related resources to accomplish any particular task.


What Constitutes an Appropriate Email Request

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Abstract

It is important that students know how to write an email request in English because they frequently communicate with their professors via email. This study recruited 26 students who were juniors in the department of applied English at a university of technology in Taichung. These students were required to write email requests to a professor in four hypothetical situations which were designed based on the manipulation of imposition and social distance variables. The content of the emails were rated by three professors, who were later interviewed to determine the essential elements which an English email request should contain by examining the cases which were rated as the highest and the lowest. After interviewing the professors, we transcribed the data and conducted content analysis to sum up the opinions of the professors in order to generalize the essentials of an appropriate request email. These essentials include address form,

1 This study is part of Chen and Rau’s NSC project on The Development of the Speech Act Profile for L2 Learners (NSC 99-2410-H-167-009, 8/1/2010-7/31/2011). We acknowledge the English editorial assistance from Dr. Gerald A. Rau.
self-introduction, specific reasons, indirect requests, and leave-taking devices. In addition, three students whose email requests were rated as inappropriate were also interviewed to explain why they wrote the email the way they did. These students had three incorrect assumptions. First, they did not provide reasons because they were afraid that professors would consider their reasons to be excuses. Second, the students thought vague reasons would provide enough information for the professors. Finally, they thought flattery was a good strategy to make their requests effective. Pedagogical implications are provided at the end of this paper.

**Keywords:** request, email, content

**Introduction**

Nowadays, writing email in English has become one of the most important communication tools in academic settings. Often students have to make requests of their professors through email. However, teachers sometimes find that a student who behaves politely in face-to-face communication may write to his/her professor with the request, “Please read it as soon as possible and answer me,” which sounds very rude and imposing.

When it comes to an email request, it is first important to know what a “request” is. Requesting behavior is one type of speech act, the function of which is for the speaker to get the hearer to do what the speaker asks. It is therefore regarded as a face-threatening act (FTA) (Brown & Levinson, 1987). To make a polite request, what the speaker has to do is to minimize the threat to the hearer while at the same time pursuing his/her communicative goal. According to Searle (1979), using conventionally indirect requests such as “Can you…” or “May I…” can help diminish the illocutionary force of requesting, thus reducing the threat to the hearer’s face to a minimum.

Research has shown that many students are not able to make request emails appropriately. Reasons for this could include that students have not mastered English or they are unaware of the cultural differences between L1 and L2. As Chen (2006) pointed out, “for L2 learners, the challenge of composing this type of e-mail can be greater due not only to their limited linguistic ability but also their unfamiliarity with the target culture’s norms and values” (p. 35). Therefore, in order to understand an L2 learner’s struggle to learn an appropriate way of making requests, she did a longitudinal case study. The data came from a Taiwanese graduate student’s English emails collected over two and a half years. Although her study demonstrates how a person made progress in writing email, it does not show how an appropriate request email should be structured.

Furthermore, many previous studies have focused on the strategy of making requests by comparing Chinese learners with English native speakers. For instance, Chang and Hsu (1998) compared the email request strategy of Chinese English learners and American English speakers. They provided the schema and strategy that an email request should contain. Specifically, they found that Chinese English learners used indirect structure but direct linguistic forms; while American English speakers used direct structure but indirect linguistic forms. For example, in one English email request, a Chinese hedged for several sentences, and finally wrote his/her request using the words “Please give me a ride on March 5 to the airport.” The full email text is as follows.

**Subject:** Long Time No See!

"Hi,-

This is (name). Long time no see! How are you? How are your wife and children in Taiwan? You must miss them a lot. I heard your family is coming to Ann Arbor this summer. Isn’t it great?"
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I hope my family will come to see me, too. By the way, I must attend a conference in New York. *Please give me a ride on April 3 to the airport. Good luck to your work! Bye-Bye!* (p. 141)

The hedging strategy is called indirect structure and the sentence, “Please…” is a direct request. On the other hand, Americans tend to request directly at the beginning of the email without hedging, but their request sentence is more indirect than Chinese request sentences, using phrases such as “I wonder if I could...”. This can be seen in the following email example.

