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Research Article

Exploring Undergraduate Students' Perceptions and Practices on How to Use Netiquette Rules in Creating Professional Emails

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Abstract

In this current study, we explored Saudi undergraduate students' perceptions toward netiquette rules in professional and formal emails through their communication with their professor in spring semester 2020. We investigated how learners formulated their formal emails in an academic domain or for their future careers whether they needed clarification, asked question, or shared issues. To apply this research, we chose critical discourse analysis as a theoretical framework to understand students' perceptions and practices. This qualitative study applied open-ended questions survey, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis (students' emails) with a thick description of their perceptions and practices. We had seven Saudi students from TESOL course. The data was analyzed through vivo coding that went through three different phases and wrote separate memos for every participant to reflect the intended meaning of the data. The results of the study revealed students' understanding of netiquette rules in professional emails. However, students' actual practices under stressful situations showed that they did not always follow the netiquette rules in emails with their professor.

Keywords: *netiquette rules, professional emails, communication*

1. Introduction

Writing skill plays an essential role for English Foreign Language (EFL) Learners "in organizing and conveying knowledge" (Ebrahimi, Namaziandost, Ziafar, & Seraj, 2021, p. 1088). EFL learners need to expose to the important aspects of writing including Productive Oriented Approach (POA) that proposed by Win (Liu & Zhang, 2019). POA focuses on different formal elements of written texts including grammatical structure, word choice, cohesion, text organization, and coherence (Kadmiry,

2021). In other words, productive approach focuses on two main aspects which are form and grammar (Kadmiry). Form and grammatical structure are not enough in writing, but rather "L2 language users need to be able...to formulate grammatically accurate and intelligible sentences...to use and judge language appropriately according to the particular sociocultural situation" (Kogetsidis, Woodfield, & Savvidou, 2021, p. 156).

There are different ways that help EFL learners attempt to develop their writing skills and encourage them to accomplish their achievement in writing (Abdelhag & Ali, 2017). Using technology has essential impact on teaching and learning language process because electronic devices have strong power in language literacy (Abdelhag & Ali, 2017). One way that learners can use to develop their writing is using emails because "email communication is still deemed to be the leading communication tool widely utilised in workplaces" (Mohomed, Mcgrath, & Yuh, 2017, p. 154). Also, email "...implies the use of certain types of linguistic and paralinguistic features to mark formality" (Rostami & Khodabandeh, 2019, p. 86). Through contacting by emails, the interaction between instructors and students in schools and universities will occurred frequently. That allows students to have more than one way to contact their instructors if they need a help or have any questions. The frequent meeting and discussion may lead students and instructors use conversational language more than academic language. According to Li and Graesser (2021), "conversational language, opposite of academic language, was defined as the spontaneous, less-organized, and more disjointed discourse, either spoken or written, with much reliance on the contexts and common ground shared by the speaker/writer and the audience" (p. 44).

Contacting instructors or professors through emails forces students to write in an professional and academic style of writing. Even though students who always prefer to meet their instructors face-to-face, they started using emails to facilitate learning process especially during the pandemic COVID 19. However, interacting with others by using foreign languages may increase learners' anxiety (Fujii, 2021). There are different studies investigated teachers' and students' emails in relation to appropriateness and politeness while they are writing their requests (Kogetsides, Woodfield, & Savvidou, 2021). The limitations of previous studies were using systematic reviews and quantitative data to investigate netiquette rules in communication. (Soler-Costa el.al, 2021; Arouri & Hamaidi, 2017) Further, few studies focused on using emails between instructors and students during the pandemic of COVID-19, which considered sudden shift in education domain all over the world. However, this study tightly connected the netiquette rules within writing professional emails during the rapid changes of using devices and new electronic languages through focusing on the communication between students and professor during the pandemic. Thus, the present study aims to investigate students' perceptions and practices in different situations by using netiquette rules in contacting with their professors through university emails. More specifically, this study seeks to investigate the following questions:

Q1. What are EFL students' perceptions toward using professional emails considering netiquette rules in communication?

Q.2 How do students practice and use netiquette rules in their formal emails with their professor?

2. Literature Review

Learners' language and culture are "a dynamic process and it is not easy, particularly in non-native learning and teaching contexts" (Tian & Dumlao, 2020, p. 1437). In this study, we focused on pragmatic, English proficiency, netiquette rules, and emails practices align with critical discourse analysis to understand their professional and formal communication.

