

# Pragmatics of e-mail communication between Saudi female students and male professors

Dogan Bulut

Erciyes University, Turkey

*bulut@erciyes.edu.tr*

Ghaleb Rabab'ah

University of Jordan, Jordan

*ghaleb.rababah@ju.edu.jo*

*This study investigated the pragmatic elements in Saudi female graduate students' authentic e-mail messages written in English to their male professors. Following Biesenbach-Lucas (2005), 99 e-mail messages sent by 9 female students to their two male professors during the academic year 2005-2006 were analyzed for communication topics (facilitative, substantive, relational), communication strategies (requesting, negotiating, reporting) and address terms. Results indicated that there was no significant difference among the frequencies of communication topics while the frequencies of communication strategies differed significantly in favor of requesting. Sub-categories of communication topics and strategies were also compared separately, and they both yielded significant differences within their sub-categories. As the most preferred communication strategy, requests were analyzed using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies and it was found that students usually preferred positive politeness strategies in their requests from their professors, while they mostly had negative politeness-oriented address terms when starting their messages.*

Computer-mediated Communication (CMC) has been rapidly replacing other means of communication in many institutions of modern life, including universities, and e-mail is one of the most commonly used forms of it. Baron (1998) sees e-mail as "an ideal tool for building and maintaining social relationships" (p. 155). In the university context, the nature, goal and frequency of it may depend on various factors such as the teaching traditions, technological facilities and specific-course requirements. Even though there still might be institutions in some countries where students and teachers have limited technological facilities and access to internet (Gu, 2004), using e-mail as a means to interact with faculty has increased greatly in others.

At a university context, communicating with the faculty via e-mail may be more advantageous as students will have "more control over planning, composing, editing, and delivering messages than face-to-face communication" (Duthler 2006, p. 501). Due to unequal status relationship between students and faculty members (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford 1990), students have to watch what they write both for the issues that can be addressed in an e-mail message to a faculty member and for the stylistic options that can be used. On the other hand, the same channel of communication which is perceived to be a less formal kind of register (Biber, 1992) may lead to serious problems especially among people with unequal status like faculty members and students. According to Feenberg (1995), people use face-to-face communication conventions while interacting online, and in case of problems related to content or style they may not easily remedy them. Bloch (2002) also argues that "Email is, ..., not a substitute for face-to-face interactions but rather a means for extending the space where these interactions can take place" (p. 119).

## Background

Every new channel of communication is a new challenge for its users whether they are native or non-native speakers of the language medium to be used through this channel. E-mail as a new channel of communication is not exempt from this and "crafting appropriate e-mail messages is more than a question of pragmatic competence of non-native speakers; it is also a question of how native speakers adapt language to a new environment that has, as of yet, no clear-cut rules as to how student-professor communication via e-mail should be carried out appropriately" (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005, p. 25).

A number of studies have been conducted in order to describe the characteristics of e-mail as a new channel of communication. While some studies investigated the reasons why students communicated with their professors (Martin, Myers, & Mottet, 1999; Ronau & Stroble, 1999), some others analyzed the e-mail messages sent by students to their professors and even compared native and non-native speakers' messages (Bloch, 2002; Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth, 2002; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Payne, 1997; Poling, 1994).

The study by Martin et al. (1999) investigated the topics students addressed in communicating with their professors and came up with a list of 24 reasons which they grouped into five major categories including relationship, functional reasons, excuses, participation and sycophancy. According to their survey results, students communicate with the professors when they want to build a relationship, to ask questions about the course material and

assignments, to offer excuses related to their late or no submissions, grading, to show that they are attentive and interested in the course, and to show that they are "on the instructors' good side" (p. 160). Another study by Ronau and Stoble (1999) investigated the use of e-mail by student teachers in English and mathematics. Besides frequency, purpose and forms of communication, they also surveyed topics of communication. They identified 10 topics such as classroom management, testing and grading and lesson ideas. As they did not identify the functional reasons of students' e-mail messages, they cannot be used for comparison purposes (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005).

The second group of studies included the ones which examined the e-mail messages themselves. Among these, Bloch (2002) examined 120 e-mail messages from international students to faculty, and depending on the purpose, messages were categorized as phatic communication (57 messages), asking for help (42 messages), making excuses (16 messages) and making formal requests (5 messages). So, most of the messages had the purpose of phatic communication. The study further examined the rhetorical strategies the students used, and concluded that they did not have any problems with using the required strategy depending on the level of formality of the context.

Another study by Biesenbach-Lucas and Weasenforth (2002) compared the e-mail messages by American and international students from an American university by first categorizing the messages for communication topics including setting up an appointment, submission of work and assignment topic/course work, and after that they parsed the messages for the negotiation moves. They also analyzed the data qualitatively for the linguistic options employed in each move. They concluded that NS e-mail messages included more negotiation and initiation moves, which may not be considered appropriate by international students. They also noted that linguistic tentativeness, that is very common in NS e-mail messages, was not present in NNSs' e-mail messages. This was attributed to the lack of status-preserving linguistic strategies NSs had.

