

Fostering Pragmatic Competence: Strategies and Materials for Email Writing

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Whereas graduate English as a second language (ESL) students have been found to use a wide range of appropriate politeness strategies in email, studies have found that emails sent by undergraduate ESL students can be perceived as impolite (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007). On the contrary, effective use of politeness strategies leads to positive perceptions of students' competence (Bolkan & Holmgren, 2012). Explicit instruction on netiquette guidelines can foster the ability to construct polite email messages. This paper offers a set of strategies and materials devoted to email writing for undergraduate students in ESL settings. The goal of the paper is to promote the development of sociopragmatic competence with a specific focus on electronic requests in academic contexts. In our overview of pedagogical materials and approaches, we draw on current literature regarding teaching pragmatics and on our own extensive experience working with English language learners both in the United States and abroad.

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The fact that international undergraduate students at American universities often experience difficulty when communicating via email with their professors has been noticed by many faculty and documented in the literature. Students typically use email to communicate with faculty when they ask questions about course content, make requests regarding deadline extensions, or need help with course assignments. Studies suggest that overly informal emails can affect student credibility (Stephens, Houser, & Cowan, 2009) and that electronic messages written by students from abroad are often perceived as rude (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007). The potential reasons are divergence from native-speaker norms such as lack of elaborate modifications (Hendricks, 2010) or overuse of directness (Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth, 2002; Chen, 2006). As a consequence, international students are at risk of being negatively perceived.

Following a belief that more native-like linguistic performance can lead to positive perceptions of international students by faculty (Bolkan & Holmgren, 2012), numerous suggestions for language teachers have been offered in the literature. They range from general principles for pragmatics-focused instruction (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2002; Butler, 2012, Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Rose, 2010) to specific teaching approaches and activities that focus on improving students' ability to write appropriate emails (e.g., Ford, 2003b; Lancaster, 2011).

In this paper, we draw on the existing literature and our own classroom experience to propose activities and materials that help international students become more effective participants in email exchanges during their studies at American colleges and universities. We use examples from students of Korean linguistic and cultural background but also offer suggestions that can be applied in diverse, multicultural and multilingual English as a second language (ESL) classrooms.

Literature Review

Pragmatic Knowledge and Email

Pragmatic knowledge can be defined as the speaker's ability to formulate and comprehend messages that are appropriate in a given context. Language users utilize pragmatic knowledge to relate their utterances to the language-use settings, such as to use and comprehend various registers and to comprehend cultural allusions (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). Pragmatic knowledge helps language users construct linguistic messages that are context-appropriate and polite, and it can be considered "one of the most complex and challenging aspects of communicative competence" (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010, p. 76).

To successfully participate in computer-mediated communication (CMC) with their professors, in particular when making a request of instructor's time or resources, students need to keep in mind the hierarchical relationship between themselves and the addressee, and carefully construct their messages to ensure they are polite. This means that they need to be familiar with the pragmatic norms of the target community, and they need to be able to employ appropriate salutations, as well as spelling, punctuation and grammar conventions. However, as Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) points out, "appropriate models for emails from students to faculty are lacking" (p. 60). This is why it is so important for ESL teachers to specifically focus on netiquette.

Teaching Pragmatics

Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2002) stress the importance of integrating pragmatics in second language instruction and argue that it is language teachers' responsibility to raise language learners' pragmatic and cultural awareness and to sensitize

them to politeness strategies available in the target language. Various approaches to teaching pragmatics and politeness have been proposed. Some argue that pragmatics instruction should be combined with grammar teaching (Félix-Brasdefer & Cohen, 2012), whereas others propose that it should be integrated into the general language teaching curriculum (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010) or, more specifically, into courses centered on content-based language teaching approaches (Krulatz, 2014).

Research suggests that implicit teaching of pragmatics is not sufficient (Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth, 2002; Chen, 2006; Hacking, 2008; Hendricks, 2010). Students, for example, are often unable to simply pick up the target language pragmatic norms from the input they receive. Consequently, various explicit tasks and activities have been proposed.

