Teaching email politeness in the EFL/ESL classroom

Maria Economidou-Kogetsidis

Writing status-congruent emails is a skill that requires high pragmatic competence and awareness of the politeness conventions and email etiquette that need to be followed. Planning and composing such emails pose a greater challenge for EFL learners who use English in lingua franca communication (ELF), as they not only often struggle with grammatical accuracy but might also be faced with a clash between English L1 norms and lingua franca norms, especially when finding themselves living in the L1 speech community. This study discusses the need for explicit email instruction in the EFL/ESL classroom by examining how a number of authentic emails, written by Greek-Cypriot university students in English, are perceived by a group of British English native speaking university lecturers. The article aims to highlight the unwelcome potential effects of EFL emails and to offer a number of practical suggestions and recommendations for pedagogical intervention.

Introduction

Linguistic politeness is an integral part of successful communicative competence which, in turn, entails pragmatic competence (Bachman 1990), an interlocutor’s ability ‘to carry out appropriate linguistic actions, appropriate in the sense of fitting both one’s own intentions and the situation in use’ (House 2003: 134). A number of studies in the field of interlanguage pragmatics have now confirmed that even fairly advanced L2 learners often lack adequate pragmatic awareness and competence in the L2 (Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei 1998) and they sometimes perform requests or other speech acts (apologies, refusals, complements, etc.) inappropriately or simply differently to native speakers (henceforth NSs). As a result, when these learners find themselves in the target language community, their language use can easily cause pragmatic failure and cross-cultural misunderstandings with the force expressed being different to the one intended. Unfortunately, pragmatic failures, unlike grammatical errors, are sometimes not recognized as such by non-linguists, and if a grammatically competent non-native speaker (NNS) appears to speak or write fluently, a NS is likely to attribute the learner’s pragmatic failure to impoliteness or unfriendliness, not to any linguistic deficiency.

In English as a lingua franca (ELF) communication, the situation might be somewhat different. Lingua franca English usually involves participants...
from different linguistic and national backgrounds (House op.cit.) and it tends to be characterized by possible variations in the cultural norms that need to be applied during interaction. It has been argued 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’ (House op.cit.: 141). House argues that ‘ELF is used purely and simply, instrumentally’, and there should be ‘an enormous negotiability potential for linguistic-cultural norms, i.e. norms would need to be open, flexible, changeable’ (op.cit.: 149). Therefore, 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.

Writing emails to an authority figure, such as a university lecturer, is one of the tasks that requires high pragmatic competence and awareness of the politeness conventions and email etiquette that need to be followed. Yet, planning and composing such emails pose a greater challenge for L2 speakers who not only often struggle with grammatical accuracy but also often lack the sophisticated pragmatic competence in the L2 and knowledge of how L2 culture shapes discourse and power relations (especially if already accustomed to the norms of ELF communication). When the same learners move to the target language community to either study or pursue a career, sophisticated pragmatic competence in the L2 becomes essential since pragmatically inappropriate language can cause pragmatic failure by unintentionally violating social appropriateness in the target culture.

This study investigates the differences between politeness norms of Greek-Cypriot university EFL students and British English NS lecturers in relation to email writing in a power-asymmetrical, academic situation. This is done by investigating the British NS lecturers’ perceptions of a number of learners’ authentic emails written to the students’ own university lecturers. Even though most EFL/ESL teachers seem to realize how important successful email writing is for learners, not all may realize the implications that these differences can have on the learner as a person during non-native–native communication, and how unfavourably NS recipients may view such emails. This study therefore aims to highlight the unwelcome potential effects of EFL emails by reporting on the findings of a perception study, and by emphasizing the need for explicit email instruction in the EFL/ESL classroom. With this aim in mind, a number of practical suggestions and recommendations for pedagogical intervention are offered.

As the implications of pragmatic failure can be serious for L2 learners, the need for explicit pragmatic instruction in the language classroom has been emphasized by a number of researchers (for example Rose and Kasper 2001) and its merits have been documented by a number of empirical studies (for example Alcón Soler and Martínez-Flor 2008). It is now widely accepted that L2 learners need to become able to accomplish goals as social actors who do not just need to get things done, but get these things done appropriately by taking into account the sociocultural context. The goal of the pedagogical intervention is therefore to develop learners’
pragmatic awareness and competence by primarily drawing their conscious attention to the pragmatic norms of the target language. Its goal is also to sensitize students to possible cross-cultural pragmatic differences, as the cause of pragmatic failure is quite often the result of pragmatic transfer from their L1 and culture.

