Writing a Formal Email in English: Exploring university students' pragmatic competence

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Recommended Citation

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Abstract

This exploratory study discusses findings pertaining to university students' pragmatic and intercultural communicative competence in the context of Uzbekistan. It begins with a brief review of the research literature related to pragmatics, and its corollary pragmatic success, initially reviewing studies conducted in various contexts in the past several decades. This is followed by a brief overview of university teaching context in Uzbekistan, a methodology for data collection and criteria for participants' selection. The article concludes with a brief discussion of findings and recommendations for further research. In particular, it highlights the necessity for incorporating explicit instruction of formal email writing in a target language at the tertiary level.

Key Words: *pragmatic competence, tertiary education, second language acquisition, L1 pragmatic transfer, formal e-correspondence instruction*.

Pragmatics Competence in a Target Language

For the past twenty years or so English has gained considerable importance as an increasing number of second language learners have come to appreciate its value as a vital tool for communication on the global arena. In addition, in the twenty-first century it has thrust into limelight as a *lingua franca-bridge* for numerous nations worldwide. Students acquiring English as a second language (ESL) have ample opportunities to benefit from rich sources of information through social media platforms, the Internet, e-journals, all of which enable them to hone their global schemata and lay foundation for developing pragmatic awareness skills essential for

effective cross-cultural communication. Whilst there is no consensus as to the domain of pragmatics, it had nevertheless attracted a number of applied linguists, philosophers and teacher-practitioners in an attempt to raise the salience of pragmatic awareness via academic debate and empirical research (Takahashi & Beebe, 1987; Matsumura, 2003a, 2007b; Schauer, 2006).

Whilst the definitions of pragmatics vary, Spencer-Oatey & Zegarac (2002) define it as "the interrelationship between language form, communicated messages and language users" (p. 74). This, in turn, highlights a pivotal role pragmatics plays in exploring ways interlocutors interpret received messages, the rationale behind linguistic choices that speakers use in their daily interactions, and specific settings and contexts language users find themselves in. Others refer to pragmatics as "the study of the use of language in communication, particularly, the relationship between sentences and the contexts and situations in which they are used" (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p. 412). One commonality between these definitions is the fact that ESL students should be equipped with the *pragmalinguistic* and *sociopragmatic* knowledge in order to avoid pragmatic errors and/or failures while communicating in a target language. Whilst '*pragmalinguistics*' is mainly concerned with the relationship between linguistic forms and their functions as speech acts and expressions of interpersonal meaning, '*sociopragmatics*' places the main focus on the relationship between the linguistic action and social structure (Leech, 1983; Thomas, 1983; Kasper, 1994). As a result, scholars caution against the differences in mapping of the form and the force in certain speech act manifestations which might cause pragmalinguistic difficulties for second language learners (Hiraga, Fujii & Turner, 2003). One area of research that has received such attention relates to ESL students' email writing competency to their teachers in a target language. This is discussed in the following section.

An overview of earlier studies in a variety of contexts

An earlier study by Formentelli (2009) aimed to examine the address strategies employed by university students and members of the teaching staff in academic interactions at a British university. The findings show that when students were not sure of how to address a professor, or when they did not know the name of a faculty member, they adopted *a strategy of avoidance*. The author of the study explicates this phenomenon as "an attempt to find a neutral compromise between formality and informality" (p. 183). In addition, it was revealed that British speakers preferred to maintain the asymmetrical distribution of forms and "perceive reciprocal informal address as a marked choice" (p. 193). Formentelli (2009) notes, "it is the context of use and the

relationship between the parties that determines the precise nuance of meaning" (p. 182). Furthermore, the author maintains that the main reason for students' use of avoidance strategy by both native (NS) and non-native speakers of English (NNS) could mean that neither had sufficient knowledge of *appropriate linguistic norms* when faced with e-communication conventions with faculty. Furthermore, for example, Greek students enrolled in the British university and took part in the study, in contrast to the British speakers, use direct questions that reflect their tendency to use positive politeness strategies or *approach-oriented* strategies. These strategies include a certain level of closeness, whereas the British are more likely to use negative politeness strategies or *imposition-acknowledgement* strategies to people they do not know well (Sifianou,1992).

