Markers of politeness and impoliteness in student-teacher interaction in the discourse genre of emails

Marcas de cortesía y descortesía en la interacción estudiante-profesor en el género discursivo de los correos electrónicos

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Abstract

Politeness is a socio-pragmatic phenomenon that conditions the success or failure of communication. Consequently, this study aims to investigate the markers of politeness and impoliteness in pupil-teacher interaction at the university stage in Spain using email, one of the most used discourse genres today. The objectives formulated for this study are: 1) To study the opinion of a group of university students on their preparedness for the composing of emails; 2) to compare the perception that the participating subjects have about their ability in the different aspects related with email composition with the competence that is seen in the composition of such texts in the analysed corpus; 3) to design a didactic intervention to teach how to compose emails, and to put it into practice so as to improve the results; 4) to compare the results after the didactic intervention. Descriptive and inferential statistical analysis has been carried out on an opinion questionnaire of 160 students on the composition of emails and on a corpus of 120 emails. A didactic intervention was then designed, based on the results obtained. Subsequently, another corpus of 60 emails was selected to compare the results from before and after the intervention. The results demonstrate considerable improvement in many aspects.

Key Words: Politeness, email, student-teacher interaction, questionnaire, email corpus.

Resumen

La cortesía es un fenómeno socio-pragmático que condiciona el éxito o el fracaso de la comunicación. Por ello, este estudio pretende investigar las marcas de cortesía y descortesía en la interacción alumno-profesor en la etapa universitaria en España mediante el uso del correo electrónico como uno de los géneros discursivos de mayor uso actualmente. Los objetivos formulados son: 1) Estudiar la opinión de estudiantes universitarios sobre su preparación para redactar correos electrónicos; 2) Comparar la percepción que los sujetos participantes tienen sobre su dominio de distintos aspectos relacionados con la composición de correos electrónicos con la competencia que se aprecia en la redacción de tales textos en un corpus analizado; 3) Diseñar una intervención didáctica para enseñar a redactar correos electrónicos y llevarla a la práctica para mejorar los resultados; 4) Comparar los resultados después de la intervención didáctica. Se ha realizado un análisis estadístico descriptivo e inferencial de un cuestionario de opinión de 160 estudiantes sobre la composición de correos electrónicos y un corpus de 120 correos. Posteriormente, se diseñó una intervención didáctica en función de los resultados obtenidos. Después se seleccionó otro corpus de 60 correos para comparar los resultados antes y después de la intervención. Los resultados indican una mejora considerable en numerosos aspectos.

Palabras Clave: Cortesía, correo electrónico, interacción estudiante-profesor, cuestionario, muestra de correos electrónicos.

INTRODUCTION

Politeness is a social behaviour, governed by social rules and conventions that a sociocultural community establishes in order to prescribe expected behaviour in determined contexts. It is a mode of behaviour established to maintain social order and harmonious relations between the members of a society. Consequently, it has a social function whose final objective is the negotiation of agreement.

Within the framework of linguistics, its study belongs to pragmatics for being a linguistic strategy, and for being a socio-pragmatic phenomenon that conditions, among other things, the success or failure of communication. It is produced in a determined sociocultural context, the components of which guarantee the presence or absence of appropriateness in speech acts. It could also be defined as a form of social behaviour, governed by rules and principles, and therefore it can be considered a communication strategy. In the terms of Martín Zorraquino (1999), verbal politeness consists of the rights and obligations that arise for the interlocutors in every communicative situation. According to Leech (1983), politeness is a principle of the social regulation of interaction. Another significant feature is that politeness is a behaviour acquired in the process of socialization, brought about principally by parents and teachers. Think, for example, of the types of phrases with which a child is taught to give thanks or ask for something: 'What do you say?, How do you ask nicely?', etc.

This article offers an approach to the phenomenon of politeness and impoliteness from a theoretical basis and an essentially pragmatic perspective, with a simultaneous focus on making the study applicable to language teaching. In order to do so, email is the discourse genre chosen to discern and analyse the markers of politeness and impoliteness in student-teacher interaction in the Spanish university sphere, with the added intention of helping the students to learn to compose emails adequately.

1. Theoretical framework

1. 1. Politeness devices in verbal communicative acts

Before pointing out some of the devices of politeness in verbal communication, it should be specified that the cooperative or conversational maxims of Grice (1975) (according to his cooperative principle) are usually recognized negatively, that is, when they are not fulfilled. Speakers normally carry out conversational interchange through mutual cooperation. When one of the maxims is transgressed, the success of the conversation continues to be possible because substitutive elements come into play. Furthermore, the context enables the inferential process and conversational implicatures.

A series of devices are presented below for the expression of verbal politeness, which will be observed throughout this study (Níkleva, 2011, 2015):

1. Modalizers and lexicalized expressions: *Por favor*, *gracias* ('please, thank you').
2. Hedging expressions of illocutionary force: *Si no le importa*, *si me permite*, *en mi humilde opinion* ('if you don't mind,' 'if you'll permit me', 'in my humble opinion').
3. The use of hedging verbal tenses. For example, substituting the imperative for the conditional (*Me gustaría que lo hicieras pronto*) ('I'd like you to do it quickly') or utilizing the interrogative form (*¿Puedes traerme el manual?*) 'Can you bring me the manual?'
4. The use of impersonal sentences: *Se dice que van a despedir a mucha gente* ('They say that they're going to fire a lot of people').
5. The forms of personal address (the use of personal pronouns: Preference for the form of *usted* over the form of *tú* to express politeness). Age is one of the factors that determine initial forms of personal address in Spanish conversation, except in familial relationships in which age no longer causes asymmetric forms of address (in which one of the speakers uses the form *usted,* the other *tú*), as it did in days gone by. It must be stressed that both forms (*tú* and *usted*) can become unpleasant and impolite. Traditionally, the form of *usted* is signalled as the pronoun of politeness but, on occasion, it can indicate anger or simply a desire to demarcate distance. In recent years in Spain, one tends to think that the elderly are addressed as *usted*. This often provokes displeasure in some people who interpret that they are being considered older than they are, for which they usually protest (normally jokingly) and convert this complaint into an amusing way of demanding the address of *tú*, and thus remove tension or distance. The interlocutor who holds the dominant position is the one who

normally explicitly proposes the use of *tú*. The opposite possibility is less frequent, given that the interlocutor found in the inferior position risks receiving a negative valuation. Normally, the choice of one form or another depends on the relations of power or solidarity, and is established after a stage of exploration and negotiation between the interlocutors.

