | | | | | | Email 2 | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Low-proficiency | | | High-proficiency | | | Low-proficiency | | | High-proficiency | | |
| | 25th | Mdn | 75th | 25th | Mdn | 75th | 25th | Mdn | 75th | 25th | Mdn | 75th |
| Total use of mitigation | .25 | .67 | 1.08 | .38 | 1.00 | 1.50 | .48 | 1.00 | 1.75 | 1.00 | 1.42 | 3.00 |
| Internal mitigation | .00 | .00 | .50 | .00 | .00 | .50 | .00 | .25 | .50 | .06 | .50 | 1.00 |
| External mitigation | .00 | .50 | 1.00 | .06 | .42 | 1.00 | .38 | .83 | 1.50 | .50 | 1.00 | 2.00 |
| Intensification | .00 | .33 | .37 | .00 | .50 | .92 | .00 | .50 | 1.00 | .33 | .59 | 1.00 |

A close look at the data showed that while 10 out of 22 lower-proficiency learners did not produce any internal mitigation when writing Email 2, only six out of 24 high-proficiency learners did so (Table 6). However, no statistically significant difference was found with respect to the two groups' use of mitigation in either email. The two groups also did not differ in terms of their use of intensification. Email 1: total use of modification: $U = 242$, $z = .49$, $p = .62$; internal mitigation: $U = 255$, $z = .21$, $p = .83$; external mitigation: $U = 248$, $z = .36$, $p = .72$; intensification: $U = 202$, $z = 1.42$, $p = .16$; Email 2: total use of modification: $U = 190.5$, $z = 1.63$, $p = .10$; internal mitigation: $U = 187$, $z = 1.76$, $p = .07$; external mitigation: $U = 214$, $z = 1.11$, $p = .27$; intensification: $U = 201$, $z = 1.41$, $p = .16$.

Further analysis demonstrates no significant differences between the two groups in terms of their use of the different sub-types of modification, except for the politeness marker "please" in Email 1 ($U = 192$, $z = 2.71$, $p = .007$). This is because the high-proficiency group did not make use of this device, while six out of 22 low-proficiency learners used politeness markers (25th = .00, Mdn = .00, 75th = .33). A closer look at the instances where this device occurred in the low-proficiency group's data revealed that it was used exclusively in the combination "Please" + imperative verb in pre-closing moves (e.g., "Please reply to me soon", "Please write to me soon"). Another difference, though statistically non-significant, observed between the two groups was the use of offensive language (e.g., insults and curses) by one low-proficiency learner in both Email 1 and Email 2 whereas this use was absent in the data of the high-proficiency group.

### 3.2 Research Question 2: What cognitive processes did the low- and high-proficiency learners engage in when performing the email writing task?

Table 7 summarises the cognitive processes underlying the learners' pragmatic production. Overall, it was found that among the five processes, the learners tended to engage most frequently in execution (54% of the processes identified for the low-proficiency group and 57% for the high-proficiency group). In contrast, they engaged much less frequently in orientation, planning, reviewing and especially evaluation (ranging between 3% and 16% of all processes). Despite these similarities, however, a Chi-square test of independence revealed that the two groups were engaged in some processes with significantly different frequencies [$\chi^2$ (4, $N$ = 362) = 13.9, $p$ = .008]. Specifically, while the low-proficiency learners tended to engage more often in re-reading and reviewing (16% of all processes being reviewing processes as opposed to 6% for the high-proficiency group), the high-proficiency learners engaged more often in evaluating the quality of their writing (10% of all processes being evaluating processes as opposed to 3% for the low-proficiency group). It was also noted that the high-proficiency group reported a greater total number of thought processes ($N$ = 222) than did the lower-proficiency group ($N$ = 140 – Table 7).

**Table 7.** The frequency of mentions of broad cognitive processes

| | | Low-proficiency | High-proficiency |
|---|---|---|---|
| Orientation | | 22 (16%) | 30 (14%) |
| | • Task goal | 15 | 20 |
| | • Task language | 2 | 4 |
| | • Context | 5 | 6 |
| Planning | | 15 (11%) | 31 (14%) |
| | • Global | 1 | 2 |
| | • Specific | 9 | 23 |
| | • Meta-language | 5 | 6 |
| Execution | | 76 (54%) | 127 (57%) |
| | • Self-repair | 10 | 26 |
| | • Search | 41 | 64 |
| | • Selection | 17 | 30 |
| | • Translation | 8 | 7 |
| Review | | 22 (16%) | 13 (6%) |
| | • Contents (task goal) | 19 | 3 |
| | • Language usage | 3 | 9 |
| | • Pragmatics | 0 | 1 |
| Evaluation | | 5 (3%) | 21 (10%) |
| | • Content | 0 | 6 |
| | • Language usage | 5 | 14 |
| | • Pragmatics | 0 | 1 |
| **Total strategies** | | **140 (100%)** | **222 (100%)** |

Further analyses of the sub-processes in which the learners engaged showed that in terms of orientation, both learner groups tended to attend more to the task goal (e.g. writing a 50-word email about their feelings) than to the social context of communication (e.g., writing to a friend versus an unfamiliar recipient). The learners also rarely attended to task language (e.g., "feelings mean …") (see Table 7). Fisher's Exact test confirmed no difference between the two groups ($p$ = 1.00) in this aspect.

In terms of text planning, both groups seemed to attend more to local planning (e.g., planning specific details to be included in the writing) than to global planning (e.g., planning the overall structure of the writing) (Table 7). The absence of attention to global text planning was also evident from the learners' rare use of meta-language to talk about their planning (e.g., "I will write in a formal way"). The lack of difference between the two groups was confirmed by Fisher's Exact test ($p$ = .67).

During task performance, both groups seemed to engage most frequently in retrieving and selecting linguistic forms. Occasionally, the learners also displayed linguistic difficulty, as seen in their practices of self-repair, expressing self-doubts and uncertainty and resorting to L1 translation (Table 7). No statistically significant difference was found in terms of how the two groups executed the writing tasks ($p$ = .37).

With respect to the reviewing processes, Table 7 shows that when re-reading what had been written, the low-proficiency group tended to engage most often in reflecting on whether they had fulfilled the task requirements in terms of word count and content coverage. They attended less to reviewing their discourse and linguistic choice (e.g., rhetorical organisation, grammar, lexis and spellings). Further, none of the low-proficiency learners reflected on whether they had used the appropriate registers. In contrast, the higher-proficiency learners engaged considerably more frequently in reviewing their language use and in one out of 13 instances, they also reviewed their use of registers. Fisher's Exact test confirmed these differences ($p$ = .000).

Finally, during the evaluation processes, while the low-proficiency learners focused exclusively on language usage (i.e. accuracy of grammar, lexis and spellings) (5/5 instances), the higher-proficiency learners attended to both task fulfillment (6/21 instances) and language usage (14/21 instances). Particularly, one learner also attended to the degree of formality of his linguistic choice ("but *get* is informal"). Nevertheless, the fact that only one high-proficiency learner engaged in evaluating the registers of his email messages suggests that in general the learners attended more to accuracy than appropriacy when assessing their work. The difference between the two groups was confirmed by Fisher's Exact test ($p$ = .000).

In sum, the results of the analysis of the types of information to which the learners attended during each process indicate no effect of general proficiency except when it came to the reviewing and evaluation processes.

## 4. Discussion and conclusion

In this study, we aimed to answer two research questions: (1) what pragmatic strategies the learners of low- and high-proficiency levels employed to carry out the acts of direct and indirect complaints in emails; and (2) what cognitive processes they engaged in when performing the email writing task. With regard to the first question, we have found that the two groups displayed much congruence in their framing of the email messages and overall use of pragmatic strategies. More specifically, the learners from both groups tended to adopt a more formal register in opening and closing their second email messages while using a more informal style of openings and closings in their first email. Although openings and closings are optional elements of email messages, especially in informal contexts, these moves can in fact contribute to rapport building between the writer and recipient. It is in the openings that "the social relationship between participants is negotiated and established, or recalled" (Bou-Franch 2011: 1773). Similarly, it is in the closing sequences that "participants work to accomplish a joint, negotiated, frictionless termination of the social event" (Bou-Franch ibid.). The choice of informality to display solidarity politeness in framing Email 1 and formality to display deference politeness in framing Email 2 by the majority of learners, therefore, suggests an awareness of the writer-recipient relationship. However, the fact that not all email messages addressing the unfamiliar, unequal-status recipient (i.e. Email 2) were completed with both openings and closings seems to suggest that the learners might not have used emails in formal contexts with total ease. In other words, since emails sent up the hierarchy tend to contain both moves to increase formality (Bou-Franch 2011), the omissions of closings in Email 2 by eight out of 24 high-proficiency and 13 out of 22 low-proficiency learners might not be deemed appropriate. Also, it was found that while the learners did not seem to have any difficulty choosing an appropriate opening in accordance with the level of formality they wished to express (e.g. appropriate use of "Dear" + First name in the informal context and "Dear" + Title in the formal context), this was not the case with their use of closings. In fact, a close look at individual learners' email data indicated that only 5/15 (33%) emails by the low-proficiency group and 12/21 (57%) emails by the high-proficiency group contained closings that were consistent with the formal tone expressed in the openings of their emails. These results, hence, seem to suggest a

need for pragmatic instruction for the development of email literacy for L2 learners (see Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Chen 2006; Chen 2015; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, 2016; Nguyen 2018 for a similar discussion on this point).

Furthermore, little effect was found for general proficiency on the learners' use of pragmatic strategies (also see Liu and Ren 2016; Nguyen 2008 for similar discussion on the effect of proficiency). When responding to the negative situation that led to the act of complaining, both groups seemed to display similar patterns of strategy use. For instance, both groups of learners tended to demonstrate a strong preference for "expressions of negative emotions", "making reference to the offensive act" and "statements of possible solutions/hopes and wishes" when realising indirect complaints, and "expressions of negative emotion", "statements of the offensive act" and "requests for repair" when realising direct complaints. While this might suggest that the strategies constitute major components of indirect and direct complaints, thus corroborating some earlier studies (e.g., Giannoni 2014; Chen et al. 2011; Vásquez 2011), the learners' production of these strategies might have also been due to the task effect. Specifically, as the prompt questions instructed the students to "write about your feelings and what you think the club should do about the situation", it might have inadvertently led the students to employ strategies in these categories. As such, these findings should be interpreted with caution.

Despite a lack of statistically significant difference in the two proficiency groups' overall strategy use, however, the higher-proficiency learners were found to employ a broader range of linguistic devices for expressing their meaning than did the low-proficiency group, presumably because the former possessed larger repertoires of linguistic resources. Also, despite a lack of statistical difference in their use of mitigation, possibly due to a lack of power because of small sample sizes, the high-proficiency learners tended to internally mitigate their direct complaints twice as frequently as did the low-proficiency learners, suggesting an awareness of the confrontational nature of the act as well as the high distance and asymmetrical writer-recipient relationship, hence the higher stake involved. The lower-proficiency learners, on the other hand, might have found internal mitigators more challenging to use due to the lack of transparent pragmatic meanings of the devices. The low-proficiency learners might have also possessed a lower level of control over language processing in real time, thus corroborating previous studies (e.g., Hassall 2001; Nguyen 2008).

Concerning the second research question, our findings indicate that when producing emails of complaints, both learner groups tended to engage more in execution than in the other equally important processes such as analysing the task, planning, reviewing and assessing their work. During the analysis and planning stages, although the learners appeared to pay attention to the social context and registers required for each email interaction, they seemed more concerned with

fulfilling the task requirement in terms of the content of the writing. Similarly, when reviewing their work, they also tended to focus less on appropriate language use than on superficial changes in writing such as grammar and spelling. We have also found little effect of general proficiency on the learners' thought processes, except that the higher-proficiency learners tended to attend more to language usage when reviewing their work and engaged more often in evaluating their work than did their lower-proficiency peers. On the one hand, our findings seem congruent with previous L2 pragmatics research which has shown that L2 learners generally consult their pragmatic knowledge during the planning of speech acts (e.g., Félix-Brasdefer 2008; Hassall 2008); on the other, the findings of our study do not corroborate the previous studies which demonstrate an increased attention to pragmatics with increased proficiency (e.g., Hassall 2008; Ren 2014). This incongruence might have been due to the different instruments used in our study and existing studies. Specifically, retrospective verbal reports were employed in Hassall (2008) and Ren (2014) for gathering learners' internal thoughts while performing speech acts, whereas concurrent (TAP) verbal reports were used in our study. According to Bowles (2010), while some studies have shown that retrospective reports seem more complete than introspective reports, others have found introspective reports more accurate and complete than retrospective reports. Given these conflicting results, proficiency effects on learners' attention to pragmatics during task performance should be examined in further research which employs both introspective and retrospective methodologies to enhance the quality of the data. Finally, our findings regarding the learners' lack of equal attention to the different writing processes are consistent with previous writing research (e.g., Key 2000) and seem to indicate a need for the learners to be trained in how to make use of writing processes, particularly what to attend to when reviewing and evaluating their work in order to perform the task more effectively.

As little research has explored L2 emails of complaints, our study contributes to expanding the small but fast-growing body of literature on L2 email pragmatics and aims to inform work into the teaching of email literacy, which is still in its infancy and undoubtedly deserves further research attention. Despite some useful insights, however, our study is not without limitations. First, our data were based on hypothetical situations rather than authentic communication, which would necessitate a careful interpretation of the findings. The different word limits of the two emails and the fact that students were told what to write might also contribute to the unnaturalness of the data. Further, our study focused on only two proficiency levels, thus potentially limiting the generalisability of the findings. Ideally, future investigations should be expanded to all different proficiency levels to gain a more comprehensive picture of proficiency effects on pragmatic performance. Finally, we employed only a single method to study mental processes involved in pragmatic

production. Because of the potential pitfalls of the introspective method, future research may thus consider including both introspective and retrospective methods to examine pragmatic decision making and processing issues. Since each method has its own pros and cons and can provide a very different angle on the minds of learners, the combination of both can enhance the quality of the data, as well as the richness of the findings.

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## Appendix 1

The DCT used for eliciting email data

You are a new member of a book club. You receive an email from the club.

*Dear Customers*,
*We are sorry to announce that from next month we will no longer be able to continue our offer of one free book every month. Also, because of problems with our delivery service, please expect a wait of 4–6 weeks before your order arrives. Please feel free to email us if you have any comments*.

*Customer Service Team*

Question 1: Write an email to one of your friends from the club. Write your feelings about the email message you just received and suggest possible action. Write up to 50 words. You have 10 minutes.

Question 2: Now, write an email to Customer Service Team. Tell them how you feel about the service and suggest what you would like them to do. Write up to 150 words. You have 20 minutes.

The DCT used for the TAP procedure

You are a member of a history club. You received this e-mail from the club.

*Dear Member,*
*We are writing to tell you that the trip to Blackrock Castle has been cancelled because of lack of interest. You will be given a refund for the cost of the coach trip. However, because this is a late cancellation, we cannot refund the cost of your entrance ticket to the castle. We apologize for this and thank you for your understanding.*

Question 1: Write an e-mail to your friend. Write about your feelings and what you think the club should do about the situation. Write about 50 words. You have 10 minutes.

Question 2: Write an e-mail to the president of the club. Write about your feelings and what you think the club should do about the situation. Write 120–150 words. You have 20 minutes.

## Appendix 2

Framing moves (adapted from Chen 2015; Nguyen 2018)

| Type | Description | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Greeting/opening | the writer opens the email with a greeting | Hello + First Name (informal)<br>Dear + Last Name or Full Name with or without Titles (formal) |
| 2. Self-introduction | the writer gives information on his or her identity | I'm …, a member of … |
| 3. Purpose | the writer explicitly or implicitly states the purpose of his or her email | I am writing in response to …<br>I am writing to express my concern …<br>I have read your email … |
| 4. Pre-closing | the writer signals the closing by using moves such as expressing appreciation for the recipient's time, good wishes, or appealing for action | Thanks for your time (informal)<br>I look forward to hearing from you (formal)<br>I hope you will consider my suggestion (formal) |
| 5. Closing | signs off and signatures | Best + First Name (informal)<br>Sincerely + Last Name or Full Name (formal) |

## Appendix 3

Coding categories for direct complaints (adapted from Chen at al. 2011; Hartley 1996; Olshtain and Weinbach 1993)

| **Realisation strategies** | **The following strategies are arranged from the least direct to the most direct** | **Examples** |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Negative emotion | the complainer expresses negative reaction to the complainable or asserts the complainable (with or without explicit mention of the complainee) | I am sad that …<br>It is really a pity that … |
| 2. Interrogation | the complainer presupposes that the complainee is guilty of offense and questions him/her about the offense | So why did we have to wait 4–6 weeks for a book? |
| 3. A statement of the offensive act/ problem | indicating what has gone wrong | You can't solve the problem immediately. |
| 4. Request for repair/Suggestion for remedy | | Would you not do it again? |
| 5. Consequence | the complainer states or implies potential consequences caused by the offense | If you open my letter again, I will move out. |

## Appendix 4

Coding categories for indirect complaints (adapted from Kozlova 2004, Olshtain and Weinbach 1993)

| **Realisation strategies** | **The following strategies are arranged from the least direct to the most direct** | **Examples** |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Beyond the level of reproach | the complainer avoids explicit mention of the offensive act by means of various remarks | Never mind. It's not a problem for me. |
| 2. Negative emotion/ reaction (sadness, dissatisfaction) | the complainer expresses negative reaction to the complainable or asserts the complainable (with or without explicit mention of the complainee) | This news really broke my heart. |

| Realisation strategies | The following strategies are arranged from the least direct to the most direct | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| 3. Reference to the offensive act/ problem | Reporting what has gone wrong | The club would stop offering one free book every month. |
| 4. Statement of possible solution on the part of the complainee, or hope & wish | Indicating what the complainer thinks the complainee could/should do (have done) | Maybe they should change the ways of delivering books to us. |
| 5. Future action/ alternative plan on the part of the complainer; or soliciting action from the recipient | | I will continue to be in the club even without the offer.<br>I know you're going to participate in Green Books club, so could you introduce me to them? |

## Appendix 5

Modification devices (adapted from House and Kasper 1981)

| Mitigation | Including linguistic elements for politeness effects | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| Internal | An integral part of the act | |
| 1. Syntactic structure | embedding, past tense | – I wonder if<br>– I was wondering, I thought |
| 2. Hedge | | – I'm not sure but …<br>– Is it possible that … |
| 3. Subjunctive mood | | could, would, might |
| 4. Politeness marker | | please |
| 5. Cajoler | | you know, you see, you know what I mean |
| External | Supportive moves | |
| 6. Sweetener | employed to grease the social relationship with the recipient and to put him or her into a positive mood | I know you are doing your best. The offer has been brilliant since the first day it was established. |
| 7. Grounder | explanation of the negative feeling or of the request for remedy | My family has been dying to get our hands on the last book of the Sherlock Holmes series. |

| Mitigation | Including linguistic elements for politeness effects | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| 8. Solidarity | expression of empathy with and understanding of the complainee's choice | I am so sorry that you have to discontinue the free book offer every month.<br>I am fully aware of the economic crisis having some impact on the club. |
| 9. Disarmer/ Apology | employed to reduce the potential offence | Sorry for being impolite but … |
| Intensification | Words or phrases that could increase the coerciveness of the utterance | |
| 10. Intensifier | | This news *really* broke my heart |
| 11. Statement of urgency | | Please reply to me *soon*! |

## Appendix 6

Coding categories for TAP data (adapted from Cohen and Olshtain 1993; Woodfield 2008)

| Processes | Description | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| Orientation | Episodes in which students analyse task requirements. These processes may include attention to task goal, task language and contextual aspects of the situation. | – Attention to task goal: "I have to write about my feelings and suggest action."<br>– Attention to task language: "Feelings mean how we feel about the situation, like disappointment."<br>– Attention to contextual aspects: "a friend from the club, so I know the person." |
| Planning | Episodes in which students consider various options of how to respond to the task. Planning can be global, i.e. talking about plans for organising the entire text, or local, i.e. talking about what to write in the next clause or sentence. | – Choosing not to perform the act of complaining (opt out): "Maybe it's not a good idea to express my disappointment."<br>– Exploring sequences of possibilities: "Before I say something negative about their service, maybe I can say something nice."<br>– Using metalanguage: "Maybe I will write in a friendly way …" |

| Processes | Description | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| Execution | Episodes in which students perform the task. These processes may include searching, retrieving and selecting language forms. | – Generating hypotheses: "You should give … give 3 months … 3 month notice." (self-repair indicates retrieval) |
| Review/revision | Episodes in which students re-read what they have written or pause to reflect on their response to the task. | – Reflecting on language use: "Is this formal enough?", "Do I need "all" here?"<br>– Reflecting on task fulfilment: "Have I written enough?" |
| Evaluation | Episodes in which students make explicit comparisons of alternatives or assess the overall quality of their writing. | – "Maybe "I was wondering" is better than "Can you."<br>– "I've made so many errors." |

CHAPTER 3

# Long-term instructional effects on learners' use of email request modifiers

Esther Usó-Juan
Universitat Jaume I

This study followed a pre-test/post-test/delayed post-test design to investigate the long-term impact of metapragmatic instruction on learners' ability to modify email requests. Twenty-five Spanish university students with an upper-intermediate proficiency level in English participated in the study. Over a two-week period, they received six hours of instruction on request modifiers by applying a form-function-context mapping framework (Taguchi 2011). Target request modifiers in written Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) were analysed for frequency and variety. Learners' self-evaluations of email appropriateness were also used to determine their degree of confidence when producing request modifiers. The within-group comparisons revealed that learners made a significant progress in their use of request modifiers and confidence level immediately after instruction and two months later. These comparisons, however, also indicated that some types of request modifiers were more amenable to instruction than others.

**Keywords**: Spanish EFL learners, requests, emails, instructional pragmatics, delayed test

## 1. Introduction

With the information technology revolution along with the widespread use of the internet, email has quickly become an integral part of the academic life since it is viewed as a common medium of communication between university students and their professors. Despite common usage nowadays, many learners are often unsure how to make the most appropriate stylistic and pragmatic choices when emailing their professors due to the unequal power of the student-professor relationship (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007). Yet, writing status-congruent (i.e. appropriate) emails poses a greater challenge for second (L2) or foreign language (FL) students,

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who not only may have limited linguistic proficiency but also may lack knowledge about the email conventions in the target language (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Nguyen 2018).

Research on email communication has shown that students write emails to professors to accomplish different communicative functions and, among them, making requests is the most common (Chen 2015; Nguyen 2018). A plethora of studies have examined email requests during academic consultations and have indicated that, in general, learners place greater emphasis on their own needs and employ insufficient mitigation, running the risk of, unintentionally, being impolite (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Codina and Salazar 2019; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996; Hendriks 2010; Pan 2012; Tseng 2015, among others). Consequently, these studies have suggested the need for teaching learners how to employ modifiers to increase politeness and decrease the face threat of email requests. Yet, despite this call, research into the effects of instruction on *email* pragmatics is limited to a small collection of studies (Alcón-Soler 2015; Chen 2015; Ford 2006; Nguyen 2018; Nguyen, Do, Nguyen and Pham 2015; Nguyen, Do, Pham and Nguyen 2019), and more research is needed to inform learning activities and teaching practices that are optimal for appropriate email communication in the academic context.

In an attempt to expand this line of research, the present study investigates whether metapragmatic instruction (i.e. instruction involving explanations about pragmatic phenomena) could be effective in developing learners' use of email request modifiers and improving learners' confidence level in their judgements of language appropriateness, not only immediately after receiving instruction, but also two months later. To this end, this chapter first presents a literature review of research on teaching different aspects of email requests to L2/FL learners. Following this, it describes the study with a detailed explanation of its methodological aspects, the results and discussion of findings. Finally, conclusions, limitations and suggestions for further research are presented, together with pedagogical implications.

## 2. Background

In a recent state-of-the-art article on the teachability of L2 requests, Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan (2020) identified nineteen relevant studies on the effects of pragmatic intervention on requests. Taken together, this literature review showed that the speech act of requesting is amenable to instruction, and pragmatic instruction has a positive role in improving not just learners' awareness (Alcón-Soler 2007) and production of requests (Sydorenko 2015), but also pragmatic confidence (Takahashi 2001), pragmatic accuracy (Nguyen et al. 2019) as well as negotiation of appropriate

requests (Taguchi and Kim 2016). As for the explicit/implicit instruction distinction, most of the reviewed studies, conducted within the framework of Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (1993), found a clear advantage for explicit over implicit teaching. It should be pointed out, however, that some studies also proved the effectiveness of implicit intervention (Fukuya and Zhang 2002) or an effectiveness similar to that of the explicit intervention (Eslami and Liu 2013; Eslami, Mirzaei and Dini 2015; Xiao-le 2011). Thus, these studies show that implicit instruction may also be sufficient to cause positive effects on pragmatic learnability, if properly operationalised.

Among all these interventional studies, a great deal of work has been conducted on the instructional effects on L2 oral requests (for a review, see Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan 2020). Nevertheless, research on the teachability of L2/FL email requests has scarcely been examined (Alcón-Soler 2015; Chen 2015; Ford 2006; Nguyen 2018; Nguyen et al. 2015; Nguyen et al. 2019). Ford (2006) used a pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test (12 weeks after treatment) to explore the extent to which a group of mixed first language (L1) students in the USA improved their ability in composing requestive emails in terms of perlocution (i.e. the effect that an utterance has on its recipient). The treatment session lasted 50 minutes and consisted of: (i) an explicit presentation of the principles of netiquette, (ii) an analysis of examples of poorly constructed email requests, (iii) a discussion of the ways to improve them and (iv) additional exposure to websites devoted to netiquette guidelines. Results showed significant improvement regarding the perlocutionary effect of the students' email requests, since students were found to use more downgraders such as downtoners, and supportive moves such as preparators, grounders and disarmers after treatment. Moreover, students also increased their usage of structural features such as greeting, introduction, closing and signature in their messages. These immediate effects of instruction on perlocution were, however, not kept in the delayed post-test, leading the author to suggest the need to include more treatment sessions to maintain what has been learned.

Focusing also on a study abroad context, Alcón-Soler (2015) employed a mixed-method research approach to explore the effect of instruction on two groups of Spanish study abroad learners in Britain. Whereas one group did not receive instruction (i.e. control group), the other group was instructed how to use internal modifiers to soften requests in email communication (i.e. experimental group) during four 20-minute sessions, adopting an explicit deductive-inductive approach. Authentic emails addressed to different teachers were collected at four different times: as a pre-test (i.e. prior to intervention), as an immediate post-test (i.e. after learners' participation in the treatment sessions), as a delayed post-test (i.e. three months after treatment) and as a post-delayed test (i.e. seven months after treatment). Results in the immediate post-test showed that the experimental group outperformed the

control group in frequency of all types of request modifiers analysed, including both lexical (i.e. please, openers, softeners, understarters, intensifiers and subjectivisers) and syntactic modifiers (i.e. conditional structures, tense and aspect). However, this effect seemed to disappear as the length of stay abroad increased. In particular, the use of openers, tense, intensifiers, subjectivisers and aspect did not show significant differences in the post-delayed test. Nevertheless, a qualitative analysis illustrated how instruction interacted with the length of stay to benefit pragmatic development. In fact, learners in the experimental group used the knowledge gained from instruction to make informed decisions to choose when and how to use request modifiers according to the level of imposition of the email request.

The remaining studies, in contrast, were conducted in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, where English is not commonly spoken, and learners have fewer opportunities to practise the language in real life situations. Chen (2015) followed a pre-test/post-test design to analyse the quality of learners' emails as well as learners' level of confidence in their email appropriateness. The treatment consisted of six hours during which learners received explicit instruction about the discourse structure of email requests, that is, framing moves (subject, opening, self-identification and closing) and the content moves (request strategies and request support). This instruction was coupled with a deductive approach in which learners, through a self-discovery process, compared American English and Chinese pragmatic norms. The quantitative analysis of learners' emails illustrated that the students made significant progress in their email productions and confidence level on the post-test over the pre-test. However, the qualitative analysis revealed that learners made greater improvements in using framing moves and only a modest progress in using content moves, as evidenced by slight increases in the use of embedded constructions, downtoners, consultative devices and in the provision of specific grounders. The author explained that these results may have been related to the formulaic nature of framing moves, being easier for learners to acquire, in contrast to the idiosyncratic characteristics of content moves, which may vary depending on the context, making them more difficult to learn and use.

Unlike the study reviewed above, the series of studies conducted by Nguyen and colleagues (Nguyen et al. 2015; Nguyen 2018; Nguyen et al. 2019) administered delayed post-tests after the treatment to test the durability of their instructional approach targeting Vietnamese EFL learners. Nguyen et al. (2015) employed a pre-, post- and delayed post-test (12 weeks later) to examine the role of corrective feedback on improving learners' production and recognition of email requests. During a six-hour training period, two treatment groups received the same instruction but different corrective feedback, and they were compared with a control group who received only regular instruction. The explicit intervention was initiated with consciousness-raising activities and metapragmatic explanations about

email structure, request forms and politeness strategies, followed by output practice used in tandem with one of the two types of feedback conditions: direct feedback (i.e. provision of answers without explanation) or metapragmatic feedback (i.e. provision of cues but no answers). The most notable component was learners' engagement in three rounds of feedback and revision for their email writing practice. Results showed that while both types of corrective feedback were equally efficacious in improving the students' pragmatic production in both the immediate post-test and delayed post-test, metapragmatic feedback led to significantly greater gains in the area of pragmatic recognition, especially in the delayed post-test. These findings suggest the varying effects of the two types of corrective feedback on different areas of pragmatic competence.

In a follow-up study, Nguyen (2018) used a research design that incorporated a pre-test, an immediate post-test, a delayed post-test (one month later) and a post-delayed test (eight months later) to investigate the long-term impact of explicit instruction on learners' production of email requests. The explicit intervention with the treatment group followed the one employed by Nguyen et al. (2015), but it provided explicit feedback, which included both the provision of the answer and an explanation. The control group, on the other hand, only followed the usual syllabus. Findings indicated that the treatment group showed greater pre-to-post-test gains in email writing than the control group, and that this improvement was sustained until the post-delayed test, administered eight months later. Focusing specifically on request realisations, findings revealed that learners demonstrated sensitivity to situational variations since there was an increase in the students' use of indirect strategies for high imposition requests. Moreover, when direct requests were used in the post-tests, students relied extensively on syntactic modification to soften them. At the same time, the supportive move of optionality (e.g., if you are available) was abundantly used, particularly when making appointments. The author attributed the positive long-term effect of intervention to the effective integration of multiple rounds in the provision of feedback followed by immediate revision, thereby facilitating learners' internalisation of pragmatic knowledge.

More recently, Nguyen et al. (2019) investigated the effectiveness of different feedback conditions on producing accurate and fluent email requests. Four groups of learners were set up: a control group and three experimental groups. All the groups received three hours of metapragmatic instruction on email requests, but only the experimental groups received written corrective feedback on their pragmatic production. The first experimental group received feedback without opportunity for revision. The second group engaged in one cycle of feedback and revision, and the third group was given two cycles of feedback and revision. The effects of different types of feedback were measured via an immediate post-test and a delayed post-test, administered nine weeks after treatment. At both post-tests, the

treatment groups showed greater gains than the control group (who received only metapragmatic instruction) with respect to the accuracy of pragmatic production, but no treatment group outperformed another. However, evidence for the effect of revision on the fluency of learners' pragmatic performance was less clear-cut.

In summary, the data from the above-mentioned studies indicate that instruction is in general advantageous in developing email requests, and also show it has differential effects on various aspects of learners' email performance. For example, Nguyen et al. (2015) found that metapragmatic feedback had greater effect than direct feedback on enhancing learners' recognition of appropriate email requests, and Chen (2015) revealed that learners made greater improvements in terms of framing moves (i.e. email openings and closings), but less progress in terms of content moves (i.e. requests strategies and supportive moves), which may require more exposure. Similarly, Nguyen (2018) demonstrated a modest progress on learners' use of supporting moves, showing the need to conduct more instructional work on request modifiers because they are important in email writing. Thus, the present chapter attempts to shed more light on this issue by examining whether metapragmatic instruction is effective to foster EFL learners' appropriate use of modifiers when producing high-imposition request emails to professors immediately after instruction and two months later. Moreover, this study follows Chen (2015) in its aim to seek out the learners' level of confidence in judging the appropriateness of request modifiers after producing the emails. In particular, three research questions (RQs) guide the current study:

RQ1. Does metapragmatic instruction work as a means to improve the frequency with which learners modify high-imposition email requests immediately following instruction as well as two months later?

RQ2. Does metapragmatic instruction work as a means to improve the variety with which learners modify high-imposition email requests immediately following instruction as well as two months later?

RQ3. Is metapragmatic instruction effective as a means to develop learners' level of confidence when judging the appropriateness of email request modifiers immediately following instruction as well as two months later?

## 3. Method

### 3.1 Participants

Twenty-five Spanish EFL learners, 8 males and 17 females, whose ages ranged from 19 to 21 years (average age = 20.3), participated in the study. These learners came from an intact class of thirty-three, and they were selected based on their performance on a standardised English proficiency test. Their English proficiency was judged to be at an upper intermediate level of proficiency based on the Quick Oxford Placement test (UCLES 2001), which is equivalent to a B2 level, using the terminology of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. All participants were second year undergraduate students majoring in English, and they were enrolled in a required academic writing course at a public university in Spain. Despite the fact that students knew some modal constructions to make requests in daily situations (i.e. *can you, could you, would you, may I*), they were unfamiliar with the pragmatics of email requests in academic institutions, particularly when writing status-congruent emails to their professors.

### 3.2 Instructional targets

As described by Chen (2015), emails are made up of two major moves: the framing moves and the content moves. The former are optional structural elements that contribute to the physical organisation of the email message and consist of subject, opening and closing, while the latter are compulsory structural elements, which contribute to the main communicative goal of the email message (Kankaanranta 2006). In an email request, the content moves are realised by request strategies. Requests are divided into two main parts (Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper 1989): (i) the core or head of the request, which performs the function of requesting and can stand by itself, and (ii) its peripheral modifiers, which mitigate (or aggravate) the force of the request and may precede and/or follow the request head act. The present study focuses on the latter (i.e. modifiers) as part of the instructional intervention.

Modifiers typically consist of two major groups: (i) internal modifiers (i.e. those devices that appear within the same request head act), and (ii) external modifiers (i.e. those devices that appear in the immediate linguistic context surrounding the request head act, either preceding or following it). Based on previous interlanguage pragmatics studies (Alcón-Soler 2013; Blum-Kulka et al. 1989; Félix-Brasdefer 2012; Woodfield and Economidou-Kogetsidis 2010), ten types of modifiers belonging to three broad categories (i.e. internal lexical/phrasal modifiers, internal syntactic modifiers and external modifiers) were chosen as instructional targets (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Instructional targets

| Type | Subtypes | Devices |
|---|---|---|
| Internal Lexical modifiers | Subjectiviser | *I'm afraid, I wonder, I suppose …* |
| | Consultative | *Do you think…, would you mind…* |
| | Downtoner | *possibly, perhaps, maybe* |
| | Understaters | *a little, a minute, just* |
| Internal Syntactic modifiers | Conditional | *Could* you… (for *can*)? |
| | Multiple syntactic combination (conditional/past tense/progressive aspect) | I *was wondering* if you *could*… |
| External modifiers | Preparators | *I need a big favour*. Could you…? |
| | Grounders | *I have been ill with flu* and I would like a deadline extension. |
| | Disarmers | *I know you are very strict with deadlines*, but could you…? |
| | Apologies | *I am very sorry*, but I need a deadline extension. |

First, internal lexical/phrasal modifiers included: subjectivisers (i.e. to express a subjective opinion), consultatives (i.e. to seek the addressee cooperation), downtoners (i.e. to state the possibility of not complying with the request) and understaters (i.e. to downplay the demanding action). Second, internal syntactic modifiers involved the use of the conditional and multiple syntactic combination of tense, aspect and/or conditional. Finally, external modifiers comprised: preparators (i.e. to prepare the addressee for the request), grounders (i.e. to justify the request), disarmers (i.e. to avoid a refusal) and apologies (i.e. to apologise for posing the request). These modifiers were selected among a larger group of internal/external modifiers (for a complete list of request modifiers, see Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011) because they are used in email requests sent by native English speaking students to faculty (Félix-Brasdefer 2012; Ford 2006; Pan 2012; Zheng and Xu 2019), and they represent a major area of difficulty for learners of English, especially internal modifiers (Nguyen 2018; Zheng and Xu 2019).

### 3.3 Instructional procedure

The instructional treatment adopted for the present study followed the structure of the one devised by Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan (2006a) to teach verbal actions: *The 6Rs Pedagogical Framework*, which has also been adapted to teach phatic discourse (Padilla 2013) or develop learners' metacognitive awareness of joke production and comprehension (Padilla 2019). This approach consisted of the following six key steps: *Researching, Reflecting, Receiving, Reasoning, Rehearsing and Revising*. Table 2 lists the main focus of each step included in the instructional procedure.

**Table 2.** Outline of the instructional procedure

| Sessions | 6Rs Pedagogical framework | Main focus of each step |
|---|---|---|
| Session 1 | Step 1: **R**esearching | Focus on email etiquette and directive language |
| | Step 2: **R**eflecting | Focus on Spanish request modifiers |
| Session 2 | Step 3: **R**eceiving | Focus on English request modifiers |
| | Step 4: **R**easoning | Focus on awareness activities in English |
| Session 3 | Step 5: **R**ehearsing | Focus on production activities in English |
| | Step 6: **R**evising | Focus on metapragmatic feedback |

The treatment was delivered during three two-hour sessions, spread over two weeks and was informed by the view that the development of pragmatic competence requires conscious learning of form-function-context mapping and control over this knowledge in real-time communication (Taguchi 2011). All sessions were conducted by the same teacher who was the researcher of the present study. As highlighted by Padilla (2013), the six-step structure facilitated: (i) the distribution of specific content in well-delimited thematic blocks, (ii) the flexibility of distributing these blocks in different class sessions, and (iii) the linear progression from theoretical issues to practical ones.

### 3.3.1 *Session 1:* Researching *and* Reflecting

The first instructional session included the first two steps (i.e. *Researching* and *Reflecting*). In the first step (i.e. *Researching*) learners were provided with information regarding two areas they need to understand in order to build solid foundations upon which to evaluate their own email requests: email structure/etiquette and directive language (Butler 2012). First, learners were provided with those genre stages that are likely to be functional for writing an appropriate email request to a professor (Gebhard 2019): a greeting, a statement of one's institutional identification, a statement of a problem motivating the request, the request itself, a closing and a signature.

After discussing email structure and etiquette as a class, they were given an explanation of what the speech act of requesting implies and its relationship to directives (i.e. the fact that it constitutes an attempt to get someone to perform an action for the benefit of the speaker), how it can be performed (i.e. by means of direct strategies, conventionally indirect strategies and hints), and how it can be modified to reduce the requestive force imposed upon the requestee (i.e. by means

of internal and external request modifiers). At this stage, learners' attention was drawn towards those contextual variables that affect the appropriate use of request modification devices (Nikula 1996): (i) the relative power (P) of the requester in relation to the requestee (i.e. those with less power may use more modifiers); (ii) their social distance (D) (i.e. strangers may use more modifiers); (iii) the ranking (R) of an imposition (i.e. high imposition requests tend to employ more modifiers); (iv) the type of interaction (i.e. a request in an interaction for transactional purposes may use less modifiers than a request for interactional purposes) and (v) the type of speech act (i.e. the more impositive a request is, the more modifiers are introduced to soften its face threatening nature).

In the next step of the session (i.e. *Reflecting*), learners were given opportunities to apply the knowledge gained. First, they were presented with six authentic request emails in their L1 (some appropriate and others not) (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007). These emails were sent by some of the students in class to the instructor of the course, and thus the P and D variables were fixed as high power (P+), given the unequal power distribution between students and the professor, and low social distance (D−) due to the frequent interaction between students and the professor in the classroom. However, the degree of imposition involved in the request emails ranged from low to high (Félix-Brasdefer 2012): (1) requests for information concerning course content and the continuous assessment procedure implemented in the writing course, (2) requests for feedback on two different writing assignments, and (3) requests for actions such as rescheduling an exam or asking for the possibility of taking a missed exam. Data were gathered with permission from the email senders, and their names were replaced with pseudonyms.

After reading these emails, learners were asked to discuss the reasons for pragmatic success or failure by first analysing the discourse structure of the emails and then by answering some pragmalinguistic awareness-raising questions (i.e. questions that focused on the amount and type of request modifiers) and sociopragmatic ones (i.e. questions that focused on those sociopragmatic features in which the request was embedded). After an individual analysis, class discussion was conducted to help them think further about how sociolinguistic factors affect the appropriate selection of request modifiers. As Kohls (1996) puts it, self-awareness of one's own culture becomes central when learning about other people's culture. Thus, the purpose of this first session was twofold: to develop learners' understanding of email genre conventions and pragmatic concepts, and to pave the way for intercultural understanding.

### 3.3.2 *Session 2:* Receiving *and* Reasoning

Steps three (i.e. *Receiving*) and four (i.e. *Reasoning*) were covered in the second class session, and these stages helped learners develop analytical and awareness

skills. In the third step (i.e. *Receiving*), learners were provided with explicit metapragmatic instruction on the ten internal/external types of request modifiers (see Section 3.2) and explanatory handouts. Subsequently, they were presented with findings of studies that compared request emails written by English native speakers (NSs) and non-native speakers (NNSs) to show them that in general NSs utilise a higher frequency and a wider variety of request modifiers than NNSs, which makes NSs sound more indirect and polite (see Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996). Here, following an intercultural orientation (Byram 1997), cultural comparisons were made and students were encouraged to discuss how cultural beliefs and values informed requestive behaviour.

To wrap up this step, learners' perceptions of different mitigating forces were strengthened by presenting them with some email request scenarios with varying imposition levels and five requests for response to each scenario, which were presented on a scale of directness and with a variety of modifiers. After reading the scenarios, learners were then asked to rank the requests from 1 (very inappropriate) to 5 (very appropriate) and comment on the rationale for their ranking. Following Zheng and Xu (2019), five requests were elaborated: (i) an unmodified request or a request with a non-target (but appropriate) modifier, (ii) a request with a lexical modifier, (iii) a request with lexical and multiple syntactic modifiers, (iv) a request with an external modifier and multiple syntactic modifiers, and (v) a request with an external modifier, a lexical modifier and multiple syntactic modifiers. See Appendix 1 for a sample activity with five modifier versions.

Once learners were aware of the importance of using modifiers when formulating appropriate requests in English, instruction shifted to the fourth step (i.e. *Reasoning*), which aimed to make learners understand that pragmalinguistic forms (request modifiers) depend on sociopragmatic variables (contextual variables). In this step, learners were presented with some poorly constructed request emails, followed by the instructor's reformulation of them. These request emails were selected (with the learners' permission) from the ones they had emailed in English to their instructor of the course, and they were characterised by an emphasis on learners' own needs, and they did not employ modification devices. Following Ford (2006), learners were engaged in teacher-led class discussion about those elements that served to improve their emails, while forcing them to explain what they understood. In so doing, the perlocutionary effect of the email requests on the receivers was also discussed. On the whole, the main pedagogic purpose of this second session was to form a refined understanding of the relationship between linguistic forms, functions and appropriateness of forms in context when mitigating request emails.

### 3.3.3 *Session 3:* Rehearsing *and* Revising

The last instructional session included the fifth and sixth steps (i.e. *Rehearsing* and *Revising*) and provided learners with opportunities to produce email requests and receive feedback. In the fifth step (i.e. *Rehearsing*), learners were presented with controlled, semi-controlled and free writing activities. The controlled activities, adapted from Chen (2016), asked learners to read some email request scenarios and use the given clues to complete the request-making sentences. See Appendix 2 for a sample of controlled activity.

The semi-controlled activities provided learners with practice in writing two appropriate request emails to the instructor of their writing course. The email scenarios described an unequal power (P+) and a familiar relationship (D–) between the writer and the recipient. Following Félix-Brasdefer (2012), the imposition levels of the requests ranged from the lowest (i.e. request for information) to the highest (i.e. request for action). Thus, learners were asked to produce a request email for information regarding the due date for an assignment as low imposition (R–) and a request for a letter of reference as high imposition (R+) because the instructor is expected to act. In this activity, learners worked in small groups and were guided by the instructor in the analysis of the sociopragmatic factors before writing their emails. Finally, concerning free writing activities, students were encouraged to send authentic emails in English to their professor when having questions or requests regarding the course subject, for the remaining of the academic semester.