Another focal study that has contributed to the research on request modifications in emails in English relates to the findings by Hendriks (2010). This study examined the effect of the (under) use of syntactic and lexical modifiers in English email requests written by Dutch learners. The results of the study revealed that the *underuse* of request modification in emails had a negative effect on participants' evaluation of the personality of the sender of the email. Hendriks (2010) comments that even *highly advanced language learners* found it difficult to use appropriate request modification in a target language, foregrounding the necessity for providing ESL/EFL learners with an *explicit* instruction on how to compose "status-unequal and language –congruent emails" to an authority (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011).

Indeed, learners in a foreign language (FL) environment are not necessarily disadvantaged in pragmatic development, rather "their pragmatic comprehension develops naturally in domestic, formal classroom settings that afford *limited* opportunity for input, communicative practice, and pragmatic awareness, as long as the context affords sufficient resources for such development" (Taguchi, 2008, p. 443).

A study that had explored students' pragmatic competence and called for the need to further students' pragmatic competence was conducted by Murray (2010). According to the author, "*pragmatic competence* is an understanding of the relationship between from and context that enables us, *accurately* and *appropriately*, to express and interpret intended meaning" (p. 293). Therefore, Murray encourages ESL/EFL educators worldwide to develop their students' pragmatic competence through the *deductive approach*. He supports his argument by claiming that ESL/EFL learners already have some sort of pragmatic knowledge of language functions as

a result of acquiring their first language (L1). As an example of pedagogic pragmatics, he recommends, for instance, to have students translate speech acts from their *own language* (L1) into English and discuss pragmatic norms of different speech communities. Murray (2010) further suggests that engaging learners in a deductive approach of acquiring pragmatic competence of a target culture will enable them to appreciate general and universal principles that govern language choices in cross-cultural communication. To conclude, the study encourages educators worldwide to include explicit teaching of language functions and speech acts of a target culture, so that EFL/ESL learners could notice the ways how those are realized and manifested in a target language.

Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) conducted a study examining the appropriateness of e-mail requests of Greek-Cypriot non-native speakers of English (NNS) university students to their professors. In particular, the study placed a specific focus on the *degree of directness* of students' e-mails to the faculty, on the *external and lexical/phrasal modification* of requests, and on the *forms of salutations* that students employed in their e-mails. Additionally, a perception questionnaire was administered to a number of British English native speaker lecturers to ascertain their views on the degree of politeness or discourteousness of students' e-mails. The findings of the study reveal that students preferred using direct strategies in the case of requests for action and for information. Also, their e-mails to the faculty *lacked* greetings and closings, the *forms of salutations* were used *inappropriately* and *lacked* any lexical/phrasal modification for downgrading the effect of the request. In addition, the results of the perception questionnaire indicated that a lack of *mitigation* stood out as the most important factor that affected British English native speaker lecturers' evaluations of students' e-mails. The findings from this study supported the hypothesis that such e-mails could be perceived as impolite and discourteous resulting in *pragmatic failure*. Therefore, the study suggests that in order to raise ESL learners' *meta-pragmatic awareness*, EFL/ESL teachers should provide *explicit* email instruction to their students. Based on the results and findings of the study, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) recommends that *pedagogical interventions* with respect to status-congruent e-mail interaction rests presently with individual ESL/EFL teachers. Further suggestions highlight the necessity to include an explicit email instruction in books and program curricula to ensure an effective educational instruction to ESL/EFL learners of English.

Moreover, students should be exposed to a number of tasks and activities based on their *needs* and *current abilities* so that the knowledge could be socially co-constructed through the completion of authentic task-based activities and assignments. This, in turn, highlights the social appropriateness of language use that implies, "there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless" (Hymes, 1971, p.10). Similar sentiments are expressed by others who comment that, "language is not just a private, in the head affair, but rather a socially constructed phenomenon" (Kern & Warschauer, 2000).

To conclude, academic studies discussed above, present a rather persuasive evidence of including pragmatic component into the ESL teaching curricula. Therefore, the following sections aim to showcase the results of the current study as a potential contribution to the academic evidence shown above.

