Features of Email Exchanges between Saudi EFL Students and Their Instructors

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Abstract

This study investigates the features of email exchanges between Saudi EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students and their instructors, focusing on communicative strategies and topics. The research analyzes 250 authentic emails sent by female undergraduate students in two Saudi universities to their Saudi non-native English-speaking (NNES) instructors. The findings reveal that facilitative topics, such as class attendance and assignment submissions, were the most frequently discussed (63.95%), followed by substantive topics like assignment clarification and evaluation (35.27%). Relational topics, limited to course-related gratitude, were the least common (0.78%). In terms of communicative strategies, requesting was the dominant strategy (93.5%), primarily for information and grades, while reporting (5.6%) and negotiating (0.9%) were less prevalent. The study underscores the pedagogical implications of these email interactions, highlighting how students' reliance on facilitative and substantive topics reflects their immediate academic needs and engagement with the learning process. The predominance of requests for information and clarification suggests gaps in classroom instruction, emphasizing the need for clearer communication of course expectations. Additionally, the minimal use of relational topics indicates a transactional approach to email communication, which may limit opportunities for building rapport and collaborative learning. The study highlights the importance of adhering to English email conventions and suggests the need for explicit instruction in email etiquette and pragmatic competence. It shows that making requests is a crucial aspect of communication that requires greater focus in EFL contexts.

Keywords: email interactions, student, faculty, EFL context, communicative strategies and topics

1. Introduction

Nowadays, emails have become an integral part of our everyday practices, whether in professional or personal settings. Since its establishment in the early 70s, email has evolved into an indispensable communication medium. Its use, in addition to other online communication methods, has largely increased as a result of the covid-19 pandemic (Alawamleh, Al-Twait & Al-Saht, 2020). In education, email is commonly used as a versatile means for fostering effective interaction between students and faculty (Kim et al., 2016). Its accessibility, practicality and efficiency make it an ideal tool for building rapport, disseminating information, clarifying misunderstandings, and submitting assignments.

However, crafting an appropriate email message in English can be challenging for students due to not receiving proper training and teaching on email etiquette (Qari, 2021). Both native and non-native English students often face difficulties on how to write English emails and what style and politeness strategy should they employ in their email correspondences especially in hierarchical relationships such as the case of student-faculty email communication (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011; 2016). Shetzer and Warschauer (2000) emphasize the importance of L2 learners' pragmatic competence in computer-mediated communication, such as the ability to perform speech acts and use appropriate strategies in online environments. Therefore, development of pragmatic competence and "email literacy" is a crucial issue in the digital age and deserves greater attention in second language research and education (Chen, 2015).

2. Literature Review

Email communication has become a ubiquitous medium for academic interactions between students and instructors, particularly in higher education. In the context of EFL, email exchanges serve as a critical tool for language practice, academic support, and relationship-building. Students often face challenges in adhering to English language conventions, such as formal tone, grammatical accuracy, and pragmatic appropriateness (Chen, 2015; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007). Studies have shown that EFL learners tend to employ direct requests and informal language, which may be perceived as impolite or inappropriate by instructors (Alcón-Soler, 2012). The study of Lewin-Jones and Mason (2014) examined student and teachers attitudes towards stylistic features of email communication and revealed that this form of communication causes ambivalence among both instructors and students.

The structure of email communication significantly differs from letter writing based on different aspects including: addressing the receiver,

greeting, subject line, main body, closing statement. It has also been found that there are misconceptions of what makes an effective academic email interaction between students and faculty in the context of the students' first language (L1) (Lewin-Jones and Mason 2014) and the English as a foreign language (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2016). This can be an indication of the need to overcome such challenges and to adhere to L2 pragmatic norms in email communications to avoid negative impact on students-instructors relationship. According to Chen (2015), EFL students from collectivist cultures may use indirect language to make requests, which can be misinterpreted as vagueness or lack of confidence by faculty from individualist cultures. Thus, EFL students often struggle with balancing cultural expectations of respect and deference with the need to communicate effectively in English. This cultural-linguistic interplay can lead to misunderstandings or perceived impoliteness in email exchanges. In the Saudi context, several studies concluded that limited exposure to English outside the classroom and a reliance on rote learning methods can hinder students' ability to communicate effectively (Alharbi, 2015; Al-wossabi, 2024). Furthermore, the lack of explicit instruction on email etiquette in EFL curricula exacerbates these challenges. Research suggests that explicit instruction on email writing can significantly improve EFL students' communicative and pragmatic competence. For example, Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) recommends teaching students how to use politeness strategies, structure emails, and adapt their tone to different contexts.

