

STUDENTS WRITING EMAILS TO FACULTY: AN EXAMINATION OF E-POLITENESS AMONG NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH

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This study combines interlanguage pragmatics and speech act research with computer-mediated communication and examines how native and non-native speakers of English formulate low- and high-imposition requests to faculty. While some research claims that email, due to absence of non-verbal cues, encourages informal language, other research has claimed the opposite. However, email technology also allows writers to plan and revise messages before sending them, thus affording the opportunity to edit not only for grammar and mechanics, but also for pragmatic clarity and politeness.

The study examines email requests sent by native and non-native English speaking graduate students to faculty at a major American university over a period of several semesters and applies Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper's (1989) speech act analysis framework – quantitatively to distinguish levels of directness, i.e. pragmatic clarity; and qualitatively to compare syntactic and lexical politeness devices, the request perspectives, and the specific linguistic request realization patterns preferred by native and non-native speakers. Results show that far more requests are realized through direct strategies as well as hints than conventionally indirect strategies typically found in comparative speech act studies. Politeness conventions in email, a text-only medium with little guidance in the academic institutional hierarchy, appear to be a work in progress, and native speakers demonstrate greater resources in creating e-polite messages to their professors than non-native speakers. A possible avenue for pedagogical intervention with regard to instruction in and acquisition of politeness routines in hierarchically upward email communication is presented.

INTRODUCTION

As email is becoming an accepted means of communication between university students and their professors, reports of faculty disturbed by the frequency of their students' email messages as well as the content and linguistic form of these messages abound. Complaints range from unreasonable requests in which students ask faculty to read drafts of students' papers, copy notes for students who missed classes, or provide students with information that is already available on the class syllabus, to inappropriate salutations, abbreviations, spelling and grammar errors, and impolite tone (see Glater, 2006, and Inside Higher Ed, 2006, for discussions of such complaints, and Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996, for an early examination of the impressions left by student emails on faculty). Few such complaints have been raised about students abusing their professors' phone lines or voice mail. Professors, as well as researchers, attribute this perceived inappropriate use of email by students in communications with them as stemming from "eras[ed] boundaries that traditionally kept students at a healthy distance" (Glater, 2006, para. 3), a generally laxer attitude among the younger generation toward stylistics (Baron, 2002), and an influence of modern technology (e.g., instant messaging) characteristics on other forms of writing (Baron, 1984; Halliday, 1990). Cameron (2003) speculates that communication in general is increasingly characterized by a "preference for directness over indirectness" (p. 29), and a "preference for a way of [interacting] that signals egalitarian social relationships" (p. 30). Another explanation is the absence of social context cues in computer-mediated communication (CMC), which "mask[s] ... status differences between participants" (Baron, 1984, p. 130): students may be temporarily "unaware" of whom they are addressing,

perhaps due to genuine naïveté, resulting in language that lacks status congruence (Herring, 2002; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986, 1991).

However, it might also be the case that students are simply uncertain about email etiquette due to lack of experience and because typically it is not explicitly taught. Email writers' ambivalence and uncertainty about how to encode communicative intent in this text-only medium tend to surface especially in hierarchical relationships, such as between students and faculty, and in situations involving impositions on the addressee. Appropriate models for emails from students to faculty are lacking (since students usually do not share their emails to their professors with one another), and feedback on the impression a student's email leaves on its recipient is not usually provided explicitly (Chen, 2006; but see Brenner, 2006, for how feedback is often given in the corporate world); thus, students may model their own messages after those they receive (Crystal, 2001), mostly from equals. As a result, crafting an appropriate and effective email message to an authority figure takes a lot of guesswork.

Students' uncertainty is further exacerbated as different professors have different reactions to student emails. Some are more accepting: "[C]ommunication just wants to be free" (Inside Higher Ed, 2006, para. 32; Y. Li, 2000); some include specific guidelines in their syllabi regarding email etiquette, as the following example shows:

[W]hen you send an e-mail message to me this term, I will expect you to have 'proofed' it (1) for spelling, (2) for grammatical accuracy, (3) for use of vocabulary, and (4) for composition. If your message does not pass my 'test' in all four respects, it will be returned to you with a message stating, 'This message is inappropriate for review. Please revise it...' (Inside Higher Ed, 2006, para. 27).

That students, even non-native speakers of English, are nevertheless aware of stylistic differences required in email communication with authority figures as opposed to peers and act upon their awareness is supported by several researchers (Chen, 2006; Danet, 2001; Herring, 2002). In most student-faculty email interaction, students *know* the professor to whom they are writing, and "if users are *not* anonymous, differential status [as in that of students and faculty] may attach to [email messages], and communication will *not* necessarily be egalitarian and non-hierarchical" (Herring, 2002, p. 137, emphasis added). Similarly, Danet (2001) has observed that "the relative status of addressor and addressee [influences] linguistic choice: messages addressed upward tend to be more formal, more polite, and more conforming with conventional norms" (p. 65). Furthermore, the asynchronous nature of email might in fact promote appropriately polite messages because writers can take time to construct and revise messages in efforts to "employ visual anonymity strategically [and] to optimize their self-presentation" (Duthler, 2006, para. 16).

If students can, in principle, be expected to have the ability and means to write status-congruent email messages to faculty, one can also expect that such messages might be characterized by features that reflect greater formality, what might be termed e-politeness in the email medium. More specifically, students' email requests of faculty might exhibit indirectness rather than directness, as well as lexical and syntactic strategies to mitigate requestive force. Some previous studies, however, have conflated various request types (e.g. Chen, 2006; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996), thus ignoring the fact that different requests may imply different levels of imposition on the faculty member (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006a). Issues of e-politeness might be more noticeable if the imposition on the faculty recipient is greater. As a result, the present study examines if request strategies in student-professor emails *vary with increasing imposition* of the request, and if such email requests are mitigated – and thus rendered more e-polite – through syntactic and lexical devices, as well as request perspective. A significant focus of the study is on how the request strategies of native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) students differ. The following questions guided the research:

- Do students' emails to professors promote more direct or indirect request strategies? Does directness level vary with increasing imposition of request? And, is there evidence of politeness features that mitigate students' email requests?
- Do request strategies and politeness features of NSs' and NNSs' emails differ?
- Is there a preferred linguistic realization by NSs and NNSs speakers for different request types?

Answers to such questions can shed light on the growing body of research on (1) institutional email practice and the complex interplay between demands for politeness conventions and adaptation to an increasingly CMC-dominated interaction environment, and (2) interlanguage pragmatics and CMC, and the need for pedagogical intervention with regard to instruction on and acquisition of e-politeness.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Socialization into Email Writing Practices: Hitting a Moving Target

As an asynchronous medium, email presents users in all interactional domains with questions as to what is acceptable to do via email (i.e., what speech acts are acceptable to perform in this medium). While just a few years ago it would have been a serious gaffe in etiquette to respond to a job announcement via email and to send one's cover letter as the message and the résumé as an attachment, such practices have become customary. Similarly, in the academic domain, where most student-professor interaction occurs during office hours, in class, before and after class, and perhaps on the phone, email has become a viable alternative means of communication, providing the convenience of obtaining clarification, feedback, and permission almost instantly when students need it. Email consultation with faculty can be seen as a recent variation of gate-keeping encounters. Therefore, the question of which topics and communication purposes are appropriate to address with faculty, and in which way, is an essential one.