2.1 English Language Proficiency and Pragmatic Competence

Language proficiency and pragmatic competence play important roles in EFL learners' production in

relation to their emails.

Pragmatic Competence. Pragmatic is defined as users "choose appropriate linguistic forms to achieve communicative goals in context" (Taguchi & Roever, 2017, p. 7). In other words, speakers have different choices to formulate their request or production based on contextual and personal preferences (Yousefi & Nassaji, 2021). That means EFL learners should take into their consideration the aspects of pragmatic information while they are writing a text, which are, "politeness, appropriacy, formality, register, and cultural knowledge" (Ton Nu, Murray, 2020, p. 10). Xiao (2015) refers to different examples that help EFL learners expose to the conventional pragmatic and facilitate their communication by saying, "(would you + verb) and (could I + verb) are usually used to make a request, and expressions like (why not + verb) and (how about + verb) are often interpreted as suggestions" (p. 132). However, language competence is unlike grammatical competence that occurs automatically, but rather EFL learners need to receive instruction of pragmatics from the early stages of their learning. In other words, it is necessary to learn pragmatic competence because miscommunication, sometimes, occurs between non-native speakers and native speakers in relation to the conversational norm (Ahmed & Hasan, 2020).

Using English Proficiency in Emails. Language proficiency is defined as "...the ability to speak the language with sufficient structural accuracy and vocabulary to participants effectively in most conversations on practical, social, and professional topics" (Ahmed & Hasan, 2020, p. 29). Through learning a foreign language, learners need to practice and interact with others because English language proficiency "...is a continuum of how well a student understands and communicates in listening, speaking, reading, and writing" (Alexandrowicz, 2021, p. 109). One of the communicative ways that learners need to use is contacting through emails. In emails, the receivers usually expect to see formal and well-organized written emails that show the appropriate words and texts in relation to the cultures (Touhidul & Sorooshian, 2019). Students do not only need to learn the grammatical rules that help them improve their writing, but also, they "... need to know how report their thoughts into texts appropriately and accurately" (Imsa-ard, 2020, p. 36). Savic (2018) investigated students and lecturers' perceptions toward im/politeness and in/appropriate emails. The participants were from a Norwegian University. The research applied different stages to collect the data, which were: authentic students' emails, questionnaires and interviews. The researchers focused on three main aspects of the emails, which were: framing moves, content moves, and contextual issues. The results of the study referred to most participants rarely indicated that their emails were impolite. The lecturers believed that polit and appropriate emails were related to the formal style of writing in terms of greetings and word choice. Last, the lecturers related students' impolite emails to their lack of second language proficiency and lack of awareness of how to communicate institutionally with others. Worathumrong (2021) refers to the lack of "cross-cultural communication skills [because it] could risk misunderstanding other people from different cultural backgrounds, even if they are fluent speakers of English" (p. 30).

2.2   Netiquette Rules and Emails Practices in Communication

Netiquette Rules. In communication, human being exchange and transfer knowledge and experiences (Sovetkanova el.at, 2021). To focus on professional communication, we integrated the netiquette rules that presented by Mclean (2012) and labeled them based on three fundamental concepts that were presented by (Soler-Costa el.al. 2021). As shown in the figure 1 below.
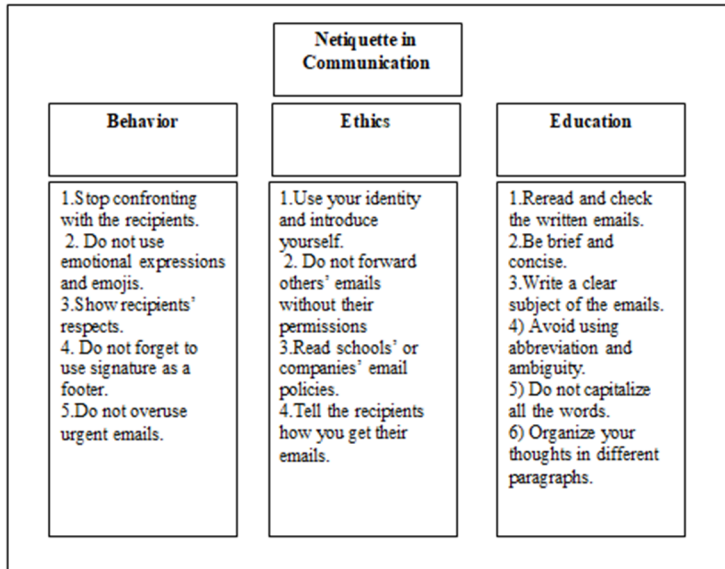
Figure 1: The integration of netiquette rules and based on three fundamental concepts

Emails Practices. Align with netiquette rules, users/senders need to follow emails essential aspects to eventually write professional emails including "subject, opening, getting to the point, closing comments, closing phrase, and signature" (Gerland, 2015, p. 25). These aspects help the recipients understand and easily follow the senders' messages from the beginning to the end. Thus, these aspects show the senders' professionality and understanding of how to communicate with others either at their schools or in their future careers.