In the sixth and last step (i.e. *Revising*), the outcome of the semi-controlled activity was revised and metapragmatic feedback was given on learners' performance. Following Nguyen et al. (2015), the produced emails were returned with underlining and metapragmatic feedback, in the form of comments/questions, provided in the margins. Feedback focused not just on the appropriateness of learners' request modifiers to a given context, but also on areas in need of revision relating to the general organisation of the email and language use. Special care was taken to provide feedback in a sensitive manner and always preserving learners' cultural identity. To summarise, the goal at this third session was to provide learners with opportunities for abundant practice in writing appropriate email requests coupled with meaningful feedback to help them gain processing control over their pragmatic knowledge acquired during the previous instructional sessions.

## 3.4 Data collection procedure

The study adopted a one-group quasi-experimental research that used a pre-test, immediate post-test and delayed post-test design in order to measure not only immediate instructional gains, but also gains made over two months. Data came

from a written DCT which required learners to write two appropriate emails to their course instructor based on two request scenarios, which included the same situational variables. In particular, the scenarios described an unequal power (P+) and a familiar social relationship (D−). Moreover, the imposition level of the requests was high (R+): one for a deadline extension, knowing that the instructor was very strict with lateness policy, and the other for a reconsideration of the final grade, knowing that the instructor was reluctant to change final grades. High imposition requests have been found to be more likely to be accompanied by modifiers (Félix-Brasdefer 2012) and that is the reason why high imposition request scenarios were selected. Following Chen (2015), the items in the scenarios were slightly modified to keep practice effect to the minimum, making a total of four scenarios (see Table 3). See Appendix 3 for a sample scenario included in the DCT.

**Table 3.** Email request situations in the pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test

| Situations | Variables | Pre-test | Post-test and delayed post-test |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Deadline extension | P+<br>D−<br>R+ | Your professor asked you to hand in a writing assignment today, but you cannot finish it by the deadline. You decide to email the professor and ask for a deadline extension. | Your professor asked you to hand in a research project today, but you cannot finish it by the deadline. You decide to email the professor and ask for a deadline extension. |
| 2. Reconsideration final grade | P+<br>D−<br>R+ | You are expecting to graduate this semester. However, at the end of the semester before you graduate, you receive a final score of 4.5 for a required course. You decide to email the professor to reconsider your score. | You will be expelled from university if you fail one more course this semester. However, at the end of the semester you receive a final score of 4.5 for a required course. You decide to email the professor to reconsider your score. |

Data were collected at three different times: (i) one week prior to the intervention (pre-test), (ii) one week after the intervention (post-test), and (iii) two months after the intervention (delayed post-test). The DCT was administered during the learners' class hours and took approximately 30 minutes. Immediately after writing each email, learners were asked to rate on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = no confidence, 5 = high confidence) their confidence when judging the appropriateness of their emails and give reasons for their language choice. Appendix 3 presents the questions learners were asked to measure their confidence level.

### 3.5 Data analysis and statistical procedure

The 150 email requests (25 students × 2 situations × 3 times) produced by the learners were analysed in terms of frequency and type of internal and external request modifiers that served to soften high imposition requests. For this analysis, the classification scheme described above (see Section 3.2) was used. Accordingly, ten request modifiers were analysed: subjectivisers, consultative devices, downtoners, understaters, conditional, multiple syntactic combination, preparators, grounders, disarmers and apologies. Following Félix-Brasdefer (2012: 100), the type 'syntactic combination' was coded as such when it included two or more of the following syntactic modifiers: conditional form ('could' vs. 'can'), past tense ('I was wondering' vs. 'I am wondering'), or progressive aspect ('I am wondering' vs. 'I wonder').

Quantitative data were submitted to the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS), software version 22.0. Non-parametric statistical tests were used since data were not normally distributed as indicated by the Shapiro-Wilk test ($p \leq 0.008$). Friedman tests for repeated measures were conducted to compare: (i) learners' frequency and variety of use of different types of modifiers in the pre-test and two post-tests, as well as (ii) learners' confidence in terms of appropriateness of their language use in the pre-test and two post-tests. All post hoc comparisons were performed using Wilcoxon tests. Statistical differences were considered significant at $p < 0.05$.

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1 Learners' frequency of request modifiers

RQ1 aimed to find out the extent to which metapragmatic instruction worked as a means to improve the *frequency* with which learners modify high-imposition email requests immediately after instruction and after two months. Table 4 displays the descriptive statistics of the frequency of modifiers in the pre, post, and delayed post-test emails. Results show an important increase in frequency with which learners modified high-imposition request emails in the post-test ($M = 5.92$, $SD = 0.909$) and delayed post-test ($M = 5.28$; $SD = 1.061$) as compared to the pre-test ($M = 2.72$; $SD = 1.242$). These results can also be seen in the box plot in Figure 1.

**Table 4.** Frequency of modifiers in pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test

| Tests | *N* | Mean | SD | Median | Minimum | Maximum |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pre-test | 68 | 2.72 | 1.242 | 2 | 0 | 5 |
| Post-test | 148 | 5.92 | 0.909 | 6 | 4 | 7 |
| Delayed Post-test | 132 | 5.28 | 1.061 | 6 | 3 | 7 |

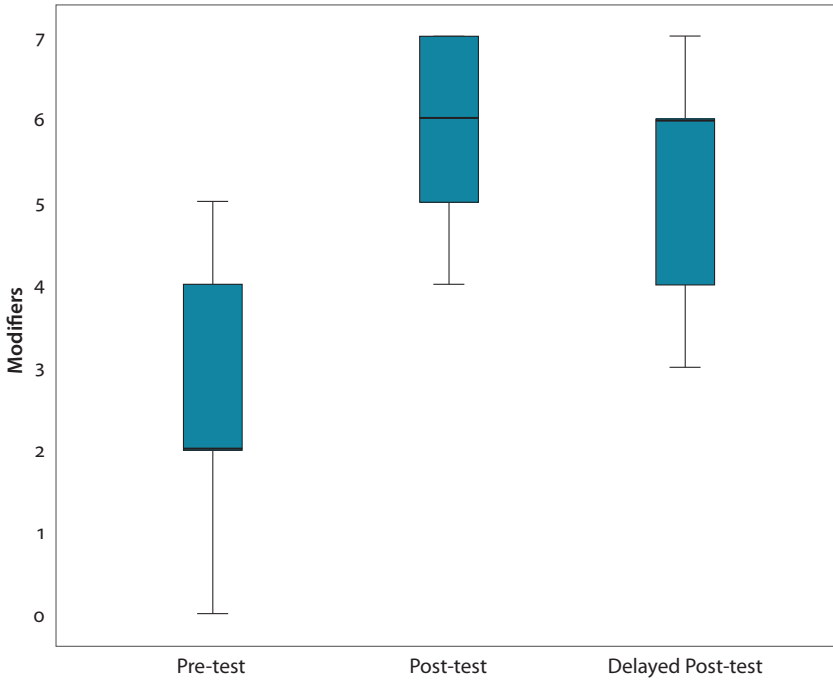


**Figure 1.** Box plot of frequency of modifiers in pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test

Friedman tests were conducted to compare means, and the results revealed a statistically significant difference among the three tests ($\chi^2$ (2) = 31.89, $p$ = 0.000) (see Table 5). Further post-hoc analyses indicated that learners used significantly more request modifiers in the post-test ($Z$ = −4.328, $p$ = 0.000) and delayed post-test ($Z$ = −4.044, $p$ = 0.000) than they did in the pre-test, but there was no significant difference between the post-test and the delayed post-test ($Z$ = −1.949, $p$ = 0.051), suggesting that learners' performance in the use of request modifiers, as far as frequency was concerned, was slightly retained over two months (see Table 6).

**Table 5.** Friedman test results for total use of modifiers used in pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test

| Tests | Range | $X^2$ | df | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pre-test | 1.16 | 31.89 | 2 | 0.000* |
| Post-test | 2.58 | | | |
| Delayed Post-test | 2.26 | | | |

* $p < 0.05$

**Table 6.** Post-hoc Wilcoxon test results for total use of modifiers

| Total use of modifiers | Z | p |
|---|---|---|
| Pre-test versus Post-test | −4.328 | 0.000* |
| Pre-test versus Delayed Post-test | −4.044 | 0.000* |
| Post-test versus Delayed Post-test | −1.949 | 0.051 |

* $p < 0.05$

In short, based on the above findings, the answer to RQ1 is positive. In fact, it clearly appears that the pedagogical intervention influenced the frequency of learners' use of request modifiers not only immediately after receiving instruction but also two months later. Excerpt (1) illustrates the performance of the same learner in situation 1 (i.e. deadline extension) before and after receiving the treatment on modifying request emails.

(1) –Pre-test
I cannot submit the writing assignment today because I had a problem. Can you extend the deadline or give me a solution, please?
*[grounder]*

–Post-test
I am very sorry to bother you, but could you possibly accept my research project tomorrow? I got stuck writing this project, so I could not submit it today.
*[apology + conditional + downtoner + grounder]*

–Delayed post-test
I was struggling with the content of my research project, so I was not able to submit it today. I was wondering if you could possibly accept my assignment two days late. *[grounder + syntactic combination + downtoner]*

Before the instruction, the learner relied on a grounder to justify the request and modified the request syntactically through the use of the modal verb 'can' and the marker 'please', which were not instructional targets due to the extensive use learners make of these two devices (see Hardford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996; Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan 2006b). In contrast, after being engaged in the instructional treatment, the same learner used a higher number of mitigating devices in the same situation, including apologies, conditionals, downtoners, grounders and multiple syntactic combinations. As for grounders, before the treatment the reason provided by the learner was very vague ('I had a problem'). After instruction, however, and in line with Chen (2015), the learners specified the problem ('I was stuck writing this project,' 'I was struggling with the content of my research project') to increase the credibility of the request. Such a high use of modifiers served to weaken

the face-threatening request to be made in this situation which involved a high degree of imposition to a professor who had a strict policy regarding submission of assignments.

These findings seem to ascertain the positive role of metapragmatic instruction in improving and retaining learners' ability to mitigate requests when writing an email to a professor and are in line with previous instructed pragmatics studies (for positive results concerning the long-term impact of pragmatic instruction on email requests, see Alcón-Soler 2015 and Nguyen 2018). Moreover, they also suggest the benefits of the particular pedagogical treatment implemented since learners could retain over two months the pragmatic knowledge they were taught. In line with Nguyen (2018), the benefits of the treatment implemented could be justified in terms of an effective integration of different instructional activities such as implicit and explicit metapragmatic instruction, awareness raising activities, scaffolded communicative practice and meaningful feedback activities. It is worth mentioning that the length of the instructional treatment might also have played a positive role in developing learners' ability to modify request emails, since it lasted three two-hour sessions. Indeed, Ford (2006) suggested that the limited effects of pragmatic instruction in his study could be attributed to the short amount of instructional time implemented, which was only fifty minutes. Therefore, it seems that the longer the instructional time-period, the greater pragmatic benefits learners can get.

### 4.2 Learners' variety of request modifiers

RQ2 aimed to investigate the extent to which metapragmatic instruction worked as a means to improve the *variety* with which learners modify high-imposition email requests immediately following instruction and after two months. In order to give a precise answer to this question, a close analysis was conducted on learners' patterns of use of different modifier types before and after treatment. Table 7 displays the distribution of modifiers in the pre, post, and delayed post-test emails. Results show that before instruction learners tended to over-rely on the use of grounders (47.1%) and conditional (30.9%) to mitigate email requests, while making little use of other types, for example apologies (11.8%) or preparators, disarmers or multiple syntactic combination (each occurring less than 5%). As for the internal lexical modifiers, learners made no use of them at all. On the contrary, after the treatment, learners employed a wider variety of modifier types in the two post-tests although they still infrequently used preparators and disarmers (each occurring 2.3% or less).

**Table 7.** Distribution of modifiers in pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test ($n$ = 348)

| | Pre-test | | Post-test | | Delayed post-test | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Types** | *f* | % | *f* | % | *f* | % |
| Lexical modifiers | | | | | | |
| Subjectiviser | 0 | 0.0 | 4 | 2.7 | 7 | 5.3 |
| Consultative | 0 | 0.0 | 8 | 5.4 | 6 | 4.5 |
| Downtoner | 0 | 0.0 | 14 | 9.5 | 9 | 6.8 |
| Understater | 0 | 0.0 | 8 | 5.4 | 10 | 7.6 |
| Syntactic modifiers | | | | | | |
| Conditional | 21 | 30.9 | 22 | 14.9 | 19 | 14.4 |
| Combination | 2 | 2.9 | 20 | 13.5 | 21 | 15.9 |
| External modifiers | | | | | | |
| Preparators | 3 | 4.4 | 3 | 2.0 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Grounders | 32 | 47.1 | 43 | 29.1 | 44 | 33.3 |
| Disarmers | 2 | 2.9 | 2 | 1.3 | 3 | 2.3 |
| Apologies | 8 | 11.8 | 24 | 16.2 | 13 | 9.9 |
| **Total** | **68** | **100.0** | **148** | **100** | **132** | **100** |

The Friedman tests results showed statistically significant differences in the use of two internal lexical modifiers -downtoners ($\chi^2$ (2) = 11.84, $p$ = 0.003) and understaters ($\chi^2$ (2) = 7.47, $p$ = 0.024), one internal syntactic modifier – the combination of at least two syntactic modifiers ($\chi^2$ (2) = 15.27, $p$ = 0.000), and one external modifier – apologies ($\chi^2$ (2) = 8.78, $p$ = 0.012). However, there was no significant effect in using grounders and conditionals potentially due to a ceiling effect, that is, learners were able to employ these two modifiers at the pre-test widely and hence there was no instructional effect (see Table 8).

Further post-hoc analyses showed a statistically significant difference located between the pre-test and the two post-tests for the modifiers of downtoners, understaters and multiple syntactic combinations ($p < 0.05$), but no significant difference between the post-test and delayed post-test, indicating that improvement, as far as variety is concerned, lasted beyond final treatment. Conversely, the modifier of apologies presented a different pattern of use: the difference was located between the pre-test and post-test ($p$ = 0.014) and between the post-test and delayed post-test ($p$ = 0.022), but not between the pre-test and the delayed post-test, showing that learners' knowledge of this modifier was not retained over the period of two months (see Table 9).

In response to RQ2, the aforementioned results suggest that learners expanded their range of modifiers for softening high-imposition request emails after the pedagogical intervention and two months later. Before treatment, learners tended to produce unmodified request emails, or they simply modified them with

**Table 8.** Friedman test results for distribution of modifiers in pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test

| | Pre-test | Post-test | Delayed post-test | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Types** | **Range** | **Range** | **Range** | $X^2$ | **df** | **p** |
| Lexical modifiers | | | | | | |
| Subjectiviser | 1.86 | 2.02 | 2.12 | 4.53 | 2 | 0.104 |
| Consultative | 1.86 | 2.10 | 2.04 | 4.33 | 2 | 0.115 |
| Downtoner | 1.70 | 2.30 | 2.00 | 11.84 | 2 | 0.003* |
| Understater | 1.76 | 2.08 | 2.16 | 7.47 | 2 | 0.024* |
| Syntactic modifiers | | | | | | |
| Conditional | 2.06 | 2.10 | 1.84 | 1.46 | 2 | 0.481 |
| Combination | 1.54 | 2.24 | 2.22 | 15.27 | 2 | 0.000* |
| External modifiers | | | | | | |
| Preparators | 2.04 | 2.04 | 1.92 | 4.00 | 2 | 0.135 |
| Grounders | 1.80 | 2.08 | 2.12 | 2.98 | 2 | 0.225 |
| Disarmers | 1.98 | 1.98 | 2.04 | 2.00 | 2 | 0.368 |
| Apologies | 1.74 | 2.36 | 1.90 | 8.78 | 2 | 0.012* |

* $p < 0.05$

**Table 9.** Post-hoc Wilcoxon test results for distribution of modifiers

| **Distribution of modifiers** | | **Z** | **p** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Downtoners | | | |
| | Pre-test versus Post-test | −2.889 | 0.004* |
| | Pre-test versus Delayed Post-test | −2.121 | 0.034* |
| | Post-test versus Delayed Post-test | −0.920 | 0.358 |
| Understaters | | | |
| | Pre-test versus Post-test | −2.070 | 0.038* |
| | Pre-test versus Delayed Post-test | −2.428 | 0,015* |
| | Post-test versus Delayed Post-test | −0.491 | 0.623 |
| Combination | | | |
| | Pre-test versus Post-test | −3.286 | 0.001* |
| | Pre-test versus Delayed Post-test | −3.051 | 0.002* |
| | Post-test versus Delayed Post-test | −0.144 | 0.886 |
| Apologies | | | |
| | Pre-test versus Post-test | −2.447 | 0.014* |
| | Pre-test versus Delayed Post-test | −0.921 | 0.357 |
| | Post-test versus Delayed Post-test | −2.296 | 0.022* |

* $p < 0.05$

conditionals (e.g., can, could) or 'vague' grounders. This underuse of request modifiers is common in L2/FL email requests (Alcón-Soler 2015; Chen 2015; Ford 2006; Nguyen 2018) and seems to indicate, as Nguyen (2018: 243) puts it, that "students lacked awareness of the need to adhere to the principles of negative politeness when interacting with people in a superior position."

Nevertheless, instruction allowed learners to produce the internal lexical modifiers of downtoners (e.g., possibly, perhaps, etc.) or understaters (e.g. just, a little, etc.), which were not used at all prior to instruction. Moreover, learners' gains were also found in the internal syntactic modifiers. In fact, learners notably increased their use of the multiple syntactic combinations (conditional, past tense, progressive aspect) which, as observed by Félix-Brasdefer (2012), shows learners' awareness of sociopragmatic knowledge of the rules of academic context (for instance, social status of participants, level of familiarity between them, or degree of imposition associated with a particular request). Learners' long-term improvement in the area of internal modifiers is encouraging as it shows the learners' pragmatic benefits after an instructional period. In fact, previous research has shown that internal modifiers represent a challenging learning area to teach because they lack transparent pragmatic meaning and add structural complexity to the speech act of requesting (see Nguyen 2012; Nguyen 2018). The use of these internal modifiers represents a movement towards the NS norm as reflected in the NS data of many studies (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Félix-Brasdefer 2012). Excerpt (2), taken from the same learner in situation 2 (i.e. reconsideration of final grade), illustrates the learner's improvement in the use of internal modifiers. As can be observed, before receiving instruction, the request was mitigated with the marker 'please', which was a non-target modifier. However, after the instructional period the same learner deployed a number of modification devices other than 'please', including conditionals, syntactic combinations, downtoners and undertaters, which made the request less imposing.

(2) –Pre-test
I need you to reconsider my score in the course, please.

–Post-test
Could you possibly reconsider my score in this course?
[*conditional* + *downtoner*]

–Delayed post-test
I was wondering if you could just reconsider my score in the course.
[*syntactic combination* + *understater*]

When it came to external modification, results revealed a mixed picture. At the pre-test, learners just used grounders, although most of them were quite 'vague' and thus the email requests they produced were quite inappropriate. At the post-test,

instruction increased the learners' use of apologies and grounders, with the latter not being significant due to a ceiling effect. It is also worth noting that most grounders were quite specific and could help the professor to better understand learners' needs (see Excerpt (1) above). At the delayed post-test, learners kept making extensive use of grounders and to a lesser extent apologies, but changes were not significant.

In short, similarly to previous studies (Nguyen 2012; Nguyen 2018), these findings show that certain types of modifiers are more teachable than others. Nguyen (2018) reported the positive effects of pragmatic instruction on learners' use of request strategies, but just a modest progress in their use of supporting moves, while Nguyen (2012) illustrated how learners significantly employed more internal than external modifiers after instruction on how to modify their criticism in a peer-feedback session. In our study, and in line with Nguyen (2012), an explanation for the modest progress in how learners used some external modifiers may lie in the instructional treatment which may have unintentionally placed more emphasis on internal modifiers since they may increase the structural complexity of the speech act of requesting. Contrary to external modifiers which – to a greater or lesser degree – learners used prior to instruction, internal modifiers, except for conditionals, were a new underused area in need of awareness. Therefore, learners might have been more interested in putting into practice this newly acquired knowledge.

### 4.3 Learners' confidence in judging the appropriateness of email request modifiers

Finally, RQ3 aimed to examine the extent to which metapragmatic instruction worked as a means to develop learners' level of confidence when judging the appropriateness of email request modifiers immediately after instruction as well as two months later. Table 10 displays descriptive statistics for the learners' confidence in their performance in the pre, post and delayed post-test emails. Results indicated that there was an increase in learners' confidence in the post-test ($M$ = 4.68, $SD$ = 0.476) and delayed post-test ($M$ = 4.28, $SD$ = 0.458) as compared to the pre-test ($M$ = 3.64, $SD$ = 0.490).

**Table 10.** Learners' confidence in pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test

| Tests | Mean | SD | Median | Minimum | Maximum |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pre-test | 3.64 | 0.490 | 4 | 3 | 4 |
| Post-test | 4.68 | 0.476 | 5 | 4 | 5 |
| Delayed Post-test | 4.28 | 0.458 | 4 | 4 | 5 |

Friedman tests used to compare means found statistically significant differences among the three tests ($\chi^2$ (2) = 34.79, $p$ = 0.000) (see Table 11). Post-hoc comparisons using Wilcoxon tests showed statistically significant differences in learners' confidence located between the pre-test and the two post-tests ($p$ = 0.000), and in the post-test and delayed post-test ($p$ = 0.002), revealing that learners were certain about the appropriateness of the modifiers they used to mitigate email requests two months after instruction (see Table 12).

**Table 11.** Friedman test results for learners' confidence in pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test

| Tests | Range | $X^2$ | df | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pre-test | 1.26 | 34.79 | 2 | 0.000* |
| Post-test | 2.62 | | | |
| Delayed Post-test | 2.12 | | | |

* $p < 0.05$

**Table 12.** Post-hoc Wilcoxon test results for learners' level of confidence

| Learners' confidence | Z | p |
|---|---|---|
| Pre-test versus Post-test | −4,245 | 0,000* |
| Pre-test versus Delayed Post-test | −4,000 | 0,000* |
| Post-test versus Delayed Post-test | −3,162 | 0,002* |

* $p < 0.05$

Based on the above results, the answer to RQ3 is positive, that is, pragmatic instruction improved learners' level of confidence when evaluating the appropriateness of the modifiers used to soften their request emails immediately after instruction and after two months. It is important to note, however, that although the results proved to be statistically significant, the learners' level of confidence in the pre-test was surprisingly high (mean = 3.64). Thus, an exploration of learners' comments was conducted to gain more insight into how certain they were about their pragmatic choices when constructing the emails. In this respect, interesting patterns were revealed. Prior to instruction, learners tended to focus on aspects such as the formality of the vocabulary employed (including the marker *please*), the avoidance of contracted forms or the 'vague' explanations provided to justify the requests. On the contrary, immediately after instruction as well as two months later, learners' responses made reference to the discourse structure of the emails and showed explicit knowledge of form-function relationships (see Alcón-Soler 2015 for similar findings regarding learners' gains in sociopragmatics after an instructional period). Excerpt (3) shows a learner's performance at post-test in situation 1 (i.e. deadline

extension). Here the student is aware of the power-distance dimension and discusses the importance of providing a 'specific' grounder to justify the request and makes explicit reference to the use of "I was wondering if…".

(3) –Post-test
Dear Professor (name of the professor),

My name is (name of the student) and I am a student in your course (name of the course). I am writing this email to tell you that last week I suffered several injuries in a car accident (see attached the medical certificate), and I will not be able to submit my writing assignment for grading on time. For this reason, I was wondering if you could give me a deadline extension.
Thank you for your time and consideration.
Yours sincerely,
(name of the student)

*Learner's self-evaluation of email appropriateness at post-test, after giving it a rate of 4.*
The email is appropriate because I used the correct structure for an email. I addressed my teacher as "Dear Professor (name of the professor)", I identified myself, and I closed the email in a formal way ("Yours sincerely"). Moreover, I provided a clear reason for the request and formulated it using polite language ("I was wondering if"…) due to differences in status between us.

Thus, students' explanations of their perception scores clarified the quantitative results and helped to observe that learners' level of confidence could be connected with a greater understanding of what appropriateness meant. These findings seem to support previous research (Alcón-Soler 2018; Chen 2015) on the benefits of metapragmatic discussion for increasing learners' awareness of those sociopragmatic factors that affect the appropriateness of an email request. Chen (2015) reported learners' gains in terms of confidence after an instructional period on request emails to faculty, while Alcón-Soler (2018) showed how task-supported language teaching led to a greater awareness of how to mitigate email requests, as measured in learners' self-evaluations of email appropriateness.

## 5. Conclusions, limitations and pedagogical implications

The current study sought to examine the effects of metapragmatic instruction on learners' ability to modify email requests over time by applying the theoretical framework of form-function-context mapping (Taguchi 2011). Results indicated that learners significantly (i) produced a higher amount of request modifiers, (ii) expanded their repertoire of lexical and syntactic internal modifiers as well as external

modifiers, and (iii) showed increased confidence in their language appropriateness when producing high imposition request emails to professors, immediately after instruction and two months later. Moreover, they also revealed that some categories were more amenable to instruction than others. In particular, they showed that lexical and syntactic internal modifiers were significantly employed more over a period of two months, despite representing a challenging learning area to teach (Nguyen 2012; Nguyen 2018).

There are some limitations, however, which call into question the generalisability of these findings. First, and in relation to the instruments used to measure learners' production of request emails, a DCT consisting of two high imposition request scenarios was used. Although DCTs may not elicit natural-like data, they allow for controlling contextual variables in scenarios, thus ensuring data comparability over time (Nguyen 2018), as was the case in this study. Future research could consider using real-life tasks (i.e. authentic emails) to investigate whether findings regarding learners' use of request modifiers would have been different (Martín-Laguna 2020; Martín-Laguna and Alcón-Soler 2018).

Second, this investigation employed a one-group ($n = 25$) quasi-experimental research design that included a pre-test, post-test and a delayed post-test. Unfortunately, a control group could not be included in the study for practical reasons (i.e. absence of another group of students with an upper-intermediate proficiency level in English). Thus, this study could be replicated with the inclusion of a control group in order to draw more reliable conclusions. Moreover, a bigger sample size of participants would strengthen its results.

Finally, the effects of the instructional treatment were measured by calculating the frequency and variety of request modifiers rather than appropriateness of their use. Future research should combine frequency counts with measures of appropriateness to further validate the findings (Alcón-Soler 2018). It would also be beneficial to address NSs' appropriateness judgments on learners' request modifiers to better understand the benefits of pragmatic instruction.

Despite these shortcomings, the present study adds to the literature by presenting an effective instructional framework designed to teach learners how to modify email requests to faculty, which is a relatively understudied area compared with the teaching of oral requests (Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan 2020), and a fairly neglected topic in English language educational publications (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Nguyen 2018). In particular, the pedagogical framework included the following recommended practices: (i) learners' familiarisation with key pragmatic notions, including the areas of email etiquette and directive language, (ii) implicit teaching through learners' analysis of and reflection on their own L1 request emails, (iii) explicit teaching of request modifiers in English through metapragmatic explanations based on authentic email requests in English, (iv) awareness-raising activities

to guide learners in understanding the form-function-context mapping of request modifiers, (v) communicative/productive activities to help learners activate their knowledge of form-function-context mapping in actual communication, and (vi) revision activities to check the learning outcomes of the different activities and offer meaningful feedback for improvement. Hopefully, these pedagogical recommendations may inform classroom practices in the critical task of enhancing learners' *email literacy* (Chen 2006) through requests to faculty, an essential skill to have, especially in an academic context.

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## **Appendix 1.** Sample activity with five modifier versions (adapted from Zheng and Xu 2019)

Read the following email scenario and the five request patterns associated with it. First rank the requests from 1 (very inappropriate) to 5 (very appropriate). Then, explain why you provided that particular answer.

| | |
|---|---|
| Scenario 1 | You want to ask your Professor for feedback on a written work in progress |
| Prompt | Dear Professor Y,<br>I am X. _____.<br>Thank you in advance.<br>Best,<br>X |
| Request 1 | I hope you can review my draft and give me feedback.<br>[*non-target modifier*] |
| Request 2 | I hope maybe you can review my draft and give me feedback.<br>[*Lexical modifier*] |
| Request 3 | I was just wondering if you could review my draft and give me feedback.<br>[*Lexical modifier + Combination of syntactic modifiers*] |
| Request 4 | I am struggling with the organization of my paper. I was wondering if you could review my draft and give me feedback.<br>[*Grounder + combination of syntactic modifiers*] |
| Request 5 | I'm really sorry to bother you, but I was just wondering if you could review my draft and give me feedback.<br>[*Apology + lexical modifier + combination of syntactic modifiers*] |

Answer: ……
Reason: ……

## **Appendix 2.** Sample of controlled activity (adapted from Chen 2016)

Please make the request sentence based on the clues in the parentheses provided in scenario 1.

| | |
|---|---|
| Scenario 1 | You want to ask your Professor for a copy of the class readings. (wonder/ possibly) |
| Prompt | Dear Professor Y,<br>I am X. _____.<br>Thank you in advance.<br>Best,<br>X |
| Student's answer | |

## **Appendix 3.** Sample email scenario included in the DCT

You are a student majoring in English studies. Your professor asked you to hand in a writing assignment today, but you cannot finish it by the deadline. You decide to email the professor and ask for a deadline extension.

Subject:_____
To: _____
_____
_____
_____

Do you think this email is appropriate? Provide your answer on a scale of 1–5. 1 representing no confidence and 5 representing high confidence.

1 2 3 4 5

Please explain your choice by referring to the language used in the email.

CHAPTER 4

# Experts and novices

## Examining academic email requests to faculty and developmental change during study abroad

Nicola Halenko and Lisa Winder
University of Central Lancashire

This longitudinal study seeks to contribute to a shortage of email investigations examining expert (L1) and novice (L2) English practices and tracking L2 developmental change during a UK study abroad period. Using a corpus of 315 authentic request emails, distinct features of Chinese ESL and British students' email practices were examined, in addition to changes in Chinese ESL practices between the beginning and end of the ten-month period abroad. Findings firstly indicated that choice of request strategies, internal modification, and request perspective showed much variation between the two groups due to different approaches to projecting politeness. Secondly, exposure to the L2 and engagement in email writing had minimal impact on pragmatic performance over the academic year.

**Keywords**: authentic emails, requests, study abroad, Chinese students, longitudinal study

### 1. Introduction

The current dominance of email as the preferred means of communication within workplace and educational settings has led to a surge in research activity analysing this form of asynchronous interaction. Nowadays, communicative interaction at university level is increasingly undertaken using some form of online communication and email is typically the go-to option for expediting many academic matters (Félix-Brasdefer 2012). For students, contacting and accessing information from academic staff is most efficiently achieved via this medium, but a particular set of skills is required to successfully achieve communicative goals in this unique, hybrid form of oral (considered more informal) and written (considered more formal) interaction. Increasing evidence suggests that, in the absence of targeted instruction,

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L2 English emails are often flawed with a variety of non-L2-like devices. A feature of this longitudinal study is to analyse the extent to which the L2 setting, as part of a study abroad (SA) stay, plays a facilitative role in shaping learners' understanding and production of appropriate email requests to faculty.

Studies on developmental pragmatics often draw on language socialisation theory (Shieffelin and Ochs 1986), which contends that by interacting with expert members of a given community, novices can develop into more competent members themselves. This concept also frames the present study. Given the diversity of opportunities to gain frequent exposure to authentic, contextualised communicative norms means that, in principle, the SA environment is an excellent resource from which to draw valuable linguistic and sociocultural pragmatic knowledge from experts. In the case of this study, as international university students (novice L2 users) are expected to participate in email interaction on a regular basis in the target language with lecturers, peers and other staff members (expert language users), one might expect these novices to naturally develop more L2-like email practices during their SA stay. However, such a linear development of email literacy in L2 English is rarely reported in the short- or long-term. Instead, students from a range of first language backgrounds reportedly struggle to demonstrate appropriate L2 linguistic moves and appropriate sociocultural knowledge of academic norms in their emails: Chinese (Chen 2015; Chen, Rau and Rau 2016); Dutch (Hendriks 2010); Greek (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, 2018), Norwegian (Savić 2018); Spanish (Alcón-Soler 2015; Bou-Franch 2011); East Asian L1s (Biesenbach-Lucas 2006, 2007). Another feature of this study then is to determine the comparative features of novice and expert user request emails.

Composing academic (request) emails is known to be challenging for a number of reasons. Emails are typically private exchanges, so appropriate models are difficult to come by. Emails are void of non-verbal cues (an extremely useful aid to a novice language user), and feedback is rarely offered beyond knowing whether the request, for instance, has triggered compliance or not. In the absence of clear guidance, request emails therefore pose pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic challenges for the L2 user, further aggravated by the face-threatening nature of the request act itself. Finally, as with pragmatic input more generally, email composition is rarely explicitly taught, leaving students to largely rely on guesswork. By gaining an understanding of how students meet, or fail to meet, linguistic or non-linguistic expectations, researchers and practitioners are in a better position to help learners rise to the pragmatic challenges they face in email writing.

From a data collection perspective, analysing naturally-occurring emails, as in this study, allows the all-important shift from a reliance on elicited data sources to situated authentic discourse. Historically, pragmatic studies have found it challenging to capture or utlilise organically-grown data in an effective way, so this

is an important new avenue of exploration for the field. Student-initiated emails can also yield sizeable corpora with considerable amounts of language samples. Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (2005) also note that email data have the desirable functions of *comparability* (variables of setting, topic and participant roles are generally constant in emails), *interactivity* (turn-taking and negotiating outcomes are featured in emails) and *consequentiality* (emails have real-world outcomes). All these factors are said to be key features when evaluating data sources, meaning academic institutions are a "natural laboratory" to investigate how L2 users develop the pragmatic know-how of the target culture in order to function successfully within it.

This study seeks to add to the current body of investigations into L1 and L2 English email practices. What sets this study apart from existing email research is its longitudinal focus, observing developmental change in the study abroad environment, the UK-based research context and the comparison of expert and novice email practices.

The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. What are the distinctive features of expert and novice English users' email requests?
2. Is there evidence of change in novice L2 English request emails over one academic year?

## 2. Background research

### 2.1 L2 English request development and study abroad

In the context of the L1 and L2 university student cohorts in this study, SA is defined as "a temporary sojourn of pre-defined duration, undertaken for educational purposes" (Kinginger 2009: 11). Beginning with an overview of the SA context more broadly, research to date has suggested that pragmatic gains made in the SA environment are highly variable despite the obvious advantages a SA environment has to offer. Xiao's (2015) synthesis of existing longitudinal, non-instructed SA investigations ranged in length from five weeks (Masuda 2011) to 4.5 years (Bouton 1994), with most longitudinal studies typically tracking development over a one-year period. Overall, these investigations of pragmatic comprehension, production and perception (of mostly speech acts) report a combination of largely positive SA effects (e.g., Matsumura 2001, 2003; Schauer 2006), minimal SA effects (e.g., Barron 2006; Iwasaki 2011) and studies generating a mixed picture (e.g., Barron 2003, 2007; Bataller 2010; Cole and Anderson 2001; Schauer 2007). These variable findings may be attributable to individual learner differences (Taguchi 2012), the target pragmatic feature (Sánchez-Hernández and Alcón-Soler 2019), length of stay, quality

and quantity of L2 exposure and contact (Bardovi-Harlig and Bastos 2011), and even programmatic variables of the SA sojourn itself (Pérez-Vidal and Shively 2019).

Examination of pragmatic development of spoken and written L2 English requests during short- and long-term SA also follows this variable trend. In terms of evidence of moves towards more L2-like norms, a greater use of, indirect requests over time has been reported (Cole and Anderson 2001; Schauer 2007; Woodfield 2012), in addition to an increase in the use of formulaic language in requests (Bardovi-Harlig and Bastos 2011; Schauer 2007). Use of internal and external request modification devices (to mitigate or soften requests) is reported to be less successfully acquired during SA. For example, studies highlighting underuse of request modification devices (Schauer 2007; Woodfield 2008, 2012; Woodfield and Economidou-Kogetsidis 2010) appear to outnumber those showing improvement in productive use of request modification across time (Schauer 2007; Woodfield 2012). The viewpoint from which emails are written (perspective) has also been reported as differing between L1 and L2 users (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Zhu 2012). In short, SA has been found to offer a facilitative role in pragmatic development of requests, but the picture is highly complex due to the interdependence of the pragmatic target under study, the many influential contextual factors and individual learner differences. Research on L2 development in email interaction reports similar findings, as discussed in the following section.

## 2.2 Email as institutional talk

Institutional talk (IT) is understood as talk between an institutional representative (e.g., a member of university staff) and a client (e.g., a student) (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford 2005). Whereas general L2 conversation often investigates pragmatics from a much broader view of how learners negotiate intercultural middle grounds, within IT there is a need to achieve an end goal within specific constraints and frameworks (Drew and Heritage 1992) such as observing social roles and power relationships, and then making corresponding language adjustments based on this knowledge.

According to Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, "the maxim of congruence predicts that participants in a speech event will generally employ speech acts that are consistent with their role or status" (1993: 281). A status-congruent request might be a student requesting an academic meeting or course information. In the event of noncongruent interactions, where the status of the representative is challenged (e.g. a student requests an extension to a deadline), status-preserving strategies (SPS) are required as mitigators to both ensure the task is accomplished in a favourable way and to maintain a good academic relationship (ibid.). Asking for an extension to a deadline, for example, could be mitigated by making the request in a brief and timely manner (non-linguistic SPS), and by using situationally appropriate request strategies and lexical modifiers (linguistic SPS). Failing to negotiate noncongruent

encounters in an appropriate way is likely to result in non-compliance in the short term (the deadline extension is not granted) but could also risk a (lasting) negative impression of the student in the long term.

It is the negotiation of these noncongruent encounters which L2 learners can find particularly challenging. In fact, it is the use, kind and number of status-preserving strategies which are often markers differentiating novice language users from their expert peers (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford 1990, 1993). Learners' awareness of (non)congruency does not guarantee the academic exchange will be successful either. A further level of risk a student faces is formulating status-congruent requests in an inappropriate way. For instance, although a request for an academic meeting is a status-congruent request for a student, if the appropriate framing devices and content moves are absent, research has reported this affecting compliance and/or having a negative impression of the sender (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2016; Savić 2018). In short, novice L2 users need to be mindful of three specific elements for email success: L2 language, L2 (institutional and local) cultural norms and adequate knowledge of email conventions (Chen 2006).

As is the trend in oral and written pragmatic research more generally, most email request studies are designed as single-moment studies, taking a 'slice' of performance over a specific (and limited) period of time. Email studies in this category can be organised into those focusing on the framing moves (openings and closings) of L2 English request emails (e.g., Biesenbach-Lucas 2009; Codina-Espurz and Salazar-Campillo 2019; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2018), studies examining content moves in emails (levels of directness and/or lexical modification of the request sequence) (e.g., Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2018), and a handful of perception studies which have evaluated L2 emails from a sociopragmatic perspective (e.g., Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, 2016; Hendriks 2010; Li and Chen 2016; Savić 2018).

Unlike single-moment studies which can only offer a moment-in-time snapshot of what a learner knows, longitudinal studies are able to show the dynamic process of actual change in individual or group behaviour. Email studies in this category are uncommon and are currently limited to the occasional examination of non-instructed (Chen 2006) and instructed (Nguyen 2018) email performance. Chen's (2006) case study tracked the changing email performance of a Taiwanese graduate student's two-and-a-half-year study in the US as she struggled to master writing situationally-appropriate emails to her professor (and peers). Though emails to her professors in the later stages of her studies were more in line with institutional expectations of status-unequal communication (e.g., more query-preparatory statements and fewer want statements), the journey to this point was slow and complicated. Exposure and practice in the L2 environment were simply insufficient to master L2 email literacy and avoid L1 influences. Contrasting implicit learning in Chen's study, Nguyen (2018) reported the results of an eight-month investigation

into the long-term impact of explicit instruction of email requests with a group of Vietnamese university students. The results indicated instructional advantages which were sustained even after eight months. Specifically, opening email sequences, use of request strategies and avoidance of aggravating devices appeared most amenable to instruction.

Drawing on these studies, this chapter aims to contribute to the shortage of longitudinal investigations into L2 email practices. Within UK-based academic sojourns, international students from L1 Chinese backgrounds are the biggest source of non-UK students (21.5%) outside of the EU (30.5%) (Universities UK 2018). At the institution where this study is located, Chinese students represent over 50% of the international student body, so examining the study abroad experience of this dominant international group is valuable locally and to the wider UK Higher Education (HE) sector.

## 2.3 Chinese-speakers' L2 email requests

From early examinations of L2 English request emails by L1 Chinese users (Chang and Hsu 1998) through to more recent investigations (Li 2018), results tend to show consistent patterns of L2 sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic behaviour. As reviewed in the following studies, research shows L2 English emails from this learner group often lack a demonstrable understanding of L2 norms at the institutional and community-wide levels, and typically contain L1 culturally-loaded strategies.

Taking Chang and Hsu's (1998) study of authentic emails as a starting point, results showed their Chinese-speaking graduate students' emails typically employed indirect email structures with direct request constructions, in comparison to their American peers where the opposite pattern was evident. Preceding the request itself, 83% of the L2 emails in status-unequal interactions also featured extended facework and reasons for the request, considered mitigating strategies by the Chinese students to reduce imposition and make the recipient feel good. In addition, 60% of the emails adopted direct strategies (want statements and imperatives), which failed to offer the recipient adequate optionality. The most indirect strategy (query preparatory) was only used 10% of the time. Many of these features were reportedly transferred from L1 Chinese. In contrast, the American students made requests more directly in terms of information sequencing, employed minimal facework and positioned the request head act much earlier. Indirect (query preparatory) strategies were also the preferred choice 90% of the time. The authors concluded that the Chinese students were underprepared for communicating via email.

Despite Chang and Hsu's (1998) recommendations for pedagogical action, subsequent studies of Chinese speakers have evidenced little change. Examining naturally-occurring (Chen 2006; Lee 2010) and elicited (Chen 2015; Li 2018; Tseng

2016; Zhu 2012) email data, investigations have also identified lengthy pre-request moves and 'storytelling', an underuse of internal modification, and an overuse of direct strategies (want/need statement, expectation statements, performatives and imperatives) to be typical features. As confirmed through Chen's (2006) and Tseng's (2016) participant interviews, it is through these L1 practices that Chinese users typically convey politeness and indirectness in the L2, though these contrast the politeness strategies typically employed by L1 speakers.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Participants and email data

The email data consisted of 315 authentic emails sent to the two authors over a period of 18 months. The researchers were members of faculty in regular contact as tutors with either the L1 users of English on an undergraduate TESOL programme ($n$ = 153 emails) or the L2 users of English on an international business (IB) programme ($n$ = 162 emails). The IB group were L1 Chinese students from several partner universities across mainland China completing a one-year study period abroad in the UK. The Chinese students' L2 English proficiency level could be described as intermediate to upper-intermediate (B1-B2 on the CEFR) since this is the benchmark needed to join the study abroad programme. No student in the L1 Chinese data set was reported to have a proficiency level beyond B2. Both sets of subjects fell within the age range of 20–23 and were final year students on their respective programmes. Although it is common practice for students to address faculty members on a first name basis within the majority of UK HE institutions, suggesting a level of informality in the staff -student relationship, there remains an expectation that communication and interaction are carried out in a way which observes the status-unequal roles of each party. This situation also best describes the academic relationship of the researchers and subjects in this study.

Each researcher archived all request emails received during the 18-month period from the two student groups selected for the study. To achieve some level of homogeneity, group selection was based on subjects' age ranges and foreign language learning experience (the TESOL students were also studying a modern foreign language as part of their degree programme). At the end of the research cycle, emails which were self-contained (i.e. not part of longer chains of messages) and did not include any sensitive or personal information, were included in the corpus. The emails in the corpus could be categorised as requests for meetings, requests for information (course information, assessment clarification, academic regulations and advice) or requests for assistance (help with academic work, writing references). The focus of this chapter, however, was not to differentiate between the request types.