Previous research on L2 learners’ requestive performance identified that the learners’ pragmatic deviations relate, among other things, to the choice of directness level and the choice and amount of internal\(^1\) and external\(^2\) modification of requests. More specifically, L2 learners from a number of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds have been found to employ higher requestive directness and less syntactic modification than English NSs, and to rely on externally mitigating their requests through reasons and explanations.

Those situations that involve power-asymmetrical requests are even more pragmatically demanding and they generally require greater pragmatic skills. Email messages from university students to their lecturers fall into this category. A number of studies (Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig 1996; Economidou-Kogetsidis 2011) examined how English NNS students use email to communicate with their lecturers in an institutional setting. Results found that learners’ emails were pragmatically unsuccessful due to inappropriate and insufficient mitigation; an emphasis on students’ personal needs, wants, and unreasonable time frames; lack of acknowledgment of the imposition involved, and in general, lack of status-congruent language. Results also confirmed learners’ preference for higher directness in their emails which were characterized by an absence of greetings and closings, and inappropriate or unacceptable forms of address.

How to address the email recipient is also one of the most difficult choices that senders often have to make. A number of EFL, EAP, and business communication textbooks advise the use of ‘Dear + sir/madam’ or ‘title + surname’ address form for formal correspondence (especially in letter writing), yet the student–lecturer relationship might require different forms of address depending on the degree of familiarity between the student and the lecturer and therefore the degree of formality which exists in the relationship. Quite often, textbooks associate formality with politeness leading learners to believe that a formal letter/email is also necessarily polite. Yet, as it has many times been argued in the literature of politeness studies, one can be impolite and formal, or informal and polite at the same time. The dimensions of politeness and formality do not always represent parallel scales.

Hendriks’ (2010) study specifically investigated the impressions of English NSs towards Dutch learners’ email requests. The study found that the underuse of elaborate syntactic and lexical modification in the NNSs’ requests led NSs to evaluate the senders negatively. In other words, their ‘bare’ emails reflected negatively on the sender’s personality. To date, however, not a lot of studies have focused on the effects of unmodified and direct emails. There has been even less emphasis paid to this by published literature geared towards EFL/ESL practitioners. This study aims to make a contribution to this area.
As a substantial number of Greek-Cypriot tertiary education students aim to graduate from local universities and then transfer to the UK for postgraduate studies (and possible careers), this study aimed to investigate whether their unmodified emails (which, typically, were very direct) could be pragmatically infelicitous and viewed as impolite when used in the target language community. This study therefore examined how a number of university EFL learners’ authentic emails (written as a form of ELF communication) are evaluated by British English NS lecturers. The emails used were written in English by Greek-Cypriot university students, addressing their lecturers in an English-medium university in Cyprus. The recipients of the emails were Greek-Cypriot, Greek, and British (who have lived in Cyprus for a number of years); thus, English was used as a lingua franca. The students were all undergraduate students whose English language proficiency was advanced. All emails involved one or more requests on various academic matters and were selected on the basis of their high degree of directness and lack of mitigators. The emails used represented first-time interactions on the topic and they were not part of an email discourse chain.

Twenty-four university lecturers (British English NSs) from 12 universities in the United Kingdom were then asked to assess the emails through the use of a perception questionnaire that was administered to them online. The age of the lecturers ranged from late 20s to over 50s. They were asked to offer their perceptions on the politeness of six email messages and were instructed to imagine that they had received the emails from one of their young students with whom they were familiar but not close. More specifically, the questionnaire asked the NSs to evaluate each email message on a five-point Likert scale along the dimension of politeness (i.e. 1 = not at all, 5 = very much). The NSs were then asked to provide comments for their assessment by making reference to specific linguistic features from the message and by explaining how they could characterize the message or the student.

