Research article / Научная статья

Politeness markers in emails of non-native English speaking university students

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Abstract

The use of computer-mediated communication including emails has become pervasive in academic contexts as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. What seems to be significant but simply overlooked by students is meeting politeness netiquettes while sending emails. To this end, the current study investigated the extent to which non-native English speaking university students adjust the level of politeness in their response emails written in English to that of the emails received from an American professor. To collect data, four versions of an academic email message with different levels of politeness were prepared in advance. The emails either included or excluded verbal and structural politeness markers and asked for the participants' demographic information and their reason for participation in the study. Then, 73 university students enrolled in a general English course were selected and divided randomly into four groups each of which received one version of the email message from the professor. The results of the data analysis on the participants' response emails, based on accommodation theory (Giles 1973) as a theoretical framework, revealed that they did not accommodate either verbal or structural politeness cues in emails. Besides, the participants' knowledge of the politeness etiquettes in the academic email genre seemed inadequate. Finally, the article provides some pedagogical implications for course designers, materials developers, and instructors to devise some plans to raise students' awareness of email politeness etiquettes and for students to be aware of the significance of meeting politeness principles in their academic emails.

Key words: *computer-mediated communication, email communication, politeness markers, politeness netiquettes*

Маркеры вежливости
в англоязычных электронных письмах студентов

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Аннотация

В результате пандемии COVID-19 компьютерно-опосредованная коммуникация, включая электронную почту, приобрела особую значимость в сфере образования. При этом студенты не придают особого значения использованию в мейлах сетевых этикетных норм вежливости. Данное исследование посвящено анализу того, в какой степени студенты – неносители английского языка – приспосабливаются к уровню вежливости американского преподавателя при ответе на его мейлы. Для сбора данных было заранее подготовлено четыре версии электронных сообщений, в которых запрашивалась информация о демографических данных участников, а также причинах их участия в исследовании и при этом использовались либо не использовались вербальные и структурные маркеры вежливости. Далее было отобрано 73 студента университета, проходящих курс английского языка, каждому из которых была направлена одна из версий электронного сообщения. В результате анализа ответных мейлов студентов, основанного на теории аккомодации (Giles 1973), было выяснено, что студенты не адаптируются к вербальным и невербальным показателям вежливости в мейлах преподавателя. Более того, студенты демонстрируют неадекватное представление об этикетных нормах академического общения в форме мейлов. В результате проведенного исследования авторы формулируют рекомендации разработчикам курсов и преподавателям относительно способов выработки у студентов понимания норм сетевого этикета при написании мейлов и значимости вежливости для достижения их академических целей.

Ключевые слова: *компьютерно-опосредованная коммуникация, коммуникация с помощью мейлов, маркеры вежливости, сетевой этикет вежливости*

1. Introduction

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic in recent years, students worldwide have been provided with more opportunities for distance learning and offered online courses (Sykes 2021). As a result, student–instructor face-to-face interactions gave way to computer-mediated communication (Codina-Espurz 2021). The latter (CMC) refers to different types of communication that occur through electronic mediums (Alemi, Pazoki Moakhar & Rezanejad 2021), such as emails, instant messaging, video chatting, or new social media platforms. With the growing application of distance learning over the last years, a new trend of research emerged which emphasizes the need for further studies on the analysis of digitally-mediated discourses (Oandasan 2021). In fact, getting engaged in digital discourse might cause new challenges for users as they will experience interaction failures if they are not familiar with the

right genre or language patterns which occur in digital communications (Sykes 2021).

Therefore, this commonly used medium of communication has its own politeness etiquette which needs to be learned by those involved in such interactions (Almoaily 2018). The necessity of acquiring these politeness strategies is intensified in academic contexts where communication occurs normally between students and their professors through emails and entails a higher level of formality, a high social distance, and different status levels (Campillo 2018). According to Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of positive and negative politeness, a higher level of politeness using more formal politeness markers is required when students are communicating with their instructors or other faculty members; otherwise, they might be perceived as impolite (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2016), fail to have successful communication with that faculty member, and it might even influence the instructors' level of willingness to work with that student (DiBartolomeo 2021). Therefore, the use of appropriate language in emails and e-politeness might have implications for students' further academic success.