After careful consideration of ethical issues, a passive consent approach was adopted, as conducted in other studies of this kind (Merrison, Wilson, Davies and Haugh 2012). Passive consent (opting-out) involves providing a method for subjects to retract permission in contrast to active consent (opting-in), which provides a means for subjects to document permission. In this study, subjects were contacted towards the end of the research period with comprehensive details of the research, including examples of email extracts and how they would be used. Initial contact with the students was also timed to coincide with the end of year formal assessment period (signaling an end to their taught classes as finalists) so students did not feel unduly pressured to participate. Students had a four-week period to respond and withdraw from the study, resulting in removal of their emails from the corpus. The students remained in contact with the authors during this time and were invited to discuss any aspects of the study or to view email samples. Following Merrison et al. (2012), the rationale for this after-the-moment approach, over gaining prior consent, was to ensure authenticity of the request emails and no possible influence from having prior knowledge of the study (the so-called Observer's Paradox). This was regarded as a critical aspect to maintain internal validity. For these reasons, the opt-out approach was considered equitable for all parties.

### 3.2 Email analysis

To establish a broader understanding of current email practice and developmental change across the academic year, the study examined several features of the emails beyond insights limited to request strategies alone. In addition to strategy use, the study also analysed frequencies of internal lexical modification (e.g., use of 'please', 'possibly', 'I was wondering' as request mitigators) and request perspective (e.g., use of 'can I' vs. 'can you'). As mentioned, such features are also reported to vary considerably for Chinese EFL/ESL speakers but email pragmatic investigations combining all these elements with naturally-occurring data with this learner group have yet to be conducted. Examinations of syntactic modification and external modification were outside the scope of the current study.

This study takes a data-driven approach for classifying the data. Since no one coding scheme was able to capture the entire range of request components, an adaptation of several existing taxonomies (as described in Tables 1–3) was used to account for the email data.

Initial data analysis looked to a range of existing coding frameworks to categorise the request strategies in this corpus. Table 1 draws on several studies (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Zhu 2012) to capture the range of direct strategies, indirect strategies and hints identified in the expert and novice English email data sets.

**Table 1.** Analysis of request strategies

| **Levels of directness in request emails** | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Direct** | **Request strategies** | **Examples** |
| | Imperatives | *(Please) send me a time to meet.* |
| | Performatives (unhedged vs. hedged) | *I'm asking for a meeting.* *I would like to ask for a meeting.* |
| | Direct questions | *Do you have time for a meeting?* |
| | Want statements (unhedged) | *I want to meet with you.* |
| | Want statements (hedged) | *I would like to meet you.* |
| | Need statements | *I need to meet with you soon.* |
| | Expectation statements | *I hope we can meet soon.* |
| | Pre-decided statements | *It's better for me to meet next week.* |
| Conventionally Indirect | Query Preparatory-can | *Can I meet you?* |
| | Query Preparatory-could | *Could you meet me?* |
| | Query Preparatory-would | *Would I be able to meet you?* |
| | Query Preparatory-Possibility Statement | *Would it be possible/Is it possible to meet?* |
| | Query Preparatory- Permission | *May I meet with you?* |
| | Query Preparatory (without modals) | *I was wondering if you are available to meet?* |
| Hints | Strong or mild hints | *I'm having problems with my work.* |

Lexical devices which have a mitigating effect on the request head act were also investigated. Devices which downgraded the request were the focus since upgraders were not present in the data sets. Table 2 is an adaptation of Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) and Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) and lists the internal modifiers present across all the email data. Chinese speakers are not known to exploit internal modification (Li 2018; Wang 2011) so exploring the extent of behavioural change over the academic year was a useful additional focus.

**Table 2.** Analysis of internal lexical modification

| **Lexical modifiers** | |
|---|---|
| *please* | |
| Downtoners | *possibly, maybe* |
| Understaters | *just* |
| Subjectivisers | *I was wondering, I think, I want to know* |
| Consultative Devices | *If/Is it possible? Is there a chance?* |
| Hedges | *some, any* |

A final point of analysis involved examining the request perspective adopted by the students in their emails. A request utterance can take the speaker (I), hearer

(you) or both participants (we) as its agent but can also be avoided altogether (impersonal) to reduce the coerciveness and imposition on others (Zhang 1995). The four categories listed in Table 3 are taken from Blum Kulka, House and Kasper's (1989) CCSARP and show an increase in perceived politeness. Few studies to date have included this as an additional dimension as a politeness measure but since Chinese (Zhu 2012), and East Asian (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007) students more generally, seem to favour the hearer- and speaker- perspectives 80–100% of the time, this examination is also of value for this study.

**Table 3.** Analysis of request perspective

| **Request perspective (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Zhu 2012)** | |
|---|---|
| Hearer-perspective (you) (least polite) | *Could you meet me tomorrow afternoon?* |
| Speaker-hearer perspective (we) | *Could we meet tomorrow afternoon?* |
| Speaker-perspective (I) | *Could I meet you tomorrow afternoon?* |
| Impersonal perspective (most polite) | *Is it possible to meet tomorrow afternoon?* |

Descriptive statistics were generated to analyse the naturally-occurring emails. To answer the first research question, frequency counts and converted percentages enabled comparisons between the data sets (expert vs. novice). Addressing the second research question involved separating the novice data into two subsets using the mid-way point (month 5) of the SA as the natural break. Emails produced in the first half of the SA (Sept-Jan, $n = 81$) were grouped as $T^1$ and emails from the second half of the SA (Feb-June, $n = 72$) were grouped as $T^2$. All of the novices were represented in both data sets but not all novices produced the same number of emails between $T^1$ $T^2$ or across the entire SA stay. As a result, the data analysis aimed to provide indicators of changes in L2 behaviour at the group level since participant homogeneity had been established and insufficient emails were generated to directly compare individual performance across the time periods.

## 4. Findings

This study aimed to determine the distinctive features of expert and novice English users' email requests (RQ1) and to ascertain any observable change in novice L2 English request emails during a SA stay in the UK (RQ2). The findings below are organised according to these two research goals, within which the types and frequency of request strategies, lexical modification and request perspective are examined.

## 4.1 Distinctive features of expert and novice English user request emails (RQ1)

As can be seen in Table 4, distinctive features of the novice and expert user data lie in both the directness levels, and the type and frequency of request strategy.

**Table 4.** Preferred choice of request strategy for expert and novice users

| Directness levels | Request strategy | Expert users (L1 speakers) | Novice users* (L2 speakers) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Direct | Imperatives | 0 | 9 (11%) |
| | Performatives | 2 (67%) | 13 (16%) |
| | Direct questions | 1 (33%) | 14 (18%) |
| | Want statements | 0 | 18 (23%) |
| | Need statements | 0 | 5 (6%) |
| | Expectation statements | 0 | 12 (15%) |
| | Pre-decided statement | 0 | 8 (10%) |
| **Totals** | | **3** | **79** |
| Conventionally Indirect | Query preparatory Ability (can) | 6 (4%) | 34 (52%) |
| | Ability (could) | 33 (21%) | 22 (33%) |
| | Ability (would) | 18 (11%) | 4 (6%) |
| | Possibility statement | 61 (39%) | 0 |
| | Query-Permission | 1 (1%) | 4 (6%) |
| | Query- no modals | 39 (25%) | 2 (3%) |
| **Totals** | | **158** | **66** |
| Hints | Strong/mild hints | 0 | 5 (100%) |
| **Totals** | | **0** | **5** |

Note:
* novice user data combines both $T^1$ and $T^2$ figures.

Expert users almost exclusively adopt conventional indirectness in the form of query preparatory strategies to realise email requests. Qualitative examinations of this exceptionally high level reveal strong preferences for possibility statements (39%), conditional clauses prefaced with *I was wondering* (query- no modals) (25%) and the conditional verb *could* (21%) above all others. More complex bi-clausal structures which include a conditional clause such as, *I was wondering if you could…* are commonplace in the expert data. Novice users, on the other hand, tend to switch between either direct or conventionally indirect strategies in almost equal measure. The frequency of direct strategies is slightly higher, however, with want statements (23%), direct questions (18%), performatives (16%) and expectation statements (15%) appearing most often. This finding suggests the novice users show less control (and understanding) of request strategy use and its illocutionary effect, given the very specific (status-unequal) academic context within which the

requests were deployed. Observing the data qualitatively, direct and indirect strategies are indiscriminately chosen regardless of request type. In emails requesting a meeting, for instance, examples from the novice users included, 'I want to meet you tomorrow to discuss the assignment' (direct request) and 'Could you please meet me tomorrow?' (indirect request). In contrast, direct strategies of any kind are rarely adopted by expert users (only three instances recorded). In the three cases where a direct question or performatives appear, these are heavily mitigated as illustrated in (1) in comparison to equivalent examples from novices in (2) which place an emphasis on personal wants and needs with the use of 'I' and 'my':

(1) I'd like to book a place on the trip if at all possible, please?

(2) I would like to ask you for my reference letter which I need to use it to apply for my future university.

Where indirectness is employed by novice users, emails tend to be limited to the modals *can* (52%) and *could* (33%) and show little or no evidence of the strategies favoured by expert users. This finding does not necessarily mean the novice L2 emails are less polite or do not successfully achieve their purpose but suggests the novice users' pragmalinguistic options may be limited due to proficiency or experience of using this medium in the L2. Hints rarely appear in the novice data set (only 5 instances recorded) and are completely absent from the expert user data. This is perhaps due to the need for clarity of message (which hints do not supply) in the absence of verbal and non-verbal cues found in face-to-face communication.

Marked contrasts between the two groups are also evident when analysing internal lexical modification. Table 5 illustrates the distribution of modifiers across the two groups. The expert users' emails contain almost five times as many instances of internal modification (218 instances recorded) as the novice data set (44 instances recorded), though certain modifiers are clearly more favoured than others, as described below. In addition, combining more than one modifier, as in the cases "Could I *please just* ask…?" or "Could you *possibly* spare *some* time…?", is a common feature in the expert data. The subjectiviser *I was wondering* (39%) and the consultative device *Would it be/is it possible* (25%) are the experts' go-to mitigators with few other devices being used in such a consistent way. The former is often further modified in the expert data with the understater *just,* which also acts as a modifier alongside other main verb forms (e.g. *just look at, just write*). This strategic placement of 'just' aims to project the simplicity of the task, thereby reducing the coercive tone of the request e.g. "I was *just* wondering", "Could you *just* look at this document for me?". This multi layering of internal modifiers in all these examples points to a subtle yet sophisticated use of mitigators to repeatedly soften the illocutionary force of the requests.

**Table 5.** Preferred choice of internal lexical modifiers between expert and novice users

| Internal modifier | Expert users | Totals | Novice users | Totals |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| please | 27 | 27 (12%) | 19 | 19 (43%) |
| downtoners | 2 (maybe)<br>4 (possibly) | 6 (3%) | 1 (maybe) | 1 (2%) |
| understaters | 30 (just) | 30 (14%) | 3 (just) | 3 (7%) |
| subjectivisers | 86 (I was wondering) | 86 (39%) | 5 (I was wondering)<br>1 (I think)<br>1 (I wanted to know) | 7 (16%) |
| consultative devices | 54 (would it be possible) | 56 (26%) | 3 (would it be possible/is it possible) | 7 (16%) |
| | 2 (is there a chance) | | 3 (Is it ok)<br>1 (Is there a chance) | |
| hedges | 8 (some)<br>5 (any) | 13 (6%) | 7 \|(some) | 7 (16%) |
| **Totals** | **218*** | | **44** | |

*Note*:
* the total number of instances in the expert user data is greater than the total number of emails since modifiers can co-occur within a single request.

As Table 5 also shows, novice users, by contrast, use internal modifiers sparingly. The data indicate the novice group prefer external modification to achieve the same purpose. Although external modification is not a focus of the current chapter, the data reveal considerable evidence of pre-request supportive moves and small talk prior to the main request head act. Word count totals also indicate this to be the case with novice user requests being between 22–50% longer than those in the expert data.

A particularly interesting outcome for both groups is the use of *please* as a mitigator. Expert and novices both employ *please* though a qualitative analysis of its use suggests the actual outcomes may differ. Whilst the example from the expert data in (3) shows *please* reducing or softening the requestive force (confirmed in 100% of the data cases), the novice example in (4), appears to have the opposite effect of aggravating it. Whilst such examples only represent 38% (of the 19 occurrences) in the novice data, this evidence shows learners need to be mindful of the potential negative effects of even the most basic request components.

(3) I was wondering if you could please take a look at this draft and let me know if I'm on the right lines.

(4) Please help me check the work because the deadline is Sunday. Please give me the feedback.

Finally, Table 6 illustrates group preferences for request perspective. Choice of perspective is considered important since it may also affect the recipient's perceived politeness of the request (Blum Kulka et al. 1989).

**Table 6.** Preferred choice of perspective between expert and novice users

| Request perspective | Expert users | Novice users |
|---|---|---|
| You | 18 (11%) | 70 (46%) |
| We | 77 (48%) | 1 (1%) |
| I | 6 (4%) | 75 (49%) |
| Impersonal | 61 (38%) | 7 (5%) |

*Note*: Total emails- expert = 162; novice = 153

The perspective options 'we' and 'impersonal', at the more polite end of the scale, dominate the expert user data (85%) whilst the options 'you' and 'I', which devolve responsibility to a particular party to perform the action, appear infrequently (15%). The opposite trend can be found in the novice email data. Novices typically assign 'you' or 'I' roles within their requests 95% of the time and appear to use these two perspectives interchangeably regardless of request type. Unlike the expert data, the agent avoiders 'we' and 'impersonal', considered less coercive, rarely feature in the novice emails.

## 4.2 Examination of changes in novice L2 user email requests (RQ2)

Building on the novice user results obtained for RQ1, this section aims to identify any longitudinal changes in email behaviour between the first and second half of the novices' study abroad period. Whilst the results from RQ1 demonstrate novice user emails are markedly different to experts on all three dimensions investigated, it is still worthwhile examining if there is any evidence the SA environment has enabled novices to reduce the pragmatic gap uncovered thus far. As a reminder, the mid-way point of the SA stay (month 5/10) was used as the cut-off point to create two data sets at $T^1$ (Sept-Jan) and $T^2$ (Feb-June). These two data sets were then compared for changes in group behaviour, with the results presented below. Choice of request strategy between the two time periods for the novice data can be found in Table 7.

Overall, there is a slight decrease in total frequency of direct strategies over the two time periods, but the choice of linguistic patterns largely remains the same. Closer observation reveals a mixed picture regarding frequency counts. On the one hand, a reduction in the number of want statements by 16% represents the biggest change. At the same time, although imperatives, direct questions and pre-decided statements show only marginal decreases, this could possibly indicate

**Table 7.** Novice user change in request strategy $T^1$ to $T^2$

| Directness levels | Request strategy | $T^1$ | $T^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|
| Direct | Imperatives | 5 (12%) | 4 (11%) |
| | Performatives | 4 (9%) | 9 (25%) |
| | Direct questions | 8 (19%) | 6 (17%) |
| | Want statements | 13 (30%) | 5 (14%) |
| | Need statements | 1 (2%) | 4 (11%) |
| | Expectation statements | 6 (14%) | 6 (17%) |
| | Pre-decided statements | 6 (14%) | 2 (6%) |
| **Totals** | | **43** | **36** |
| Conventionally Indirect | Query preparatory Ability (can) | 13 (38%) | 21 (60%) |
| | Ability (could) | 15 (44%) | 7 (20%) |
| | Ability (would) | 1 (3%) | 3 (9%) |
| | Possibility statements | 0 | 0 |
| | Query-Permission | 4 (12%) | 3 (9%) |
| | Query- no modals | 1 (3%) | 1 (3%) |
| **Totals** | | **34** | **35** |
| Hints | Strong/mild hints | 4 (100%) | 1 (100%) |
| **Totals** | | **4** | **1** |

*Note*: $T^1$ (Sept-Jan) and $T^2$ (Feb-June).

early beginnings of learners' socialisation into institutional email culture, which only a longer time period could validate. On the other hand, performatives and need statements also show marginal increases at similar levels (16% and 9% respectively) so results may be misleading.

This mixed picture is also evident in the use of indirect strategies. Table 7 shows similar overall frequencies over time though the preferred choice of modal changes from *could* (24% decrease) to *can* (22% increase) towards the end of the SA stay. Since expert users generally opt for the past tense modal *could*, this finding seems to suggest novices are not on a L2 target-like trajectory and prefer to make safer linguistic choices.

Table 8 charts the distribution of internal modifiers and Table 9 illustrates the choice of request perspective. Both data sets reveal little change over the two time periods.

It appears exposure and experience have not benefited the learners on either the frequency and type of internal modification, or request perspective. Both dimensions have been the least susceptible to change over time. The novices continue the trend of underusing internal modifiers throughout their SA stay and employing *please* as the preferred mitigator. In the second half of the SA period, evidence

**Table 8.** Novice user change in internal lexical modification $T^1$ to $T^2$

| Internal modifier | $T^1$ | $T^2$ |
|---|---|---|
| please | 9 (38%) | 10 (50%) |
| downtoners | 1 (4%) | 0 |
| understaters | 3 (13%) | 0 |
| subjectivisers | 6 (25%) | 1 (5%) |
| consultative devices | 2 (8%) | 5 (25%) |
| hedges | 3 (13%) | 4 (20%) |
| **Totals** | **24** | **20** |

*Note*: $T^1$ (Sept-Jan) and $T^2$ (Feb-June).

**Table 9.** Novice user change in perspective $T^1$ to $T^2$

| Request perspective (least to most polite) | $T^1$ | $T^2$ |
|---|---|---|
| you | 38 (47%) | 32 (44%) |
| I | 38 (47%) | 37 (51%) |
| we | 0 | 1 (1%) |
| impersonal | 5 (6%) | 2 (3%) |

*Note:* $T^1$ (Sept-Jan) and $T^2$ (Feb-June).

still suggests that *please* often acts as an aggravator rather than as a softener to a request. In terms of request perspective, there is also no uptake of formulating requests from any viewpoints other than the speaker and hearer even at the end of the academic year.

## 5. Discussion

To a large extent, this study's findings are consistent with existing research on email requests by Chinese or East Asian L2 learners of English (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Chang and Hsu 1998; Chen 2006; Chen 2015; Lee 2010; Li 2018; Tseng 2016; Zhu 2012). The findings also tend to mirror those from studies on spoken request production with this learner group (Halenko and Jones 2011, 2017; Lee Wong 1994; Li 2014; Lin 2009; Wang 2011; Yu 1999; Zhang 1995). Comparisons between the present study and these earlier investigations are discussed below.

The profile of experts favouring indirectness and the novices' tendency for directness found in other studies (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Chen 2015; Wang 2011) is also evident here. In this British context, the experts show predictable patterns of behaviour to formulate requests and consistently select particular, more linguistically

complex forms to maximise tentativeness and reduce imposition. Novices, on the other hand, select direct requests much more frequently. As reported by Chen (2006), direct strategies emphasise the importance and urgency of a request from a Chinese perspective, so a response and help are more forthcoming. Li (2018) suggests, in line with positive face wants which underlie Chinese culture, directness also expresses a sincere belief and optimism for cooperation. Directness may be an ineffective strategy in an L2, however, as the tone may be perceived as coercive and the directness gives the impression of elevating a student's rights in an academic setting (Bardovi Harlig and Hartford 1993).

L1 English speakers' status-preserving strategies have been shown to rely heavily on internal modification (e.g., Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Li 2018) and this study is no exception. In fact, evidence of what might be described as a multiple layering of mitigation, such as the co-occurrence of more than one modifier in the request head act, may be a distinct feature of British email requests. This multilayering technique signals the importance of this strategy for the expert user group to further emphasise distancing, tentativeness and optionality. These effects are mainly achieved using three devices in this study: subjectivers, consultative devices and understaters, meaning experts rely on a limited number rather than a wide range (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007), but employ them frequently. As reported elsewhere (e.g., Chen 2006; Halenko and Jones 2017; Wang 2011), L2 users, on the other hand, rarely adopt this mitigating technique and instead appear to prefer external modification through small talk and supportive moves, prior to the core request, to achieve the same status-preserving effect. As in this study, this often means requests are much longer than in expert user emails, though from a Chinese perspective, lengthiness also serves to increase the likelihood of compliance and adds a personal touch (Chen 2006). Underusing internal modifiers, however, often leaves L2 learners open to pragmatic failure as their emails may be perceived as overly direct and assertive. According to Li (2018), the lack of equivalent English internal modifiers in Chinese (e.g., past tense inflection, bi clausals), the unavailability of Chinese internal modifiers in English (e.g., particles and honourific pronouns), L1 interference and the processing complexity of internal modification are all major obstacles in the uptake of mitigating devices by L1 Chinese users of English. Such non-L2-like tendencies in relation to greater request directness, lower use of internal request softeners and a reliance on external request modification are not exclusive to L1 Chinese learners, however, but feature in learner requests from other L1 backgrounds (Alcón-Soler 2015; Ali and Woodfield 2017; Göy, Zeyrek and Otcu 2012; Hassall 2001; Vilar-Beltran 2008). Taken together with the challenges of operating within a UK negative politeness society (emphasising privacy and freedom of action), which may contradict the values of a positive politeness

culture such as China (emphasising group solidarity and a desire for approval), all add to the interlanguage and intercultural load L2 students need to negotiate as part of their SA stay.

The experts' preference for the 'we' and 'impersonal' request perspectives may be linked to the general trend of adopting the most polite linguistic features at their disposal to maximise distance and tentativeness, as noted elsewhere (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Merrison et al.; Zhu 2012). By contrast, novice users' reliance on speaker and hearer request perspectives could be linked as much to L1 linguistic practices as to the broader L1 Chinese sociopragmatic view of rights and obligations between teachers and students. In Chinese societies, students often draw on the teachers' moral obligations to help and take for granted their rights to appeal directly for this help (see Chen 2006).

The second research question examined developmental change in novice emails over one academic year. Unlike Chen's (2006) study, long term exposure to emails and increased experience in email writing did not seem to advance the novice users' pragmatic development or reduce the non-L2-like features present in the first half of their SA period. Marginal decreases were only found in the number of want statements. As declines in this feature from exposure alone have been reported elsewhere (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Chen 2006), suggests want statements may be recognised as inappropriate options much earlier than other features. Otherwise, direct strategies remained the preferred choice throughout the academic year. As sociopragmatic skills are known to develop much more slowly than pragmalinguistic skills (Chen 2006; Li 2018), it is perhaps unsurprising to observe little development in this area when the learners are clearly influenced by the need to make direct appeals in their requests, as discussed earlier.

Proficiency may also have played a role with the intermediate novices in this study. Biesenbach-Lucas' (2007) low-advanced students showed less of a pragmatic gap than the current study. Tseng (2016) reported higher proficiency learners increased some aspects of internal modification and Li (2018) found his higher proficiency learners showed less directness and more indirectness in their email requests. As is often the case though, these studies also note learners' underperformance against L1 benchmarks.

It is also possible the length of stay was too short to determine positive effects of other aspects of requests. Only after 18 months did Chen's graduate student reduce the frequency of want statements and it took two years to reduce the length of request emails. Intensity of interaction (the types and frequency of L2 interactions) is in fact said to play a more decisive role in pragmatic development (Bardovi Harlig and Bastos 2011; Bella 2011). In this UK academic setting, students regularly receive multiple emails from staff so the quality and quantity of (implicit) input is

available. However, how frequently the L2 students responded to or initiated emails to gain valuable experience and practice was not investigated in this study. Low engagement in email writing, or L2 social interaction more generally, may also then account for the findings, underlining the importance of the partnership between the facilitative expert and interactive learner found in sociocultural theory.

It is the size of the pragmatic gap between expert and novice users, however, which is somewhat unexpected. Since L1 user data is generally provided by American participants, a plausible explanation for this gap may lie in the British academic context within which this study is located. Examining email data to faculty from British and Australian students, Merrison et al. described their British email requests as "deferentially dependent" and "lacking entitlement", leading the authors to suggest that British students orient to a perceived institutional hierarchy. This is evidenced, they say, through the use of linguistic forms such as *just* and *wondering* (among others), which are also distinctive features of the present study. Such markers position the requests as "either beyond the rights or skills of someone in their (low) position or would be an onerous deal for them" (2012: 1094), even when the request falls within an academic's expected duties. The authors contrasted this deferential dependence with the Australian request data which claimed to show "interdependent egalitarianism" through more well-wishing and establishing personal common ground, for instance. Australian students seemed to perceive faculty members as social equals rather than elevating their lecturers as British students did. The findings, the authors suggest, demonstrate "systematic cultural differences", even though a common language exists between the two settings. A concluding comment that, "knowing a language is not enough, users need to know how to do politeness in a particular cultural and situational context" (2012: 1096) seems highly applicable to the study in this chapter and may go some way to further understanding the pragmatic gaps identified.

With this in mind, managing academic relationships may be perceived as somewhat contradictory in UK HE settings and may cause confusion for international students. On the one hand, there is the expectation in email communication, for instance, that the asymmetrical power relationship and imposition on the tutor's time is acknowledged through appropriate linguistic means, as noted earlier (+SD in Brown and Levinson's (1987) terms). On the other hand, academic staff are generally known for fostering informal relationships with students and actively encouraging first name use, without the use of formal titles, in online and offline communication (–SD). This is illustrated in the following (appropriate) example request from the expert data which has both +SD elements (indirect strategies, multiple internal modifiers) and –SD elements (use of first name, informal greeting and closing).

> Hi Nicola,
> I was wondering if I could possibly meet with you later this week? I'm struggling a bit with my assignment and I could do with a little advice. I would be grateful for any help. Please let me know if this is ok and when you are free to meet.
> Thanks,
> Joe (pseudonym)

This subtle yet sophisticated combination of maintaining friendly informality whilst activating multiple status-preserving strategies such as indirectness and repeated layering of internal modification is understandably challenging for L2 users. In such situations, pedagogical intervention may be the best course of action, as discussed in the next section.

## 6. Pedagogical implications

To help learners address the shortcomings of their current email practices and avoid having to rely on guesswork, most email studies point to the favourable benefits of explicit instruction (Alcón-Soler 2015; Chen 2015; Nguyen 2018). This conclusion is consistent with recommendations for advancing pragmatic knowledge more generally and is particularly important when preparing learners for a SA experience. Studies examining pre-SA instruction (Halenko and Jones 2017; Halenko et al. 2019) and in country SA instruction (Halenko and Jones 2011) found that Chinese L2 English learners reduced their reliance on L1 transfer and showed a heightened awareness of which linguistic request strategies to use for the best pragmatic effect. Without the benefits of instruction, pragmatic development is known to be slow, and gains are minimal (Chen 2006; Taguchi 2010).

In terms of choice of pragmatic targets for intervention, since some well-used English request devices have no Chinese equivalents (bi-clausal structures, past tense inflections) (Li 2018; Lin 2009) or some Chinese request devices have less politeness value in English (imperatives and performatives) (Li 2018), these seem to be sensible starting points for novice Chinese students of English. As this study also revealed experts favoured particular request strategies, internal modifiers and request perspectives more than others, class time can be used efficiently to introduce these predictable patterns as valuable discussion points and include them as the basis for practice activities in email writing. These pragmalinguistic features could be explicitly presented and practised as pragmatic routines or formulaic expressions within emails: an approach which has been shown to be particularly effective (Bardovi Harlig and Vellenga 2012; Wang and Halenko 2019) and would also benefit lower proficiency learners. Structured linguistic input would need to

sit within broader discussions of the institutional and community-wide cultural conventions specific to the SA community in which the learners are based, as it was noted earlier that expectations within different L1 English SA settings and international academic institutions may vary.

## 7. Conclusion

L2 pragmatics research has observed the development of situationally-appropriate email requests to be no less challenging for L2 learners than face-to-face exchanges. That email writers have opportunities to plan, edit and revise their requests, unlike in synchronous interactions, does not seem to offer many advantages. This conclusion also best summarises the data found in this study. Whilst spoken request data has found novice L2 users tend to operate at a lower pragmatic level than their expert peers, the data in this study finds the gap to be much wider in written email request production. Possible explanations may lie in the British context within which the study was based and the distinct behaviours of the expert cohort, the L1 Chinese background of the novices, or the well-documented challenges of employing situationally-appropriate netiquette in an L2. Without the necessary guidance, it is clear L2 learners tend to fall back on the safety of the L1 systems and this leaves learners open to pragmatic failure.

There are limits, however, to the interpretability of these findings. Since the study was limited to expert users of British English and novice Chinese users of English, the results are not generalisable to the wider international student population but instead provide insights to these specific learner groups in a university context. Using organically-grown data meant a focus on changes in group performance but a larger corpus may be able reveal changes in individual behaviour through a larger data set. The addition of qualitative interview data would have provided possible motivations to the learners' linguistic and sociopragmatic choices, as undertaken in other studies of this kind (Chen 2006; Li 2018; Tseng 2016). Finally, understanding the appropriateness of the emails from the lecturers' perspective, such as Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011, 2016) and Savić (2018), would have completed the picture and helped provide an understanding of how all these data sets interact with one another in the SA environment.

This study is one of a growing number of studies to show the incompatibility of sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic transfer from L1 Chinese to L2 English on several dimensions. Email writing involves a set of considered behaviours which need to be learnt and practised within the particular cultural context of the SA site. It is clear students need to be fully prepared for their SA periods which includes

being able to construct academic emails confidently and successfully. Pre-departure or in-country instruction appear to be best ways forward since exposure alone, over a typical academic year abroad, appears to have minimal impact.

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PART II

# Relational practices in email communication

CHAPTER 5

# Phatic communion in Chinese students' gratitude emails in English

## Production and perception

Wei Ren and Wenjie Liu
Beihang University

This study investigates Chinese students' production and perception of phatic communion in English gratitude emails to professors. The data were collected in two parts. First, a total of 78 Chinese graduate students were asked to write a thank-you email in English to a professor in a hypothetical academic situation. Their phatic communion strategies were coded and statistically analysed. Second, a separate group of 53 Chinese students were asked about their perceptions of the phatic expressions via questionnaires. The findings are discussed with respect to the preference for phatic communion in Chinese culture, the legitimacy of L1 pragmatics in L2 email communication, and the difficulties of L2 sociopragmatic development in foreign language contexts.

**Keywords**: phatic communion, gratitude emails, production, perception, pragmatic competence

### 1. Introduction

Email has become an accepted and a popular means of communication between university students and staff. As an asynchronous medium, email can be edited or deleted without the knowledge of the intended recipient. In addition, email is a one-way transmission (Herring 2001: 615), in that it is transmitted in its entirety as a single unit, conveying a message that might have taken multiple turns in face-to-face communication. Therefore, investigations of learners' L2 email communication may yield different pragmatic strategies and patterns compared with face-to-face communication, which will provide illuminating insights into L2 pragmatics research.

Phatic communion, often described as small talk, has attracted increasing research attention (Coupland 2000; Jin 2018; Kulkarni 2014; Malinowski 1972;

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Schneider 2008; Senft 2009). The term was originally proposed by Malinowski (1923/1999), who investigated phatic communion in a limited domain as "a mere phrase of politeness … [that] fulfils a function to which the meaning of its words is almost completely irrelevant" (Malinowski 1972: 151). However, it is not always straightforward to distinguish what is marginal and what is core in interactions (Coupland 2000; Holmes 2000, 2005). Therefore, in this study we define phatic communion as affect-oriented utterances used for establishing, maintaining, and enhancing rapport, which are not the transactional goal of the communication (see Section 2.3 for more discussion). Thus, what counts as phatic communion varies depending on the speech event taking place. For instance, asking about a professor's plans for the weekend in a tutorial situation might constitute a check on his/her availability prior to a request for help, but it could also function as a phatic communion strategy if it takes place at the end of the tutorial.

In spite of the fact that phatic communion plays a crucial role in developing rapport among individuals, very few L2 pragmatics studies have focused on phatic communion as a pragmatic target (Taguchi 2018). More specifically, little research to date has investigated learners' L2 phatic communion in email interactions. Studies on learners' phatic communion in emails will shed light on their L2 pragmatic competence in the genre of email communication. This study aims to address these gaps by investigating Chinese students' production and perception of phatic communion in L2 English emails.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Research on email pragmatics

Email communication has been studied from different perspectives with native and non-native speakers and writers (hereafter as NSs and NNSs) (e.g., Bella and Sifianou 2012; Merrison, Wilson, Davies and Haugh 2012), particularly in relation to students' emails to faculty members (e.g., Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, 2016, 2018; Hendriks 2010; Savić 2018). Many studies have examined L2 pragmatic development through students' emails.

L2 pragmatics studies mostly focus on the speech act of request (e.g., Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Félix-Brasdefer 2012; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2018). For example, comparing American and international students' email requests to staff, Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) found that both groups employed a similar range of request strategies. However, the NSs produced a higher frequency of syntactic modifiers (e.g., past tense, embedding [e.g., "I would appreciate it if you could"]) than the NNSs in requests for appointments and feedback. Although the NNSs produced

more lexical modifiers (politeness markers [e.g., "please"], downtoners [e.g., "possibly"]) than the NSs did in requests for feedback and extensions, the NNSs tended to use a limited range of lexical modifiers.

In contrast, examining internal modification in natural academic email requests to staff by L1 English and L2 Spanish students in an American university, Félix-Brasdefer (2012) showed that L2 users employed lexical and syntactic modifiers less frequently than NSs did. In terms of overall language style, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) found that Greek Cypriot NNSs of English preferred a significant degree of directness in request emails (requests for information in particular), which was characterised by their underuse of mitigating devices, necessary greetings, and appropriate address terms. In a later study, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2018) revealed that NNSs employed formal forms of address with bald-on-record request strategies. It was difficult for NNSs to achieve a balance between pragmatic clarity and politeness.

Culture may influence email styles (Chen 2015). Bjørge (2007) found that when writing emails to faculty members, students from countries with high power distance scores (Hofstede 2001), such as China, were more likely to use formal openings and closings. Similar findings were also documented by Chen (2015) and Biesenbach-Lucas (2009), who both observed that students from Chinese or other Asian backgrounds tended to use 'Dear + title + last name' in their emails to faculty members, while American students most commonly used 'Title + last name' followed by 'Hi + title + last name'. Therefore, Chinese students' preference for formal openings and closings may not be solely influenced by their L2 proficiency (Ren 2017). Investigating Chinese students' L2 English gratitude emails across two proficiency groups, Ren (2017) found that the types of openings and closings in emails written by the two groups shared more similarities than differences. He argued that students may consciously diverge from NSs to maintain their L1 socio-cultural identity in certain situations. Therefore, the legitimacy of using L1 pragmatic norms and cultural values should be acknowledged, providing new perspective and avoiding the approach of evaluating students' L2 pragmatic performance against native-speaker models (Ren 2017).

With respect to the perception of emails, some scholars have focused on lecturers' evaluations of students' emails. For example, Stephens, Houser and Cowan (2009) revealed that inappropriate messages in students' request emails may influence lecturers' willingness to grant requests. A lack of salutation at the end can also cause a strong reaction among instructors. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2016) examined British English lecturers' perceptions of direct emails written by Greek-Cypriot university students in English, uncovering a mismatch between lecturers' and students' understanding of politeness in request emails. Importantly, such discrepancies between lecturers' and students' perceptions may have a negative influence on

the lecturer's evaluation of the student. As revealed by Hendriks (2010), the (under) use of syntactic and lexical modifiers in English email requests written by Dutch learners may even cause a negative evaluation of their personality among English NSs. However, as Savić (2018) noted, the reasons for the discrepancy may not result from the student's intention but rather from a lack of L2 pragmatic competence or awareness regarding what institutional communication entails. Therefore, students' accounts of their intentions underlying their language use in emails are worth exploring.

However, comparatively fewer studies have explored students' perceptions of their own emails. Cheng (2017) gathered both NS and NNS students' perceptions of their apology strategies used in emails through retrospective verbal reports (RVR). The RVR data showed that both the NS and NNS groups showed awareness of the importance of using "explicit expressions of an apology" and "explanations for the wrong-doing" in academic emails to a professor. However, only NS students emphasised the strategies "acknowledgement of responsibility" and "request for information" in their RVRs. Cheng argued that the differences in the students' concerns were probably on account of the NNSs' lack of vocabulary and knowledge of linguistic forms, as well as cross-cultural communicative ability.

## 2.2 Phatic communion

Malinowski (1923/1999) was one of the first researchers to pay attention to phatic communication. He proposed the term "phatic communion" and introduced the phenomenon by exemplifying that people chat during breaks or gossip while doing simple manual work. Later, Malinowski (1926/1985) defined phatic communion as ties of union created by an exchange of words, with the aim of maintaining interpersonal relationships. With respect to content, phatic communion includes "inquiries about health, comments on the weather, affirmations of some supremely obvious state of things" (Malinowski 1972: 149). Thus, for Malinowski (1923/1999, 1926/1985, 1972), phatic communion is conducive to avoiding silence, diffusing hostility, or enjoying mutual companionship further.

Later researchers also referred to phatic communion as small talk, agreeing on the fact that it can enact social cohesiveness, reduce the inherent threats of social contact, and establish and maintain social solidarity (Brown and Levinson 1987; Coulmas 1979; Coupland 2000; Coupland, Coupland and Robinson 1992; Lyons 1968; Schneider 2008). In this study we operationalise phatic communion as conventionalised expressions and strategies that involve relatively little reference content for the specific speech event, but aim to maintain or enhance interpersonal relationships between interlocutors.

Many studies have investigated phatic communion empirically. For example, Coupland et al. (1992) analysed elderly people's responses to the small talk "how are you" in their medical experiences. Jin (2018) explored where small talk was positioned, how it was initiated and stopped between participants in traditional Chinese medicine treatment and Western medicine treatment in China. Unlike the above two studies focusing on face-to-face communication, Sun (2004) discussed the opening moves that occurred in informal Chinese telephone conversations between female participants. All these studies suggest that phatic communion can be performed in a variety of forms and can serve important discoursal and interpersonal functions. Phatic communion in conversations is a crucial component of the sociolinguistic repertoire, allowing interactions to start with a propitious opening.

Phatic communion may differ across cultures (Senft 2009). Some studies have compared the use of phatic communion across two or more languages; for example, Stenström and Jörgensen (2008) carried out a comparison between London and Madrid teenagers' use of phatic communion as a politeness device in everyday conversation. The authors argued that their differing use of phatic communion was largely dependent on the divergent cultural backgrounds of England and Spain. Kulkarni (2014) explored the nature of phatic communion in the openings, middles, and closings of instant messages in a mixture of English and Indian languages. He found various linguistic cues such as back-channels, expressives, evaluations, questions, and agreement markers were used frequently in interactions. Kulkarni suggested that observing phatic communion in online environments was necessary to reveal different aspects of online socialising.

Indeed, increasing studies have explored phatic communion in computer-mediated communication (CMC) in recent years. For example, Dayter (2016) investigated phatic communion in microblogs written by a ballet community, which included small talk, thanks, expressions of support, congratulations, greetings and leave-takings. Miller (2017) suggested that digital communication, and social media in particular, demonstrated a rise of phatic communion, and this may promote social change by creating a shared conversational ritual that everyone follows. Maíz-Arévalo (2017) analyzed the functions of phatic communion in online intercultural communication in an educational online tool. The study found that the students employed a wide range of formulaic, easy and effective expressions to foster their collaboration as a group, such as greetings and parting tokens characterised by informality and a remarkable use of emoticons. Despite the transactional nature of the task, the students paid attention to phatic communion to build rapport since offline relationships affected the use of phatic communion.

As the above review indicates, the realisation of appropriate phatic communion differs in cultures (Maíz-Arévalo 2017; Padilla Cruz 2013; Senft 2009).

Phatic communion occurs in accordance with the local etiquette and ritual order (Goffman 1981). Therefore, studies are warranted to examine phatic communion in intercultural communication and L2 pragmatics. Furthermore, although there has been a lot of research to date into email openings and closings oriented towards relationship building (Chen 2015), other forms of phatic communion have been disregarded. Considering the pervasiveness of email communication, it will be instructive to investigate the uses of phatic communion in emails.

### 2.3 L2 pragmatic research on gratitude

Because phatic communion may vary from situation to situation and differ with respect to addressees and the context, in this study we decided to focus on phatic communion in Chinese students' L2 English gratitude emails to a professor. We chose to examine phatic communion in the speech act of gratitude because so far only a few studies have investigated gratitude in email discourse, with the exception of Ren (2017). Eisenstein and Bodman (1986, 1993) suggested that expressing gratitude was realised differently cross-culturally, and "values may focus differentially on the various components that constitute expression of gratitude" (Eisenstein and Bodman 1993: 74). Likewise, Wong (2010) argued that cross-cultural differences exist between Chinese and Western cultures in expressing gratitude. She hypothesised that Chinese people might be too reserved to express their gratitude openly and explicitly. Thus, it will be insightful to focus on how the Chinese express their gratitude in emails.

Examining data collected by observing naturally occurring interactions, discourse completion tasks (DCTs), and role-plays, Eisenstein and Bodman (1986, 1993) found that even advanced learners had considerable difficulty expressing gratitude adequately, because they lacked the linguistic resources at the lexical and syntactic levels. On the other hand, there were incongruities between NSs' and NNSs' judgments regarding the necessity and appropriateness of expressing gratitude. Investigating gratitude emails produced by competent Chinese English users at two different proficiency levels, Ren (2017) found that the more advanced group wrote significantly longer emails to express their gratitude to professors than did the less advanced group. However, no significant difference was found in terms of the frequency of pragmatic strategies.

Following the above studies on gratitude, this study also examines Chinese students' gratitude emails across different proficiency levels. The following specific research questions guided the research:

Research question 1: Do Chinese graduate students at two proficiency levels employ phatic communion in gratitude emails in English to professors? If so, what kind of phatic communion strategies are produced in their L2 English gratitude emails to professors?

Research question 2: How do advanced Chinese students perceive the phatic communion employed in the gratitude emails to professors?

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Participants

The study is organised into two stages, the first examining students' production of phatic communion in gratitude emails, and the second examining students' perceptions of such phatic communion. The participants in the production study were 78 Chinese graduate students of non-English majors at a university in China, who were randomly chosen from a large pool of volunteer students contacted by the researchers via email. The students were told that the researchers were interested in analysing Chinese students' English writing, and their writing would be anonymised and used for research purposes only. English was a compulsory course during their first-year study in a 3-year Master's program; they had just completed their first year of the program at the time of data collection. Based on their marks in the final English exam, the participants were divided into two groups, a higher proficiency group (39 students), and a lower proficiency group (39 students), with a statistically significant difference in the exam marks between the two groups. According to their reported years of English learning and their English teachers' description, English proficiency levels of the two groups could be considered high-intermediate and low-intermediate, respectively.

The perception study recruited another 53 Chinese Master's students majoring in English Language and Literature at another university in China. We purposefully selected those students because the English proficiency of English-major students is generally considered to be higher than that of non-English majors. Although no official assessments were conducted with these Master's students, this group may be considered advanced learners. It should be noted that we did not assume that higher L2 proficiency equates to more advanced pragmatic knowledge; we were fully aware that the relation between language proficiency and pragmatic competence is inconclusive, although many studies have demonstrated a positive correlation between the two. However, we deliberately chose this advanced group for the perception part of the study for two reasons. On the one hand, we wanted to

exclude the possible influence of English proficiency in understanding the emails. On the other hand, as Ortega and Byrnes (2008) note, more studies on advanced learners' L2 performance are needed. Therefore, we were particularly interested in learners' perceptions of phatic communion at the advanced level.

For clarity, High group is used to indicate the higher proficiency group and Low group is used to indicate the lower proficiency group in the production stage. Advanced group is used to refer to the English major Master's students in the perception stage. All the participants completed the tasks voluntarily without financial payment.