Hacking (2008) provides a range of activities that target sociopragmatic competence, which she defines as “the ability to select linguistic forms appropriate for a given situation” (p. 110). These include inductive data description activities in which students become researchers, analyzing linguistic language samples collected from native and nonnative speakers and deciding which responses are more appropriate in a given context. Another similar activity focuses on the analysis of speech acts with the goal to discover their structure. For instance, a request can consist of an attention-getter, a request proper, a supportive move, an explanation, a mitigator and an upgrader (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989). Students can be asked to compare the structure of a given speech act in their first and second language and reflect on their own performance. Hacking also describes an activity, which she refers to as “exploring pragmatic transfer” (2008, p. 121). The activity aims at familiarizing the students with the concept of transfer and helping them reflect on some potential areas of pragmatic transfer between their first language and the target language. This can be followed by guided practice during which students are encouraged to perform scenarios originally used to collect native speaker data.

Research suggests that teaching netiquette to nonnative speakers can have a positive, lasting impact on the employment of politeness strategies (Ford, 2003b), and web resources with netiquette guidelines abound (see Appendix B). Some specific activities that focus on netiquette for international students have been suggested as well. For instance, Ford (2003a) describes an activity appropriate for intermediate to advanced ESL students. First, emails are collected from students in response to a prompt that requires them to write a high-stakes request to a fictitious professor. The instructor then selects a few emails that contain typical areas of difficulty and uses these to guide a class discussion on netiquette. Lancaster (2011) proposes a complete lesson plan that includes brainstorming the characteristics of a formal email with the students, guided email writing practice with a partner, and a whole-class discussion about potential areas for improvement in the emails written by the class. Nevertheless, there are few ready-to-use materials that engage students in active learning, and most of the resources we have been able to identify simply consist of an explicit presentation of prescriptive netiquette rules.

Email Samples and Areas of Difficulty for Korean Learners of English

As instructors working with ESL students, we have identified several areas of difficulty that they can encounter when writing emails. The challenges that this paper addresses include (a) culture norms and pragmatic choices; (b) formal and informal writing conventions including capitalization and punctuation; (c) forms of address and composition of subject lines; and (d) directness. We use email samples from Korean ESL students selected from a personal email collection. The names of the students have been replaced

with pseudonyms, and any information that could lead to identification of the authors has been removed or modified.

Cultural Norms and Pragmatic Choices

When communicating with others, language users make linguistic choices based upon their cultural norms (i.e., traditions, customs, beliefs, values, and thought patterns), which are shared by a group of people and which influence their behaviors (Spencer-Oatey, 2000). In other words, “the norms of the community tend to make certain pragmatic behavior more or less preferred or appropriate in a given context by speakers in that community” (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010, p. 13). This notion suggests that learning a different language entails learning the cultural norms of the language speakers. This is often challenging for ESL students, especially since the cultural norms are seldom explicitly taught. Often, when ESL students translate what they would have said in their languages into English literally, it may result in negative transfer and affect the listener in an unintended way. Email 1 is a case in point.

Email 1. Example of differences in cultural norms.

Subject: About TA

Dear. Professor Eldrdge K.P.

Hello, I'm Hye-jin Song who is an international student to U. I'm writing with regard to TA in your Korean class. I wanna know if I can be TA. By teaching Korean to my friends who are interested in Korea and Korean, I have taken courage of teaching Korean. In addition, I have wanted to help some students who want to learn about Korean, and to contribute to introduce Korean culture! also, I want to be a teacher after graduate. If you think I lack Korean teaching skill, I'll also study in a way to teach Korean before helping them.

I would be grateful if you permit to be TA. I'm looking forward to hearing you.