6. Lexical repetition (of the opinion already expressed by the interlocutor).
   A. *Pedro es muy agradable.* 'Pedro is very nice.'
   B. *Sí, muy agradable.* 'Yes, very nice.'

7. Diminutives: *Espera un minutito.* 'Wait a 'tiny' minute.'

8. Modesty plural: *Nos parece conveniente elaborar una propuesta de mejora* o *En este artículo estudiamos la cortesía.* ('It seems advisable to us to make a proposal for improvement *or* In this article we study politeness.').

9. Object doubling (clitic doubling), which can receive another denomination: Duplication of the complement. Perhaps this device does not become a conscious politeness device; perhaps it is not a strategy of face-flattering politeness, but one of mitigating politeness. In Spanish, the direct complement (DC) and the indirect complement (IC) enable to a varying degree the appearance, alongside the verb, of a co-referential clitic that traditionally has been considered pleonastic or redundant (Aijón Oliva, 2006).
   (*Le*) *entregué los documentos al secretario.* 'I gave (her) the documents to the secretary.'
   Esos son los niños a los que (*les*) *doy clase.* 'Those are the boys to whom I give (them) class.'
   When it comes to analysing the implications of this variable on the level of politeness, Aijón Oliva (2006) starts from the hypothesis that the typical association of the human and the salient with clitic doubling could cause a tendency in the speaker to employ this variant more often in contexts of positively face-enhancing a referent, while the absence of doubling would be associated more with the pejorative and impoliteness. The absence of IC doubling is related, in general, with the opposite values of what is referred to as politeness.

10. Euphemisms (euphemistic substitutes). These refer to a facilitating mechanism of social relationships and of expressing politeness. Examples: *Invidente* 'sightless' for *ciego* 'blind', *tercer mundo* 'third world' for *países pobres* 'poor countries'.

It should be noted that none of the devices laid out above expresses politeness by itself. The communicative situation and all its components will determine if the act is polite or not. Remember that irony, for example, consists of saying something that means the opposite. The same can be done with devices that apparently denote politeness.

Moreover, politeness devices do not have a univocal interpretation. The formal character of an expression is not associated with a unique function. For example, depending on the form, an interrogative phrase can have various functions: Request (¿*Puedes cerrar la puerta*? 'Can you close the door?'); invitation (¿*Quieres venir a comer*?

'Would you like to come for lunch?'); order (*¿Por qué no te callas?* 'Why don't you shut up?'); a suggestion (*¿Qué tal si nos vamos ya?* 'How about if we go now?'); a greeting (*¿Cómo estás?* 'How are you?'), etc. In other words, a univocal correspondence between form and function does not exist.

Other politeness strategies and devices are hedging and intensification. They are used to gain the upper hand in the interaction, to achieve conversational success.

Intensifiers are used to reinforce the positive face that the speaker has of him- or herself. They also reinforce the truth of what is expressed by the speaker, thus also giving argumentative strength and influencing the listener. These can be syntactic, morphological, lexical and phonetic devices. One uses intensification to give greater illocutionary force to statements and also to provide emotional features. This can also be used to reinforce some categories of quantity and quality. Hyperbole is a good example. Examples of quantifiers are, among others, the prefixes 'super-', 'hyper-', etc.

Hedging, meanwhile, is a conversational politeness strategy that mitigates the illocutionary force of a statement or the meaning of a word or an expression to protect the positive face of the speaker and his listener. The lexical devices of hedging (*me parece que, creo que…* 'it seems to me that, I think that…') are regulators of tact and modesty.

These two strategies –hedging and intensification– are employed to achieve two types of politeness: Positive and negative. Negative politeness (mitigating) is utilized to compensate for possible aggression toward the negative face of the interlocutor. It makes use of hedging mechanisms and strategies. Positive politeness tries to establish a positive relationship in which the need of a person to be liked is respected. It refers to face-flattering acts. For this reason, it utilizes intensifying measures.

1.2. Email as discourse genre: A new genre with specific features

Email is currently considered a new genre (Vela Delfa, 2008; Níkleva & Núñez, 2013), resulting from the intersection between textual properties of epistolary discourse and electronic discourse. Crystal (2002) considers it the third communicative modality – after oral and written– which is given the name of 'cyberspeak' or 'netspeak', and is defined by the intersection of oral and written features.

One of the more remarkable aspects regarding the communication media on the internet –synchronic communication (instant messaging or chat) or asynchronic communication (email)– is the creation of a 'netiquette' (Zapata, 2003), a neologism that refers to etiquette on the network, that is, to the rules of interaction, to the good manners of communication on the internet. Another important feature is the international character of these rules that apparently predominate over national cultural rules (Noblia, 2001, cited by Dumitrescu, 2008).

