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Politeness in an Educational Context

Areej Albawardi

Albandari Alqahtani

Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University,
Dammam 34212, Saudi Arabia

Abstract

Human daily social interaction is anchored in interpersonal discourse, and linguistic politeness is thus vital to our everyday language including face-to-face and computer-mediated communication. Politeness conventions in emails are not being taught to students and seem to be a work-in-progress. In a power-asymmetrical context such as student-teacher interaction, requests are pragmatically demanding, complex, and inherently face-threatening acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Little research has been conducted on face-saving and politeness in requests produced by a sufficient number of participants. This paper attempts to investigate requestive emails written in English by Saudi students directed to instructors belonging to the same Saudi academic institution. The study attempts to examine how English language female students employ linguistic politeness in composing their requestive emails. In more detail, it aims to examine English language students' use of email openings and closings and uncover the different devices employed in both, including address term's presence/absence and formality/informality. Results show that most students (97%) in the current data opt for including an opening pre-request, while only 72.5% of their emails include a closing.

1. Introduction

Younger generations, or what Crystal (2006, p. 6) names "digital citizens," are driven by technology and its changing means of communication. One of these means, which are used on a regular basis in a formal or informal context, is email. Young Arabs are among other students who use email for schoolwork. In their study, Shen and Shakir (2012) reveals that email usage was the second top online activity used for communication or asking for information. In a more recent study conducted on IAU female students, Albawardi (2017) found that, unlike the use of other digital entertaining modes of communication, young female English students use emails less often, only for exchanging schoolwork and to ask for information from their instructors. Hence, it can be seen that email use in college is a primary means of communication between students and their instructors. This paper is concerned with the openings and closings of this means of communication.

Email communication falls under the category of Out-of-Class Communication (OCC), which is defined by Martin and Myer (2006) as an informal campus meeting, office hour visits, pre- or post-classroom conversations between instructor and student. The definition was recently updated by

Stephens, Houser, and Cowan (2009) who adds technology as another form of OCC. This kind of communication mostly revolves around academic topics and course-related information (Alamri, 2016; Albwardi, 2017).

This interaction has become routine for various academic purposes, such as submitting assignments, requesting information or extensions, excuses from attendance, and/or informing of potential absences. Thus, this paper aims to shed the light on how Imam Adulrahman Bin Faisal University (IAU) English Language students address their instructors (who by virtue of their status have social power) and close their requestive emails.

1.1 Email Communication in the Academic Context

The student-instructor relationship is important and can have various positive effects on students (Warschauer, 1996; Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth, 2002; Hassini, 2006; Alamri, 2016). Hinkle (2002) describes the email as "increasingly becoming the preferred means of communication between students and faculty" (p. 27). Email allows students greater access to instructors. It is also an important contemporary classroom issue (Hassini, 2006; Martin & Myer, 2006).

Email texts should be polite to facilitate interaction. Politeness is meant to reduce the likelihood of conflict and prevent pragmatic failure (Lakoff, 1975; Leech, 2014). However, email lacks paralinguistic cues present in face-to-face or synchronous communication (e.g., chatting). In addition, the email sender needs to exercise more caution in constructing appropriate messages, especially in an asymmetric power situation such as student-instructor communication (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007); and where the message includes a request that is typically and inherently a face-threatening act (FTA) (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Pragmatic competence, awareness of politeness conventions, and understanding email etiquette help build effective communication with instructors (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Students may need more time to plan and compose emails in which various FTAs may be performed. Furthermore, they have to make sociopragmatic choices regarding forms of address, degree of formality and directness, closings, amount of mitigation strategies, and types of modification strategies (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011).

Emails have reduced face-to-face office meetings between students and instructors; they are so-called "cyber consultations" (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006, p. 81). However, they lack synchronicity which produces a monologue style that creates a unidirectional stream message; this might put pressure on email senders when formulating a requestive message to an authority such as an instructor.

Thus, students face difficulties in writing requestive emails since guidelines on appropriate language and writing style are limited, or students are just not acquainted with them. Another problem is the aforementioned absent paralinguistic cues, which might hinder an instructor's acceptance of the request or deem it impolite. Instructors usually complain about students, both native speakers (NSs) and non-native speakers (NNSs) of English, about sending inconsiderate requests, impolite style, informal salutations, too much informality, inaccurate grammar, and insufficient explanations of abbreviations (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2016). Hence, in a text-based medium such as emails, students find it challenging to navigate politeness in requests directed to instructors, particularly in a Saudi academic context.

1.2 Social Power-Distance in Student-instructor Interaction, Saudi Academic Context

University instructors are in a position of formal authority stemming from their institutional affiliation and professional competence. Polite, deferential behavior is expected. In his discussion of power and discourse, Fairclough (1989, p. 66) holds that politeness stems from a formality based on the recognition of differences in power and degree of social distance. From a sociological perspective, Holmes and Stubbe (2003) believe that power is a relative concept entailing both the ability to control others and the ability to accomplish one's goals; this is manifested in the degree to which one person/group can impose their plans/evaluations at the expense of others. This kind of power clearly

is not possessed by students. Thus, when requests are targeted towards someone with greater authority, "politeness considerations typically weigh more heavily" on the sender (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003, p. 44). Requestive email messages, therefore, are expected to feature greater formality and less directness.