Your sincerely,

Hye-jin Song

The student in this email shows her interest in becoming a teaching assistant (TA) in a Korean class. She displays her confidence in the ability to teach Korean indirectly by stating that she has some experience teaching her friends. However, she also contradicts this by mentioning her lack of Korean teaching skills. In the Korean culture, confidence may be perceived as arrogance. Being influenced by Confucianism, which considers modesty an essential virtue of group-oriented human communication (Kim, 2003), Koreans consider *gyomson* (겸손, “modesty”) an important cultural norm. Whereas Koreans would more likely perceive the author of this message as humble, American recipients may get an impression that she lacks in confidence. As a result of this failure to make appropriate pragmatic choices in accordance with U.S. cultural norms, the student is likely not to receive a post as a TA.

Writing Conventions

Writing conventions vary across languages. As the term suggests, the ways in which written varieties of languages employ the rules of spelling, punctuation, and capitalization depend on what is commonly agreed upon or believed to be correct. There is thus no empirically based support for why in English the Oxford comma should be used, or why in Korean there are no capital letters. Nevertheless, Korean learners of English are expected to

place a comma immediately before a coordinating conjunction in a series of three or more items and to learn the rules of capitalization. Learning to use the conventions of written language which differ from one's native language has been shown to pose significant challenges for learners (Doughty & Long, 2003). Email 2 illustrates some areas of difficulty for Korean learners of English.

Email 2. Example of differences in writing conventions.

Subject: about TA

hi. professor eldredge.

my name is minjung lee.

i am studying at the U.

my major is international studies.

i just found your intermediate class this fall semester.

i am interesting in the TA for your class.

so, if i can, what should i do?

thank you.

best.

It can be inferred that the student may not be aware of how capitalization correlates with forming formality in English, as such punctuation features do not exist in the Korean writing system. In addition, this student begins each sentence with a new line, which is a common pattern that can be observed in Korean CMC. Lack of capitalization and incorrect punctuation are often associated with text messaging and carelessness, and this student is risking being negatively stereotyped as someone who does not take the time to revise and edit a message to a person of higher status.

Forms of Address and Subject Lines

A problem often encountered by ESL students is how to address the recipient of an email. Forms of address are complex and vary widely across languages and cultures since sociolinguistic and contextual parameters must be considered and appropriately applied (Formentelli, 2009). For example, it is most common for Korean students to address their teachers using titles (e.g., teacher). Other combinations such as teacher's last name and title (e.g., Park teacher), or a full name (last name and first name) and title (e.g., Park Koeun teacher) are also acceptable, while addressing teachers by first names is perceived as extremely rude.

In the United States, the ways in which teachers prefer to be addressed vary. While some teachers want to be addressed by their academic title and last name, others prefer informal styles of address, which can be confusing for foreign students. As Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) asserts, "if this issue is a difficult one among native speakers of a language, it becomes even more complex when correspondents from different cultures are involved" (p. 3197). Consequently, explicit attention should be given to forms of address in ESL classrooms.

Research confirms that student choices of address forms vary considerably (Bjørge, 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011; Formentelli, 2009). Sample emails we have received from Korean ESL students confirm this finding. They include salutations as varied as "Dear.

Professor Eldrdge K.P., “Dear. Kona Eldredge,” “Dear, Professor Eldredge,” “hi. professor eldredge.,” or simply “Hi.” Thus, it appears that how to write an email subject line can be a challenge for international students. Email 3 illustrates this issue.

Email 3. Example of differences in forms of address and subject lines.

Subject: Hi, my name is Jun

Hi,

This is Jun and I was wondering that is any opportunity that I can be a TA in your Korean class next semester? . . . I would love to discuss face to face about this. I hope I hear from you near future. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Jun

The author of Email 3 used the subject line to identify himself to the faculty. He likely did not realize that an effective subject line should include the purpose of the email. Chen (2014) asserts that inappropriate subject lines could lead to a negative impression of senders by their recipients.