The emails, as well as a summary of the politeness and modification features of these emails (see Table 1), are presented below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Email</th>
<th>Form of address</th>
<th>Greeting/opening</th>
<th>Email structure/ internal modification</th>
<th>External modification</th>
<th>Email pre-closing/ closing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Dear + first name (Dear Mary)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Please + imperative</td>
<td>+ reason/ explanation</td>
<td>‘Thanks in advance’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Zero form of address</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Please + imperative</td>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Zero form of address</td>
<td>‘Hello’</td>
<td>Would like (want statement)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>First name (Mary)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Please + imperative (× 2) Direct question</td>
<td>Aggravator (‘as soon as possible’)</td>
<td>‘Thanks’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Dr + first name (Dr Paul)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Direct question</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>‘Thanks’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Dr + surname</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Please + imperative</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>‘Thank you’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1**
A summary of the politeness and modification features of the emails

**Maria Economidou-Kogetsidis**
Email 1

Dear Mary,

Please email the syllabus of the course ENG 551 taught during the second semester because I would like to familiarize myself with the content of its books.

My email is .........

Thanking you in advance,

[student’s name]

Email 2

To: ........@unic.ac.cy
Subject: questionnaire

Attachement
Please note what changes should be made.

Email 3

hello.

My name is ........ and I missed today’s lecture because I’m sick.

I would like to know about assignment 2.

Email 4

Mary,

I collected some ‘chunks’ about professional identity from the chapters that I read. I’m going to use them in my literature review that I will write tomorrow. Please take a look and see whether what I collected are necessary and important but also whether my references are ok ...

Shall I include a quotation as it is ... or shall I paraphrase?

Please answer me as soon as possible.

Thanx

C [student’s name]

Email 5

Dr. Paul,

When can I come to your office to speak to you about a problem that I have?

Thanks
Email 6

Dr. Jones,

Please let me know if you received my assignment.

Thank you.

Results

The statistical analysis indicated that there was a significant difference in the perceived degree of politeness of the six emails included in the questionnaire. Email 2 was perceived as significantly less polite than the rest of the emails. Emails 1, 5, and 6 were not found to significantly differ from each other but were found to be significantly more polite than the rest of the emails. Finally, Emails 3 and 4 were found to be significantly more polite than Email 2 but less polite than Emails 5, 1, and 6. Table 2 presents the mean results and orders the emails in terms of their perceived politeness.

It therefore becomes evident that Email 2 was the email that received the most negative evaluation, while Emails 6 and 1 were significantly more successful in not violating social appropriateness. A closer look at the content of these emails allows us to see that, although all three emails employ the ‘please + imperative’ structure, Email 2 has no salutation (zero form of address), no opening/greeting, no syntactic mitigation, no external mitigation (for example reasons and explanations), no closing, and no acknowledgment of the imposition caused. The student is asking the lecturer to review his written work (a rather large imposition) by sending a bare imperative request with an attached file of the work that needs to be reviewed.

Even though participants were not asked to comment specifically on the degree of imposition involved in each email, a closer look at the content of the emails allows us to claim that the degree of imposition involved and not the wording alone has also influenced the participants’ evaluations. It can be argued that Email requests 1 and 2 involve a larger imposition than the rest of the email requests because of the effort and time involved on the part of the lecturer. Unlike Email 2, Email 1 offers a reason/explanation and acknowledges the imposition involved by thanking the lecturer. It also employs an informal ‘Dear + first name’ address form.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Email no.</th>
<th>This email is polite</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Email 6 (n* = 23)</td>
<td>3.78 (0.736)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email 1 (n = 24)</td>
<td>3.42 (1.248)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email 5 (n = 21)</td>
<td>3.38 (0.590)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email 4 (n = 24)</td>
<td>2.54 (0.721)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email 3 (n = 24)</td>
<td>2.17 (0.963)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email 2 (n = 24)</td>
<td>1.38 (0.576)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *n shows the number of questionnaire responses received for the specific email.

Table 2
Emails ordered in terms of politeness

Maria Economidou-Kogetsidis
which, in the context of British higher education, has been seen as an acceptable greeting.

Similarly, Emails 5 and 6 (found to be significantly more polite than the rest) also include a ‘thank you/thanks’ pre-closing, which can be seen as some form of acknowledgement of the faculty’s time.

The comments provided by the NSs shed some valuable light on the email features that were seen as acceptable or problematic in this student–faculty online interaction. Positive comments were made by a number of NSs in relation to the use of the mitigator ‘please’, the pre-closing mitigator ‘thank you’, the term of deference ‘dear’ in the salutation, and the inclusion of a reason/explanation, especially in relation to Email 1. Importantly, however, some participants pointed out the need for greater mitigation even in relation to Email 1, something which also indicates that the degree of imposition has played a role.