Saudi culture can be identified as one of high-power distance if we consider Hofstede's cultural dimension theory (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). Power-distance can be defined as "the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like family and school) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally" (Hofstede ibid, p. 61). Bjerke and Al-Meer (1993) report, using Hofstede's (1984) earlier cultural dimension theory that Saudi culture scored high on power-distance. Their study targeted businesses management culture not academia. However, it reflected the power-social distance that exists between superiors and subordinates in Saudi Arabia, where accepting authority is a feature of Islamic society (Bjerke & Al-Meer, 1993).

High power-distance cultures entail collectivism, including that of the educational sector. Hofstede et al. (2010) describe the educational process in high power-distance countries as teacher-centered where students treat teachers with respect because the quality of learning depends on the excellence of teachers. Students are dependent on teachers, and teachers do not expect to be publicly contradicted or criticized. Low power-distance educational systems, however, encourage teacher-student equality, teaching is student-centered, critical discussion expected.

Social relationships in the former culture are hierarchical. In consequence, it could be argued that this high social power-distance would be manifested in email discourse. When students formulate a request to an instructor, they should employ deferential address terms in email openings and proper email closings. In a recent study of female students in a higher education sector, Alamri (2016) emphasizes that power and social distance are an inherited constituent of Saudi culture and are reflected in the students-instructor relationship; i.e., the instructor with a higher status and knowledge.

Analyzing the politeness of requestive emails sent by Saudi students to instructors can indicate how this social power-index is manifested. Studying the notion of politeness is valuable because "in studying politeness, we are automatically studying social interaction and the appropriateness of certain modes of behavior in accordance with socio-cultural conventions" (Watts, Ide & Ehlich, 1992, p. 6). The following section introduces some definitions of politeness and requests.

Politeness is largely but not exclusively linguistic behavior (Lakoff & Ide, 2005; Park, 2008). Its definition involves behavior meant to reduce or avoid interpersonal friction (Lakoff, 1975; Leech, 2014). Face, a main constituent of politeness, according to Brown and Levinson (1987), has a dualistic nature. There is 'positive face', representing the positive consistent personality people suppose themselves to be, their desire to be approved, liked, and admired by others. A speaker (S) can satisfy a hearer's (H) positive face by communicating solidarity with that aspect of the hearer's self-image. On the other hand, 'negative face' is the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, and rights to non-distraction (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 61). Attempting to save H's negative face is done by the avoidance or minimization of imposition and "is communicated by speaker self-effacement, formality, restraint, and the use of conventionalized indirectness" (Lakoff & Ide, 2005, p. 131).

Performing such an act is highly complex for various reasons. Thus, the production of requests calls for a great deal of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence in any language. Leech (2014) defines pragmalinguistics as the study of language use and its meaning to speakers and hearers while sociopragmatics is the study of "the various scales of value that make a particular degree of politeness seem appropriate or normal in a given social setting" (p. 14). According to Leech (2014), pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics are two facets of pragmatics and politeness: they have to be studied in terms of how "the pragmalinguistic resources of a language enable cultural values to be expressed" (p. 15). English Language students in IAU may have a good grasp of the rules of language but find employing this language in a social setting challenging.

Brown and Levinson (1987) assume that a speaker has a cognitive assessment ability and can formulate polite utterances addressing both H's positive and negative faces. Accordingly, it seems

that students have the same assessment, whatever the language used, to formulate their requests while maintaining politeness, especially the negative politeness typical of an academic context. They must protect H's (instructor) personal territory from potentially distressing interpersonal contact. This means that students will benefit from smooth, mitigated requests, which will most probably be granted. In order to facilitate instructor-student communication, this study aims at examining naturalistic data to highlight politeness strategies used by students in academic context.

2. Methodology

This paper investigates emails sent by Saudi undergraduate female students, majoring in the English language at IAU in Dammam, Saudi Arabia, to their instructors. It was important to analyze requestive email data based on a homogeneous set of subjects who produce requests that largely come from one institution, one academic major, and directed to the same instructors from a specific department (note that all the instructors are non-native speakers of English). This method has two benefits, namely, it avoids the observer paradox, and it represents naturally occurring data.

Two hundred requestive email messages written in English addressed to eighteen instructors for 13 months (since the beginning of December 2018) were collected. Table 1 below presents the number of requestive email recipients, i.e., the instructors. It also included the number of email senders, i.e., students, and the total number of the collected email data that was utilized for analysis.

Table 1: Demographic Information of the Sample

Number of requestive email recipients (instructors)	Number of requestive email senders (students)	Total number of requestive email messages
18	137	200

The sample was selected randomly; however, some considerations were taken into consideration in order to minimize the extraneous variables that might negatively affect the data. These considerations revolved around controlling the sample for the paper including covering the students' various academic levels in the program, the start of learning English at school, the amount of time spent in an English-speaking country, the relative similarity in terms of the level of English language proficiency, and the age of participants, which ranged from 19 to 27. These considerations minimized the number of emails from 250 to 200 emails as explained in Table 1.

Gender, culture, and context as social factors affect the use of requests. The students are female Saudi Arabic native speakers, some of whom have studied English since 4th grade while some have studied English since kindergarten, while their language skills range from intermediate to advanced.