### 3.2 Instruments

The instrument for the production study was a written discourse completion task (WDCT), which required the participants to write a thank-you email to a professor in a hypothetical situation. The following illustrates the WDCT situation:

> *Write a thank-you email according to the information given below.*
>
> *You want to further your studies with a Ph.D. at Harvard University. During the application process Professor John Smith, from Harvard, has given you a lot of effective and constructive suggestions, which helped you get an offer from Harvard. Write an email to express your thanks.*

The instrument for the perception study was a judgment task using Likert scales, which was designed after coding the production study. First, we chose one representative example of each of the three strategies of phatic communion found in the gratitude emails (see Section 3.2 for the coding of phatic communion) from both the High and the Low groups. Therefore, altogether there were six emails in the perception questionnaire. Second, we copied the emails containing the phatic communion and underlined the relevant expressions. We ensured that each email only contained one phatic communion strategy. Third, we constructed a questionnaire to examine the students' evaluations of the appropriateness of the underlined phatic communion in gratitude emails, using five-point Likert scales. In addition, after scoring each email the students were asked about the reasons for their ratings. However, this open-ended question was not compulsory. The questionnaire was sent to the students online. The following shows an example.

Please read Email 1 and evaluate the underlined sentence ("1" representing the most inappropriate, "5" representing the most appropriate.)

*Dear Professor John Smith,*

*Thank you for your last letter on May 24 to give me some advise on my application for the further study with my Electronic Engineering Ph.D. at Harvard University. It is very informative and useful and please accept my heartfelt appreciation. I did as you suggested and it worked out well. Harvard has offered me the opportunity.* ***I will be pleased if you give me a chance to say thank you face to face when I get to Harvard this September.***

*Wish you everything be OK.*
*Yours Sincerely,*

(1) In this situation, how appropriate would you rate the underlined sentence?

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

(2) In your opinion, why did the student write the underlined sentence?

## 3.3 Data analysis

For the production data, as stated earlier, we only focused on the body text of the emails, since many studies have already examined phatic communion in the opening and closing of emails. We first coded the emails based on coding categorisations developed by previous pragmatic studies on gratitude, including Aijmer (1996), W. Cheng (2005), and Ren (2017), resulting in the following gratitude strategies: (a) thanking – head act (e.g., *Thank you for your kindness and instruction.*), (b) thanking – pre-closing (e.g., *Thanks again!*), (c) appreciation (e.g., *I really appreciate your favor.*), (d) expressing gratitude (e.g., *I'm very grateful for your help.*), (e) stressing gratitude (e.g., *I must thank you again.*), (f) positive feeling (e.g., *Without your help, I couldn't get the offer.*), and (g) repayment (e.g., *I will take some Chinese tradition food to you.*). However, some sentences could not be coded according to previous coding schemes of gratitude, for example, *I hope I can get more help from you in the future*, or *I will not let you down. Trust me.*

We then coded these sentences under the framework of Grounded Theory (Corbin and Strauss 2015), with the help of NVivo (Version 12). First, we read through all the sentences and coded them using content analysis without any assumptions. Strategies emerged after several rounds of modifications to better adapt to the data. Second, we grouped the strategies according to similar functions under the same category; see Table 1 for the strategies and examples of phatic communion in the dataset (examples presented remain as they are in the original emails.)

**Table 1.** Coding scheme for phatic communion

| Phatic communion | Examples |
|---|---|
| Expecting future meetings | *I will visit you to express my thanks when I get American.* |
| Promising hard work | *I'll do my best and not let you down.* |
| Wishes | *I wish you a good health and success in career.* |

The two authors individually coded all the data and discussed the names of the strategies. The percentage of interrater agreement was 92.3%. All discrepancies were discussed and solved.

For the perception data, the analyses were more straightforward. First, we calculated the mean and standard deviation of the Advanced group's ratings for each item. Second, we employed inferential statistical tests to examine whether there was any difference in their evaluations of the phatic communion produced by the High and Low groups. Finally, we coded their answers to the open questions using content analysis.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Production of phatic communion in gratitude emails

This section shows the results for the use of phatic communion in the Chinese graduate students' gratitude emails. To recap, 39 students in the High group and 39 in the Low group contributed a total of 78 gratitude emails. Table 2 presents the frequency and percentage of the phatic communion in the students' emails across the two groups.

**Table 2.** Frequency and percentage of phatic communion across High and Low groups

| Strategy | High | | Low | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Frequency | Percentage | Frequency | Percentage |
| Expecting future meetings | 21 | 51.2% | 17 | 50.0% |
| Promising hard work | 8 | 19.5% | 6 | 17.6% |
| Wishes | 12 | 29.3% | 11 | 32.4% |
| **Total** | **41** | **100%** | **34** | **100%** |

As shown in Table 2, the High group produced a total of 41 instances of phatic communion (mean = 1.05; *SD* = 0.60), of which 21 were "Expecting future meetings" (accounting for 51.2% of all the phatic communion), 12 were "Wishes" (29.3%), and 8 were "Promising hard work" (19.5%). In contrast, the Low group

produced 34 instances of phatic communion (mean = 0.97; *SD* = 0.66), of which 17 were "Expecting future meetings" (50.0%), 11 were "Wishes" (32.4%), and 6 were "Promising hard work" (17.6%).

The two groups exhibited a similar profile concerning the employment of phatic communion in their gratitude emails in English. "Expecting future meetings" was the most frequently used phatic communion strategy in the gratitude emails of the students in both groups. In terms of between-group contrasts, the High group used four more instances of this strategy than the Low group (21 vs. 17). We conducted separate Fisher's Exact tests for the three strategies of phatic communion. The results showed that the difference between the two groups with respect to the frequency of "Expecting future meetings" was not significant ($p = 0.50$). We then read through all the uses of the "Expecting future meetings" strategy in the two groups' emails. The qualitative analyses also indicated that the two groups' usages of this strategy were rather similar. The following excerpts showed examples of "Expecting future meetings" from the two groups.

(1) I am looking forward to meeting you at Harvard University. (High group)

(2) I will visit you to express my thanks when I get American. (Low group)

The "Wishes" strategy was the second most frequently used by both groups ($f = 12$ and $f = 11$, respectively) among the three types of phatic communion. Fisher's Exact test showed that the two groups were not significantly different with respect to the frequency of the "Wishes" phatic communion strategy ($p = 0.61$). Qualitative analyses revealed that the students often expressed their good wishes concerning the professor's health and career development, as exemplified in the following.

(3) I wish you a good health and success in career. (High group)

(4) I wish you will make a new breakthrough in your study area. (Low group)

It was interesting to note that the Chinese students also promised that they would work hard in the future, although this strategy was not used as frequently as the other two. The High group used slightly more instances of "Promising hard work" ($f = 8$) than the Low group ($f = 6$), although the difference was not significant ($p = 0.79$). The students often wrote that they would work hard so as not to let the professor down, or to even make the professor proud of them. The following two examples are representative in the two groups' uses of "Promising hard work".

(5) I will do my best at Harvard and will not let you down. (High group)

(6) I will study hard and express my thanks to you with my good scores. (Low group)

### 4.2 Perception of phatic communion in gratitude emails

This section presents examinations of Chinese graduate students' perceptions of phatic communion in gratitude emails written in English. To recap, the perception questionnaire consisted of six complete emails, covering the three strategies of phatic communion found in the production stage, with one example of each strategy from the High and Low groups (six emails in all). To help readers understand the perception questionnaire clearly and to save space, we have provided the examined expressions as the six examples in Section 4.1 above.

Table 3 shows the Advanced group's ratings of the appropriateness of the uses of the three strategies of phatic communion in the gratitude emails to a professor written in English.

**Table 3.** Appropriateness of High and Low groups' phatic communion rated by Advanced group

| Phatic communion | High group's emails | | Low group's emails | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | mean | SD | mean | SD |
| Expecting future meetings | 2.68 | 1.17 | 2.19 | 1.09 |
| Promising hard work | 2.85 | 1.15 | 2.57 | 1.26 |
| Wishes | 3.58 | 1.25 | 2.47 | 1.31 |

With respect to the Advanced group's perception of the appropriateness of the "Expecting future meetings" strategy, the average rating of associated expressions in Email 1 (see Example (1) in Section 4.1) was 2.68. A close examination of the Advanced group's ratings showed that 24 students (45.23%) rated the expression as not appropriate (either 1 or 2), while 14 students (26.42%) considered it appropriate (either 4 or 5). For Email 2 (see Example (2)), the Advanced group's average rating was 2.19, lower than the rating of Email 1. Altogether 35 students (66.04%) rated the expression of "Expecting future meetings" in Email 2 as inappropriate, while only 8 students (15.09%) rated it as appropriate. A Mann-Whitney U test showed that the differences between the appropriateness ratings of the two expressions reached a significant level ($U = 1069$, $Z = -2.189$, $p = .029$), indicating that the Advanced group students rated the Low group's expression of phatic communion "Expecting future meetings" as more inappropriate than that of the High group.

In response to the open question asking participants to state the reasons for their judgments, regarding the expression of "Expecting future meetings" in Email 1 (produced by the High group), 9 Advanced students (16.98%) thought the expression might intensify the student's expression of gratitude, and another 6 (11.32%) considered it a strategy to show politeness. The following excerpts illustrate the two themes in the students' statements.

> 更加深刻的凸显自己对老师的感激之情 (It more profoundly highlights his/her gratitude to the teacher.)
> 非常礼貌，站在对方角度考虑问题 (Very polite. (The writer) considers issues from the perspective of the other party.)

In contrast, 12 students (22.64%) wrote that the underlined expression resulted from L1 pragmatic transfer, with explanations such as "中国式思维 (Chinese thinking)" and "文化背景原因 (It resulted from (the writer's) cultural background)".

For the "Expecting future meetings" strategy in Email 2 (produced by the Low group), 10 Advanced students (18.87%) thought that it could intensify the student's expression of gratitude, as shown in the comment "表达对对方的感激之情 (It expresses gratitude to the other party)". In contrast, 4 students (7.55%) wrote that the expression resulted from L1 pragmatic transfer, for example, "受中文影响 (It was influenced by Chinese)". In addition, 5 students (9.43%) considered it impolite because they thought the expression sounded too aggressive, as indicted in the following excerpt:

> 强调必然性，一定会去拜访，但在英语中没给老师商量的余地，显得太过绝对 (This sentence emphasises certainty that he/she will definitely pay a visit. But the English expression does not leave any room for the teacher to discuss. It seems too absolute.)

With respect to the "Promising hard work" strategy, the average rating of the expression in Email 3 (produced by the High group, see Example (3)) was 2.85, and the rating of the expression in Email 4 (from the Low group, see Example (4)) was 2.57. For Email 3, 18 Advanced students (33.96%) rated the sentence expressing future hard work as appropriate. Similarly, for the phatic communion in Email 4, 15 Advanced students (28.30%) rated it as appropriate. A Mann-Whitney U test showed that the differences between the appropriateness ratings in the two expressions were not significant ($U = 1215.5$, $Z = -1.228$, $p = .219$). That is, the students in the Advanced group rated the "Promising hard work" strategy in the two emails similarly.

In response to the open question asking them to state the reasons for their ratings, for the expression of "Promising hard work" by the High group, over half of the Advanced students (31 out of 53) thought that the expression would intensify the student's expression of gratitude, as shown in the comment "表达自己将会努力不辜负老师的期望 (It expresses that he/she will strive to live up to the teacher's expectations)." In contrast, however, 11 students (20.75%) pointed out that this kind of expression resulted from the Chinese way of expressing gratitude (i.e. L1 pragmatic transfer). For example, a student wrote, "中文就常这么说, '我一定好好努力不让您失望 (It's often said in Chinese, 'I must work hard not to let you down')."

For the expression of the "Promising hard work" strategy produced by the Low group, 6 Advanced students (11.32%) thought that it could intensify the student's expression of gratitude, 4 students (7.55%) considered it a strategy to show politeness, and another 6 students (11.32%) thought that this kind of expression resulted from the Chinese culture (L1 pragmatic transfer).

With respect to the "Wishes" strategy, the average rating of the expression in Email 5 (see Example (5)) was 3.58, whereas the rating of the expression in Email 6 (see Example (6)) was 2.47. For Email 5, 30 students in the Advanced group (56.60%) considered the wish appropriate, whereas for Email 6, 13 Advanced group students (24.53%) rated the wish as appropriate. A Mann-Whitney U test showed that the differences between the appropriateness ratings in the two wishes were significant ($U = 768 Z = -4.106$, $p < .0005$).

In response to the open question asking them to state the reasons for their ratings, for the expression of "Wishes" by the High group, 11 Advanced group students (20.75%) thought it was a strategy to show politeness, for example, "礼貌程度较高以及显示了对教授的尊敬和祝福 (The degree of politeness is high, which shows respect and blessings to the professor)", 3 students (5.66%) believed that it could intensify the student's expression of gratitude, for example, "表达对对方的感激之情，同时也给予对方祝愿 (It expresses gratitude to the interlocutor, and meanwhile offers wishes)", while another 3 students thought that it resulted from L1 transfer, for example, "母语思维的影响 (It was influenced by L1 thinking)."

For the expression in Email 6 (produced by the Low group), 15 Advanced students (28.30%) thought it was a strategy to show politeness, for example, "表达对老师的良好祝愿 (It expresses good wishes to the teacher)." In contrast, however, 4 students (7.55%) commented that they felt the expression was rather impolite. For example, one student wrote, "太过具体，学生对老师说不合适 (The wish is too specific, not appropriate from a student to a professor)".

## 5. Discussion

This study has investigated Chinese graduate students' production and perception of phatic communion in gratitude emails written in English. The High and Low group students (39 in each group) produced 41 and 34 instances of phatic communion in their gratitude emails, respectively. The phatic communion was realised by three strategies, namely "Expecting future meetings", "Wishes", and "Promising hard work", in decreasing order of frequency. The uses of the three strategies were similar in the two groups' emails, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

The findings indicate that L2 proficiency did not affect the Chinese graduate students' employment of phatic communion in their gratitude emails in English,

at least in the present dataset. Although some previous studies have documented a positive correlation between learners' L2 proficiency and their pragmatic competence (e.g., Al-Gahtani and Roever 2012, 2015; Bella 2012, 2014; Chang 2010; Su and Ren 2017), it is possible that phatic communion, as a more culture-specific phenomenon (Kulkarni 2014; Senft 2009; Stenström and Jörgensen 2008), may require higher pragmatic competence to perform it appropriately in a second language. That is, phatic communion in L2 may bring more challenges for learners, particularly those in foreign language contexts (Ren 2013).

The frequent use of "Expecting future meetings" in the Chinese students' gratitude emails may result from the influence of Chinese culture. Chinese students may be too reserved to express their gratitude explicitly (Wong 2010). Even if a Chinese person would like to repay the interlocutor, they might not say it directly. This echoes Cheng's (2005) observation that when expressing gratitude, regardless of their proficiency levels Chinese English learners used fewer repayment strategies than English NSs. Instead, they preferred meeting their interlocutor in person, during which it would be likely that they would bring gifts and/or express their indebtedness. For the Chinese, face-to-face conversations in informal settings are an important way to maintain and enhance interpersonal relationships (Zhu 2019). Therefore, "Expect a future meeting" in person might be considered a ritual for Chinese people to show their concern about rapport management and enhance solidarity.

"Promising hard work" indicates the writer's determination to improve him/herself. This is often used in Chinese in-group conversation to accompany gratitude or apology. In Chinese culture, teachers and their students are considered a family. Students traditionally treat their teachers as a senior in-group member, reflected by the term "*shimen* (academic family)" and the Chinese idiom "Once a teacher, always a father". Students must study hard to strive for great achievement in order to win honour for their teachers and their *shimen* (academic family), because for the Chinese prestige or reputation achieved through accomplishment significantly enhances face (Zhu 2019). This could explain why the Chinese graduate students wrote sentences such as "I will study hard and make you proud of me". By promising hard work and self-improvement, the Chinese graduate students implicitly expressed that they considered the professor to be their teacher. That is, "Promising hard work" in gratitude emails, although it may sound irrelevant to interlocutors in Western countries, is a conventionalised way to show involvement (Scollon and Scollon 2001) in Chinese culture.

Finally, the use of "Wishes" may conform to the genre of email writing. However, some of the content of these wishes may not be appropriate in emails in English, although it can be justified by Chinese culture, for example, a wish for career development. The uses of such wishes indicate that the Chinese graduate students

may still lack adequate sociopragmatic competence in institutional communication, echoing Savić (2018), who found that students may lack L2 pragmatic competence or awareness regarding what institutional communication entails. This finding is also in line with previous studies on email openings (e.g., Biesenbach-Lucas 2009; Chen 2015; Ren 2017), in which L2 learners displayed competent pragmalinguistic repertoires but their under-developed sociopragmatic competence did not enable them to employ the openings preferred by L1 users.

The three strategies of phatic communion found in this study have some common features. They all intend to show involvement, whether by emphasising the writer's positive face ("Promising hard work"), the receiver's ("Wishes"), or both ("Expecting future meetings"). It is likely that Chinese graduate students value the relationships between their professors and themselves, and therefore they intended to use the gratitude email as a means to keep in touch with the professor, rather than as a one-off contact. Thus, they used topics that allowed them to write again, such as expecting face-to-face meetings, work, and promising achievement in the future. With the use of such phatic communion strategies, the Chinese students hoped to perform the social function of enhancing solidarity (Coulmas 1979; Lyons 1968). However, as previous studies note (e.g., Kulkarni 2014; Senft 2009; Stenström and Jörgensen 2008), phatic communion differs across cultures. The Chinese students' uses of these phatic communion strategies may be at risk of being considered inappropriate or even impolite. The discrepancies between the Chinese students' intentions and the receiver's perceptions may lead to misunderstandings (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2016; Hendriks 2010). Therefore, the present study sheds light on intercultural communication, in which the receiver should try to avoid evaluating the writer's intentions against his/her own cultural or pragmatic norm. Likewise, L2 pragmatics research should consider learners' performance legitimate if they are acting in conformity with their cultural identities (Li 1998; Ren 2017). On the other hand, writers should bear in mind the possible cultural differences and take the receiver's culture and pragmatic norms into account when drafting emails. Writers may want to employ preemptive strategies such as providing local cultural knowledge and metalinguistic comments to help the receiver grasp their intended meaning (Ren 2018b).

The present study also investigated Chinese graduate students' perceptions of phatic communion in gratitude emails. Although people's perceptions may influence their production (Zhu 2019), little research has explored learners' perceptions and production in the same study. This reflects a general problem in L2 pragmatics research (Ren 2015), since research in the field is "heavily outweighed by the proliferation of study on pragmatic production" (Kasper and Rose 2002: 117). The present findings show that in terms of the expression of "Expecting future meetings" produced by the High group, overall the Advanced group's perception of it was

rather neutral, with a mean of 2.68. However, the Advanced group evaluated a similar expression by the Low group more towards the inappropriate end, with a mean of 2.19. The difference between the appropriateness ratings in the two expressions was significant, indicating that the advanced learners considered the expression of expecting future meetings in the Low group's email more inappropriate.

In addition, the Advanced group evaluated the expression of "Wishes" produced by the High group as appropriate with a mean of 3.58, but they rated the Low group's "Wishes" significantly less appropriately. On the other hand, with respect to expressions of "Promising hard work", the Advanced group rated the High group's and the Low group's expressions similarly, both as neutral. Although they rated the Low group's expression as slightly more inappropriate, the difference was not significant. In this regard, it is possible that promising hard work to professors is deeply rooted in Chinese students' minds, and even the Advanced group did not have sufficient metapragmatic competence to effectively detect any inappropriateness.

The investigation of the students' perceptions revealed important methodological implications. As presented in Section 4.1, analyses of the production data did not reveal differences between the High and Low group's uses of "Expecting future meetings" and "Wishes". However, similar productions were perceived differently by the Advanced group. The findings indicate that studies of pragmatic perception can sometimes uncover more nuanced variation that cannot be disclosed by examining strategies of pragmatic production alone. This incongruity between analyses of pragmatic production and perception highlights the importance of conducting more perception research in L2 pragmatics (Kasper and Rose 2002; Ren 2015; Taguchi 2019).

The results of open questions in the perception stage revealed intra-group variation in the Advanced learners' metapragmatic evaluations of the phatic communion. On the one hand, some of the advanced learners were aware of the possible risk of directly incorporating L1 pragmatic norms in intercultural interaction, which could be considered impolite because they may affect the receiver's negative face (Brown and Levinson 1987) or independence face (Scollon and Scollon 2001). On the other hand, some of the advanced learners thought that phatic communion could intensify the writer's expression of gratitude and show their positive intention to strengthen the relationship with the receiver. Our mixed results in this regard indicate that phatic communion in L2 email communication brings many difficulties for learners, particularly those in a foreign language context who lack real-life intercultural experience. Even learners at quite advanced levels may still not have enough sociopragmatic competence with respect to phatic communion in L2 interaction; this is in line with previous studies on other L2 pragmatics aspects (D. Cheng 2017; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2018; Ren 2013). This possibility highlights the need for pedagogical intervention in support of learners' pragmatic competence

(Ren 2013; Taguchi 2015), as well as the potential advantages of study abroad contexts (Kasper and Rose 2002; Ren 2018a). However, as stated before, the email receiver should evaluate phatic communion according to its pragmatic function, i.e., to maintain and enhance interpersonal relationships, rather than merely judging the content of phatic communion, which is more vulnerable to cross-cultural differences (Kulkarni 2014; Senft 2009; Stenström and Jörgensen 2008).

The present study highlights the importance of investigating phatic communion as an important aspect of L2 pragmatics. In the study, we coded expressions as phatic communion if they were: (1) not necessary for and did not carry the illocutionary force of the speech act; and (2) helpful to enhance interpersonal relations and rapport. As shown in the study, examining phatic communion can enrich investigations in L2 pragmatics research, as it can provide more insights than often-researched speech acts.

## 6. Conclusions

This study investigated the production of phatic communion by two groups of Chinese graduate students in gratitude emails written in English. The results showed that they employed strategies of "Expecting future meetings", "Wishes", and "Promising hard work" in gratitude emails to a professor, in decreasing order of frequency. Also, the study examined another group of Chinese graduate students' perceptions of the phatic communion produced in the first stage. The results revealed variation in the perception of phatic communion.

The present study has some limitations and implications for future research. First, the study only examined one hypothetical situation. Future studies are encouraged to expand the research scope by including more situations and collecting authentic emails. Second, the study investigated phatic communion in gratitude emails. Phatic communion in other contexts needs to be explored as well. Third, the study examined Chinese graduate students' production and perception of phatic communion using questionnaires. As the gratitude email was intended to be sent to a faculty member, future research could explore the perceptions of faculty members in relation to such emails, or compare the students' and the lecturer's perceptions. Furthermore, verbal reports (Gass and Mackey 2016; Ren 2014) may also be employed to uncover more interesting insights into the learners' pragmatic competence.

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CHAPTER 6

# The effect of first language pragmatics on second language email performance

## The case of Greek students' email requests

Maria Economidou-Kogetsidis
University of Nicosia

The present study is a comparative production study which investigates the effect of L1 email pragmatics on L2 email performance and examines the extent to which the L2 email production of advanced, Greek learners of English shows agreement with their L1 email production. The study identified culture-specific pragmatic norms and aspects of L1 pragmatic behaviours that learners transferred to their L2 emails. A preference for formality and direct strategies was confirmed in both data sets suggesting that the learners' emails converge with those of NS of Greek and approximate native Greek norms. Results further pointed towards a high degree of agreement in the majority of the modifiers employed by the two groups.

**Keywords**: L1 pragmatic behaviour, requests, Greek learners, first language, culture

### 1. Introduction

Understanding how learners of a second/foreign language (henceforth L2 learners) construct their emails, or negotiate the relational aspects of language in computer-mediated contexts (Locher 2010) has recently become a key issue in interlanguage pragmatics, with an increasing number of studies (e.g., Bella current volume, Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, 2018; Ren and Liu current volume, Savić 2019; Schauer current volume) focusing on the typically hierarchical emails sent by students to their university lecturers. At the same time, in the field of interlanguage and intercultural pragmatics, a number of reasons have been put forward to explain L2 learners' (sometimes unsuccessful) pragmatic choices. These explanations have made reference to cultural effects (Barón and Ortega 2018)

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or transfer of pragmatic norms (Ishihara and Cohen 2010) to account for the effect L1 pragmatics might have on the learners' production in the L2.

In particular, research in interlanguage pragmatics has shown that L2 learners' speech acts are influenced by pragmatic transfer (Kasper 1992) from their first language (L1), and has emphasised the role of the L1 in how L2 learners not only produce, but also comprehend and learn L2 pragmatic information (Kasper 1992: 207). Pragmatic transfer has been found to be influenced by various factors (e.g., L2 proficiency, context (EFL vs. ESL), the length of time in the target community), with the learners' L2 proficiency being perhaps the most debatable factor, as some studies have confirmed a positive correlation between pragmatic transfer and proficiency (e.g., Allami and Naeimi 2011; Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz 1990; Keshavarz, Eslami and Ghahraman 2006; Takahashi and Beebe 1987), while others reported negative correlations (e.g., Bu 2012; Morkus 2018; Ren and Gao 2012).

Yet, arriving at a comprehensive and sound definition of the term 'pragmatic transfer' can be a daunting task (Bou-Franch 1998), as numerous, albeit similar, definitions have been offered by scholars in the field. Pragmatic transfer, for instance, has been defined as "cross-linguistic influence", "transfer of L1 sociocultural competence" (Beebe et al. 1990), "sociolinguistic transfer" (Woflson 1989) or "discourse transfer" (Odlin 1989), to generally refer to the "influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired" (Odlin 1989: 27). Pragmatic transfer has also been seen as transfer of L1 sociocultural competence in performing L2 speech acts or any other aspects of L2 conversation where the speaker is trying to achieve a particular function of language (Beebe et al. 1990: 56). For Kasper, the term is used to refer to the "the influence exerted by learners' pragmatic knowledge of languages and cultures other than L2 on their comprehension, production and learning of L2 pragmatic information" (1992: 207). Importantly, pragmatic transfer may be positive (i.e. when resulting in interlanguage outcomes consistent with L2 patterns) (Kasper 1992) or negative (i.e. when resulting in pragmatic failure).

For the purposes for the present study, pragmatic transfer is treated as "equivalent to L1 influence" (Ishihara and Cohen 2010: 78) and refers to the effect of L1 pragmatics on L2 performance (Keshavarz et al. 2006), and to the reliance of learners on their own L1 pragmatic patterns and norms in the production of L2 pragmatic functions. Pragmatic transfer may therefore involve the learners transferring the pragmatic strategies and linguistic resources from L1 to L2 (pragmalinguistic transfer, Kasper 1992). It may additionally involve transferring the learners' own pragmatic perceptions about how to perform in given situations from native language to an L2 situation (i.e. sociopragmatic transfer). Examining whether

instances of possible transfer are positive or negative falls outside the scope of the present study, as the perlocutionary effects of the learners' L2 emails would be the focus of a perception rather than a production study such as the one at hand.

The present study is a comparative production study which aims to investigate the effect of L1 email pragmatics on L2 email performance. As such, it examines whether L2 authentic emails to faculty, produced by Greek, advanced learners of English observe the pragmatics of L1 Greek emails, and the extent to which their L2 email production shows agreement with their L1 email production. Even though email communication has been studied extensively from a number of perspectives and with learners from diverse linguistic/cultural backgrounds, to the best of my knowledge, no research has so far focused on the degree of pragmatic agreement between L1 and L2 emails. In addition, in the majority of pragmatic transfer studies, data have been obtained primarily through the use of a discourse completion test (DCT) (e.g., Bu 2012; Keshavarz et al. 2006; Takahashi and Beebe 1987) and compared short, decontextualised, written segments rather than longer stretches of discourse typical of actual interaction (Rose 1992). Very few studies (cf. Lorenzo-Duz and Bou-Franch 2013) have so far focused on the examination of authentic email messages in order to examine extended email discourse beyond individual speech acts or opening and closing moves. The present study aims to make a contribution to this understudied area by analysing and comparing the internal organisation of L1 and L2 emails and not just the speech acts in them. As such, the analysis focuses not only on the email request types prevalent in the L1 and L2, but also on the types and amount of internal and external mitigation including email openings and pre-closings. Emails are therefore examined as complete speech events rather than just isolated speech acts (Merrison, Wilson, Davies and Haugh 2012).

The following section sets the scene and briefly discusses some of the most prominent findings regarding native and non-native speakers' (henceforth NSs and NNSs) emails to faculty. Section 3 presents the methods and procedures of the study, while Sections 4, 5 and 6 present the results, discussion and conclusions.

## 2. Setting the scene: L2 learners and native-speakers' emails to faculty

A growing body of research has been conducted on students' email requests to faculty, with the majority examining L2 learners' performance and/or the deviations of their emails from native pragmatic usage (e.g., Alcón Soler 2013; Biesenbach-Lucas 2006, 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996; Zhu 2012). The majority of these email studies revealed findings which overall agree

with those of non-email interlanguage request studies, as far as the degree of directness and mitigating devices are concerned. When compared to NSs' production, L2 learners from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds frequently displayed a higher degree of requestive directness, a lower use of internal softeners, and a reliance on external modifiers with a tendency for lengthier productions and an overuse of grounders (e.g., Ali and Woodfield 2017; Göy, Zeyrek and Otcų 2012; Vilar-Beltran 2008). This was especially the case with Greek learners of English, whose request production was found to be in line with that of Greek NSs', i.e. characterised by more direct structures, an overuse of reasons and explanations (grounders), and an underuse of internal mitigators (e.g., Economidou-Kogetsidis 2005, 2009, 2012; Sifianou 1992; Woodfield and Economidou-Kogetsidis 2010). These findings concerned requests both in the personal and in the public sphere and were consistent with the ethos of spontaneity and overt expressions of feelings which characterises Greek society (Vassiliou V., Triandis, Vassiliou G., McGuire 1972), and with a tendency for structural directness found to characterise Greek requests (Sifianou 1992; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2005). These findings also seem to add support to the role of cultural effects as an important factor influencing speakers' pragmatic choices both in their L1 and in their L2.

These same tendencies were also revealed when Greek EFL learners' *emails* to faculty were examined. More specifically, emails to faculty written by Greek NSs and by Greek learners of English were found to be characterised by high formality (Bella current volume; Bella and Sifianou 2012; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2018), often expressed through high directness and formal forms of address. In examining the correlation between the high degree of email directness and the forms of address employed, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2018) argued that this correlation might be the result of pragmalinguistic transfer from Greek, where negative politeness (usually in service encounters) often operates through the use of directness. Such directness is motivated by clarity and goal orientedness, and aims to keep the involved imposition to the minimum (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2005), in line with Brown and Levinson's definition of formal politeness (1987: 130).

A number of email studies that compared English NS emails to faculty (albeit focusing on English speakers of different regional varieties) with that of L2 learners from different backgrounds, have given support to the finding that NNSs' emails tend to be characterised by higher directness (e.g., Barón and Ortega 2018; Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Chen 2001). Email studies further gave support to the claim that NNSs often show a tendency to rely on lexical rather than syntactic mitigation and on supportive moves (e.g., Alcón-Soler 2013; Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Chen 2006). This was in contrast to English NSs (both American and British), who were found to tend to make a more substantial use of syntactic modifiers and

often employ a *combination* of modification devices as a way to mitigate their email requests to faculty (e.g., Biesenbach-Lucas 2006, Halenko current volume).

However, findings regarding ENSs and NNSs' preference for formal or informal email forms of address have been rather inconsistent. While certain studies showed a preference on the part of ENSs for formal greetings (e.g., '*title* + surname') (cf. Alcón-Soler 2013; Barón and Ortega 2018; Félix-Brasdefer 2012 regarding American NSs; Merrison et al. 2012 regarding British NSs), others revealed a different tendency. Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch's (2013) examination of British English and Spanish students' emails to faculty, for example, indicated that both groups of students orientated themselves toward informality. Their results, therefore, were more in line with Merrison et al.'s (2012) Australian participants. Barón and Ortega (2018), whose native and non-native participants were divided into two age groups (younger vs. older speakers) considered differences and similarities between the email openings and closings of the different age groups. The openings produced by their younger Catalan/Spanish NNSs were characterised by a high degree of familiarity in terms of the type of greeting used (e.g.,, *hi, hello*, use of the name of the teacher), showing possible cultural effects and being in line with Alcón-Soler's (2013) NNSs participants, who were in the same age range (16–20). Unlike the Catalan/Spanish NNSs, the younger English NSs' openings implied some distance between interlocutors, usually realised by 'Dear' plus surname. However, when the same study compared the older learners with the older English NSs, it found a similar preference by both older groups – a preference for more formality (*Dear Dr + surname*). The study argues that "a possible explanation here could be that, culturally, new generations might be less formal… and that may directly affect their pragmatic choices in both their L1 and L2" (Barón and Ortega 2018: 156).

Schauer (in current volume) carried out a contrastive investigation of the greetings and closings of German university students' emails to faculty in their native language (i.e. L1 German) and in L2 English. Her findings have importantly revealed that L1 transfer was at play as far as the participants' use of greetings was concerned. The L2 English emails, similarly to the L1 German emails, indicated a preference for a more formal salutation style, and showed preference for salutations that were transferred from German (e.g., Dear Prof. Dr. Surname).

Overall, the findings in the relevant literature give an unclear picture regarding the role of cultural effects. While these might be at play when examining certain findings, other variables, such as the participants' age, interlanguage or proficiency levels might also directly affect their pragmatic choices in the L2. The present study aims to investigate the effect of L1 email pragmatics on L2 email performance, with the aim of delving deeper into the role of cultural effects in NNSs' email performance. No attempt is presently made to use native-speaker email practices as a

benchmark, given the high degree of variation identified in English native-speaker student emails. Rather than viewing the participants' email choices as potential instances of negative transfer and thus "sociopragmatic failure, stem[ing] from cross-culturally different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour" (Thomas 1983: 99), the emails examined are discussed "as the e-mail writers' attempts to position themselves in relation to the lecturer in the light of the potential influence of L1 pragmatic norm" (Savić 2019, pagr.10, Retrieved from https://www.immi.se/intercultural/nr49/Savić.html).

The research questions of the study are as follows:

1. To what extent do the L2 emails of Greek, advanced learners of English show high agreement with the request strategies and substrategies prevalent in L1 Greek emails?
2. To what extent do the L2 emails of Greek, advanced learners of English rely on the types and amount of internal and external modification prevalent in L1 Greek emails?
3. To what extent do the L2 emails of Greek, advanced learners of English rely on the same forms of address prevalent in L1 Greek emails?

## 3. Methods and procedures

### 3.1 Data and participants

The data comprised 200 authentic email messages sent to 3 teaching faculty members (2 female, 1 male) of an English-medium university in Cyprus. One hundred emails were written in Greek by Greek and Greek Cypriot university students (GNSs) who were registered in a distance-learning (online) Masters programme in Greek Language. The remaining 100 emails were written in English as an L2 by Greek and Greek Cypriot students registered in a distance-learning TESOL Masters programme at the same university in Cyprus. Before using their emails for the present study, the students had been contacted by the faculty members in order to receive their permission to use their messages in the current study. The students were asked to provide their written consent, along with some demographic information regarding their programme of study, age, native language, and country of permanent residence.

As the email senders were all distance-learning students, the degree of familiarity between them and the lecturer was very low and none of them had met the lecturer in person prior to the study (all prior communication had taken place

online). Some of the students were contacting the faculty for the first time while others had electronically contacted the faculty member before about other academic matters. The age of these students ranged between 24–35 years old as they were all postgraduate, more mature students. Greek was the L1 for all of them while those who were writing an email in English had an advanced English language proficiency, in line with the entry requirements of the MA TESOL programme they were attending.

The email requests which were used in the study involved both requests for information and requests for action concerning various academic issues and were of varying degrees of imposition. These requests included requests for feedback on written work, requests for an assignment extension or a recommendation letter, clarification requests regarding issues to do with the programme, assistance requests concerning the learning platform etc. The emails were all 'self-contained' requests and not part of longer exchanges (i.e. follow-up requests in a chain of messages).

### 3.2 Email analysis

The analysis of the two data sets (L1 and L2 emails) involved the identification and coding of request head act/s within each email message (request strategies and substrategies), the forms of address/salutations employed, and the types and amount of internal and external mitigation in each email message.

Regarding the dimension of directness/indirectness, the taxonomy used in Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011, 2018) was utilised in order to analyse and code the requests found in every email. All email requests were analysed along the dimension levels of direct/bald-on-record – conventionally indirect – non-conventionally indirect strategies (hints) (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989) and they were then further analysed according to the substrategy type employed. Importantly, requests for action and requests for information were analysed on a separate scale of directness, following Hassall (1999). There were in total 333 requests produced: 175 produced in the English L2 emails (130 requests for information, 45 requests for action), and 158 produced in the Greek L1 emails (84 requests for information, 74 requests for action). The main strategies and substrategies are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

**Table 1.** Requests for action – English and Greek

| Directness level Main strategies | Request substrategies | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| Direct | Imperatives/Mood derivable (Past subjunctive: Greek) | – Please + imperative<br>– Δώσε/δώστε μου……../Να μου δώσεις/να μου δώσετε |
| | Elliptical requests | – Any comments?<br>– Σχόλια? |
| | Performatives | – I am asking for an extension.<br>– Σας ζητώ να…./ Ζητώ να…….. |
| | Hedged Performatives | – I would like to ask for an extension….<br>– Θα ήθελα να ζητήσω/παρακαλέσω… |
| | Want statements | – I would like/want your suggestion<br>– Θέλω/ θα ήθελα/ Θα επιθυμούσα να… |
| | Need statements | – I will need a little more time<br>– Χρειάζομαι…. |
| | Expectation statements | – I hope you'll give me the weekend to finish my assignment.<br>– I look forward to hearing from you.<br>– Ελπίζω να μου δώσετε μια παράταση…<br>– Αναμένω απάντηση… |
| | Reminder requests | – I would like to remind you of my reference letter<br>– Θέλω να σας θυμίσω… |
| | Pre-decided statements | – I will hand my assignment in tomorrow |
| Conventionally Indirect | Query preparatory (ability, willingness, permission) | – Can/could…/ I would appreciate it if…. |
| | Present indicative, past subjunctive or future indicative question in Greek | – Μπορώ να…<br>– Μου δίνετε…./ Θα….(θα μου δώσετε?) |
| Hints | Strong hints/ Mild hints | – Attached is a draft of my work.<br>– I'm having a very hard time figuring out how to put these materials together. |

**Table 2.** Requests for information – English and Greek

| Directness level | Request strategies | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| Direct | Direct questions | – Did you get my project?*<br>– Λάβατε το μήνυμα μου? |
| | Elliptical | – Any news? |
| | Mood derivable | – Please let me know if you have to withdraw me from class.<br>– Πέστε μου, πόσο είναι τα δίδακτρα? |
| | Performative | – I am asking if …<br>– Ζητώ να μάθω…/ Ρωτώ για…. |
| | Hedged Performative | – I would like to ask if …<br>– Μπορώ να σας ρωτήσω….<br>– Θέλω/ θα ήθελα να σας ρωτήσω/…. |
| | Want statements | – I would like to know what your policy is ….<br>– Θέλω να μου πείτε…./ Θα ήθελα να μάθω…. |
| | Need statements | – I will need to know….<br>– Χρειάζομαι να μου πείτε… |
| Conventionally Indirect | Query preparatory (ability, willingness, permission) | – Could you tell me….<br>– I was wondering…<br>– Θα μπορούσατε να μου πείτε….<br>– Μπορώ να μάθω…. |
| Hints | Strong hints/ Mild hints | – I tried very hard to find your office but couldn't find it.<br>– Προσπάθησα να βρω τις πληροφορίες αλλά… |

* Direct interrogative forms for performing information requests (e.g., 'Have you received my email?', 'Does John live here?') are considered to realise direct requests (cf Merrison et al. 2012) following Hassall's (1999) argument and are thus analysed on their own scale of directness. Hassall (1999: 594–595) argues that requests for information ('asks') need to be analysed separately from other requests because of problems presented by one strategy for asking for information, the 'direct question'. A direct question (e.g., '*Where is the train station?*') is the most direct way of all to ask for information, but as a means of asking anything other than information (e.g., for goods or a service) (e.g., mother to son before going out: '*Where is your jacket?*'), a question is *not* direct.

Each email was further analysed according to the type and amount of softening devices present (i.e. lexical/phrasal downgraders and external mitigators). The classification adopted for coding the modification of the collected e-requests follows Economidou-Kogetsidis' (2011, 2018) taxonomy which is based on Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989), and Woodfield and Economidou-Kogetsidis' (2010) taxonomies. The data classification schemes for lexical/phrasal and external downgraders are presented in Tables 3 and 4. The external mitigators presently examined can be seen as softening devices/supportive moves of the whole email message rather than of the request head act alone. As such, opening moves (e.g., 'self-introduction') and closing moves (e.g., 'Pre-closing/thanks/wishes') are classified as email external modifiers and not are not classified separately.

**Table 3.** Lexical/phrasal downgraders

| Devices | Examples in English | Examples in Greek |
|---|---|---|
| Marker 'please' | 'please' | Σας παρακαλώ |
| Openers [Consultative devices Downtoners] | 'would you mind', 'I would be grateful', 'do you think'/ 'would it be all right if'/ 'would it be possible'<br>'possibly'/ 'perhaps'/ 'just'/ 'rather'/ 'maybe'/ 'by any chance'/ 'at all' | 'Θα σας πείραζε', 'Μήπως θα..'<br>'αν μπορείτε', 'Σας είναι εύκολο…'<br>'Μήπως γίνεται', 'αν είναι εφικτό',<br>'Υπάρχει περίπτωση' |
| Understaters/ Hedges | 'a bit', 'a little', 'sort of', 'a kind of" | 'Λίγο', 'Καμία'/ 'κανένα'/<br>'Απλά'/ 'απλώς'/ 'τίποτα'/<br>'Μονάχα'/ 'μόνο'<br>Diminutives in Greek |
| Subjectivisers | 'I'm afraid', 'I wonder', 'I think/ suppose' | 'Φοβάμαι πως…'<br>'Διερωτώμαι κατά πόσον…' |
| Cajolers | 'You know', 'You see…' | 'ξέρετε.', 'Βλέπετε..' |
| Appealers | '…..ok/ right?' | 'Εντάξει;', 'Θα μου κάνετε την χάρη;' |

**Table 4.** External mitigation – Supportive moves

| Devices | Examples in English | Examples in Greek |
|---|---|---|
| Opening/good wish | 'How are you?'<br>'I am sorry to hear that you are not well…' | 'Ελπίζω να είστε καλά' |
| Self-introduction | 'I'm Maria K from your LALI-141 class.' | 'Ονομάζομαι…/ Είμαι ο/η…' |
| Grounder | 'I would like an assignment extension because I could not deal the typing time.' | 'Θα πρέπει να στείλω την αίτηση για Εράσμους και πρέπει να δώσω τον γενικό βαθμό' |
| Disarmer | 'I know that this assignment is important but …' | 'Αντιλαμβάνομαι/γνωρίζω ότι η εργασία είναι σημαντική..' |
| Preparator | 'I really need a favour ….'<br>'I'd like to ask a question' | 'Θα ήθελα να σας κάνω μία ερώτηση…' |
| Getting a precommitment | 'Could you do me a favour?'. | Θα ήθελα μια εξυπηρέτηση. |
| Promise | '… I promise I'll have it ready by tomorrow.' | 'Υπόσχομαι πως…' |
| Imposition minimiser | 'I would like to ask for an extension. Just for a few days.' | 'Μόνο για λίγες μέρες…' |
| Apology | 'I'm very sorry but I need an extension on this project.' | 'Ζητώ συγνώμη για τον χρόνο σας.' |

**Table 4.** (*continued*)

| Devices | Examples in English | Examples in Greek |
|---|---|---|
| Orientation move | 'You know the seminar paper I'm supposed to be giving on the 29th …' | 'Επικοινωνώ μαζί σας για να σας εκφράσω το ενδιαφέρον μου για να εκπονήσω μεταπτυχιακή διπλωματική εργασία.' |
| Complement/ sweetener | 'Your opinion counts' | 'Η γνώμη σας είναι σημαντική για μένα' |
| Pre-closing/ thanks/wishes | 'Thanks for your time' 'I hope you feel better' | 'Ευχαριστώ πολύ' 'Ελπίζω να αισθάνεστε καλύτερα' |

Finally, emails were further analysed according to the address forms/salutations employed in the opening of the email. The address forms/salutations were classified into 4 categories: (a) formal address forms/formal greetings, (b) informal address forms/informal greetings, (c) neutral address forms/neutral greetings, and (d) blended address forms. The first category (formal address forms/formal greetings) included those address forms that made use of the lecturer's surname or a formal title (e.g., 'Dear Dr Kogetsidis', 'Dr Kogetsidis', 'Dear Professor', 'Αξιότιμη Δρ. Μαρία Κογκετσίδη'/ 'Esteemed Dr Maria Kogetsidis' (lit. translation)). The same category included those Greek formal greetings that utilised the 'polite' plural form (v-form) (with or without the lecturer's name) (e.g., 'Καλησπέρα σας'/ 'Hello to you (plur)', 'Καλησπέρα σας κύριε καθηγητά'/ 'Good evening to you (plur) Mr Professor' (lit. transl.)). The second category concerned those address forms that made use of the recipient's first name (e.g., 'Dear Harry', 'Ms Maria'), or an informal greeting (with or without the lecturer's name) (e.g., 'Hi'/ 'Hello'/ 'Γεια'). Those emails that used no address forms whatsoever (zero form of address) were classified as 'neutral'. The use of longer greetings such as 'Good morning'/ 'Καλημέρα', 'Good evening'/'Καλησπέρα', which are neither formal nor informal, was also classified as 'neutral'. Finally, some blended constructions were received from the data. These included the combination of formal and informal elements, such as 'dear + title + first name' (e.g., 'Dear Dr Maria'), 'title + first name + formal greeting' (e.g., 'Κυρία Μαρία Καλησπέρα σας/ ('Ms Maria good evening to you' (plur.)), or 'informal greeting + title + surname (e.g., 'Hi Dr Kogetsidis').