To avoid unwanted face-threatening acts such as using inappropriate salutations or closing remarks which might cause misconceptions or even communication breakdowns, students need to become cognizant of the nature of formal emails and right netiquettes (Campillo 2018, Konuk 2021). To this end, a number of studies in the area of CMC have investigated the nature of emails sent by students to their professors. However, there is still a need for further research addressing politeness manifestation in emails (Almoaily 2018, Oandasan 2021). Indeed, it seems significant to shed more light on contexts where students are still struggling with the appropriateness of emails in unequal communications with their professors (Campillo 2018) and to raise email users' awareness of these netiquettes (Níkleva 2017). In order to contribute to the existing literature, the current study drew on both accommodation and politeness theories to investigate the degree to which non-native English speaking university students tend to adapt the level of politeness in their response emails to the inclusion or exclusion of verbal and structural politeness markers in academic emails they receive.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Communication Accommodation Theory

Communication accommodation theory (CAT) explains cognitive reasons for possible changes in individuals' speech as they strive to minimize or emphasize the social differences between others and themselves (Giles 1973). CAT seeks to "clarify the motivations underlying, as well as the constraints operating upon, speech shifts during social interactions and the social consequences of these" (Giles et al. 1987). Convergence and divergence are the two key models associated with CAT. Convergence refers to the process through which individuals adapt their speech to others' speech (Giles 1973). However, divergence occurs when

individuals adjust their speech away from that of others in order to distinguish their differences. By accenting the linguistic differences between the "us" and "them", speakers maintain their separate and favorably distinct group identity. The current study concentrated on convergence aiming to see if the students will attempt to mirror verbal and structural politeness markers in the professor's emails.

Giles et al. (1991) have identified several convergence features including speech rate, utterance length, vocal intensity, information density, self-disclosure, expressing opinions or solidarity, gesture and posture, facial expression, and head nodding. Giles and Smith (1979) and Scotton (1980), asserted that while the convergence of speech patterns is typically met with a positive evaluation, there is a line where excessive convergence can be seen as patronizing. Due to the fact that even the most trifling aspects of speech take on crucial importance, individuals seek or avoid identification with others through the medium of language, either consciously or unconsciously. In this way, accommodation theory can shed light on why individuals may accommodate their communication in email messages.

2.2. Politeness Theory

Politeness is considered as a social behavior which can be shaped based on social principles and conventions that a sociocultural community defines; therefore, it is a form of communication strategy (Níkleva 2017). The degree of politeness can be defined based on the context of communication and the interlocutors' expectations and status (Graham & Hardaker 2017). Goffman's (1959) theory of linguistic politeness is centered on 'face'. Protecting your own face or identity and preserving and validating other people's face/identity is a universal concept and important in face-to-face (FtF) communication where there is the possibility of face-threatening action (FTA). Face-threatening actions may include disagreeing, criticizing, interrupting, asking a favor, imposing, or requesting information (Morand & Ocker 2003). Face management strategies, including general politeness strategies, are used to navigate interpersonal relationships. Just as in FtF interaction, FTAs are also inevitable in CMC. Common digitally-mediated interactional events, such as requests for help or information, criticism, disagreements, giving directives, or requests for a previous message clarification, can be considered as FTAs.

Goffman (1959) focused on activities designed to reinforce and maintain face, while politeness emphasizes activities designed to sustain other's face. Essentially, politeness means "phrasing things in such a way as to take into consideration the feelings of others" (Brown & Gilman 1989). According to Brown and Levinson (1987), when the need to commit a FTA arises, a choice must be made between either directly performing the FTA or mitigating the FTA with face managing strategies to save the interlocutor's positive/negative face. While the positive face can be conceptualized as a person's desire for solidarity and inclusion, the negative face is a person's willingness for privacy and deference, For instance, addressing a professor with the first name in emails indicates that both the professor and student

are in academic solidarity; however, the title and last name address signifies the distance between the faculty and student (Eslami & Ko 2015).

Mitigation strategies are labeled as politeness strategies by Brown and Levinson (1987). Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed two types of politeness strategies: the positive and the negative strategy. Positive politeness strategies refer to the desire to be liked, appreciated, and understood. Conversely, negative politeness strategies take place when the speaker strives to minimize the sense of imposition on the listener.

Individuals choose to employ different strategies depending upon the seriousness of the FTA, their evaluation of the social situation, the degree of imposition, social distance, and power relationships (Eslami & Ko 2015). There is little doubt that FTAs and the politeness strategies used to defuse the face threat occur frequently in digitally-mediated environments including emails. This need for approval led the current study to look at the possibility that politeness strategies are embedded in accommodation theory and may affect the way people communicate through email.