Considering the importance of email as an academic means of communication and its frequent use between students and teachers, the present study aims to investigate the English email messages sent by Saudi EFL university students to their Saudi NNES instructors in two national universities. It focuses mainly on the communicative strategies and topics used while addressing their instructors. The results of study will provide a better understanding of the purpose of emails sent by Saudi students to their teachers and the areas that need improvement in writing academic emails. It mainly attempts to answer the following questions:

1) What communication strategies do Saudi EFL students employ while corresponding via email with their University teachers?

2) What kinds of communication topics, do Saudis EFL students use in their email messages with their University teachers?

3. Research Method

3.1 Context and Participants

This study is conducted in two Saudi universities. The original data set consists of 250 emails written in English by Saudi female undergraduate students enrolled in the College of Translation to their lecturers. All the email senders were studying English and they had different English levels. Their age ranged from 17 to 21. The emails were addressed to their university teachers, female Saudi lecturers between the age of 30-50, teaching different courses in the department of English translation, English literature and applied linguistics. The emails were sent between the years 2021-2023. The emails were authentic natural discourse as opposed to elicited data. They were student-initiated interactions, which required a response from their teachers. 64 emails were excluded from dataset because they were sent to non-Saudi teachers.

3.2 Data Collection

The data were collected from convenient sample who agreed to participate in the study and provided the researcher with emails from their inbox. For ethical considerations, all participants were informed that their data would be used only for research purposes and were assured that their identifying information (such as their names) would be kept confidential.

3.3 Data Analyses

The data were analyzed and categorized based on the communication strategies and topics used by students. Following the data coding applied by Biesenbach-Lucas (2005) and Bulut and Rababah (2007), the communicative strategies includes requesting, reporting, and negotiating. In accordance with Chalak and Eslami-Rasekh (2009), the requests were classified into the following categories with a few adjustments. Examples of requests from the data include the following:

1) Requesting a grade/ a grade reconsideration:

"can you upload the phonology-214 midterm marks so we know if we should take the makeup test or no"

"unfortunately my grade was 1.5 out of 5. So, if there is a chance for improvement?"

"I want to ask you about the midterm grades. When we will have it?"

2) Requesting an appointment:

"I would like to ask when I can come by your office next week?"

3) Requesting an excuse:

"I want to apologize for today's class. I'm not feeling well, I really want to attend the class but I can't."

4) Requesting information:

"Is translating words/sentences from Arabic to English and the other way around included in the final exams? Please let us know."

5) Requesting an extension:

"if there is a possibility to extend the project's deadline to week 8?"

"We would like to ask you if you could please consider postponing the project submission till Sunday."

6) Requesting a feedback:

"I would like to know what my mistake so I can avoid them in the future"

7) Requesting a permission or approval:

"I have a midterm for another subject today, and it will be very hard for me to attend today's class. Will it be okay if I can miss this class and show you my homework on Tuesday without losing any homework marks?"

"I'm sending this email to tell you that I can't attend tomorrow"

8) Requesting an explanation/ a clarification/ a confirmation:

"I would like to know how should we study hypothetical scenarios and building on existing knowledge in chapter 2 'Analysing Needs.' I can't comprehend this part in the chapter."

"Does analyzing the metaphor, personification, and alliteration in a text make it a foregrounding analysis? I'm just a little confused and need some clarity."

"I am checking if you received my previous email that I have attached on it the literature review file since we did not receive any feedback about it."

9) Requesting help:

"I don't have a partner for the presentation. What should I do?"

"I got another question to ask and I hope you don't mind helping me with it"

10) Requesting something (teaching materials, lecture slides, etc.):

"My classmates and I wonder if you could please provide us with the syllabus"

11) Requesting a change in the class medium or time:

"We have an issue with the new blackboard... So if we can have our classes in other platforms is going to be good."

"me and my colleagues would like to start our lectures at 12:00 if it's possible because i have work at 2 clock, please let us know if it's possible."

The reporting strategy was mostly built around declarative sentences, like:

"I put my paper under your office door today"

"I sent the exam right now, but the blackboard says that I am late??"