Email obviously shares traits with the traditional letter written on paper, given that these two genres belong to the epistolary discourse. The medium is different, and the tools, but even the terminology –email, mailbox, email address, sender, acknowledgement of receipt– reveals the underlying idea of its relationship with postal mail. Some icons of email interfaces, such as the envelope, also confirm this association. However, the main advantages of electronic correspondence (aside from its relative lack of cost) are the speed of process, the ability to store digitalized information, and the large capacity to transmit content by way of attached files, all aspects that bear little similarity with traditional epistolary structures.

This genre is characterized by a different communicative and textual purpose, new temporal conditions in which the interval between production and reception is reduced, in which there is a new paratextual structure, etcetera. It is an interaction that exists due to reasons of distance, but which is also immediate (temporal proximity). One of the clearest examples is here presented of the profound transformation of the conditions of linguistic enunciation that technology has entailed and that has resulted in two phenomena: Delocalization and detemporalization, in a loss of importance of the location of communication as interlocutors share neither space nor time.

As a new discourse genre, email is becoming an object of study for Linguistics research and for all the humanist and social sciences. This new genre of correspondence is part of the discursive modality of electronic discourse (which includes all the new genres brought about by the Internet, such as forums, chat rooms, social networks, etc.) and, at the same time, has specific features that mean it may be considered as an independent genre. This is a genre of autonomous correspondence that has its own rules of production and interpretation, and specific properties.

The structure and idiosyncrasy of email is learned only with the use of the medium. Contact with texts of this genre and, consequently, imitation, is the only key for now for acquiring competence. This is something that ought to be changed by including email as one of the discourse genres that is taught in schools.

In the emails that the students sent to their teachers, which are the object of this study, the use of language is governed by spontaneity and linguistic economy to the detriment of politeness, correctness and regulation. The semi-dialogic structure and the semi-simultaneity of the communicative situation create the sense that each message is a turn of intervention in a conversation. Thus some features of oral and colloquial language are intensified, such as spontaneity, principally. It is considered that the digital format of email induces the sensation that it is an unstable, transitory and ephemeral linguistic object, and this leads to neglect of spelling. The lexicon and syntax also imitate an oral interaction in which the kinesic and paralinguistic elements

are replaced by all types of substitute elements (emoticons, profuse punctuation, etc.) (Níkleva & Núñez, 2013).

Priority is given to informative progression and not to textual organization, and so a more careless cohesion is observed.

In the email language model, other textual models have an influence, such as the letter, telephone messages (Short Message System or SMS), virtual chats, etc. The reduction of words in the SMS is due to the intention of economizing space and money, while in chats it is caused by the speed of the interaction. This has created the use of a phoneticized spelling in these media. Email, while not sharing the same limitations as SMS and chats, includes the same tendency, but more moderately. However, teachers observe with concern that pupils tend to transfer the 'spelling' from SMS and social networks to any other type of writing independent of its addressee and pragmatic purpose.

Therefore, it can be seen that the email genre has its own norms of expression that combine the character of writing with the spontaneity of oral communication.

2. Objectives

The aims of this study are the following:

1) To study the opinion of a group of university students on their preparedness for the composing of emails.

2) To compare the perception that the participating subjects have about their ability in the different aspects related with email composition (appropriate use of formulas of personal address, greeting and saying goodbye; identification or introduction; choice of appropriate register; consideration of the age of the addressee; statement of subject matter; spelling correctness; etc.) with the competence that is seen in the composition of such texts in the analysed corpus.

3) To design a didactic intervention to teach how to compose emails, and to put it into practice so as to improve the results.

4) To compare the results after the didactic intervention.

3. Methodology

In this section, the methodology used in this study is described.

3. 1. Investigation instruments

Two instruments of investigation have been employed: An opinion questionnaire of 26 items about the composition of emails and two corpora of 60 emails each from

university students written between 2009 and 2012. The second corpus was selected after a didactic intervention applied in the classroom in 2012.

Regarding the reliability of the questionnaire, a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.603 has been obtained for 23 of the items (excepting questions 12, 23 and 26), which confirms the internal consistence of the questions.

3.2. Participants

The participants were 160 students from the Primary Education Degree, Faculty of Education Sciences, Granada University (Spain).

The ages of the participants range from 18 to 46 years old, with an average age of 20.87 and a mode of 19. Regarding the gender of the students, there is a considerable majority of women (62.3%) to men (37.7%).

The majority (95.6%; 153 students) do not have a previous university qualification, as opposed to 4.4% (7 students) who do have another qualification.

3.3. Data analysis

For the data analysis, the statistical program Statistical Product and Service Solutions 17 (SPSS 17) was used. A descriptive analysis of the individual variables was applied by means of inferential analysis (cross-tabulation and the chi-squared statistic). An alpha of 5% was utilized to evaluate the meaning of the contrasts. In those cases where the contrasts were significant the strength of the association was measured using Cramer's V coefficient.

4. Results of the descriptive analysis of the questionnaire

It is important to compare these results with those of corpus 1 (before the didactic intervention) and corpus 2 (after the didactic intervention) (Table 4).

Hypothesis 1 is confirmed, according to which the students considered themselves educationally prepared to compose emails.

The results of the descriptive analysis of the questionnaire are collected in Table 1:

Write only a number from 1 to 5 (1 being the minimum value, 5 the maximum) to express the degree of disagreement or agreement with each statement.
    1 = totally disagree
    2 = disagree
    3 = neither agree nor disagree (indifferent)
    4 = agree
    5 = totally agree

Table 1. The frequency and percentages of answers P1-P19 of the questionnaire.

