



A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN ACADEMIC
AND INFORMAL EMAILS

Nigmatova Iroda Khikmatovna

Student of English Philology Faculty at Uzbekistan State World Languages University

Abstract: *Politeness strategies are considered as linguistic tools used to express respect and sympathy, maintain harmony and manage social relationships while communicating. As Brown and Levinson (1987) explain, politeness functions as a universal mechanism through which speakers protect both their own and others' "face", or social self-image. In the rapidly changing world, digital tools are evolving, so it is important to understand how to express politeness both in academic and informal ways. This study investigates the differences in politeness strategies used by undergraduate students. Overall, understanding and applying appropriate politeness strategies not only improves written interaction but also fosters more respectful and culturally sensitive communication.*

Key words: *Politeness strategies, academic emails, informal emails, communication.*

INTRODUCTION

With the rapid growth of digital communication, emails have, no doubt, already become a dominant medium in both academic and personal contexts. The way that people express politeness through language in emails reflects their awareness of social distance, power relations, and situational formality. For example, in academic emails, where the sender is often a student and the recipient a professor or lecturer, there tends to be greater linguistic formality and heightened politeness. This is because the hierarchical relationship demands respect, considering that the professor are highly educated, experienced and they guide students in their academic journey which means that students ought to express respect to their professors while writing formal emails to them. As an example, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2018) found that students formulating academic requests often have to make difficult choices about how to address their instructors, and how much deference to show. In her words, "the politeness of the language that university students use during these email encounters with their lecturers is an important issue which has been the focus of a number of investigations, students' emails are not only sent with the aim of receiving some form of service but they also need to adhere to the interactional function of language in order to establish and maintain social relationships."

When it comes to the examples of writing academic emails, there are some key features of writing them to teachers or professors. Certainly, students should start with proper greetings ("Dear Professor X," "Dr. Y"), the use of modal verbs and hedging ("could you," "would it be possible," "I was wondering if..."), expressions of gratitude or apology, to soften requests, and proper closings (e.g. "Sincerely," "Best regards"). These features serve to mitigate face-threatening acts and to show respect for power and status differences. For example, Alemi et al. (2021) note that "adhering to appropriate language ... in academic contexts where the relationships are mainly hierarchical is significant and students are expected to use language and email markers which comply with and acknowledge the



higher status of their professors.” In contrast, in informal letters between peers, friends or family members, there will be reduced formality and familiarity. In this style, writers can start with the simple and common salutations like “Hey, Hi, How are you doing?” and use abbreviations or contractions such as don’t, doesn’t, or I’m and so on. As illustrated in interviews with language learners, one student Emilia (2022) said: “It depends on whom the people write emails, for instance if they are just writing to a friend or classmate, they can just write a few lines which are fine. But when the emails are for bosses or professors or someone who is older than them, then they need follow the structure and norms.” Thus, the contrast is not only in the linguistic forms used, but in how writers perceive appropriate norms: students show they adjust politeness according to recipient’s status, power, and distance. These choices in formality vs informality reflect sociopragmatic competence—and missteps (too informal in academic contexts, or overly formal in informal ones) can lead to misunderstanding, awkwardness, or perceived rudeness. In this regard, analyzing students’ email practices becomes essential for revealing how linguistic choices reflect social hierarchy, relationship dynamics, and cultural perceptions of politeness in digital communication.

METHODOLOGY

The study aimed to compare politeness and request strategies used in emails which were written by Turkish EFL learners, native English speakers and native Turkish speakers. The researcher focused on how linguistic and cultural backgrounds influence the use of politeness in both informal and formal email communication.

Participants

1. 20 Turkish EFL students
2. 10 native English speakers
3. 10 native Turkish speakers

Certainly, all of the participants were university students.

Procedure

In the experiment, all participants were asked to write two emails:

1. An academic email to a professor – asking for something or making a request.
2. An informal email to a friend or a peer – making an invitation.

