Politeness of Saudi EFL Students in Writing Request Emails to Faculty

أدب الطلب لدى الطالبات السعوديات في كتابة رسائل البريد الالكتروني لأعضاء هيئة التدريس باللغة الانجليزية

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Abstract:

This study explores the request strategies employed by EFL female learners studying at King Khalid university in Saudi Arabia. The diverse spectrum of opinions surrounding the place of request within the context of student-teacher relationships were discussed and an analytical outline was chosen based on Elmianvari and Kheirabadi (2013) and Biesenvach-Lucas' (2007) coding schemes. The results suggest that most of the requests made were notably polite. The analysis showed that the majority of students articulated their requests in a polite, formal, and semi-direct and indirect mode, employing long sentences in an attempt to mitigate threats to the addressee's negative face. All of this reflects Saudi norms of politeness, which generally places great emphasis on respectability and formality, particularly when approaching addressees of a high social status. This confirms the contention that cultural and pragmatic knowledge is transferred from L1 to L2 in an EFL setting.

Keywords: Face, Email to faculty, Request Strategies, Saudi Students.

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الملخص:

تستكشف هذه الدراسة استراتيجيات الطلب التي تستخدمها طالبات اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية اللاتي يدرسن في جامعة الملك خالد في المملكة العربية السعودية. تمت مناقشة مجموعة متنوعة من الآراء المحيطة بمكان الطلب في سياق العلاقات بين الطالب والمعلم وتم اختيار إطار تحليلي بناءً على مخطط ترميز إلميانفاري وخيرابادي (٢٠١٣) وبيسينباخ- لوكاس (٢٠٠٧). تشير النتائج إلى أن معظم الطلبات المقدمة كانت مهذبة بشكل ملحوظ. أظهر التحليل أن غالبية الطلاب عبّروا عن طلباتهم بطريقة مهذبة ورسمية وشبه مباشرة وغير مباشرة، مستخدمين جملًا طويلة في محاولة للتخفيف من التهديدات على الوجه السلبي للمرسل إليه. كل هذا يعكس معايير التهذيب السعودية، والتي تركز عمومًا بشكل كبير على الاحترام والرسمية، خاصة عند مخاطبة الأشخاص ذوو المكانة الاجتماعية العالية. وهذا يؤكد الزعم القائل بأن المعرفة الثقافية والعملية يتم نقلها من اللغة الأولى إلى اللغة الثانية في بيئة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصورة الذاتية، البريد الإلكتروني لأعضاء هيئة التدريس، أساليب الطلب، المداراة، الطلبة السعوديون.

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Introduction:

The increasingly significant role digital communications platforms play in society has given rise to studies regarding the interrelationships between politeness theory and online communication. In an anonymized online setting devoid of nonverbal cues, politeness is understood in a number of polyvalent interpretations, with various norms and conventions surrounding politeness arising in different virtual communities, often in a manner quite different from face-to-face social interaction. The extant corpus of research largely focuses on strategies employed in academic and professional contexts to make requests via e-mails, and, building off this framework, this study intends to assess email requests composed by L2 English speaking students to professors in a Saudi university over the course of several semesters with reference to speech act analysis framework of Blum-Kulka, Olshtain, and Kasper (1989).

E-mail has been selected as the object of examination in this study as one of the most significant forms of computer-mediated communication, one that facilitates interactive language learning and affords learners an opportunity for reliable communication in their target language (Chun, 2011). Furthermore, e-mail serves to empower students and it may motivate them to functionally utilize their second language.

Literature Review

Emails between EFL teachers and their students serve to impart self-assurance and experience in using electronic media to communicate in a foreign language. Research indicates that the most significant benefit of integrating email in EFL classroom is its "potential to offer learners opportunities for much more valuable communicative interaction in the target language than was ever possible in the traditional foreign language classroom" (Gonglewski, Meloni, & Brant, 2001, p. 12). These speech acts and pragmatics are invaluable to authentic communicative interaction that EFL contexts seek to foster, and email is evidently a medium conducive to this objective.