3. Analysis and Discussion

Before analyzing the data, cleaning it was an important step. Two hundred fifty emails were received while only two hundred were good enough to be used for this study. All of the requestive emails are completely written in English.

Regarding coding, multiple excel sheets were generated to code the segments of the requestive emails. The first sheet contains the raw data, and the other sheets were designed to tabulate the occurrence and non-occurrence of the investigated devices in each requestive email, particularly openings and closings in respect of the present paper. All requests were coded according to their level and strategies of directness and not their weight of imposition.

For request modification, opening and closing devices, table columns for each device and modifier were established; and if the email had a certain modifier or an opening device, '1' would indicate its presence while '0' would indicate its absence.

The study employs descriptive analysis where results are normalized as a percentage of all of the

requestive emails that were sent by the participants to their instructors. Descriptive analysis provides statistics that specifically measure the frequency of each requestive email device.

3.1 Analytical Frameworks

The theoretical framework for this study is largely based on the CCSARP (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984), and politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The CCSARP has been used in cross-cultural studies (e.g., Blum-Kulka & Oshtain, 1984; Bunker, 2014; Davis & Hamida, 2017). However, it is also utilized in particular language and culture studies (e.g., Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011; Chejnová, 2014; Hariri, 2017) similarly to the current paper.

Emails were analyzed in terms of openings and closings along with their devices; these devices were suggested in previous research on students' requestive email politeness (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011; Chejnová, 2014). Address terms, which are classified under email openings, were analyzed following Economidou-Kogetsidis's (2011) frame. They included the presence or absence of the term of deference 'dear,' the inclusion of a greeting in the title (e.g., Hi, Hello), the formality/informality in the use of incorrect titles instead of academic titles (e.g., 'Mr.' Mrs.'/'Miss' instead of 'Dr.'). However, due to the Saudi Arabic context, instructors are addressed by their first names 'FN' not their last names 'LN'. Zero forms of address (i.e., emails without a greeting, and/or the instructor's title or name) are also identified. The main email opening and closing devices are:

- Greetings + address terms.
- Self-introduction
- Phatic element
- Apology
- Orientation move
- Thanking

Finally, the current study also attempts to examine these abovementioned devices, in the email's openings & closings, in the light of some on-record positive and negative politeness strategies. The politeness strategies are based on Brown and Levinson (1987) politeness theory and are defined below.

3.1.1 Openings and Closings

An email opening can be any linguistic device, such as a person's name and/or greeting term to initiate the email message, and closing words used to sign off, goodbye formulas, or phatic phrases (e.g., Have a great weekend). Although it is considered an optional move in emails (Crystal, 2006), the majority of English requestive emails sent by IAU English language students to instructors started off with an opening and ended with a closing indicating both positive and negative politeness.

Regarding email openings, the data under investigation shows that the students tended to start their requestive email message with an opening rather than to start baldly. Each email was analyzed in terms of the use of opening, as presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Number of Emails with and without Openings in the Email Data

Device	Number	%
Opening	194	97
No opening	6	3

Table 2 above demonstrates that among the two hundred emails that were collected for the purpose of this study, 97% contain openings and only in six emails, i.e., 3%, students started their requests baldly with no openings.

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An email opening is also analyzed based on the different device forms of openings. An email opening was particularly analyzed for whether it had a term of endearment, namely 'dear,' a 'greeting,' 'terms of address' (correct or incorrect academic titles), 'Arabish or Arabic socioreligious greeting,' and/or 'instructor's FN LN.' The frequencies of such device forms along their combinations are displayed in Table 3 below.

The following table addresses the discovery of the different devices employed in both, including address term's presence/absence formality/informality in IAU English language students' emails.

Table 3: Opening Devices: Greetings and Address Terms

Type of openings	Structure	Number	%
Greeting (e.g. hi/hello/timely greeting)	Hi/Hello + incorrect academic title + FN (Hi. Miss Norah)	46/200	23
	Hi/Hello + academic title + FN (Hi Dr. Norah)	46/200	23
	Hi/Hello/timely greeting + academic title +LN (Hi Dr. Alsad)	1/200	0.5
	Hi/Hello/timely greeting + academic title alone (Hello doctor)	29/200	14.5
	Hi/Hello/timely greeting + incorrect academic title alone (good evening ms)	9/200	4.5
	Omission of greeting	13/200	6.5
	Greeting alone, e.g. Good evening	26/200	13
Academic title+ FN alone	e.g. Dr. Sara	4/200	2
Incorrect academic title+ FN alone	e.g. Ms. Nadiah	1/200	0.5
Arabish socioreligious greeting. e.g. Alslam ulykum	Alone	1/200	3.5
	with academic title+ FN	3/200	
	With incorrect academic title+ FN	3/200	
Arabic socioreligious greeting	e.g. السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته	3/200	1.5
Use of 'dear'	Dear + academic title+ LN (Dear Dr. Alsad)	0/200	0
	Dear + academic title+ FN (Dear Dr. Ahmad)	8/200	4
	Dear + incorrect academic title + FN (Dear Miss Norah)	1/200	0.5
	Dear+ academic title alone (dear teacher)	1/200	0.5
Greeting+ dear+ academic title+ FN	Hello dear Dr. Nadia	5/200	2.5

Notes: FN refers to instructors' first name and LN to their last names.