### 2.3 Scoring and statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated in order to establish the frequency of occurrence of the pragmatic features under investigation. In addition, in order to examine whether any observed differences were statistically significant, the Chi-square test for Association (Pearson Chi-square), suitable to determine the presence of an association between two qualitative variables (Kinnear and Gray 2006), was used as part of the statistical procedure.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Request head-acts: Strategies and substrategies

Separate analyses of email requests for action and requests for information were carried out, following the taxonomies presented in Tables 1 and 2. As far as requests for information were concerned, results indicated that both groups favoured direct/bald-on record strategies (EL2: 81.5%, GNSs: 92%) over conventional indirectness and hints. The same result was received when anaysing email requests for action, as direct strategies were again the preferred strategy among both groups (EL2: 68.9%, GNSs: 73%). Importantly, as far as both requests for action and for information were concerned, the statistical analysis confirmed that the frequency differences in the use of direct strategies were not statistically significant. There were also no statistical differences in the use of conventionally indirect strategies in the action requests of the two groups. However, as far as requests for information were concerned, a statistically significant difference emerged in relation to the employment of conventional indirectness. L2 learners employed a significantly higher degree of conventional indirectness compared to the GNSs (EL2: 17.7%, GNSs: 5.7%, $X^2$ = 6.62, $df$ = 1, $p$ = 0.01).

Results in relation to requests for action revealed no statistically significant differences as far as the strategies and substrategies within the English and Greek emails were concerned. However, some frequency differences were evident in some of the substrategies employed. The main difference concerned the employment of (hedged) performatives. While the GNSs showed a preference for performatives (EL2: 9.7%, GNSs: 20.4%) (e.g., 'Σας ζητώ θερμά να μου παραχωρήσετε μια ολιγοήμερη παράταση'/ 'I am asking you (plur.) warmly to grant me a few days' extension' (lit transl.)), the L2 learners showed a higher preference for hedged performatives (EL2: 25.8%, GNSs: 16.7%) (e.g., 'I would like to ask you about the unavailability of the web tutorial sessions').

The general results which took into account the total amount of strategies and substrategies employed by learners and NSs in their requests for action and requests for information further revealed that the learners employed overall more conventionally indirect strategies than the GNSs (EL2: 21.1%, GNSs:12.4%). This difference was found to be significant at a $p \leq 0.05$ level ($X^2 = 4.53$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.03$). Figure 1 shows the strategy distribution of the action and information requests among the two groups. It can be observed that the strategy selection of the two groups follows a very similar distribution.

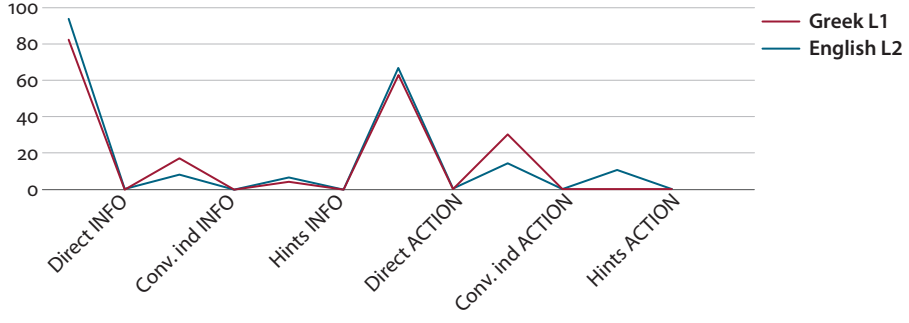


**Figure 1.** Strategy distribution in the EL2 and GNSs requests for action and requests for information

## 4.2 Lexical/phrasal and external modifiers

When comparing the internal and external mitigators in the L1 and L2 data, results indicated a high degree of agreement in the majority of the modifiers employed by the two groups. As can be seen in Figures 2 and 3 below, the softening devices of the EL2 learners and the GNSs follow a very similar trend across the different internal and external modifiers. As far as internal modification is concerned, both groups showed the highest preference for consultative devices and downtoners (classified as 'openers') (EL2: 43.9%, GNSs: 75%). As far as external modification is concerned, both groups similarly relied primarily on grounders (EL2: 31.6%, GNSs: 36%), and 'thanks/good wish' closing markers (EL2: 34%, GNSs: 30.1%) (e.g., 'thanks for your time').

The statistical analysis revealed only two significant differences in the use of internal modifiers and two significant differences in the use of external modifiers. As far as internal modification was concerned, differences emerged in the use of consultative devices/downtoners (openers), and the marker 'please'. The L2 learners were found to employ the marker 'please' significantly more than the GNSs (EL2: 43.9%, GNSs: 16.7%) while the GNSs made a significantly higher use of openers

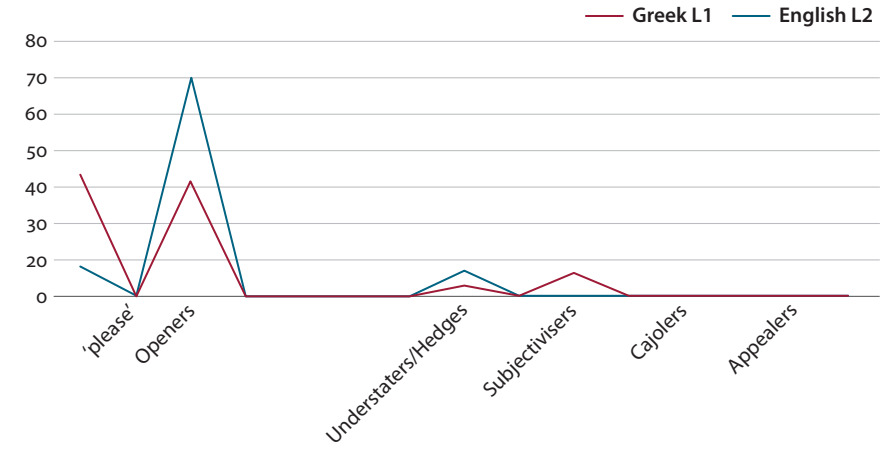


**Figure 2.** Internal mitigators – Distribution in the EL2 and GNSs requests for action and requests for information

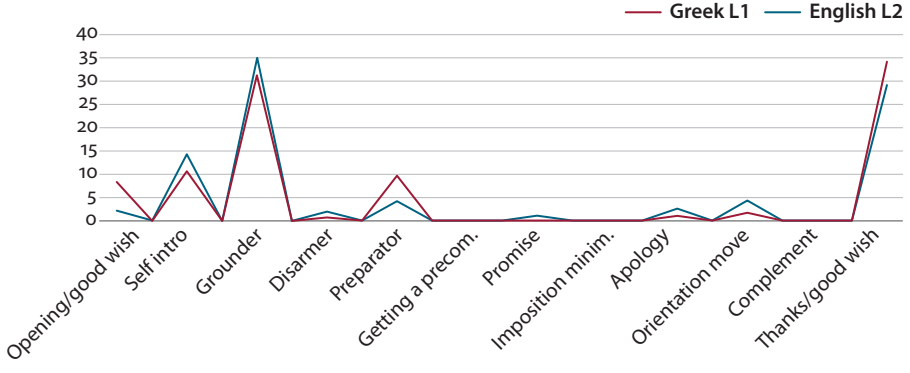


**Figure 3.** External modification – Distribution in the EL2 and GNSs emails for action and for information

(EL2: 43.9%, GNSs: 75%) (e.g., 'Εάν θέλετε' ('if you (plur) want'), 'αν δεν έχετε αντίρρηση' ('if you (plur) have no objection') (see Table 5 and email Example (1)). Regarding external modification, differences emerged in the use of 'openings/good wish' and preparators. The EL2 learners made a significantly higher use of 'openings/good wish' (i.e. a phrase that enquires after the health or wellbeing of the addressee) in their emails (e.g., 'I hope my message finds you well') (EL2: 7.8%, GNSs: 2.5%, $X^2 = 7.202$, $df = 1$ $p < 0.01$), and a significantly higher use of preparators (e.g., 'I would like to ask a question') (EL2: 10.2%, GNSs: 3.2%, $X^2 = 9.849$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.00$) (see Figure 3).

**Table 5.** Internal mitigation: Lexical/phrasal downgraders

| | English L2 | Greek L1 | Pearson Chi-square |
|---|---|---|---|
| Marker 'please' | 18 (43.9%) | 6 (16.7%) | $X^2 = 6.63$<br>$df = 1$<br>$^{**}p = 0.01$ |
| Openers<br>Consultative devices<br>Downtoners | 18 (43.9%) | 27 (75%) | $X^2 = 12.23$<br>$df = 1$<br>$^{**}p = 0.00$ |
| Understaters/ Hedges | 2 (4.9%) | 3 (8.3%) | $X^2 = 0.38$<br>$df = 1$<br>$p = 0.54$ NS |
| Subjectivisers | 3 (7.3%) | 0 | $X^2 = 2.74$<br>$df = 1$<br>$p = 0.09$ NS |
| Cajolers | 0 | 0 | – |
| Appealers | 0 | 0 | – |
| **Total** | **41** | **36** | |

** indicates significance at the 0.01 level.

**Table 6.** External modification

| Name | English L2 | Greek L1 | Pearson Chi-square |
|---|---|---|---|
| Opening/good wish | 16 (7.8%) | 7 (2.5%) | *$X^2 = 7.20$*<br>$df = 1$<br>*$^{**}p = 0.01$* |
| Self-Introduction | 24 (11.7%) | 43 (15.5%) | $X^2 = 1.45$<br>$df = 1$<br>$p = 0.23$ NS |
| Grounder | 65 (31.6%) | 100 (36%) | $X^2 = 1.03$<br>$df = 1$<br>$p = 0.31$ NS |
| Disarmer | 1 (0.5%) | 4 (1.4%) | $X^2 = 1.05$<br>$df = 1$<br>$p = 0.31$ NS |
| Preparator | 21 (10.2%) | 9 (3.2%) | *$X^2 = 9.85$*<br>*$df = 1$*<br>*$^{**}p = 0.00$* |
| Getting a precommitment | 0 | 0 | – |
| Promise | 0 | 3 (1.1%) | $X^2 = 2.24$<br>$df = 1$<br>$p = 0.14$ NS |

(*continued*)

**Table 6.** (*continued*)

| Name | English L2 | Greek L1 | Pearson Chi-square |
|---|---|---|---|
| Imposition minimiser | 0 | 0 | – |
| Apology | 4 (1.9%) | 10 (3.6%) | $X^2 = 3.272$<br>$df = 1$<br>$p = 0.07$ NS |
| Orientation move | 5 (2.4%) | 17 (6.1%) | |
| Complement/sweetener | 0 | 0 | – |
| Pre-closing/thanks/wish | 70 (34%) | 85 (30.1%) | $X^2 = 3.71$<br>$df = 1$<br>$^*p = 0.05$ |
| **Total** | **206** | **278** | |

** indicates significance at the 0.01 level.
* indicates significance at the 0.05 level.

Importantly, a closer qualitative analysis revealed a common, frequent pattern which was followed in both data sets. This recurring pattern concerned emails that often started with a self-introduction, typically followed by a preparator (sometimes followed by an orientation move), a grounder, and ending with a 'thanks/good wish' marker. This rather common pattern, which was evident in 27% of EL2 emails and in 18% of Greek L1 emails can be observed in Examples (1) and (2). Oftentimes, this pattern included an information request phrased as a direct question (e.g., Example (1)), and/or more than one grounder which frequently preceded and followed the actual request.

English email message

(1) Dear title + surname,
My name is ….. [Self Introduction] and I would like to ask you a final question concerning the assignment [preparator], since I do not have contact with any of my classmates [grounder]. My question is: should we refer to the teaching of vocabulary as a part of the methodology? Also, how many lesson plans do you expect us to create? [Information request – Direct Question]
Thank you very much. [Pre-closings/thanks/wishes]
E.P

Greek email message with English translation

(2) Καλημέρα σας,
Ονομάζομαι ……. με αριθμό μητρώου ……[Self Introduction]
Έχω κάποιες απορίες σχετικά με την εκπόνηση μεταπτυχιακής εργασίας. [preparator]

Σκέφτομαι να αναλάβω θέμα σχετικά με τη διδασκαλία του λεξιλογίου, ωστόσο δεν είμαι σίγουρη αν αυτό πληροί τα κριτήρια, καθώς δεν έχω παρακολουθήσει μάθημα ακριβώς με αυτόν τον τίτλο. Επίσης δεν ξέρω σε ποιον καθηγητή να απευθυνθώ [grounder]
Η βοήθεια σας κρίνεται απαραίτητη. [Request for action – Strong Hint]
Σας ευχαριστώ [Pre-closings/thanks/wishes]
Α.Π
---
Good morning to you (plur.)
My name is…… with ID number…..
I have some questions regarding the conducting of the MA thesis. I am considering choosing a topic concerning vocabulary teaching, however, I do not know if it fulfils the criteria as I have never attended a class related to this. Also, I do not know who is the lecturer that I should contact.
Your-plur. help is deemed necessary.
Thank you-plur,
A.P

## 4.3 Forms of address/salutations

As can be seen from Table 7, both groups showed a high preference for formal forms of address/salutations in the majority of their emails (EL2: 87%, GNSs: 74%) (also see email Examples (1) and (2)), and made a lower use of all the other options. The statistical analysis confirmed that there were no significant differences in the frequencies as far as the formal forms of address were concerned.

However, certain significant differences emerged as far as their preference for the specific *formal* salutation constructions were concerned. While the majority of the EL2 emails (62%) made use of the 'Dear + Title + Surname' construction, the Greek emails made a significantly lower use of this strategy (18.2%) and relied significantly more on the 'formal Greeting + title + surname' construction (e.g., Καλησπέρα σας Κυρία Κογκετσίδη – Good morning to you (plur) Dr Kogetsidis) (48.1%). This was the second most preferred strategy among the learners.

Some significant differences also emerged as far as the participants' preference for specific *informal* salutation constructions were concerned. While the EL2 learners relied exclusively on the use of the informal greeting ('Hi'/'Hello'/'Ια') when opting for informal salutations, the GNSs opted mainly for 'Dear + FN' (e.g., 'Αγαπητή Πωλίνα' ('Dear Polina').

**Table 7.** Forms of address/salutations (no. of emails: 100 per group)

| | English L2 | Greek L1 | Pearson Chi-square |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Formal** | **87%** | **74%** | $X^2 = 5.38$ $df = 1$ $p = 0.020$ |
| Dear/esteemed + Title + Surname (Dear Dr / Mrs Kogetsidis) (Αγαπητή Δρ Κογκετσίδη | 62% | 18.2% | $X^2 = 34.4$ $df = 1$ $^{**}p = 0.00$ |
| Dr/Mrs/Mr + Surname (Dr Kogetsidis/ Κυρία Κογκετσίδη) | 6.9% | 10.4% | $X^2 = 0.64$ $df = 1$ $p = 0.42$ |
| Dear + Professor/Dr (Dear Professor) | 5.7% | 0 | $X^2 = 4.56$ $df = 1$ $p = 0.03$ |
| Dear + FN + Surname (Dear Maria Kogetsidis) | 1.1% | 0 | $X^2 = 0.89$ $df = 1$ $p = 0.35$ |
| Formal Greeting (Καλησπέρα σας/ Γεια σας) | 0 | 18.2% | $X^2 = 17.3$ $df = 1$ $^{**}p = 0.00$ |
| Greeting + title+ surname (Good morning Dr Kogetsidis) | 22.9% | 48.1% | $X^2 = 11.32$ $df = 1$ $^{**}p = 0.01$ |
| Greeting + professor (Hello professor / Καλησπέρα σας κύριε καθηγητά) | 1.1% | 1.3% | $X^2 = 0.01$ $df = 1$ $p = 0.93$ |
| **Informal** | **4%** | **11%** | $X^2 = 3.53$ $df = 1$ $p = 0.06$ |
| Informal greeting (Hi/ Hello/ Γεια) | 100% | 0 | $X^2 = 15$ $df = 1$ $^{**}p = 0.00$ |
| Title + FN (Mrs Maria) | 0 | 27.3% | $X^2 = 6.23$ $df = 1$ $^{**}p = 0.00$ |
| Dear + FN (Dear Polina / Αγαπητή Πωλίνα,) | 0 | 72.7% | $X^2 = 6.23$ $df = 1$ $^{**}p = 0.01$ |
| **Neutral** | **4%** | **12%** | $X^2 = 4.35$ $df = 1$ $p = 0.04$ |
| Zero form of address | 50% | 16.7% | $X^2 = 1.78$ $df = 1$ $p = 0.18$ |
| Greeting [good morning/ good evening] Καλησπέρα/ Καλησπέρα | 50% | 83.3% | $X^2 = 1.78$ $df = 1$ $p = 0.18$ |
| **Blended** | **5%** | **3%** | $X^2 = 0.52$ $df = 1$ $p = 0.47$ |
| Dear + Dr + FN (Dear Dr Maria) | 60% | 0 | $X^2 = 2.88$ $df = 1$ $p = 0.09$ |
| Title + FN + Greeting (plur) (Κ.Μαρία Καλησπέρα σας) | 0 | 100% | $X^2 = 4.29$ $df = 1$ $p = 0.04$ |
| Informal greeting + title + surname (Hi Dr Kogetsidis) | 40% | 0 | $X^2 = 1.60$ $df = 1$ $p = 0.21$ |
| **Total** | **100** | **100** | |

** indicates significance at the 0.01 level.

## 5. Discussion

The results of the present study have indicated that the request strategies and substrategies used in the L2 emails of advanced, Greek learners to faculty, show high agreement with the strategies and substrategies prevalent in the L1 Greek emails. Even though the learners overall employed more conventionally indirect strategies than the GNSs, a preference for direct strategies over conventional indirectness was confirmed in both the Greek and the English L2 emails. These results suggest that the learners' L2 emails rely on L1 culturally-loaded strategies as they converge with those of native speakers of Greek and approximate native Greek norms. This preference for email requestive directness also agrees with the findings of previous studies on Greek L2 emails. Economidou-Kogetsidis' (2018) study also found that 63% of the Greek learners' emails resorted largely to direct/bald-on-record strategies, mainly in the case of requests for information, and in relation to both low and high imposition requests. Similarly, her 2011 study also revealed that 58.5% of the Greek learners' e-requests for information were phrased as direct questions. This reliance on directness is very much consistent with the ethos of directness and spontaneity which characterises Greek society (Triandis and Vassiliou 1972; Vassiliou et al. 1972) and agrees with pragmatic studies with Greek native speakers which showed that requests in Greek are expressed structurally more directly than in English (Bella and Sifianou 2012; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2005; Sifianou 1992). Bella and Sifianou (2012), when discussing their Greek students' email requests for information to faculty, also describe such emails as "comparatively very short and sparsely mitigated", sometimes appearing "particularly direct and straightforward" (2012: 107).

Nevertheless, the preference for directness is also in line with previous email studies with learners from other cultural and linguistic backgrounds (e.g., Alcón-Soler 2015; Biesenbach-Lucas and Weasenforth 2002; Chang and Hsu 1998; Krulatz 2012; Zhu 2012), which similarly found that L2 email writers resorted largely to direct/bald-on-record strategies, thus confirming the overall tendency of L2 learners to opt for a high degree of requestive directness in institutional email communication. This preference for directness might therefore not only be culture-specific and thus exclusively connected to pragmatic transfer from L1, but also to the email as a *medium* of communication whose unique nature often allows for spoken and written language features to mesh, and to the general practice of sending email messages from a smart device; a practice which inevitably gives emphasis on straightforwardness, clarity and directness.

The present study further revealed that, despite their preference for bald-on-record strategies, the learners employed overall more conventionally indirect strategies compared to GNSs, especially in relation to their requests for information. This is not surprising given their advanced language proficiency, which seems to

have allowed them to divert from L1 culturally-loaded strategies and converge more with English native speakers' general preference for conventional indirectness (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Halenko and Winder current volume; Merrison et al. 2012). Their advanced proficiency seemed to also have allowed them to hedge their performatives more and diverge from Greek NS performance, which showed a preference for explicit performatives.

When comparing the lexical/phrasal modifiers and external mitigators in the L1 and L2 data, results further pointed towards a high degree of agreement in the majority of the modifiers employed by the two groups. Both the GNSs and the L2 learners modified their emails largely with consultative devices and downtoners (openers) and relied primarily on grounders. Yet, unlike the GNSs, the learners relied equally on the marker 'please' and therefore recognised the more conventionalised function of the marker as a politeness device in the target language.

In addition, the two groups showed high agreement in using the same email moves as a recurring fixed pattern (self-introduction- preparator, [orientation move] – grounder- 'thanks/good wish']. Rose and Kasper (2001: 15) explain that L2 learners' performance may differ noticeably from target language norms not only in the choice of speech acts, but also in the choice of semantic formulas (i.e. the means by which a particular speech act is accomplished in terms of the primary content of an utterance), the content (i.e. the specific information/explanation given by the speaker) (e.g., the content of explanations offered when performing a request), and the form of a speech act (e.g., when learners do not use the mitigators used by NSs but use aggravators instead). Going a step further with this, it could be suggested that learners' performance may similarly converge with their L1 norms in the above dimensions, as it is evident in the present study. In line with their GNSs counterparts of the present study, the learners often provided lengthy reasons/explanations to mitigate their e-requests, and in both groups grounders frequently preceded and followed the actual request within the same email.

This result is consistent with the pragmatic performance of GNSs in other studies and supports the hypothesis that first language (L1) pragmatics has a strong effect on Greek learners' email performance as far as the internal and external email mitigation is concerned. Bella and Sifianou's (2012: 97) investigation on students' Greek emails to faculty similarly found Greek emails to be "quite lengthy, including a remarkable number of grounders". Their grounders also had the tendency to appear both before the main request and as additional support after the realisation of the main request (2002: 101). Bella (in current volume) also notes throughout her corpus of the L1 Greek emails numerous grounders which are provided as "institutional accounts" (Merrison et al. 2012: 1089) – i.e. explanations usually relating to the University or, in general, the educational context. Sifianou's (1992) study on politeness phenomena in England and Greece equally pointed towards a tendency

in Greek for a greater use of grounders for explicit justifications in requests, while Marmaridou (1987) also notes the presence of explicit justifications in the Greek announcements delivered on board of an Olympic Airways aircraft. More recently, Sifianou (2010) explains how excuses and explanations were common in the Greek announcements heard in the Athens Metro stations.

Following the above, it could be argued that the learners' reliance on such justifications is the result of transfer of their own L1 sociopragmatic norms, and might thus be driven by culture-specific motives. Sifianou (2010) explains that "even though explanations and excuses in requests have been found to be a feature characteristic of non-native speakers…the presence of such justifications is a positive politeness device, in Brown and Levinson's (1987: 128) terms" and "probably results from the positive politeness orientation of Greek society" (2010: 36). Giving or asking for reasons is seen as a positive politeness strategy through which the addressee is included in the activity and can see the reasonableness of the face-threatening act, conveying that the speaker and the addressee are co-operators. This can be supported further if we consider that the student participants of the present study are postgraduate, more mature students in terms of age (and working professionals in many cases), who might have positioned themselves closer to the lecturer in this vertical relationship.

Their preference for grounders in their emails echoes Merrison et al.'s (2012) findings relating to their British corpus, and can be seen as a way in which the Greek students construct a similar institutional identity in the two languages. Similarly to Merrison et al.'s British participants, these Greek students seem to construct themselves as insecure university students who "are not always able to manage their institutional role as student effectively" (2012: 1095) and therefore display, as Merrison et al. (2012) put it, "deferential dependence". In email Example (1), the student presents herself as an isolated (distance learning) student who has no contact with any of her classmates, while in email Example (2) she admits being uncertain about whether the topic she has in mind fulfills the relevant criteria. This argument may appear to contrast with that of Bella (current volume), who found that it was her NNS of Greek who constructed an identity of helpless beings (Merrison et al. 2012) unlike her Greek NSs who came across as more independent learners who emphasised the co-membership of themselves and their lecturers in the same community of practice. This difference, however, may be explained if one considers that the participants of the present study were distance-learning students who were trying this mode of study for the first time. In addition, the vast majority of these students came from a Greek university and were registered in a Cypriot university for the first time. It is to be noted that the educational systems of the universities in the two countries have some significant differences and this may also explain the students' insecurity and uncertainty.

At the same time, however, the two data sets allow us to observe how students orient to a perceived institutional hierarchy evidenced through formality, despite positioning themselves closer to their lecturers through the provision of grounders. Even though this might sound contradictory, Spencer-Oatey (1997) exemplifies how the variables of distance and closeness may coexist and be compatible in high power-distance societies[1] (Hofstede 2005).

This email formality (that is also evident in Examples (1) and (2)) gives additional support to the transfer claim. The quantitative analysis of the present investigation confirmed the high preference for formal forms of address/salutations in the majority of the emails of both groups, a finding which strongly points towards the influence of L1 on the L2 learners' email performance. Bella and Sifianou (2012: 93) explain that it is unthinkable for Greek students, especially undergraduates, to use first name terms of address. This seems to be the case here, especially if one takes into account the online nature of the relationship of the distance-learning students of the present study, which renders their relationship with their lecturer even more distant and formal.

Both the GNSs and the L2 speakers of the present study combined their formality with high directness, a combination that has been seen as a negative politeness strategy often employed by Greek speakers (see Bella and Sifianou 2012; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2005, 2018). Bella and Sifianou argue that "the features of formality and negative politeness (Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987) that are employed indicate the students' positioning of themselves within an institutional, socially distant and status-unequal encounter" (2012: 93). In line with the Bella and Sifianou's study, the Greek emails of the present investigation realised formality and deference through formal forms of address, the second person plural (v-form), and an epistolary format, all of which can be seen as strategies for emphasising a status-incongruent relationship. The same negative politeness strategies seem to be employed in their L2 English emails.

The combination of email directness with formal forms of address was also found in Economidou-Kogetsidis' study (2018), a finding which again pointed towards pragmalinguistic transfer from Greek and the phenomenon of directness and formality expressing negative politeness. Also in line with Economidou-Kogetsidis' (2005) study, the results of the present study concerning email formality seem to add further support to the claim that the Greeks' formality and high directness aim to achieve social distancing and are motivated by clarity, goal orientedness,

1. Greece's power distance index (PDI) (Hofstede 2005) is 60. "This is an intermediate score which indicates a slight tendency to the higher side of PDI – i.e. a society that believes hierarchy should be respected and inequalities amongst people are acceptable." [Hofstede Insights: Consulting, Training, Certification, Tooling. Available from https://www.hofstede-in-sights.com/country/greece/]

and minimising imposition. Of course, further qualitative research examining the email writers' views and perceptions would be necessary in order to probe deeper into the claim regarding sociopragmatic transfer.

Importantly, the L2 participants of the present study had an advanced English language proficiency, being future/current TESOL teachers, enrolled in a TESOL postgraduate programme. Nevertheless, as the results have strongly indicated, they still relied heavily on the pragmalinguistic strategies and politeness conventions of their L1 when constructing status-congruent L2 emails to faculty. These results may add support to the positive correlation between pragmatic transfer and advanced L2 proficiency, and agree with the findings of Beebe et al. (1990), Keshavarz et al. (2006) and Takahashi and Beebe (1987), which confirmed the hypothesis that high proficiency learners sometimes transfer complex first language conventions because they have the necessary linguistic resources to do so (Kasper and Rose 2002: 153).

A further parameter that needs to be taken into account when interpreting the results of the present study is the context of ELF (English as Lingua Franca) that the study is situated in. One might suggest that ELF involves less demanding norms for EFL learners and that pragmatic failure in ELF might not be as salient as it might be during native–non-native interaction when culture-specific norms apply. House (2003: 141) argues that the interactional style of ELF tends to be explicitly consensual and, as long as understanding is achieved, participants tend to adopt a principle of 'Let it Pass'. Both the faculty members and the students of the present study were proficient bi/multilingual users of English and native speakers of Greek, and therefore the expectation to use target and native language norms may never have been an expectation or the goal for the email communication of these advanced learners.

A further likely scenario that should also be considered as an explanation for this convergence with L1 culturally-loaded strategies, is the learners' deliberate resistance to using perceived L2 pragmatic norms (Ishihara and Cohen 2010: 77) – in other words, these advanced participants may have indeed mastered some L2 norms, but they have still chosen not to use them. As Ishihara and Cohen (2010: 86) explain, leaners may deliberately divert from L1 norms in order to accentuate their social identity and "maintain their subjectivity (e.g., their cultural identity, personal principles, sense of value, and integrity that were in conflict with a perceived L2 norm)". Of course, this issue of learner resistance would also require further qualitative insights into the participants' views and beliefs, and is therefore pending for future research.

To conclude, in order to succeed in producing status-congruent emails, L2 learners need to have the necessary tools to identify which pragmalinguistic strategies and politeness conventions can successfully be transferred from their L1 to the L2 and which cannot. Clearly, L2 language proficiency alone is insufficient, and

pedagogical intervention for raising pragmatic awareness in email writing, along with meaningful interaction with members of the target language community, are the ways forward. As the participants of the present study are (future) EFL/ESL teachers, these results have also clear pedagogical implications for teacher development. They add support to the necessity of the inclusion of pragmatics not only in the foreign language learning curriculum but also in teacher development and training courses and the need to help teachers integrate cultural and linguistic dimensions of learning (Basturkmen and Nguyen 2017). The knowledge and skills necessary to teach the L2 pragmatics and cultural awareness may not come automatically to all L2 teachers, especially to those without sufficient exposure to the target L2 culture.

## 6. Conclusions

The present study compared L1 with L2 email choices in order to shed some light onto the extent to which L2 learners' pragmatic email choices are culture-specific and therefore the possible result of pragmatic influence from their L1. The results strongly indicated that, despite their advanced language proficiency, these Greek L2 learners relied heavily on the pragmalinguistic strategies and politeness conventions of their L1 when constructing status-congruent L2 emails to faculty, and they constructed a similar institutional identity in the two languages. Both when writing L1 and L2 emails, the students oriented to a perceived institutional hierarchy evidenced through formality, directness and negative politeness, as well as through positive politeness strategies such as the provision of grounders.

Nevertheless, the results of the present investigation need to be treated with caution as a number of limitations make further research necessary. The study drew from relatively small data samples, and did not utilise any English baseline data as no attempt was made to use NS email practices as a benchmark and thus to examine the participants' email choices as potential instances of sociopragmatic failure. In addition, the employment of interviews or verbal report to investigate the views and perceptions of the email writers and/or email recipients would have offered some valuable qualitative insights regarding claims for sociopragmatic transfer and/or failure. Also importantly, the recipients of the L2 emails used in the study were of Greek origin (albeit having English native-like proficiency). This could have affected the Greek writers' pragmatic and stylistic choices, as they might have accommodated their pragmatic style to fit the L1 of their addressees and/or that of the specific educational institution. Future research needs to examine further the role of the recipients' L1 and cultural background as variables affecting the writers' pragmatic choices.

Overall, the waters around the role of cultural effects in L2 learners' email writing are still very murky and in need of further systematic investigation. The juxtaposition of L1 influence with interlanguage and with other variables such as the email as a medium, the participants' proficiency levels, age, and perceived identity, all form a complex landscape that needs to be systematically examined in order to shed more light into the exact role of these variables on the pragmatic choices of the L2 email writers.

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CHAPTER 7

# Email communication in English and in German

## A contrastive pragmatic investigation of German university students' emails sent to university staff in their native and foreign language

Gila A. Schauer
University of Erfurt

This semi-longitudinal investigation examines greetings and closings in emails written by German university students in their native and foreign language. The results reveal students' preference for formal greetings in both English and German. However, the data also suggest that not all students were aware of appropriate address term combinations in formal English emails. Regarding closings, the students used a limited set of standard formal closings in English but employed a greater variety of closing strategies in German. The results further revealed the importance of micro-analysing individual students' contributions in a corpus, as this provides insights into an individual's language use over time and also shows the impact individual students' routine preferences can have on group scores.

**Keywords**: greetings, openings, salutations, leave-takings, closings, address terms (terms of address), EFL, German, institutional discourse, student emails

### 1. Introduction

Emails are widely and frequently used in communication between students and university staff in many higher educational contexts (e.g., Biesenbach-Lucas 2009; Bou-Franch 2011; Codina-Espurz and Salazar-Campillo 2019; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, this volume; Félix-Brasdefer 2012a, 2012b; Kiesendahl 2006; Savić 2018, 2019). Thus, being able to write emails that are considered appropriate and polite is an essential skill that students need to master. While university students should be able to write polite and appropriate emails in their native language (L1) when communicating with university staff – as this is an ability that they are also

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likely to need in their future post-university life – university students who are English as second or foreign language (L2) learners should also possess this skill in their L2, as it is part of their L2 pragmatic competence (Félix-Brasdefer 2012b).

This study was conducted to obtain insights into the greeting and closing routines used by German native speakers when writing emails in their mother tongue and in English as their foreign language (EFL). The email corpus comprises a total of 126 emails that were sent by 17 undergraduate students. Of the 126 emails examined, 65 were written in English and 61 were written in German. The majority of the students sent emails both in English and in German, which makes it possible to compare their pragmatic choices in both languages.[1] All emails were sent to me, a female professor at their university.

In the present study, I will concentrate on salutations (e.g., *dear, sehr geehrte*) and terms of address (e.g., *Prof. Dr. Surname*) when analysing greetings, and pre-closings (e.g., *I wish you a pleasant evening*), leave-takes (e.g., *kind regards, best wishes*) and signatures (e.g., first name surname) in my analysis of the data and will address the following research questions:

1. Which greetings are used by the students in English and German?
2. How do the students close their emails in English and German?

The analysis of the greetings and closings will address both the use of individual greeting and closing routines in the two language corpora, as well as the students' employment of different greeting and closing routines over time.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Greetings

A number of studies have examined greetings in English emails that were written either by native speakers (NSs) or L2 learners of English. In one of the earlier investigations in this area, Crystal (2006) found that in the 500 emails written to him two thirds included a greeting, while one third did not. That greetings may not always be included in emails was also found in a study by Marsden and Kádár (2017) involving a British English native speaker and 12 non-native speakers (NNSs) of

1. Students knew that they could communicate with me both in English and German. While I tended to write to them in English when communicating with them for the first time or when writing an initiating email, they chose whichever language they preferred. Information on the languages chosen by the students in replying and initiating emails is available in Table 1.

English which was based on 955 emails. The study which examined several email exchanges between the NS and the 12 NNSs showed that both the native speaker and the non-native speakers did not always include greetings in their email correspondence and thus indicates that individual email writers may vary their inclusion or not-inclusion of greeting strategies based on the number of email exchanges they had with their interlocutor on a particular issue. This suggests that emails not containing greetings may be those that reply to a previously discussed topic.

The absence of greetings may also be related to email writing norms of a particular context or institution, as noted by Waldvogel (2007), who compared a total of 515 emails written in an educational organisation and in a manufacturing plant in New Zealand. She found that at the educational organisation 59% of the emails began without a greeting, while the inverse was the case at the manufacturing plant where 58% of the emails contained a greeting.

Focusing on the higher educational context, Biesenbach-Lucas (2009) analysed 375 emails written by American English NS students and 150 emails sent by EFL learners at the same American university. She found that both groups "clearly preferred to send messages to their professor that included a greeting (*NS* = 87% and NNS = 93%)" (Biesenbach-Lucas 2009: 188). In two other studies situated in the US American university context, Eslami (2013) examined 300 emails written by NS and EFL graduate students, while Félix-Brasdefer (2012a) analysed 120 emails sent by NSs. Eslami's results revealed that 78% of the emails sent by American English native speakers and 95% of the emails sent by EFL students contained openings, while Felix-Brasdefer found that 90.8% of the English emails in his study contained a greeting.

In the European higher education context, Savić (2019) analysed 109 emails sent by Norwegian EFL learners and found that 97.2% of them contained a greeting. In Economidou-Kogetsidis's study (this volume), in which 200 emails were analysed, of which 100 were written in English and 100 in Greek by Greek native speaking EFL students, 98% of the emails written in English and Greek featured a greeting.

Whether the presence or absence of greetings is perceived as impolite in emails written in English may depend on a number of factors, such as the sequencing of the individual email in an email correspondence (e.g., initiating email versus replying email), contextual/cultural norms and conventions, relationship of the individuals corresponding, and personal opinions of the readers and recipients. Addressing precisely this issue in the academic context, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) asked British English university staff how they perceived two emails that did not feature a greeting. She noted that

> (…) [i]mportantly, these results seem to indicate that the avoidance strategy (zero form of address) and the omission of deference form 'dear' can easily become a source of pragmatic failure in this asymmetrical online communication. A number of lecturers who assessed e-mail[s] […] as "rather abrupt", made reference to the "lack of salutation" that characterized them and presented this lack of salutation as one of the reasons that affected their evaluations. Some participants commented on how they found "the lack of salutation disrespectful" (…).
>
> (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011: 3209)

Interestingly, the presence or absence of greetings does not seem to be a central concern of email studies in the German language (e.g., Hiller 2014; Hoffmann, Keller and Pfeiffer 2011; Kiesendahl 2006). A possible explanation for why this is the case may be that correspondence guidelines published by the prescriptive German dictionary publishing house Duden (2015) all feature greetings and in addition contain long lists on how to address individuals holding academic, noble or political titles. Thus, the absence of greetings may not be focused on as it could be seen to be a non-issue, since the style guides clearly state that they ought to be included.

Regarding the types of greetings used in emails, Waldvogel (2007) found differences and similarities across workplace contexts in her data from an educational organisation and a manufacturing plant in New Zealand. In both workplace contexts, greeting words only were the least preferred option corresponding to 5% of the greetings in both contexts, while greeting word + first name was used by 53% of the manufacturing staff but only 15% of the educational staff. This is interesting because Crystal (2006: 106) observed that in his corpus greetings including *dear* were "twice as common" as emails not including *dear*.

Crystal (2006) also noted that the use of greetings by individuals is not necessarily static but may change over time (see also Savić and Đorđević this volume). This was also observed by Marsden and Kádár (2017), whose data showing the use of greetings by individual dyads over time illustrates that both native speakers and non-native speakers of English may vary their employment of greetings, such as *hi* + first name and *dear* + first name.

In higher educational contexts, conventions and expectations concerning greetings vary. While at some Australian, British or Norwegian universities students can address staff holding doctoral or professorial titles by their first names (cf. Merrison, Wilson, Davies and Haugh 2012; Savić 2019), this may not be acceptable at American or German universities (cf. Aguilar-Roca 2009; Biesenbach-Lucas 2009; Kiesendahl 2006; Seifert 2012). Thus, students need to be aware of the conventions of the institution they are enrolled in and the norms and expectations of the higher educational institutions in the country they are studying in or wish to study in (in case they need to contact a scholar from another institution – for example in order to obtain information about postgraduate degree programmes).

## 2.2 Closings

Regarding closings in emails written by native speakers, Waldvogel's (2007) study based on New Zealand data revealed differences between the two workplace contexts. While 46% of the emails in the manufacturing plant ended with a farewell formula and name, only 11% in the educational organisation did so. In the educational organisation there was a clear preference for either name only closings (38%) or no closings (34%). In the US American higher educational context, Biesenbach-Lucas (2009) found that 91% of the emails by her NSs featured a closing, while the percentage was even higher in Félix-Brasdefer's (2012a) study with 98.3%. This suggests, that with the exception of Waldvogel's (2007) findings, the presence of closings seems to be more frequent in email communication involving English native speakers than the absence of closings.

In the literature on German emails (e.g., Hiller 2014; Hoffmann et al. 2011; Kiesendahl 2006) the presence or absence of closings does not tend to be the focus of discussion. This mirrors the fact that the presence or absence of greetings is also not discussed per se. A possible reason for this may again be the very strong influence of the prescriptive style guidelines concerning email writing by the Duden publishing house and other well-known publishers, such as PONS (e.g., Pöschel 2018), which have a firm stance on including greetings and closings.

One focus of the German research literature is the combination of various closings and greetings based on considerations regarding formality and informality as discussed by Seifert (2012). He illustrates that university students may select leave-takes that would be associated more with the informal system such *as Liebe Grüße*[2] and combine them with formal greetings, such as *Sehr geehrter*[3] *Herr Dr*

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**2.** The translation of this rather frequently used German leave-take is not easy. The German word for the noun *love* is *Liebe* but in this context the word "liebe" is a premodifier for *Grüße* [Greetings]. German leave-takes nearly always include the word *Grüße* and some kind of premodifier, such as the standard and formal – neutral *freundlich* [friendly], *beste* [best], *schöne* [lit. beautiful] or the *herzlich* [lit. from the heart] which can indicate formal but close relationships (i.e. those involving the use of the formal pronoun *Sie*) but also more personal ones. That providing a fitting translation for *liebe Grüße* is difficult is also exemplified by the fact that not many German-English dictionaries feature the term. The PONS Online dictionary shows an awareness of the potential problems with this leave-take since it offers a number of translations: *liebe Grüße = alles Liebe* [*all good things* or lit. *all love*] is translated as either *lots of love* or *love*, while "liebe Grüße (freundschaftlich z.B. unter Kollegen [in a friendly sense, e.g., among colleagues])" is translated as *best wishes*.

**3.** In written communication in German academic contexts, two forms of salutations were traditionally used, either the formal *Sehr geehrte* followed by (if applicable) academic titles, gender title and then surname (e.g., *Sehr geehrte Frau Prof. Dr. Surname*) or the more informal *Liebe(r)*

*Nachname [lit. Much honoured Mr Dr Surname, non-literal Dear Dr Surname]*. According to both the Duden (2015) and the PONS style guidelines (Pöschel 2018), only a variation of the farewell routine *[mit] freundliche[n] Grüßen/Gruß* [lit. *with friendly greetings/friendly greeting* [idiomatic: *best regards*] is considered formal with all other variations such as *beste Grüße* [lit *best greetings*, idiomatic: *best wishes/ regards*] already veering towards informality.

In English closings, Marsden and Kádár (2017) noted that the English native speaker tended to use a variation of leave-take routines involving the words *best, regards, wishes, kind, thanks* and *look-forward*. Crystal (2006: 108) also noticed considerable variation in his corpus but pointed out that he noted a "relative absence of the *Yours sincerely* type (turning up in only 5% of my messages, though it seems to be increasing)". In her university email corpus, Eslami (2013: 85) observed that

> Iranian NNES [non-native speakers of English] students used more deferent and distanced style, and they used greater variety of closing expressions compared with NESs [native speakers of English]. NES students used the following main variants in their farewell moves: *Regards; Best; Best regards; All the Best; Cheers; Blessings*.

A higher formality in EFL learner data was also observed by Biesenbach-Lucas (2009). This completes my discussion of the literature review, in the following I will introduce my own email corpus in more detail and also present my coding categories.