N	QUESTIONS	1	2	3	4	5
1	You consider yourself educationally prepared to compose different types of text correctly.	0	17 10,6%	58 36,3%	76 47,5%	9 5,6%
2	You consider yourself educationally prepared to compose different types of text with cohesion and coherence	0	13 8,1%	71 44,4%	64 40,0%	12 7,5%
3	Your writings fulfil the requirements of appropriateness	1 0,6%	7 4,4%	71 44,9%	70 44,3%	9 5,7%
4	You write letters on paper very frequently	58 36,7%	54 34,2%	20 12,7%	20 12,7%	6 3,8%
5	You write emails very frequently	2 1,3%	11 6,9%	40 25%	62 38,8%	45 28,1%
6	You write in social networking sites very frequently	3 1,9%	3 1,9%	7 4,4%	32 20%	115 71,9%
7	The degree of formality, correctness and appropriateness should be the same in the different types of writing	31 19,4%	30 18,8%	41 25,6%	45 28,1%	13 8,1%
8	Your way of writing mobile text messages (sms) and in social networking sites influences all the other types of texts you write	77 48,1%	34 21,3%	21 13,1%	20 12,5%	8 5%
9	You try to take care over the correctness of the text, or not, depending on the addressee (friends, teachers, etc.)	2 1,3%	3 1,9%	10 6,3%	50 31,3%	95 59,4%
10	You overuse the language abbreviations from chats and sms when writing other types of text.	39 24,5%	28 17,6%	42 26,4%	26 16,4%	24 15,1%
11	In the emails you send to your teachers you use colloquial register.	67 41,9%	34 21,3%	31 19,4%	24 15,0%	4 2,5%
12	In the emails you send to send to your teachers you use standard register.	5 3,1%	25 15,6%	48 30%	54 33,8%	28 17,5%
13	The correctness of an email is not important	83 52,2%	38 23,9%	23 14,5%	8 5%	7 4,4%
14	What is important in an email is that its message is understood	23 14,7%	31 19,9%	43 26,9%	39 25%	20 12,8%
15	The correctness of an email sent by you to a teacher influences how he/she replies	4 2,5%	9 5,7%	35 22%	68 42,8%	43 27%
16	The age of a teacher has an influence when you compose emails	34 21,3%	28 17,5%	45 28,1%	36 22,5%	17 10,6%
17	The formality of your emails increases if the addressee is an older teacher	26 16,4%	24 15,1%	37 23,3%	42 26,4%	30 18,9%
18	The formality of your emails increases if the addressee is a teacher who remains aloof	24 15%	10 6,3%	32 20%	58 36,3%	36 22,5%
19	The subject matter influences the formality of the email	26 16,5%	16 10,1%	44 27,8%	60 38%	12 7,6%

Is the writing of emails taught in any educative stage? Among the questionnaire results one can observe that a high percentage of pupils indicate that they have not been taught to compose emails in any educative stage (43.1%, 69 students). 25.6% (41 students) specified the stage of Secondary Education, 25.6% (41 students) University and 5.6% (9 students) answered Primary Education.

The last question of the questionnaire refers to the criteria that the students have for considering that they are good at composing a particular type of writing. The

results (Table 2) show that 40.88% consider that they write well because nobody has criticised their written work.

Table 2. Students' criteria for expressing that they know how to compose a determined type of written work well (in descending order.

CRITERIA	PERCENTAGE
Knows how to write because nobody has criticised their work	40,88%
It is the opinion of their teachers	25,79%
Knows how to write because they have done it many times	12,58%
Other	10,69%
It is their opinion without being able to explain why	10,06%

The rest of the questions of the questionnaire are discussed in section 8 to compare the results with the two corpora of emails.

5. Results of the inferential analysis of the questionnaire and the corpus

The inferential analysis pointed out the dependency between variables. Some of the results are summarised in Table 3.

The students consider that the correctness of the email is not important and so use the abbreviations of chat language and SMS excessively. These have an influence on the composition of all the types of writing that they compose.

It is also observed that the formality of the emails increases, depending on whether the addressee is an older teacher or one who stays aloof from the students. This has repercussions in the presence or absence of politeness markers.

Table 3. The dependency relationship between variables of the questionnaire.

Variables	Chi-square x^2	Degree of freedom	p value chi-square test	Cramer's V	Degree of dependence
Between P10 (*You overuse the language abbreviations from chats and sms when writing other types of text*) and P13 (*The correctness of an email is not important*).	32.342	16	.009	.226	low
Between P8 (*Your way of writing mobile text messages (sms) and in social networking sites influences all the other types of texts you write*) and P10 (*You overuse the language abbreviations from chats and sms when writing other types of text*).	35.735	16	.003	.237	low
Between P17 (*The formality of your emails increases if the addressee is an older teacher*) and P18 (*The formality of your emails increases if the addressee is a teacher who remains aloof*).	142.486	16	.000	.473	medium
Between P9 (*You try to take care over the correctness of the text, or not, depending on the addressee (friends, teachers, etc.*) and P19 (*The subject matter influences the formality of the email*).	34.283	16	.005	.233	low

6. Discussion

The variables analysed in the corpus were: Presentation/identification; subject heading (presence/absence) and appropriateness of the subject heading; greeting (presence/absence) and appropriateness of the greeting; signing off and appropriateness of the signing off; appropriateness to the topic; appropriateness to the addressee; register (formal/informal); form of personal address (*tú*/*usted*); appropriateness of the user address; modalizers and lexicalized expressions (*gracias, por favor* 'thank you, please', etc.); hedged expressions of illocutionary force (*si no te importa*; *si no es mucha molestia*; *perdone las molestias*; *pido perdón* 'if you don't mind; if it's not too much bother; sorry for the bother; please excuse me'); hedging verbal tenses (*me gustaría, podría* 'I'd like; I could/might'); intensifiers (quantifiers, etc.); fallacies.