Sometimes if it was followed by requests such as:

"I asked my classmates about the midterm being on Sunday, so there is no problem with that. (Reporting) Also What are the chapters that will be included in the midterm? (Requesting information)"

"I sent the assignment. (Reporting) Can you see it if it needs to be modified or not? (Requesting feedback)"

The negotiation strategy was also followed by requests:

"the quiz was supposed to cover chapters 1-2 only but then the quiz included questions from chapter 3! A lot of questions were unfamiliar which made most of us mess up and started putting random answers just to finish on time and not get a zero! (negotiating) Please miss this is a little not fair, I hope you could look through this problem. (request for help)"

"I used the second attempt on the quiz. (negotiating) Is that OK? (request for approval) I felt that I can express myself in a better way"

The communicative topics were facilitative, substantive, and relational. Facilitative topics covered scheduling appointment, changing class or exam time or the class medium, class attendance, extension of due date, massage confirmation, and submission of assignment or sick leave. For example,

"I'm writing to you regarding my attendance tomorrow, I don't think I can make it due of me being really sick and having high temperature." (class attendance)

"This is our final report and presentation" (submission)

"Students want to schedule a meeting with you. And wondering what's the appropriate time for you" (scheduling appointment)

Substantive topics included evaluation of assignments or exams, information about exam or assignment and clarification of exam or assignment. For example,

"Could you please explain this part for me? I couldn't understand it well" (information about an assignment)

"I wanted to ask you about the odyssey poem, are we required to memorize all the characters of the poems, or there are

important ones only?" (clarification of exam)

"I remember during class this morning you said you'd add today's slides to blackboard but I checked and they weren't there. I though I'd let know if maybe you've forgotten or something" (class materials)

Relational topics pertained to preserving the social and personal bonds between students and their instructors. According to Biesenbach-Lucas (2005), they are classified into social relationships and course-related issues. However, in the study, relational topics were all about course-related matters. For example,

"I wanted to thank you for the explanation you sent to me it was very helpful"

"First, thank you for all your hard work in the course, it was beneficial and knowledgeable"

Since the email correspondences in this study present authentic data that had not been coded before, it brought some coding challenges especially when the students used multiple communicative strategies in their emails or when the structure of the email was not clear or contained grammatical/syntactical issues. Therefore, coding was revisited many times until it was finally determined. The researcher, in some cases, asked her colleagues about their opinion on the communicative strategies and topics used by students for more accuracy. It worth mentioning that some emails contained multiple communication strategies or topics. As a result, the email messages were not used as counting units. Figure 1 below shows an example of an email with two communicative topics and one purpose:
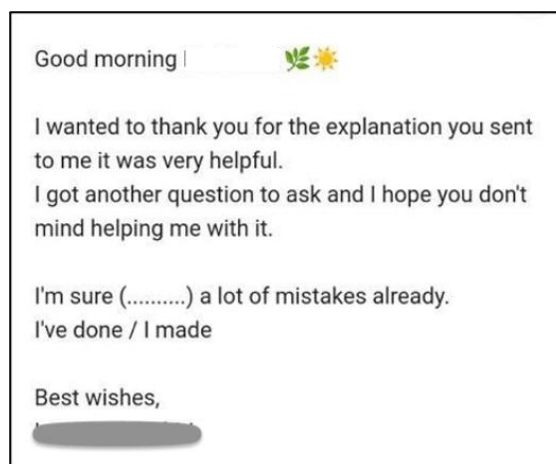

Figure 1. E-mail from Dataset

In this email, the student used relational topic in which she expressed her appreciation for the teacher's useful explanation. After that, the student requested some help in answering a course-related question and this was substantive topic:

"I wanted to thank you for the explanation you sent to me it was very helpful" (Topic: relational, course-related). "I got another question to ask and I hope you don't mind helping me with it…" (Topic: substantive, requesting help).

4. Findings and Discusssion

According to the examination of emails written by Saudi EFL students to their lecturers, the participants employed all three types of communicative topics: facilitative, substantive, and relational. The following table presents their frequency and percentage of usage.

Table 1. Communicative Topics Used in the Dataset

Communicative Topic	Frequency	Percentage
Facilitative	165	63.95 %
Substantive	91	35.27 %
Relational	2	0.78 %
Total	258	100 %

As shown in Table 1, Saudi EFL students used facilitative topics the most in their email interactions with their Saudi lecturers (P=63.95%). The highly discussed facilitative topic in the students' email messages was class attendance. The Saudi students seemed to care about attending their classes and not losing any marks for absence. Other common facilitative topics used were scheduling appointment and submission of work.