2.3. Email: Its Nature and Politeness

One of the most commonly used types of out-of-class interaction between faculty members and university students is email communication (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2018). In fact, nowadays emails can be sent easily from cell phones and therefore the majority of students rely exclusively on this medium of communication (Alemi et al. 2021). Email communication is placed within the computer-mediated discourse (CMD) field, which is in turn the branch of a broader field called computer-mediated communication (CMC) (DiBartolomeo 2021). The function of emails can be both transactional and interactional. It means that they are sent with the purpose of not only receiving and sending information but also establishing and maintaining a social relationship (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2018). Graham and Hardaker (2017) defined emails as a highly asynchronous medium of communication as there is usually a time-lapse between the time something is sent and the time that message is read. Then, they emphasized that "the more asynchronous an environment is, the more likely it is that any perception of impoliteness will expand and multiply within a community" (Ibid: 787).

Writing an email based on the right politeness etiquette is not an easy task and requires both pragmalinguistic (the knowledge of what the appropriate forms are) and sociopragmatic (the knowledge of when these forms are contextually appropriate) knowledge (DiBartolomeo 2021). Adhering to appropriate language functions in academic contexts where the relationships are mainly hierarchical is significant and students are expected to use language and email markers which comply with and acknowledge the higher status of their professors (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007). Therefore, they need to make appropriate pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic choices to meet e-politeness etiquettes. This seems to be more challenging for non-native speaker students who are sending emails in a foreign/second language (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2018).

Academic emails follow a specific template which includes a greeting, a body, as well as a closing. Email formats can vary dramatically depending on the situation and different communicative functions (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2018). Emails are asynchronous and their authors have an opportunity to revise them based on the format compatible with their particular context before sending them (Pratama 2019). However, faculty members usually complain about the informal styles of emails they receive from their students and claim that they sometimes have impolite tones, lack appropriate formality, have inappropriate greetings or closings or even simply lack them (Campillo 2018). This arises from students' lack of awareness of different factors including the use of mitigations, the choice of the form of address, and the type of greetings and closings which might influence the level of politeness in their emails (DiBartolomeo 2021).

2.4. Previous Studies on Politeness in Email

Digital or computer-mediated interaction is an inseparable component of everyday life and therefore the attempt to the scrutiny of different facets of CMC including emails is no surprise (Graham & Hardaker 2017). From the perspective of politeness theory as a conceptual framework, the nature of email has been recently addressed by numerous researchers from different angles. For instance, Níkleva (2017) investigated the markers of (im)politeness in student-instructor interactions in emails at the university level. The results indicated that the level of politeness in the students' emails did not meet the politeness adequacy required for this low-to-high type of interaction. In fact, the participants' email messages lacked politeness markers and linguistic correctness to some extent. However, the phase of intervention helped the students make significant progress in politeness strategies, linguistic accuracy, spelling, and the usage of emoticons. It was then suggested that writing email as an independent discourse genre needs to be taught to students at different educational levels. Almoaily (2018) also discovered EFL students' awareness and use of salutations as a politeness marker in academic emails. The types of email analyzed in this study were highly formal as they were the first-time contact with a supervisor and there was a high social distance between the students and that faculty member. The results indicated that only a small proportion of email messages consisted of formal greetings and the majority of them contained informal or null greetings. It was concluded that, as the participants lacked the essential knowledge of politeness cues in formal emails, they need to be provided with an opportunity for politeness etiquette training.

Another study by Campillo (2018) analyzed the use of structural politeness markers by Spanish students in their first-contact emails to their lecturer. One group of participants was asked to employ their mother tongue in their email message and the other was supposed to use English as a foreign language. The findings revealed that both groups, regardless of their language, were not aware of the degree of formality required for openings in this type of email interaction. Contrarily, in their choice of closings, they showed deference to the lecturer. In light of the gained

results, Campillo suggested teaching students how to write appropriate salutations as an urgent task. Moreover, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2018) examined the nature of requests to faculty members made by the students via email interaction. It was revealed that the participants who preferred utilizing highly formal address terms in writing emails to a faculty member who is seen as an authority. On the contrary, they tended to employ direct strategies to make even high imposition requests signifying the students' inability to adapt the level of directness in their strategies to the degree of imposition. It was then concluded that, as their request strategies did not meet the appropriate level of politeness, they caused face-threatening acts which led to the imposition on their professor. University applied linguistics lecturers' perception of (im)politeness in the academic email genre was also scrutinized by Hashemian and Farhang-Ju (2019). It was found that the participants' perception of polite email etiquette was influenced by the appropriate use of openings and closings, linguistic accuracy, and the level of request directness. More precisely, both appropriate pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic aspects of language seemed to be prominent in the view of lecturers.