Studies investigating the communication purposes for which students use email with their professors have found similar facilitative and academic functions: building a relationship, getting information/advice about course materials and quizzes, addressing late work and missed classes, challenging grades, showing interest in and understanding of course material, and "get[ting] on the instructor's good side" (Martin, Myers, & Mottet, 1999, p. 160; Collins, 1998; Marbach-Ad & Sokolove, 2001; Payne, 1997; Poling, 1994). A difference between NSs' and NNSs' email interaction with faculty is the presence of phatic communication in NNSs' messages, not "intended to carry real information but ... used to maintain ... relationships" (Bloch, 2002, p. 124). Biesenbach-Lucas (2005) found that NNSs' email messages often consisted of adding one phatic expression after another, which buried and "detract[ed] from the substantive part of the email message" (p. 37). Similarly, asking for help via email and thus coming across as a "needy [and] problem-plagued" student (Gee, 2002, p. 168) may be less acceptable in U.S. academic culture where individual effort and initiative are valued (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990; Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth, 2000).

Communication styles and conventions are typically shared in speech communities and learned by new apprentices over a course of years. However, email, as a relatively recent development, is not yet governed by clear conventions and expectations. Typically, students must behave and use language in status-congruent, or status-appropriate, ways (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990, 1993); that is, students must do the sorts of things students are expected to do and must use language that properly acknowledges their own lower institutional status and faculty's higher institutional status. For example, issuing directives, setting expectations, or determining whether or not work is sufficient are not examples of status-congruent language functions for students (Boxer, 2002a). In face-to-face encounters, traditional power routines tend to be exercised (Drake, Yuthas, & Dillard, 2000), but such routines may manifest themselves in different ways in email communication to authority figures, especially when the bulk of students' email experience to date has been among peers and equals.

Email use in academia is still a language-using situation with less clearly defined constraints, despite the fact that many of today's students have grown up with email and other CMC technology (Malley, 2006). Socialization into acceptable email interaction is subtle and without much guidance. Books on email netiquette (e.g., Flynn & Flynn, 1998; Hale & Scanlon, 1999) provide little help to students who are looking for advice on composing email messages to their professors, with whom they are in a hierarchical relationship. Unless students are exposed to recent books primarily targeting writing for English as a Second Language (ESL) that explicitly address email use in academia (e.g., Swales & Feak, 2000), or unless ESL teachers incorporate email composition into their syllabi, students are left to their own devices in trying to craft a message that is effective as well as status-congruent and polite. Guidelines on professors' syllabi also more often reflect professors' individual expectations and preferences rather than generally agreed-upon conventions for institutional email communication (Inside Higher Education, 2006; The New York Times, 2006). As a result, crafting an email message that professors will consider appropriate, status-congruent, and polite is like aiming at "a moving target" (Baron, 1998, p. 142). Even though writers can "take time to compose and edit their messages [to be more] formal, and linguistically complex" (Herring, 2002, p. 115), students can never be quite certain what impression their message may leave, and are not able to follow uniform "standards of appropriateness set by those [with greater institutional power] in order to communicate successfully" (Chen, 2006, p. 36).

Studies of the characteristics of email language in a variety of sender-recipient constellations (Baron, 2002, 2003; Crystal, 2001; Herring, 1996, 2002) have, not surprisingly then, found evidence for a wide range of linguistic and stylistic features, and have repeatedly placed email on a continuum from looking more like speech (i.e., less formal) (Baron, 2003) to looking more like writing (i.e., more formal) (Davis & Brewer, 1997). The assumption is that either the absence of social context cues causes email writers to neglect social protocol and formalities (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986), or conversely it may lead to an increase in formality (Spears & Lea, 1992) and "more socially desirable levels of interaction ... and the creation of polite speech" (Duthler, 2006, para. 16, 18). While there is a perception among university students that email in general is characterized by more casual language, truncated syntax, abbreviations, and symbols (in fact, my own students have always told me that email is "so much more casual"), evidence from actual email messages sent from students to faculty suggests that there is in fact a range of email realizations (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006a, 2006b), but that students in general write more formal emails to professors (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006b; Bou-Franch & Lorenzo-Dus, 2005; Chen, 2006). These observations also support Duthler's (2006) findings of politeness evidence in (elicited) student-faculty email production. An important question then is how the email medium affects the language that (NS and NNS) students use in their interaction with professors, and particularly how students navigate the choppy waters of face-threatening acts in email, such as requests, to convey an appropriate sense of e-politeness with varying levels of impositions. Is pedagogical intervention necessary, and what form might it take?

Research on Request Speech Acts in Email

Linguistic competence alone is not sufficient for communicative competence. Speakers of a language must also master sociopragmatic and sociolinguistic norms to achieve communicative purposes appropriately. Speech act research has focused on differences between NSs and NNSs of English performing a variety of speech acts: requests (Blum-Kulka, 1991; Blum-Kulka & House, 1989), apologies (Cohen & Olshtain, 1993), complaints (Murphy & Neu, 1996), compliments and compliment responses (Billmeyer, 1990), and refusals (Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, 1990). In the majority of request speech act studies, language data have been obtained primarily through elicitation in discourse completion tasks (DCTs), but have rarely been based on naturally-occurring requests (Beebe & Cummings, 1996; Bou-Franch & Lorenzo-Dus, 2005). In contrast, the available studies on email requests have been based on actual email messages and thus authentic speech act production. However, due to privacy and ethical concerns, these studies have tended to examine only a small number of messages sent to the researchers themselves (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006a; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Warschauer, 1999).

Assessing the effect of email requests sent by NSs and NNSs to two faculty recipients, Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996) found that NNSs' requests differed from those of NSs in the use of mitigation (i.e., politeness features) as well as extra-linguistic aspects, such as emphasis on personal needs and unreasonable time frames rather than institutional demands. A similar inappropriate concern for student-oriented reasons and personal details was observed by Chen (2006) in her case study of a Taiwanese graduate student's email messages to her professors, and by Biesenbach-Lucas and Weasenforth (2001) in a study of the impressions students' email messages left on faculty readers (although these faculty readers were not the intended recipients of the messages).

While research on politeness has looked toward Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) pioneering work on speakers' positive and negative face wants, much of the research on requests has used the well-known Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) coding framework developed by Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989), as it allows a more thorough analysis of politeness devices at the syntactic and lexical level. The CCSARP framework analyzes requests in terms of (a) direct and indirect strategies realized by particular linguistic structures (e.g., imperatives are direct while *could/would you* constructions are indirect) (Table 2), (b) request modification realized by lexical items and syntactic elements (Table 3), and (c) request perspective (from hearer's or speaker's viewpoint) (Table 6) that serve to mitigate the force of the request and thus assure compliance through greater politeness. In continuation with this tradition, the few available studies on email requests have also applied this framework (cf., however, Duthler's (2006) application of Brown & Levinson's (1978, 1987) model of politeness to elicited voicemail and email requests), and the following picture of email use from students to professors has emerged.