These variables were selected because appropriateness is a manifestation of politeness, since it considers the circumstances of the communicative situation: The roles of the participants, age, communicative purpose, etc. In this sense, to be appropriate means to be polite at the same time.

Some variables related to spelling and linguistic correctness in general are included in the analysis because, in our opinion, correctness is also a marker of politeness that considers the characteristics of the addressee and of the roles at play in the communicative situation.

After this first stage of the study, a didactic intervention was designed in order to teach the students to compose emails and achieve an improved pragmatic competence in which, most importantly, politeness and appropriateness are emphasized. The importance of linguistic correctness was also stressed.

The methodology consisted of discussing various emails in class with different activities that promoted reflexion and group conversation. The teacher took the role of coordinator and centred the conversation on a few aspects that needed improving. It was observed that the students themselves spotted the errors, the impoliteness, the lack of appropriateness, etc. They even laughed at the inadequate and impolite behaviour. To begin with they were not conscious of the importance of many of the criteria, but together they formulated some pragmatic and linguistic rules for the composition of emails.

Below (Table 4) are some of the data obtained from the questionnaire and from the two corpora: Corpus 1 (before the intervention) and corpus 2 (after the intervention). A considerable improvement can be observed after the didactic intervention (which confirms our hypothesis 4): The number of students who identified themselves increased (from 76.7% to 96.7%), as did those who greeted with the formula *Estimado* 'Dear' (from 13.33% to 23.3%).

It must be stressed that in the questionnaire, the students answered various questions correctly, yet this did not correspond with what they do in reality (as seen in the corpus).

Regarding the form of personal address, in the questionnaire 100% answered that they use the *usted* form. Nevertheless, in corpus 1 only 53.33% used it, and this number fell to 45% in corpus 2. It is important to note that in corpus 2 the number of students who did not greet fell from 10% to 1.7%.

As well as the greetings that have been collected in Table 4, one was found that was actually in the subject line: "*Hola, hola X* 'hello, hello X' [first name of the teacher]. *Soy XXX* 'This is XXX' [first name of the student]". The reduplication of the informal greeting aims to establish a very relaxed and, at the same time, close and friendly tone, removing distance and abolishing their roles.

The common formulas for signing off were:

> *Un saludo y gracias.* 'Regards and thanks'.
> *Un abrazo.* 'A hug' – which is equivalent to 'best wishes' or 'love', depending on the register.
> *Espero tu respuesta, gracias* 'I hope to hear from you, thanks'
> *Sin más me despido. Un saludo y quedo a la espera de su contestación.* 'Without further ado, I'll sign off. Regards and I await your reply'.
> *Espero noticias suyas pronto*!! 'I hope to hear from you soon!!'
> *Un Saludo y Muchísimas Gracias de Corazón.* 'Regards and Many Heartfelt Thanks.'
> *Muchas Gracias.* 'Many Thanks.'
> *Muchas gracias de antemano Un saludo.* 'Many thanks in advance. Regards.'
> *Muchísimas gracias por adelantado. Le envío un cordial saludo.* 'Very many thanks in advance. I send you kind regards'.
> *Muchas gracias, por todo. Perdone las molestias.* 'Many thanks, for everything. Sorry for the bother.'
> *Nos vemos el viernes. Un saludo*! 'See you on Friday. Regards!'
> *Atentamente.* 'Yours sincerely.' (Used only twice in corpus 1 and 4 times in corpus 2).
> *Le mando desde Burdeos un gran besito. Espero tener respuesta pronto. Muchas gracias.* 'A big 'little' kiss from Bordeaux. I hope to get a reply soon. Many thanks.'

In the last example, the contradiction between the adjective *gran* [big] and the diminutive *besito* 'little kiss' is noteworthy. The combination between the two words, due to their semantics and the formal features of the diminutive, results in incoherence.

In corpus 2 an improvement was also observed in the use of the 'subject' heading, signing off, in the appropriateness to the topic and addressee. The use of formal register increases, and therefore the signs of politeness too. The 'subject' heading is

the space given for formulating the topic or subject matter of the message. It is a short phrase that sums up the contents of the text and, therefore, allows the formulation of a hypothesis concerning the relevance and interest of the message. In this way it determines the decision regarding its reading or, on the contrary, its deletion. Consequently it is a question of politeness to provide this information for the addressee. In professional emails the 'subject' is characterized by a greater obligatory nature that is explained with the highest degree of formality in the interaction and with the necessity of contextualizing the message. Moreover, it is impolite to try to impose upon the teacher the obligation of reading it with urgency without the students identifying themselves (in the case of the user address not being identifiable).

Another variable included in the corpus analysis is the user address. It is convenient to choose an address that is informative about the sender. In the professional world the use of institutional email is recommended. However, very few students make use of it and, furthermore, the majority have an email address that does not identify them (despite the fact that normally they introduce themselves in the message body). It is inappropriate and impolite to use an email address like *elmasguay@* [thecoolest@], *lacabraloca@* [crazy@] o *lamassexy@* [thesexiest@] in correspondence with teachers. It shows a lack of appropriateness and politeness. The data obtained reveal that 83.1% of the emails in corpus 1 have an 'unsatisfactory' address that does not identify the user. Only 8.5% use an appropriate address that identifies them or that is institutional. In corpus 2 the appropriateness of the user address has improved from 8.5% to 21.7%.