2.3 Critical Discourse Analysis

Discourse means either written production including books and newspapers or spoken production, such as verbal conversation (Alsaawi, 2016). It is crucial to reflect the relationship between the critical discourse analysis and languages. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) helps to understand the "power and agency in language and text. [It] views language as an integral analytic lens for social practices and semiosis" (Baker, 2021, p.78). Focusing on the form and function of spoken and written production reflects "social, political, cultural, and institutional worlds" (Gee, 2004, p. 48). In this study, we selected CDA as an analytical framework because we are interested in looking at students' utterances through their interaction with their professors by emails. This study explores learners' language and identity that constructed and affected their interaction and production with their professors.

3. Methods

3.1 Participants

Participants were Saudi who are from the middle of Saudi Arabia. The participants were undergraduate students from level five and six. These selected students had opportunities to contact their professor through university emails after the sudden shift from face-to-face into online platforms. In this study, the participants were seven students who accepted to be volunteers and

share their perceptions toward their studying online. Participants' names were pseudonyms to protect their identities in this study.

3.2   Data Collection

To answer the research questions, semi-structured interviews, open-ended questions survey, and document analysis (students' emails) were used in this research. For the interview sessions, the duration of interviews was between 30 to 45 minutes; it was online by using Zoom application. The interview sessions and the survey were important to understand the participants' perceptions, understanding, and experiences. The academic emails and text messages on WhatsApp are considered document analysis in the present study. We chose WhatsApp because it is considered as the second and common application that used among students and instructors (Romani el.at, 2021). The authentic emails had been written by the participants during 2020 spring semester. Random emails were selected from the whole spring semester that students had sent in order to collect more details and examples by looking for the formality and pragmatic competence that the students use with their professor. In this study, we used participants' emails and text messages that occurred in a TESOL class in spring semester 2020 after getting students' approval to use them in the study.

3.3   Data Analysis

To start the data analysis, the data was transcribed verbatim to make sense and deepen the understanding of the participants' meaning and messages. After completing the transcriptions, we inductively coded the interviews In Vivo coding, which used participants' "own language for codes" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 97). We selected the most important data to reflect the meaning of the gathered data (Saldaña). This was the preliminary codes from the first phase of the analysis. After the first phase, we reduced the multiple developed codes into themes. In the second phase, we tried to combine the common codes across the data. In the third phase, we merged some related themes and got two main themes, which were: language and communication. Under each main theme, there are subthemes that presented in the findings section.

After analyzing the open-ended questions survey and the semi-structure interviews, we analyzed the participants academic emails and text messages on WhatsApp with their professor. To analyze the participants' academic emails, the main focus on the netiquette rules and their email practices, such as opening phrases, the content, closing comments, and closing phrases. Then, we compared the data from the survey and the interviews to the data from the emails because it helped us to better understanding the participants' perceptions.

We also wrote analytical memos for every single participant. Memos helped us evaluate the themes that we created from the data. These details and descriptive memos derived to the intended meaning as Saldaña (2016) said, "Let your memos read like letters to a close friend. There's no need for stodgy, academic prose" (p. 44).

4.   Results

Q1. What are EFL students' perceptions toward using professional emails considering netiquette rules in communication?

To answer this question, we used the data that we collected from the open-ended question survey and semi structured interview sessions. There were sides of the participants' responses, which were: (a) their preference of face to face and online communication, (b) their emails' levels of formality and informality, and (c) their usage of emojis in their emails.

At the beginning, the participants reflected their understanding of the importance of using netiquette rules in their formal emails. They were aware of how to write professional emails by listing the netiquette rules and providing specific examples of formal phrases. They also were able to clearly

explain how to send polite and professional emails.