Chen's (2001) study of American and Taiwanese graduate students' email requests (appointment, recommendation, special consideration) of faculty whom students either knew or did not know revealed that both groups of students preferred query preparatory (e.g., *can you*) and want statements (e.g., *I want/would like to*) to realize their requests, but they differed in amount of lexico-syntactic politeness features (e.g., use of past tense, *please*, *possibly*, *I was wondering if*), rendering the NSs' requests more indirect and polite. In a longitudinal case study of one Taiwanese student, Chen (2006) observed that the student's ability to make requests of her professors via email improved over time: the student's requests changed from primarily want statements to query preparatory strategies and showed evidence of greater politeness through lexico-syntactic modification. What makes Chen's study intriguing is the fact that it provides insight into a NNS's motivation for selecting direct over indirect forms: the student felt that in order to have the professor attend to her email requests, she needed to make them "sound important and urgent" (p. 44), but she was unaware that an unmitigated request might be perceived as "coercive" (p. 44) and thus impolite.

In Biesenbach-Lucas's (2002, 2004), Biesenbach-Lucas and Weasenforth's (2000), and Weasenforth and Biesenbach-Lucas's (2001) application of the CCSARP framework to NSs' and NNSs' email requests of faculty, the differences in request strategies chosen by NSs and NNSs were comparatively small, with both groups preferring similarly direct or indirect strategies for request realization; however, NNSs tended to use more direct requests than NSs, similar to Chen's (2006) graduate student. NSs also used more syntactic modification than NNSs while NNSs used more lexical modification, particularly *please* (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2004). NNSs were also found to add more supportive moves (e.g., reasons, apologies) to their email requests than NSs, possibly due to a lack of linguistic flexibility that would allow them to craftily select lexicon-syntactic modifiers (Weasenforth & Biesenbach-Lucas, 2001), or due to a transfer of speech act norms governing their native language use (Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, 1990; Kasper, 1992).

In her recent application of two versions of the CCSARP coding framework to students' email requests, Biesenbach-Lucas (2006a) investigated how the inconsistent assignment of request strategies to directness/indirectness levels observed in request studies can affect findings and conclusions regarding

the preferred strategies of any linguistic group (NSs or NNSs). The study found not only that whether or not direct or indirect request strategies are used may have much more to do with how requests are coded than with NS or NNS status, addressee, level of imposition, or medium, but also that naturalistic email data yield request realizations that have not previously been accounted for in the CCSARP framework and thus precipitate a need for revision of the original framework.

In one version of the CCSARP framework, Biesenbach-Lucas (2006a) coded want statements (e.g., *I want/would like to*) and need statements (e.g., *I need ...*) as direct request strategies, following the original CCSARP categories (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989); and in the other analysis, she coded want statements as an indirect strategy (see Iwai & Rinnert, 2001; Kim & Bresnahan, 1994; Rinnert & Kobayashi, 1999; and Trosborg, 1995, for such coding assignment), and need statements as hints (see Iwai & Rinnert, 2001; Rinnert & Kobayashi, 1999; Rose, 1996; Weizman, 1993, for such coding assignment). When the original CCSARP framework was used to code students' email requests, low imposition requests for appointment and mid-level imposition requests for feedback were realized through direct strategies, but high imposition requests for extension of due date through more indirect strategies. However, when the above adaptations of the CCSARP framework to code the email requests were used, *all* requests were realized through predominantly indirect forms.

Biesenbach-Lucas (2006a) suggests that "rather than looking at broad directness levels and categories, it might be more constructive to examine specific [email] request realizations to uncover not only aspects of directness, but also of politeness" (p. 97). Her examination of NSs' and NNSs' use of lexico-syntactic modification shows that few such modifiers (Table 3) were used in frequently-occurring request patterns, but that *combinations* of syntactic politeness devices were used by NSs in high imposition requests. In contrast, NNSs did not show evidence of similar linguistic and contextual sensitivity as their politeness modification was restricted to the past tense, *possibly/maybe*, and *please*. A surprising finding was that "NSs' request realizations [were] not overly adorned with [politeness] modification" (p. 100), suggesting "that in the email medium, a minimum amount of ... modification may be considered sufficient for realizing students' requests of faculty ... perhaps in an attempt at message economy and clarity" (p. 101).

Features Contributing to Politeness in Requests

Language use in face-threatening acts such as requests, especially to higher-ups, requires a certain degree of politeness if the requester wants to assure compliance from the person he or she is asking. In request research, lack of politeness has been associated with direct strategies (e.g., imperatives), with the presence of intensifiers (e.g., *right now, asap, terribly* + adjective) and aggravating moves (e.g., threats, criticism, emphasis on urgency), and with the concomitant lack of mitigating features (Blum-Kulka, 1987); conversely, politeness is attributed to indirect strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1978) and to the presence of devices that soften the impact of requestive force, such as syntactic and lexical modifiers, as well as non-hearer oriented request perspective (e.g., *can I/we* as opposed to *can you*) (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989). Counterintuitively, lack of politeness has also been associated with the most indirect request strategies, hints (as in *it's cold in here*, which represent the second most polite form in Brown & Levinson's (1978, 1987) politeness theory), because "they testify to a lack of [a speaker's] concern for pragmatic clarity" (Blum-Kulka, 1987, p. 144). Fraser and Nolen (1981) argued over two decades ago that "no sentence [and by extension, email] is inherently polite or impolite... It is not the expressions themselves but the conditions under which they are used that determines the judgment of politeness" (p. 96). In addition, direct requests are typically perceived as more polite "if politeness features are added [and] if they are considered appropriate for a given situation depending on role expectations as well as rights and obligations of interaction participants" (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006a, p. 85).

Research on requests had uncovered that NSs and NNSs differ in their use of politeness features. Blum-Kulka and Levenston (1987) observed that when NNSs used lexical and syntactic devices in ways that deviated from NS norms, they often "achieve[d] different pragmatic effects from those intended" (p. 163)



because, for example, they tended to use *please* in a way that marked the utterance as having requestive force rather than as a politeness marker. With respect to students' email requests, NNSs have also been found to use *please* over other modification devices, presumably both in an attempt at appearing polite when other linguistic means are lacking and at urging the professor's response (Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth, 2000; Chen, 2006). Biesenbach-Lucas (2006a) found that all students tended to use comparatively little modification in email requests to faculty, pointing to a potentially intriguing effect that the email medium may have on use of lexical and syntactic modification as politeness features: these features are kept to a minimum perhaps in order to avoid message ambiguity.