Politeness Theory

The expression "face" that has been proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) defined as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (p. 61). In everyday interactions, members of society collectively seek to preserve their own "faces" under threat and uphold the broader dignity of society. Furthermore, in the conception of politeness, there are two sides to each face – the positive and negative face. The negative face relates to a desire for autonomy and self-reliance, whereas the positive face relates to the demand to be respected, appreciated, valued, and understood. Request behaviour thus threatens the negative face of the recipient, as submission to the request entails the hearer performing an act according to another's desires rather than his own (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). In order to mitigate this threat to the negative face, politeness strategies are thus employed by the speaker to avoid affronts to autonomy.

As such, in relationship to whichever side of the face is under threat, Brown and Levinson (1987) propose a conception in which politeness is bisected into positive and negative politeness, such that positive politeness serves to implement an "approach-based" strategy to satisfy the need for self-image and appreciation within the positive face. Negative politeness, by contrast, consists of "avoidance-based" strategies of minimising any degree of imposition, such that the addressee's autonomy is not imperilled. Furthermore, a "bald on-record" politeness strategy states what is wanted directly and unambiguously without any attempts to sugar-coat what is being said. Considering its immense threat to face, this approach is generally used within intimate, familiar relationships such as close friends or family. On the other hand, an "off-record" strategy employs indirect speech to imply an offer or demand to the hearer, which of course requires the speaker to understand the subtleties of the speaker's communication.

In this conception, a person employs a strategy commensurate to the degree to which an action threatens face by assessing a social situation and choosing the strategy most likely to save face. Brown and Levinson posit several significant factors in this selection progress, such as power relations, social distance, and the degree of imposition.

The degree of imposition is defined by Brown and Levinson (1987) as "a culturally and situationally defined ranking of impositions by the degree to which they are considered to interfere with an agent's wants of self-determination or of approval (negative and positive face wants)" (p. 77). It should be noted that impositions are not equal, and highly imposing actions (e.g., requests) must be softened by redress to politeness to reduce the degree of imposition. Furthermore, the relative power of the listener over the speaker, which is defined as "the degree to which the hearer can impose his own plans and his own self- evaluation (face) at the expense of the speaker's plans and self-evaluation" (ibid), influences the manner of speech between the listener and the speaker in relation to who is of a higher or lower social station. Practically speaking, this means that a speaker distinguishes between friends and strangers of the same social status who are nevertheless separated by social distance, such that positive politeness is employed when speaking with family while negative politeness may be employed against strangers.

Request in Academic Emails

Requests were particularly selected as an object of inquiry because of their centrality within politeness theories and the puissance of culture pertaining to requests. Although politeness is a universal notion, it has myriad transfigurations according to cultural and linguistic particulars.

Since Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig's (1996) investigation of the perlocutionary effects resulting from e-mail requests made by native and non-native graduate students to their instructors, research on requests made using academic emails has been conducted (e.g. Chen, 2001; Ford, 2003, 2006). Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996) concluded that because of non-native students failing to adequately address imposition in their emails, perlocution was negatively impacted. Without mitigating the imposition of their requests through downgraders, grounders, and apologies, the impact of these requests was tampered significantly.

While there is a paucity of research regarding cultural variations in e-communication within academia, Chen's (2001) analysis and comparison of email requests made by Taiwanese and American graduate students and sent to their professors is informative. She contends that the

variance in strategies between the two groups reflects culturally determined perceptions of power relations, familiarity, and imposition, a finding that certainly sheds light on the underpinnings of varying electronic communication strategies employed by students from diverse backgrounds.

An interesting study was conducted by Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) evaluating the politeness devices used by native and non-native speakers of English in their email requests to the faculty. The author followed the original CCSARP framework developed by Blum-Kulka, Olshtain, and Kasper (1989) for her analysis. She focused on levels of directness, syntactic and lexical devices, and linguistic request realization utilized by the participants. Results indicated that direct strategies and hints were preferred more than the indirect ones. Native speakers were able to demonstrate greater linguistic resources than their NNSs peers.

Elmianvari and Kheirabadi (2013) examined the applicability of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory to request emails sent by 21 Iranian female students to their professors. The researchers have employed a coding scheme for politeness considered three factors: Formality of address phrase, degree of imposition and directness. The analysis revealed that most of the requests were polite, formal, and indirect. The participants used long sentences attempting to save the addressee's negative face.