Furthermore, Savić (2019) analyzed email requests of a group of Norwegian students regarding the range and frequency of the opening and closing occurrence and their variation based on the degree of request imposition and the lecturer-student social distance. A high frequency of opening and closing occurrence was revealed signifying the students' orientation to rapport–building. Besides, while a preference for respect was identified in closings, a tendency for familiarity and solidarity was found in openings. Also, Pham and Ye (2020) investigated politeness strategies utilized by Vietnamese students while sending request emails to their professors. It was revealed that the participants' mother tongue greatly influenced their email writing as they overused the word 'please'. Besides, they were revealed to lack knowledge of the honorific language and sociopragmatic competence due to the inflexible use of fixed lexical devices and phrases in every context. It was then suggested that students' sociopragmatic and intercultural awareness should be raised. In addition, Codina-Espurz (2021) explored the impact of power and social distance on Spanish students' use of requestive and politeness strategies. Unexpectedly, students employed more indirect strategies, a higher number of politeness elements, and more mitigation in email messages sent to a person of an equal status such as their peers than in high-to-low email interactions with their professors. This reveals students' concern about their classmates' face and maintaining their interpersonal relationships. Besides, they might consider the request as a simple transaction between them and their professor in the academic context pursuing no personal relationship. Finally, Konuk (2021) investigated the email literacy of a group of students at higher-level education and revealed that they had problems with spelling and punctuation, paragraph structure, the level of language formality, contact information, opening and closing statements, etc. In view of these findings, the necessity of teaching email etiquette to students was highlighted.

3. Purpose of the Study

A great deal of early research was conducted on asynchronous communications such as emails within the CMC environment. Since then, however, the scope of using emails has been expanded from business communications to personal connections or interactions in academic and professional contexts. Therefore, the idea of what forms (im)politeness in emails has been widened and changed significantly, particularly with respect to the audience (Graham & Hardaker 2017). In such an evolving context, email users might encounter new challenges regarding the use of appropriate language while addressing interlocutors of particularly higher status (Campillo 2018) and might commit a face-threatening act unintentionally as they lack the knowledge of politeness netiquettes. Consequently, further studies on email communications are warranted to shed more light on the nature of emails and factors which cause an email to be considered as (im)polite (Oandasan 2021). In order to bridge this gap, this study strived to expand the study by Bunz and Campbell (2004) who adopted accommodation theory as a conceptual framework of their study and scrutinized the extent to which the use of verbal politeness markers including 'thank you' and 'please' and structural politeness elements, such as salutations and closings in email messages, influence the level of politeness in native students' response emails.

The current research presented in this paper investigated the same issue on Iranian non-native students. Therefore, the following research questions were pursued:

1. Do non-native English speaking university students accommodate politeness in email messages by mirroring verbal markers (i.e., 'please' and 'thank you') in a response email?

2. Do non-native English speaking university students accommodate politeness in email messages by mirroring structural elements (i.e., salutation and closing remark) in a response email?

4. Methodology

4.1. Participants

Seventy-three Iranian non-native English speaking university students enrolled in a general English course were selected through convenience sampling to participate in the current study (n =73, response rate of 81%). C onvenience sampling was used based on availability and voluntary basis. There were 21 (29%) female and 52 (71%) male subjects with Persian as their mother tongue. The average English language proficiency level of the students was intermediate. All the students were Engineering majors. The students' ages ranged from 18 to 24, but the majority of the participants were 18 (17%) or 19 (59%) years old. On average, the participants used email one (19%), two (30%), or three-to-four (15%) hours per week. Also, they had been using email for approximately three to six years. Besides,

while 42% of the subjects reported using email primarily for task-related purposes, such as school or work, 19% of them claimed to use email secondarily for social reasons such as interacting with family and friends.

4.2. Instrumentation

A self-report questionnaire developed and tested by Bunz and Campbell (2004) was used for this study. The participant's demographics including age and sex and email use information, specifically years of email use, the amount of email use per week, and the types of email (work/ school and personal/social usage) were assessed (see appendix A). In fact, the only materials used in the current study were email messages that asked for the participants' demographic information (using the aforementioned questionnaire) and their reason for participation in the study. Four emails with different short messages consisting of different politeness markers were sent to the participants. More precisely, the messages contained either: (1) verbal politeness markers including the phrases 'please', 'thank you', or expressions such as 'I would appreciate' or 'I'm grateful'; (2) structural politeness elements which included salutations and closing sign-offs; (3) both verbal and structural politeness markers; or (4) no politeness elements at all (see short messages in appendix B). The participants were assembled randomly into four groups and each group received one of the four different messages.