With a wider scope, Biesenbach-Lucas (2005) also compared American and international students' e-mail messages for communication topics (facilitative, substantive and relational) and strategies (requesting, negotiating and reporting). She found that both American and international students addressed mostly facilitative, relational and substantive topics in their messages, but American students produced more messages with facilitative and substantive topics while messages from international students had more relational topics. According to Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996), facilitative and substantive topics can be addressed in e-mail messages to professors. Thus, they are acceptable in the American university context. Biesenbach-Lucas (2005) attributes the high percentage of messages with relational topics to the fact that physical and social non-presence requires verbal compensation. Regarding communication strategies, American students had higher percentages in all three categories in different ratios. For example, in requesting explicit response category, American students had a higher percentage for which Biesenbach-Lucas (2005) asserts that

*If a student wants to increase the chances that his or her message is responded to, the student has to encode this request explicitly, leaving the professor no choice but to respond.... However, this is also far more risky as appropriate linguistic realizations for these requests have to be chosen that do not come across as inappropriately impolite and imposing (p.40).*

Such precision may be a big challenge for non-native students and they may choose indirectness when they are not certain of the appropriate linguistic form. Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1990) also reported a similar tendency for face-to-face advising sessions during which American students were more explicit and international students were more indirect in their requests. The differences between negotiating and reporting strategies were also attributed to cultural implications.

With a more qualitative approach, Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996) compared NS and NNS student requests in e-mail messages sent to their professors. They specifically looked into the positive (PAR) and negative (NAR) affect that requests created on the faculty members. They analyzed the linguistic forms students used to realize the requests and the content related to time frames and acknowledgement of the level of imposition on the part of faculty. They assert that "given the status difference and the institutional roles of the participants, the students are in the position of having to perform face-threatening, potentially status non-congruent speech acts. They must be able to judge how much of an imposition any given request might be and determine a reasonable explanation for such a request" (pp. 66-67). Their results showed that the requests from NNS students had fewer downgraders and more personal time needs while the level of imposition was acknowledged more often by NS students. Even though it did not include NNS students, a study by Duthler (2006) compared voice mail and e-mail requests by American students when they were interacting with their professors with regard to levels of politeness using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies. It was found that e-mail messages included more polite requests than voice mail messages as the students had the option "to plan, compose and edit a communication" (p. 519).

Two other frameworks have been proposed for the study of the topics covered in e-mail messages. According to Payne (1997), students write e-mail messages to professors mainly for two reasons: facilitative and academic. Facilitative messages include arrangements for meetings, submission of work and evaluations while academic topics include resources, formats and organization for written work, developing insights and points of view. Poling (1994) also has a list of categories including asking questions about course content; asking for advice; asking about homework, upcoming quizzes or tests; and making excuses for missing classes. Both frameworks are similar to Martin et al.'s (1999) categories but do not show any frequency of use (cited in Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005).

With an ex-post facto design, the present study aims to describe the pragmatic characteristics of e-mail messages written in English by graduate female students to their non-Saudi male professors at a Saudi university. As there is no face-to-face interaction between male professors and female graduate students, female students can either call or write e-mail messages to their male professors outside the class period. So, this study deals with a unique context of non-native English speaker students who have to communicate in English with their male professors in another form than face-to-face office hours, and attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What communication topics do Saudi graduate female students use to communicate with their non-Saudi male professors in English?

2. How do sub-categories of communication topics compare with regard to their frequencies?
3. What communication strategies do Saudi graduate female students use to communicate with their non-Saudi male professors in English?
4. What politeness strategies do Saudi graduate female students use in their requests from their non-Saudi male professors in English?
5. What politeness strategies do Saudi graduate female students use in their address terms to their non-Saudi male professors in English?

## **Method**

### ***Data and Participants***

During the academic year 2005-2006, the two authors of this paper were teaching in the English Language and Literature Department of a Saudi state university. They were also teaching graduate level courses to both male and female students in the Applied Linguistics Program. Both male and female students have to achieve a high level of English before they are accepted to the M.A. program as they have no chance to interact in their native language because the faculty members do not all have Arabic as their native language. Due to cultural reasons male professors do not teach female students in face-to-face interaction classrooms but in studios where they can non-visually interact with their female students. Outside the class periods, female students can interact with their professors only in two ways: telephone calls or e-mail messages while male students are able to attend professors' office hours.

Such a cultural difference makes this study unique in the sense that all the e-mail messages included in this study are authentic and represent the actual communication topics and strategies that students may include in their e-mail messages to their professors. E-mail messages from male students were not included as they were a lot fewer in number due to the fact that they had the third option of attending their professors' office hours which they generally preferred to exploit.

Following Biesenbach-Lucas (2005) and Condon and Cech (1996), only students' first messages related to a topic/strategy were included in the data sample as further exchanges may "exhibit a variety of discourse and coherence building features, such as the copied and pasted portions of the e-mail that is replied to in the responding e-mail messages" (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005, p. 29). Thus, 99 e-mail messages written in English by 9 female graduate students comprised the data sample of this study. The students did not have any problems with knowing how to write and send e-mail messages and they all (had) to use this medium to interact with their professors outside the class period. The professors saved the messages and by the end of the academic year asked for the consent of the students and they assured students that they would not reveal any names or personal information.

### ***Data Analysis Procedures***

A coding scheme was adapted to categorize and analyze the data both qualitatively and quantitatively. First, replicating Biesenbach-Lucas (2005), e-mail messages were analyzed

for communication topics and the communication strategies that students used to achieve their goals in their messages. Communication topics included facilitative, substantive and relational topics. *Facilitative* topics comprised *scheduling appointments, submission of work, class attendance, self-identification and message confirmation*, which can all be labeled as external issues. *Substantive* topics comprised *clarification of assignments, content and format of work, resources, and evaluation of work*, and all these topics can be considered as internal issues. *Relational* is the third category and it refers to the relational level of communication. Biesenbach-Lucas (2005) divides relational topics into two categories: those that address course-related issues which Martin et al. name as *sycophancy*, and those "that are phatic and grease social relationships" (p. 31), which Bloch (2002) also labels as *phatic*.

