

Politeness is more than ‘please’

Teaching email requests

Emily Rine Butler, University of Oregon

Emails have become one of the trickiest genres of communication for students to master. As a hybrid genre exhibiting features of both spoken and written discourse (Crystal, 2001), it is often difficult to gauge the changes one needs to make depending on who they are addressing or what the context is for the email. In fact, as instructors, many of us have opened our email inboxes to find an email from a student that makes us cringe at its inappropriateness. Perhaps the student has demanded rather than asked politely for help, or perhaps the student has used such informal language as to wonder if they really meant to email you and not their roommate. In many cases, we may ignore such breaches of etiquette, viewing such behavior as symptomatic of the informal nature of the net generation or a lack of knowledge about the conventions of emailing in English.

As ESOL instructors, we are trained to be empathetic to the plight of students who may not have yet mastered the socio-pragmatic norms of English. And in most cases, the immediate consequences of such email behavior are small, if any. However, most individuals that an L2 learner of English will come into contact with during their university careers are not trained to overlook such pragmatic “flubs”. In fact, after being on the receiving end of such an email, some professors may simply refuse to reply to such “impolite” language and essentially write off the student as arrogant and insolent. Rarely, however, do we stage an intervention, although research has shown that without instruction, learners for the most part do

not acquire pragmatics on their own (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Bouton, 1988; Kasper, 1995; Rose & Kasper, 2003).

While students are often familiar with and capable of producing the linguistic forms of a request (which falls into the speech act category of *directives*) (Searle, 1976), one challenge in making requests in English is knowing the level of politeness one should use with a person. As in any sort of one-on-one conversation, relationships are negotiated using politeness strategies. A speaker uses these strategies to appeal to a listener’s *face*, which is the listener’s need to belong or feel involvement (positive face) as well as the listener’s need to feel respect or independence (negative face). The concept of ‘maintaining face’ describes strategies used to balance both positive and negative face in interaction, which involve the use of certain kinds of language. Personal style, culture, and status of speakers with relation to one another affect choice of politeness strategies. Therefore, in order for students to build awareness of making email requests, it is important to teach them what types of directives are appropriate given the relationships between the participants. Although the teaching of request strategies, or pragmatics in general, may seem daunting to teachers whose time and syllabi are often overstretched as it is, it need not be. This article presents additional evidence to support the need for the explicit instruction in pragmatics. It also illustrates one way to raise students’ pragmatic awareness of email requests through a workshop given to a group

of EFL students using their own emails as examples for analysis and change.

Teaching Pragmatics

Within the field of L2 pragmatics research, the issue of whether to and/or how to teach pragmatics to students has been oft discussed. In much of the early research in the field, many researchers sought to discover whether pragmatics needed to be taught explicitly, or whether pragmatics could be picked up implicitly while learning other aspects of a language. And, as the early research has shown, some aspects of pragmatics have been shown to develop implicitly. Studies have shown, for example, that learners are sensitive to the fact that different contexts require different communicative strategies that may vary according to differences in social power, status, or degree of imposition associated with a particular speech act (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Faesch & Kasper, 1989; Piirainen-Marsh, 1995; Takahashi & DuFon, 1989). In addition, some cross-linguistic influence may occur if the form-function mapping between the L1 and L2 are similar in similar social contexts (Faerch & Kasper, 1989; House & Kasper, 1987). However, cross-linguistic similarities between a speaker's L1 and L2 do not always guarantee success. In fact, even if students use politeness markers in their L1, that does not always mean they use those markers in the L2, even if a contextual situation in the L2 requires the same degree of sensitivity to social distance and power as in the L1 (Fukushima, 1990; Kasper, 1981; Tanaka, 1988).

While research has indicated that some pragmatic elements can be learned implicitly by learners, overwhelmingly studies have shown the benefits of *explicitly* teaching pragmatics (Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Bouton, 1994; Kasper, 2001; Kubota, 1995; Tateyama et al., 1997; Wildner-Bassett 1994). In an online handbook on the teaching

of pragmatics, Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2003) explain that one of the main reasons why the teaching of pragmatics is so important is that even as learners develop in areas of syntax or phonology, pragmatic abilities may not develop in parallel without direct instruction (see also Bouton, 1988; Kasper, 1995; Rose & Kasper, 2003). Furthermore, in another study by Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1997) about the pragmatic awareness of Hungarian and Italian learners of English, learners could more easily recognize utterances which were grammatically correct but were pragmatically inappropriate rather than the reverse. As Kasper (1996) notes about Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei's (1997) study, "This finding strongly suggests that without a pragmatic focus, foreign language teaching raises students' *metalinguistic* awareness, but it does not contribute much to develop their *metapragmatic* consciousness in L2" (n.p., *italics in original*). Therefore, Kasper (1996) recommends using pragmatic awareness-raising tasks in order to gain both the socio-pragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge of a particular act or event.