METHODS

Data, Participants, and Variables

The data in the present study represent a subset of a larger data corpus consisting of student email messages that contain a variety of requests made of faculty. Important points to consider for the email interaction data examined here are the following: first, the power dimension across messages is stable – the professor (the email recipient) is in position of relative authority over the student (the email sender) by virtue of their institutional relationship; and second, the social distance dimension is also relatively stable and can be characterized as low since students and professors typically have frequent and regular interactions in the institutional context. What varies is the imposition of students' email requests on the professor. Three types of request were identified as occurring with great frequency in the overall data corpus of student email messages to faculty: requests for face-to-face appointments with the professor, requests for feedback on work in progress sent in an attachment, and requests for extension of the due date for submission of an assignment. Table 1 shows that the imposition of students' requests of faculty, as determined by a survey among university students, can be said to vary along two dimensions: *across* request types (horizontally), and *within* requests types (vertically). The request types and subset examined in the present study are indicated in the shaded cells of Table 1, together with the number of NS and NNS messages in each of the three request type data sets.

Table 1. Overall Data Corpus, and Data Set Examined in Present Study.

		Increasing Imposition 		
		Requests for appointment	Requests for Feedback	Requests for extension of due date
Increasing Imposition 	Appointment later in week/next week NSs – 188 NNSs – 72	Feedback on attached draft/work in progress NSs – 128 NNSs – 59	Before due date NSs – 66 NNSs – 20	
	Appointment same day	Feedback on attached revised work	After due date, without attaching work	
	Canceling appointment and rescheduling	Feedback on more than one attachment	After due date, with late work attached	

Overall, 533 email messages (382 NS messages; 151 NNS messages) containing the targeted request types were analyzed in the present study. They were collected, together with the other student email messages in the larger data corpus, over the course of six semesters and had been sent to one faculty recipient. In accordance with the university's Internal Review Board requirements, students completed informed consent forms, which allowed the researcher to store and analyze their messages, and

permission forms, which allowed the researcher to quote messages or parts of messages without revealing identifying information other than NS and NNS of English status.

The students whose email messages were examined in the present study were NSs of English and NNSs of English from Asian backgrounds (Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Thailand); all were enrolled in graduate level TESOL courses at a major American university. The NNSs had had English instruction in their native countries, and some of them additionally in the US, but they were not taking ESL courses while they were enrolled in their TESOL degree program. As a result, their proficiency can be identified as low-advanced. All students were familiar with email technology, although not necessarily within an academic context. This might be one of the reasons why some NS and NNS students who were enrolled in the semesters during which the email messages were collected did not send any email messages to the particular faculty recipient, possibly underscoring the ambivalence that comes with new channels of communication.

The professor to whom the email messages were sent was a female in her early forties with extensive teaching experience in ESL and teacher training. She indicated to students that email was an acceptable means of communication through inclusion of her email address on her course syllabi, and she was familiar with a variety of CMC technologies. While approachable and friendly, her communication style tended to be more formal than informal with her students, and she did not encourage first-name use with students, following the standards set by full-time faculty in her teaching unit.

The predictor variables examined in the present study were the imposition of students' email requests on the professor, and NS/NNS status; the criterion variables examined were the request strategies in the students' email messages, the amount and type of lexical and syntactic modification, and the request perspective to enhance politeness.

Analysis Procedures

Analysis of the email requests followed the original CCSARP framework developed by Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989). The analysis was limited to request head acts; therefore, the first step involved identifying the exact sentence in each message that contained a request for appointment, for feedback, or for extension of a due date. Since the email messages present authentic data not previously coded according to the CCSARP framework, a number of coding challenges emerged. These ranged from identifying a request head act in messages when the linguistic realizations included structures that had no previous equivalent in the CCSARP framework (see Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006a, for other coding challenges). For example, explicit requests were often absent, but they were replaced by other moves (e.g., (1)-(2)), which might need to be identified as new request strategies.

- (1) assurance getter: *I wanted to make sure that I'm on the right track.*
- (2) gratitude: *I appreciate your taking a look.*

Similarly, some of the categories identified in the CCSARP taxonomy (e.g., (3)-(4)) were found to have no tokens in the email data (the asterisks indicate possible forms that did not occur in the students' emails).

- (3) suggestory formulae: **How about giving me feedback?*
- (4) obligation statements: **You must/should give me an extension.*

The request head acts were then categorized into request strategies representing one of three directness levels identified in CCSARP: direct, conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect (hints). Table 2 presents the directness levels and the request strategies coded under each, with examples from the request types under investigation. The directness levels correspond to the degree of pragmatic clarity with which the requests are encoded, from least to most ambiguous.

Table 2. Coding Categories in Present Study.

CCSARP Directness Levels	Request Strategies	Examples
Direct	Imperatives	<i>Please extend the due date.</i>
	Elliptic constructions	<i>Any comments?</i>
	Performatives	<i>I feel I have to ask for an extension for a week.</i>
	Direct questions	<i>When do you have time?</i>
	Want statements	<i>I want to set up a meeting with you. I would like your suggestions.</i>
	Need statements	<i>I will need an extension.</i>
	Expectation statements	<i>I hope you'll give me the weekend to finish typing my work.</i>
Conventionally indirect	Query preparatory (ability, willingness, permission)	<i>Could I meet with you next Tuesday? Would you mind to take a look and give me some suggestion?</i>
Hints	Strong hints/mild hints	<i>Attached is a draft of my grammar lesson plan. I'm having a very difficult time in figuring out how to put these lesson materials together.</i>

Within each request head act, syntactic and lexical devices that added to a mitigating effect on the imposition of the request and contributed to perceived politeness were identified. They are presented in [Table 3](#).

Table 3. Syntactic and Lexical Modifiers in Present Study

Syntactic modifiers	past tense progressive aspect embedding
Lexical modifiers	<i>please</i> downtoners: <i>possibly, maybe, perhaps</i> understaters: <i>just, a little, a minute</i> subjectivizers: <i>I was wondering, I think/feel, I wanted to know</i> consultative devices: <i>do you think, is there a chance</i> hedges: <i>some, any, somehow</i>

In addition to modification, the present analysis also examined the request perspective taken by the students in each request (i.e., who was mentioned in the emails as having to perform the primary action entailed in the request). Four perspectives are possible, and are associated with an effect on perceived politeness (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989); they are listed from least to most polite in (5)-(8).