Recently, (Pham & Yeh, 2020) examined the politeness techniques used by Vietnamese EFL students while writing English request emails to Vietnamese and foreign instructors. A corpus-based critical discourse analysis was utilized. Findings showed that students' pragmatic knowledge of the Vietnamese language is firmly embedded and has a significant impact on their ability to write L2 emails. Furthermore, there was an excessive amount of imposition due to the usage of formal salutations and terms of address, directness techniques, and the overuse of hedging words. Gender did not turn out to be a deciding issue due to a lack of socio-pragmatic ability, hence, some phrases and syntactic-lexical strategies were used rigidly.

However, gender is a factor in politeness strategy selection according to other studies, although admittedly there are conflicting interpretations of this topic within the present corpus of literature. It is accurate to say that women typically use less direct speech and positive politeness techniques to ensure face is saved (Tamimi & Mohammadi, 2014).

Requests in Saudi Culture

The Saudi Arabian culture of communication, widely influenced by the Islamic traditions, values, and social norms encapsulated by the term *adab*, is immensely influential on how requests are made and received. Broadly speaking, it has been recognised that polite phrases, honorifics, and greetings are essential in making requests, while expressions such as "if you would be so kind", "please", and "may I request" are oftentimes used to soften requests. Saudis tend to be highly conscious of social hierarchies and status, such that requests are often made in a manner reflective of the addressee's position, age, or status. Formal and elaborate language tends to be employed to those of higher status, with conversational indirectness often characterising situations wherein inferiors are addressing their superiors, regardless of the degree of imposition entailed.

As direct requests can be viewed as impolite or confrontational, Saudis generally prefer to speak indirectly and politely when making requests, particularly to superiors, while directness is only employed when speaking to friends or attempting to exert power over the listener (Tawalbeh & Al-Oqaily, 2012). Furthermore, "subordinates acknowledge and perceive power differences between them and the superiors. Thus, subordinates must show formal and respectful behaviours. Part of that respect is requesting indirectly from their superiors and using formal titles such as doctor/dr, *ustadhi*/my boss." (ibid, p. 92).

Furthermore, in his study of requests made by Saudi females in SA, Al-Ageel (2016) employed a roleplay method and questionnaire to collect data from 101 participants, focusing on the effect of social variables, namely gender of the hearer, power, and social distance on the requests made by Saudi women. His results demonstrated that above all

other factors, social distance had the most influence in determining requesting behaviour among Saudi women. The gender of the addressee was also informative, with results indicating that negative politeness and opting-out strategies were employed in distant relationships.

Qari (2017) has likewise produced a comparative study between Saudi EFL and British native speakers of English, using DCT to gather data from 160 university students, (40 male and 40 female) of each group. The researcher contended that Saudi males and females alike utilised direct communication when making requests, while other groups generally preferred indirect speech. He concluded that directness does not necessitate impoliteness in Saudi culture, and furthermore, that men and women employ different strategies while speaking. Saudi men tended to speak more directly than women, although they extensively employed religious softeners and disarming moves. This was the case, according to the author, because it allowed participants to convey unambiguous instructions such that the intentions of the request are not obfuscated by indirect language, while nevertheless speaking politely through softeners.

Research Questions:
This study intends to answer the following two questions:

1. What are the politeness strategies employed by Saudi EFL female learners when writing English request emails to faculty?
2. To what extent does data collected from the academic email requests made by Saudi female students adhere to politeness theory?

Methods

Participants

Selected participants were a group of 30 female university students engaged in studies at the English department of the College of Languages and Translation at King Khalid University in Abha, Saudi Arabia. All students are undergraduates studying BA degree levels 4 to 8, proposing that their English proficiency is intermediate to advanced. They are ranged in age from 17 to 20 years old, with a mean of 18.5 years.

Considering the personal information contained within these emails, purposive sampling was utilised to ensure the adherence of this

study to ethical guidelines. The researcher utilised her social network to recruit suitable participants, who were six female professors teaching English as a foreign language within the same department. In order to protect the identities of participants, all personal information has been either omitted or pseudonymised.