Another example of impoliteness and lack of appropriateness in correspondence with a teacher is the use of smile emoticons or substitute-laughter verbal expressions like *jeje* ['haha']. In corpus 1 the following email was found, about which it is important to clarify that the student and the teacher have not yet met:

> *"Muchísimas Gracias por la Rápida respuesta a mi mensaje!!! jeje Por último, me gustaría saber cuando será el examen o si va a haber varias posibilidades, el tipo del mismo (o solamente lo que me ha puesto de los textos) y poco más jeje creo que ha resuelto claramente mis dudas!! pero me faltaría eso por saber...*
>
> *Un Saludo y Muchísimas Gracias de Corazón."*
>
> 'Many Thanks for the Quick reply to my message!!! haha Lastly, I'd like to know when the exam will be and if there are going to be various possibilities, its type (or only what you have told me about the texts) and not much more haha i [sic] think you have clearly resolved my doubts!! but I still need to know this…
>
> Regards and Many Heartfelt Thanks'.

It must be highlighted that after the didactic intervention the use of emoticons and paralinguistic substitutes of the type 'haha' disappear in corpus 2.

It is important to emphasize that a marker of politeness is not only the use of formal register but also spelling, punctuation, the good use of upper- and lower-case letters, etc., whose degree of obligation varies depending firstly on the addressee and then on the roles between the participants of the communication. These features are not only examples of correctness but also of politeness. Since, regrettably, it seems very difficult to manage to get the students always to write well, one ought at least to insist on them knowing how to differentiate between different communication situations and all the rules that derive from their components and from the relationship between them. One can allow that they relax more with their friends and are careless with spelling, use many abbreviations and smile emoticons, but they should know how to use formal register and apply the rules of correctness according to the addressee (age, roles, etc.) and the communicative purpose.

Some students who use informal register sometimes insert phrases from another language, such as *tipical spanish* [sic], criticizing the lack of punctuality of some teachers, but neglecting correctness both in Spanish and in English.

Regarding the results of corpus 2, it can be concluded that the students have also managed to improve their spelling and linguistic correctness in general, in all aspects. Table 4 shows the mode values, the mean and the minimum and maximum number of errors in an email.

Table 4. Results of the descriptive analysis of the questionnaire and the two corpora.

VARIABLES		RESULTS		
		QUESTIONNAIRE	CORPUS 1	CORPUS 2
identifying oneself	yes	97,5%	76,7%	96,7%
	no	2,5%	23,3%	3,3%
greeting	*Hola* [Hello]	23,3%	53,33%	45%
	Buenos días [Good morning]		18,33%	25,3%
	Buenas [Morning]	another greeting	5%	1,7%
	No greeting		10%	1,7%
	Estimado [Dear]	55,3%	13,33%	23,3%
signing off	bad		8,5%	1,7%
	satisfactory		40,7%	39%
	good		50,8%	59,3
form of personal address	*usted*	100%	84,5%	87,9%
	tú	0%	15,5%	12,1%
subject	yes	100%	95%	98,3%
	no	0%	5%	1,7%
appropriateness of the subject heading	bad		24,6%	8,3%
	satisfactory		12,3%	23,3%
	good		63,2%	68,3%
appropriateness to the topic	bad		30%	11,7%
	satisfactory		18,3%	31,7%

	good		51,7%	56,7%
appropriateness to the addressee	bad		26,7%	20%
	satisfactory		28,3%	30%
	good		45%	50%
register	formal	51,3%	72,9%	79,7%
	informal	17,5%	27,1%	20,3%
user address	bad		8,4%	1,7%
	satisfactory		83,1%	76,7%
	good		8,5%	21,7%
number of words	mode		88	87
	mean		91,32	86,18
	min. – max.		18 - 330	1 – 261
number of spelling errors	mode		0	0
	mean		0,54	0,57
	min. – max.		0 - 5	0 - 4
number of punctuation errors	mode		5	1
	mean		4,54	3,03
	min. – max.		0 – 19	0 - 14
n° of upper- or lower-case errors	mode		1	1
	mean		2,53	1,68
	min. – max.		0 - 10	0 - 8
number of accentuation errors	mode		0	0
	mean		1,83	1,68
	min. – max.		0 - 18	0 - 14
number of morphological errors	mode		0	0
	mean		0,32	0,31
	min. – max.		0 - 2	0 - 2
por favor [please]	mode		0	0
	mean		0,29	0,47
	min. – max.		0 - 3	0 - 3
gracias [thank you]	mode		1	1
	mean		0,69	0,73
	min. – max.		0 - 2	0 - 2
hedged expressions of illocutionary force	mode		0	0
	mean		0,58	0,77
	min. – max.		0 - 6	0 - 6
hedging verbal tenses	mode		0	0
	mean		0,47	0,67
	min. – max.		0 - 3	0 - 3
fallacies	0 per email		74,6%	80%
	1 per email		18,6%	16,7%
	2 per email		5,1%	3,3%
	3 per email		1,7%	0%

Another of the analysis variables was the use of modalizers and lexicalized expressions such as *por favor* 'please' and *gracias* 'thank you'. It is confirmed that Spanish presents a lower frequency of their usage in comparison with English, for example. In the great majority of the emails the students ask for something: Information, favours, etc. Nonetheless, a high frequency in the use of *por favor* and *gracias* was not observed. It was observed that in corpus 1, in 79.7% of the emails, the expression *por favor* was not used even once. The word *gracias* normally appears in the signing off formulas, but even so in 39% of emails (corpus 1) it is not used once. It is

fitting to add that the use of quantifiers occurs again with much frequency in the signing off: *Muchísimas gracias* 'very many thanks', *mil gracias* 'a thousand thank yous', etc.

The use of formal register in the correspondence between students and teachers is a marker of politeness as well. In corpus 1, 72.9% of the emails have used formal register compared to 27.1% informal. Nevertheless, in the emails with formal register the informal greeting *hola* 'hello' predominates (53.3%) over 13.3% that use a formal greeting and 10% that have no greeting. The formal greeting in Spanish is *Estimado* o *Estimada* 'Dear', followed by a colon, not a comma. In corpus 1 it was used correctly in only 5 emails (out of 60). In 3 emails it was used with a comma.