Current Study: The Rationale

During the time of an ongoing reformation period in Uzbekistan, the country has been appealing for more foreign investment aimed at making positives changes to its infrastructure as well advance the development in numerous spheres including but not limiting: banking, energy, oil and gas, manufacturing, telecommunications, transport and agriculture. This, in turn, brought to the fore an issue of highly qualified specialists and translators to deliver e-correspondence on a governmental as well as business domains.

It has become highlighted repeatedly and reiterated by the government that future university graduates will be required to engage in daily tasks of conducting formal written correspondence, i.e., including an e-mail, fax or other forms of e-communication. From educational perspective, it connotes that teachers of higher education should strive to be fully aware of economic and political issues of its own country and the rest of the world, in order to tailor and customize the syllabi based on students' needs analysis (Brown, 1995). Written correspondence may be utilized in future engagements as an official document, thereby becoming a permanent record. In addition, it can also be validated as a legal document for future references, as well as indicating cultural and societal mores and values. What it means is that, if used inappropriately, some words/phrases of *L1 transfer* may cause pragmatic failure/misunderstanding and/or cultural shocks. Therefore, it is essential that university graduates should be equipped with a relevant pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge of a target language by the time they have graduated from a university programme.

Participants

Thirty first-year university students currently enrolled in one of the universities in the Tashkent area (Uzbekistan) took part in the study (*N*=30). They have all studied English for ten years at a secondary and high school settings. After having successfully passed university entrance exams, they had all been accepted into the first year of studies at the tertiary level. Whilst students' current English proficiency varies, their current level ranges between intermediate- and high-intermediate, thus enabling them to take English classes at the said university. All students are enrolled in the Translation Theory and Practice department, majoring in Uzbek-Russian-English translation. Therefore, all students are studying towards the Bachelor Degree in the Translation and Pedagogy. As per the curriculum and syllabi designated by the Translation Theory and Practice department, students took three 80-minute English classes per week in the first academic semester of 2020, however, the latter were reduced to two classes in the second semester. The main curriculum of all first-year English classes is designed around General English Courses aimed at enhancing students' English language proficiency in all four skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Yet another crucial information relevant to participants' data, concerns students' ethnic background: whilst students' ethnicity ranges from Uzbek, Tajik, Korean and Russian, all of them had received their secondary obligatory education in a Russian-medium educational setting, which means that besides their *mother tongue* (MT), Russian is considered to be their L1.

The most important factor taken into consideration by the study design, however, was to make sure that students had no prior explicit instruction on how to write a formal email in English. Additionally, all students selected for the study had to be in their first year of university studies in Uzbekistan.

Methodology:

Students were asked to complete one task-based activity (see below), aimed at exploring their *current* skills and abilities in writing a formal email in English. Whilst the task was initially planned to be completed in a face-to-face class session, due to the COVID-19 regulations, all classes had to be moved to an online teaching where the Zoom Video communications software had been used. As a result, all students were asked to complete and submit their work via the Moodle educational platform used by the university.

The Task

[You are a university student who missed a class last week. Write an email to your teacher, Mrs. Jackson, asking her to send you a homework assignment for the next class].

Analysis:

Students' responses were collected and analyzed with a special focus on requests. In particular, the analysis aimed to explore the degree of directness, forms of requests, lexical and/or phrasal modification for downgrading the effect of the request deployed by students in writing a formal email to their *hypothetical* teacher.

Table 1: Students' Responses

Syntactical/Pragmatic Structures Deployed in Making a Request	Male	Female
-Can you tell me the homework for the next lesson? / Can you send me…	1	1
-Would you please tell me what homework to do?	1	
-I will be ready for the next lesson, so I need the homework to prepare. If you send me homework, I will be happy.	1	
-Since I am feeling much better today, I decided to send you a message so as to catch up with schoolwork and **kindly ask you** to send me a homework… / I **kindly** ask you to send me…	1	1
-**May I** know about the given home task, please?		1
-**May I** ask you to send me….		1
- I got homework from my friends and I will definitely do it. (***no request***)		1
- Is it possible to come up to you tomorrow for homework?		1
-Just dropping a line to let you know. Hope I didn't miss too much.		1
-Since I was unable to attend today's zoom class, **I ask you to** write me a homework assignment. - **I ask you to** explain what the topic is and the exercises and homework that need to be done. - Please, teacher, **I ask you to** tell me what the homework was.		3
-**I wanted to ask** you for homework to prepare for your next lesson. / **I wanted to ask** you to send me…/ So, **I wanted to ask**/ **I wanted to ask**: Could you send me homework…		4
Teacher, **please write down** the homework…/ **Please tell me** the homework/ **Please give me** homework.		3
-**Could you** send and explain me the task? / **Could you please** send		6