Data Collection

Spontaneous, non-solicited emails from students to their lecturers were collected throughout the first two trimesters of the academic year 2022-2023. Students had been previously informed that they were expected to use English as a language of correspondence between themselves and their instructors. The total of emails has been forwarded by the author's colleagues were 30 from different 30 students. The average of length of these request emails was about 43.5 words.

Analysis Procedures

In order to increase the applicability of the findings by providing them with unbiased empirical support, the current study used a corpus-based analysis and a theoretical framework that synthesizes quantitative and qualitative approaches (Stubbs, 1996).

Only the most important components of politeness—directness, degree of imposition, terms of address, request strategies, and lexicon-syntactic modifiers—were evaluated considering the depth of politeness as a concept. The following is how (Elmianvari & Kheirabadi, 2013) and (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007) coding categories have been applied:

Framework for analysing Academic Request emails:
  a. Coding category for directness level and modifiers deemed more suitable for request acts in written communication (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007)
  b. Coding category for formality, and the degree of imposition (Elmianvari & Kheirabadi, 2013)

Results and Discussion

1. Directness: The directness level of requests was evaluated according to the coding scheme of (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007), with various types of direct and indirect request strategies presented in the tables below. Thereafter, the request head acts were divided into request

strategies that indicated one of three directness levels identified within CCSARP: direct speech, conventionally indirect, and non-conventionally indirect (hints). Table 1 below displays this information with examples of the request types investigated. As is evident, directness levels correspond positively to the degree of pragmatic clarity, which ranges from least to most ambiguous.

Table 1. *Directness levels and the request strategies*

CCSARP Directness Levels	Request Strategies	Frequency	Percentage	Total
Direct	Imperatives	5	13.8%	55.7%
	Performatives	1	2.8%	
	Direct questions	2	5.6%	
	Want statements	9	25%	
	Need statements	1	2.8%	
	Expectation statements	2	5.6%	
Conventionally indirect	Query preparatory (ability, willingness, permission)	8	22.2%	21.4%
Hints	Strong hints/mild hints	12	22.2%	25.6%

A. Directness: the more indirect, the more polite

The most explicit level of speech occurs when a speaker directly conveys information regarding the expected action of the addressee. This level of speech can be recognised by the least ambiguous request strategies such as imperatives, direction questions, and need/want statements. Quantitative data presented in Table 1 indicates that direct strategies were more frequently employed than conventionally indirect strategies, occurring at 55.6% and 22.2% frequency respectively. The following excerpts taken from the emails present some examples of this communication:

1. Imperative

(15): "Please put it from 6 pm to 8 pm."

(4): "But please accept my apology and reopen the test."

(17): "re-upload our online lectures please?"

It merits mention that in the examples above, the imperative statement is generally buttressed with "please" and syntactic modifiers utilised by participants.

2. Performative

(27): "I thought it would be better to wait until the quiz is over."

3. Want statements (the most employed direct approach).

(24): "We want to ask about changing the day of the presentation."

(5): "I want to inform you about my absence excuse for tomorrow."

(30): "I wanted to ask you if the assignment is complete before I submit it through Bb."

(21): "I just want to ask if there is any chance to open the assignment again."

(22): "I would like to inform you that I was absent at our online session."

4. Expectation statements:

(8): "I hope you take the situation into account."

5. *Query preparation (conventionally indirect):*

(2): "Would you mind 'update' my mid-grade on blackboard?"

6. *Hints (indirect):*

(2): "I couldn't make it yesterday and came to college to see my paper".

(4): "I couldn't test because there was a power outage."

(5): "I had a doctors appointment today that was from 6 to 8 pm, therefore I couldn't get to the quiz on time."

(7): "my mother suddenly fell ill and I had to go with her to the hospital to accompany her. There is no one to stay with her but me."

(10): "…. for the delay in handing over my Assignment? I was very sick and did not know what the duty was."

(27): "I have an appointment tomorrow at 10:45 AM which is the time of the lecture"

It is noteworthy that hints were extensively employed by participants in this study in comparison to those of (Ren, 2014), and (Taguchi, 2018) in which no hints were found to have been used. This may chiefly be a result of a concern for clarity among students, as, for L2 learners, hint production may require more cognitive processing, may increase their difficulties in communication if they had not yet developed socio-pragmatic and pragma-linguistic competency.