Table 3 above reveals different variations in the forms of email openings. The forms ranged from polite formal formulas including a 'greeting', addressing the instructor by his/her 'academic title' and 'FN' to a simple 'greeting' with the majority of students adopting the form of 'Hi/Hello + academic/incorrect title + FN' (e.g. Hi Dr. Norah; e.g., good evening Ms. Norah). The most common opening form was the combination of a 'greeting,' the 'address academic or incorrect academic term,' and the instructor's 'FN': 'Hi/Hello/timely greeting with academic title + FN' (e.g., Hello Dr. FN), which occurred 46 times (23%), and 'Hi/Hello/timely greeting+ incorrect academic title + FN' (e.g., Good evening Miss FN), which also occurred 46 times (23%). Both forms appeared similar and statically equal; the difference was that some students coupled their greeting with addressing the instructor with a more deferential professional term (doctor/teacher) while others preferred addressing them by an informal term (Ms/Miss).

A rare form of opening found in the data was the use of 'Hi/hello/timely greeting+ academic title +LN,' which occurred once in the data (0.5%). The student addressed her male instructor employing 'Hello Dr. LN,' structure which is a grammatically accepted English form of address but not existent in the Arabic/Saudi context. Due to the Ismalic culture, this shows that students are aware of the gender barrier that exists and consciously select a more formal way to address their male instructors. On the other hand, students might intentionally address female instructors less formally due to their gender.

The results further revealed other forms of openings by which students preface their requestive email messages without directly addressing the instructor's 'FN.' Thus, twenty-nine (14.5%) email messages were prefaced by greeting the instructor, then addressing her/him with their 'academic title' alone (e.g., Hello doctor). By contrast, only nine (4.5%) emails were prefaced by a 'greeting,' and the instructor's 'incorrect academic title' alone (e.g., Good evening ms).

There were other less frequently used opening forms found in the data. Few students prefaced their email messages with the 'academic title' coupled with the instructor's FN. Four emails messages (2%) started with the form 'academic title+ FN alone' (e.g., Dr. Sara) and one instance (0.5%) of the form the 'incorrect academic title+ FN alone' (e.g., Ms. Nadiah). Both email openings were found alone with no positive politeness device like a 'greeting.'

However, students can also open their email messages with a brief formula like 'greetings' alone, which in a sense, minimizes the social distance between them and their instructors; they do not address the instructor by her/his academic title. Twenty-six emails (13%) were prefaced by a 'greeting' alone (e.g., Hello). On the other hand, in thirteen email openings (6.5%), students opted for 'omission of greeting,' but generally included some other devices of opening, such as 'phatic element,' 'self-introduction,' 'orientation move,' and/or 'apology' (presented in Table 4).

Another form of opening, which was used less frequently by students and is particular to the context of this study as other Arabic based studies, is the 'socioreligious greeting,' which is roughly translated into "peace be upon you." In the current dataset, two forms of socioreligious greeting were identified, namely, Arabish Islamic greeting (i.e., Alslam ulykum), which was used seven times (3.5%), and Arabic Islamic greeting (i.e., السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته), which was used three times (1.5%). Arabish greeting was found to be coupled with 'academic title+ FN' (three times), with 'incorrect academic title+ FN' (three times), and alone in one instance. Such opening is a positive politeness strategy as it is categorized under the 'Use of in-group language or dialect' (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

The last form found of email opening was the use of honorific term 'dear.' It occurred differently, giving four different structures. The most frequent opening structure that contained the term of endearment is 'Dear + title+ FN' (e.g., Dear Dr. Ahmad), which occurred eight times (4%). The second 'Dear + incorrect academic title + FN' (e.g., Dear Miss Norah) and third 'Dear+ title alone' (e.g., Dear teacher) structures occurred only once (0.5%). The fourth structure 'Greeting+ dear+ academic title+ FN' occurred five times (2.5%) in the email opening. It can be seen that the total of the use of the term of endearment was quite few compared, for instance, to the use of 'greetings' as an opening strategy; it occurred only nineteen times (9.5%). The opening structure 'Dear + title+ LN' (e.g., Dear Dr. Alsad) was never found in the current data. This kind of structure or the few usages of the term 'Dear' as an opening strategy can be explained by the fact that students in the Saudi academic context tend to call instructors by their titles (e.g., Dr) alone, or coupled with their first names, so the term of endearment 'Dear' is an uncommon form that is not expected, and thus, is absent in the Saudi context. This is due to Saudi culture and the literal Arabic translation of the word 'dear' that may sound informal and indicate closeness and emotions.

When students initiated their email messages with a 'greeting,' four other devices to which an opening was analyzed against were also found and summed up in Table 4. These are 'self-introduction' 'phatic element,' 'orientation move,' and 'apology.'

Table 4: Frequency of Opening Devices Found in IAU English Students' Requestive Email Data

Openings	Number					%
Self-introduction	64	FN LN (18)	FN LN+ group no. (33)	FN LN+ group no.+ ID no (11)	Group no. alone (2)	32
Apology	34	Apology for disturbance (23)	Apology for late submission (6)	Apology for non-attendance (5)		17
Orientation move	30					15
Phatic element	30					15

Notes: FN refers to students' first name and LN to their last names.