Subject: Advice

“I wonder if I could talk to you for just a few minutes about my course selection for the winter term. I’m concerned about (1) preparation for prelims (2) fulfilling program's requirement (3) workload. I’ll be in the writing lab Thursday from 3:00 til 6:00. Could I pop in to see you before, during, or after? Thanks.” (p. 139)

Chen (2001) also showed differences between Taiwanese and American students when they wrote emails to professors, but she only generalized the distribution of email textual features without telling us possible reasons why the students were not aware their email requests could be considered rude. Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) compared the strategies of native and non-native speakers of English in making email requests and provided some pedagogical implications. He found that “far more requests are realized through direct strategies as well as hints than conventionally indirect strategies typically found in comparative speech act studies” (p. 59). However, as with the two studies mentioned above, it wasn’t the purpose of his paper to probe why the students wrote the emails the way they did.

Thus, this study will not only focus on investigating the essential elements of request expressions but also on discovering why the students regarded their seemingly rude requests as appropriate. This will allow us to generalize pragmatic rules from our study to help EFL students make email requests properly without offending others.

Therefore, the research questions of this study are as follows:

1. What are the essential elements of making an effective email request in English?
2. Why do the students consider their requests in English appropriate while the professors think they are rude?

Methods

Participants

The participants were twenty-six college students and three university professors. The students were juniors recruited from the department of applied English of a university of technology in Taichung. Their English proficiency levels were intermediate to advanced, comprising 23 intermediate level students and 3 advanced level students. The three professors were experienced teachers teaching in universities in central Taiwan. One is a native speaker of American English (Dr. R) and the other two are near native speakers of English (Dr. C and Dr. H).

Instruments

Four Discourse Completion Task (DCT) situations were designed as prompts to elicit email requests from the students. The situations were selected based on the life experience of college students in Taiwan. For instance, two of the situations involved students asking for the instructor’s permission to take a leave of absence. The emails...
were divided into four situations according to the combination of two variables “±I (imposition)” and “±D (social distance).” Since a request is a face-threatening act, the two variables are considered the most important because they can strongly influence the ways the speaker reacts to a given context (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Imposition is defined to reflect whether the problems in the request are easy to solve or not, while distance refers to the relationship between the student and the professor, particularly whether they know each other or not. The social factor “power” is controlled, since all of the situations focused on students writing emails to a professor. Table 1 shows the four DCT situations for the email requests.

Table 1
Four DCT Situations for Email Request in English

Situation 1: You are a senior (in the fourth year of college). However, in the end of the semester before you graduate, you know your English Reading score is 59. You need the credits in order to successfully graduate. You want to explain to the teacher your situation and request him/her to let you pass. How would you make the request to the teacher by email?

Situation 2: In the beginning of the semester, you chose an Advanced Listening course on the school internet but did not check to see if you were officially admitted to take that course. After the midterm, you got the information from the Office of Student Affairs that you missed too many classes and would fail the course. You do not know the teacher but want to explain to him/her your situation and request for an opportunity to make things up. How would you make the request to the teacher by email?

Situation 3: You want to take a leave of absence the next morning, so you ask your course teacher for permission. How would you make the request to the teacher by email?

Situation 4: It’s the beginning of the new semester. Before you attend the first class, you have to take a leave of absence because of some personal reasons. You do not know the teacher. How would you make the request to him/her by email?

Situation 1: -D, +I; situation 2: +D, +I; situation 3: -D, -I; situation 4: +D, -I.

Data Collection
In this study, the student participants were asked to respond to the four email request situations as a homework assignment for their Advanced Writing course. The emails were then scored by the three professors on content (sociopragmatic in nature) (Leech, 1983) on a scale of 1-10.