B. Lexical and syntactic modifiers

Syntactic and lexical devices were employed within each request head act in order to lessen the degree of imposition presented by the request, thereby contributing to the perceived level of politeness. Table 2 further details the manner in which lexical and syntactic modifiers are classified.

Table 2. *Coding of Lexical and Syntactic Modifiers* (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007) *(p. 67)*

	Types	Frequency
Syntactic modifiers	Past tense, Progressive aspect, if-clause	Past 9, progressive 7, if 14
Lexical modifiers	*Please* downtoners: *possibly, maybe, perhaps* understaters: *a minute, just, a little* subjectivizers: *I wanted to know, I wonder, I was wondering, I think/feel,* consultative devices: *do you think, is there a chance* hedges: *some, any, somehow*	Please 30, possibly 2, maybe 1, Just 3, Wondering 2, want to know 5, Is there a chance 1, some 1, any 3,

Table 2 illustrates how participants displayed strong preferences for embedding and hedges, while also liberally employing past tense modifiers. As has been stated, embedding was often paired with direct requests through imperative statements, while hedges employed included modal verbs (would, may, should, could, etc.), or phrases indicating hesitation (as far as I know, I was wondering, seem, I think, etc.). The past tense modifiers largely pertained to the use of pre-selected phrases such as "could/would you please", "I wonder", and "I was thinking".

Lexical modifiers, as is evident in Table 2, were more frequently employed than syntactic modifiers. This may be explained by the fact that non-native speakers rely on lexical/phrasal devices to a greater extent than syntactic modification, as the former are generally easier to process and can be appended to sentences, while the latter requires reworking an entire sentence. The mitigating function of these syntactic structures is not inherent in the meaning of their grammatical composition, but rather arise from a pragmatic, extrinsic meaning produced by the interplay between the structure and its surrounding context – thus, it requires additional interpretive effort compared to lexical modifiers. It stands to reason, then, that the varying frequencies between lexical and syntactic modifiers reflects the lack of English fluency in non-native speakers.

2. **Degree of imposition:** This study utilised the scheme of coding for low and high degrees of imposition in requests delivered by e-mail proposed by (Elmianvari & Kheirabadi, 2013).

Table 3. *The coding scheme for imposition degrees* (Elmianvari & Kheirabadi, 2013)

A request with low degree of imposition	A request with high degree of imposition
1. Getting attention	1. Getting attention
2. (Supportive sentences)	2. (Small talk)
3. Requesting	3. Supportive sentences
4. Thanking	4. Requesting with modifications
	5. Thanking
	6. (Closing a conversation)

Rather than merely depending on the request statement in isolation to categorise the entire email as having a high or low degree of imposition, this study took into consideration other elements of e-communication, for example requesting statement, supporting sentences, getting attention, thanking, and closing signals. As is expected, the higher the degree of imposition an email request entails, the more politeness is required. It warrants mentioning that while supportive sentences are oftentimes overlooked by writers in minimally imposing emails, they are the key to showing respect in emails in which there is a high degree of imposition. The frequency of each element in the emails was manually estimated for this study, although it is important to point out that repetition was not

taken into consideration in calculating the quantity of supportive sentences.

Table 4. *Coding of formality and address phrases* (Elmianvari & Kheirabadi, 2013)

Strategy	Examples	Frequency
Getting Attention	Formal (Doctor, Teacher, Dear, Professor)	17
	Informal (Ms, Mrs, miss, good morning, good evening)	19
Supporting sentences	Asking for permission/ availability/ excuse	3, 7
	Explanation	19
	Promise reward	1
	Asking for forgiveness	Sorry 6,
	Thanking	14
	Closing remarks	**6**
Level	**Low imposition = 6 requests ,**	**High imposition = 24 requests**

2.1 Getting attention (Salutation and terms of address)

As is manifest in the table above, the "getting attention" portion of the email in which salutations and terms of address were employed was included by all participants. As such, any "getting attention" phrase that refers to the addressee by name would be considered informal.