In one email the diminutive of teacher was used, which is inappropriate and impolite, since the student and teacher barely know each other; moreover, the interaction roles do not allow this form of address, nor had it been permitted.

To the three factors that determine politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987) – power, social distance and cultural context– the emotional relationship between the interlocutors must be added (Kienpointner, 2008). Kienpointner establishes a relation between politeness and emotional arguments. The strategies of (im)politeness are often used to "create or modify more or less pleasant emotions during the interaction" (Kienpointner, 2008: 27).

It was decided to include in the analysis one of these emotional arguments – fallacies– that has decreased in corpus 2: False reasoning or arguments. Following the classification of Copi (1969), only those that predominate in the student emails have been collected, which are fallacies that appeal to psychological and affective means. Among them, the most frequent in the analysed emails is of the *argumentum ad misericordiam* type –those that are used to provoke pity in the other person. For example: "¡*Profesora, no me suspenda*! *Mi padre no me va a pagar más los estudios, si no apruebo*". ('Don't fail me, professor! My father won't pay for my studies anymore if I don't pass.').

Another group of fallacies that has been found in the student emails is of those based on pseudo-reasoning: False cause, accident, etc.

Cultural differences that determine different behaviour and strategies must be considered. In other words, (im)polite strategies to create emotions are different in different languages and cultures.

In some languages and cultures priority to the independence of the individual is given, and this brings about mutual distancing, as in Anglo-American, Dutch or Swedish culture, while in other cultures affiliation or closeness and group solidarity are

more important, as in Spanish peninsular, Turkish, Chinese, and Japanese culture (Bravo & Briz, 2004; Briz, 2004; Haverkate, 2004).

For example, regarding the rank of imposition, Kienpointner (2008: 26): states "the fear of intrusion in English culture or the desire for affiliation in Spanish culture". Thus emotions become a communicative purpose.

> "The emotions (positive or negative) have a dialectic relationship with (im)politeness: On the one hand, certain emotions are the effect of (im)polite communicative acts; on the other, emotions can cause these same acts" (Kienpointner, 2008: 27).

Following this line, fallacies have been included in the analysis, because they are a type of argumentation and therefore, as a strategy, the same as politeness.

A dependency relationship has been established between the use of *por favor* 'please' and fallacies, because in the analysed emails the most used fallacy is the *argumentum ad misericordiam* type and therefore is usually used to try to provoke the teacher's pity and request a favour, normally related to marks. This causes an increased use of *por favor*. However, its use in cases of requesting information is minimal. The students do not always give thanks for the information they request and receive. Neither do they apologise when asking for information that has already been given in the class or that is available on a virtual platform of the course and is available to everyone. They are not conscious of how much work is required for a teacher to have to reply individually about issues already dealt with in class and/or available online. It is, therefore, the author's opinion that to educate the students on how to choose when to send the teacher an email would be an act of politeness and respect.

Below are a few examples of fallacies in the analysed emails:

> *"Sólo le pido que se ponga en mi lugar, voy a perder la plaza de profesor en un colegio con lo que eso cuesta conseguirlo y todo porque tuve un mal día a la hora de hacer la parte práctica su examen* [sic]…"

> "I only ask that you put yourself in my shoes, I'm going to lose my position as a teacher in a school, after all the trouble it takes to get one, and all because I had a bad day at the time of doing the practical part your exam [sic]…".

> *"En serio X* [Profesora]*, no soy alumno de rogar ni suplicar pero es que necesito el aprobado, no creo que me vuelva a salir la oportunidad de poder trabajar como profesor sin tener que hacer las oposiciones y si no me cree en que solo me queda su asignatura le puedo enviar una copia de mi expediente. […] Perdóneme por la insistencia pero es que este suspenso trastoca todo por lo que he estado trabajando durante el curso académico además de mi futuro como docente".*

> "Seriously, X [Teacher], I am not the type of student to beg but I really need to pass, I don't think I'll get another opportunity to able to work as

a teacher without having to do the public exams and if you don't believe that I only have your subject left to pass I can send you a copy of my file. […] Forgive me for insisting but this failure ruins everything that I have been studying for during the academic course as well as my future as a teacher".

"Me gustaría pues que me ayudase para conseguir aprobar la asignatura por fin, ya que es mi último año en la facultad y debido a la situación económica que vivimos no puedo permitirme seguir ningún año más aquí.. además de que ya tenía que haber finalizado la carrera. Ruego pues que me ayude lo máximo posible para poder dar por finalizado este tema".

*'*So I'd like you to help me to finally pass the subject, given that this is my last year in the faculty and due to the current economic situation I can't afford to carry on another year here… and also I should have finished my degree already. I implore you to help me as much as possible to finish this subject*".*

Politeness is not an automatic result of certain formulas. Let us look at the subject of a student who sent three messages. In the first two she requests information that she is refused, but she is told where she can look it up, given that there is a virtual platform online that is used for the subject, as well as having been provided in class. It is also suggested to her to go to a tutorial. The student does not attend classes even though they are compulsory, nor is she able to go to a tutorial. Her reaction to the teacher's reply is to be upset at not receiving what she asked for and how she asked for it, so that in her last message she uses the formal greeting with the correct punctuation, but the entire message is ironic. Thus she utilizes another type of fallacy: *Ad hominem* (false reasoning used to attack the interlocutor or opponent). In the first sentence of the email there is this ironic *ad hominem* attack: *Gracias por su comprensiva respuesta* 'Thank you for your understanding reply.' Furthermore, she goes on to describe the teacher as inflexible and lacking understanding:

"He leido [sic] *que para hacer compatible tabajo* [sic] *y estudios en esta universidad, también depende de la flexibilidad y comprensión que el profesorado estime dar al alumno o alumna en cuestión, por eso yo buenamente pensaba que usted me podía responder a esas pequeñas dudas que tenía."*

"I have read [original missing accent] that to make wok [sic] and studies compatible in this university also depends on the flexibility and understanding that teachers deem to give the student in question, so I honestly thought that you could reply to these small questions that I had".