Directness

The use of directness and indirectness varies among languages and cultures. Research suggests, however, that beginning and intermediate language learners tend to overuse direct request strategies such as want statements and imperatives, which can be perceived as less polite if used with an interlocutor of a higher social status (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, 1996). This is illustrated in Email 4.

Email 4. Example of differences in directness.

Subject: Korean TA

Dear, Professor Eldredge,

My name is Minsun Kim. I'm Korean international student in University of Utah.

I want to be Teaching Assistant in Korean class. My major is Linguistic and Communication (Double major)

I want to be a Korean TA in your class. Please let me know what should I prepare and what should I do.

I will wait your reply.

Sincerely,

The author of this message employs a direct requestive strategy three times. There are two want statements in the email and one imperative. Even though the imperative is modified by a lexical hedge *please*, the message may still be perceived as somewhat rude because in English, direct strategies are more commonly used by interlocutors of equal status.

Classroom Approaches and Materials

The examples above illustrate potential areas of difficulty for Korean learners of English who engage in CMC with their professors. This section presents a sequence of activities that can be used as a complete lesson plan, or selectively, to foster international students' sensitivity to American politeness norms and to improve their ability to successfully participate in formal email exchanges.

Ishihara and Cohen (2010) point out that the following cognitive and social frameworks are relevant to second language pragmatic development: the language socialization theory, the input hypothesis, the noticing hypothesis, and the output hypothesis (p. 101). We refer to these frameworks below as we justify the use of specific activities.

Activity 1

According to language socialization theory, acquiring a new language goes along with learning about the social practices of the target community. The process of socialization is a gradual one, and it does not necessarily culminate in convergence to, or following of, all social pragmatic norms. In fact, some learners deliberately diverge from the cultural and linguistic routines of the target community. Thus, it is important to understand that language socialization should be a bidirectional learning process that involves both the language learners and the native speakers (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010).

In this vein, the first activity focuses on recognizing the differences in linguistic and cultural norms between the learners' first language and English. Using an infographic from the web article "Email Etiquette in Different Countries" (Cowan, 2015), the teacher leads a discussion about email writing conventions across cultures. Students are then asked to identify similarities and differences between emails in their first language and English. The activity is an enriching cultural experience for all students in class as well as the teacher, who can better understand students' areas of difficulty.

Activity 2

The important role of input in second language acquisition is undisputable: students need to be exposed to examples of target language because they are expected to successfully produce it. Ishihara and Cohen (2010) suggest including research-based information into pragmatics instruction to provide students with authentic language models. In this activity, the teacher begins by examining various politeness strategies using examples from empirical research (e.g., Biesenbah-Lucas, 2007; Ogiermann, 2009). It may be useful to prepare a short, simplified, research-based text that summarizes some politeness feature in English, for example typical requestive strategies used in emails by native speakers. After reading and discussing the text, the students are asked to revise sentences that may be considered impolite.

Activity 3

This activity is rooted in the notion of noticing as an important factor in second language acquisition (Schmidt, 2001). According to the noticing hypothesis, language learners need to consciously attend to pragmatic information in the input if the learning of pragmatics is to take place. In this particular activity (see Appendix A), the teacher uses an inductive approach that raises students' pragmatic awareness by guiding them in the process of discovering rules and making generalizations. Students are presented with samples of formal and informal emails and asked to identify linguistic features that are formal and informal. It is important that the students provide justifications and explanations

of their decisions and that the activity culminates in a teacher-led discussion so that consensus is reached.

Activity 4

According to the output hypothesis, language learners are more likely to notice gaps in their language system if they produce language forms in interaction (Swain, 1998). Output tasks focused on various pragmatic features create opportunities for language learners to produce utterances that are appropriate in the context. In Activity 4, students are instructed to compose and revise emails with a focus on politeness using the knowledge they have gained from the previous activities. During this stage, students can improve their own emails, participate in a peer-review session, or be assigned emails selected in advance by the teacher. They can also receive explicit individual feedback.