The devices shown in Table 4 above are found in the opening segment alone and sometimes coupled with each other. First, 'self-introduction' is a strategy by which students introduce themselves either by their first and last names and/or group/ID numbers. The total number of 'self-introduction' device in the email opening was sixty-four occurrences (32%). Also, the different structures of 'self-introduction' were identified and counted: 18 instances of 'FN LN,' 33 instances of 'FN LN + group no.,' and 11 instances of 'FN LN+ group no.+ ID no.' Such a strategy can be used to indicate politeness as it attempted to save the instructor's time to look up for the student's identity and comply with the request.

Another opening device that contributes to mitigating the request was an 'apology,' which was used by many students to mitigate the force of their requests and as an effort to make their requests be met by such a mitigation. A total of thirty-four apologies (17%) were found in the opening segment. Students apologized for different reasons in the current data; namely, 'apology for disturbance' (23 instances), 'apology for late submissions' (6 instances), and 'apology for non-attendance' (5 instances). The third opening device found in the data and was specific to the opening segment of the requestive email was 'orientation move;' there were 30 instances (15%). It is considered as an opening discourse, which can serve an orientation function but does not necessarily mitigate or aggravate the request (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Lastly, students often included a 'phatic element' pre-requesting by which they expressed their nice wishes to the instructor. This device appeared thirty times (15%) in the data.

Moving to the closing segment of the requestive email messages, Table 5 below shows the total of closings found in the data.

Table 5: Number of Emails with and Without Closings in the Email Data

Device	Number	%
Closing	145	72.5
No closing	55	27.5

As shown in the above table, more than half of the emails have a closing segment, which is a post request feature and mitigator. Students in 145 (72.5%) requestive emails employed closing remarks of some kind, such as, 'self-introduction,' 'apology,' 'thanks,' or 'greeting.' Many email messages, 55 (27.5%) requestive messages, on the other hand, have no closing at all. The frequencies of these closing devices are summed up in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Frequency of Closing Devices Found in IAU English Students' Requestive Email Data

Closings	Number	%
Phatic element	8/200	4
Thanking	103/200	51.5
Greeting	31/200	15.5
Self-introduction	66/200	33
Apology **Apology for disturbance (18)** **Apology for late submission (1)**	19/200	9.5

The most used device in the closing segment was 'thanking' appearing 103 times (51%). Students further tended to introduce themselves in the closing if they did not do so in the opening segment. Sixty-six (33%) email messages contained 'self-introduction' for the purpose that is being politely formal and known to the recipient (i.e., the instructor) of the requestive email message. Thus, making the recipient more likely to comply with the request due to importance of students' identification before requesting the instructor or after the request is stated.

Students also tended to greet the instructor at the end of their requestive email, which is a positive politeness strategy. 'Greeting' device occurred thirty-one (15.5%) times in the data by which students express their kind and best regards to the instructor. Finally, like 'self-introduction' device, 'apology' and 'phatic element' were coded in both opening and closing segments; however, they were used less often in the closing than the opening. 'Apology' appeared only 19 (9.5%) times, while the least used device of all in the closing segment is 'phatic element' appearing eight (4%) times.

The data has shown, just like in the device forms of greeting and/or addressing the instructor in the opening segment of the email messages, device forms of closing can vary from one email message to another. Table 7 demonstrates the variations and their frequencies found in email closing.

Table 7: Forms of Closings Devices in IAU English Students' Requestive Email Data

Patterns of closing	Number
Thanking+ phatic element+ FN LN	2
Thanking+ FN LN+ ID no.	3
Thanking+ FN LN+ group no.	3
Thanking+ FN LN	10
Thanking+ FN	1
Thanking+ greeting	1
Thanking+ greeting+ FN LN	4
Thanking+ greeting+ FN	2
Thanking+ greeting+ FN LN+ group no.	1
Thanking+ group no. only	1
Thanking+ greeting+ FN LN+ ID no. +group no.	1
Thanking+ apology+ FN	1
Thanking+ apology	3
Thanking alone	61
FN LN alone	3
FN LN+ greeting	1
FN LN+ thanking	1
FN+ group no.	3
FN LN+ group no.+ thanking	2
FN LN+ ID no.	2
FN LN+ id no.+ group no.+ thanks	1
FN LN+ ID no.+ group no.	1
Greeting+ FN LN+ group no.	1
Greeting+ FN LN+ ID no.+ group no.	1
Greeting+ FN LN	9
Greeting+ FN	2
Greeting alone	7
Group no. only	1
Apology+ thanks+ FN LN	2
Apology+ thanks	3
Apology+ phatic element alone	1
Apology+ phatic element+ FN LN+ group no.	1
Apology+ FN LN+ group no.	1
Apology+ phatic element+ FN LN	1

Table 7 above displays 36 forms that appeared in the data. Certainly, students showed devices variation in the closing segment. Some forms appeared alone, like, 'thanking', 'apology', 'greeting', and students' 'FN LN.' The rest of the closing forms occurred in combination and gave different orders of the same devices resulting in individual email closing variations. Three forms were evident among these individual closing formulas; those were 'Thanking+ FN LN,' 'Greeting+ FN LN,' and 'FN LN+ group no.+ ID no.' They All included 'self-introduction' strategy which is an important indicator of email message politeness. Overall, the 'FN LN+ group no.+ ID no.' formula was particular to findings of the current study and appeared in different orders in many email closings. This full form of 'self-introduction' device is typically an expected email closing formula that represented the academic context. Many emails were sent from students' university email address which already contained their full ID.no., but they did send their messages giving a full identification of their names, group numbers and ID. numbers indicating politeness.

