The Role of Iranian Students’ Gender in Using Email Writing Linguistic Features

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Abstract

This study investigated the role of gender in Iranian students’ email writing features as an electronic software to enhance mechanics of email writing. The focal question was whether gender could play any significant role in the quantity and quality of the students’ email writing since it has been made new demands on language that leads to interesting variations in written language use. The design of study was descriptive regarding the evaluation mode of research procedure. Thus, one hundred MA students (57\% female, 43\% male) with the age ranging from 22 to 26 participated in this study. Two researcher-made instruments were utilized to collect the data. The first one was a five point Likert self-report questionnaire on the participants’ age, gender, and years of experience using email as well as the amount and type of weekly email use. The next research instrument was the checklist extracted from Mulac, Bardac, and Gibbons’ (2001) linguistic features including interpersonal, textual, and contextual markers. Data were analyzed through percentage and Chi-square ($X^2$) statistics. Results revealed that there was a significant difference between Iranian males and females in the use of email linguistic and stylistic features ($p<0.05$). Males’ messages had more textual errors. Moreover, it was found that females tended to use more informal and conversation contextual and interpersonal features than males.

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1. Introduction

Information and communication technologies are having a profound impact on all aspects of life, language is no exception. One of the most significant changes that this digital revolution has prompted is a transformation in how students write and communicate. Email, which falls under the broader category of computer-mediated communication (CMC), is also an important medium of language to study, as it is a relatively new and unique form of communication. This new medium of language is also experiencing exploding growth around the world. E-mail is the most frequently used application of the Internet and has become an important aspect of the communication process within higher education (Willis, 2005). The language of email, chats, web-based discussions and text messages is marked by features of both informal speech and formal writing, a host of text-based icons and acronyms for managing social interaction, and changes in spelling norms (Saffarian & Gorjian, 2012). In addition, the electronic medium (e-medium) provides a new context for the writing process.

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These phenomena have prompted research on whether students’ frequent engagement with electronic writing (e-writing) has implications for writing and writing instruction (Gorjian, 2008). Accordingly, the goal of this research study was to determine whether the email messages by Iranian male and female EFL students reveal gender-related distinctions in relation to features mentioned by Mulac, Bardac, and Gibbons (2001). The research questions were: 1) Do male and female EFL students significantly differ in terms of textual features (i.e., total number of words, mean length sentences, etc.), verb phrases (i.e., uncertainty verbs), and modifiers (i.e., intensive adverbs, hedges)? 2) Do male and female EFL students differ significantly in using interpersonal features (i.e., greeting markers, opening and closing markers in writing email?), and 3) Do male and female EFL student significantly differ in email writing in terms of contextual features (i.e., referring to social rules and roles, emotion, quantity, locatives and “I” references)?

2. Review of the Related Literature

Despite extensive theorizing, actual empirical investigations have yet to converge on a coherent picture of gender differences in language. Studying these differences can help us shape a better world of communication (Gorjian, 2008). Moreover, the last several decades have seen an explosion of research on the nature and existence of differences between men and women. One particularly popular question has been the extent to which men and women use language differently (Saffarian & Gorjian, 2012). To date, a number of studies have been carried out to investigate the gender differences in the Internet usage and uncover the reasons for these differences, but very few research studies have examined the gender differences of the characteristic of communication and interaction in email messages between male and female EFL students in Iran (Mohammadi, Gorjian & Alipour, 2012).

2.1. Email as a medium of communication

In today’s world “Next Generation”, students live in a digital world. Recent studies (e.g., Gorjian, Alipour & Saffarian, 2012) reveal that students spend over 10 hours a day using multimedia devices, such as mobile phones, mp3 players, and computers in their daily communication. Electronic mail as a means of communication has its roots in, and is now firmly established in, the international system developed in the world’s universities, and a great many individual users now have access to this system (Gorjian, 2008). As email is not bound by personal schedules, geographical limitations, or time zones, it can be sent and received at the convenience of the participant, and the informal style of email makes it less threatening to use when communicating in a foreign language, which makes email very attractive for intercultural communication. The advent of new forms of communication, such as e-mail and instant messaging, decreases the necessity of seeking help from a professor in person during office hours. However, best practices for the use of e-mail are still forming (Gorjian, 2008).