Face to Face Vs. Online communication. Most participants preferred to contact their professors and partners face to face. Samar said, "I believe teachers understand me face to face more than writing, and I can explain and deliver the message clearly." However, Amani believed that she had enough time to explain her thoughts clearly in emails comparing to face-to-face meeting. She mentioned that there was no time to discuss a matter face-to-face because there were other students need the professors. Amani added that students should be polit in both ways online and face-to-face because they were contacting their professors.

On the other hand, the participants discussed different netiquette rules that they understood. Zainab gave herself a minute to reread her emails before sending to her professors. She also believed that online was more formal than face-to-face because the written language of the emails is different from the spoken language. Samar was also agree with Zainab by saying, "I have enough time to check spelling and grammar before sending the emails to my professors to be professional unless I did not catch some mistakes." Also, Amani believed that she always be formal in writing her emails and checked everything before sending to her professors. However, she mentioned a situation under pressure made her sent an email to the professor with less formality by saying,

In the final. The questions were multiple choice. So, I sent an email to my professor, and I said *quikly please*. My professor was surprised because of the way that I used in the email. To be honest, this is not a formal way to contact my professor, but because it was urgent, and it should be done very quickly. This is the only situation that I ever had, and it was so imparissing, but I had to do it anyways.

Zainab's also added "in face-to-face, I was using praying, but not in emails." Noor mentioned that during the chatting on online lecture, she did not care about the grammar because the meaning was important for her; while, she checked everything if she wanted to send an email to her professors.

Formality and Informality. All participants were agree that using colloquialisms, contractions, or a personal style along with the words that express familiarity like (Hey) referred to informal style. They sometimes directly asked for what they need without greeting. As Noor said, "informal writing is when we talk to our friends, we say *hi* and directly say what we want to say." All participants were agree that they did not think about their grammar structure if they send a text or email to their friends.

Further, the participants referred to the appropriate way that students should follow in order to write formal emails to their professor. One of the participants Noor listed some characteristics and instances of writing academic and formal emails by saying,

Formal writing, I think, when we write certain structure. I mean we need to write formal letters or send formal emails. We should include greetings at the beginning and introduce ourselves. Then, we talk about what we want to talk about. Then, we have to conclude our emails by saying *sincerely* and mentioning our names. This is a formal writing for me.

Using Emojis. Although, the participants showed their advanced understanding toward netiquette rules in emails, they still believed that some emojis may be acceptable to be used. However, Zainab believed that there were couple of emojis considered formal and it was acceptable to use in her emails with her professors. She said, "I have never used emojis except the thumb up because I believe it is formal." Another formal emoji from Zainab's opinion was "dots with slash not the yellow face because I had serious problem." She sometimes used other emojis because she did not know how to reply to their professors and thought the emojis could explain more, as she mentioned, "I use face with hearts to say you are welcome because I do not know how to reply."

Q.2 How do students practice and use netiquette rules in their formal emails with their professor?

To answer this question, we analyzed the participants' practices through their emails and WhatsApp application align with their responses in the interview sessions of how they used netiquette rules in a professional way.

Based on the participants' emails, we found two different practices. First, they wrote formal

emails by starting with opening phrases, getting to the points, and closing phrases. They used formal emails when they were in a normal mood and needed clarification or requests from the professor. However, the second practice of the participants when they were under pressure or stress. The frustration impacted on their emails' formulation, which made their emails less formal and impolite.

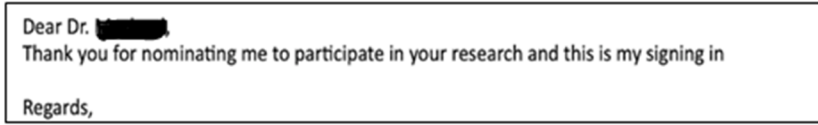The figure 2 below reflected one of the participants' practices of formal emails to her professor.

Dear Dr. ████,
Thank you for nominating me to participate in your research and this is my signing in

Regards,

Figure 2: Amani's email in a normal situation

Based on the netiquette rules, the participants' emails showed their respects and politeness; they were concise and direct in the normal situations. They began with opening phrases align with the title of the professor. They ended up their emails with closing phrases, such as regards, sincerely, and thank you etc. to let the recipients know that they finished writing their emails. The students' emails indicated their awareness of the receivers' time by writing short emails.