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<td>Good</td>
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After the professors scored all the emails, they were interviewed either in person or via Skype. During the interviews, the professors were asked to comment on the email cases which they rated as the highest and the lowest for each situation, and to point out what elements they thought would make the emails more or less appropriate.

In addition, in order to know the students’ opinions, we also asked three students whose requests were rated Poor or Very poor to respond why they wrote the emails the way they did. We intended to elicit the
strategies they thought they had used, why they thought their emails were appropriate, and whether they felt there was any deficiency in their emails. Thus, our questions were formulated in Chinese and translated into English, as shown in Table 2:

Table 2
*Questionnaire for the Students whose Emails were Rated as Inappropriate*

1. What politeness strategies (i.e. words, sentence structures, expressions) do you think you used in the emails? Why do you think the way you wrote emails would make your professor approve your request?

2. Which part of the email do you think is the most satisfactory?

3. Refer back to the emails you wrote three weeks ago again. Do you wish you could revise it because of any deficiency?”

**Data Analysis**

We used content analysis to analyze the data from the professors and the students. We first grouped the email essentials mentioned by the professors in the interviews. Then we summed up what the professors thought to be the weak points of a poor email, and what they thought to be the strong points of a good email. This allowed us to determine which parts are considered to be significant elements in a request email. Finally, we generalized what the students thought would constitute appropriate request emails from their interview data.

**Results and Discussion**

For research question 1, we determined the essentials of a request email based on the professors’ interview data. For research question 2, we interviewed three students whose compositions were considered inappropriate by all the professors in order to understand the students’ perspectives on the seemingly inappropriate request emails.

The following section presents the essentials that the professors considered an email request should contain, summarizing the opinions of the three professors interviewed. The analysis mainly focuses on the content, that is, what students said in the email request and what strategies they used in the requests such as direct and indirect expressions, terms of address, self-introduction, reasons, and the use of leave-taking. By comparing and contrasting good and poor cases of the students’ emails, we can generalize important elements which can help formulate the script of an email request:

**Script of an Email Request**

First of all, the professors interviewed suggested the most proper address form is “Dear + title + last name” such as “Dear Professor Chen.” However, many students tended to use “Dear teacher” or “Dear professor” to address the professor in their emails. Over half (53.8%) of the students used “Dear teacher” at the beginning of the email. Only 26.9% of the students used the most appropriate form to greet the professor. Dr. H and Dr. C pointed out that the students may have been influenced by Mandarin. Students usually call professors: “teacher” (老師 *Laoshi*) in Taiwan, which may be the reason why students addressed their professors as “Dear teacher.” Huang (2009) also mentioned the idea that Chinese think it is impolite to address a person by his/her given name, so people would address others by their occupational titles. Thus, in her paper, she gave examples where the students addressed the teacher “老師 *Laoshi*” and the director “主任 *Zhuren*”
instead of using their names. On the other hand, frequent examples of American interactions showing solidarity may lead EFL students to conclude that it is always appropriate to address a professor by “Dear” followed by their “first name” such as “Dear Linda.” This could be related to a common false belief that Americans tend to address each other on a first name basis, even a person higher in status.

Secondly, the professors thought the students should introduce themselves at the beginning, especially when the email is sent to a professor who does not know him/her. However, the students sometimes did not introduce themselves at all or did not introduce themselves clearly. For example, 34.6% of the students did not provide any self-introduction to a professor in +D situations. Only 38.4% of the students had a proper self-introduction. The others (27%) gave an unclear self-introduction, such as “I’m John.” This could be because students think that email writing is an informal style of communication (Crystal, 2001). Dr. R said that students should not give a self-introduction like “I’m John” to a professor because this kind of self-introduction is useless, especially in situations where the professor does not know them at all. This concept is also mentioned in Chen (2001), who argued that, “Self-introduction is normally given when the addressee meets the addressee for the first time because they do not know each other” (p. 9). Moreover, when one wants to do self-introduction, s/he has to give his/her full name, class information (e.g. in the sophomore year of the Applied English Department), the course he/she is enrolled in and preferably his/her student ID number in the Taiwan context. This information helps the professor to identify the student more easily. It is also convenient for the professor’s record keeping if the student needs to take a leave of absence from the class because the professor can easily find the student on the attendance list.