4.3. Data Collection Procedure

In order to collect data, a number of students from Sharif University of Technology in Iran were invited to take part in the current study via email and were provided with enough information about the research project. The subjects who gave their informed consent to participate were informed by their instructor that a professor from an American university is looking for subjects to fill out a survey for a study being conducted on the email used by university students. All the students were provided with a free email account by their university and were asked to send their email addresses to their English course instructor. They were further told that the professor would contact them via email containing more information about the project.

Later, the students were divided randomly into four groups and each received a different email message from the American professor, whose pseudo-identity was Dr. Davidson. The reason why an American identity was selected for the professor was the complaints made by the targeted participants about sending emails to foreign professors who either do not answer them or consider them rude. Therefore, the current study aimed at investigating the root of this problem. Also, no first name was mentioned for this professor to prevent the gender factor from influencing the participants' responses. Besides, in order to neutralize the impact of the existing student-instructor relationships on the level of politeness in the participants' responses, rather than a familiar professor, an unknown professor was selected.

The email messages aimed at stimulating a reply that could be later studied to determine if the students experienced any accommodation to the professor's email. Since at least two or three sentences in the response message would be necessary to allow an opportunity for convergence to occur, the professor's email asked the students to explain their reasons why they wished to participate in the present study. Finally, the students' responses were saved in the excel file for data analysis.

4.4. Data Analysis

In order to explore whether the four groups of participants accommodated to different levels of politeness in email messages in their responses and indicate if there was a significant difference among the responses provided by each group*,* a one-way ANOVA was used along with the calculation of means and standard deviations. The first group received an email including verbal politeness markers, the second group received an email consisting of structural politeness elements, the third group received an email with both verbal and structural politeness elements, and the fourth one received an email with no politeness elements. These four groups made up the independent variables. The total of the politeness indicators (total politeness score), in the response emails, made up the dependent variables.

The measurement process to determine the total politeness score was a simple form of content analysis. First, words or terms that were considered politeness indicators were identified for use in the coding scheme. Then, verbal and structural politeness markers in the email responses were identified and counted. Student responses containing expressions of 'please', 'thank you', 'I would appreciate', or 'I'm grateful' were counted as including verbal politeness markers. Response messages which contained a salutation and/or a closing were counted as including a structural politeness element.

5. Results

In this section, the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data is presented.

5.1. The Result of Descriptive Statistics and One-way ANOVA

This study investigated politeness as an element of communication accommodation in email between a professor and university students. The research sought to provide information on whether politeness context cues are accommodated by the students. The results of the SPSS analysis are listed in Table 1 presenting descriptive statistics and Table 2 showing the one-way ANOVA results.

According to the Table above, the participants' responses to the third version of the email consisting of both verbal and structural politeness markers contained the most politeness indicators (M = 2.25, STD = 1.39), followed by responses to the second version of the email including just structural politeness markers (M = 1.76, STD = 1.044), and the fourth version of email with no verbal and

structural politeness markers (M = 1.67, STD = 1.23). Responses to the first version of the email consisting of just verbal politeness markers contained the fewest politeness elements (M = 1.58, STD = 1.579).

Table 1. **Descriptive Statistics**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Version 1	26	1.58	1.57	0	6
Version 2	21	1.76	1.04	0	4
Version 3	16	2.25	1.39	0	5
Version 4	12	1.67	1.23	0	4
Total	75	1.79	1.34	0	6

Then, one-way ANOVA was run to specify the significance of differences among the participants' responses to different versions of email messages (Table 2). Checking the f-values with f-critical for the distribution of F with the appropriate degrees of freedom, and overall F (F observed) revealed no meaningful differences among different versions, F (3) = 0.869, p = 0.462.

Table 2. **One-way ANOVA**

	Sum of Squares(SS)	df	Mean Square (MS)	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4.764	3	1.588	.869	.462
Within Groups	129.822	71	1.828		
Total	134.587	74			

The findings in the Table above indicate that the difference between the means of the responses to the different versions of email received by the students was not significant enough to allow the researchers to say there are any differences. The small differences between the means that were found were likely either due to chance or other possible factors but not due to which version the student received. As a result of this statistical non-significance, no further post hoc tests were performed. Thus, it can be concluded that the participating students did not accommodate verbal or structural politeness markers in this particular genre of email writing.