We adapted the three communication strategies of *requesting, reporting* and *negotiating* from Biesenbach-Lucas (2005) to identify what students actually wanted to do with the topics they addressed in their e-mail messages to their professors, and these categories correspond to Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford's (1990) categories of *requesting, providing history* and *making suggestions*. However, instead of sub-categorizing the requests as *explicit requests for response* and *other requests*, we employed Brown and Levinson's (1987) five superstrategies of politeness to categorize all the requests for two reasons: first, requesting is a face-threatening speech act and thus it is important to identify how students linguistically manage to reveal their requests in a status non-congruent interaction (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990); second, *other requests* stands for a too general category.

We based our classification of requests on Duthler's (2006) examples for Brown and Levinson's categories, as in: (1) the student can state the request *Baldy, On Record* in the imperative form (e.g. "Meet with me!"); (2) the student can state the request with a positively polite strategy presuming that the professor will comply with it due to close relationship (e.g. "Let's meet to discuss your ideas."); (3) the student can state the request by linguistically minimizing the imposition on the hearer (e.g. "Would you be willing to meet with me for just a minute about this concept?"); (4) the student can state the request by using a nonconventional indirect form to minimize the face threat (e.g. "Usually when I talk through a concept, I can understand it better."); (5) the student may opt out and not make the request at all.

*Reporting* was the second strategy and included "declarative statements with clearly informative illocutionary force" (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005, p. 33) such as informing the professor about a work in progress or a future project. *Negotiating* as the third strategy differed from reporting in the sense that in addition to reporting, it also included a response option for the professor to proceed with a work/project ahead.

We also analyzed address terms used by students in their e-mail messages. Duthler (2006) defines an address term as "the greeting at the beginning of the message created by the participant" (p. 509), and classifies them as formal, informal and not present. All 99 messages included in this study had address terms, and instead of classifying them as formal and informal, we used Brown and Levinson's (1987) "positive politeness" and "negative politeness" as the two strategies to classify them. So, address terms like "Dear Dr. . . .", "Professor", "Hello Dr. . . ." are categorized as negative politeness while terms like "Hi Doctor", "Assalamu Aleikum (peace be upon you)", "Hi" are categorized as positive politeness address terms. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), formal address terms represent negative politeness while informal address terms represent positive politeness.

It is to be noted that we did not take e-mail messages as the norms but the topics and strategies in the messages, as some messages included more than one communication topics and strategies. Thus, we counted the total number of topics and strategies independently from the number of messages, and we also took into consideration not the number/percentage of texts which included a certain topic/strategy but the frequency/percentage of a topic/strategy in relation to other topics and strategies in general. All data were coded by two readers and the conflicts were resolved with mutual agreement. In addition, Chi-square tests were applied to the results to find out if they were significant.

## Results and Discussion

### *Communication Topics*

One of the goals of this study was to identify the communication topics addressed by Saudi female graduate students in English to their male professors. In classifying the data we adapted the categories from Biesenbach-Lucas (2005) which she used to compare e-mail messages from American and international students to their professors at an American university.

**Table 1. General communication topics in students' e-mail messages**

Communication Topic	Frequency	Percentage
Facilitative	44	32.6
Substantive	53	39.3
Relational	38	28.1
Total	135	100.0

As can be seen in Table 1, students addressed all three kinds of communication topics in their e-mail messages to their professors. Substantive communication topics such as content clarification, format, development of viewpoint, resources and evaluation had the highest frequency in the e-mail messages (39.3%), and this was followed by facilitative topics which included scheduling, submission of work, class attendance, self-identification and message confirmation (32.6%). The third category included relational topics which were sycophantic and phatic communication topics (28.1%). Chi-square test did not yield any significant differences among the frequencies in the three categories. This means that all three communication topics were addressed with similar frequencies.

The data show that physically non-existent professors can well be reached via e-mail to enquire about both substantive and facilitative topics. In this special context, a female student who misses the class (facilitative) does not have the chance to knock on the professor's door and explain her reason, or if she does not understand a topic covered in class she does not have a chance to go and talk to the professor in his office. As professors are expected to respond to course and program related inquiries, facilitative and substantive

aspects can be considered acceptable communication topics to be addressed in e-mail messages. The ratio of relational topics can also be considered relatively high, and this shows that even if they are physically and temporally away from their professors, students try to promote relational communication with their professors. It can be presumed that they are trying to find a way to compensate for the non-presence of face-to-face communication with their professors. In a previous study, Biesenbach-Lucas (2005) found that for both American and international students facilitative topics had the highest percentage, and this was followed by relational and substantive topics. It can be claimed that substantive issues are directly course and content related and are thus crucial. Such a difference may be attributed to the fact that students who have the opportunity to interact with their professors in person might prioritize the substantive issues to discuss with their professors during their office hours. As the Saudi university context is different, female students might be prioritizing substantive issues in their e-mail messages to their professors.

### Facilitative Communication Topics

Table 2 shows the distribution of facilitative topics addressed by Saudi female students in their e-mail messages to their professors. There were six categories under this topic, and frequency of distribution was found to be significant at  $p < .01$  level ( $X^2 = 19.81$ ,  $df = 5$ ). Similar to Biesenbach-Lucas (2005) study, the most commonly addressed facilitative topic was the *submission of work* (38.6%). The students had three options to submit their work: to send them through the department which could take some time to deliver; ask a male relative/driver to take it to the professor or just attach it to an e-mail message.