The type of awareness-raising task presented in this article focuses primarily on raising awareness of the pragmalinguistic forms used by English speakers when making requests over email at the university level. In describing the purpose of the pragmalinguistic task in the context of 'thanking' someone, Kasper (1996) writes the following:

A *pragmalinguistic* task focuses on the strategies and linguistic means by which thanking is accomplished - what formulae are used, and what additional means of expressing appreciation are employed, such as expressing pleasure about the giver's thoughtfulness or the received gift,

asking questions about it, and so forth. Finally, by examining in which contexts the various ways of expressing gratitude are used, sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic aspects are combined. By focusing students' attention on relevant features of the input, such observation tasks help students make connections between linguistic forms, pragmatic functions, their occurrence in different social contexts, and their cultural meanings. Students are thus guided to *notice* the information they need in order to develop their pragmatic competence in L2 (Schmidt, 1993). (n.p.)

Participants

The students who participated in the workshop were part of a 4-week intensive study abroad program at the University of Oregon for Japanese students at Meiji University in Tokyo. During the program, students took courses in American Culture, University Skills, and Oral Communication, which were coupled with a homestay experience and several field trips. In the Summer 2011 session, 23 students participated in the program. For such classes as Oral Communication, the students are normally sorted into two classes according to higher and lower proficiency levels. However, for the University Skills and American Culture courses, the students are all together in one class.

Prep Work

The workshop on pragmatics took place in the University Skills class during the third week of the four-week program. After noticing what I would deem “inappropriate” language use in many emails by the students in the early weeks of the program, I decided to create an awareness-raising activity for the students in the form

of a workshop. In order to illustrate the differences between students' and expert speakers' understanding of socio-pragmatic norms in English, two days before the workshop, I emailed all 23 students of the Meiji Program and asked them to send me 3 emails, each for a different scenario meant to highlight how differences in power and status relationships can affect language use. For the expert speaker group, I emailed the Meiji Program faculty, the students' native English-speaking conversation partners, and several faculty colleagues in other departments around the university. In terms of response, 21 of the 23 students responded to my request, as well as 6 expert speakers of English. The scenarios emailed to the participants are listed below:

1. Write an email to your professor (Dr. Emily Butler) in which you ask her to clarify what the due date is for an assignment you have in her class. On the syllabus, it has one date, but you thought she told you a different date in class.
2. You are going to be a new student at the University of Oregon in the fall. You are interested in studying Computer Science and want to request information about the department. Email the department head (Dr. Emily Butler) to ask for information about the department.
3. You are planning to meet up with your friend later to work on a project for English class. You were originally supposed to meet her on Friday but you can only meet her on Wednesday this week. Email your friend (Cathy) to request a meeting time on Wednesday instead of Friday.

Once the emails were collected, I separated and coded the emails into groups according to scenario and English proficiency (i.e. English learners vs. expert

speakers). After looking at the recurrent elements used by the expert speakers of English in tandem with several sites providing email etiquette tips, I came up with a set of recurrent elements that the expert speakers of English used when writing emails, such as the type of greeting used or the salutation used, in addition to the directive language used. For example, below (Fig. 1) is an example of an expert speaker email response to Scenario 1 (see above).

As is illustrated in Figure 1, there were 4 main elements included in the emails of the expert speakers that were consistently used. First, the email begins with a formal greeting that includes the professor's last name and a title (Dr. or Professor). Second, when need-

ing to make a request of a professor, the expert speaker uses an *indirect request*, followed by a *reason for making the request*. Lastly, the expert speaker *thinks* the professor for considering the request. While the content of each email varied, each of these 4 elements was present in all of the expert speakers' emails for Scenario 1.

By contrast, the emails of the English language learners were qualitatively very different. Figure 2 below illustrates a typical student email response for Scenario 1.