Salutation and formal address terms are favoured by most of the respondents, in particular the phrase "Dr., Teacher, Dear Professor + last name, first name, full name", which concords with (Tawalbeh & Al-Oqaily, 2012) findings. It is interesting to note that some students even support greeting professors with "Dear Mrs./Ms. + first name" as a sign of their utmost respect. The above-discussed Saudi Arabian cultural trends may have an impact on this phenomena. Saudi citizens show consideration for elder or higher-status individuals by using appropriate salutations to prevent being characterized as uncivilized and uneducated.

Students have a social responsibility to address their teachers as "Teacher/Professor/Doctor + first name" (instead of last name, as in American or British cultures). This fact clarifies why some participants use their professors' first names while addressing them.

The majority of participants favoured formal terms of address and salutations, with the phrase "Dear Professor, Teacher, Dr. + First name, last name, full name", which supports the conclusions drawn by Qari (2017). Of interest is the fact that some students employed the phrase "Dear Mr./Mrs + first name" to display their profound respect for their professors. This is likely a reflection of the cultural particularities of Saudi Arabia, as Saudi nationals tend to venerate high-status people and their elders through formal terms of address in order to appear civilised and educated.

Supportive sentences

Female students in Saudi Arabia tended to articulate requests of a high degree of imposition mitigated by a high degree of politeness, which took place through clear, formal email structures and the liberal use of supportive sentences. This finding mirrors that of Qari's (2017) study of emails composed by Saudi EFL undergraduates, in which providing reasons was a favoured politeness strategy in another confirmation of politeness theoretical framework. Therefore, compared to flattery and indirect hints to cooperate, providing reasons prior to making a request may effectively encourage the listener to perform the requested act in many situations.

2.2 Thanking and closing remarks

Generally, all participants endeavoured to show gratitude in their remarks, with most participants adopting some formulation of "thank you" at the end of their email. Other participants opted to end their emails with well-wishing, employing phrases such as "have a nice day" or "kind regards" to demonstrate their sincerity.

Only three students entirely neglected to display thanks in their concluding remarks. This may indeed confirm the contention of (Pham & Yeh, 2020) that female students tend to adopt more thanks more liberally

because of their increased sensitivity and awareness of the threat to face entailed by making a request.

The absence of an expression of gratitude may be indicative of informality or perhaps even impoliteness on the part of the sender, although other closing aspects for instance concluding signals and remarks evince an impression that students are indeed concerned about saving face. This may reflect Saudi linguistic norms on emails written in the English language. Saudis generally disregard closing remarks in order to avoid seeming overly polite. Instead, it is customary to end one's writing with thanks or well-wishes prior to signing-off with one's name. This represents another confirmation of the theories of (Chen C. , 2001) that pragmatic knowledge is unconsciously transferred from L1 to the context of L2 writing.

In total, 24 emails (80%) have been coded as highly imposing yet highly polite, while the remainder have been categorised as either moderately or slightly imposing. This supports the contention of (Al-Ageel, 2016) and (Qari, 2017) that Saudi females typically make requests directly. However, as was mentioned, this does not necessarily indicate politeness, as the choice of direct speech may be a result of a desire to ensure that the requestee clearly understands the intentions of the requester. In addition, these findings reveal that Saudi female students tend to write in a highly polite manner, which once more reflects the cultural emphasis on formality and showing deference to superiors for the sake of social harmony prevalent in Saudi Arabia.

Conclusion

This study has revealed new insights into the linguistic and pragmatic virtues of Saudi female students in their composition of English language emails. There are further broad-ranging pedagogical implications for the field of English language education. The findings of this study, despite the use of more direct request strategies, expose that the Saudi female EFL students are adequate in using English and polite request to their higher position addressees. However, the influence of L1 pragmatic knowledge and cultural norms are inescapable, which contributes to the inappropriate use of linguistic devices in some authentic

situations. EFL students must thus become aware of the distinct disparities between their L1 and cultures and those of their addressees in order to avert possible miscommunication.

There are indeed limitations to this study. Firstly, participants were selected according to an objective criterion, in other words, all participants were from the same geographic region and attended the same university. Hence, the sample does not necessarily reflect Saudi Arabian society or even Saudi female EFL learners. Furthermore, the corpus of 30 emails is quite limited in scope, and as such, the generalisability of the study is not guaranteed. Future studies may remedy these shortcomings by providing a more statistically significant corpus of emails from a diverse range of participants looking at English language emails in the Saudi EFL context.

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