**Table 2. Distribution of facilitative communication topics in students' e-mail messages**

Facilitative Topic	Frequency	Percentage
1. Scheduling	9	20.5
2. Submission of work	17	38.6
3. Class attendance	6	13.6
4. Self-identification	2	4.5
5. Message confirmation	7	15.9
6. Other	3	6.8
TOTAL	44	100.0

There were three different kinds of submission-related topics:

(1) to submit the work, as in:

Dear Dr. ...



How are you? Hope you are OK. Attached is my second review of literature ...

Regards,

(2) to ask for informal evaluation before officially submitting it, as in:

Assalamu alaikum,

I actually have the assignment of "grammar" chapter done. I did the rest of the homework several weeks ago. Do you mind evaluating it just for evaluation not for the grade? If so, shall I send it as an attachment or wait till I submit the literature review?

Biesenbach-Lucas (2005) reports that such messages are not very common among international students, and American students will use them to make sure that they do not impose extra work on the part of the professor. In our study, this was one of the common submission topics students addressed in their messages.

(3) to ask for deadline extension, as in:

Dr....

I would like to inquire about the due date of our portfolios. You have asked us to turn in our projects during the last week of April, on the 22<sup>nd</sup> to be exact. However, the 22<sup>nd</sup> falls on a Friday. So, would you accept them on the 26<sup>th</sup> ... the last week of April?

I thank you in advance.

Regards,

Biesenbach-Lucas (2005) states that asking for a late submission is a face-threatening act on the part of the student and students may not make such a request in face-to-face interaction; however, the safe distance of the computer may be encouraging for such a purpose. Even though she claims that "international students may consider any request for late submission unacceptable" (p. 36), Saudi female students addressed this topic in their messages at a noticeable frequency, and this contradicts her claim.

Again similar to Biesenbach-Lucas's findings, the second most frequently addressed facilitative topic was *scheduling* (20.5%). However, in contrast with the American context none of the scheduling topics was related to taking an initiative to meet the professor in person due to cultural reasons. Three different scheduling-related topics had a noticeable frequency in students' e-mail messages:

(1) to confirm the dates which have already been set before, as in:

Dear Dr. ...

...

As for our test on the 8<sup>th</sup>, I just want to make sure that it's from 9 to 11, or am I mistaken?

Thank you and kind regards,

(2) to schedule telephone calls during or outside the office hours set by the professor, as in:

Dear Professor ...,

I have a question regarding our scheduled phone calls. By the time I received your e-mail, I had already had a plane reservation on Thursday because I need to see my family. Is this a problem? I have no problem calling you from there. Is it OK?

Kind regards,

(3) to arrange a face-to-face meeting between the professor and a relative or the drivers (usually to submit work), as in:

Hi Dr. ...,

My father will pass by your office Sun. bet. 10.30 and 11.00 insha'Allah.

Happy wishes and salams to your family.

*Message confirmation* (15.9%) and *class attendance* (13.6%) were also two relatively high-frequency topics. Typical message confirmation included asking the professor to confirm the receipt of message(s) sent earlier, as in:

Dear Dr.

...

I sent you two e-mails on your gmail account and was wondering if you saw them. They have the setup package info for the website, the password and everything.

...

Thank you.

Regarding class attendance, students sent two kinds of e-mail messages:

(1) asking the professor to be excused from a future class,

Dr. ...,

I apologize for the delayed notification; however, I will not be able to attend class this week due to mandatory training I must undertake at work.

...

Regards,

(2) apologizing for not attending a past class,

Dear Dr. ...,

First, I want to deeply apologize for not being able to attend the last two lectures. I had really pressuring circumstances and I had to stay with my son throughout his sickness.

...

Sincerely,

These two facilitative topics did not have any noticeable frequency in Biesenbach-Lucas (2005) study at all, which may be due to the fact that students could ask for message confirmation and also apologize or ask for permission when they met in person.

### **Substantive Communication Topics**

Substantive topics were classified as clarification, format, development of viewpoint, resources and evaluation. As stated earlier, they had the highest percentage among the three general topics students addressed in their e-mail messages. The Chi-square test yielded a significant difference among the sub-categories of substantive topics at  $p < .05$  level ( $X^2 = 9.92$ ,  $df = 9.92$ ).

**Table 3. Distribution of substantive communication topics in students' e-mail messages**

Substantive topic	Frequency	Percentage
1. Clarification	18	34.0
2. Format	5	9.4
3. Dev't of viewpoint	13	24.5
4. Resources	10	18.9
5. Evaluation	7	13.2
TOTAL	53	100.0

As can be seen in Table 3, clarification had the highest frequency for Saudi female students (34%), and this was followed by development of viewpoint (24.5%). These two topics had the highest frequency also in Biesenbach-Lucas (2005) study for the American students, but in the reverse order. Similar to her findings, format had the lowest frequency

(9.4) also in our study. This shows that both American and Saudi students use e-mail for similar substantive topics even though their conditions are completely different. This may be due to the fact that regardless of context some topics can be easier to communicate via e-mail. For example, if a student has a question regarding the format or evaluation of a work, it may not be that practical to do it via e-mail. Additional ways of communication such as telephone may be needed for prompt questions and answers. Typical clarification topics addressed by the students in our study included how to do something that was explained by the professor before, what to study or do as part of the coursework assigned by the professor, and what to understand from material content they were assigned to read for a future lecture or presentation. Typical examples are presented below:

(1) how to do:

Dr. ...