The student tries to reinforce her positive face with the use of the qualifying adverb *buenamente* [honestly] and with the quantifier *pequeñas* [small], while the intention regarding the face of the teacher is exactly the opposite: She accuses her of inflexibility and lack of understanding. Moreover, in the rest of the message she

reflects on what one earns, on the prices of university teaching, on "*los precios que suben como la espuma a diferencia del sueldo del trabajador*" 'the prices that soar, unlike the pay of the worker.'

If a favour is asked and this request is refused, one must know how to accept it and, depending on the communicative situation, know how to maintain polite style. It is a question not only of politeness but also of education, without which one tries not to request but to impose and demand. One must know when and with whom this can be done.

Insistence on being granted a favour is by itself impolite, as in the case of these other emails:

> "*Necesito que me diga mi nota en la mayor brevedad posible*". "I need you to tell me my mark as soon as possible".

> "*Necesito acabar ya*". "I need to finish now". (Referring to finishing and passing the academic course).

> "*Espero que me pueda ayudar con la mayor brevedad posible*". "I hope you can help me as quickly as possible".

In some emails the use of the *captatio benevolentiae* strategy is observed, normally in the days approaching the exam. An example would be:

> "*Estoy haciendo todo lo que está en mis manos para poder sacar la asignatura hacia delante con el estudio intensivo…*"

> "I am doing all that I can to be able to pass the subject, with intensive studying…".

On other occasions, face-flattering polite expressions are emphasised:

> "*Me ha gustado mucho el trato que usted nos ha dado y lo interesante de cómo impartía las clases. Nos ha motivado mucho. Enhorabuena y espero que siga así. ¡Gracias!*".

> "I have really liked how you have treated us and how interesting your way of teaching has been. You have really motivated us. Congratulations and I hope it continues. Thank you!".

Among hedging strategies, the students introduce apologies for not accenting words when they send email from a mobile telephone or for possible spelling mistakes due to their state of mind, as in this message where a student informs that she cannot take the exam the next day because of the death of a family member:

> "*Perdone si no me expreso muy bien, pero las circunstancias me lo impiden.*"

> "Forgive me if I am not expressing myself well, but the circumstances make it difficult for me".

"…*me gustaría tener una breve tutoría con usted si es posible* […] *Si es posible le rogaría me constestase* [sic] *citándome cuando usted desee.*"

"…I would like to have a short tutorial with you if possible […] If it is possible could you please replys [sic] making the appointment whenever you'd like".

To conclude the discussion of the results, it is worth highlighting that during the analysis of the data obtained it was noteworthy how the students filled out the questionnaire, answering what they believe is considered to be correct, and not what they think or do. Their questionnaire responses have been contrasted with the email corpus, where the record shows what they do in reality. They know that in theory they should identify themselves, state the subject or topic of the message, greet and sign off respectfully, use the form of personal address *usted*, utilize standard register in the emails they send to their teachers, consider the variable age of the addressee and the interaction roles, take care over correctness, etc. The reality is far removed. Errors of spelling, accenting, punctuation, morphology, etc. abound. The erroneous usage of upper- and lower-case letters is very worrying. Many students do not separate sentences, and they write the whole message without a break, which makes comprehension difficult.

For all of these reasons, it is shown that the students do not use email appropriately, do not know the requirements for a good composition or for appropriate behaviour in their interaction with teachers using email as a medium of communication.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the fact that university students are considered to be qualified to compose different text types, the markers of politeness in their emails –as part of their discourse and pragmalinguistic competence – do not meet the adequacy required for the teacher-student relationship type.

The teacher-student relationship is a social relationship, in which a role difference exists that creates rights and obligations which require the use of formal or standard register, without neglecting the markers of politeness and correctness of expression. The message should be appropriate for the subject, appropriate for the addressee and appropriate for the communicative situation. All these aspects form part of politeness and affect the efficacy of the communication.

A pragmatic competence is required for the composition of emails. The codification and decodification of an email form part of a polyphonic phenomenon that demands a collaborative (shared) and negotiated interpretation in which the sender and receiver are jointly responsible for the success or failure of the interaction.

It can be concluded that politeness acts as an indication of the appropriateness of linguistic and social behaviour, and from the pragmalinguistic point of view contributes to the success or failure of the communicative interaction. It is a principle of the social regulation of interactions. Moreover, the illocutionary force (the intentional value) underlies the whole message and one must know the rules both to encode and decode it.

The didactic intervention, as an essential part of this investigation, has improved the results in many aspects: The number of students who identify themselves and greet in a polite form has increased; the usage of the subject heading and of signing off has improved; the appropriateness to topic and addressee has improved, as has the appropriateness of user addresses; the use of emoticons and paralinguistic substitutes has disappeared; and spelling and linguistic correctness in general has also improved, although to a lesser extent. All this permits us to state that the email as discourse genre should be taught at several educational stages. Hence teachers will update the types of text and genres that they teach, corresponding to current demand, according to which email is a new discourse genre (Vela Delfa, 2008; Níkleva & Núñez, 2013).

This will bring about improved competence for the students who, at the same time, will respond with greater interest and motivation, since email forms a part of their daily life.

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