## 3. Methodology

The email corpus on which this study is based consists of 126 emails that were sent to me, a female professor in English and Applied Linguistics at a German university, by 17 German native speakers over a two-year period (2012–2013). I had contacted all undergraduate students that I had been teaching in seminars at the University of Erfurt asking them for permission to use their emails that they had sent to me

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which can be combined with a more formal form of address or a more informal one depending on the relationship of the interlocutors (e.g., *Liebe Frau Prof. Dr. Surname – Liebe Frau Surname – Liebe First name*). In German higher education workplace communication, the academic titles are frequently dropped when members of staff write to each other that are not addressing each other with the informal pronoun *du* and are of similar rank and/or know each other well (e.g., if a female and male professor would correspond, they may write *Sehr geehrte Frau Surname / Sehr geehrter Herr Surname* or *Liebe Frau Surname / Lieber Herr Surname*). Students may also sometimes drop the academic title when communicating with academic staff. Considerable differences in opinion exist among academic staff as to whether this title drop by students is appropriate and polite or not.

previously for research purposes. Seventeen students – all of whom were German native speakers – gave written permission for their emails to be used. The participants also answered questions regarding their major and minor, gender, native language, CEF level in English and time spent living abroad in an English-speaking country (if applicable). The age of the students was not elicited. However, no mature students had replied to my email.

Of the 17 students, 12 were studying English and American Studies or Linguistics as their major and five of them as their minor. Sixteen students were female and one was male. Their CEF level[4] in English ranged from B1 (one student) to C1 (10 students) with one of the students deciding not to disclose their CEF level. Eleven students had lived in an English-speaking country for more than 2 months (e.g., as part of a student exchange programme). Three students had lived in two different English-speaking countries. The maximum total time spent abroad was 1 year and six months. Students had sojourned in the following countries: Australia (1), Canada (1), England (2), Ireland (4), South Africa (1), and United States of America (5).

The email corpus includes 8570 words which corresponds to the main body of the emails excluding subject lines contained in 126 emails. Of these 3232 words are included in the English language sub-corpus representing 65 emails and 5338 are included in the German language sub-corpus representing 61 emails. All students sent me at least two emails with the majority of students sending me four to six emails, while two students sent me 17 emails each and one sent me 22 emails. Ten students sent emails in both English and German, while five only sent emails in English and two only wrote to me in German. Students decided themselves in which language they wrote their emails. The student who reported the lowest CEF level (B1) only wrote in German, while the student who had decided not to disclose their CEF level wrote 3 emails in English and 4 emails in German. Table 1 provides an overview of the language used (English or German) and the turn-type (i.e. initiating[5] or responding[6]) of the individual emails sent by the students.

**4.** The students' CEF levels were either based on in-house tests and exams or external tests, such as TOEFL or IELTS.

**5.** Initiating means that the students wrote an email on a new topic or issue, i.e. that they were not replying to an earlier email.

**6.** Responding means that this email was sent as a reply to an earlier email. If a longer conversation developed between a student and myself, the responding emails have consecutive numbers, e.g., "15,16,17" in the case of 16FC1A.

**Table 1.** Students' emails according to language and turn-type

| ID | English | German | Initiating | Responding |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1FC1A | 1,2,3,4,5 | 6,7 | 1,3,4,6 | 2,5,7 |
| 2FB2A | 3 | 1,2 | 1,3 | 2 |
| 3FC1A | 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9 | | 1,3,4,6,8 | 2,5,7,9 |
| 4FB2A | 4 | 1,2,3 | 1,3 | 2,4 |
| 5FC1A | 1,2,3,4 | | 1,2,3,4 | |
| 6FB2N | 1,2,3,4,5,6 | | 1,2,4 | 3,5,6 |
| 7FC1A | 1,2,3,4,5,6 | | 1,2,3,5,6 | 4 |
| 8FC1A | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| 9FB2A | 3 | 1,2,4 | 1,2,4 | 3 |
| 10FC1N | | 1,2 | 1,2 | |
| 11FC1N | 2,3,4,5,6 | 1 | 1,2,4,5 | 3,6 |
| 12FC1A | 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8, 9,10, 11, 12,13,14,15,16,17 | | 1,2,5,6,8,10,11,12, 15 | 3,4,7,9,13,14,16,17 |
| 13FB1N | | 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10 ,11,12,13,14,15,16, 17,18,19,20,21,22 | 1,4,6,7,9,11,13,14, 16,19,20 | 2,3,5,8,10,12,15,17, 18,21, 22 |
| 14MC1A | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| 15F?N | 2,3,7 | 1,4,5,6 | 1,4,5,6 | 2,3,7 |
| 16FC1A | 2,17 | 1,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,1 1,12,13,14,15,16 | 1,2,3,5,6,7,8,10,11, 14 | 4,9,12,13,15,16,17 |
| 17FB2A | 1,8 | 3,4,5,6,7 | 3,4,6,7 | 1,5,8 |

*Notes*: The ID I assigned to the students provides insights into their gender (female or male abbreviated as *f* or *m*), CEF level in English (ranging from *B1* to *C1* and also including one student who did not want to include this information designated by *?*) and previous sojourns in an English-speaking country that lasted longer than two months (indicated by *A* for study abroad experience in an English speaking country and *N* for no study abroad experience in an English speaking country). For example, the first person in the list *1FC1A* is female, has the level C1 in English and has studied abroad.

Following Waldvogel (2007: 460), greetings in this study are defined as "the use of a person's name and or greeting word to initiate the email" with the addition of any academic titles the writer may be using. A greeting may contain (a combination of) the following five categories:

- The word used to perform the greeting (e.g., *dear, sehr geehrte*) will be referred to as *salutation*.
- The academic title(s) (if any) will be referred to as *academic title(s)*, e.g., *Prof. Dr*.
- Address terms based on a person's gender identity (e.g., Ms or Miss) will be referred to as *gender title*.
- Names will be distinguished according to *first names* or *surnames*.
- If no greeting is used, this will be coded as *none*.

Concerning closings, my framework is also largely based on Waldvogel (2007: 460), who defines closings as "any name sign-off, farewell formula (e.g., *Cheers*), or phatic comment (e.g., *Have a good day*) used to end the email. *Thanks* is counted as a closing when it comes with or without the writer's name at the end of a message". In my framework, I differentiate three parts of a closing sequence:

- a *pre-closing* – which corresponds to email content that immediately precedes the final farewell formula and is separate from the main message content (e.g., *have a nice afternoon; Ich wünsche Ihnen ein schönes Wochenende*),[7]
- a *leave-take* – a term that was introduced by Edmondson and House (1981), and will be used here to refer to final farewell formula that is included in the email immediately preceding the writer's signature (e.g., *kind regards, mit freundlichen Grüßen*)
- a *signature* - which can include the writers' first name, surname, initials, student registration number and information concerning their major and minor (e.g., *First name Surname*)[8]

The analysis of the data will address both the use of individual greetings and closings in the two language corpora, as well as the writers' employment of different greeting and closing routines over time.

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1 Greetings

Fifty-eight of the 65 emails written in English and 56 of the 61 emails written in German contained a greeting corresponding to 89% and 92% respectively. This finding is in-line with the results of previous studies concerning the inclusion of greetings in emails written by EFL learners (e.g., Biesenbach-Lucas 2009; Economidou-Kogetsidis this volume; Eslami 2013; Savić 2019). All but one of the emails that did not feature a greeting in my corpus were emails that were replies to an earlier email sent by me. Only in one case (see student ID 17FB2A in Table 3) did an initiating email written in German not include a greeting. In this case, it needs to be noted, however, that this student had already engaged in longer email conversations with me on other topics and that she tended to show a preference for a rather informal writing style.

Table 2 presents an overview of the greetings used by the students in their English and German emails. The results show that the English data display no

7. I wish you a pleasant weekend (for pre-closings see also Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011))

8. see also Bou-Franch (2011)

**Table 2.** Overview of greetings in the L2 English and L1 German emails

| English greetings | No. | % | German greetings | No. | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dear Prof. Dr. Surname | 18 | 31% | Sehr geehrte Frau Prof. Dr. Surname | 23 | 41% |
| Dear Prof. Surname | 15 | 26% | Sehr geehrte Frau Prof. Surname | 11 | 20% |
| Dear Ms Surname | 15 | 26% | Liebe Frau Prof. Surname | 10 | 18% |
| Dear Ms. Prof. Surname | 5 | 9% | Sehr geehrte Prof. Dr. Surname | 5 | 9% |
| Dear Mrs Surname | 2 | 3% | Sehr geehrte Frau Surname | 2 | 4% |
| Dear Ms Prof. Dr. Surname | 1 | 2% | Guten Morgen | 2 | 4% |
| Dear Miss Surname | 1 | 2% | Sehr geehrte Frau Professor Dr. Surname | 1 | 2% |
| Dear First name Surname | 1 | 2% | Guten Tag Frau Prof. Dr. Surname | 1 | 2% |
| | | | Guten Abend | 1 | 2% |
| **Total** | **58** | | | **56** | |

*Notes*: In the German greetings, both *sehr geehrte* and *liebe* would be translated as *dear* in English, with the former German form being the more formal option used for someone that is addressed with the formal pronoun *Sie* and the latter being a somewhat more informal option that can be used in interactions with individuals which are addressed by *Sie* or by *du*. The equivalents of *Guten Morgen, Guten Tag* and *Guten Abend* are *Good morning, Good day* [lit.] and *Good evening* in English.

variation with regard to the salutation formula, as only *dear* is used. This indicates a preference for a more formal salutation style in the English data (corresponding to findings of Biesenbach-Lucas 2009 and Eslami 2013). In contrast, the German data display a greater degree of variation concerning the salutation routines. Combinations of the formal *sehr geehrte* + academic titles + surnames are used in the vast majority of the emails corresponding to 72%. In German, gender titles (e.g., *Frau* [Ms/Mrs]) are used in combination with the academic title(s)/rank of a person. Thus, the most standard formal greeting is the one that is used by the majority of the German students (41%) and contains a formal salutation + gender title + professorial title + doctoral title + surname. The slightly less formal option salutation + gender title + highest academic title (professor) is in second place in the German data with 20%, while the more informal salutation *Liebe* is in third place with 10%.

What is striking in the English email data is the number of greetings that do not correspond to English greeting norms, i.e. greetings that contain a combination of academic titles and gender titles (e.g., *Dear Ms Prof. Surname*), or that do not include an academic title at all. This finding supports the results of Economidou-Kogetsidis's (2011) study, which reported that her EFL learners also employed greetings that did not correspond to English norms. A particular problem in the German EFL data is that the students seemed to have transferred norms from their L1 to their L2 with regard to dropping academic rather than gender titles, i.e. instead of leaving out the *Ms* they dropped the *Professor*. This is highly problematic,

as it can lead to negative perceptions of the writers as being unaware of English norms or being deliberately impolite (cf. Schauer 2019).

The individual students' use of greetings is presented in Table 3. This table also includes information on when the individual greetings were used by the students and how many different greetings were employed by them. In addition, the table shows when no greeting was used. For example, student 4FB2A used the greeting *Sehr geehrte Frau Prof. Dr. Surname* in her first and third email and then did not use any greetings (indicated by *no greet*) in her second and fourth email. The comparison of the no greeting emails with the turn-type categories (initiating vs responding) shows that of the 6 learners who did not use a greeting, 5 of them did so in emails that were replies to an email from me, while only one learner also did not include greeting in initiating emails (17BC2A).

The results in the table show that most of the students (12 out of 17 corresponding to 71%) used two different greetings. Of these 12 students, three also wrote at least one email that did not feature a greeting. Three of the 17 students only used one greeting (corresponding to 18%) and of these three, two also wrote at least one email that did not contain a greeting. One of the 17 students employed three different greeting and one used four different strategies.

**Table 3.** Use of greetings by the individual students

| ID | **Greeting 1** (+) | **Greeting 2** (+) | **Greeting 3** (+) | **Greeting 4** (+) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1FC1A | Dear Ms Surname (1,4) | Dear Mrs Surname (2, 3) | Dear Miss Surname (5) | Sehr geehrte Frau Surname (6,7) |
| 2FB2A | Sehr geehrte Frau Prof. Dr. Surname (1) | No greet (2) | Dear Prof. Dr. Surname (3) | |
| 3FC1A | Dear Ms Surname (1,2,3,6,7,8) | Dear First name Surname (4) | No greet (5,9) | |
| 4FB2A | Sehr geehrte Frau Prof. Dr. Surname (1,3) | No greet (2,4) | | |
| 5FC1A | Dear Prof. Surname (1,2,3,4) | | | |
| 6FB2N | Dear Ms. Surname (1,2,4,5,6) | No greet (3) | | |
| 7FC1A | Dear Ms Prof. Surname (1,2,4,5,6) | Dear Ms Surname (3) | | |
| 8FC1A | Sehr geehrte Prof. Dr. Surname (1) | Dear Prof. Dr. Surname (2) | | |
| 9FB2A | Sehr geehrte Frau Prof. Dr. Surname (1,2,4) | Dear Prof. Dr. Surname (3) | | |
| 10FC1N | Guten Tag Frau Prof. Dr. Surname (1) | Sehr geehrte Frau Prof. Dr. Surname (2) | | |

(*continued*)

**Table 3.** (*continued*)

| ID | Greeting 1 (+) | Greeting 2 (+) | Greeting 3 (+) | Greeting 4 (+) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 11FC1N | Sehr geehrte Prof. Dr. Surname (1) | Dear Prof. Dr. Surname (2,3,4,5,6) | | |
| 12FC1A | Dear Prof. Dr. Surname (1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9) | Dear Prof. Surname (10,11,12,13,14,15, 16,17) | | |
| 13FB1N | Sehr geehrte Frau Prof. Surname (1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11) | Liebe Frau Prof. Surname (12,13,14,15,16,17, 19,20,21,22) | No greet (18) | |
| 14MC1A | Sehr geehrte Frau Prof. Surname (1) | Dear Ms Surname (2) | | |
| 15F?N | Sehr geehrte Prof. Dr. Surname (1,4,5,6) | Dear Prof. Surname (2,3,7) | | |
| 16FC1A | Sehr geehrte Frau Prof. Dr. Surname (1,3,4,5, 6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14, 15,16) | Dear Prof. Dr. Surname (2) | Dear Ms Prof. Dr. Surname (17) | |
| 17FB2A | No greet (1,4,5,7,8) | Guten Morgen (2,3) | Guten Abend (6) | |

*Notes*: The numbers in brackets following the individual greetings indicate the email(s) in which the greeting(s) was/were used, e.g., 1,2,4 indicate that that particular greeting was used in the first, second and fourth email. The "+", e.g., "Greeting × (+)" signifies that the greetings presented in these columns are used for the first time in "x" sequence but may also have been used in subsequent emails.

There does not seem to be a connection between the number of emails written and the number of different greetings employed, since two of the students who wrote the largest number of emails, 12FC1A and 13FB1N – who wrote 17 and 22 emails respectively – only used two different greetings.

The results also show that a greater variation of greetings used does not automatically correspond to a higher competence concerning the use of greetings, as is shown by student 1FC1A, who used four different greetings of which the three English ones (*Dear Ms S.*, *Dear Mrs S.*, *Dear Miss S.*) do not feature an academic title and therefore seem inappropriate. This student's use of gender titles only was rather surprising given that this student had spent time abroad and had also passed the C1 test of the CEF. Her use of greetings suggests that contextually appropriate and polite greetings in emails need to be addressed more and potentially also repeatedly in language courses at university.

The data also provide insights into what the students perceived to be equivalent greetings in English, e.g., student 11FC1N used *Dear Prof. Dr. Surname* five times in her English emails and then used *Sehr geehrte Frau Prof. Dr. Surname*

in her only German email. In addition, the data also show subtle changes in the relationship over time. For example, student 12FC1A switched from the *Dear Prof. Dr. Surname* to *Dear Prof. Surname* after she had written 9 emails to me. The same can be observed in the German data where 13FB1N changed her salutation from the formal *Sehr geehrte Frau Prof. Surname* to *Liebe Frau Prof. Surname* in her 12th email to me.

Also interesting are the more idiosyncratic greetings produced by the previously mentioned 17FB2A – the only student who also wrote initiating emails with no greetings – which refer to the time of day and never include gender titles, academic titles or names. These findings highlight the importance of micro-analysing data as this provides insights into writers' individual preferences and also individual writers' changes in language use over time.

## 4.2 Closings

Sixty-two of the 65 emails written in the students' L2 English and 61 of the 61 emails written in their L1 German contained a leave-take routine, which corresponds to 95% of the English emails and 100% of the German emails respectively. All three English emails that did not contain a leave-take routine were responding emails.

The range of leave-takes in the English emails is similar to the ranges observed in Marsden and Kádár (2017) and also in-line with Biesenbach-Lucas's (2009) and Savić's (2019) observations that EFL learners tended to prefer a more formal routine when bidding farewell in their emails. Routines involving the word *regards* make up 89% of all leave-takes used, while the only routine including wishes, *best wishes*, is merely used in 3% of the emails. *Thank you* is equally rarely used. The different leave-take formulae are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Overview of Leave-takes in the L2 English and L1 German emails

| English leave-takes | No. | % | German leave-takes | No. | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Kind regards | 34 | 55 | Mit freundlichen Grüßen | 16 | 26 |
| Best regards | 10 | 16 | Mit [den] besten Grüßen | 15 | 25 |
| With kind regards | 5 | 8 | Beste Grüße | 5 | 8 |
| Kindest regards | 4 | 6 | Viele Grüße | 4 | 7 |
| Yours sincerely | 3 | 5 | Freundliche Grüße | 3 | 5 |
| Best wishes | 2 | 3 | Vielen Dank und viele Grüße | 2 | 3 |
| Thank you | 2 | 3 | Viele Grüße und bis x | 2 | 3 |
| With regards | 1 | 2 | Mit freundlichem Gruß | 1 | 2 |

(*continued*)

**Table 4.** (*continued*)

| English leave-takes | No. | % | German leave-takes | No. | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Kind and sunny regards | 1 | 2 | Beste Grüße von [location] | 1 | 2 |
| | | | Beste Grüße und ein angenehmes Restwochende | 1 | 2 |
| | | | Beste Grüße und ein schönes Wochenende | 1 | 2 |
| | | | Beste Grüße zurück | 1 | 2 |
| | | | Mit besten Grüßen aus [location] zurück und bestem Dank | 1 | 2 |
| | | | Ich wünsche Ihnen einen erholsamen Ostermontag und verbleibe mit besten Grüßen | 1 | 2 |
| | | | Mit besten Dank und besten Grüßen nach [location] | 1 | 2 |
| | | | Vielen vielen Dank für alles und beste Grüße | 1 | 2 |
| | | | Vielen Dank und mit besten Grüßen | 1 | 2 |
| | | | Viele Grüße aus [location] | 1 | 2 |
| | | | Ein schönes Wochende | 1 | 2 |
| | | | Ein schönes Wochenende und bis bald, viele sonnige Grüße | 1 | 2 |
| | | | LG | 1 | 2 |
| **Total** | **62** | | | **61** | |

*Note*: A list of translations for the German routines can be found in the Appendix.

While there appears to be relatively little variation and firm favourites with regard to the English leave-takes, this is not the case in the German data, as there is no routine that is used in close to 50% of all the emails. Instead, two routines are used with higher frequency than the others: the standard *mit freundlichen Grüßen* and the syntactically similar *mit [den] besten Grüßen*, corresponding to 26% and 25% respectively. It is interesting that the leave-take routines in third and fifth place are the somewhat more informal versions of the top two, *beste Grüße* and *freundliche Grüße*, with *viele Grüße* coming in at fourth place.

Starting from fifth place, many of the leave-takes are combinations of farewell routines and good wishes (e.g., *Beste Grüße und ein angenehmes Restwochende – best wishes and a pleasant remaining weekend*) or combinations of farewell routines and expressions of gratitude (e.g., *Vielen Dank und mit besten Grüßen – many thanks and with best wishes*). Compared to the English leave-takes, the German ones tend to combine features that may also be found in emails written by English native speakers but are then set apart from the leave-take and presented as a separate pre-closing strategy.

Table 5 presents the leave-takes produced by the individual students. The results show that the majority of the students did not tend to vary their leave-takes much. Five of the students (2FB2A, 8FC1A, 9FB2A, 14MC1A, 15F?N) who wrote emails both in English and German only used one leave-take formulae for each language. Students who used more than two different formulae in one language often tended to employ very similar ones, e.g., *With kind regards* and *Kind regards* (3FC1A) or *Mit besten Grüßen* and *Mit den besten Grüßen* (16FC1A). The three English emails that did not feature a leave-take were responding emails that also did not include a greeting. These emails only contained one line which in each case was an expression of gratitude. This indicates that a lower degree of formality was deemed to be acceptable by the students in the event of short replies which solely intended to convey gratitude.

**Table 5.** Use of leave-takes by the individual students

| ID | LT 1 (+) | LT 2 (+) | LT 3 (+) | LT (x) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1FC1A | Kindest regards (1,3,4,5) | Kind and sunny regards (2) | Mit freundlichen Grüßen (6,7) | |
| 2FB2A | Mit freundlichen Grüßen (1,2) | Kind regards (3) | | |
| 3FC1A | With kind regards (1,2,3,4,6) | No LT (5) | Kind regards (7,8,9) | |
| 4FB2A | Mit freundlichen Grüßen (1,2,3) | Kind regards (4) | | |
| 5FC1A | Best regards (1) | Yours sincerely (2,3,4) | | |
| 6FB2N | Best regards (1,2,4,5,6) | No LT (3) | | |
| 7FC1A | Kind regards (1,2,3,4,5,6) | | | |
| 8FC1A | Mit freundlichen Grüßen (1) | Best wishes (2) | | |
| 9FB2A | Freundliche Grüße (1,2,4) | Kind regards (3) | | |
| 10FC1N | Beste Grüße (2) | | | |
| 11FC1N | Mit freundlichen Grüßen (1) | Thank you (2) | With regards (3) | Kind regards (4,5,6) |

(*continued*)

**Table 5.** (*continued*)

| ID | LT 1 (+) | LT 2 (+) | LT 3 (+) | LT (x) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 12FC1A | Kind regards (1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17) | | | |
| 13FB1N | Mit freundlichen Grüßen (1,2) | Viele Grüße (3,6,12,18) | Vielen Dank und mit besten Grüßen (4) | Beste Grüße zurück (5); Vielen Dank und viele Grüße (7, 20); Viele Grüße und bis × (8,9); Beste Grüße und ein schönes Wochenende (10), Viele Grüße aus × (11); Ein schönes Wochenende und bis bald, viele sonnige Grüße (13); Ein schönes Wochenende (14); Mit besten Grüßen aus × zurück und bestem Dank! (15); Ich wünsche Ihnen noch einen erholsamen Ostermontag und verbleibe mit besten Grüßen (16); Beste Grüße (17, 22); Vielen vielen Dank für alles und beste Grüße (19); Mit besten Dank und besten Grüßen nach × (21) |
| 14MC1A | Mit freundlichen Grüßen (1) | Kind regards (2) | | |
| 15F?N | Mit freundlichen Grüßen (1,4,5,6) | Best regards (2,3,7) | | |
| 16FC1A | Mit besten Grüßen (1,3,13,16) | Kind regards (2, | Mit den besten Grüßen (4,5,6,7,8,9,10, 12,14,15) | Mit freundlichem Gruß (11), Best wishes (17) |
| 17FB2A | No LT (1) | Beste Grüße (2,3) | LG* (4) | Thank you! (5), Beste Grüße von × (6), Beste Grüße und ein angenehmes Restwochenende (7), Best regards (8) |

*Notes*: The numbers in brackets following the individual leave-takes (LTs) indicate the email(s) in which the leave-take(s) was/were used, e.g., 1,2, indicate that that particular leave-take was used in the first and second email. The "+", e.g., "LT 2 (+)" signifies that the leave-take presented in this column was used for the first time in the second email but may also have been used in subsequent emails. For example, 9FB2A uses the leave-take *kind regards* in her third email for the first time and uses *freundliche Grüße* in her first, second and fourth email. LT(x) is the category used when a student employed four or more different leave-takes. The number in brackets following the leave-take shows in which emails specific leave-takes were employed, e.g., 13FB1N used *vielen Dank und viele Grüße* in emails 7 and 20.

* *LG* is short for *Liebe Grüße*.

Table 5 reveals that the very high percentage score for *kind regards* can be mainly attributed to student 12FC1A, who used this routine 17 times out of the total of 27 instances found in the data. Also, student 13FB1N used a substantial number of different leave-takes. This further emphasises that it is important to not only look at how a group uses routines, but to also provide information on the individual writers to see if personal preferences have an effect on the total number of instances of a feature investigated.

Table 6 presents the pre-closing routines included in the corpus. Only 22 English and 21 German emails featured pre-closing routines. This means that 43 of the English emails and 40 of the German emails did not include a pre-closing strategy corresponding to 66% of all emails. However, as the data in the table illustrates

**Table 6.** Use of pre-closings by the individual students

| ID | Pre-closing 1 (+) | Pre-closing 2 (+) | Pre-closing 3 (+) | Pre-closing (x) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1FC1A | Thank you (1) | No PCL (2,3,4,5) | Für Ihre Mühen danke ich schon im Vorraus. (6) | Über eine Antwort freue ich mich. (7) |
| 2FB2A | No PCL (1,2,3) | | | |
| 3FC1A | No PCL (1,2,3,4, 5,6,7,8,9) | | | |
| 4FB2A | No PCL (1,2,3,4) | | | |
| 5FC1A | No PCL (1,2,3,4) | | | |
| 6FB2N | I am thanking you in anticipation (1,2) | No PCL (3,4,5) | See you next Thursday (6) | |
| 7FC1A | No PCL (1,2,3,4,5,6) | | | |
| 8FC1A | No PCL (1,2) | | | |
| 9FB2A | No PCL (1,3) | Ich wünsche Ihnen noch einen schönen Abend (2) | Ich wünsche Ihnen noch eine schöne vorlesungsfreie Zeit (4) | |
| 10FC1N | Über eine Rückmeldung würde ich mich sehr freuen (1,2) | | | |
| 11FC1N | No PCL (1,2,3,4,5,6) | | | |

(*continued*)

**Table 6.** (*continued*)

| ID | Pre-closing 1 (+) | Pre-closing 2 (+) | Pre-closing 3 (+) | Pre-closing (x) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 12FC1A | Thank you very much (1,2,3,4,5,6,7, 8,9,10,12,13, 14,16) | Thank you very much. Have a nice Easter time (11) | No PCL (15,17) | |
| 13FB1N | Vielen Dank, bitte entschuldigen Sie die Umstände (1) | No PCL (2,3,4, 5,6,7,8,9,10, 11,13,14,15,16, 17,18,19,20,21) | Ich wünsche Ihnen ein schönes Wochenende (12) | Ich wünsche Ihnen ein schönes und angenehmes Sommersemester (22) |
| 14MC1A | No PCL (1,2) | | | |
| 15F?N | No PCL (1,2,3,4,5,6,7) | | | |
| 16FC1A | Ich danke Ihnen vielmals im Voraus für Ihre Hilfe. (1) | I look forward to hearing from you as soon as possible. Thank you in advance. (2) | Vielen Dank im Voraus für Ihre Hilfe. (3) | No PCL (4,5,10, 14);<br>Vielen Dank für Ihre Hilfe und Ihr Verständnis (6);<br>Ich danke Ihnen im Vorraus für Ihre Mühe und Hilfe. (7);<br>Ich danke Ihnen im Vorraus für Ihre Mühe und Hilfe. Über eine baldige Antwort würde ich mich sehr freuen :) (8);<br>Vielen Dank für Ihre Hilfe im Voraus. Über eine baldige Antwort würde ich mich sehr freuen. (9);<br>Ich wünsche Ihnen ein schönes Wochenende, (11);<br>Bis Mittwoch (12);<br>Vielen lieben Dank und ein schönes, hoffentlich sonniges Wochenende. (13);<br>Ich wünsche Ihnen ein frohes Osterfest und schöne Feiertage. (15);<br>Vielen Dank für Ihre Hilfe und Unterstützung während der Arbeit. (16);<br>Have a nice afternoon. (17) |
| 17FB2A | No PCL (1,2,3,5,6,7) | Nochmals vielen Dank (4) | Wish you a nice weekend. See you next week. (8) | |

*Note*: English translations for the German pre-closings are included in the Appendix.

the high number of absent pre-closings in the German data can be attributed to student 13FB1N, since 19 of her 22 emails did not feature a pre-closing strategy and her correspondence represents a large percentage of the data. It needs to be borne in mind, though, that this is the same student who produced a very large number of combined leave-takes (cf. Table 5). This is an issue that should be considered for future studies that compare emails written in English and German.

It should also be noted that nine of the 17 students never used a pre-closing routine in either English or German. This suggests that the presence or absence of pre-closing routines in the present corpora does not seem to be connected to the use of a particular language nor to potential proficiency-related language problems. Instead, the use of pre-closing routines appears to be more related to individual writers' preferences and/or writing style. While some students never use pre-closings, student 16FC1A employs a remarkable range that features 13 different formulae. However, even this student did not consistently employ pre-closings in all of her emails, since four of them did not feature a pre-closing.

The final closing category analysed is the signature provided at the end of the email (if any). The results presented in Table 7 reveal that in all but two of the emails, signatures are featured. The two emails that did not include a signature were also the emails that featured neither a greet or a leave-take and were one line responding emails.

The results show that there is very little variation concerning the signature, as students typically used their first name and surname. Three students provided their registration number in their initial email to me in addition to their first name and surname, while one of them also added information about her major and minor. Initials + surname was used in five English emails by one student (11FC1N) and in a German email by another student (17FB2A).

Overall, therefore, the signatures, like the pre-closings and leave-takes, show that the students used a formal style when communicating with their professor. The only somewhat surprising exception is the use of first name only by student 17FB2A which occurred in two English and one German email. As this was also the student who tended to use the more informal daytime related greetings, her use of first name only may again represent her own individual style that deviates in some respect from that of the other students. Interestingly, the use of first name only and first name surname signatures switched back and forth over time, i.e., there was no development from first name surname at the beginning of the correspondence with me to first name only. Instead, the various forms tended to vary without a discernible pattern.

**Table 7.** Use of signatures by the individual students

| ID | Signature 1(+) | Signature 2(+) | Signature (3+) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1FC1A | First name Surname (1,2,3,4,5,6,7) | | |
| 2FB2A | First name Surname (1,2,3) | | |
| 3FC1A | First name Surname (1,2,3,4,6,7,8,9) | None (5) | |
| 4FB2A | First name Surname (1,2,3,4) | | |
| 5FC1A | First name Surname, registration number (1) | First name Surname (2,3,4) | |
| 6FB2N | First name Surname (1,2,3.4,5,6) | | |
| 7FC1A | First name Surname (1,2,3,4,5,6) | | |
| 8FC1A | First name Surname (1,2) | | |
| 9FB2A | First name Surname, registration number, major and minor (1) | First name Surname (2,3,4) | |
| 10FC1N | First name Surname (1,2) | | |
| 11FC1N | First name Surname (1) | Initial + Surname (2,3,4,5,6) | |
| 12FC1A | First name Surname (1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10, 11,12,13,14,15,16,17) | | |
| 13FB1N | First name Surname (1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10, 11,12,13,14,15,16,17,18,19,20,21,22) | | |
| 14MC1A | First name Surname, registration number (1) | First name Surname (2) | |
| 15F?N | First name Surname (1,2,3,4,5,6,7) | | |
| 16FC1A | First name Surname (1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10, 11,12,13,14,15,16,17) | | |
| 17FB2A | None (1) | First name Surname (2,3,7) | First name (4,5,8) Initial + Surname (6) |

## 5. Conclusion

This study focused on emails written in English and German by German native speakers studying an EFL related subject as their major or minor at a German university. The results showed that the students included greetings and closings in the vast majority of the emails included in the corpus. All EFL learners used the salutation *dear* when greeting their interlocutor, thus adhering to the standard formal greeting style. The learners did, however, display some transfer problems with regard to their address terms, as some of them combined terms that are not combined in English (e.g., gender title + academic title) or dropped the academic titles altogether using only the gender one. The majority of the German greetings

were of a very formal nature with only few moving towards a slightly more informal tone.

The leave-takes used in the English email closings were also rather formal in nature with one exception (*kind and sunny regards*). In contrast, the German data showed more variety in form and also revealed a tendency towards combining strategies that would be more typical in pre-closings in English with the leave-take. The analysis of the individual students' data showed that it is important to not only consider group analyses when more than one email from any one student is included but to also consider whether the style preferences of individual students may have an impact on the group results.

Overall, the data did not show any serious pragmatic infelicities in English and German apart from the problems some students had with selecting the appropriate term of address in English. However, since terms of address that are perceived to disregard a scholar's academic achievements can lead to negative evaluations of the writer, EFL classes at university level should ensure that students know how to address their teaching staff appropriately.

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## Appendix

Translations of German leave-taking and pre-closing routines included in Tables 4 and 6. The translations are intended to be as literal as possible wherever possible.

Translations of the content of Table 4

| | |
|---|---|
| [Mit] freundlichem/n Gruß/Grüßen | [With] [a] friendly regard[s] |
| Mit den besten Grüßen | With best regards |
| Beste Grüße [von/zurück] | Best regards [from/in return) |
| Viele Grüße [und bis morgen /Xtag] | Many regards [and until tomorrow/xday] |
| Vielen Dank und viele Grüße | Many thanks and many regards |
| Beste Grüße und ein schönes Wochenende | Best regards and a pleasant weekend |
| Mit besten Grüßen zurück und vielen Dank | With best regards in return and many thanks |
| Ich wünsche Ihnen einen erholsamen Ostermontag und verbleibe mit besten Grüßen | I wish you a relaxing Easter Monday and remain with my best regards |
| Mit besten Dank und besten Grüßen nach Deutschland | With best gratitude and best regards to Germany |
| Vielen [vielen] Dank [für alles] und mit besten Grüßen | Many [many] thanks [for everything] and with best regards |
| Viele Grüße aus [location] | Many regards from [location] |
| Ein schönes Wochenende [und bis bald, viele sonnige Grüße] | A pleasant weekend [and until soon, many sunny regards] |

Translations of the content of Table 6

| | |
|---|---|
| Über eine [baldige] Antwort freue ich mich. | A [prompt] reply would be appreciated. |
| Für Ihre Mühen danke ich schon im Voraus. | Thank you in advance for your efforts. |
| Ich wünsche Ihnen noch einen schönen Abend/eine schöne vorlesungsfreie Zeit. | I wish you a pleasant evening/a pleasant lecture-free period |
| Über eine Rückmeldung würde ich mich sehr freuen! | A reply would be much appreciated! |
| Vielen Dank, bitte entschuldigen Sie die Umstände. | Thank you very much, please excuse the bother. |
| Ich wünsche Ihnen ein schönes Wochenende/ein schönes und angenehmes Sommersemester | I wish you a pleasant weekend/a pleasant and pleasant summer semester. |
| Ich danke Ihnen vielmals im Voraus für Ihre Hilfe. | Thank you very much for your help in advance. |
| Vielen Dank [im Voraus] für Ihre Hilfe und Ihr Verständnis/für Ihre Mühe und Hilfe. | Many thanks for your help [in advance] and your understanding/for your effort and help. |
| Vielen lieben Dank und ein schönes, hoffentlich sonniges Wochenende. | Thank you so much and a pleasant and hopefully sunny weekend. |
| Ich wünsche Ihnen ein frohes Osterfest und schöne Feiertage. | I wish you happy Easter and pleasant holidays. |
| Bis Mittwoch. | Til Wednesday |
| Nochmals vielen Dank. | Thank you very much again. |

CHAPTER 8

# In search of the missing grade

## Egalitarianism and deference in L1 and L2 students' emails to faculty members

Spyridoula Bella
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

The present study investigates the performance of email requests by L1 and L2 Greek University students to faculty members. Drawing from a corpus of authentic data the study seeks to highlight the differences in the way the two groups of students frame their requests in terms of both the structure of the whole speech event and the specific sociopragmatic means employed to achieve the lecturers' compliance. It is argued that the observed differences reflect different perceptions of the two groups in relation to the degree of entitlement to make the request, as well as different orientations along the egalitarianism/ deference axis. Implications for language teaching are explicated and discussed.

**Keywords**: email requests, Greek, egalitarianism, deference, sequence, move, appropriateness

### 1. Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that, despite the popularity and convenience of using email as a means of contact in personal relationships, writing emails in institutional contexts remains a challenge, especially when relationships are asymmetrical and hierarchical (see e.g., Baron 2002; Bella and Sifianou 2012; Biesenbach-Lucas 2007, 2009; Bjørge 2007; Chen 2006; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2018; Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch 2013; Stroínska and Ceccetto 2013). Therefore, it is not surprising that one area of email communication that has attracted considerable interest in the past decade is that between students and faculty members, especially when it involves requests directed from the former to the latter (see, e.g., Bella and Sifianou 2012; Biesenbach-Lucas 2006, 2007; Bloch 2002; Bou-Franch 2006, 2011; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, 2018; Félix-Brasdefer 2012; Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996; Merrison, Wilson, Davies and Haugh 2012; Savić 2018). The typically hierarchical relationship in which the lecturer has power over the student

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and "the legitimate right to exert influence by virtue of his/her institutionalized role" (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011: 3194) pose significant challenges for the students who need to attend to a number of issues, such as status-congruent language, face concerns and construction of acceptable identities in order to achieve the lecturers' compliance with their requests. Therefore, this kind of email interaction turns out to be particularly interesting from a sociopragmatic point of view.

Most relevant research to date has taken up an interlanguage pragmatic perspective focusing on comparisons between native and non-native speakers of English when performing email requests to faculty members (see e.g., Biesenbach-Lucas 2006, 2007; Chen 2015; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, 2018; Savić 2018). However, research involving other languages as L1s and/or L2s remains rather scarce. The current study seeks to partially fill this gap by investigating a small corpus of emails to faculty members produced by L1 and L2 Greek university students. Therefore, it aims to contribute to the growing body of relevant literature from a different cultural and linguistic perspective. Similar to previous research, the present study examines the differences in the linguistic devices the two groups employ to perform their requests in a specific situation which I will refer to as "the missing grade situation". However, unlike previous research, it focuses on how the two groups' linguistic choices reveal their perceptions regarding their entitlement to perform their request and negotiate their relationship with their lecturers as well as their own position as students in the institutional hierarchy.

The paper is structured as follows: The next section (Section 2) reviews literature and findings related to students' email requests. The specifics of the situation under examination (missing grade) and the method of the study are detailed in Sections 3 and 4, respectively. The findings (Section 5) are discussed in Section 6. The final section puts forward the conclusions of the study as well as some important implications for language teaching.

## 2. Background: Student's email requests

The fact that the bulk of the research on email requests initiated by students to faculty members has been conducted from an interlanguage pragmatics perspective (see, e.g., Biesenbach-Lucas 2006, 2007; Bloch 2002; Bou-Franch 2013; Chen 2015; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, 2012, 2018; Félix-Brasdefer 2012; Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996; Pan 2012; Savić 2018) is anything but surprising. After all, if writing emails to authority figures can be a "sticking point"[1] for native speakers,

1. The expression has been used originally by Beebe et al. (1990: 56) in regard to the complexities of the performance of refusals by L2 learners.

it is even more so for L2 users. This is not only because the latter's linguistic ability can be limited, but also because the norms and values of the L2 community can remain *terra incognita* for non-native speakers even in cases where their proficiency level is high and their length of stay in the target community extensive (see Bella 2011, 2012a).

On the other hand, the intriguing nature of requests has rendered them the "pampered" speech act of interlanguage pragmatics. Requests fall under the category of directives, which are considered attempts "to get the hearer to do an act which speaker wants hearer to do, and which is not obvious that the hearer will do in the normal course of events or hearer's own accord" (Searle 1969: 66). Therefore, the requested action is beneficial exclusively for the requester (Trosborg 1995) and, potentially damaging for the addressee's *negative face*, i.e., their need to have their freedom of action unimpeded (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61). Moreover, certain requests can be damaging for the speaker's positive face, since they can potentially reflect the speaker as less than a self-sufficient and independent individual. It follows that the felicitous performance of a request calls for a great deal of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic expertise on the part of the speakers, in order for compliance to be achieved and potential unwelcome effects on the participants to be reduced or mitigated.

Most of the relevant research to date has aimed at providing comparisons between the NSs' and L2 learners' production of email requests focusing mainly on the goals of the students' requests, their degree of directness and the content and frequency of the devices employed to modify them externally or internally (see Félix-Brasdefer 2012: 91). These studies have revealed that L2 users' emails contained various pragmatic infelicities,[2] such as unreasonable expectations, absence of openings and closings, inappropriate forms of address, inappropriately high levels of directness, informality where formality would be expected, lack of sufficient syntactic and/ or lexical modification, vague or non-credible grounders and no acknowledgement of the imposition (cf. Chen 2015: 132). These infelicities have been attributed to the language learners' inadequate pragmatic and sociopragmatic competence, the consequences of which can be socially disadvantageous in situations such as writing emails to authority figures, where politeness conventions and etiquette need to be followed (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2015: 2). The informality and directness often characterising L2 emails, in particular, has been causally connected to the L2 users' lack of training in composing emails to higher-status users and the "students' reliance on past email experience, mainly made up of informal exchanges with friends which is used as a template for email correspondence with

**2.** For thorough reviews of these studies, see Economidou-Kogetsidis (2012); Félix-Brasdefer (2012).

lecturers" (Chen 2015: 132; cf. Biesenbach-Lucas 2007; Bou-Franch 2013). It has also been argued that this informality and indirectness might result from the students (millennials mainly belonging to the instance messaging culture) treating their emails as formal text messages as well as to sending emails from a smart device (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2018: 505–506). These findings have led researchers and language teachers to emphasise the need for explicit teaching of email writing in the L2 classroom and to form concrete teaching proposals (see, e.g., Chen 2015; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2015).

However, in the current study, what was found to be most striking about the data was not the L2 users' pragmatic infelicities, but the differences in the way the two groups framed their requests in order to achieve the lecturers' compliance. Moreover, these differences appeared to have implications in regard to both the students' perceived entitlement to make the requests and their perceptions of their relationship to their lecturers. These issues, rather neglected in the interlanguage pragmatics literature, have been the focus of at least two studies that provide significant background for the current one: Bella and Sifianou (2012), and Merrison et al. (2012). Bella and Sifianou (2012) examined various types of email requests (concerning reference letters, extensions, information, appointments and clarification of problems with grades) initiated by Greek students to faculty members through a linguistic politeness perspective. They found that formality was a typical feature of those emails, but that the degree of formality employed reflected the perceived entitlement of the student to make the request and the perceived obligation of the faculty member to comply. The issue of entitlement was also central in Merrison et al.'s (2012) study which compared email requests to faculty members in a British and an Australian university in order to investigate the "cross-cultural nature of Englishes in these requesting events" (2012: 1077). The analysis of the means the two groups of students employed to achieve compliance revealed that "the degree of perceived entitlement to make a requesting *act* is inherent within the construction of the entire requesting *event*"[3] (2012: 1093). What is more, the two datasets were found to display different orientations along the axis of egalitarianism/ dependence, with Australian students' emails orienting more towards the former and the British ones towards the latter.

Based on the above and in line with Merrison et al. (2012), the present study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What do differences in linguistic choices and in the overall construction of the requesting event reveal about the perceived entitlement of the two student groups under examination when making a request?

3. Emphasis in the original.

2. How is the students' relationship with their lecturers evidenced in their email writing and how do they construct themselves as students in this institutional context?

## 3. The "missing grade" situation

As pointed out in Bella and Sifianou (2012), in the Greek academic context the very large number of students enrolled in any given course and the fact that attendance is not obligatory have significant repercussions for both the lecturer/student relationship and their overall interaction. Students, as a rule, know their teachers but not the other way round, which renders social distance rather high. At the same time, the relationship "is construed as highly power asymmetrical, with teachers having power as faculty members, in a society and an educational system, which cultivate power difference and formality in such contexts" (Bella and Sifianou 2012: 92; cf. Hirschon 2001). The requests under examination in the current study are those related to a "missing grade". Marking the students' exam papers certainly falls within the lecturers' duties. However, grades are provided to the students through the registry by means of an electronic platform (*mystudies*) rather than by the lecturers themselves. At the beginning of each semester the students have to 'declare' the courses that they will be attending through the platform. This procedure has a number of particularities: (a) depending on the semester, the number of courses that the students are entitled to declare varies (b) the students are entitled to choose optional courses from different departments and, (c) there is no limitation to the number of times that a student can resit the exam for a specific course. The complexities of the system render mistaken declarations of courses' choice a common occurrence and along with the vast number of students (it is possible that more than 500 students are sitting the exam for a specific module at the same time) can cause problems, the most common being a student not receiving a grade at all. Therefore, appealing to lecturers via email about a missing grade is rather common. Hence, focusing on one specific and commonly occurring type of email requests in the current study was considered a sound strategy for efficient comparative purposes.