You have asked us to include audio and/or video material when we use quiz faber. We have tried this site but we could not do it. If you don't mind, would you give us some guidelines and illustrations for this site?

Thanks

(2) what to do:

Dear Dr. ...

We got copies of the selection of the articles. We are asking what portion we are supposed to prepare for the next class.

Our regards

(3) what to understand from content:

Dear Dr. ...

As I was preparing for Saturday's presentation, I came across a few things which I need to ask you about. I just need to have a rough idea so that I'm not reading something I don't understand.

The author states: Vygotskian framework is used to document L2 pragmatic learning through the study of "microgenetic change". What does "microgenetic change" mean?

Thank you

The second most commonly addressed communication topic was development of viewpoint in students' e-mail messages. The students addressed this topic in their messages to get the professor's approval for a research topic or to consult the professor about

their findings. The Saudi female students' messages displayed the characteristics of both American and international students as reported by Biesenbach-Lucas (2005). While some messages included the students' perspective in addition to asking for approval, some others basically listed the topics and asked the professor for their opinion.

Hi doctor!

Please give me your suggestions for the following topics:  
The effect of using cognitive strategies in developing vocabulary.

Developing listening comprehension by using news broadcasts.

...

Thanks

In the above example, the student basically asks what the professor thinks about a list of four different topics without any rationale why she would choose any of them. On the other hand, the student message presented below shows both the topic that she is interested in and the reason why she would like to deal with the topic:

Hi Dr. ...

I have decided to make literature review on the following topic:

The effect of using computer in teaching vocabulary to the intermediate students in Dammam.

In fact, I chose this topic because it is related to the most recent method in teaching, which is computer technology. Moreover, the application of this method is almost rare in Saudi Arabia. Fortunately, there is a government school in Dammam which uses this technology.

What do you think about this topic? Shall I start collecting references for it or else.

Regards,

### ***Relational Communication Topics***

Table 4 presents the results for the two kinds of relational communication topics of sycophantic and phatic. As it was presented in Table 1, 28.1% of the topics were relational topics. Following Biesenbach-Lucas (2005), we made a distinction between course-related (sycophantic) and person-related (phatic) relational topics, while Bloch (2002) put them all under the same category. In Bloch's study 57 of 120 messages from international students at an American university were identified as phatic communication messages. In our study we observed more than a single communication topic in most of the messages, and almost 40% of the messages included relational topics. In the study conducted by Biesenbach-Lucas (2005), two thirds

of the messages from both American and international students included relational topics. Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1990) contend that during face-to-face office hour meetings, students are expected to follow a certain social protocol and this usually involves a relational first stage and verbal leave-taking at the end. Students who violate such protocol may be considered rude by their professors even though they do not intend to be so at all.

**Table 4. Distribution of relational communication topics in students' e-mail messages**

Relational topic	Frequency	Percentage
1. Sycophantic	9	23.7
2. Phatic	29	76.3
TOTAL	38	100.0

Based on our experience and what we share with our colleagues, we can say that a similar social protocol is expected when students write e-mail messages as well. Otherwise, they may be considered as rude and bossy unintentionally, especially when they make requests. On the other hand, Biesenbach-Lucas (2005) claims that "too much social talk going beyond simple protocol, either unrelated to the courses a student is enrolled in or striking the professor's ego too heavily, ... may not be appropriate in academic emails" (p. 38). She also adds students' cultural background as another variable with regards to how much relational topic can be addressed in e-mail messages.

As can be seen in Table 4, while 23.7% of the relational topics were course-related (sycophantic), 76.3% were phatic. The difference was found to be statistically significant at  $p < .01$  level ( $X^2 = 10.52$ ,  $df = 5$ ). This result is in agreement with the findings reported by Biesenbach-Lucas (2005) in the sense that the majority of the relational topics were phatic both in messages by American and international students. In our study, we observed that relational topics were addressed either as part of the social protocol before or after addressing a facilitative/substantive topic in an e-mail message, or just by itself as a single e-mail message. The following are typical examples which include a phatic relational topic at the beginning and then address a facilitative/substantive topic:

Dear Dr. ...

I hope you are enjoying your weekend.

... (A facilitative topic)

Thank you.

Dear Dr. ...

I hope you are doing fine approaching the end of the semester.

...(A substantive topic)

Thank you so much in advance.

The number of sycophantic topics addressed by the students in their e-mail messages was not so many as the phatic ones, and they usually appeared towards the end of the messages unlike the phatic topics which were generally the introductory expressions in students' e-mail messages. The following are typical examples for sycophantic topics, which seemed to be functioning similar to verbal leave-taking (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990) in face-to-face professor-student office hour interactions:

Dear Dr.

...(a facilitative topic)

We will be honored if you would stay in touch with us even after the course is over. This course was a wonderful experience.

Thank you.

Dear Dr.

... (a relational-phatic topic)

... (a facilitative topic)

I wanted also to thank you for everything you taught us. We really did learn in this course.

... (a substantive topic)

Thank you very much.

Unlike what Biesenbach-Lucas (2005) reported for the international students at an American university, Saudi female students did not latch too many relational topics in one message with the main intention of revealing a facilitative or substantive topic eventually. Instead, as mentioned earlier, the messages which addressed only a relational topic were also existent and they included more phatic rather than sycophantic topics, as in:

Dear Dr. ...