While the student's email also included a greeting ('Dear. Dr. Emily'), the greeting itself was less formal than the expert speaker's greeting in Figure 2, referring

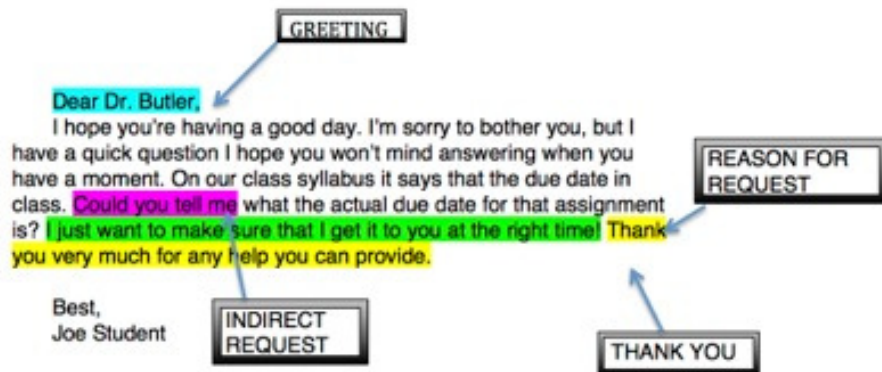


Figure 1. Expert speaker email: Scenario 1

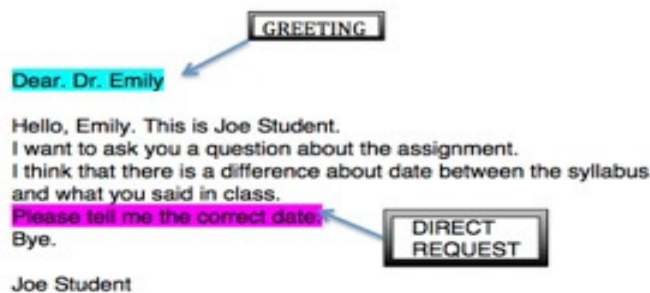


Figure 2. English learner email: Scenario 1

to the professor's first name rather than surname. Although the greeting itself is not 'wrong' per se, highlighting the differences between the choices expert speakers make and the students make can be a very powerful tool for raising pragmatic awareness and helping them realize more appropriate socio-pragmatic choices. Additionally, the student's email included directive language ('Please tell me the correct date'), although he or she used a direct request + hedge instead of the indirect request with a modal/semi-modal that the expert speaker used.

Teaching Directives Use in Emails

In order to increase students' pragmatic awareness of writing email requests, I presented two areas students need to understand: directive language and email etiquette. I chose to focus first on a general discussion of pragmatics, followed by what *requests* are and their relationship to *directives*; finally, I explained what the linguistic elements of a directive are. This gave the students a more fine-grained set of tools by which to evaluate their own emails in terms of directive use.

As previously mentioned, a *request* falls into the category of speech acts called *directives* (Searle, 1976). A directive is a phrase or a group of words that we use to tell or suggest to others what we want them to do. There are three main types of requests, which vary in terms of directness and level of demand: 1) direct (e.g. Give me a book!),

2) conventional indirect (e.g. Could you give me that book?), and 3) non-conventional indirect (e.g. You know, a book would really help me to study right now).

In constructing a directive, I explained that there are essentially three main parts: (1) *pronoun/subject*, (2) *main element*, and (3) *modifier*. The *pronoun/subject* refers to the pronouns or subjects used in making the directive (e.g. Could *you* give me that book?). The *main element* is the part of the directive that carries the main action or verb of the directive. As will be described later, the main element carries the main 'weight' for level of politeness in a directive, although many students mistakenly assume that the *modifier* carries the most weight. There are four types of *main element*, which are *imperatives* (e.g. Give me the book), *modals/semi-modals* (e.g. You *should* give me the book), *directive vocabulary* (e.g. It is *required* that you give me the book), and *hypotheticals* (e.g. *If* I were you, I *would* give me the book). Lastly, *modifiers* describe those words used to either hedge a directive (e.g. Could you *please* give me that book?) or intensify it (e.g. You *really* need to give me that book).

Once the students were given an overview of directive usage, I used this as a segue into the larger question of "What kind of request should I use?" and into having them discuss and work hands-on with their own emails. As a way to concretize the infor-

Which kind of request should I use?

- The directness of a request needed is determined by the *social power* and *distance* between the interlocutors, as well as *degree of imposition* involved.
- In education environments, teachers and advisors usually give *directives* to students, while students make *requests* of teachers and advisors.

Figure 3. Notes to remember requests

mation I presented about pragmatics and directive use, I provided two notes that they could try to remember (Figure 3).