Conclusion

Participating in CMC can be a real challenge for undergraduate ESL students on American campuses. Models of polite emails are not readily available, and email writing conventions and English politeness norms are rarely addressed in ESL classrooms. Research findings suggest that explicit instruction in email pragmatics has a positive effect on the ability to write polite email messages, including the use of certain structural and pragmatic features. However, netiquette instruction has to be carefully designed, as research also indicates that explicit teaching may result in the overuse of politeness features in email messages (Ford, 2003b).

In this paper, we specifically discussed potential areas of difficulty for Korean ESL learners. We have provided examples of linguistic choices that may prevent successful CMC, and suggested activities that support the development of pragmatic knowledge, which enables English language learners to successfully communicate with their professors via email. The activities are rooted in four strands identified as crucial in pragmatics instruction, namely the socialization theory, the input hypothesis, the noticing hypothesis, and the output hypothesis (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). As effective employment of politeness strategies can lead to positive perceptions of students' competence (Bolkan & Holmgren, 2012), it is crucial that ESL students across American campuses are provided adequate instruction and guidance to help them develop sociopragmatic competence in English.

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Appendix A

Activity 3: Noticing hypothesi

- Activity: Formal and informal emails
- Objectives: Students will be able to successfully identify the elements of formal emails and differentiate between formal and informal emails.
- Materials: Handout 1 (Formal and informal emails)
Handout 2 (Guidelines for writing formal emails)
- Time: Approximately 60 minutes
- Procedure: 1. The teacher distributes Handout 1.
2. In pairs or small groups, students analyze each email and identify features that make them formal or informal. They provide reasons for their decisions.
3. Using Handout 2, the teacher guides a discussion: compare and contrast findings.
4. The teacher provides individual feedback as appropriate.

Handout 1: Formal and informal emails

In pairs or small groups, analyze the two emails. Identify features that make them “formal” or “informal” and provide the reasons why.

Steve’s Email

Subject: Hi. my name is Steve.

dear. professor

I’m sorry but I can’t finish my paper by tomorrow.

We have too much homework, so I can’t keep up with everything.

Can I turn it in next week?

Please permit me to do so.

I’m sorry to bother you.

I will wait for your reply.

thanx!

Jessica's Email

Subject: Paper Extension

Dear Professor Lopez,

This is Jessica from your Intermediate ESL course (ESL 2000).

I am currently taking four courses and feel quite overwhelmed with the amount of work that I am dealing with. I am aware that our paper for this course is due tomorrow; however, I am not confident I will be able to finish it on time. Due to this, I was wondering if you would consider extending the deadline for me. This would allow me to put more time and effort into the paper instead of rushing through it. I would greatly appreciate it if you could grant this request. Please let me know what your thoughts are when your schedule would allow for a response.

Thank you,

Jessica Lee

Handout 2: Guidelines for writing formal emails (adapted from Ford, 2003)

- Use a proper greeting and address the recipient appropriately.
(e.g., Dear Professor Last name)
- Write brief and specific subject lines.
- Introduce yourself in the opening line of the message unless you are sure the recipient will recognize you from your email address alone.
- Use proper punctuation, spelling, and grammar.
- Remain polite, even if the topic is controversial.
- Do not get too emotional or personal.
- Keep your message brief and to the point, but not so brief that it sounds terse and rude.
- Provide the context for the message without going into unnecessary detail, ask specific questions, and do not wander off the topic.
- Ask for a reply at the recipient's convenience, keeping in mind some people may not check their email accounts frequently.
- End your message with a proper closing that includes your name and affiliation.
(e.g, Thank you, Best Regards, Sincerely)

Appendix B

Resources

Karlovich, N. (2012). Take-away tips for academic email [PDF file]. Retrieved from http://twp.duke.edu/uploads/media_items/academic-email-tips.original.pdf

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