Thanking alone was the most employed closing strategy (61 instances) although it is considered to be a pre-closing device in email discourse (Crystal, 2006).

Having presented the results we must now attempt to analyze and discuss in-depth the emails' openings and closings. Since requests are inherently face threatening acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987), opening and closing formulas are vital strategies employed by students to construct a polite email message, appropriate in an academic context. Many researchers on politeness and requestive emails suggest that the degree of directness, deferential forms of address, and the amount of lexical, syntactic, and external modifiers in a hierarchical student-instructor relationship are expected (Duthler, 2006; Economidou- Kogetsidis, 2011; Chejnová, 2014; Economidou- Kogetsidis, 2008, 2011; Hariri, 2017).

In examining the extent of students' use of requestive email openings and closings, we must look at the different devices employed in both, including the presence/absence of address terms and their formality/informality. This objective is vital in determining the level of politeness because requesting via email lacks facial and intonation cues, meaning that email might deliver the message as abruptly impolite if typical opening and closing devices, or deferential formal address terms are not included. The data showed that although openings and closings are optional (Crystal, 2006), the majority of English requestive emails sent by IAU English language students to their instructors started off with an opening (97%), and ended with a closing (72.5%), indicating both positive and negative politeness. An email opening is the use of a person's name and/or greeting word to initiate the email message, and a closing as any name sign-off, farewell formula, or phatic comment (e.g., Have a good day).

The openings of IAU English language students' requestive emails to instructors were coded into different categories. Some of the analyzed elements appeared only in openings or closings, but others were present in both openings and closings. The coding of the data collected for this study revealed the use of a number of devices in email openings. These devices are set out below.

Table 8: Opening and Closing Devices in IAU English Language Students' Requestive Emails

Opening Devices	Closing Devices
Greeting and address forms	Greeting
self-introduction	self-introduction
phatic element	phatic element
apology	apology
orientation move	
	thanking

These devices are examined in detail in the following sub-sections.

Greetings and using address terms were among the different forms of openings found in the collected requestive emails. In the data under examination, twenty-one formulas were identified as

follows:

1) 'Hi/Hello/timely greeting+ academic title + FN,'
2) Hi/Hello/timely greeting + academic title+ LN,'
3) 'Hi/Hello/timely greeting+ academic title alone,'
4) 'Hi/Hello/timely greeting +incorrect academic title+ FN,'
5) 'Hi/Hello/timely greeting+ incorrect title alone,'
6) 'title+ FN alone,
7) 'greeting+ dear+ FN,'
8) 'incorrect title+ FN alone,'
9) 'Dear+ title', 'Dear+ title+ FN,'
10) 'timely greeting+ dear+ incorrect academic title+ FN,'
11) 'timely greeting+ dear+ correct academic title alone,'
12) 'timely greeting+ dear+ correct academic title+ FN,'
13) 'Dear+ academic title+ LN,'
14) 'Dear+ incorrect academic title+ FN,'
15) 'socioreligious greeting+ title+ FN,'
16) 'socioreligious greeting+ incorrect academic title,'
17) 'socioreligious greeting alone,'
18) 'Arabic socioreligious greeting+ timely greeting+ correct academic title+ FN,'
19) 'Arabic socioreligious greeting+ timely greeting+ incorrect academic title+ FN,'
20) 'greeting alone,' or
21) 'omission of greeting.'

Generally, starting with a deferential term of address, professional academic titles in the current study, expresses negative politeness since it makes deference to higher-up addressees (Chejnová, 2014). Withholding an appropriate form of address, in some societies where the power index is high such as Saudi society (Hofstede, 2010), might be considered an act of blatant on-record impoliteness. In the collected data, greetings and forms of address co-occurred in different ways.

The most common combination under this category was the use of a greeting word or phrase accompanied by a title and the instructor's first name. Specifically, 46% of the emails' openings included either a greeting with 'academic title+ FN' (Hello Dr. FN,) or 'incorrect academic title+ FN' (Good evening Miss FN) (46 times, 23%). The total of 'academic titles' in company with the different forms of greeting 'dear, socioreligious, timely greetings' or alone was 97 instances (33.5%) out of 200 emails to 60 instances of the use of 'incorrect academic titles.' This indicates that the deferential form is not falling into disuse and is still valued. Students seemed to be conscious of the formal institutional setting as they selected the deferential professional titles, either 'Dr' or 'teacher' followed by the instructor's first name over the informal titles 'Ms & Miss.' Such a choice of an address term indicates negative politeness, which is typically expected in an academic context (Chejnová, 2014) and reflects the level of formality that is appropriate for the student-teacher interaction. This is closely consistent with previous research on students' requestive email openings (Chejnová, 2014; Hariri, 2016). Chejnová's (2014) email data demonstrated that all of her students included academic over incorrect academic titles in their email openings. Hariri (2017) found that 40% of the female students' email openings contained the address term 'academic title' followed by the instructor's 'FN' without a greeting.