5.2. The Examples of Email Responses to the First Version of Email

Looking more closely at the following examples from the participants' responses will give more insight into the issue under investigation. In response to the first version of the email which contained verbal politeness markers only, one of the participants sent the following message:

> *Helping such international research aiming at the enhancement of my countrymen's life is a must; consequently, I will participate in it to boost the progress of human being's lifestyle.*

As indicated in the example above, none of the elements of politeness was used by the targeted participant. He did not even accommodate politeness in his response by mirroring verbal markers in the email received from the professor. Another participant answered the first version of the email in this way:

> **Hello** Mr. Davidson,
> *I just wanted to help you to make a more valid survey.*

In this case, the student began his email message with a simple greeting as he said "*Hello Mr. Davidson*". This can be considered as a structural politeness marker. However, no element of verbal politeness was observed revealing that the participant did not adjust the level of politeness in his response to the one in the received email.

5.3. The Examples of Email Responses to the Second Version of Email

In response to the second version of the email which consisted of just structural politeness markers, one of the participants revealed a slight accommodation:

> *Actually, I prefer email as a means of communication. So, I think it is an amazing opportunity to participate in such research.*
> **Kind regards**
> *Amin Karimi (pseudonym)*

In this example, the participant ended his message with a formal closing, i.e. 'Kind regards', which is an indicator of structural politeness. However, this student ignored the significance of salutations in writing emails, particularly to a person of higher status as his email message contained no greeting. This indicated the participant's incomplete knowledge of structural politeness markers in the email genre. In response to the same version of the email, another participant sent the message below:

> *I participated in this activity to help you to conduct your study.*
> *I **wish** this project to be done well and its results help to have a more successful society.*

The only sign of politeness in the example above was the use of the verbal marker 'wish' in the second line. However, this message did not include any greetings or closings signifying that this student did not adapt the level of politeness in her response to the received email containing structural politeness elements.

5.4. The Examples of Email Responses to the Third Version of Email

Regarding the third version of the email consisting of both verbal and structural markers, one of the participants replied in this way:

> ***Dear*** *Dr. Davidson*
> *I attended this test because I wanted to have a part in research as an Iranian resident. And I also wanted to know what other people in the world think about these questions.*

The only element of politeness in the example above is that this message started with a salutation, i.e. "Dear Dr. Davidson". However, there was not any trace of verbal politeness markers throughout the whole message. Besides, no closing was written at the end of the email. Based on the available evidence, it is obvious that this student lacked enough knowledge of the politeness elements necessary in the formal email genre. Therefore, the use of greeting at the beginning of the message could be possibly by chance rather than the student's awareness of the existing politeness strategies. Another student's response to the third version of the email was as follows:

> *I will participate in this research to get more information about students in Iran and their interests and introduce Iranian students to academic groups.*

Although the email sent by the professor included politeness elements at both verbal and structural levels, no sign of accommodation was observed in this example. In fact, none of the elements of politeness was used by this student.

5.5. The Examples of Email Responses to the Fourth Version of Email

In response to the fourth version of the email including no verbal or structural politeness markers, one of the participating students sent the following message:

> *As a freshman, I believe that participating in such research increases my knowledge and ability. Besides, I like topics related to technology and its uses in life.* ***Thank you*** *for considering my answers in your research.*

In this case, the participant finished her message with the verbal politeness expression of 'thank you' disregarding the fact that her received email contained no sign of politeness. Therefore, she was not completely under the influence of the level of politeness in the received email. Another participant replied the same message in this way:

> *I think it would be nice to help such inexhaustible researchers who work for us in order to have a better life. If these researches could change the new age even a little, I'm a lucky one to have an effect on this happening. Finally,* ***thank you*** *for your scientific works.*
> ***Best wishes*** *to you.*
> *Parsa Pirooz (pseudonym)*

Observing the instances of a verbal ('thank you') and structural (Best wishes') politeness markers in the example above reveals that the participant did not adjust the level of politeness in his response to that of the email received. These signs of deference in the students' response email might partly go back to his cultural background based on which people of a higher status deserve to receive respect.

However, as in other examples, in these two last cases the participants' knowledge of politeness indicators in the email genre also seems insufficient. More precisely, although some degrees of politeness could be traced through these messages, these participants did not use all politeness elements required for an academic email signifying their lack of awareness in this regard.

Overall, it was obvious that the participating non-native students in the current study were not thoroughly cognizant of the politeness principles in the academic email genre. Thus, the random traces of verbal or structural politeness markers within the response messages were more likely due to chance or factors other than accommodation to the level of politeness in received emails or knowledge of politeness elements in formal emails.