Asking a lecturer to solve a missing grade problem is quite an imposition, not least because experience shows that it is, more often than not, the students' incorrect course declarations that trigger the problem in the first place. It goes without saying that this is not without exceptions, since there is always the chance that the grade was not properly registered due to an omission on the part of a lecturer dealing with hundreds of exam papers at the same time or a malfunction of the electronic platform. In any case, the lecturer has to spend time and effort looking for the particular exam paper of the particular semester and exam period, contact the registry and, of course, provide a reply to the student's email to offer information

and/or guidance on what needs to be done for the problem to be solved. Therefore, a request involving a missing grade in the Greek University context is a high imposition request which involves a series of actions and a considerable amount of time and effort on the part of the lecturer.

## 4. Method: Data, population and analytic tools

The data for the present study, a small corpus of 70 emails by native (L1S) and Greek L2 speakers (L2S) studying at the University of Athens, is a subset of a larger corpus of emails received in the course of six semesters by the researcher and a colleague. Since not many foreign students attend Greek Universities and because the study targeted a specific type of request (missing grade), the corpus included 35 emails from L2S. These L2S (19 male and 16 female) were all undergraduate students from various countries (Serbia, Moldavia, Russia, Syria, Iraq, China, Ukraine, Mexico, Libya). They were all considered advanced learners of Greek, since the Greek University demands certification of B2 level of proficiency[4] in Greek for students to qualify for undergraduate studies. Because the "missing grade" emails from L1S were considerably more than those of the L2S, the 35 emails of the former (were picked randomly to match the number of those of the L2S. Besides deleting all personal information (names, titles of courses etc.) and any sensitive/ confidential information, the passive consent approach was used.[5]

Following Bou-Franch (2006, 2011) and Bella and Sifianou (2012), the internal structure of the emails was analysed in terms of frame sequences (opening and closings) and content sequences (the main body of the email) with a focus on the latter. The former initiate and end the email and are considered "highly ritualistic and more interpersonally than informationally oriented" (Bou-Franch 2006: 70), while the latter are supposed to be mainly dealing with information. However, at least in the specific context investigated here, content sequences will be seen to function both informationally and interpersonally, i.e., to establish certain types of relationships between the students and their lecturers.

Frame and content sequences are comprised of moves, i.e., minimal units with distinctive functions (Bou-Franch 2011; Sinclair and Coulthard 1975; Stubbs 1983), often manifested by means of specific speech acts. The following section presents the findings regarding the sequences and moves of the two groups' emails. These findings will be discussed in Section 6.

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4. See Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001).

5. The students were asked to contact the researcher only in case they did not consent for their anonymised emails to be used for research purposes (see Merrison et al. 2012; Savić 2018).

## 5. The findings

The presentation of the findings to follow starts with the frame sequences and proceeds to the content sequences. The focus will be on what were considered to be the most interesting differences attested between the two datasets. The analysis is mainly qualitative, although some quantitative data will be provided when deemed necessary.

### 5.1 Opening sequence

Table 1 presents the main quantitative findings in regard to the moves contained in the opening sequences of the emails examined here.

**Table 1.** Distribution of moves in the openings sequences of the two groups

| | L1S = 35 | | L2S = 35 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **n** | **%** | **n** | **%** |
| Salutation | | | | |
| Address form | 6 | 17 | 9 | 25.7 |
| Address form +greeting | 29 | 83 | 26 | 74.3 |
| Self-identification | 35 | 100 | 35 | 100 |
| Apology | 0 | 0 | 13 | 37 |

As shown in Table 1, the opening sequences typically included two moves: (a) a salutation (e.g., *καλημέρα σας* 'goodmorning to you-$_{PL}$') and (b) a student self-identification (e.g., *ονομάζομαι XXX* 'my name is XXX').

The L1S opening sequences exhibited a remarkable uniformity. In their vast majority (83%) the pattern *title + surname+ greeting* (e.g., *Κυρία X, καλημέρα σας* 'Mrs X, goodmorning to you-$_{PL}$ ') was employed, although in some cases the greeting preceded the address form (e.g., *Καλημέρα σας, κυρία X* 'Good morning to you-$_{PL}$, Mrs X). In the rest of the emails (17%) the students employed *title + surname* (*Κυρία X*) omitting the greeting. The formality of the address terms and the use of the formal plural (V-form) were found to be a consistent feature of the opening sequences, as well as of the rest of the L1S emails, indicating that these students view their relationship with their lecturers as one of hierarchy and distance.

The self-identification included, as a rule, the name of the student and, in most cases, their registry number (e.g., *Ονομάζομαι XXX με αριθμό μητρώου XXX* 'My name is XXX with registry number XXX).

The main moves identified in the L1S opening sequences, i.e., salutation and self-identification, were also typical of the L2S opening sequences. However, L2S

salutations exhibited considerable variability, especially in terms of the address forms employed. Specifically, only six L2S (17.1%) employed an address form similar to the one that appeared to be typical of the L1S. The rest of the salutations varied from excessively formal to informal and even inappropriate in this context. Some examples are: *σεβαστέ κύριε X* ('respected Mr X'), *αξιότιμη κυρία X* ('honourable Mrs. X'), *αξιότιμε Δρ. X* (honourable Dr. X), *κυρία δασκάλα* ('Mrs teacher'), *αγαπημένη μου κυρία X* (my beloved Mrs X), *title +first name* (Mrs Spyridoula), *first name + last name* (Spyridoula Bella), *title + first name+ last name* (Mrs Spyridoula Bella). From those examples, the first two forms of address (*σεβαστέ κ. X* 'respected Mr X'), *αξιότιμη κυρία X* 'honourable Mrs. X'), are too formal and, therefore potentially infelicitous when referring to one's lecturer, whereas the rest can be considered rather inappropriate in this context. For instance, the term *δασκάλα* (teacher) attested in the address form *κυρία δασκάλα* ('Mrs teacher') is mainly used in Greek to refer to primary school teachers and can sound rather downgrading when directed to a university lecturer, whereas the form *αγαπημένη μου κυρία X* ('my beloved Mrs X') directed at a Professor with whom the students have no personal relations is highly inappropriate. Along similar lines, *Mrs+first name* is generally used by Greeks for people like friends of their parents, i.e., older people that they met as children, and is frowned upon in formal contexts, where the alternative *title+ surname* is considered the appropriate one. Still, highly formal address forms, reminiscent of formal letter writing practices, were considerably more frequent in the NNSs' data than informal or inappropriate ones.

Finally, an additional move in the form of an apology following the salutation and preceding the self-identification was often included (37%) in the L2 students' opening sequences. These apologies referred to the potential inconvenience caused by the student's email. The opening in (1) from the L2S' data exemplifies this pattern:

(1) [L2S]
*Αξιότιμη κυρία Μπέλλα,*
*Συγγνώμη που σας ενοχλώ. Είμαι ο XXX με ΑΜ XXX και είμαι φοιτητής στο μάθημα XXX.*
Honourable Mrs Bella,
I am sorry to bother you-$_{PL}$. I am XXX with registry number XXX and I am attending XXX (name of course).

## 5.2 Closing sequence

The main quantitative findings regarding the closing sequences' moves are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Distribution of moves in the closing sequences of the two groups

| | L1S = 35 | | L2S = 35 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **n** | **%** | **n** | **%** |
| Expression of gratitude | 29 | 83 | 34 | 97 |
| Request for reply | 21 | 60 | 2 | 5.7 |
| Apology | 1 | 2.9 | 27 | 77 |
| Sign off phrase | 7 | 20 | 16 | 45.7 |

As shown in Table 2, the most frequent move in the L1S closing sequences was the expression of gratitude attested in 29 out of the 35 emails (83%) and realised mainly with the expression *ευχαριστώ εκ των προτέρων* ('thank you in advance') or, simply, *ευχαριστώ* ('thank you'). Less frequent (4/35, 11.4%) was the maximisation of the expression of gratitude (*ευχαριστώ πολύ*, 'thank you very much') and the explicit reference to the imposition caused by the email (*ευχαριστώ (πολύ) για τον χρόνο σας*, 'thank you (very much) for your-$_{PL}$ time') (3/35, 8.6%).

The second most frequent move was a request for a reply (21/35, 60%), typically performed indirectly (*θα περιμένω απάντησή σας*, 'I will be waiting for your reply'/ *περιμένω απάντησή σας*, 'I am waiting for your-$_{PL}$ reply'), but also (in 6/35, 17% of the emails) performed directly by means of an imperative preceded by the marker *παρακαλώ* ('please') (e.g., *παρακαλώ απαντήστε μου* 'please reply-$_{PL}$ '). Only one of the students was found to employ a conventionally indirect form to perform such a request (*μπορείτε να μου απαντήσετε για να ξέρω τι να κάνω;* 'can you reply-$_{PL}$ so I know what to do?').

It is worth noting that the request for a reply stood alone only in three emails. In the rest of the L1S data, it appeared combined with an expression of gratitude always preceding the latter (e.g., *Θα περιμένω απάντησή σας. Ευχαριστώ* 'I will be waiting for your reply. Thank you'). Only seven (20%) of the L1S emails contained a sign off phrase (*Με εκτίμηση* 'With esteem'), while three of them (8.6%) lacked a closing sequence altogether.

In contrast, all of the L2S emails included a closing sequence, a finding that stands in sharp contrast to findings indicating absence of closings in L2 users' emails (see e.g., Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011; Li 2018). Once more, the expression of gratitude was found to be the most frequent move for closing the students' emails

(34/35, 97%). Unlike the L1S, these students tended to maximise their thanking expressions (*Ευχαριστώ (πάρα) πολύ*, 'Thank you (very) very much'). However, the formulaic expression '*Ευχαριστώ εκ των προτέρων*' ('Thank you in advance'), which was found to be particularly common in the L1S closings was attested only in two (5.7%) of the NNSs' emails. Furthermore, these students hardly ever asked either explicitly or implicitly for a reply. Instead, they combined their thanking with an apology (e.g., *Σας ευχαριστώ πολύ και σας ζητάω συγγνώμη για το λάθος* 'Thank you-$_{PL}$ very much and I apologise for the mistake'), a move that turned out to be the second most frequent in their closing sequences (27/35, 77%). The majority of these apologies referred to the imposition caused to the addressee by the action s/he possibly had to take in response to the email.

In contrast to the emails of the L1S, about half of the L2S' emails contained a sign off phrase (17/35, 49%). These students' sign off phrases were often markedly formal (e.g., *με τιμή* 'with honour', *μετά τιμής* 'with honour', *με εκτίμηση* 'with esteem').

## 5.3 Content sequence

The content sequences of the students' emails contained two main moves: (a) stating the goal of the email, i.e., the request and, (b) supporting the request, i.e., preparing the ground and/ or mitigating the request's impact (Bou-Franch 2006: 85). The analysis of the linguistic material employed by the students to perform these moves is based on Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper's (1989) taxonomy. The linguistic strategies performing the actual requesting move are analysed as *head acts*, whereas any strategies serving to support or mitigate their requests as *supporting moves* (see Blum-Kulka et al. 1989). Table 3 summarises the findings in relation to the use of head acts across the two groups.

As shown in Table 3, unlike L2S, L1S did not employ any mood derivables to express the requests, while want/need statements were almost completely absent from the L1S and rather rare in the L2S data. When attested in the L2S performance, both the mood derivable and the want statement tended to make explicit appeals to the professor's help (e.g., *κάντε κάτι* 'do$_{-plur}$ something', *πείτε μου τι μπορεί να γίνει* 'tell-$_{PL}$ me what can be done', *βοηθήστε με* 'help-$_{PL}$ me', *θέλω/ χρειάζομαι/ θα χρειαστώ τη βοήθειά σας* 'I want/need/will need your-$_{PL}$ help') and, therefore, had the pragmatic effect more of a plead than of a bald-on-record request.

At first glance, the strategy most frequently employed by the L1S was the hedged performative, a rather direct strategy in terms of which "the illocutionary verb denoting the requestive intent is modified, e.g., by modal verbs expressing intention" (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989: 279). However, a closer look at the data revealed

**Table 3.** Request head acts across the two groups

| Head ACT (HA) | Examples | L1S = 35 | | L2S = 35 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | *n* | % | *n* | % |
| Mood derivable | *βοηθήστε με* ('help me') | 0 | 0 | 6 | 12<br>14.6 |
| Want/need statement | *θέλω τη βοήθειά σας* ('I want your-PL help')/ *θα ήθελα να περάσετε τον βαθμό μου* ('I would like (you) to register-PL my grade' | 1 | 2.8 | 3 | 7.3 |
| Hedged performative | *θα ήθελα να σας ζητήσω να περάσετε τον βαθμό μου* ('I would like to ask you-PL to register-PL my grade')/ *θα ήθελα να ρωτήσω τι συμβαίνει με τον βαθμό μου* ' (I would like to ask what is happening with my grade') | 11 | 30.5 | 3 | 7.3 |
| Query preparatory | *μπορείτε να περάσετε τον βαθμό μου* ('can you-PL register my grade?') | 10 | 27.8 | 22 | 53.7 |
| Hint | *σας γράφω γιατί δεν έχει ανακοινωθεί ο βαθμός μου στο mystudies* ('I am writing to you because my grade has not been announced in *mystudies*')/ *θα ήθελα να σας ενημερώσω ότι δεν έχει περαστεί ο βαθμός μου* ('I would like to inform you that my grade has not been registered') | 10 | 27.8 | 6 | 14.6 |
| Other | | 4 | 11.1 | 1 | 2.5 |
| **Total HA** | | **36** | **100** | **41** | **100** |

that these students commonly employed the hedged performative to present a request for action as a request for information as in Example (2):

(2) [L1S]
*Καλησπέρα, κύριε XXX*
*Θα ήθελα να σας ρωτήσω αν υπάρχει κάποιο πρόβλημα με τον βαθμό μου στο μάθημα της XXX. Το έδωσα στην εξεταστική του Ιουνίου αλλά ακόμα δεν έχει περαστεί στο mystudies.*
*Θα περιμένω απάντησή σας*
*Σας ευχαριστώ εκ των προτέρων.*

Good afternoon, Mr. XXX
I would like to ask you-PL if there is some problem with my grade in XXX. I sat the exam in June, but it still has not been registered in *mystudies*.
I will be waiting for your-PL reply.
Thank you in advance.

In instances like (2), the hedged performative head act is possibly intended to minimise the imposition on the lecturer, since a request for information in this context is less demanding in terms of time and effort and, hence, less imposing than a request for action. Moreover, the Greek students quite frequently employed this strategy to produce a hint, i.e. a non-conventionally indirect strategy. That is, in a number of instances the students used the hedged performative to present their request as a piece of information that is relevant to the lecturer. The email in (3) is typical of this use:

(3) [L1S]
*Καλησπέρα σας, κυρία XXX.*
*Θα ήθελα να σας ενημερώσω ότι, ενώ είχα δηλώσει το μάθημα κανονικά, ο βαθμός μου στην XXX δεν φαίνεται στο σύστημα.*
*Σας ευχαριστώ*

Good afternoon, Mrs. XXX,
I would like to inform you-$_{PL}$, that although I had properly declared the course, my grade in XXX (name of course) does not appear on the system.
Thank you

In Example (3), the student presents the goal of his email as 'merely letting the professor know' about the problem without explicitly asking for any action on her part. That is, he presents his email as relevant to the professor's right and (possibly) need to know that something is wrong with the grade while refraining from explicitly asking the lecturer to do anything about it. The expectation that the professor has to actually spend some time and effort to solve the issue is only reflected in the use of the thanking expression closing the email. This use of the hedged performative dispenses the student from having to provide any explanations that might have to imply blame for any of the parties involved. That is, since no real request has been made, there is nothing to be corroborated or explained. Therefore, moves like those were classified as hints where "the illocutionary intent is not immediately derivable from the locution; however, the locution refers to relevant elements of the intended illocutionary and/ or propositional act" (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989: 280). That is, these moves were treated as falling into the same category with prototypical uses of hints such as the one in (4), where the student merely states the reason for writing the email and leaves it to the lecturer to read the request 'between the lines'. Once again, the 'in advance' thanking for the lecturer's reply is the only pointer to the action to be taken by the lecturer.

(4) [L1S]
*Κυρία Χ,*
*Με συγχωρείτε για την ενόχληση. Σας γράφω γιατί ο βαθμός μου στο μάθημα της ΧΧΧ δεν υπάρχει στο mystudies και ανησυχώ.*
*Σας ευχαριστώ εκ των προτέρων για την απάντησή σας*
*Με εκτίμηση,*

Mrs X,
I apologise for bothering you-$_{PL}$ I am writing to you-$_{PL}$ because my grade in XXX does not appear in *mystudies* and I am worried.
Thank you-$_{PL}$ in advance for your-$_{PL}$ reply
With esteem,
XXX

It is worth noting that the hedged performative was employed by the L1S exclusively to perform hints or information requests. No 'prototypical' uses of the hedged performative (e.g., *θα ήθελα να σας ζητήσω να περάσετε τον βαθμό μου* 'I would like [I would want$_{lit.}$] to ask you-$_{PL}$ to register my grade') were instantiated in their data. In contrast, the few instances of the hedged performative attested in the L2S data was exactly of this 'prototypical' sort.

Of particular interest was the difference between the two groups in the use of query preparatories, i.e., "utterances containing reference to preparatory conditions (e.g., ability, willingness)" (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989: 18)). As shown in Table 1, the L2S used twice as many manifestations of this strategy as the L1S. In fact, the query preparatory was the strategy that exhibited by far the highest frequency in the L2S data. What was more impressive than this quantitative difference *per se*, however, was the difference in the way the query preparatories were employed by the two groups in relation to their choice of request perspective, verifying the latter's role as "an important source of variation in requests" (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989: 19; cf. Ogiermann and Bella 2020). Specifically, requests can be hearer-oriented (*can you do it?*) emphasising the role of the hearer, or speaker-oriented (*can I do it?*) shifting the agency towards the speaker. Alternatively, they can be phrased as impersonal (*can it be done?*) or as inclusive (*can we do it?*). The query preparatories that emerged in the L1S data were, as a rule (9/10), phrased as impersonal, as in Example (5).

(5) [L1S]
*Λόγω ενός προβλήματος με τη Γραμματεία δεν έχει περαστεί ο βαθμός μου της εξεταστικής του Σεπτεμβρίου. Ωστόσο την Παρασκευή το πρόβλημα διορθώθηκε και το μάθημα δηλώθηκε κανονικά. Μπορεί ο βαθμός μου να περαστεί τώρα;*

Due to a problem with the registry my grade of the September examination period has not been registered. However, on Friday the problem was fixed and the course has been declared properly. Can my grade be registered now?

As seen in (5), after explaining how the problem came about (due to a problem with the registry), the student employs a query preparatory to perform her request (*Μπορεί ο βαθμός μου να περαστεί τώρα;* 'Can my grade be registered now?'). No mention of the agent of the request is made since the request perspective of choice is the impersonal. Only one instance of inclusive perspective (*μπορούμε να κάνουμε ό,τι χρειάζεται για να περαστεί κανονικά ο βαθμός;* 'Can we do what is necessary for the grade to be properly registered?' ) and one of hearer perspective (*είναι εφικτό να περάσετε τον βαθμό μου;* [is it possible that you$_{\text{-plur}}$ register my grade?][6] 'is it possible for you to register my grade?') emerged in the L1S data. In contrast, all the L2S query preparatories were found to be hearer-oriented (e.g., *μπορείτε να βοηθήσετε;* 'can you-$_{\text{PL}}$ help-$_{\text{PL}}$ me?' *μπορείτε να περάσετε τον βαθμό μου;* 'can you-$_{\text{PL}}$ register-$_{\text{PL}}$ my grade?').

With the exception of a couple of apologies, grounders, (i.e. explanations of the reasons that motivated the email) were the most frequent supporting moves emerging from the L1S data. These grounders occurred mainly to support query preparatory head acts and, less frequently, head acts performed by means of the hedged performative (when the latter was used to express a request for information). Examples (6) and (7) are indicative of the use of grounders along with the two head act strategies.

(6) [L1S]
*Θα ήθελα απλά να σας πω ότι δεν έχει περαστεί ο βαθμός του μαθήματός σας στο mystudies παρόλο που το μάθημα είχε δηλωθεί και θα ήθελα να ρωτήσω αν υπήρξε κάποιο πρόβλημα ή απλά είναι θέμα χρόνου.*

I simply wanted to tell you-$_{\text{PL}}$ that my grade of your-$_{\text{PL}}$ XXX course has not been registered in *mystudies*, although the course had been declared, and I would like to ask you if there was some problem or it is just a matter of time.

(7) [L1S]
*Είχα δώσει το μάθημά σας XXX και το είχα περάσει αλλά έγινε ένα λάθος με τη δήλωση και δεν έχει βγει ο βαθμός. Πιστεύετε πως μπορεί να διευθετηθεί;*

I have sat the exam for your-$_{\text{PL}}$ XXX course and have passed it but there has been a mistake with the course declaration and the grade has not been announced. Do you think- $_{\text{PL}}$ it can be arranged?

In (6) and (7) (and throughout the corpus of the L1S as well as the L2S data) the grounders provided were what Merrison et al. (2012: 1089) call *institutional accounts*, i.e., explanations usually relating to the University or, in general, the

**6.** Notice that even in this case, the hearer perspective emerges only in the complement of the impersonal structure *είναι εφικτό* 'is it feasible', since no modal verb is used.

educational context. Notice that grounders in these emails work towards both explaining the reasons for writing the email (*δεν έχει περαστεί ο βαθμός του μαθήματός σας στο mystudies* ' my grade […] has not been registered in *mystudies, δεν έχει βγει ο βαθμός* 'the grade has not been announced') as well as giving an -often implicit- explanation of why this is the case. The grounder *παρόλο που το μάθημα είχε δηλωθεί* ('although the course had been declared') implies that the student is not to blame for the problem and, therefore, the lecturer has to look elsewhere for its causes, whereas *έγινε ένα λάθος με τη δήλωση* ('there has been a mistake with the course declaration') is ambiguous in putting the blame either on the student or on the registry, but definitely not the lecturer.

It becomes evident that the use of grounders in this context is inevitably connected to the assignment of responsibility and/ or blame. That is, in order to account for the problem, the students have to refer to the relevant circumstances. As already mentioned, those circumstances can only have arisen due to the student's, the registrar's or the professor's not taking the necessary action for the grade to show on the system. Looking closely at (6) and (7) (and also (5)), it becomes obvious that the systematic avoidance of naming explicitly any of the involved parties observed in the NSs' use of query preparatories with impersonal perspective expands to the phrasing of grounders through the systematic use of passive constructions (δεν *έχει περαστεί ο βαθμός μου* ('my grade has not been registered'), *το πρόβλημα διορθώθηκε* ('the problem has been solved'), *το μάθημα δηλώθηκε/ δεν δηλώθηκε* ('the course was/was not declared'), *ο βαθμός δεν έχει βγει* 'the grade has not been announced'). These constructions allow the omission of agents which has the effect "of emphasising *what* was done rather than *who* did it"[7] (Fleischman 2001: 479). No such attempt for 'impersonalisation' was attested in the NNS's grounders. On the contrary, their grounders exhibited a strong tendency for assuming personal responsibility for the missing grade. Examples (8) and (9) are typical of this use of grounders.

(8) [L2S]
*Σας γράφω γιατί έκανα ένα τρομερό λάθος. Έδωσα το μάθημά σας χωρίς να το δηλώσω και τώρα ο βαθμός μου δεν υπάρχει στον κατάλογο. Με συγχωρείτε πολύ που έκανα αυτό. Μπορείτε να κάνετε κάτι τώρα; Μπορείτε να μου πείτε τι πρέπει να κάνω για να έχω τον βαθμό μου;*

I am writing to you-$_{PL}$ because I made a terrible mistake. I sat the exam for your-$_{PL}$ course without having declared it and now my grade is not in the list. I am very sorry I did that. Can you-$_{PL}$ do-$_{PL}$ something now? Can you-$_{PL}$ tell-$_{PL}$ me what I should do in order to have my grade?

7. Emphasis in the original.

(9) [L2S]
*Μήπως μπορείτε να με βοηθήσετε; Ο βαθμός μου στο μάθημά σας δεν φαίνεται στο mystudies. Μάλλον δεν το δήλωσα σωστά. Όπως ξέρετε, είμαι ξένος και δεν γνωρίζω καλά το σύστημα. Ζητάω συγγνώμη για το πρόβλημα που σας κάνω.*
Can you-$_{PL}$ perhaps help-$_{PL}$ me? My grade for your-$_{PL}$ course does not appear in *mystudies*. Probably, I did not make the declaration properly. As you know, I am a foreigner so I do not know the system that well. I apologise for the problem I am causing you-$_{PL}$.

In both (8) and (9) the students state the problem that motivated the email pre- and/or post-posing accounts that point to themselves as responsible for the problem, even if they are not sure this is the case. Self-blame and even self-denigration (e.g., *είμαι απαράδεκτή* 'I am unacceptable', *είμαι ασυγχώρητος* 'I am inexcusable') were remarkably common in the LS2 data, appearing in 20 of the 35 emails. What is also noteworthy, is that these instances of self-denigration emerged in (5) out of the (6) cases in which the L2S employed the most direct strategy, i.e., the imperative to express their request, as exemplified in (10).

(10) [L2S]
*Σας γράφω επειδή δεν δήλωσα το μάθημα όπως έπρεπε και δεν έχω βαθμό. Ξέρω ότι είμαι απαράδεκτη αλλά παρακαλώ βοηθήστε με γιατί είναι το τελευταίο μου μάθημα για να πάρω το πτυχίο μου.*
I am writing to you-$_{PL}$ because I did not declare your-$_{PL}$ course as I should have and I do not have a grade. I know I am inexcusable but please help-$_{PL}$ me because it is the last grade I need to get my degree.

The imperative *βοηθήστε με* ('help-$_{PL}$ me') in (10) combined with the marker *παρακαλώ* ('please') and preceded by the self-denigrating comment *ξέρω ότι είμαι απαράδεκτη* ('I know I am unacceptable') creates the effect of pleading eliminating the directness usually attributed to requests expressed by means of the mood derivable.

A final striking difference between the two groups' emails involved the use of apologies. The L1S were found to employ very few apologies (only 5 in the whole corpus). These apologies appeared mainly at the opening or closing sequence and referred to the trouble the email might have caused (e.g., *ζητώ συγγνώμη για την αναστάτωση* 'I apologise for the inconvenience', *ζητώ συγγνώμη που σας ενοχλώ* 'I am sorry to bother you-$_{PL}$'). The L2S, on the other hand, made far more frequent use of apologies. In fact, all but three of their emails contained at least one apology which occurred either in the opening sequence in a fashion similar to that of the L1S or/and in the content sequences. Its function in the latter was to express the student's regret for the mistake that caused the problem with the grade, as was shown in Examples (8) and (9).

## 6. Discussion

The findings of the current study indicated that the L2 users' email requests do not exhibit the problems most commonly reported in previous studies (see Section 2), the only exception being some infelicitous address forms in the opening sequences. Other than that, the L2S' emails contained adequate openings and closings, appropriate status congruent language, high degree of formality, systematic acknowledgement of responsibility, acknowledgement of the imposition on the lecturer and appropriate degree of indirectness. Therefore, it is not pragmatic infelicities that surface as the distinctive feature of the L2S data. This can be attributed to a number of factors including the advanced L2 proficiency of the L2S of this study along with the increased opportunities for interaction with native speakers that their status as Greek University students allows them. Moreover, since previous research on the use and development of Greek L2 learners has repeatedly shown that these learners indicate a significantly higher degree of sociopragmatic competence in formal rather than informal situations (see Bella 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c),[8] the formality of the situation could be an additional factor.

However, certain differences between LS2 and L1S did emerge. I suggest that these differences are related to the different approaches the two groups took to achieve compliance with their requests, which in turn reflect different orientations towards the speech event under examination, as well as different ways of constructing their identities as students. This leads us back to the research questions posed in the beginning of this paper and involved (i) the implications of the observed differences in linguistic choices and the overall construction of the speech event in regard to the two student groups' perceived entitlement to make the request, and (ii) the way the students' email writing constructs their relationships with their lecturers as well as their own identities as students. The discussion to follow aims at answering these questions which, in light of the data, I consider interrelated.

The openings and closings of the L1S of this sample were found to be routinised and formulaic to a great extent. Despite its oral-like character, the address form *title+surname* that was found to be preferred by those students remains rather deferential and formal, although not as formal as some of the choices made by their L2S counterparts. Moreover, since "the opening sequence functions as a social pointer or reminder of the relationship that holds between co-participants" (Bou-Franch 2006: 90), both the formality of the address forms and the consistent use of the plural of formality (V-form) highlight the L1S perception of the relationship as one

**8.** Bella (2012a, 2012c) explains this finding as a result of teaching practices that tend to equate politeness with formality and, therefore, puts stronger emphasis on the teaching of language forms associated with formality.

of distance and hierarchy where the student is of a lower status than the lecturer. At the same time, L1S participants' closings were not as straightforward as their openings in the sense that they could be viewed as rather ambivalent in regard to the attitude they project: on the one hand, L1S appeared to play by the rules of the academic hierarchy game closing their emails by means of thanking expressions and, thus, acknowledging the indispensable role of the lecturer for the accomplishment of their requestive goal and their indebtness to him/her; on the other, they did not hesitate to directly or indirectly, but in any case rather presumptuously, ask for a reply, indicating that the lecturer's attention and his/her response are expected and even taken for granted.[9]

Unlike L1S, L2S were found to present remarkable variability in their opening sequences, especially in their choice of address forms, although they mainly tended towards the use of increased formality. This variability, which occasionally led them to rather infelicitous choices, could probably be attributed to lack of adequate sociopragmatic competence for handling this specific genre. It is possible that those that opted for the more formal manifestations resorted to some dated letter writing manual, while others just improvised when choosing address forms. As for their closing sequences, L2S, just like L1S, were found to consistently use thanking expressions. However, unlike their L1S counterparts they refrained from asking the lecturer for a reply. Instead, they tended to apologise for the trouble they had caused to the lecturer. The most plausible interpretation for this difference in the two groups' closing patterns would be that the L2S compensate for the explicitness in the content sequence by opting not to add a second request on top of the main one. The L1S, on the other hand, compensate for quite the opposite. Since, as shown in the previous section, their requests were rather implicit in various ways and/ or presented as requests for information, the final request for a reply highlights the fact that, indeed, some kind of action on the part of the lecturer is expected.

Regarding content moves, the systematic use of hints as well as requests for information rather than action on the part of the L1S appears to foreground the perceived common ground between students and lecturers. That is, by employing these strategies, the L1S implicitly evoke the common knowledge of this particular academic community about the course of action that needs to be taken in cases of missing grades. At the same time, the use of these strategies permits them to exploit this common ground in order to avoid appearing imposing and demanding by explicitly making a request for action.

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**9.** Although it can, rather safely, be claimed that this is typical of the Greek native speakers' "missing grade" emails, it does not appear to be so for other types of email requests. Bella and Sifianou (2012) have shown that the type of the request (reference letter, extension, grade etc.) plays a decisive role in the students' choice of strategies.

Along similar lines, the extensive use of impersonal perspective and passivisation, not only moves the spotlight away from 'delicate' issues of responsibility and blame, but also makes it possible to present the problem of the missing grade as one that concerns the specific academic community as a whole rather than one individual student. In other words, through impersonalisation and passivisation, the L1S implicitly highlight the fact that there is a problem that concerns equally all parties involved and, therefore, it needs the consideration and cooperation of all parties in order to be solved. This is in line with the consistent use of institutional grounders usually referring vaguely to "some problem" with the registry and/ or the electronic platform. The latter can also be considered a means of hinting to the stereotype of lack of organisation in Greek public institutions and, hence, can function as an additional means of appealing to common ground between the Greek students and their lecturers.

In contrast, the L2S sequential and linguistic choices, as a whole, have the form of appeals for help with the lecturer being singled out explicitly as the agent of the act to be performed, i.e., as the person that can provide the help. The extensive use of query preparatories and hearer-oriented perspective, the pleading-like imperatives as well as the instances of self-denigration that were found to be typical of these emails contribute to the construction of the identity of these students as individuals in need, that present themselves as helpless and, thus, dependent on the hierarchically superior lecturers. These students' readiness to assume responsibility and blame for the missing grade, as well as the extensive use of apologies in their data, corroborate their projected identity as weak and ineffectual. At the same time, both those choices are possibly aimed to portray them as responsible students who acknowledge their inadequacies and appeal to their more potent and effective superiors in order to overcome them.

The differences between the two groups discussed above make the distinction of orientations along the axis of egalitarianism/ deference particularly relevant. It seems that similar to Merrison et al.'s (2012) British students, the L2S of this sample in this particular situation construct themselves as of a lower social standing in relation to their lecturers, rather helpless beings (Merrison et al. 2012) that are dependent on the lecturers' help in order to respond to the demands of the academic community. In this sense, they can be seen as displaying what Merrison et al. (2012: 1093) call "deferential dependence".

In contrast, the L1S, appear to orient more towards egalitarianism, in that by tending both to impersonalise and evoke common ground between themselves and their lecturers, they emphasise the co-membership of themselves and their lecturers in the same community of practice. Nevertheless, the consistency of formality and, especially, the plural of formality emerging in those students' emails does not allow one to go as far as speaking of an "egalitarian interdependence" orientation like the

one claimed by Merrison et al. (2012) for their Australian students. However, since egalitarianism does not preclude deference and vice versa, it could be suggested that the L1S of this sample exhibit a deferential(-egalitarian) interdependence orientation, at least in this particular situation.

In my view, the different orientations described above are closely connected to the perceived entitlement to make the request on the part of the students. According to Bella and Sifianou (2012: 93), the ways students' email requests to their lecturers are built in regard both to the interrelation of the three main components of these emails (openings, closings and content), as well as the linguistic material employed to express and mitigate them, reflect the "students' perceptions of their right to perform their request and the teachers' obligation to grant it". In other words, the degree of the students' perceived entitlement to make a particular request is "inherent within the construction of the entire requesting event, along with the contigencies that may be involved in the recipient granting the request" (Merrison et al. 2012: 1078). In the current study, the linguistic means that each group employs to achieve compliance and the way each group orients towards the relationship with the lecturer, unavoidably reflect a difference in the perceived entitlement to perform the request, with the L1S projecting a higher degree of entitlement than their L2S counterparts.

It is highly likely that both the low degree of entitlement and the helplessness reflected in the L2S' behaviour is related to those students' status as foreigners that are not as certain about their academic rights and obligations as native students. Moreover, being foreign, potentially, deprives those students of the sense of "in-groupness" that comes naturally for the L1S group and leads them to construct themselves as of a lower social standing in relation to their lecturers. Future research including retrospective interviews could lead to safer conclusions as to the exact source of the differences in the two groups' behaviour observed here.

## 7. Conclusions and implications for language teaching

This study focused on the differences in the sociopragmatic means employed by native and non-native Greek University students when performing requests to faculty members in a specific situation. It attempted to show that the observed differences have implications in relation to how the two groups under examination construct their identities as students, as well as to how they appear to perceive the teacher-student relationship and, consequently their entitlement to perform the request. Although the study must be taken with the caveat that it is a preliminary one, drawing from relatively small data samples and one single situation, it has hopefully managed to foreground some issues that tend to be neglected in the

interlanguage pragmatics research tradition and to trigger interest in future relevant research. Moreover, the findings of the study highlight the fact that research on computer-mediated communication practices, like student-teacher emails, can reveal "both shared […] understandings of the activity underway and shared […] identities that can be signaled through the activity" (Georgakopoulou 2004: 33).

One question that naturally arises concerns what findings like the ones presented imply about teaching theory and practice. It would be naïve to claim that linguistic competence has nothing to do with the differences observed in the two datasets under examination. It is plausible that the L1S native competence allows them greater access to rather complex linguistic devices like hinting, passivisation, manipulation of request perspective and formulaic expressions as well as to their combinations for the 'strategic' expression of their communicative goals. It would also be naïve to ignore the impact that the 'foreign status' of the L2S mentioned above might have on the construction of their identity as the weak links of the academic chain.

However, none of the above observations can safely lead to the conclusion that L1S students' linguistic behaviour is the appropriate one in this particular context. Despite the expanding interest in non-native speakers' infelicitous email request performance, several researchers have pointed out that sociopragmatic failure, inappropriate linguistic choices and non-observation of suitable politeness conventions are not encountered solely in L2 users' email requests but also occur in email requests performed by NSs (see, e.g., Bella and Sifianou 2012; Biesenbach-Lucas 2009; Stroínska and Ceccetto 2013). This could mean that in the case of students' emails to faculty, the native speakers' choices, systematic as they may be, are not necessarily more sociopragmatically appropriate and, hence, they cannot be safely considered as the "norm" to which foreign students' emails can be compared and from which implications for language teaching should be drawn. In the case of the present data, the degree of appropriacy of the L1S performance could only be verified through analysing the lecturers' perceptions and evaluations of these email requests. A pilot study of the lecturers' perceptions of both the L1S and L2S emails of the current study (Bella forthcoming) shows that in some cases lecturers tend to prefer the L2S style as "more sincere and less manipulative". When Biesenbach-Lucas (2007: 62) argues that determining the appropriacy of a student-to-faculty email is like "shooting to a moving target", she does not only refer to L2, but also to L1 emails. It is, therefore, promising that the perceptions of the students' emails by the lecturers increasingly becomes an object of investigation (see e.g., Economidou-Kogetsidis 2018; Savić 2018). In fact, I believe that this type of studies is a prerequisite for any solid teaching suggestions to be put forward. After all, "appropriateness is an 'ideological' category, which is linked to particular partisan positions within a politics of language" (Fairclough 1995: 234). In other words, "appropriateness is ideologically

situated in different sociocultural contexts and those who have less power need to […] follow the standards of appropriateness set by those who are on the dominant side in order to communicate successfully" (Chen 2015: 36).

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CHAPTER 9

# "You are the best!"

## Relational practices in emails in English at a Norwegian university

Milica Savić and Miodrag Đorđević
University of Stavanger / University of Niš

This study investigates relational practices in developing email conversations between interactants performing various institutional roles at a Norwegian university. Three variables were examined: conversational progression, institutional roles, and social distance. Conversational progression was found to exert an influence on increasing familiarity in closing sequences. The openings and closings in the conversations between faculty members tended to orient to familiarity to a greater extent than in most other institutional role dyads, while the widest variety and the highest frequency of relational moves outside the framing moves appeared in faculty – PhD fellow conversations. Social distance was identified as a driver of deference in both openings and closings, while its influence on the frequency of occurrence of other relational moves was limited.

**Keywords**: relational practices, institutional emails, conversational progression, institutional roles, social distance

### 1. Introduction and background

This chapter sets out to explore relational practices in email communication in English at a Norwegian university. Relational practices are regarded as "other-oriented behavior at work" (Holmes and Schnurr 2005: 142) and as orienting to "constructing and maintaining good relations at work" (p. 161). In a similar vein, but without an explicit reference to "good relations", relational work is viewed as "all aspects of the work invested by individuals in the construction, maintenance, reproduction and transformation of interpersonal relationships among those engaged in social practice" (Locher and Watts 2008: 96).

The overarching aim of the chapter is to reveal how relationships between interactants performing different institutional roles are negotiated as email conversations unfold and whether relational practices are affected by the social distance

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between interactants. The interactants in the current study include faculty members, administrative staff, PhD fellows, and MA students. Thus, this study takes the interpersonal pragmatics perspective (Haugh, Kádár and Mills 2013), primarily concerned with exploring the ways in which "social actors use language to shape and form relationships in situ" (Locher and Graham 2010: 1). In line with a broadly discursive perspective, interpersonal relationships are regarded as dynamic, arising from and shaped in situated institutional interactions through the email medium. At the same time, it is recognised that "interactants draw on complex and multifaceted representations of the self developed in previous interactions, which they negotiate and renegotiate in emergent interaction" (Locher 2013: 147).

Relational aspects of communication have been found to play a significant role in workplace discourse, even when the focus is on the accomplishment of work-related tasks (e.g., Holmes 2000; Koester 2004, 2010). With the email medium becoming "an important – or perhaps even *the most* important – means of communication in the workplace" (Koester 2010: 34), the past two decades have seen a number of studies on various linguistic strategies, including, for example, the use of a range of lexical, grammatical, semantic and pragmatic resources, evaluative language, emoticons, opening and closing sequences, employed in emails to create a supportive working environment (e.g., Ho 2010, 2014; Kankaanranta 2005; McKeown and Zhang 2015; Skovholt, Grønning and Kankaanranta 2014; Waldvogel 2007). Since email has become "the most preferred, pervasive and efficient means of communication between students and instructors" (Félix-Brasdefer 2012: 223), thus replacing face-to-face communication in academic environments to a considerable degree, its potential for performing social functions in academia has become a growing research area. However, most studies have examined student emails to faculty (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011, 2016, 2018; Félix-Brasdefer 2012; Savić 2018, 2019) rather than focusing on other interactants in academic email communication. Moreover, relational practices have almost exclusively been investigated through framing moves (Kankaanranta 2005), i.e. email opening sequences (greeting, self-identification) and closing sequences (expressions of gratitude, good wishes, leave-taking, signature), these being "mainly phatic, interpersonally loaded structural slots, mostly empty of content regarding the goal or reason for the interaction" (Bou-Franch 2011: 1773). Alternatively, relational practices have been examined through various aspects of email requests (e.g., Economidou-Kogetsidis 2016, 2018; Ho 2010, 2014). Scant, if any, attention has been devoted to other relational practices, such as the use of humour or compliments, in academic emails, to the best of our knowledge.

In contrast, relational work in face-to-face workplace interactions has been investigated extensively and its central role has been acknowledged. It has even been suggested that it cannot always be clearly separated from transactional

exchanges, focusing primarily on work-related tasks (e.g., Koester 2004, 2010). Koester (2004: 1425) holds that "participants in workplace simultaneously pursue transactional and relational goals" and proposes that relational goals can be observed at various levels of discourse, from interpersonal markers in individual turns to full non-transactional conversations (Koester 2010: 97). In the British university context, in a departmental office for undergraduate administration and teaching, Koester (2010) found that relational talk (small talk and humor in particular) plays a central role both between close colleagues and with students, faculty members and visitors. Overall, in a number of workplace settings examined, more relational talk was identified in encounters with visitors and/or customers than between colleagues, suggesting "the importance of phatic communion for relationship-building when the relationship is not so well-established" (Koester 2010: 106).

Given the significant role of relational work in institutional discourse, the present study explores relational practices in institutional email communication, by addressing the following research questions:

1. Does conversational progression, i.e. the position of the email within the unfolding conversation, affect relational practices? If so, how?
2. Do institutional roles of the interactants affect relational practices in email conversations? If so, how?
3. Does the social distance between the interactants affect relational practices? If so, in which ways?

The present study views relationships both as a context and as a process (Haugh, Kádár and Mills 2013: 2), i.e. both as "resid[ing] in the subjectivities of individual persons" and "in the intersubjectivities of two or more persons interlinked through ongoing interactions" (Haugh, Kádár and Mills 2013: 4). While these two positions may be considered contradictory, we align with Locher's (2013: 147) argument that:

> Interactants do not approach other interactants in a particular speech event with a tabula rasa mind. They make analogies to previously experienced interactions and draw on expectations derived from their knowledge of these frames (Tannen, 1993: 53). Frames entail knowledge on interactional conventions, roles, and procedures and are acquired in socialization processes; as such they include the expected norms of a particular practice.

The research questions reflect this view by regarding institutional roles and social distance as potential drivers of relational practices, and at the same time focusing on unfolding conversations as a site for negotiating and reshaping existing relationships.