Thirdly, it is necessary for students to provide specific reasons for the request. All of the professors consider the reasons and the background information for making a request to excuse an absence to be a very important element. They all agreed that the students had to provide reasons why s/he wrote the letter and the background of the problems they encountered such as the reasons why they had not studied hard for the course. The more complicated the problems they encountered, the more clearly they should explain the reasons to the professor. Additionally, if students want to take a leave of absence, they have to tell the professor which course they are talking about. Dr. C said that if a student provided the date of her absence and the course name, the information would help the professor locate the student on the long name list of the class. Furthermore, all three professors pointed out that the more convincing the reason is, the more likely the professor would be to approve the student’s request. One convincing reason concerns “circumstances beyond one’s control.” Thus, when a student is trying to take a leave of absence, it is much better for the student to first indicate to the professor the fact that s/he is very “reluctant” to be absent from the class. The specific reasons which s/he can give could be family problems, parent problems, health issues, need for medical care, sickness, etc. It is not sufficient for a student to provide a vague reason such as “personal affairs,” although half of the students provided reasons like this. Often their reasons even seemed a little rude: “I want to take a leave because of my personal reason that it’s hard to tell.” or “Due to some personal reasons, it is inconvenient to explain to you. Hope you can understand.” In addition, the three professors also stated if a student has to take a leave of absence, it is also important for him/her to provide the reason why s/he has to take care of those things during the class hours rather than some other time. Thus, it is inappropriate to say simply, “Because of my personal reasons, I really need to be absent at that time.”

Fourthly, one of the essential elements in writing appropriate email requests is to “make the request indirectly.” Searle (1979) argued
that using indirect requests can decrease the illocutionary force of requesting. In other words, indirect requests can minimize the threat to the hearer’s negative face wants (i.e., not wanting to be bothered). All three professors remarked that when students make requests indirectly, they give the professors room to grant or refuse the request, thus showing the students’ politeness and courtesy. For example, some students used the strategy of questioning to make requests. A good example is, “Can you give me any chance to make things up?” while a poor example is, “Please let me pass.” This opinion is also expressed in Chen (2006), who stated that a query preparatory, such as “Can/Could/Would you…” which contains the question of asking ability, willingness, and possibility is generally considered more indirect and more polite than want statements, such as “I want/need/hope you…”. In the students’ questionnaires, 42.3% of the students used want statements when they made requests. Overall, when making requests, the student is expected to allow the professor to be the final decision maker without feeling being imposed on by the student.

Finally, providing an appropriate leave taking at the end of the email is also important. Students in general signaled leave taking by using a complimentary closing such as “sincerely,” “yours sincerely,” “sincerely yours,” “best regards” etc. at the end of the email before signing their names. Only a few students (19%) did not do so. Interestingly, even emails with the lowest scores still contained leave taking. Chen (2001) mentioned that Taiwanese students give leave taking as well as American students because leave taking “was not affected by situational factors of the requests. (p. 11)” However, the choice of complimentary closing reflects the writer’s ideology and personal relationship with the addressee. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that if the professor does not know the student yet, it is inappropriate for the student to use leave taking expressions signaling intimate relationship, such as “Student,” “Your student” or especially

“Love.”

Learners’ Perspectives

In order to answer research question 2, we singled out three cases which all the professors considered inappropriate. In the following section, we present the phenomenon we found in the compositions first, and then we show the examples below. The next step is to mention the reasons why the professors thought the emails were inappropriate, followed by the students’ opinions and reasons why they wrote emails like that and the strategies they used. That is, we will compare and contrast the students’ thoughts and the professors’ ideas.

We found that almost half of the students (46%) did not write down any reasons/explanations when they asked their professors about the scores, as shown in Sample 1.