Afterwards, I split the students into small groups and asked them to re-analyze the scenarios, but this time using some of the new terms we just learned in the lecture (Figure 4). Each small group was given 15-20 minutes to discuss before we discussed each scenario as a whole class for 15-20 more minutes. The whole-group discussion allowed for the entire class to benefit from the comments made by each smaller group about the types of language that should be used in each email scenario; it also allowed me to affirm that the students had grasped the meanings and uses of the new vocabulary terms.

Once the group discussion had finished, the students then had the opportunity to rewrite several emails for each scenario that I had selected from the ones they emailed me. While I let the students work in small groups to promote further discussion while rewriting, this activity could work just as well as an individual activity or a homework assignment. An example from Scenario 1 is listed below in Figure 5.

Following each small group's email rewriting activity, I asked a representative from each group to write their group's new email of a particular example on the board. This allowed for a visual comparison of each group's new emails, as well as a discussion of any differences in the language choices each group made.

Discussion Q: In small groups, look again at the 3 situations for the email exercise. What is the relationship between the participants? If we look again at the main elements of directives, how "strong" or "weak" should our directives be?

Pronouns?
 Modals and Semi-Modals?
 Imperatives?
 Hedges?
 Intensifiers?

Figure 4. Directions for small group discussion of scenarios

Until this point in the lecture, I had not presented any examples from the expert speakers' emails. However, now that they had practiced rewriting the emails themselves, presenting several examples of the expert speakers' emails allowed them to compare their newly written emails to the ones the expert speakers did. Using the labels I provided in Figures 1 and 2 above, I then presented typical examples from the original student emails in juxtaposition to the expert speaker ones. By placing all of the emails side-by-side, I was able to more easily show the differences between the choices each group made. In terms of directives, by presenting

Directions: Practice re-writing the following emails to make them more polite and acceptable in English

SITUATION 1

Dear. Dr. Emily

Hello, Emily. This is Joe Student.
 I want to ask you a question about the assignment.
 I think that there is a difference about date between the syllabus and what you said in class.
 Please tell me the correct date.
 Bye.
 Joe Student

Figure 5. Email re-writing activity

the data in this way, I was able to more clearly illustrate that even though the expert speakers used hedges like ‘please’ intermittently in their directives, the recurrent “polite” element in all of them wasn’t the modifier, but the use of an indirect request with a modal/semi-modal as the main element. This stands in stark contrast to the student emails, in which the students over-relied on hedges to mark politeness. When pared with an imperative (e.g. ‘Please tell me the correct date’), and given the social distance between the hypothetical student and professor in the scenario, the use of an imperative as a directive, even with the hedge, is inappropriate.

Presenting samples of the two groups’ emails also allowed me to highlight the two elements present in the expert speakers’ email that were not present in the students’ emails, namely (a) a reason for the request and (b) a thank you to the professor for considering the request, as well as the differences in greetings between the two groups. In terms of greetings, I presented all

<p>Expert Speaker:</p> <p>Hi Dr. Butler, Hi Professor Butler! Dear Dr. Butler, Good morning, Dr. Butler, Dear Dr. Butler, Dear Professor Butler,</p> <p>Japanese student:</p> <p>Hello Dr.Emily. Dear. Dr. Emily Hi, Emily, Dr. Emily Butler Dear, Dr.Emily Butler</p>
--

Figure 6. Expert speaker vs. student email greetings

of the greetings from the 21 student emails and the 6 expert speaker emails. A small sample is presented below in Figure 6.

The main difference between the two groups is that while the expert speakers used only the professor’s surname, the student group more often used the professor’s first name or used both names together. Again, while the students’ greetings are not ‘wrong’, the comparison with the expert speakers’ greeting highlights a more socio-pragmatically appropriate choice for this type of scenario.

In the last part of the lesson, I presented examples from several websites that give tips for email etiquette, highlighting several key points those authors bring up that mirror the points we discussed in class. These examples provide extra reinforcement of the concepts presented in class, as well as additional legitimacy to the concepts presented as well. A highlighted excerpt from a *US News and World Report* article on email etiquette for students is presented below in figure 7.

<p>6. Salutations matter. The safest way to start is with “Dear Professor So and So” (using their last name). That way you won’t be getting into the issue of whether the prof has a Ph.D. or not, and you won’t seem sexist when you address your female-professor as “Ms.” or, worse yet, “Mrs. This and That.”</p>
--

Figure 7. Salutations matter

Conclusions

Teachers often lament the inappropriateness of student emails, but lack the time, energy, and/or materials to do anything

about it. Research has shown that implicit modeling of pragmatically appropriate forms is not enough for students to completely acquire the necessary skills to participate in particular contexts; however, students do benefit from direct, explicit instruction of pragmatic forms and concepts (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Bouton, 1988; Kasper, 1995; Rose & Kasper, 2003). This article presents additional support that direct instruction in pragmatics is necessary in terms of doing email requests, given the major qualitative differences between the students' emails and the expert speakers'. The article also demonstrates one approach that teachers can use to raise students' pragmatics awareness using their own language in conjunction with information on speech acts.