Today's lecture was so interesting at the beginning with my colleagues' presentations, but allow me to say that it turned to be so sad. Believe me that even thinking that we are not going to see you again breaks our heart. I really can't express how wonderful it was to be one of your students and I really feel sorry for those who will not have the chance to be ones. Forgive me for being informal in expressing myself, but this is the way we all feel toward

you as our professor who was always there for us. Thank you so much Dr. for everything. We were really blessed to have such a respectful, kind and organized professor like you.

Sincerely,

It is interesting that this student uses an expression like "...who was always there" for a professor who was never physically there in fact, and the phone as a medium for communication was not always that practical due to timing issues, but in fact it was the asynchronous e-mail messages that were available all the time and which probably gave the students that feeling and also the opportunity.

### *Communication Strategies in Students' E-mail Messages*

Table 5 presents the communication strategies students used in their e-mail messages to their professors. We were able to identify 105 strategies in the messages and students addressed earlier mentioned communication topics to request (42.9%), to report (34.3%) and to negotiate (22.9%), respectively. Chi-square test yielded a significant difference among the frequencies in these three categories at  $p < .05$  level ( $\chi^2 = 6.343$ ,  $df = 2$ ).

**Table 5. Communication strategies in students' e-mail messages**

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Requesting	45	42.9
Reporting	36	34.3
Negotiating	24	22.9
TOTAL	105	100.0

Based on this distribution it can be claimed that e-mail was an important means for Saudi female students to deliver their requests to their male professors, and they used requesting with all three kinds of communication topics, but it was noticeable that the majority of them were related to substantive topics including evaluation and development of view-point. Unlike earlier research finding (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005) for students in America, in our data there were no requests from students asking to meet in person due to cultural reasons. Also, even though previous research on e-mail (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005) and face-to-face advising sessions (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990) reported that international students in America used more indirect ways of requesting while American students were more direct in their requests, in our study we observed that level of directness was also high with Saudi female students in general. There was not a single request that was far too indirect to obscure the intended meaning.



Regarding the communication strategies of reporting and negotiating, Saudi female students in general had similar content specifics as American students reported by Biesenbach-Lucas (2005). For example, when they were reporting they usually wrote detailed messages whether the topic was facilitative, substantive or relational. The following is an e-mail message with a substantive topic about a source and reports all the details:

Dear Dr. ...

Regarding my critical paper, before making a printout, I wanted to check the internet to find out whether the author of the article I'd chosen, Yasuo Nakatani, was a man or a woman so that I could refer to him/her correctly in my paper. Unfortunately, I forgot to do this before making the printout. I just remembered this whole matter as I was coming back home today in the car. So, if you please, don't read the summary because I've just sent the author a message asking him/her about his/her sex since I couldn't get any information directly from the internet. I'll have the information soon insha'allah and I'll let you know. If Nakatani is a man, then the paper you have is ok. But if Nakatani turns out to be a woman, then I'll bring a new printout next week insha'allah.

The following is also a typical e-mail message with a substantive topic again and details how much progress has been made and negotiates and elaborates into questions based on the details provided latching many e-mail exchanges into one, similar to American students' messages reported by Biesenbach-Lucas (2005):

Dear Dr.

I am now analyzing my data and I need to know if I am going in the right direction or not.

I have these kinds of data:

1. reading comprehension test scores.
2. cognitive (12 strategies) and metacognitive(12 strategies) (5 point likert scale questionnaire).

In my research I am looking at how "use of strategies" relate to "test scores"

What I did was:

organize the participants' scores by dividing them (total No. of participants is 25) into:

highly successful: participants No. 1-10 (grades 14-13-12 out of 15)

moderately successful: participants No. 11- 20 (grades 11-10-9 out of 15)

unsuccessful: participants No. 21-25 (grades 8-7-6 out of 15)

Now I have descriptive statistics on each group of students (attached tables)

My questions are:

1- How can I calculate the mean of the whole group? the "one" mean of the highly successful (10 participants) the moderate (10 participants) and the unsuccessful (5 participants)?

2- If I calculated the means should I compare those means with means of test scores of the groups? each one at a time? correlation?

3- Is it correct to just look at the means?

### ***Politeness Strategies in Students' Requests and Address Terms***

We used Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness strategies, and analyzed students' requests in their e-mail messages to their professors. We thought that such an approach would be more systematic in identifying the degree of directness and also type of politeness.

**Table 6. Politeness strategies in students' requests in e-mail messages**

Politeness strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Bald-on-record	1	2.2
Positive politeness	27	60.0
Negative politeness	11	24.4
Off-record politeness	6	13.3
TOTAL	45	100.0

As can be seen in Table 6, 27 (60%) of the 45 student requests had positive politeness strategies, and this was followed by negative politeness (24.4%), off-record politeness (13.3%), and bald-on-record (2.2%) politeness strategies. The Chi-square test also yielded a significant difference among the politeness strategy categories for our data at  $p < .01$  level ( $X^2 = 51.77$ ,  $df = 4$ ). The distribution shows the level of directness involved in students' requests as mentioned earlier. Starting from Bald-on-record strategy the level of directness decreases, and based on this distribution it can be extrapolated that level of directness is closer to the higher end of the continuum. It should be noted that the fifth category of politeness ("the student may opt out and not make the request at all") was not identified in any of the messages. Following are typical examples for politeness strategies in students' requests:

(1) Bald-on-record:

In the research evaluation checklist, one of the questions under "analyses" is:

Is the confidence level (alpha) specified?

What does this mean?

(2) Positive politeness

Please let me know which of previous topics is the one that you think is most workable.