Then, the researcher observed all of the emails and compared them how direct and indirect each group was in their phrasing and how they used modal verbs, salutation or others.

Findings

1. Turkish EFL learners used more direct request forms when compared to native English speakers in their academic emails.
2. Native English speakers used formal and indirect expressions.
3. However, in informal contexts, all participants used simple forms and reflected humor and familiarity, generally, positive politeness.

Ultimately, the researcher made a conclusion part by giving his own opinion about the experiment. Precisely, the context affects politeness choices, and cultural norms also influence how people, EFL learners or native ones, perceive and perform politeness.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of (2017) comparative study which was conducted among Turkish EFL learners, native English speakers and native Turkish speakers who were students of university, revealed significant differences how the participants expressed politeness in both academic and informal email communication. The analysis showed that the cultural norms, politeness markers influence the participants` linguistic choices.

By contrast, Turkish EFL learners displayed a mixture of formal and informal features. While they used polite forms such as “Could you please...”, they often combined them with more direct expressions influenced by Turkish linguistic norms, for example “I want to ask about the deadline” or “Please give me feedback.” Ölmezer-Öztürk noted that these students frequently relied on direct request forms, reflecting transfer from their native language, where showing directness is not necessarily perceived as impolite. In many cases, Turkish EFL learners attempted to sound polite through lexical markers like please and thank you, but their overall phrasing remained relatively straightforward compared to native English speakers.

Native Turkish speakers, when writing in Turkish, tended to use highly formal and honorific expressions in academic contexts, such as elaborate greetings and respectful titles. However, when writing in English, these participants sometimes simplified their structures, losing part of the polite nuance present in their native language. This linguistic shift suggests that pragmatic transfer—the influence of one’s first language on second-language pragmatic behavior—played a major role in shaping their email style.

In informal emails addressed to friends or peers, all three groups exhibited more positive politeness strategies.

These included the use of friendly tone, humor, and direct language, for instance, “Can you send me the notes?” or “Let’s meet later.” The formality level dropped noticeably, and participants often omitted greetings or closing lines.

However, even in informal contexts, native English speakers tended to use more softening devices (e.g., maybe, could you, if you don’t mind) compared to Turkish participants, who used more direct imperatives and expressed familiarity more openly, which is consistent with Turkish cultural norms valuing solidarity and closeness.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the findings demonstrate that context and cultural background strongly affect the selection of politeness strategies.

Turkish EFL learners occupied an intermediate position between native English and native Turkish speakers, showing partial awareness of English politeness conventions but not fully mastering the indirectness typical of native speakers.

Ölmezer-Öztürk (2017) concluded that explicit instruction in email pragmatics and cross-cultural awareness are essential for EFL learners to communicate appropriately in academic settings.

The study highlights how second language learners navigate between two politeness systems, balancing native norms of respect with the expectations of English academic discourse.



REFERENCES:

1. Alemi, M., Eslami, Z. R., & Rezanejad, A. (2021). Politeness strategies in email communication of Iranian EFL learners with their professors. *RUDN Journal of Language Studies, Semiotics and Semantics*, 12(2), 223–239. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-2299-2021-12-2-223-239>
2. Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press.
3. Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
4. Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics*. Oxford University Press.
5. Economidou-Kogetsidis, M. (2018). Politeness in academic email requests: A comparative study on the e-mail requests of native and non-native speakers of English. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 143, 72–85. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2018.04.002>
6. Emilia, I., & Suryani, M. (2022). Students' perceptions of appropriate email writing to lecturers in EFL contexts. *TESOL International Journal*, 17(4), 34–49. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1338985.pdf>
7. Ölmezer-Öztürk, E. (2017). Requestive e-mails of Turkish EFL learners: A comparison with native speakers of English and native speakers of Turkish. *European Journal of English Language Teaching*, 2(4), 68–85. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.572358>