On the other hand, the participants' emails reflected a different side of analysis, which was less formality and used her first language under stressful situations as the figure 3 shown below.
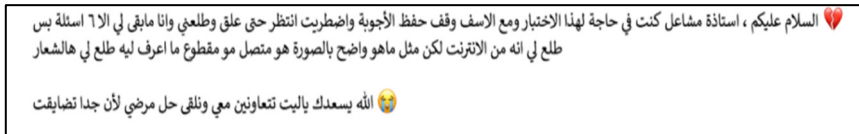

❤️ السلام عليكم ، استاذة مشاعل كنت في حاجة لهذا الاختبار ومع الاسف وقف حفظ الأجوبة واضطربت انتظر حتى علق وطلعني وانا مابقي لي الا ٦ اسئلة بس طلع لي انه من الانترنت لكن مثل ماهو واضح بالصورة هو متصل مو مقطوع ما اعرف ليه طلع لي هالشعار

😭 الله يسعدك ياليت تتعاونين معي ونلقي حل مرضي لأن جدا تضايقت

Figure 3: Being less formal in a stressful situation

Through analyzing different emails, we noticed that the participants followed different practices when they were under pressure. They first were blackmailed senders when they needed to reach what they need from their professor, such as getting good scores. Second, they used emotional emojis, including broken hearts and crying faces. From the interview sessions, the participants believed that using emojis helped them to deliver their intended meaning. Third, they did not use greetings, opening, and closing phrases. Last, they switched to use their first language, which is Arabic, to convey their intended messages.

Sahar usually preferred to use Arabic because it was her mother tongue and felt more confident. However, she said that she used English with her professors unless she noticed that her professors did not understand her messages, she then switched to Arabic to clearly explain her thoughts. However, Sahar's emails and text messages in WhatsApp application showed that she always used Arabic language with her professor. As shown in figure 4.
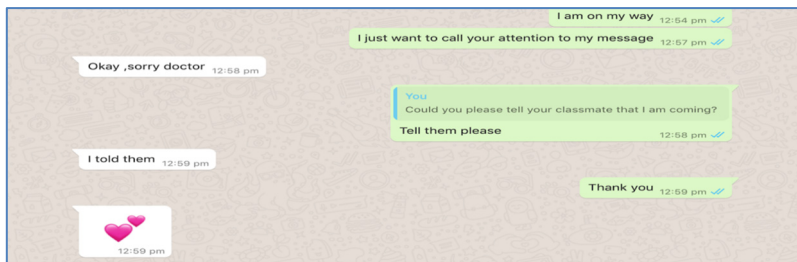

I am on my way 12:54 pm
I just want to call your attention to my message 12:57 pm
Okay ,sorry doctor 12:58 pm
You
Could you please tell your classmate that I am coming?
Tell them please 12:58 pm
I told them 12:59 pm
Thank you 12:59 pm
💕 12:59 pm

Figure 2: Sahar's WhatsApp text message to her professor.

Wafaa, Zainab, and Noor also preferred to use English in their production unless they had a problem, they spoke Arabic. Wafaa said that if she was sick, she preferred to use her mother tongue because she could not think in the way that helped her explain her message clearly. One of Wafaa's email reflected her bad situation, so she used Arabic in her email.

Another reason of using their first language was looking for writing perfect emails. For example, one of the participants pointed out that she avoided using English all the time or using codeswitching because she wanted to avoid committing grammatical mistakes. Her fear was not only preventing her from practicing her foreign language, but also restricted her from interacting and expressing freely her perceptions. She thought that her Arabic language was better than her English and could help her to express her thoughts in different ways.

5. Discussion

Technology rapidly developed in the last two decades, and it was one of the important tool for people's daily life (Soler-Costa el.at, 2021). The results showed EFL students' understanding of netiquette rules in professional and formal emails in terms of different aspects, including face to face vs. online and integrating emojis in their emails.

Face to face VS. Online. Most participants considered that being formal and polite, their lack of vocabulary, and using English in their production lead to limit the chance of interacting with their professors face to face. The participants were careful and strict when they interacted with their professors because Arab societies restrict in showing respect and politeness to others. For this reason, they preferred online interaction because their lack of vocabulary weaken their spoken production which might lead to informal and impolite way of interaction or lead to miscommunication. This finding was consistent with Savic (2018) who indicated that learners' impolite emails tightly related to their lack of English proficiency and lack of awareness of how to use the appropriate form and function of a second language. For example, Shahad clarified that she felt nervous when she communicated with her professor face to face because she spent effort to be more formal and polite to ask a question.