2.2. Gender in email communication

Although men and women, from a given social class, belong to the same speech community, they may use different linguistic forms. The investigation and identification of differences between men’s and women’s speech date back across time. Until 1944, no specific piece of writing on gender differences in language appeared. As stated by Grey (1998, cited in Nemati & Bayer, 2007), it was in 1970s that comparison between female and male competitiveness in linguistic behaviour began. Two of the most significant theories on social differences between males and females are “difference theory” and “dominance theory”. Nemati and Bayer (2007) argue that according to “difference theory” men and women, even those within the same group, live in different or separate cultural worlds and, as a result, they promote different ways of speaking. In “dominance theory”, men and women are believed to inhabit a cultural and linguistic world, where power and status are unequally distributed. In this theory, also called power-based theory, the focus is on male dominance and gender division. (Nemati & Bayer, 2007)

2.3. Gender differences in writing

The differences between girls and boys in terms of writing support the ideas of Graddol and Swann (1989), who argue that the difference between girls and boys lies in the perceptions and preferences of girls and boys about writing. Girls tend to have positive feelings about writing while boys are negative. More boys than girls say they prefer factual writing; girls prefer imaginative writing. Girls’ writings are confessional and reflective, dealing with people and emissions, using more private forms while boys’ like facts and actions, and more public forms. However, amongst the academics, the narrative writing of academic women differed markedly from that of academic men, though as a whole, the academic group differed from the students. The women’s texts were strongly self-reflexive and evaluative, while the men’s were more egocentric (Graddol & Swann, 1989). Thus, a study of language learning on gender differences related to email writing of EFL learners would be interesting because it would involve multiple aspects: academic settings, non-native speakers, and difference of cultures.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

One hundred male and female EFL students (57% female, 43% male) participated in this study. They were all Masters of Arts
(MA) studying at both public Universities and Islamic Azad Universities of TEFL in Iran. Their age ranged from 22 to 26 years old. They used email writing activities between 3 and 4 hours per week. They had been using email for an average of over 7 years. 47% of the participants reported using email for task-related purposes like school or work. 27% of them reported using email for social reasons such as interacting with friends and family. All the participants had already studied English as their major for at least 5 years. They had all passed the General English Language Proficiency test by taking the Iranian National MA Entrance Exam, which is a highly competitive exam; therefore, they were assumed to possess a fairly high and equal command of English.

3.2. Instrumentation

Information about the participants’ age, sex, email experience, weekly email use, and the purpose of email use were collected through a self-report 5-point Likert type questionnaire included twenty items. Its reliability index was met through Cronbach Alpha as (α=0.716). The other instrument was a checklist extracted from Mulac, Bradac and Gibbons (2001). It included seventeen items, which collect data on interpersonal, textual and contextual markers used by the participants in their email messages sent to the researchers. Since the purpose was to elicit the responses of the participants, the content of the emails was designed around a request for participation in a project. As a result, the linguistic features mentioned by Mulac, Bardac and Gibbons (2001), which the research checklist was extracted from, are as follows:

a) Elliptical Sentences: Crystal (2001, p. 47) defines ellipsis as a sentence where “for reasons of economy, emphasis, or style, a part of the structure has been omitted, which is recoverable from a scrutiny of the context”. For example, “Gorgeous!” (a beautiful snowy setting).

b) Mean length sentences: The number of words divided by the number of sentences, defined as sequences of words beginning with a capital letter and ending with a period.

c) Judgmental Adjectives: These indicate personal evaluation rather than merely description. For example, “distracting, nice, bothersome.”

d) Uncertainty verbs: The type of verb phrases indicating apparent lack of certainty. For example, “I wonder if…, I’m not sure…, It seems…..”

e) Intensive Adverbs: Adverbs which tend to give force or emphasis, such as, “very, really, quite.”

f) Hedges: They are the modifiers that indicate lack of confidence in, or diminished assuredness of, the statement and also indicate lack of confidence in, or diminished assuredness of, the statement. For example, “sort of, kind of.”

g) References to Emotions: Any mention of an emotion or feeling, such as “happy, enticing, depressing”.

h) References to Quantity: Any mention of an amount, such as “6-8 thousand feet elevation, below 3”.

i) “I” References: First-person singular pronoun in the subjective case.

j) Words: Total number of words spoken or written.

3.3. Data analysis

One hundred emails were sent to the intended participants. Content analysis of the email responses from the participants was conducted through using the checklist of email features. The researchers, based on the review of the related literature and their identification of the gender difference, and mainly features mentioned by Mulac, Bardac, and Gibbons (2001) agreed on a coding scheme for identifying gender-related features in the messages. Thereafter, 10% of the messages were chosen through systematic random sampling (i.e., by means of coding emails from 1 to 100 and the selection of every 10th email equally among males and females). After reaching a general consensus on gender-related cues, the researchers identified and counted different gender-related elements in the responses and tabulated the frequency of use of these elements in the checklist. Chi-square analysis was used to find the difference between male and female participants in using email writing features.

4. Results and discussion

The comparative study between males and females has shown that the linguistic features used in writing email could be categorized in terms of textual, interpersonal, and contextual features.