- (5) you (hearer)-perspective: *Could you please give me some feedback ...?*
- (6) we (speaker/hearer)-perspective: *Can we please meet to go over ...?*
- (7) I (speaker)-perspective: *I was wondering if I could have an extension on ...*
- (8) Impersonal perspective: *Is it possible to meet tomorrow afternoon?*

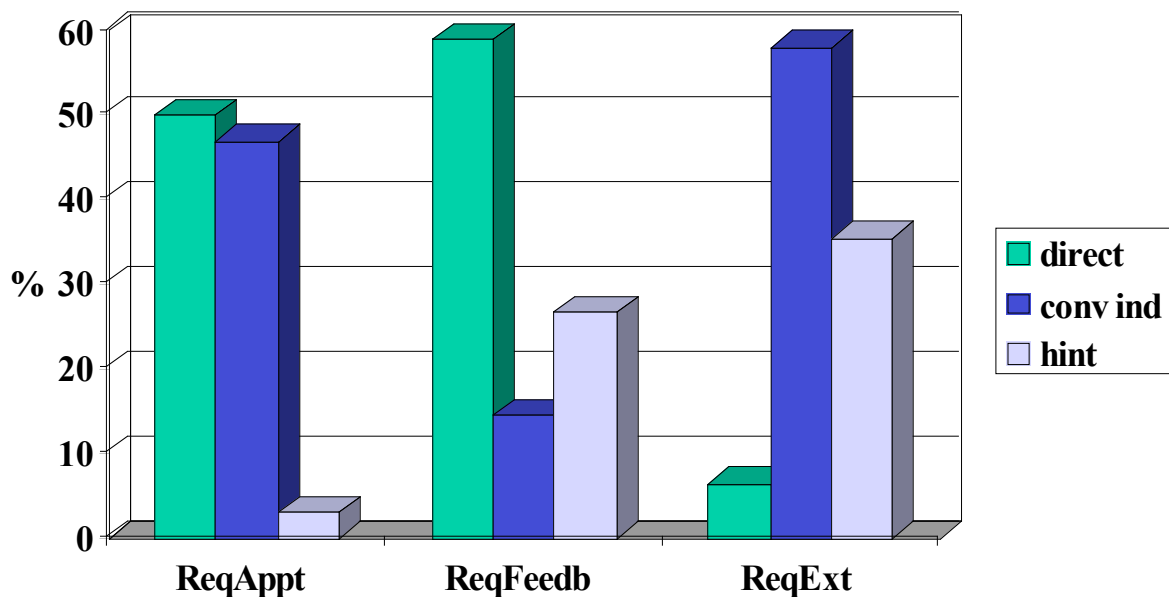
Frequency of occurrence, modification, and speaker perspective for each request type were established and converted to percentages to compare the proportion of direct, indirect, and non-conventionally indirect strategies, the amount of modification, and the perspective from which requests tended to be formed for the three request types and for both groups of students.

RESULTS

Directness Levels in Students' Email Messages Across Request Types

Figure 1 shows that for lower imposition requests (i.e., appointment and feedback), NSs resorted largely to direct strategies. For the lowest imposition request (appointment), NSs used almost as many indirect as direct strategies, but for slightly higher imposition requests (feedback), they used far more direct than indirect strategies.

Only in the situation of the highest imposition (extension) did NSs use more conventionally indirect requests, as well as a substantial number of hints (e.g., *I'm having a hard time finishing this paper*), which allowed them to avoid asking the uncomfortable question. For feedback requests, NSs also used more hints than conventionally indirect forms (e.g., *attached is a draft of my ... assignment*). These students apparently assume that the context speaks for itself: when they attach a *draft* to their email message, they are sending it because they want the professor to read it and provide some feedback. By the same token, for the faculty recipient, familiarity with the situation and with course requirements will not make such hints difficult to interpret. Hints have not often been found in request studies relying on elicitation through DCTs (Beebe & Cummings, 1996; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1992), presumably because the task in DCTs is to write a request and because there are no social consequences of using more direct request forms (Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth, 2002a).



Key: ReqAppt = requests for appointment; ReqFeedb = requests for feedback; ReqExt = requests for extension

Figure 1. Directness levels by request type for NSs. Figure 2 shows that, in general, there is a similar pattern in request strategies for NNSs. They used more direct request strategies for the lower imposition requests (appointment and feedback), but unlike the NSs, they used far fewer direct requests for requesting feedback than for requesting appointment. A possible reason might be that using email for requesting feedback may not be considered appropriate by NNSs, especially when the requested feedback is for an unfinished piece of work. Similarly to the NSs, NNSs used mostly conventionally indirect request strategies for requesting an extension, but they used far fewer hints, perhaps because they do not know how to produce situation-appropriate hints.

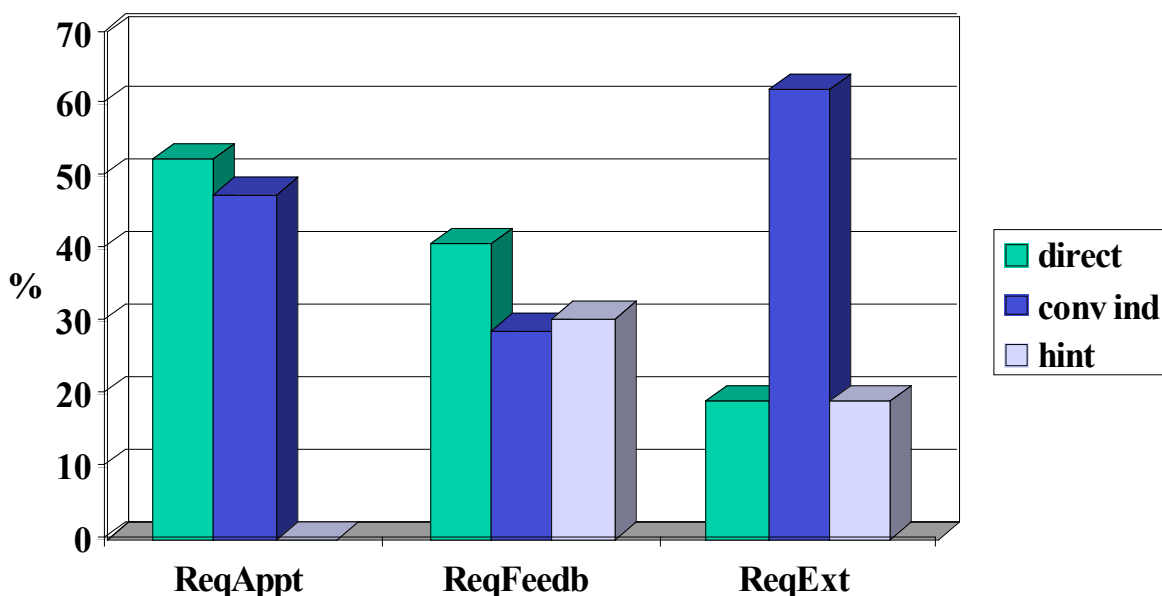


Figure 2. Directness levels by request type for NNSs

Politeness Features in Students' Email Requests

Syntactic modifiers

The following predominant syntactic modification devices were found:

Past tense	<i>I was wondering</i>	instead of	<i>I am wondering;</i>
	<i>Could you</i>	instead of	<i>Can you;</i>
	<i>I would like</i>	instead of	<i>I want/like;</i>
Progressive aspect	<i>I was wondering</i>	instead of	<i>I wonder;</i>
	<i>I'm hoping</i>	instead of	<i>I hope;</i>
Embedding	<i>I would appreciate it if you could...;</i>		
	<i>Do you think I am on the right track?</i>		

The totals in Table 4 indicate that both NSs and NNSs modified at least half their email requests by adding syntactic politeness devices (shown in the last row). However, there is a marked difference between NSs and NNSs in their use of such syntactic devices for appointment requests, while they used syntactic modification overall to a similar extent in requests for feedback and extension.