Because this workshop was meant as an informal pedagogical intervention rather than as a formal study of the pre- and post-email language of students, I did not collect official samples of student emails following the workshop. However, in subsequent class-related emails from the students, I did notice improvements in their email writing, particularly in terms of 'greetings' and use of indirect requests. While this evidence is clearly anecdotal, the techniques and materials I used in the original lesson may hopefully provide some guidance to instructors wanting guidance in how to "do" raising pragmatic awareness but not sure how or where to begin.

References

- Bardovi-Harlig, K., and Dörnyei, Z. (1998). Do language learners recognize pragmatic violations? Pragmatic versus grammatical awareness in instructed L2 learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32, 233–259.
- Bardovi-Harlig, K., & Mahan-Taylor, R. (2003). *Teaching Pragmatics*. Washington, DC: United States Department of State.
- Blum-Kulka, S., & Olshtain, E. (1986). Too many words: Length of utterance and pragmatic failure. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 8, 47-61.
- Bouton, L. (1988). A cross-cultural study of ability to interpret implicatures in English. *World Englishes*, 17, 183-196.
- Bouton, L. F. (1994). Conversational implicature in the second language: Learned slowly when not deliberately taught. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 22, 157-67.
- Crystal, D. (2001). *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Faerch, C., & Kasper, G. (1989). Internal and external modification in interlanguage request realization. In S. Blum-Kulka, J. House, & G. Kasper (Eds.), *Cross-cultural pragmatics* (pp. 221-247). Norwood, N. J.: Ablex.
- Fukushima, S. (1990). Offers and requests: Performance by Japanese learners of English. *World Englishes*, 9, 317-325.
- House, J., & Kasper, G. (1987). Interlanguage pragmatics: Requesting in a foreign language. In W. Lörcher & R. Schulze (Eds.), *Perspectives on language in performance. Festschrift for Werner Hülsen* (pp. 1250-1288). Tübingen: Narr.
- Kasper, G. (1981). *Pragmatische Aspekte in der Interimsprache*. Tübingen: Narr.
- Kasper, G. (1995). Wessen Pragmatik? Für eine Neubestimmung fremdsprachlicher Handlungskompetenz. *Zeitschrift für Fremdsprachenforschung*, 6, 1-25.
- Kasper, G. (2001). Four perspectives on L2 pragmatic development. *Applied Linguistics*, 22(4), 502-530.
- Kasper, G., and Blum-Kulka, S. (Eds.) (1993). *Interlanguage pragmatics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kubota, M. (1995). Teachability of conver-

- sational implicature to Japanese EFL learners. *IRLT Bulletin*, 9. Tokyo: The Institute for Research in Language Teaching, 35-67.
- Piirainen-Marsh, A. (1995). *Face in second language conversation*. Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä.
- Rose, K., and Kasper, G. (Eds.)(2001). *Pragmatics in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schmidt, R. (1993). Consciousness, learning and interlanguage pragmatics. In G. Kasper & S. Blum-Kulka (Eds.), *Interlanguage pragmatics* (pp. 21-42). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Searle, J. (1976). A taxonomy of illocutionary acts. In K. Gunderson (Ed.). *Minnesota studies in the philosophy of science: Language, mind, and knowledge* (Vol. VII, pp. 344–369). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Tanaka, N. (1988). Politeness: Some problems for Japanese speakers of English. *JALT Journal*, 9, 81-102.
- Tateyama, Y., Kasper, G., Mui, L., Tay, H., & Thananart, O., (1997). Explicit and implicit teaching of pragmatics routines. In L. Bouton (Ed.), *Pragmatics and language learning*, Vol. 8. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
- Thomas, J. (1983). Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics*, 4, 91-112.
- Wildner-Bassett, M. (1994). Intercultural pragmatics and proficiency: 'Polite' noises for cultural appropriateness. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 32, 3-17.

Emily Rine Butler is an instructor in the American English Institute at the University of Oregon. She received a Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics from Penn State University in 2009. Her research interests include applied conversation analysis and intercultural pragmatics.