4.1. Textual features

Textual features used in males and females’ emails in writing emails are presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Ave. no. of words in each email</th>
<th>No. of words in each sentence</th>
<th>Freq. of chunks in each email</th>
<th>Dictation error</th>
<th>Grammatical error</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>X²</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>32.08</td>
<td>13.20</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>25.58</td>
<td>11.62</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.81</td>
<td>0.307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>33.89</td>
<td>14.31</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>17.54</td>
<td>22.58</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 shows that there is not a significant difference between males and females in using email writing features since the observed $X^2$ is less than the critical $X^2$ ($X^2_o = 0.307 < X^2_c = 11.070$, $p<0.05$). We found that there was not a significant difference between the males and females’ email length. The participants used average number of words similarly. Furthermore, in a comparison between their emails, we found that the dictation errors in males’ messages were 25.58 percent, while the dictation errors in females’ messages were 17.54 percent. The most challenging word in terms of spelling errors was "interest". Some spelling errors were significant and frequent enough that it made emails difficult to understand.

4.2. Interpersonal features

Similarly related to above findings, Cheng and Beaumont (2004) in a longitudinal case study found that his only participant, Linda, used such an informal style for two reasons. First, from the second language perspective, this style helped her to express herself in English more easily and fluently, for she did not need to spend much time pondering what words and forms to use. Second, from the interpersonal perspective, this style helped her to create a sense of group belonging, for her friends all wrote emails in this style.

Since one of the aims of the present research was to examine the structural makers (e.g. “Dear”, “Regards”) in emails, some interesting findings related to them were found. The styles chosen to open the email messages in this study represent a much-diversified spread of forms, and seem to be fairly an area for personal expression. Each message was evaluated in terms of address form and opening. The evaluation led to address phrases such as uncommon greeting norm, informal, semi-formal, and formal as presented in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Address phrase types</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-formal</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncommon greeting</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 3 shows, the preferred form of greeting was formal such as the greeting “Dear” accompanied by last name with the highest frequency, 40%. Another phrase was semi-formal phrases such as “Dear” accompanied by first name of researcher, with the frequency of 10%. The salient address phrase was Persian patterns of greeting e.g., “Dear Mr. X” accompanied by “Hi” and “Hello”, with the frequency of 10%. This could be ascribed to pragmatic transfer, which also confirms Kasper’s (1992) definition of pragmatic transfer, which refers to “the influence that previous pragmatic knowledge has on the use and acquisition of L2 pragmatic knowledge” (p. 207).

4.3. Contextual features

According to Crismore, Markkanen and Steffensen (1993), contextual markers are used to emphasize propositional content by allowing the writer to express his intention in an appropriate context with the content in which he may use specific functions of words or phrases. They are used to convey surprise, obligation, agreement and importance. In a study of emails, Nickerson (2000) found a number of attitude markers that were used by writers to emphasize their perspective on information, or in order to justify a certain action. Examples of attitude markers in the present dataset were “interested”; “I am interested in participating in your research”, as well as “glad” and “I'd be glad to help you”. The phrases used by the participants are presented in Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am interested</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’d be glad</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would be happy to</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking forward to</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It would be my pleasure</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’d like to help</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like to</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want to help you</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’d appreciate</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would be pleased</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This would be my honour</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would be grateful</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Anonymity or use of pseudonyms in CMC sometimes has been used in educational and business applications to encourage frank response or unbiased exchange. It has been argued that anonymity can be a positive value, when it creates opportunities to invent alternative versions of personal identity and to engage in untried form of interaction. In this way, not only fictional identities can be created, but also anonymous communication users can switch genders, appearances, and countless other usually integral personality aspects (Reid, 1991). Usually, the practice of hiding identity is protecting a communicant in a public forum from adverse social reactions to the expression of views, which might be considered socially deviant or from being identified as participating in a CMC forum popularly perceived as socially deviant.

5. Conclusion

Results revealed that there was a significant difference between Iranian males and females in the use of email textual, contextual and interpersonal linguistic features (p<0.05). Textually, males’ emails had more spelling and grammatical errors than females’. Moreover, females tended to use more interpersonal cues than their counterparts did. Females were more aware of contextual cues rather than males such as in using appropriate titles, formal of greeting, politeness phrases, and attitude markers. Although the number of linguistic elements such as the quantity and amount of words used by males and females were equal per each email, in which they use the three domains of textual, contextual and interpersonal markers differently. Future research is needed to uncover the pragmatic elements concerned with the intended meaning of the emails. This study may contribute to English language teachers and learners to practice writing generally and composing letters and emails specifically in Iranian context via computer-mediated communication.

References