Further, the participants preferred using Arabic language because they have a lot of vocabulary words in the target language that allowed them to express their full thoughts and feelings; "they found that Arabic speakers generally had limited resources of phrases and lexical bundles used in ending their emails, while the native speakers varied the expressions they used" (Deveci & Hmida, 2017, p. 208). Thus, this showed that students need not only linguistic knowledge, but also pragmatic competence in order to satisfy their needs and achieve the communication purposes.

Emojis. Regarding the use of emojis in their formal emails, there was contradiction in students' responses and practices. At the beginning, the participants showed their refusal toward using emojis in formal emails, which was not professional and not appropriate to be used with professors. As stated by Riordan and Glikson (2020), "...emojis continue to be viewed as inappropriate in workplaces with more formal communication climates" (p. 17). This indicated their awareness and understanding of how to communicate and practice in different situations. They were all agree that they never used emojis with their professors because it would decrease the degree of formality. However, the participants admitted, from their own perspectives, that there were some emojis considered formal and could be used with professors, such as the red heart.

Although the participants admitted the informality of using yellow faces emojis, they kept using them in urgent situations because they believed it helped in delivering the intended feelings. According to Famularsih (2020), "The use of emoticons is to represent emotional and personality nuances present in face-to-face communication" (p. 119). Their problem was that they had the difficulty to use Only-English because of their lack of English proficiency. Another reason that encouraged students to use emojis was some of their professors used emojis in their emails. This led students to be less formal and constructed their identities from their professors' normal practices in virtual contexts.

6. Recommendation

We recommended stakeholders and professors to offer workshops to EFL learners related to formulating professional emails for either getting a job or contacting their professors. Also, the professors and instructors should insist and ask their students to use emails in a professional way during their communication. They also should provide feedback to their students from time to time to always remind students of the professional emails. Further, research studies need to be conducted on this area because the need of using emails professionally in an educational domain and for EFL/ESL students' near future is necessary.

7. Conclusion

In this study, the main focus was on foreign language learners' perceptions and their application of netiquette rules within writing professional emails to their professor. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was considered as a framework to analyze the gathered data. We sought to understand their actual practices through natural interaction under different types of situations either normal or stressful. Ultimately, their identities seem constructed in different ways "which are deeply rooted in learners' struggles in language learning and [practices]" (Tian & Dumlao, 2020, p. 1454). Based on the presented data, learners forgot all the information that related to netiquette rules and formality when they were in urgent situations. This led learners to be blackmailed and use other tools, such as emojis, because they felt that emojis helped in expressing their feelings and issues. However, both the survey and the interview sessions reflected their full understanding of how learners should formulate academic and formal production in a polite and appropriate ways. This finding was consistent with the results of (Yousefi & Nassaji, 2021; Ton Nu, Murray, 2020; Touhidul & Sorooshian, 2019; Savic, 2018; Taguchi & Roever, 2017) who indicated learners' awareness of writing formal emails in an appropriate way, but their lack of English proficiency and pragmatic competence led them to write informal and impolite emails.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Q1. What is formal writing?

Q2. What is informal writing?

Q3. What is the type of writing that you usually use with your professors through emails, discussion...etc?

Q4. Do you think that you interact with your professors differently from your friends through typing/online chatting/discussion?

Q5. What are some words/phrases/ statements that you use with your professors that you did not use with your classmates or friends?

Q6. Do you find yourself easily comprehending your professor's written/oral instruction? If so,

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Explain?

Q7. What are the words/phrases/statements that you use more while you are interacting with others online rather than using them in the physical classrooms?

Q8. What is the language (English/Arabic/both) that you use through interacting with your professors and classmates? Why?

Q9. What is the language (English/Arabic/both) you feel more confident to use in sharing your ideas, opinion, and discussion? Why?

Q10. Do you prefer your professors use Only-English or Arabic and English through the online teaching-learning process? Why?

Q11. Do you prefer your classmates use Only-English or Arabic and English through the online teaching-learning process? Why?

Q12. Do you think using emojis while typing your emails, messages, or discussions help you deliver your feelings and meaning? How?

Q13. Do you check your English structures and word choice after typing your response or you pay more attention to the meaning rather than the structure? Why?

Appendix B: Open-ended Questions Survey

Q1. What do you know about netiquette?

Q2. Tell us some rules related to netiquette rules?

Q3. Why should you follow netiquette rules?

Q4. What do you know about blackmailed senders?

Q5. What are the languages (first/second) that you feel confident to write professional/formal

Q6. emails?

Q7. What are the essential elements of writing professional emails?

Q8. How do you typically deal with stress while writing your formal emails?