Another recurrent formula of email openings had what appeared to be a full and ideal structure of self-introduction, that is, the student's 'FN, LN, university ID.no, and/or group number.' However, they solely began with a greeting without the title and the name of the instructor. Avoiding prefacing a requestive email with the instructor's deferential professional address term (e.g., Dr. Teacher) indicates a smaller social distance established by the students (Economidou- Kogetsidis, 2011).

Such an opening creates a smaller social distance between the student and the instructor although a big social difference is typically expected in this hierarchical relationship. It is probable that some instructors have developed, over time or due to their varying personal characteristics, a

smaller social distance between them and their students, which diminishes hierarchy.

Differences in address terms differ from culture to culture. It is polite, for instance, in the English or Czech cultures to address people by their last name (Chejnová, 2014), but this structure does not exist in the Arabic language, so the students' first language transferences have an effect on address terms as they couple the title with the instructor's first name, and this is true in both spoken and written communication. Yet, there was one address term that contained the instructor's last name (e.g., Hi Dr. LN); an email message sent to a male instructor. This might imply the student's conscious selection of a formal address term given the gender barrier that continues to exist not only because of Islamic culture but also the separated culture that pertains to education. On the other hand, students might intentionally address female instructors less formally given their gender. Another potential explanation is that the student in this instance showed a successful pragmalinguistic choice of address term; she employed the formal address term of the English language not the Arabic.

3.1.2 Self-Introduction

'Self-introduction' is a strategy used to show the sender's identity to the receiver. In the current email data, students, as senders of email requests, attempted to introduce themselves differently, mentioning either their first names accompanied by their last names, group number, and/or university ID number. Sixty-four email messages (32%) contained this strategy in email openings, and a closely similar finding in email closings, sixty-six email messages (33%) contained this strategy (see Tables 4 & 6).

As described above, a typical polite opening will contain a student's 'FN LN', 'group number,' and/or 'university ID number'. This was a recurrent opening/closing formula in the current email data. It helps to save the instructor the time and effort to figure out who the student is, consequently making it easier to comply with the request.

Some other students wrote their 'FN LN' only in the closing segment without the group number or 'the university ID number.' Although many students in the current data sent their requests from their official university email addresses, which have their full university ID number and names, yet thirty-five requestive messages contain 'FN LN,' as a sign-off in closing. Closing a message with the sender's identity, i.e., his/her 'FN LN,' is a typical language feature of closing in both traditional letter messages and email messages (Crystal, 2006).

3.1.3 Phatic Element

A polite email message will often contain a phatic element in openings or closings wishing well or a great day to the interlocutor, in this case the instructor. In the current data, this device was utilized in email's opening (15%) more than in email's closing (4%), (see Tables 4 & 6).

Waldvogel (2007) classifies phatic comments as a closing formula. A phatic element is a feature of positive politeness described and listed by Brown and Levinson (1987) as the second strategy which is "Exaggerate interest, approval, sympathy with hearer" (p. 104). This device if used in openings indicates that the speaker did not come only to state the act but addressed the interlocutor's positive face by using small talk. In the current study, IAU English language students used such a strategy attending to the instructor's positive face, especially if located in the openings preceding the request head act. It indicates that they initiate small talk in the email openings thus expressing that the instructor's positive face needs cared for and not merely or directly stating what they want. A phatic element also helps minimize the assumed social distance between the student and the instructor as it creates a sense of solidarity as claimed by Hariri (2017).

A 'phatic element' can also be emphasized when it is located in both openings and closings, creating a friendly positive politeness tone that minimizes the social distance in student-instructor interaction.

3.1.4 Apology

An 'apology' is a third element that students employed either in the openings (17%) or closings (9.5%) of their requestive email messages (see Table 4 & 6). Apologizing in a sense works to remedy. Fraser (1980) argues that an apology has two meanings; one is to acknowledge responsibility for having performed some act; and second is to convey regret for the offense, which might come about as a result of doing of that act. While it is a face-threatening act to the speaker's positive face, Brown and Levinson (1987) suggest that an apology is generally a negative politeness strategy that addressees the hearer's face needs. It shows the speaker's reluctance to impinge on the hearer's negative face since it partially redresses that impingement (Brown & Levinson, 1987), resulting in restoring the hearer's negative face after committing the face-threatening act. In the data, students apologized for three reasons: disturbance, late submission, or class non-attendance. The apology strategy preceded or followed the requests and was found in the openings or closings, or in both. In the current data, students apologize for reasons such as disturbance in impinging on the instructor's time of day and the time to respond to such a request of information, or for late submissions.

3.1.5 Thanking

Closing or pre-closing a requestive email message with a thanking expression to the addressee is an important indicator of politeness. Leech (2014) argues that 'thanking' signals closure conveys an appreciative acknowledgment. It is also categorized as a negative politeness strategy where the speaker redresses the face-threatening act by expressing his indebtedness to the hearer (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Thanking expressions are generally expected in a hierarchal context; they are used more often when messages are directed upward than when they are directed downward (Waldvogel, 2007). In the current email data, thanking is the most used device of email closing (51.5%) (see Table 6 & 7). Many students used 'thanking' as a closing signal alone without 'greeting' or 'self-introduction' devices possibly due to the redundancy factor, i.e., those two devices are already introduced in the opening or in the email address.