Please doctor, when you evaluate my assignment write the weaknesses and the strengths.

Please print yourself a copy since it would be impossible to send you a copy tomorrow morning before the presentation.

(3) Negative politeness

I have promised to send you a copy of the materials that I have told you about before, but would you mind sending me your mail address in order to send them to you?

My other question has to do with the date of our exam. A few of us think it's Tuesday (the 7th) and the rest think it's Wednesday (the 8th). Would you kindly clarify that point?

I was wondering if you would permit the others to have a look at the proposals you've lent me.

(4) Off-record politeness:

I am really confused and can't tell if I am doing well so far or not, thank you in advance for everything.

I understand from your e-mail and from my friends that you sent the first assignment to all of us, but I have not received it. I received only one e-mail with the subject: Presentations.

All the messages sent by students to their two professors included an address term. There was not a single message without one. On the other hand, Biesenbach-Lucas (2005) reported that 41% of the messages sent by American students and 76% of the messages sent by international students had a greeting expression at the beginning. American students were reported to have been less concerned about opening greetings, which may be attributed to the claim that this information is already provided in the “virtual envelope” of the e-mail message’s memo-style header (Danet, 2001, cited in Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005). However, both the international students in America and the Saudi female students seem to be more sensitive to follow the social protocol rules of greeting a professor, which apply to face-to-face communication.

**Table 7. Politeness and address terms in students’ e-mail messages**

Politeness strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Positive politeness	22	22.8
Negative politeness	77	77.8
TOTAL	99	100.0

Table 7 presents the politeness orientations of students in their address terms to their professors when starting an e-mail message. Positive politeness address terms (22.8%) were fewer than the negative politeness (77.8%) address terms, which means that when they were setting the stage, they were more formal than informal toward their professors. Chi-square test also yielded a significant difference between the two categories at  $p < .01$  level ( $X^2 = 30.556$ ,  $df = 1$ ). When the frequencies in Table 6 and Table 7 are compared, it can be noticed that there is a reverse raking of positive and negative politeness preferences. While most of the messages started with a negative politeness address term such as *Dear Dr. ..., Respected Professor, Hello Dr. ...*, most of the requests in messages had a positive politeness strategy. Such a mismatch was noticeable in quite a few messages, as in the following example below:

Hi Doctor ...,  
 ... would you mind sending me your mail address in order to send them to you? (greeting: positive politeness; request: negative politeness)

This kind of a mismatch has been acknowledged to be a natural discursive fact by Coup-land, Grainger and Coupland (1988) in natural conversation. However, e-mail is a different medium in which the message writer has all the options to revise his/her message before clicking the ‘send’ icon. Thus, such a mismatch should be attributed to other variables, such as the nature of e-mail itself as a medium or lack of pragmatic competence on the part of the students who wrote these messages.

## Conclusion

This study intended to contribute to CMC research by focusing on a non-Western gender-segregated context where female students were in a sense obliged to exploit e-mail as an indispensable medium to communicate with their male professors in English. When we think of the professor-student status and the institutional roles assigned to participants, students may have to perform face-threatening and non-congruent speech acts (Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996). Thus, they should know how to express what they want to express without leading to any repercussions. In order to be able to see how much Saudi female graduate students exploited this medium when they were writing to their male professors, we examined their e-mail messages to find answer to a list of five research questions.

It was found that students addressed substantive, facilitative and relational topics in their messages, respectively. This result differs from previous findings (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005), as the students in our study used e-mail to communicate mostly substantive topics rather than relational topics. The commonly addressed substantive topics were clarification, and development of viewpoint. Clarification topics mostly included asking the professor *what to do*, *how to do* and *what to understand* kind of questions. Saudi female students displayed characteristics of both American and international students in their development of viewpoint topics. In some cases, they detailed the topic and latched multiple turns into a single message by elaborating on their work in progress or presenting options for which they wanted the professor's approval, which is similar to what has been reported for American students (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005). In other cases, they listed the topics and asked for the professor's opinion, and this is similar to what has been claimed for international students.

Among the facilitative topics, the most commonly addressed ones included submission of work and scheduling, and this is similar to earlier findings from American context. However, none of the messages included scheduling a meeting in person due to cultural reasons. Rather, they would include topics such as confirming dates for exams, to schedule telephone calls or to arrange a face-to-face meeting between the professor and a relative or someone else to submit work. The students addressed both phatic and sycophantic relational topics in their messages, but the ratio of phatic topics was higher than the ratio of sycophantic topics, which is similar to what has been reported for American and international students (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005). Obviously, the students exploited e-mail as a medium to build rapport with their professors, and thus compensate for the absence of face-to-face interaction in this way.

Communication strategies used by students included requesting, reporting and negotiating. Requests had the highest frequency, which means that students used e-mail as a medium mostly to express their requests from their professors. In all three communication strategies, they displayed similarities to what has been reported for American rather than international students in America (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005). For example, they provided multiple response points in their messages to their professors, came up with what is possible for them with regards to scheduling a phone call.

Analysis of the messages for politeness strategies in students' requests and address terms revealed that they mostly used negative politeness address terms in their messages while most of the requests had a positive politeness strategy. Some messages had mismatch between politeness strategy for the address term and the politeness strategy for the request

in the same message. It may not be appropriate to make a judgment at this stage as such a mismatch may be attributable to the nature of e-mail as a medium of communication. Thus, further research may compare native and non-native students in that sense. It should be noted that their using mostly positive politeness strategies in their requests is an indication of the level of directness and explicitness. Unlike what has been reported for non-American students (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005; Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth, 2002), Saudi female graduate students were direct and explicit in their requests to their professors.