6. Discussion

The current study aimed at investigating whether non-native English speaking university students accommodate verbal and structural politeness markers in academic email interactions. Although existing research shows that email recipients detect politeness makers, consciously or not, and accommodate to the level of politeness in received emails by including similar indicators in their emails, this study showed that this might not be true in an EFL context. In fact, the findings indicated that contrary to previous research done by Bunz and Campell (2004), the targeted university students here did not accommodate either verbal or structural politeness cues in emails. However, the means and standard deviations revealed some slight differences. These differences in the means of the politeness level of four versions of the email showed that version 3, containing both verbal and structural politeness cues, stimulated the most polite responses. Version 2, containing structural cues, motivated the second level of polite responses. These findings are in agreement with the study done by Bunz and Campell (2004).

However, this study found that version 4, containing no politeness cues had higher means than version 1, containing verbal politeness cues only. It could be argued that in an EFL context and without instruction on how to write an academic email based on politeness principles in the English language context, possible factors such as L1 culture (power/respect hierarchy, age/respect hierarchy), and L1 linguistic structures have a greater impact on student responses compared to the need to converge and accommodate to politeness. While it cannot be proven in this study, cultural differences might be a factor affecting the unexpected results of this study. In the context of this study, there is an inherent expectation of respect, and therefore the level of politeness in situations where the power level or age level differs between participants. Individuals will most likely respond and react politely when engaged with an older person or a figure of authority (professor). Thus, the high-to-low professor-student relationship might cause the participating students to respond politely regardless of the nature of the email they received.

Another possible complication is the use of the word 'dear' as a structural politeness indicator. Indeed, in the participants' mother tongue (L1), the use of this

term has a higher emotional connotation than in English. These non-native students would normally use the term Agha = Mr. or Khanoum = Mrs. rather than 'dear' which translates literally into sweetheart or love. This factor is normally more prevalent in the culture of female students or when male students address female professors. As this study did not give the participant any clues about the sex of the professor, they could have elected to give more polite answers to be safe. The majority of the participants' reluctance to use this structural politeness marker might stem from the existing intercultural differences and the participants' lack of experience in communicating with international parties.

Such unexpected results probably caused by students' L1 culture were also observed in previous studies. For instance, Pham and Ye (2020) revealed that the participating Vietnamese students overused the verbal politeness marker ('please') and other hedges in their request email to their professor under the influence of their cultural background. In another study by Codina-Espurz (2021), Spanish students' use of more direct strategies and fewer politeness strategies and mitigation suggested that the participants might be employing their first language sociocultural norms in writing emails in the English language, as the student-professor relationship is not too distant in Spain and therefore it seemed unnatural to them to utilize a formal form of address. In view of this finding, what sounds significant is that raising students' intercultural awareness as the incomplete knowledge of the target language culture and over-reliance on the first language culture might cause pragmatic failure.

Scrutinizing the results of this study from the politeness theory perspective also revealed that the participating students' knowledge of politeness elements in the academic email genre was inadequate as they either randomly used verbal or structural politeness markers in their emails or completely neglected them. This finding which proved the participants' deficit knowledge of politeness strategies in academic emails is in alignment with the results of some studies conducted previously in this area. For example, Konuk (2021), investigating the nature of emails sent by students to their professors at higher-level education, indicated that they had problems with opening and closing statements. Campillo (2018) also revealed that the participants were not cognizant of the degree of formality required for openings in their first-contact email to their instructor. In another study by Almoaily (2018), only a small proportion of academic email messages consisted of formal greetings, while the majority of them contained informal or null greetings. In the same direction, Níkleva (2017) showed that the participants' email messages to their instructor lacked politeness markers and linguistic correctness to some degree signifying their lack of awareness of politeness elements in the low-to-high type of interaction. Overall, what was concluded at the end of these studies was the necessity of training students on how to meet politeness requirements in their emails.

7. Conclusion

Investigating the extent to which non-native English speaking university students adjust the level of politeness in their response emails to that of the emails received from their professor indicated no desire for convergence. Besides, comparing the means of the politeness level of four email versions and a more in-depth analysis of email responses suggested the probable impact of the participants' L1 language and culture on the politeness strategies utilized by them while writing academic emails. Moreover, it was revealed that the participating students lacked adequate knowledge of politeness etiquettes in the academic email genre as they either randomly used verbal or structural politeness markers in their emails or completely ignored them.