Table 4. Syntactic Politeness Modifiers Across Request Types.

	Req Appointment		Req Feedback		Req Extension	
	NS	NNS	NS	NNS	NS	NNS
Past tense	80.9%	45.2%	25.9%	35.2%	32.2%	33.3%
Progressive	15.3%	9.5%	3.1%	3.7%	12.9%	0%
Embedding	27.5%	30.9%	29%	18.5%	54.8%	23.8%
Total	85.5%	59.2%	51.9%	44.4%	58.1%	57.1%

Note: (1) % indicates the percentage of messages within each request type that contained the type of modification indicated; percentages add up to more than 100% since syntactic devices are not mutually exclusive but can occur together. (2) The total includes all emails with syntactic modifications.

NSs used the past tense as a politeness device predominantly with requests for appointment, and the past tense use was also the preferred syntactic modifier for most NSs (85.5%). NNSs also preferred past tense

as a politeness device, but they used the other syntactic devices almost as much. NSs tended to prefer embedded forms twice as much as the other syntactic modifiers in requests for extension, the request with the greatest imposition. Thus, NSs not only used indirect strategies for this type of request, but also found ways to make these requests more polite, indicating the apparently perceived greater imposition represented by that request. Interestingly though, the lowest imposition requests for appointment were most often mitigated through syntactic modifiers by both NSs and NNSs. This shows an interesting balancing act between direct strategies (which were used the most with appointment and feedback requests) and concomitant syntactic politeness devices; thus, the impact of the direct strategy is softened through syntactic modifiers, and NNSs appear to be similarly aware of this as NSs.

Lexical modifiers

Table 5 shows the percentage of email messages with lexical politeness devices. Perhaps the most intriguing finding is that presence of lexical modifiers does not linearly increase with increased imposition level; the highest imposition is only minimally modified through lexical politeness devices by both NSs and NNSs. Apparently, both groups relied more on the use of syntactic rather than lexical means to soften requestive force and enhance politeness. The lack of increase in lexical modifiers may be explained by the fact that the request strategies preferred for requesting extension were indirect strategies, which students may have felt were sufficiently polite precisely because of the nature of their indirectness.

Table 5. Lexical Politeness Modifiers Across Request Types

	Req Appointment		Req Feedback		Req Extension	
	NS	NNS	NS	NNS	NS	NNS
please	2.3%	4.7%	17.9%	25.4%	0%	14.3%
Downtoners	16.8%	14.3%	15.3%	1.7%	6.4%	19%
Understaters	8.4%	2.4%	3.8%	0%	3.2%	0%
Subjectivizers	15.3%	11.9%	3.8%	5.1%	19.3%	0%
Consultative devices	2.3%	2.4%	1.5%	0%	0%	0%
Hedges	13.7%	19%	20.6%	20.3%	0%	0%
Total	58.8%	57.1%	49.6%	73.8%	6.9%	16.7%

Note: (1) % indicates the percentage of messages within each request type that contained the type of modification indicated; percentages add up to more than 100% since syntactic devices are not mutually exclusive but can occur together. (2) The total includes all emails with lexical modifiers.

While Table 4 had shown that NSs were the ones who tended to use more syntactic politeness devices than NNSs for all request types, Table 5 shows that it is the NNSs who used more lexical modifiers than NSs for two of the request types (feedback and extension), and it is the requests for feedback that NNSs modified the most lexically. Again, this might be an indication that NNSs feel uncomfortable submitting writing that is not a finished piece of work but a work in progress for review to their professor. It may not be acceptable for NNSs to do so in their native countries, as anecdotal reports from students suggest.

An examination of specific lexical politeness devices reveals that *please* was the preferred lexical modifier for NNSs, especially with feedback and extension requests. Interestingly, *please* was not used the most frequently in the highest imposition request (extension), but in the mid-level imposition request (feedback), again apparently indicating that NNSs do not feel comfortable sending a draft for review. However, feedback requests are also the request type where NSs used *please* the most, and unlike NNSs, NSs do not use *please* at all with the highest imposition request (extension), suggesting that NNSs might use *please* indiscriminately as an illocutionary force indicator (i.e., a device to mark the sentence as a request) rather than a mitigating politeness device (see Blum-Kulka & Levenston, 1987, for a similar

conclusion). Perhaps NSs' syntactic modifications (especially embedding) as well as indirect strategies make lexical politeness devices unnecessary when clarity in a text-only medium is at stake.

Just as *please* was preferred by NNSs, subjectivizers were preferred by the NSs in the present study. These were forms (e.g., *I was wondering, I wonder, I'm hoping*, etc.) were found in about 1 out of 6 email messages. It is interesting that NSs appear to use subjectivizers especially for those type of requests (appointment and extension) where the focus is not solely on the professor performing the requested action, but where the student also has to do his or her part (e.g., the student has to go to the office for the appointment, the student has to furnish the assignment at some point, etc.).

Request perspective

The perspective the requester takes to make his or her request can also affect the perceived politeness of the request (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989). However, requests and the actions they refer to are characterized by certain *normal* speaker-hearer constellations. In other words, while students are sending email requests for different services to their professors, these services may not always require the sole action of the professor (the hearer perspective). The person who will typically have to perform the primary action entailed in the request differs depending on request type, as summarized in [Table 6](#).

Table 6. Task Expectations and Perspectives in the Three Request Types

Request for appointment	<i>we</i> speaker/hearer	Professor makes time for appointment; student needs to go to office
Request for feedback	<i>you</i> hearer	Professor needs to provide feedback; student waits
Request for extension	<i>I</i> speaker	Professor grants extension; student needs to complete and submit work

Requests for appointment assume a "we" perspective: action is required from both student and professor to make the appointment happen, as the professor makes time for the appointment and the student needs to go to the professor's office. In contrast, requests for feedback are the only one of the three request types that clearly assume a "you" perspective: the professor performs the primary action of providing feedback while the student waits. Finally, requests for extension can be said to presuppose an "I" perspective: while the professor grants the extension, it is still the student who needs to complete and submit the work.

[Table 7](#) presents how these perspectives were translated into actual requests. The category "impersonal" was added as impersonal constructions (agent avoiders) were also used to express the requests in this study.

Both NSs and NNSs formed the majority of their requests from the expected perspective, except in the case of appointment requests, in which students chose to express their requests from their own (i.e., the "I") perspective (e.g., (9)-(10), thus deflecting the focus of the request from the professor.

- (9) *I would like to make an appointment to meet with you this week.*
 (10) *Could I meet with you sometime this week?*

However, it is also evident that NNSs, more so than NSs, tended to form their requests from the "you" perspective (hearer/addressee perspective) in *all* request types (e.g., (11)-(13)).

- (11) *Could you give me some time on Tuesday, May 2nd?*
 (12) *Can you please look at this?*
 (13) *Could you extend the deadline?*

In contrast, NSs also used impersonal forms to request an extension (e.g., (14)), which NNSs did not do at all.