In fact, the ‘please + imperative’ structure was viewed particularly negatively by NSs in relation to Emails 1, 2, 4, and 6. A number of participants explained that such directness ‘sounds like a demand’ or ‘an instruction’, and that it ‘always sounds harsh even when a “please” is added’. Indeed, their comments can confirm that such significantly direct strategies can easily become responsible for pragmatic infelicities as they appear to give the faculty member no choice in complying with the request. The use of the imperative in particular can be seen as an institutionally inappropriate strategy because the degree of power in such emails is not properly assigned to the lecturer. As a participant explained: ‘the imperative is what I would expect from a supervisor or a manager not a student’ and thus creates the assumption that the lecturer will comply. It therefore becomes clear that the marker ‘please’ alone does not serve as a strong enough mitigator to soften the force of the imperative in power-asymmetrical situations.

Emails 3 and 5 did not make use of the ‘please + imperative’ structure, yet they still employed direct strategies that caused them to be seen as rather abrupt (see Table 3) and to receive rather negative evaluations. More specifically, Email 3 employed a ‘want statement’ (‘I would like …’) and Email 5 employed a ‘direct question for information’ (Hassall 1999). Both of these requests were externally unmodified and included no lexical/phrasal mitigators. In relation to Email 3, most participants made reference to the need for such external mitigators by criticizing the lack of an explanation and/or mainly the lack of an apology. Participants characterized the sender as ‘imposing and authoritative’, ‘bad-mannered’, ‘abrupt’, and ‘self-centred’. It therefore becomes clear that the use of a want statement without the necessary mitigation can render the email inappropriate by emphasizing the sender’s own personal needs and wants.

A number of NSs also commented on the use of ‘thank you in advance’. Even though thanking the lecturer was seen positively, the expression ‘thank you in advance’ was seen as giving a negative effect to the email as it openly presupposes that the request will be granted, and ‘demands compliance’. It can be argued that such a presupposition in hierarchical relationships can be seen as quite inappropriate, even when the request falls within the students’ rights and the faculty’s obligations.
A further element which was negatively evaluated was the omission of deference form ‘dear’ in the salutation of Emails 4, 5, and 6, and a number of lecturers pointed out its absence. One participant explained that ‘missing out “Dear” seems a mistake’, while another participant admitted:

I am also uncomfortable about the use of the lecturer’s name without ‘dear’—I would prefer ‘hi’ or ‘hello’. As it stands, it seems very formal … (Female, age 50+)

What also received particularly negative evaluation was the absence of a salutation altogether in Emails 2 and 3. Even though Email 3 begins with ‘hello’, this was still seen as an inappropriate way of opening such an email. One of the lecturers explained how he found the lack of salutation in Email 3 ‘disrespectful’, while another one explained in relation to Email 2:

this email is not addressed to me or not signed by student ...therefore abrupt and to a good degree impolite. (Male, age 41–50)

The informal form of address ‘Dear + first name’ (for example in Email 1) was not found to be inappropriate by participants as most of them agreed that ‘UK culture is quite informal in this regards’. Similarly, the grammatically incorrect ‘title + first name’ form (for example ‘Dr Paul’) was seen as amusing rather than rude or insulting, which indicates that such violations are minor and do not appear to cause pragmatic failure.

However, what can easily become the source of pragmatic misunderstandings in such power-asymmetrical emails is the employment of intensifiers that can render the requests coercive and abrupt. In Email 4, for example, the student not only employed the imperative form twice but also used a time intensifier (‘as soon as possible’), possibly to stress the urgency involved. Yet, the participants of this study commented negatively on this intensifier. They mentioned how it gave a ‘rude’ effect to the message, ‘demanded information’, ‘put pressure’ on the lecturer, and how the student ‘failed to take the lecturer’s time into consideration’. This reference to unreasonable time frames mirrors previous findings relating to NNSs’ emails (Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig op.cit.).

This article provided some evidence that EFL learners’ pragmatic choices in ELF email communication can cause pragmatic failure in NS–NNS interaction. Even though learners’ pragmatic choices might be acceptable in ELF email communication, the same choices can cause pragmatic failure when used in the target language community during native–non-native communication. Learners’ emails can come across as impolite, and/or status-incongruent, and the L2 senders themselves can be judged unfavourably for their personality and not for their lack of linguistic proficiency. Of course, the results of this study do not straightforwardly suggest that learners simply need to increase the level of mitigation with their email requests. Requests that include too much mitigation might also sound inappropriate, subservient, and/or insincere (for example ‘I’m ever so sorry to bother you but I was wondering if you could, by any chance, possibly provide me with some feedback?’). Therefore, being pragmatically successful is a matter of pitching it right. Also, as this study focused on the evaluations of British English NSs, it is possible that different results
would have emerged with American speakers or speakers of other English varieties where different politeness norms may be in place.