me…/ **Could you** send and explain me a homework to do…		
I would also like to ask you to write down what homework you gave the students in the lesson.		1
Will you be able to send me…		1
Could you let me know what was the homework?		1

Results and Discussion

As Table 1 shows, all thirty students have applied their currently-existing email writing skills in English. Whilst their strategies vary, it can be noticed that most of them have attempted to sound polite and less direct in making requests to their teacher. For example, most of them used polite forms such as '*could you*, *would you*, *please*,' as well as forms of requests modifications '*kindly ask*' and/or '*please*'. However, three students used the phrase "*I ask you*", which may seem somewhat impolite and/or aggressive to native speakers of English. In this case, we see an example of L1 transfer from Russian, where "*I ask you*" translates as "*Ya proshu vas*"/*я прошу вас* which is a polite way of making a request in Russian language and is not considered to be impolite/rude.

Yet another example of L1 transfer is evidenced in the use of "*I wanted to ask you*" /*Ya hotela bi vas poprosit*/*я хотела бы вас попросить* by four female students who used this structure as a polite form of making requests in Russian. Further instances of L1 transfer are shown in the use of the phrase "*Could you…*" which translates into Russian as "*Ne mogli bi vi*"/ *не могли бы вы* which is widely used by Russian native speakers when making a request in both aural and written communication. Moreover, the use of "*please*" / "*pozhailusta*" in making a request was used by three students which can also be categorized as L1 transfer since the word "*pozhailusta*" in Russian "*пожалуйста*" expresses both polite requests and gratitude. Moreover, L1 transfer is shown through the use of "*May I*" /*mogu li ya*/ *Могу ли я*/ used in Russian language as both asking for a permission to do something and when making a request.

In addition, two students used a request-modification strategy by using the word "*kindly*" as in "*I kindly ask you to*" and "*kindly ask you to*". Nevertheless, it can be observed that whilst one student provides a reason for missing the class, the other one fails to do so.

One email that stands out (*an outlier*) though reveals a student's rather unusual strategy in making a request. Indeed, rather than making a request, she simply informs the teacher that, "*I got homework from my friends and I will definitely do it*", which we refer to as a *request-*

avoidance strategy. It can be hypothesized that a lack of knowledge of a proper linguistic form of making a request in English prompted this student to avoid making a request after all.

Another example showcasing one student's deployment of the *request-avoidance* strategy is shown in the following instance: "*Just dropping a line to let you know. Hope I didn't miss too much.*" Indeed, this example shows student's lack of knowledge in writing status-unequal and language-congruent email to her teacher. The deployment of informal linguistics structures in this email could be alluded to the fact that the student simply *transferred* her email/text-messaging writing skills she had used on the social media platforms such as Instagram, Signal, Viber, WhatsApp and so on.

Pedagogic Interventions and Future Research

Whilst this exploratory study aimed to examine university students' pragmalinguistic knowledge and skills in writing a formal email in a target language, the results of preliminary data analysis reveal that all thirty participants deployed a variety of email-writing strategies. In line with previous studies discussed earlier in this paper, this study reports similar findings, thereby aligning with other academics who argue in favour of providing explicit email instruction to ESL students enrolled in a language learning programme. Moreover, the findings of this study reveal that in order to raise ESL learners' meta-pragmatic awareness, awareness-raising and noticing activities should be deployed as a supplement for the introduction of pragmatically relevant input in instructed L2 learning, particularly in the EFL settings.

Furthermore, future research studies should look into the development of university students' pragmalinguistic competence *before* and *after* an explicit email writing instruction has been implemented into the ESL curricula and syllabi.

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