(14) **Would it be possible** to get this paper to you by Monday?

Table 7. Use of Perspectives in Requests.

		NSs	NNSs
Requests for Appointment	we	11.9%	7.1%
	you	17.5%	31%
	I	61.1%	57.1%
	impersonal	9.5%	4.8%
Requests for Feedback	We	0%	0%
	You	60.6%	65.8%
	I	31.9%	34.2%
	impersonal	7.5%	0%
Requests for Extension	We	0%	0%
	You	10%	37.5%
	I	50%	62.5%
	impersonal	40%	0%

In fact, NNSs used impersonal forms only with the lowest imposition request for appointment and may not realize that requests are often formed impersonally, especially in business writing. Forms such as *advice greatly appreciated* and *is it possible to turn in my paper on Monday* are in fact associated with more formal (e.g., letter) writing. It is interesting that NSs used norms related to written language as a resource to convey e-politeness; thus, email clearly does not always look like speech, despite claims to the contrary (Baron, 2003). The email medium appears to have an interesting effect here on language, especially in a context where the email writer addresses a recipient of higher institutional status.

Preferred Linguistic Realizations in Students' Email Requests

The most frequently chosen request forms provide further evidence that NSs are developing e-politeness strategies in their messages to professors. The syntactic patterns in appointment requests show that while NNSs may use the same request strategies as NSs, the actual realizations differ, as the examples in Table 8 suggest. The differences are subtle, but might affect how the request is perceived when judged in terms of politeness. While NNSs primarily used the contracted form *I'd* and the hearer perspective *could you*, NSs did not use contractions and used the speaker perspective *could I* in addition to embedding.

Table 8. Preferred Linguistic Realizations for Appointment Requests

	NSs	NNSs
direct	<i>I would like to meet with you/set up an appointment with you</i>	<i>I'd like to meet [with] you/talk to you/see you/visit your office</i>
indirect	<i>Could I meet with you /make an appointment to see/meet with you I was wondering if I could make an appointment with you/come by and see you ...</i>	<i>Could you give me some time</i>
hints	N/A	N/A

Similar differences between NSs and NNSs in preferred linguistic realizations were found for feedback requests (Table 9). While NSs used embedded constructions and non-contracted *I would*, NNSs used non-

embedded imperatives and simple present tense constructions. Further, NSs used a variety of synonyms for "feedback" and phrasal verbs (e.g., *take a look*, *look over*), which did not occur in the linguistic repertoire of NNSs. The language used for indicating an attachment (as in the hints) also shows differences in lexical items and aspect (e.g., *attached* vs. *sending*), all of which are subtle differences that do not surface in a quantitative examination of request strategies, but can potentially influence perception of the requests by faculty.

Table 9. Preferred Linguistic Realizations for Feedback Requests

	NSs	NNSs
Direct	<i>[Please] let me know what you think/ if you have any comments/suggestions/ if.... I would appreciate any comments/ feedback/input/suggestions. Any feedback would be appreciated. Thanks for taking a look.</i>	<i>Please take a look/ send me some feedback/ give me comments. I appreciate your comment.</i>
Indirect	<i>Could you please take a look/ look over [attachment] (and give/ help/ guide me with some feedback)?</i>	<i>Could you look at [attachment]/ give some/any comment(s)/advice?</i>
Hints	<i>Attached is I've attached Here is</i>	<i>I'm sending</i>

Finally, requests for extension show that NSs preferred embedded syntactic patterns phrased from the point of view of the speaker, or as an impersonal request. NNSs added occasional lexical politeness devices (e.g., downtoners), but they generally did not use embedding, and they used a more direct hearer perspective, thus aggravating requestive force rather than mitigating it in this high imposition request (Table 10).

Table 10. Preferred Linguistic Realizations for Extension Requests

	NSs	NNSs
direct	<i>N/A</i>	<i>N/A</i>
indirect	<i>Would it be a problem if I turned it [assignment] in on I was wondering if it would be possible for me to submit/turn in</i>	<i>[If possible], could you give more time/extend the deadline</i>
hints	<i>I'm having a difficult time I cannot complete I'm having doubts</i>	<i>I've been unable to complete It's impossible for me to send [assignment] ...</i>

CONCLUSION

Another Look at the Research Questions

What light did the present study shed on the research questions asked at the outset of the present study?

- Do students' emails to professors promote more direct or indirect request strategies? Does directness level vary with increasing imposition of request? And is there evidence of politeness features that mitigate students' email requests?

The findings of the present study suggest that students selected more direct strategies for the lower imposition requests, but not for the highest imposition request. This suggests that students, NSs and

NNSs, do possess awareness of situational factors and do not consider all email requests of faculty equal. In other words, the nature of the email medium and its characteristic lack of face-to-face clues do not obviate differentiation among different request goals. Another possible explanation might also be found in the concept of a standard situation (House, 1989), where the roles and obligations of participants in an interaction are clearly defined. With regard to email requests for appointment, feedback, and extension, this notion might apply as follows. Email requests for appointment could be considered the most standard situation: professors are expected to hold office hours and meet with students. Email requests for feedback might contain standard and non-standard elements: professors are expected to give feedback on students' work, but the "in-progress" feedback facilitated through email technology remains at present at the discretion of individual professors (Glater, 2006; Inside Higher Ed, 2006). In contrast, professors are under no obligation to grant a request for extension as it is the student who is transgressing the course policy. Students' pragmatic awareness of different contextual factors is already an important first step for successful pedagogical intervention.

There also tended to be more politeness devices with direct request strategies (in the case of appointment and feedback requests), and comparatively fewer politeness devices with indirect request strategies. Apparently, the email medium did not make politeness features unnecessary; it is the request strategy that may have a greater impact in email as to whether or not and to what extent requests are modified syntactically and/or lexically, in attempts at preserving brevity and clarity.

- Do request strategies and politeness features of NSs' and NNSs' emails differ? And, is there a preferred linguistic realization by NSs and NNSs for different request types?

When students' email messages are quantitatively examined from the point of view of broad request strategies, it was found that both NSs and NNSs tended to use the same general strategies. Differences between the two groups did not clearly surface until a more qualitative analysis was conducted. Despite similar strategies, NSs and NNSs realized these strategies differently and preferred different types of politeness devices, pointing toward a mix of lack of linguistic flexibility and idiomatic expressions, unawareness of letter conventions transferable to email, and inability to select appropriate lexical modification among NNSs. While some researchers (Duthler, 2006; Herring, 2002) have claimed that email, due to its asynchronicity and reduced context clues and its resulting "elevated control over message production and delivery" (Duthler, 2006, para. 5) does promote more polite language, the present study implies, however, that students can plan, compose, revise, and edit toward an appropriate and polite email message only if they *have* flexible linguistic means at their disposal and *know* which linguistic structures and politeness devices to use. Even if NNSs have sufficient time to revise and edit their messages, but can retrieve only one learned structure to formulate requests indiscriminately (e.g., *could you*, which was found to be NNSs' most frequently used request strategy for all three types of requests), then any additional time they might have for message production is not going to help them. Pedagogical intervention could help make these students more aware of which request realizations tend to be more common, as well as pragmatically acceptable, with different request goals and addressees. Consequently, the present study has shown that NSs are demonstrating a developing awareness of e-politeness in institutional emails despite the lack of available models, whereas NNSs might run the risk of not being perceived as appropriately e-polite.