4. Concluding Remarks

The current paper has attempted to examine politeness and directness in email requests within a Saudi academic context, particularly, female students' requestive emails to their instructors in Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal university. A corpus of two hundred emails written in English by students majoring in the English language were collected and analyzed to examine how they constitute politeness through email openings and closings.

Email communication is a viable integrating part of higher educational student life. It reduces face-to-face communication (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006), but it also enhances student-instructor solidarity (Hariri, 2017). IAU female students' use of email is largely exclusively for schoolwork and/or requesting instructors (Albawardi, 2017). A request speech act is inherently face-threatening (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and navigating politeness strategies of requests in a text-based medium directed to a higher-up addressee is not an easy task. Requests typically have a potential weight of imposition that requires politeness. The purpose of politeness is conflict-avoidance, which is meant to minimize imposition and save face by showing that the face threat is not intended (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Leech, 2014).

Based on the face-work proposed by Goffman (1967), a person typically constructs a self-image of her/himself and becomes emotionally attached to it. This self-image denotes the notion of face to be protected by other social actors. The instructor has constructed a self-image of someone with a higher authority in the academic institute and is expecting interactants, i.e., students, to maintain and support this social self-image. Thus, students' politeness arises especially when encountering the

instructor with an FTA such as a request.

The students in this study have grown up with much more exposure and use of CMC through numerous platforms than their counterparts who entered university a decade or two ago. The instant messaging culture of the younger generation typically projects requests informally and casually (Stephens, Houser, & Cowan, 2009). This in return, may well affect communication rendering, it impolite when exercised in the context of student-instructor interaction. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2016) argued that age was an important factor affecting the perception of politeness in requestive emails which differed from her digital native speakers, i.e., students, to their instructors who are "digital migrants" (p. 12). Many students in the current study, however, showed a different use of request mitigation and proper email structure through the use of email openings and closings. This suggests that emails might become less speech-like and more polite given contextual features of institutional discourse. The institutional hierarchy is kept visible, probably pushing students toward acknowledging the power-asymmetrical relation and greater politeness. This finding runs counter to the findings of Danielewicz-Betz's study (2013). Among non-native learns of English in Danielewicz-Betz's (2013) study, Saudi participants appeared to be very direct in using imperatives and external modifiers that expressed dissatisfaction, thus minimizing the student-instructor power distance and neglecting the instructor's face needs.

Although openings and closings are optional moves in emails (Crystal, 2006), most students (97%) in the current data opted for including an opening pre-request, while only 72.5% of their emails had a closing. Data descriptive analysis also showed that some devices were present in both openings and closings such as, 'greeting,' 'self-introduction,' 'apology,' and 'phatic element' while other devices were exclusive either in closings or openings. For email openings, this included address terms for the instructor's academic title or incorrect academic title, or 'orientation move.' For email closings, students were quite adept at utilizing various devices of closing from the beginning including sign off 'greeting,' 'thanking,' 'apology,' 'phatic element,' and 'self-introduction.'

The data showed some variation in email openings and closings. Some users liked using deferential professional address terms which indicated negative politeness as they reflect the formality of the academic context. Findings regarding address term's presence/absence, formality/informality suggested that academic titles (e.g., Dr. FN, Teacher) are not falling into disuse and were present more than incorrect academic titles (e.g., Miss FN, Mr. FN) indicating the presence of the power difference in Saudi culture and academic context. This result resembles the results of Hariri's (2017) research where students employed titles in openings reflecting the power-index of Saudi culture. Also, exploitation of mitigating devices such as 'phatic elements' or 'apology' in email openings and closings indicated students' concern for face-saving and minimizing request impositions.

Regarding addressing the instructors' positive and/or negative face, students adopted negative politeness strategies more often when requesting instructors via email, which is, according to Chejnová (2014), more appropriate in an academic context where power and distance are viable and considered by both students and instructors, whereas positive politeness may lead to sociopragmatic failure. Negative politeness strategies found in the data were more employed (58.7%) than positive politeness strategies (41.2%). The most used positive politeness strategy was 'give or ask for reasons,' which mirrored the external modification device 'grounder' while the most used negative politeness strategy was 'give deference' which stood for the students' use of proper address terms in email messages opening, i.e. 'academic titles.' Students did not implement positive politeness strategies addressed to the instructor's positive face like 'sweeteners' and 'Arabic socioreligious greetings' as often as one might have expected. This finding puts emphasis on the student's requestive emails, and the nature of this academic-context communication reflecting the high power-index social distance that exists in student-instructor interaction in Saudi culture.

The current research constituted findings specific to an institutional academic context but studying politeness of email use in other organizational contexts is valuable future research. Recommendation for future studies would suggest extending the sampling of research beyond an

educational context to see how these findings apply to organizations other than higher education institution. Another recommendation remark is relevant to pedogeological intervention of implementing email writing through writing courses. This constitutes a part of netiquette which could be provided in both Arabic and English languages.

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