As a result of this lack of awareness, serious steps need to be taken to provide students who are involved in email communications with the opportunity to be trained on how to use the right politeness netiquettes including appropriate greetings and closings while writing emails, particularly in contexts where a high level of formality dominates, such as sending emails to professors, supervisors, or instructors who are of a higher social status. Besides, students' awareness of intercultural differences should be raised to avoid the probable pragmatic failure. Therefore, the first implication is for professors who could design a course for English speaking university students addressing how to write an academic email according to the target language politeness principles. The second implication is for material developers who should consider email writing as an independent genre of writing and use materials aiming to booster students' knowledge of politeness etiquette in academic emails. It is also suggested that instructors should train students in the appropriate language and set of politeness procedures required to communicate effectively in emails. The last implication is for students who should be cognizant of politeness strategies and cultural differences to be able to communicate with their instructors more properly.

In view of the findings here, there are some suggestions for further studies. First of all, as the non-native students in the study did not adjust the level of politeness in their response email, in contrast with the results of the previous study conducted on non-native speakers, it is recommended to replicate the same study in other EFL contexts to see if the results will vary or not. Also, it is suggested to conduct some intervention studies to raise students' awareness of email politeness markers and intercultural differences to investigate their progress in email writing. Finally, exploring other social and contextual factors including the level of formality (student to student or professor to professor), age, the experience of email use, gender, and the communicative accommodation in personal or professional email messages are avenues for future studies.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Self Report Scale of Email Usage and Demographics, Administered via Email
This survey consists of items designed to provide information about your use of electronic mail and demographics. There are no right or wrong answers. Please respond to each item according to the scale provided.

1. How many years have you been using email to interact with others?
    (1) Less than 1
    (2) 1–2
    (3) 3–4
    (4) 5–6
    (5) 7–8
    (6) 9–10
    (7) More than 10

2. How many hours per week would you estimate you currently spend using email to interact with others?

    (1) 0
    (2) 1
    (3) 2
    (4) 3–4
    (5) 5–6
    (6) 7–8
    (7) 9–10
    (8) 11–12
    (9) 13–14
    (10) 15+

3. I use/would use email primarily for ...

    (1) interacting socially with acquaintances, friends, or family
    (2) school, work, or other task-related purposes
    (3) gathering information on current events/special interests
    (4) gathering information about an upcoming purchase
    (5) all of the above
    (6) none of the above

4. I use/would use email secondarily for ...

    (1) interacting socially with acquaintances, friends, or family
    (2) school, work, or other task-related purposes
    (3) gathering information on current events/special interests
    (4) gathering information about an upcoming purchase
    (5) all of the above
    (6) none of the above

5. What age group are you a member of?

    (1) 17–18
    (2) 19
    (3) 20
    (4) 21
    (5) 22–23
    (6) 24–26
    (7) 27–29
    (8) 30–35
    (9) 36–45
    (10) 46+

6. What is your sex?

    (1) female
    (2) male

Appendix B

Email message 1: Verbal politeness markers

You expressed interest in being a participant in a research study I am conducting. Thank you for that. Participation would involve filling out a short survey asking about your uses of electronic mail and basic demographic information. If you are still interested, please send a response to me via email and I will forward the survey to you. As a visiting professor, I am not familiar with the research requirements of the COMS 130 course, so please also provide a brief explanation of why you wish to be a participant in this study. If you are no longer interested, please disregard this message. Thanks again for your interest.
Dr. Davidson

Message 2: Structural politeness markers

Dear [insert participant first name].
Recently you expressed interest in being a participant in a research study I am conducting. Participation would involve filling out a short survey asking about your uses of electronic mail and basic demographic information. If you are still interested, send a response to me via email and I will forward the survey to you. As a visiting professor, I am not familiar with the research requirements of the COMS130 course, so also provide a brief explanation of why you wish to be a participant in this study. If you are no longer interested, disregard this message.
Regards,
Dr. Davidson

Message 3: Both Verbal and structural politeness markers

Dear [insert participant first name],
Thank you for expressing interest in being a participant in a research study I am conducting. Participation would involve filling out a short survey asking about your uses of communication technology and basic demographic information. If you are still interested, please send a response to me via email and I will forward the survey to you. As a visiting professor, I am not familiar with the research requirements of the COMS130 course, so please also provide a brief explanation of why you wish to be a participant in this study. If you are no longer interested, please disregard this message.
Thanks again.
Regards,
Dr. Davidson

Message 4: None (Neither verbal markers nor structural elements)

Recently you expressed interest in being a participant in a research study I am conducting. Participation would involve filling out a short survey asking about your uses of communication technology and basic demographic information. If you are still interested, send a response to me via email and I will forward the survey to you. As a visiting professor, I am not familiar with the research requirements of the COMS 130 course, so also provide a brief explanation of why you wish to be a participant in this study. If you are no longer interested, disregard this message.

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