Our findings and their comparison with previous research from other contexts show that different sociocultural and linguistic contexts may lead to different levels of e-mail use. The Saudi female graduate students fully exploited this medium to request, report and negotiate their facilitative, substantive and relational issues in English. In most cases, they were found to be similar to American students and in the way they used this medium rather than international students in America. Even though the male students' messages were not included in our study due to their far too limited number, a further study may compare male and female e-mail messages. As male students had the opportunity to meet the professors in person, they did not have to write many e-mail messages, and thus had less practice in writing e-mail messages. Even the messages that students receive from other classmates and professors may stand as good models to follow, and we believe that frequency of exchange of e-mail messages may enhance the quality. A further study may have a longitudinal approach and analyze the level of progress which might come with more practice in writing e-mail messages to professors and other classmates. It can be claimed that e-mail is more like a different genre, and has/will have its own rules. Whether it is one's native or non-native language, success in communication depends on "the ability to express oneself using a variety of language forms and rhetorical strategies as well as to know when it is appropriate to use these different forms" (Bloch, 2002, p. 132).

## References

- Bardovi-Harlig, K., & Hartford, B. S. (1990). Congruence in native and nonnative conversations: Status balance in the academic advising session. *Language Learning*, 40(4), 467-501.
- Baron, N. (1998). Letters by phone or speech by other means: The linguistics of e-mail. *Language and Communication*, 18(2), 133-170.
- Biber, D. (1992). Using computer-based text corpora to analyze the referential strategies of spoken and written texts. In J. Svartvik (Ed.), *Directions in corpus linguistics: Proceedings of Nobel Symposium*. Stockholm (pp. 213-252). Berlin: Mouton.
- Biesenbach-Lucas, S. (2005). Communication topics and strategies in e-mail consultation: Comparison between American and international university students. *Lanaguage, Learning & Technology*, 9(2), 24-46.
- Biesenbach-Lucas, S., & Weasenforth, D. (2002). Virtual office hours: negotiation strategies in electronic conferencing. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 15(2), 147-165.
- Bloch, J. (2002). Student/teacher interaction via email: The social context of Internet discourse. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 11, 117-134.

- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Condon, S. L., & Cech, C. G. (1996). Functional comparison of face-to-face and computer-mediated decision making interactions. In S.C. Herring (Ed.), *Computer-mediated communication: Linguistic, social, and cross-cultural perspectives* (pp. 65-80). Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.
- Coupland, N., Grainger, K. & Coupland, J. (1988). Politeness in context: Intergenerational issues. *Language in Society*, 17, 253-262.
- Duthler, K. W. (2006). The politeness of requests made via email and voicemail: Support for the hyperpersonal model. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11, 500-521.
- Feenberg, A. (1995). The online patient meeting. Presented at the Sixth International Symposium on ALS/MND: Quality of Life Issues in Dublin, Ireland, October 31 (online). Retrieved November 20, 2006 from the [www.cnsonline.org/www/docs/dublin.html](http://www.cnsonline.org/www/docs/dublin.html)
- Goffman, E. (1955). On face-work: An analysis of ritual elements in social interaction. *Psychiatry*, 18, 213-231.
- Gu, P. (2004). Leaving the bathtub to make waves. *Essential Teacher*, 1(4), 32-35.
- Hartford, B., & Bardovi-Harlig, K. (1996). "At your earliest convenience": A study of written student requests to faculty. In L. F. Bouton (Ed.), *Pragmatics and language learning*, Monograph Series Volume 7 (pp. 55-69). Urbana, IL: Division of English as an International Language.
- Holtgraves, T., & Yang, J. (1992). Interpersonal underpinnings of request strategies: General principles and differences due to culture and gender. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 62(2), 246-256.
- Martin, M. M., Myers, S. A., & Mottet, T. P. (1999). Students' motives for communicating with their instructors. *Communication Education*, 48, 157-164.
- Payne, C. R. (1997). *Opening the door with e-mail: From no tech to low-tech*. Retrieved March 9, 2007, from [http://kolea.kcc.hawaii.edu/tcc/tcc\\_conf97/pres/payne.html](http://kolea.kcc.hawaii.edu/tcc/tcc_conf97/pres/payne.html) ED412936.
- Poling, D. J. (1994). E-mail as an effective teaching supplement. *Educational Technology*, 34(5), 53-55.
- Ronau, R. N., & Stroble, B. (1999). Student teacher electronic network: Expenditure or investment? *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, 7(1), 33-55.

### **Biodata:**

**Dogan Bulut** is an assistant professor of Applied Linguistics at Erciyes University in Turkey. He teaches both undergraduate and graduate level courses in the fields of Linguistics and Language Teaching. His main research fields of interest include cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics, second language acquisition, CMC, CALL and pedagogical stylistics.

**Ghaleb Rababah** is an assistant professor of applied linguistics at the Department of English and Literature of the University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan. He got his Ph.D in Applied Linguistics from the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, UK. He taught at both the undergraduate and graduate levels in United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Jordan. He has published several papers on ESL/EFL, and applied linguistics. He edited the special issue of Indian Journal of Applied Linguistics (IJOAL) on Strategies in Learning and Using English as a Foreign/Second Language, which will be published in June 2007.

During AY 2005-2006 both authors were working at a Saudi University in Saudi Arabia when they collected the data for this paper.