While none of the issues addressed in the research questions have thus far been researched extensively, previous research has nevertheless found that "opening

and closing formulae [are] not used as meaningless design features" (McKeown and Zhang 2015: 104), but rather perform a range of socio-pragmatic functions in the workplace (Kankaanranta 2005; McKeown and Zhang 2015; Waldvogel 2007), "whether in relation to an aspect of an interlocutor's identity […]; the specific context […]; or issues related to the text as an evolving entity (e.g., conversational progression)" (McKeown and Zhang 2015: 104). The number of studies examining unfolding email conversations has been comparatively small, but the few that have been conducted (Bou-Franch 2011; McKeown and Zhang 2015) reveal that "as the interaction unfolds, users seem to perceive less need to do complex interpersonal work through openings and closings and, after breaking the ice in the initial contact, negotiate their relationship toward greater informality" (Bou-Franch 2011: 1783). In relation to the second research question, "institutional power" (Bou-Franch 2011), "institutional status" (McKeown and Zhang 2015), or "status" (Waldvogel 2007) in various institutional settings have been found to affect opening sequences more consistently than closing sequences. Regarding social distance, McKeown and Zhang (2015: 104) argue that "greater formality may be expected […] in situations in which there is a degree of social distance".

The studies by McKeown and Zhang (2015) and Bou-Franch (2011) are particularly relevant in relation to the current study as they are among the few that have examined conversational progression. McKeown and Zhang (2015) set out to determine which socio-pragmatic variables influenced in/formality in email openings and closings in a data set consisting of 387 emails collected in a private company in Britain. Multivariate regression analysis was employed to investigate the impact of 24 independent variables, the position of the email in the conversation and social distance being among them. Conversational progression was found to be a driver of informality in the openings, while social distance was identified as a driver of formality in openings and closings alike.

Bou-Franch (2011) examined the influence of two variables on opening and closing practices in academic emails written in Peninsular Spanish: institutional power and conversational progression. The corpus consisted of 100 short email conversations, each comprising two or three exchanges, evenly distributed in two groups: lecturer-lecturer conversations and student-lecturer conversations. The two investigated variables turned out to affect opening and closing practices to a considerable degree. With regard to institutional power, its influence was particularly apparent in the opening sequences. Student emails to lecturers were found to "stand out as being markedly affected by power patterns" (1783). In lecturer emails to students, i.e., "emails sent down the hierarchy", "less elaborated forms of sociability were expected and the formal norms within the institutional setting appeared to be more relaxed" (1783). Conversational progression also influenced

discourse practices in openings and closings, with non-initial emails displaying "less elaboration and more intimacy" (1783). Leave-taking practices, generally orienting to respect building, were less affected, "only show[ing] a slight move towards somewhat less deference" as conversations progressed.

The Norwegian university context, in which the present study was conducted, is typically described as rather informal and "based on teacher-student equality" (Bjørge 2007: 67), possibly emerging from the egalitarianism of the country as a whole, which Røkaas (2000) also relates to the scarce use of titles and honorifics regardless of the context. This is reflected in Norway's ranking on Hofstede's (2001) power-distance index scale, which, despite having been criticised for being reductionist in some respects, may still prove "useful as a starting point for understanding ways in which the values underlying communication may vary" (Yates 2010: 298). This general informality was also acknowledged by the Norwegian and international university lecturers in Savić's (2018) lecturer perception study of im/politeness and in/appropriateness in student emails. In their interpretations of student email requests, they repeatedly drew on contextual considerations, making allowances for the students' informality based on the Norwegian context, testifying to the highly situated nature of institutional email communication (e.g., Merrison, Wilson, Davies and Haugh 2012).

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Context

Norwegian universities are becoming increasingly more international in terms of both the student population and staff, which has affected the status of English in academic settings. According to the Database for Statistics on Higher Education (DBH, http://dbh.nsd.uib.no/), there was a steady increase in both international and exchange student numbers at almost all Norwegian higher education institutions in the period leading up to the present study (2012–2015). Additionally, the university where the data was collected prioritises internationalisation in its Institutional Strategy. At the time of the study, international students comprised 11% of the student population at the university, and roughly 15% of the university staff were international (according to the statistics provided by the human resources department). As a result, English is employed increasingly more frequently as a lingua franca (ELF), which is why email communication in English is examined in this study.

## 2.2 Data

A total of 558 authentic institutional email conversations, comprising over 2000 individual emails, were collected in the autumn semester of 2016. Following an email sent to all the employees' institutional email addresses at a university in Norway, eleven employees volunteered to participate in the study: five doctoral fellows, four faculty members, and two administrative staff members. With regard to their first language (L1) background, six participants were native speakers of Norwegian, two of English, and three of other languages, but they had all been part of the university environment as students or staff for at least three years at the time of the study.

Depending on how often they received and sent emails in English, the participants were asked to forward to me their email communication spanning a one-month period (1st-30th April 2016) or a three-month period (1st February-30th April 2016). Two participants provided emails from a different period as they were on a leave in the spring. They were instructed not to forward any emails containing sensitive information about themselves or third persons and were assured that, in case they were sent accidentally, all such emails would be immediately deleted, in line with the permission to conduct the project obtained from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. All the emails were anonymised prior to conducting the data analysis.

The original corpus comprised both self-contained emails and longer conversations in a thread, consisting of two to sixteen emails exchanged between two or more interactants. However, in line with the interpersonal pragmatics perspective, concerned with relationship building and negotiation developing over multiple conversational turns, only conversations consisting of at least three exchanges, rather than self-contained emails, were included in the analysis. Regarding the number of interactants, only the conversations between two interactants were examined as the number of participants arguably influences conversational dynamics (Spencer-Oatey 2008). Thus, after discarding all the self-contained emails, conversations including only two exchanges, and conversations involving more than two participants, 101 email conversations, including 441 emails altogether, remained in the corpus. The conversations varied in length from 3 to 16 exchanges (Table 1), and encompassed interactions between faculty members, administrative staff, and/or students at all levels of studies (Table 2). Out of these, five dyads with the highest number of conversations were chosen for analysis: (1) faculty member – faculty member, (2) faculty member – PhD fellow, (3) faculty member – administrative staff member, (4) faculty member – MA student, and (5) administrative staff member – administrative staff member. Initial emails in the majority of the conversations were request emails (p. 76), 10 were emails giving an update to the recipient regarding an academic matter, and 15, classified as 'other', included invitations, enquiries,

or comments on previous events. What all the conversations had in common was their institutional character, with the interactants performing institutional tasks and orienting to institutional roles. However, being authentic, the corpus was not ideally balanced, i.e., it comprised different numbers of conversations in the five institutional role dyads and longer conversations were underrepresented.

**Table 1.** Length of conversations and number of exchanges

| Length of conversation | Number of exchanges |
|---|---|
| 3 | 47 |
| 4 | 25 |
| 5 | 13 |
| 6 | 4 |
| 7 | 5 |
| 8 | 1 |
| 9 | 3 |
| 11 | 1 |
| 14 | 1 |
| 16 | 1 |
| **Total** | **101** |

**Table 2.** Institutional role dyads

| | Faculty member | PhD fellow | MA student | BA student | Admin. staff | Other* | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Faculty | 9 | 5 | 33 | 7 | 0 | 1 | 55 |
| PhD fellow | 15 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 17 |
| Admin. staff | 12 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 9 | 6 | 29 |
| **Total** | **36** | **8** | **33** | **7** | **10** | **7** | **101** |

* 'Other' refers to professional contacts outside the institution.

The email conversations also varied with regard to the social distance between the interactants. In the present study, social distance was operationalised as stemming from the frequency of contact and closeness of the working relationship as perceived by one of the interactants. The data on social distance was obtained through a short questionnaire, including two questions about each interactant in the email conversations individual participants had contributed to the corpus. One question was about their frequency of contact at the time and one about the level of closeness of their working relationship, followed by a three-point Likert-scale. Eight out of eleven participants responded. The other three had changed jobs and could no longer be reached at their institutional email addresses. In these cases (23 conversations), we evaluated the level of familiarity based on the number of

emails with a specific interactant and the content of the emails, i.e., references to previous contact or self-identification (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Social distance between the interactants

| Social distance | Number of conversations |
|---|---|
| Close | 51 |
| Medium | 19 |
| Distant | 31 |
| **Total** | **101** |

While data generated through self-reports may not be able to provide "a complete picture of interpersonal relations" (Haugh, Kádár and Mills 2013: 6), these were considered useful for examining the relational practices in these conversations since interactants necessarily draw on expectations built in previous interactions at the onset of each new interaction (Locher 2013).

### 2.3 Data analysis

All the emails were first classified in terms of the opening and closing sequences, and other relational moves. Previous classifications of openings and closings (Félix-Brasdefer 2012; Kankaanranta 2005) were supplemented by a number of additional categories stemming from the data set. As for the relational moves outside the framing moves, the classification was fully derived from the data (Table 4). These relational moves were identified and classified based on their content and/or function rather than linguistic form.

The openings and closings were further classified following Bou-Franch's (2011) broad classification into expressions of "familiarity, involvement and closeness" or "distance, independence and deference" (p. 1781), and Bjørge's (2007) and McKeown and Zhang's (2015) division into formal and informal openings and closings. For the openings, the main criterion for the classification was the choice of greeting and the form of address (Bjørge 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2018), those making use of the recipient's surname and/or title being categorised as orienting to distance, and those employing the recipient's first name or no address form as expressions of familiarity. With regard to the closings, all the emails employing a form of leave-taking (*Best regards, Kind regards, Best*),[1] followed by the sender's name, name and surname, and/or institutional signature were regarded

1. Following McKeown and Zhang (2015), *Best (+name)* was classified as an expression of distance since it does not occur in spoken interaction, unlike, for example, expressions of gratitude. As McKeown and Zhang employed similar data analysis procedures as the statistical procedures employed in the current study, we opted for this classification to facilitate comparison of results.

**Table 4.** Classification of openings, closings and other relational moves

| Openings | Closings | Relational moves |
|---|---|---|
| No greeting | No closing | None |
| Greeting word only | Signature (name only) | Compliment |
| Greeting + first name | Signature (name + surname) | Humorous remark |
| Greeting + first name + surname | Leave-taking + name | Expression of interest |
| Greeting + title + surname | Leave-taking + name + surname | Enquiry about the recipient |
| Greeting + first name + thanking | Leave-taking + name + institutional signature | Personal update |
| Greeting + title + surname + thanking | Leave-taking + name + surname + instit. signature | Professional update |
| Thanking + first name | Leave-taking + institutional signature | Response to an update |
| Thanking | Institutional signature | Congratulatory expression |
| | Thanking + (leave-taking +) name | A combination of two or more relational moves |
| | Thanking + leave-taking + institutional signature | |
| | Thanking | |
| | First name initial | |
| | Looking forward to… / See you… + name | |
| | Have a nice… + name | |
| | Hope… + name | |

as expressions of distance; those comprising only the name or first name initial, expressions of gratitude and/or good wishes followed by the sender's first name (without a form of leave-taking), or no closing at all, were classified as orienting to familiarity. An additional category between these two was deemed necessary since some closing sequences included a combination of moves indicating distance and familiarity. This resulted in forming two broad categories of greetings and three categories of closings. All the other relational moves identified in the data, such as, for instance, humorous remarks, compliments and updates about personal life, clearly demonstrated an orientation to familiarity. Following the classification of the framing moves and other relational moves in each email, conversations were coded in terms of the length, the institutional roles of the interactants, the nature of the initial email, and the social distance between the interactants.

The data was primarily analysed quantitatively. IBM SPSS Statistics 25 software was used for data analysis. As Holmes and Schnurr (2005: 162) argue, quantitative analyses can provide "a valuable backdrop, capturing some of the norms and patterns of different communities of practice, against which the behaviors of individuals can be more relevantly interpreted." Indeed, few studies have utilised statistical modeling to examine the influence of different variables on relational practices (McKeown and Zhang 2015).

Regression analysis was used to analyse the influence of conversational progression and social distance on opening and closing sequences, and at the same time examine the openings and closings employed in email conversations between interactants with different institutional roles. Specifically, the panel regression model was employed. Five institutional role dyads were considered: (1) faculty member – faculty member (FM–FM), (2) faculty member – PhD fellow (FM–PhD), (3) faculty member – administrative staff member (FM–AS), (4) faculty member – MA student (FM–MA), and (5) administrative staff member – administrative staff member (AS–AS). The dependent variables were orientations to familiarity and distance in openings and closings. The predictors in the model were conversational progression and social distance. The four dummy variables[2] were chosen as indicators of the following institutional role dyads: FM–PhD, FM–AS, FM–MA, and AS–AS. The case when both interactants were faculty members (FM–FM) was the reference category.[3]

In order to examine the differences in the frequency of occurrence of the other relational moves depending on conversational progression and social distance, the Chi square test was employed. For the purposes of this analysis, the corpus was divided into three groups according to the conversation length. The first group consisted of the first four emails in each of the conversations, the second comprised all the emails from the fifth to the ninth, and the third group included all the emails from the tenth to the sixteenth. The same procedure was followed for social distance, according to which the corpus was divided into the close, medium and distant groups.

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**2.** A dummy variable is an indicator of the occurrence of a certain event. It is a dichotomous numeric variable, with a value of 0 (in case of non-occurrence) or 1 (in case of occurrence). For example, for the AS-AS dyad indicator, value 1 means that the interactants are two members of administrative staff and value 0 means that other interactants are involved. Similarly, for the FM-PhD dyad indicator, value 1 means that the interactants are a faculty member and a PhD fellow, while value 0 is assigned to all the other interactants.

**3.** A reference category is the category (in this case a dyad) to which all the other categories are compared.

## 3. Results

This section presents the results of regression analyses and Chi square analyses. The results regarding each of the research questions, addressing the influence of conversational progression, institutional roles and the social distance between the interactants respectively, are presented separately for opening sequences, closing sequences, and other relational moves. Examples of developing conversations in different institutional role dyads are provided at the end of the section.

### 3.1 Opening sequences

The results of the regression model with the orientation to familiarity or distance in the openings as the dependent variable are presented in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Panel regression model* for openings

| Dependent variable: Openings | Unstandardized coefficients B | Standardized coefficients Beta | t | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| (Constant) | *1.904* | | 64.320 | 0.000 |
| Conv. Progress | 0.003 | 0.063 | 1.172 | 0.242 |
| Social distance | −0.039 | 0.263 | −5 | 0.000 |
| IR2 | −0.072 | −0.248 | −3 | 0.004 |
| IR3 | −0.016 | −0.042 | −0.562 | 0.575 |
| IR4 | −0.015 | −0.063 | −0.645 | 0.520 |
| IR5 | 0.032 | 0.086 | 1 | 0.269 |

* The obtained model has a significantly high predictive power (sig = 0.000).

According to the obtained significances, social distance has a significant negative influence on the use of the expressions of familiarity (sig = 0.000), while the influence of conversational progression is not significant. In other words, greater social distance between interactants results in the more frequent use of openings orienting to deference; however, conversational progression does not affect email openings. The values of the regression coefficients for the dummy variables (IR2, IR3, IR4 and IR5) indicate that the average level of familiarity expressed in the opening sequences in the referent category (FM–FM) is higher than in the following three categories: IR2 (FM–PhD), IR3 (FM–AS) and IR4 (FM–MA). However, only the difference between the opening sequences in conversations between two faculty members, as compared to a faculty member and a PhD fellow, was significant (sig = 0.004). On the other hand, the familiarity displayed in the openings between two faculty members is lower than in the IR5 category (AS–AS), but not significantly. This means that

the openings in FM–FM conversations revealed a higher degree of familiarity than in all the other dyads, except for the conversations between two administrative staff members. Yet, the only significant difference was between FM–FM and FM–PhD conversations, the former employing more openings that displayed familiarity. A graphical representation of these results is given in Figure 1, in which each regression surface represents dependence of familiarity on social distance and conversational progression for a particular institutional role dyad.

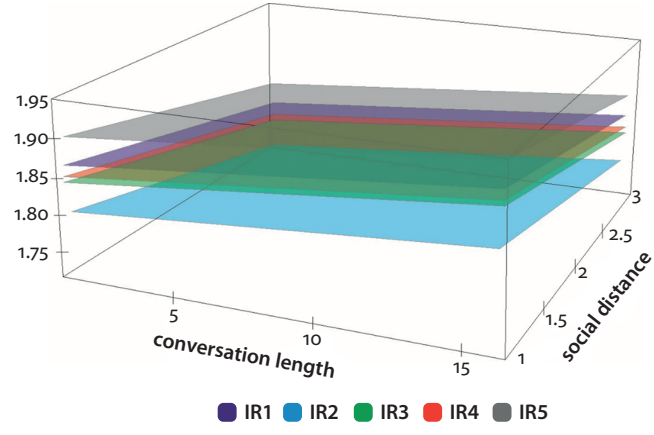


**Figure 1.** Panel regression surfaces for dependence of familiarity in the openings on social distance and conversational progression

## 3.2 Closing sequences

The results of the regression analysis for the closing sequences are presented in Table 6.

**Table 6.** Panel regression model* for closings

| Dependent variable: Closings | Unstandardized coefficients B | Standardized coefficients Beta | t | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| (Constant) | 1.699 | | 8.047 | 0.000 |
| Conv. progress. | 0.052 | 0.133 | 2.468 | 0.014 |
| Social distance | −0.143 | −0.137 | 2.371 | 0.018 |
| IR2 | −0.72 | −0.348 | −4.062 | 0.000 |
| IR3 | −0.523 | −0.197 | −2.634 | 0.009 |
| IR4 | −0.917 | −0.543 | −5.5 | 0.000 |
| IR5 | −0.393 | −0.15 | −1.933 | 0.054 |

* The obtained model has a significantly high predictive power (sig = 0.000).

Regression analysis has revealed that conversational progression has a significant positive influence (sig = 0.014) on familiarity in the closings, while social distance has a negative influence (sig = 0.018). In other words, as the conversations progressed, the closings displayed an increasing orientation to familiarity. With the increase in social distance, the familiarity in the closings decreased. According to the values of the regression coefficients for the dummy variables (IR2, IR3, IR4 and IR5), the average level of familiarity in the closings in the referent category (FM–FM) is higher than in all the other categories. It is significantly higher than in the IR2 category (FM– PhD), the IR3 category (FM–AS), and the IR4 category (FM–MA). It is also higher than in the IR5 category (AS–AS), but not significantly. Simply put, the closings in the conversations between two faculty members demonstrated a significantly higher level of familiarity than all the other dyads. These results are graphically represented in Figure 2. Each regression surface represents dependence of familiarity in the closings on social distance and conversational progression for a particular institutional role dyad.

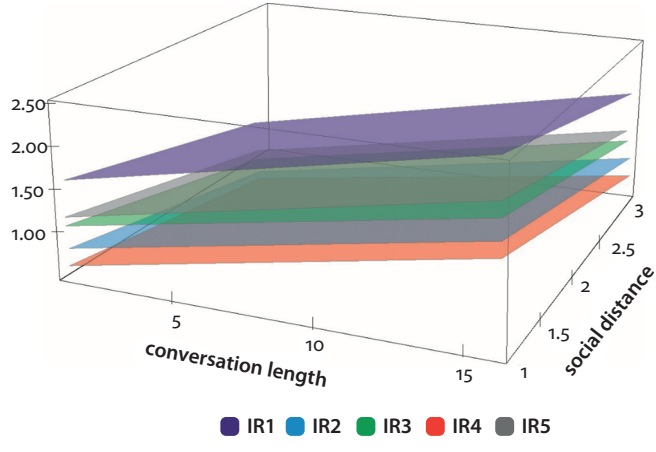


**Figure 2.** Panel regression surfaces for dependence of familiarity in the closings on social distance and conversational progression

## 3.3 Relational moves outside openings and closings

Nine different kinds of relational moves outside openings and closings were identified in the corpus: compliments, humorous remarks, expressions of interest, enquiries about the recipient, personal updates, professional updates, responses to updates, congratulatory expressions, and a combination of two or more of these. Examples are provided in Table 7. These moves were by far most frequently placed immediately following the opening sequence, and sometimes directly preceding

the closing sequence, revealing much less flexibility with regard to placement than relational talk in spoken workplace discourse (Koester 2004, 2010). However, some emails, especially between PhD fellows and faculty members, seemed to be primarily relational in nature, in which case relational work occurred throughout the emails.

**Table 7.** Relational moves outside openings and closings

| Code | Relational moves | Example |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Compliment | These look GREAT |
| 2 | Humorous remark | After working a bit on the paper, it hopefully looks more like a… paper 😊 |
| 3 | Expression of interest | Hope all is well and that you are excited for the course in [place name] next week! |
| 4 | Relational question about the recipient | […] is there anything you would like/need from [place name]? |
| 5 | Personal update | I just came back from 8 months maternity leave. |
| 6 | Professional update | Getting there now… 😊 |
| 7 | Response to an update | I perfectly understand, you have a lot to deal with at the moment. |
| 8 | Congratulatory expression | […] and belated congratulations on the baby! |
| 9 | Combination of two or more relational moves | This was a great start for me coming back!<br>Yes, this is my final paper, but we also have to write a 'summary' of all our papers, which would take some time as well… Hopefully I'll deliver my thesis within the next year!<br>I'm glad you are so close to graduation! Congratulations! I looked up some of you youtube videos, seems like you have it all figured out 😊<br>[First name] says hi, she will graduate close to Christmas, so we are all very excited about that! |
| 10 | None | / |

In order to examine the differences in the frequency of occurrence of these moves as conversations developed, the Chi square test was employed. The results show that there is no significant dependence of the usage of these moves on conversational progression for any of the dyads, except for the FM–AS conversations (sig. = 0.000), which means that only the conversations between administrative staff and faculty members were affected by conversational progression. This, however, is a direct

result of the small sub-sample, i.e., a single occurrence of a compliment influencing the significance, and thus has to be treated with caution.

As conversational progression did not turn out to affect the use of these relational moves, the next step in the analysis was to examine whether the frequency of their occurrence was affected by the institutional role dyads. The frequencies for each relational move within each dyad are shown in Figures 3 and 4.

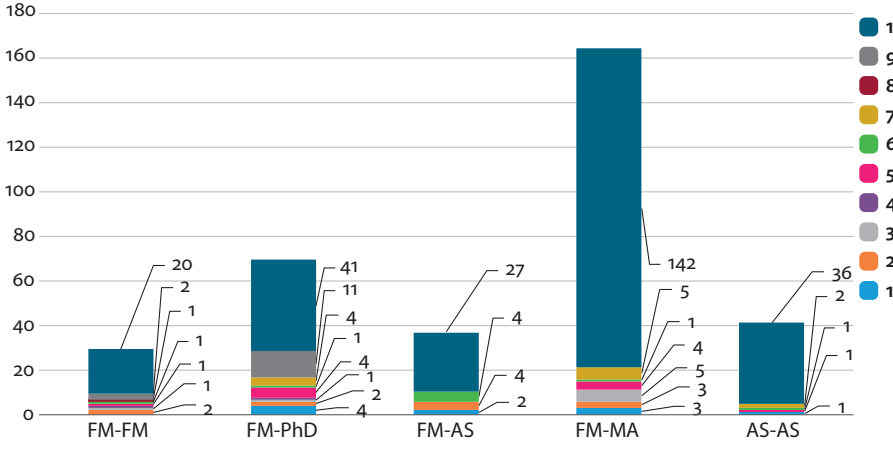


**Figure 3.** Distribution of relational moves in conversations in different dyads: Raw numbers

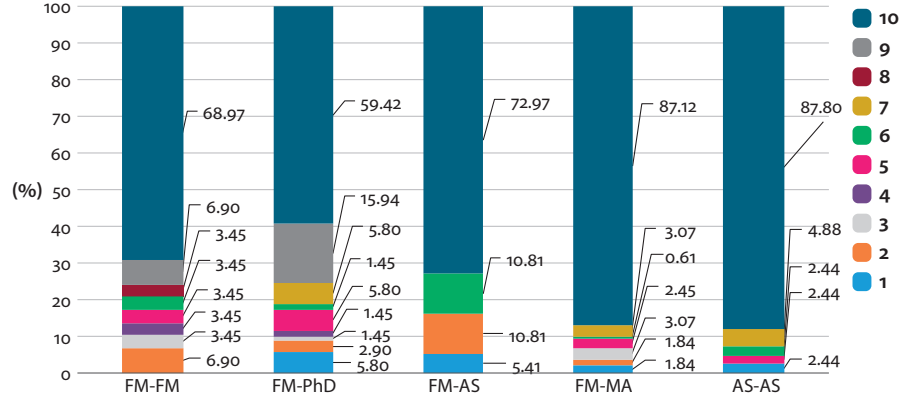


**Figure 4.** Distribution of relational moves in conversations in different dyads: Percentages

The interactants most often opted out of doing relational work regardless of the institutional roles or conversational progression. This was especially prominent in FM–MA and AS–AS conversations (87.12% and 87.80% respectively), followed by the FM–AS conversations (72.97%). The widest variety of relational moves was employed in FM–PhD conversations, which contained all but a single relational move identified in the corpus. Similarly, a wide range of moves was identified in FM–FM conversations. On the other hand, FM–AS conversations included considerably less variety, comprising only three types of relational moves: compliments, humorous remarks and professional updates.

The Chi square test was utilised to test for the differences between the use of relational moves in conversations in different institutional role dyads. The test revealed a significant difference (Chi square = 96.83, sig = 0.000), resulting from a more frequent occurrence of professional updates in FM–AS conversations, as well as a greater prominence of a combination of relational moves in FM–PhD conversations.

Finally, the Chi square test was run in order to examine the differences in the frequency of occurrence of these relational moves in the five dyads with regard to social distance. The results show a significant influence of social distance on the use of these relational moves only in FM–MA conversations (Chi square = 25.177; sig.=0.014), as a consequence of compliments being used only in conversations characterised by a medium distance between the interactants. In the conversations between the interactants performing other institutional roles, social distance was not found to affect their frequency of occurrence.

In sum, the widest variety of relational moves outside the framing moves was observed in the conversations between faculty and PhD fellows. While the position of the email in the developing conversation was not found to exert a significant influence on their frequency of occurrence, some significant differences were identified depending on institutional roles (FM–PhD) and social distance (FM–MA).

### 3.4 Examples

As one of the aims of this paper was to examine developing conversations, the conversations below are provided almost in their entirety, with only some transactional parts missing (substituted by […]). Relational moves other than openings and closings are underlined. One example is provided of an exchange involving each institutional role dyad.

The higher level of familiarity in the framing moves in FM–FM conversations revealed by the regression analysis can be illustrated by Example (1).

(1) Email 1. Hei,
Was wondering if you still have some of the animals bones from [place name] that were sampled for isotopeanalysis?
[first name initial]
***
Email 2. Somewhere. I will get some for you. I'm at home today and tomorrow morning. Will be back in tomorrow afternoon.
[first name]
***
Email 3. Ideally I'd like to have them before 13 o'clock tomorrow. Is there a chance I might find it in your office? If not, no worries, it's not that important. We'll be on a stand at the airport tomorrow, then Forskertorg on Saturday.
[first name initial]

This conversation demonstrates the use of framing moves classified as informal (Bjørge 2007) and clearly orienting to familiarity and closeness (Bou-Franch 2011). Apart from the Norwegian greeting *Hei* in the first email, there are no opening sequences in the following two emails. Similarly, no leave-taking expressions are included in any of the emails – only signatures: the first name initial in the first and third emails and the first name in the second email. A professional update, classified as relational since it was unrelated to the task at hand, is included in the third email. While this exchange seems to illustrate a "business first, people second culture" (Waldvogel 2007: 471), it also reflects a very close working and personal relationship, confirmed both by one of the interactant's rating of this working relationship as close and by the relational practices identified in a number of other emails between these two colleagues in the corpus.

A similar transactional orientation was observed in the majority of FM–AS conversations as well. However, in order not to lose sight of the variation within the groups, Example (2) illustrates one of the few conversations in which some relational work was observed outside the framing moves. This conversation about travel dates and flight details for a conference was initiated by the administrative staff member.

(2) Email 1. Hi [first name],
My flights:
I arrive in [airport] but leave from [airport]. Hotel not booked yet, since I don't know where the venue will take place.
Regards,
[first name]
***

Email 2. Are you leaving on 8/3 afternoon?
[first name]
***

Email 3. Hi, now with dates ☺
[full flight details provided]

The only example of relational work apart from the framing moves was the beginning of the third email after the greeting, coded as a humorous remark at the sender's own expense because she had forgotten to send flight details in the first email. While informal throughout, the openings altered as the conversation progressed from a greeting accompanied by the recipient's first name in the first email, to no opening in the second email, and only a greeting in the third one. The change in the closings was more interesting since it represents a move from a formal closing in the first email, clearly indicating distance, to an informal closing in email 2 and no closing, also classified as informal, in email 3.

Email conversations between PhD fellows and faculty revealed lower levels of familiarity with regard to framing moves than conversations between faculty members, as well as the most substantial variation in the other relational moves, with approximately 40% of emails containing relational work outside the framing moves. Interestingly, the only emails purely relational in nature were identified in PhD fellow–supervisor conversations,[4] with a single relational conversation between two faculty members. Example (3) represents a conversation between a PhD fellow and a faculty member, who was not the supervisor. The faculty member rated the social distance between them as medium (2 on a scale 1 to 3). The conversation was initiated by the PhD fellow asking for a favour, followed by two emails by the faculty member, and another one by the PhD fellow.

(3) Email 1. Hi [first name]
Finally i managed to make my supervisors happy. Therefore, it is with great pleasure that I deliver to you the final section that needs proofreading ☺
[…]
Thank you in advance
[first name + surname]
***

Email 2. I'll do my best.
[first name]
***

4. The purely relational emails will not be exemplified due to ethical reasons.

Email 3. [first name],
Here it is. Good luck with the rest of the process.
[first name]
***

Email 4. [first name], you are the best!
Thank you very much
[first name + surname initial]

Throughout the conversation, the openings are informal, ranging from a greeting accompanied by the recipient's first name in the first email to no greeting in the second one and only the first name in the third and fourth emails. The closings demonstrate some variation, including expressions of gratitude in the two emails sent by the PhD fellow and good wishes in the faculty member's email in addition to the signatures. With respect to the other relational moves, they occur in the two emails written by the PhD fellow, and include a humorous remark in email 1 and a compliment in email 4.

Example (4) illustrates an exchange between an MA student close to submitting her thesis and a faculty member, her supervisor. The faculty member reported they had been in frequent contact and had a close working relationship at the time of the exchange. The conversation was initiated by the MA student.

(4) Email 1. Dear [first name].
The thesis is not quite ready to be handed in, but this is what I have managed to get done since our meeting on Friday. As I told you in our supervision meeting, I am taking a break and going to your home country for the rest of the week to gather up lots of energy!
[…]
If you find it too messy, I understand if you won't give feedback just yet, but a few pointers would be very much appreciated!
Best,
[first name]
***

Email 2. Dear [first name],
I hope you had a good trip to [place name]. It must have been thrilling to be at the match.
I've gone through the whole thesis. […]
Hera are some guidelines for the conclusion and abstract: […]
Best,
[first name]
***

Email 3. Dear [first name].
I had a great time and it was nice to get a break from writing.
Thank you for great feedback! Hope to send the discussion to you some time in the week end if that is ok.
Best,
[first name]
***

Email 4. Dear [first name].
Do you know where to find all curriculums in English. I need them for my appendix and I can't find it. […]
Best,
[first name]
***

Email 5. Dear [first name],
[…] I have three of the curricula in English (M87; L97 and LK06), but not M74. I suggest you attach the latter in Norwegian as most of it is in English anyway. There may not even be an English version of that one.
Best,
[first name]

The framing moves remain the same throughout this conversation, including an opening orienting to familiarity in all five emails, and an expression of gratitude in email 3, and a closing expressing deference. This tendency in the openings and closings is representative of the FM–MA conversations in this data set. It reflects the high frequency of openings and closings and their respective orientations identified in Bou-Franch (2011: 1777) and Savić (2019). As for other relational moves, they appear in the first three emails: a personal update by the MA student, the supervisor's expression of interest in the student's trip, followed by another personal update by the student in the third email. The last two emails are purely transactional except for the framing moves, unaffected by conversational progression.

The conversations between administrative staff included less variety and a lower frequency of relational practices compared to the conversation in other dyads. This is exemplified in (5).

(5) Email 1. Hi again!
About pictures: You have to upload them and use the picture format. Pictures should not be pasted into the text.
I published the article without picture.
[first name]
–
[institutional signature]
***

Email 2. Hi
Ok I see it now. I will make changes later.
Could you publish a new logo that I've uploaded and 'Call for Papers' together with "Plenary Speakers" if possible?
Regards,
[first name]
***

Email 3. Hi!
There is nothing there to publish… Only Plenary Speakers is in my Til korrekturleser inbox. And that article has no content.
[first name]
–
[institutional signature]
***

Email 4. But logo is different now, isn't it?
[first name]

No relational work apart from framing moves occurred in this conversation between a project secretary and an IT support person. Despite the high degree of social distance reported by one of the interactants, i.e., the working relationship being characterised as "not close", all the openings and closings were informal, with the exception of the formal closing in email 2.

## 4. Discussion

Following the order and the focus of the three research questions guiding the present study, this section discusses the findings with regard to the influence of email conversational progression, institutional roles, and social distance on relational practices in this corpus. Their influence on the orientation to familiarity or deference in the openings and closings will be discussed first, followed by the findings concerning the relational moves outside the framing moves. Since the latter have not been systematically investigated in email research so far to the best of our knowledge, this aspect of the study was largely exploratory, and will thus be discussed separately.

With regard to the first research question, the position of the email in the evolving conversation was not found to exert a significant influence on the orientation to familiarity or deference in the openings. This result contrasts sharply with the findings of previous studies, which have consistently found conversational progression to have an effect on opening sequences (Bou-Franch 2011; McKeown and Zhang 2015). For instance, Bou-Franch (2011) has observed the effects of the position

of the email in the conversation on different aspects of the opening sequences in Spanish, including their decreasing frequency of occurrence after the initial email, decreasing density, and increasing familiarity in the greetings. Similarly, McKeown and Zhang (2015) identify conversational progression as one of the drivers of informality in the openings. There could be several reasons for the discrepancy between previous studies and our results. One could be the composition of the corpus; namely, while Bou-Franch's corpus incorporated conversations consisting of either two or three exchanges, the present corpus comprised longer conversations – mostly 3-5-exchange-long messages, but also much longer ones (up to 16 exchanges). The length of the conversations itself may have reduced the potential influence of this variable on relational practices as the conversations evolved. Another reason might be the difference in the coding schemes employed. Namely, the current study focused on the general orientations to familiarity or deference (Bou-Franch 2011), rather than the more fine-grained distinctions between opening sequences; therefore, after the initial classification into nine groups (Table 1), all the openings were grouped into two categories only: the ones expressing familiarity, which also included an absence of openings, and the ones expressing deference. This contrasts with the data coding and analysis in the previous studies. Finally, due to the highly situated nature of email discourse practices (Merrison et. al. 2012; Waldvogel 2007), the fairly informal Norwegian higher education context itself (Bjørge 2007; Savić 2018, 2019) may have played an important role in obtaining such results. As the openings were already very informal, and possibly influenced by Norwegian address forms (Dittrich, Johansen and Kulinskaya 2011) – even in initial emails, most often including an informal greeting (Hi, Hei) with or without the recipient's first name, and never involving titles and/or surnames – there was not much room for an increase in familiarity as the conversations progressed. Indeed, in initial student emails to a lecturer at a Norwegian university, Savić (2019) found that "[t]he openings were almost exclusively conversational and oriented towards rapport-building."

The results of the same study (Savić 2019) further revealed a strikingly different orientation in the closings, with a slight preference for expressions of deference. Such a distribution of expressions of familiarity and deference potentially allowed more possibilities for changes in orientation as conversations develop. Indeed, in the present study, the closings were affected by conversational progression, which exerted a significant positive influence on familiarity. This is in line with McKeown and Zhang (2015), who also found conversational progression to be one of the drivers of informality in the closings. However, Bou-Franch's results were markedly different. She claimed that the "preference for distancing mechanisms […] only showed a slight move towards somewhat less deference in contrasting initial and non-initial emails," (2011: 1782), but leave-taking expressions displayed a general orientation to deference throughout.

In relation to the second research question, focusing on the institutional roles of the interactants, the present study found that institutional roles had a certain impact on the orientation expressed in the openings. The familiarity identified in conversations between faculty members was higher than in the conversations between the interactants performing all the other institutional roles, except for the exchanges between administrative staff. However, it was significantly higher only compared to FM–PhD conversations. While faculty members and PhD fellows could be regarded as performing unequal institutional roles, PhD fellows in Norwegian universities are full-time employees, and their position can thus, strictly speaking, not be regarded as one of lower status compared to that of faculty members. On the other hand, an imbalance may stem from age, professional experience, or other factors. Because of the position of PhD fellows, together with the egalitarian nature of the Norwegian society (Hofstede 2001; Røkaas 2000), we have consequently refrained from defining dyads in terms of power or status differences, in contrast to many previous studies. Situated in this specific context, these results should therefore be compared with caution to the previous studies, all of which have identified a causal relationship between opening practices and what was termed "institutional power" (Bou-Franch 2011), "institutional status" (McKeown and Zhang 2015), or "status" (Waldvogel 2007). Interestingly, however, the familiarity in the openings of the conversations between faculty members and MA students was not significantly lower than that between two faculty members. While this may be surprising with regard to institutional roles, a marked preference for informality and rapport-building in the openings is in line with previous research on student emails to faculty in the Norwegian academic context (Savić 2018, 2019) as well as with a general orientation to equality in Nordic countries (Dittrich et al. 2011). This finding also mirrors the views of many of the surveyed British students (Lewin-Jones and Mason 2014: 83), who commented on "a developing informality over time" in student-lecturer email communication. As the current study explored unfolding conversations, and the faculty member who contributed the data reported being in frequent contact with all the MA students and having a close working relationship with them, the familiarity in the opening sequences may simultaneously reflect and reinforce this close relationship between the students and their supervisor.

Institutional roles also exerted a considerable impact on closing practices. A significantly higher orientation to familiarity was identified in FM–FM conversations compared to FM–PhD, FM–AS and FM–MA conversations. The conversations between the interactants performing the same institutional roles, i.e., the ones between two faculty members and two administrative staff members, were similar in terms of the extent to which the interactants resorted to rapport-building strategies. The findings of previous research regarding the influence of this variable are inconclusive. The institutional status of the sender was found to be one of the

drivers of formality in a private company in Britain (McKeown and Zhang 2015), while in the university setting in Spain, "although power and conversational position played significant roles in the social meanings of greetings, they did not have an impact on the social meanings conveyed by farewells, which generally showed patterns of respect-building practices" (Bou-Franch 2011: 1782). At the same time, the above studies examined fewer or different institutional role dyads, so the possibilities for drawing comparisons are limited.

The final variable explored in the regression model, in relation to the third research question, was social distance. It was found to have a significant negative influence on familiarity in framing moves. In other words, the larger the social distance as perceived by one of the interactants, the clearer the orientation to deference both in openings and closings. Despite different operationalisations of this variable in previous studies, as well as data analysis procedures ranging from descriptive statistics to statistical modeling, social distance has been consistently found to influence discursive practices in framing moves (McKeown and Zhang 2015; Savić 2019; Waldvogel 2007). The current study, thus, confirms this relationship.

When it comes to the relational moves other than those occurring in opening and closing sequences, a range has been identified in the corpus, but on the whole they did not occur very frequently. According to their function in the evolving email discourse, they were classified as compliments, humorous remarks, expressions of interest, enquiries about the recipient, personal updates, professional updates, responses to updates, congratulatory expressions, or a combination of the above. Their frequency of use was found to be affected by conversational progression only in the FM–AS dyad, but, as pointed out in the results section, this finding needs to be considered with caution. In none of the other dyads did conversational progression exert an influence. Contrary to its significant influence on the framing moves, social distance was found to have a limited influence on other relational moves; namely, it was only in FM–MA conversations that this variable made an impact. Institutional role dyads, on the other hand, affected the frequency of occurrence of these moves, specifically due to the use of a combination of various relational moves identified in FM–PhD conversations in over 15% of emails. Indeed, the highest frequency and widest variety were identified in FM–PhD conversations, closely followed by conversations between two faculty members. This seemed to reveal a deliberate investment in doing relational work alongside addressing transactional goals. Compared to relationships between faculty and MA students, or faculty and administration, FM–PhD and FM–FM relationships tend to be longer-term working relationships, with the interactants continually orienting to relational goals and creating what Bou-Franch (2011: 1783) refers to as a "people first, business second" culture. As is the case in spoken discourse, these practices may indeed serve to "reaffirm and consolidate [the interactants'] relationship as close colleagues" (Koester

2004: 1416), and "contribute to a positive working relationship by showing affiliation and solidarity" (Koester 2004: 1425) through "claiming common ground or showing interest, approval, sympathy, etc" (Koester 2010: 62). However, based on the data analyses performed in the current study, we can only speculate. Thus, to advance our understanding of these relational practices, future qualitative research could explore email communication in long-term working relationships, in which localised relational practices have had time to evolve (Marsden and Kádár 2017).

## 5. Conclusion

The present study investigated relational practices in developing email conversations between interactants performing various institutional roles at a Norwegian university. The influence of three variables was examined: conversational progression, institutional roles, and social distance. In relation to the first research question, conversational progression was found to have the most limited influence, observable only with regard to increasing familiarity in closing sequences. The analyses conducted in connection with the second research question revealed that openings and closings in the FM–FM institutional role dyad tended to orient to familiarity to a greater extent than in most other dyads, while the widest variety and the highest frequency of relational moves outside the framing moves were identified in FM–PhD conversations. In line with previous research, social distance, explored through the third research question, was identified as a driver of deference in both openings and closings, and it was found to significantly influence the frequency of occurrence of other relational moves in FM–MA interactions.

The quantitative nature of the study did not allow for a closer inspection of relational orientations by individual contributors or in specific dyads. In order to gain a deeper insight into the complexity of the relational practices in the dataset, the next step in the data analysis will be more discursive, focusing on turn-by-turn developments in individual conversations against the backdrop of the general tendencies and patterns discovered through the quantitative approach. In Holmes and Meyerhoff's words (2003: 13), there is "a place for quantitatively oriented studies, at least as a background for understanding the social significance of particular linguistic choices at specific points in an interaction." Identifying causal relationships between certain sociological variables and relational practices through statistical modeling, largely underrepresented in email research, represents a valuable contribution of the current study.

Through the choice of research focus on institutional roles and social distance, as social variables informing relational orientations at the outset of communication, as well as on conversational progression, offering possibilities for reshaping

relationships through relational practices, the study has attempted to combine two perspectives on relationships – as contexts for interaction and as emerging from interaction. Thus, this was also a preliminary attempt to explore whether quantitative analyses might have something to offer to the interpersonal pragmatics perspective. The finding that conversational progression only affected the relational orientation in the closings while institutional roles and social distance exerted a more substantial influence on relational practices may suggest that the interactants' roles were already fairly well-established and only further negotiated though the closing sequences in the dataset. However, qualitative analyses of the minute details of unfolding conversations are necessary to complement or challenge these quantitative findings. Our hope is that there is a potential within interpersonal pragmatics to fruitfully combine quantitative and qualitative methodologies to further our understanding of interpersonal aspects of institutional email communication.

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# Index

This is the first edited collection focusing exclusively on how second language users interpret and engage with the processes of email writing. With chapters written by an international array of scholars, the present volume is dedicated to furthering the study of the growing field of L2 email pragmatics and addresses a range of interesting topics that have so far received comparatively scant attention. Utilising both elicited and naturally-occurring data, the research in this volume takes the reader from a consideration of learners' pragmatic development as reflected in email writing, and their perceptions of the email medium, to relational practices in various email functions and in a variety of academic contexts. As a whole, the contributions incorporate research with learners from a range of proficiency levels, language and cultural backgrounds, and employ varied research designs in order to examine different email speech acts. The book provides valuable new insights into the dynamic and complex interplay between cultural, interlanguage, pedagogical, and medium-specific factors shaping L2 email discourse, and it is undoubtedly an important reference and resource for researchers, graduate students and experienced language teachers.

"This is a must read for anyone interested in pragmatics in digitally-mediated communication."

**Naoko Taguchi**, *Northern Arizona University*

"Taking a view of email as a culturally and contextually shaped phenomenon, this volume's attention to issues of production, perception, and development makes it an indispensable resource for researchers and teachers interested in email pragmatics."

**Troy McConachy**, *University of Warwick*

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