Nevertheless, what becomes evident from this study is that learners are in need of explicit pragmatic instruction when it comes to writing emails to authority figures. This is more the case for those learners who are planning on moving to the target language culture for educational, professional, or personal reasons. These L2 learners need, as a first step, to have their pragmatic awareness raised through consciousness-raising activities, which can help them become aware of the different politeness norms that might prevail in the target language environment. Awareness-raising activities are also essential because students’ knowledge of pragmatic appropriateness in their own language(s) is also likely to be inconsistent and there will undoubtedly be differences of opinion. Importantly, pragmatic infelicities are often caused by pragmatic transfer from the learners’ native language and culture; thus, awareness-raising activities can help learners realize the unwelcome effects that their pragmalinguistic choices might have on the tone and the politeness of the email.

As part of such pragmatic awareness activities, learners can be presented with pragmatically appropriate and inappropriate emails written by NSs and NNSs and be asked to compare, evaluate, and discuss. Learners’ attention must be specifically drawn to distinctive elements that differ from those in their mother tongue (Schmidt 1995). They can be asked to consider/discuss the context, directness choices, address forms, and modification choices according to specific sociological and contextual factors (for example participants’ relationships, degree of imposition involved, degree of formality, possible urgency, power differences, rights and obligations) and then be involved in carrying out revisions on pragmatically inappropriate emails. Learners could also benefit from discussing the different politeness norms that exist in their culture as compared to the target culture in relation to writing emails to an authority figure.

If learners have access (personal or electronic) to NSs, they can also be involved themselves in collecting NSs’ evaluations and comments which can then provide the basis for classroom discussion. Learners can share their findings in the class with the aim of identifying and discussing those email features that can unintentionally lend an impolite and abrupt effect to the email, and thereby lead to a negative evaluation of the sender. Learners can then be involved in writing new emails either to each other or to their NS lecturers/instructors whom they can ask for feedback on the email style and its overall tone. Writing and/or revising emails will help them develop not only their pragmatic awareness but their pragmatic competence as well.

The above pedagogical suggestions could be particularly useful in raising the pragmatic awareness and competence of those learners who are receiving pre-sessional or in-sessional language support at a particular university in the target culture. In this scenario, the target culture is clear and therefore more specific politeness and pragmatic norms can be investigated and suggested. Importantly, however, in a world where English is increasingly used as a lingua franca, it is essential that teachers...
are careful to avoid prescriptivism and trying to enforce Anglo-Saxon standards of behaviour. As House (op.cit.: 149) explains ‘if one wants to develop interactional competence in ELF, it is inappropriate to teach a particular cultural, literary profile—British, American, Canadian etc.’. The responsibility therefore of the language teacher is not to enforce the norms of a particular culture if the culture targeted is not clear, but to equip the student with the ability to express him/herself in ‘exactly the way he/she chooses to do so—rudely, tactfully, or in an elaborate polite manner. What we want to prevent is her/his being unintentionally rude or subservient’ (Thomas 1983: 96). A step in this direction can be achieved not only by heightening and refining the students’ metapragmatic awareness and pragmatic skills but by raising their awareness of the possible pragmatic implications that their linguistic choices can have.

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Notes
1 Internal modifiers are elements within the request that can act either as downgraders (‘please’, ‘possibly’, ‘a little’, etc.) or as upgraders, meant to intensify the coerciveness of a request (‘truly’, ‘really’, etc.).
2 External modification involves markers that externally modify the request through the use of supportive moves. Such moves can either soften a request (for example by offering an apology) or intensify its force through an emphasis on urgency, the inclusion of a complaint, a criticism, etc.
3 All names of lecturers in emails are pseudonyms.

References


The author
Maria Economidou-Kogetsidis is Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of Nicosia and the MA in TESOL programme coordinator. Her research areas are interlanguage and intercultural pragmatics, cross-cultural communication, and politeness. Her publications have appeared in the Journal of Pragmatics, Intercultural Pragmatics, Journal of Politeness Research, and Multilingua. Her current research focuses on the pragmatic performance and development of Greek learners of English, and on e-requests.
Email: kogetsidis.m@unic.ac.cy