Sample 1

Dear teacher:
I’m Max. I know I didn’t study hard so that I got 59. But I am going to graduate in June. So could you please give me a chance to make up?

The three professors thought that this email was not appropriate because the student did not provide the reason why he had not studied hard. From this student’s perspective, however, he reported that he thought it was not appropriate to provide any reason in the situation because he presumed the professor would consider any reasons to be simply excuses. Thus, he chose to make a request directly without giving any explanation.

Furthermore, we also found that the students who provided explanations tended to provide vague reasons across all the four situations, as illustrated in Sample 2.
Sample 2

Dear teacher:
I’m sorry that I have to miss the first class because of some personal reasons and I wish to obtain your permission in advance. I’m eager to attend the course and see teacher next time.
Kind Regards, Joyce

The professors thought the student should have provided more specific reasons to justify her urgent need to take a leave and miss the class. However, the interview data shows that this student assumed that such an implicit reason should be sufficient for the professor to understand her intention.
Finally, we found that some students adopted a “flattering” strategy. Sample 3 is a typical example of flattery.

Sample 3

My kindly teacher, Linda:
I want to take a leave of absence the next morning because I have to go home for some necessary things. I know you are the most kindly and beautiful teacher, so you would permit my asking, wouldn’t you?
Sincerely Yours, Amy

The professors all thought flattering is a bad strategy when making a request. They pointed out that the student’s use of address form “My kindly teacher, Linda” is very inappropriate because it is flattering. However, the student used the strategy deliberately because she thought that by addressing the teacher by first name directly, she could foster an intimate relationship with the teacher. Thus, the teacher would be willing to permit her request. Moreover, the professors interviewed thought the final sentence of the email to be very bad because if the student’s request for taking a leave of absence was not granted, it implies that the professor must be a mean and ugly woman. However, the student confessed that flattering is her favorite strategy because it can force the professor to give in to her request.

Conclusion

Our study has generalized the essential elements of an email request based on interview data with the professors. In addition, the comparison and contrast of different perspectives of the students and professors have revealed students’ top three false assumptions about writing email requests. We hope this paper has shed light on interlanguage pragmatics and provided pedagogical implications. EFL teachers can use the scripts of the essential elements of writing email requests that we generalized from this study to instruct their students and correct the students’ myths or wrong assumptions about writing email requests.

There are some limitations of this study. For example, we did not elaborate on the differences between Chinese and American culture in making requests. Cultural background is undoubtedly an important factor which would influence how students write their email requests. For instance, Taiwanese students tend to compliment their professors first before they make requests because they consider this to be a culturally effective way of communication, which usually leads to accomplishment of their goal. However, American culture regards compliment and request as two separate issues. In addition, although Chen (2001) concluded that Taiwanese students used leave taking expressions as well as American students, future research should focus on analyzing the differences between leaving taking in different cultures and the social meaning they signal.
References


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Evaluation of American and Taiwanese English Speakers’ Apologies

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Abstract

This study presents an evaluation of American and Taiwanese English speakers’ apologies. A total of 40 American and Taiwanese college students were selected and asked to fill out a discourse completion task (DCT) comprising eight apology exchanges in situations differing in social power and distance. Seventeen American English speakers were asked to give scores to and comments on students’ written apology exchanges based on their native speaker intuition and training as in-service teachers. The quantitative results indicated that speakers’ cultural backgrounds affected American English speakers’ judgment of apology. In addition, social power and distance between the interlocutors had an impact on American English speakers’ judgment of apology. The different cultural values were found to be a critical factor in perceiving acceptability of the apology. Overall, this study presents a sociopragmatic difference in American

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1 This study is part of Chen and Rau’s NSC project on The Development of the Speech Act Profile for L2 Learners (NSC 99-2410-H-167-009, 8/1/2010-7/31/2011). We acknowledge the English editorial assistance of Dr. Gerald A. Rau.