The Email Medium and Students' Language Use

With much of today's interaction between students and professors occurring in cyberspace, it is worth asking what effect the email medium will, in the long run, have on students' language use, or, how students' face-to-face language use in the academic domain might affect their email use with their professors. This is a particularly important question to ask, because students entering universities in the near and distant future will have grown up with much more exposure and use of CMC in numerous formats than their counterparts who entered universities only five or ten years ago, as did the students in

the present study. Two paths of development seem possible: email in student-professor interaction might become less like speech and more formal, or email might become more like speech and less formal.

On the one hand, student emails might become less speech-like and more e-polite due to contextual features of institutional discourse. When students address their professor, via email or face-to-face, they are addressing a higher-up, and while some requests closely resemble standard situations, others are non-standard situations with increased levels of imposition which need to be acknowledged. By the same token, in university courses in which face-to-face components remain integrated with distance components (e.g., email, discussion boards, etc.), the institutional hierarchy is kept more visible, likely pushing students toward more status-congruence and greater e-politeness.

On the other hand, emails from students to professors might take on more speech-like, less formal features, especially with length of contact, such as when students have been taking several classes with the same professor. While the outward institutional hierarchy does not change, with each semester student and professor learn more about each other and achieve greater familiarity. Chen (2006) reports that her subject "learned to use conversational language ... with a few professors she was more familiar with" (p. 41). Similarly, Walther (1994) discovered that email users were influenced by their own expectations of whether the online interaction was a "one-shot" occurrence (p. 491) or was projected to extend over a longer period of time. Another potential reason for a more speech-like character of students' email language might be the fact that email is developing into a dominant form of contact among people, not only in academia but also in all other walks of life, and with that certain standards of formality and politeness might dissipate (see Baron, 1984, for predictions of the influence of new computer mediated technology).

Pedagogical Intervention

A number of researchers agree that pedagogical intervention with regard to instruction in and acquisition of appropriate speech act performance is helpful for NNSs of English (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; House, 2003; Kasper, 2001). Without instruction, these speakers' language production tends to diverge from NS norms, which often results in negative assessments of their personalities and even cultural groups (Boxer, 2002b). While existing studies have examined language learners' speech act performance after instruction on elicited tasks (such as role plays and DCTs), few have examined speakers' authentic language production after pragmatics instruction. It should come as no surprise then that teaching the writing of appropriate and polite email messages in academic contexts has not yet been investigated. However, the existing studies suggest that NNSs could benefit from explicit email instruction as well as activities that involve discovery and raising of meta-pragmatic awareness.

Until now, few ESL books include sections on email communication (exceptions include Swales & Feak, 2000, and Mackey, 2005), but they tend to focus more on overall email etiquette than specific speech act production. As a result, pedagogical intervention with respect to appropriate student-professor email interaction rests, at present, with individual teachers and teacher-made materials. Tasks could be structured along the following lines when students learn to write an email message to a professor to request, for example, feedback on an assignment:

- 1) In a warm-up, students examine actual requests examples – some appropriate, some not – and discuss the reasons for pragmatic success and failure in an initial consciousness-raising task, comparable to Rose's (1999) use of pragmatic failure anecdotes.
- 2) Students read several email messages and examine the layout of the messages on paper and on the screen. The messages they read differ in terms of imposition (e.g., requesting feedback on one attachment is less imposing than requesting feedback on more than one).

- 3) Students dissect each email message into its components and uncover the standard elements (e.g., subject line, salutation, mention of attachment, request, expression of gratitude, student's name), comparable to DuFon's (2003) frame analysis approach.
- 4) Students focus on the actual request language and how it differs depending on the degree of imposition, akin to House's (2003) phase-specific speech acts and a meta-pragmatic and meta-linguistic focus-on-form approach recommended by Kasper (2001).
- 5) Finally, students practice writing email requests for feedback, first in more controlled fill-in-the-speech-act activities on worksheets (cf. Judd, 1999, for such cloze-type tasks in conversations), and eventually on their own in the computer lab, where they send actual email messages to their professor.

The same approach can then be used for other email requests and emails with different purposes. This lesson approach has been used successfully in classes of advanced level ESL students preparing for American university courses (Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth, 2002b).¹

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

In an attempt to describe and analyze the email use of NSs and NNSs to faculty and to uncover similarities and differences between them, and due to limitations of data collection, other potentially intriguing factors remain unexamined. In order to look at comparable groups of students, only email messages from students in the same degree program were examined, and the NNSs came from Asian language backgrounds. In addition, only messages sent to one faculty member could be collected due to ethical reasons. Future studies might look at a broader spectrum of students, including graduate students from a variety of academic fields of study, NNSs from a variety of language backgrounds, as well as undergraduate students whose computer experience most likely began at a much earlier age than that of graduate students. If possible, studies could be undertaken longitudinally in the way that Chen (2006) carried out her case study to gain insights into how NS and NNS students might change and adapt their email writing practices to their professors over the course of several semesters. If ethical hurdles can be overcome, it would be worthwhile to examine email messages sent to different faculty members to investigate how faculty gender, age, and field might influence students' email messages.

In addition, the analysis of requests could include analysis of supportive moves (i.e., standard email elements) in addition to the request head acts and politeness devices examined here (Biesenbach-Lucas (2006a). A more complete picture of e-politeness could emerge if the presence or absence of greetings and signatures, as well as the nature of the "virtual 'envelope'" (Danet, 2001, p. 53), are examined. Further, the CCSARP coding categories might need to be re-examined to accommodate request realizations found in naturalistic email communication. Also, in order to triangulate the descriptions of e-politeness aspects focused on in the present study, research should survey university faculty for their impressions of various email messages, following Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig's (1996) and Biesenbach-Lucas and Weasenforth's (2001) leads to corroborate insights into what contributes to e-politeness (or lack thereof) in institutional discourse.

Lastly, research should focus on pedagogical intervention and investigate what type of instruction (explicit, implicit, awareness-raising) is effective in helping language learners compose polite and effective email messages to professors. Factors such as proficiency level, amount of input and practice, length of exposure in the target culture and academic environment, and pragmatic transfer could be controlled to determine optimal intervention. Perhaps, as email becomes as commonplace as the telephone, institutional standards will become more solidified and ESL teaching materials aimed at an academic audience will include email communication as a regular course component. As a result, professors may eventually no longer write email etiquette rules into their syllabi.

NOTES

1. Sample teaching materials may be requested by emailing the author at biesenbs@georgetown.edu.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers, as well as the Managing Editor and Copy Editor at LLT, for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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