The second highest percentage (P=35.27 %) was given to substantive communication topics, such as assignment clarification and evaluation of previously submitted work. Relational topics which was only course-related in the dataset received the lowest percentage (P=0.78 %). They seemed to be the least favored by Saudi students. The majority of emails had only one topic, but eight emails included two topics: four (substantive and facilitative), two (facilitative and substantiative), one (relational and substantive), and one (relational and facilitative). Therefore, the students generally seemed to focus on only one topic in each email.

Regarding the use of communicative strategies, the data analysis showed that 90 % of the emails included communicative strategies except 10% (N=24) which were facilitative and mainly to submit documents such as: assignments (N=13), sick leaves (N=9), contact details (N=1) and list of students' names (N=1).   Based on the analysis, Saudi students utilized communicative strategies for: requesting, reporting, and negotiating. The following table indicates how frequently and what proportion of students used each strategy:

Table 2. Communicative Strategies Used in the Dataset

Communicative Strategies	Frequency	Percentage
Requesting	217	93.5%
Reporting	13	5.6%
Negotiating	2	0.9%
Total	232	100 %

As illustrated in the table above, requesting strategies accounted for the largest percentage (93.5 %), while negotiation received the lowest percentage (0.9 %). Reporting strategies were not frequently used by students and reached nearly 5 %. Table 3 below illustrates the distribution of request topics in Students' e-mail messages:

Table 3. Request Topics Used in the Dataset

Request topics	Frequency	Percentage
Request for information	62	28.5%
Request for grades	26	12%
Request for explanation	22	10.1%
Request for permission	19	8.8%
Request for an excuse	15	7%
Request for an appointment	14	6.5%
Request for something	13	6%
Request for help	13	6%
Request for an extension of a due date	12	5.5%
Request for changing class time/medium	11	5.1%
Request for feedback	10	4.6%
Total	217	100%

Requesting was the most common communicative method employed in email interactions between Saudi students and their lecturers, and as shown in Table 3, it was mostly used for information (28.5 %), and secondly for grades or grades' reconsideration (12%). Other request topics identified in the dataset were requests for: explanation (10%), permission (8%), an excuse (7%), an appointment (6.5%), something (e.g., syllabus, makeup quiz) (6%), help (6%), an extension of the due date (5.5%), changing class time/medium (5%), feedback (4.6%). Most students in the study used emails to make a request or multiple requests to their teachers, and these requests were mostly related to class attendance, work evaluation and exam/assignment information.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study's analysis of Saudi EFL students' email communications reveals important insights about digital literacy in language learning. The findings demonstrate that students primarily use email for transactional academic purposes (facilitative and substantive topics comprising 99.22% of communications), with minimal attention to relational aspects (only 0.78%). The overwhelming predominance of direct requests (93.5%) coupled with rare use of negotiation strategies (0.9%) suggests significant gaps in pragmatic competence, particularly in understanding politeness strategies and academic email conventions.

The pedagogical implications are clear: EFL instruction must incorporate explicit teaching of email pragmatics through genre analysis, metapragmatic awareness activities comparing L1 and L2 norms, and authentic practice opportunities like simulated exchanges and peer feedback. As Economidou-Kogetsidis (2016) emphasizes, email competence represents a crucial intersection of linguistic, pragmatic, and intercultural skills essential for academic success. Future research should explore how mobile communication habits influence academic email norms and investigate potential gender differences in Saudi students' practices. Ultimately, these findings underscore the need to systematically address digital communication skills in EFL curricula to better prepare students for English-medium academic and professional contexts.

This study has several limitations. First, it focused exclusively on emails written by female Saudi EFL students in two universities, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research could expand the scope by including male students, students from different disciplines, and institutions across Saudi Arabia. Additionally, comparing emails written in Arabic with those in English could provide further insights into the influence of students' first language on their email practices.   Second, the study did not explore the impact of factors such as gender, age, and power dynamics on email communication. For example, emails sent to senior faculty members may differ from those sent to younger instructors, and emails sent by male students to female instructors may differ from those sent by female students to male professors. Investigating these factors could provide a more nuanced understanding of email communication in academic settings.   Finally, future research could focus on the pragmatics of email communication by examining other elements of email messages, such as the degree of directness, politeness strategies, and the use of internal modifiers. Cross-cultural studies comparing email practices between native and non-native English speakers could also provide valuable insights into the role of cultural and linguistic differences in

shaping email communication.

Authors' contributions

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The author declares that she has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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