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Facework in teacher-student email interactions

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Abstract

Two trends have become prominent in higher education worldwide. On the one hand, globalization has favored the expansion and influence of the English language. On the other hand, email has become one of the main forms of communication in academic settings, especially in teacher-student out-of-class correspondence. While these facts have increasingly attracted scholarship attention, studies in education seem to focus more on the students' display of face(work) alone, while neglecting the teacher's counterpart. To redress this imbalance, the present study aims to examine face(work) as displayed in students' email requests for consideration (e.g., on late assignments submission and class attendance) and teachers' responses. A qualitative analysis of 20 sets of teacher-student interactions reveals different strategies opted for by the students and the teacher in face(work) management. Drawing on face-constituting theory, the findings show that whilst the students are concerned with their own face alone, the teacher is concerned with how to avoid classroom conflicts in the way that attends to one's own face, the students' face and the classroom harmony. In this way, the management of face(work) operates in a complex and dynamic way that allows the co-construction and reaffirmation of their respective identities. For example, whilst the students' actions overlook the relevance of the interdependence relation between them, their peers and the teacher, which is critical for the harmony of the classroom, the teacher's actions privilege connectedness over separateness. Furthermore, the findings suggest that cultural specificities governing the backgrounds of both the teacher and the students are not always influential in the management of face in email interactions.

Keywords: *facework, im/politeness, requests, emails, teacher-student interaction*

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Сохранение лица в электронной переписке преподавателей и студентов

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Аннотация

В современном высшем образовании можно отметить две важные тенденции: (1) вызванное глобализацией расширение и влияние английского языка и (2) широкое использование электронной переписки, ставшей одной из основных форм общения в академической среде, особенно среди преподавателей и студентов. Хотя электронная коммуникация в сфере образования является объектом многих исследований, в центре внимания находятся в основном нацеленные на поддержание лица стратегии студентов. Чтобы устранить этот дисбаланс, в данной статье ставится цель проанализировать как стратегии студентов (в электронных письмах, содержащих запросы о поздней сдаче заданий, посещениях занятий и т. д.), так и стратегии преподавателей (в ответных письмах). Качественный анализ 20 примеров взаимодействия преподавателя и студента, проведенный с использованием теории конституирования лица, выявил различия в стратегиях, используемых студентами и преподавателями для поддержания лица. Результаты показывают, что студентов главным образом заботит их собственное лицо, в то время как преподаватель стремится избегать конфликтов в учебном процессе, проявляя заботу о своем лице, лице студентов и сохранении гармонии в классе. Таким образом, «управление лицом» является сложным и динамичным процессом, позволяющим совместно создавать и утверждать идентичности участников коммуникации. Например, если действия студентов не учитывают важности отношений взаимозависимости между ними, их однокурсниками и преподавателем, которые имеют решающее значение для гармонии в учебном процессе, преподаватель отдает предпочтение единению, а не разобщенности. Кроме того, результаты показывают, что культурные различия между преподавателем и студентами не всегда влияют на стратегии сохранения лица при общении по электронной почте. **Ключевые слова:** работа по сохранению лица, (не)вежливость, запрос, электронные письма, взаимодействие между преподавателем и студентом

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1. Introduction

In the past three decades, two facts have become prominent in higher education worldwide. On the one hand, globalization has favored the expansion and influence of the English language. On the other hand, email has become one of the main forms of communication in academic settings, especially in teacher-student out-of-class correspondences. The common denominator of these two realities is that they both revolve around and involve communicative strategies, discursive practices as well as the style of interaction predetermined by both situational and cultural contexts of interaction (Codina-Espurz 2021, Alemi & Maleknia 2023, Eslami et al. 2023). Because of this, the teaching process becomes an opportunity for face(work) to

operate as a sensitive matter for both the students and the teachers (Gordon & Luck 2012, Economidou-Kogetsidis 2016). Conceptually, face is defined in one of the following standpoints. From a cognitive perspective, face is “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself/herself” (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61). From a sociopsychological standpoint, face is “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself/herself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (Goffman 1982: 5). Face(work) can be understood as a process where one’s face ascription can be contested and altered in a given interaction (Haugh 2009). It involves a myriad of interactional concerns, including self-face identity, sense of worth, dignity, and is associated with issues such as respect, honor, status, reputation, and competence (Ting-Toomey 2005, Spencer-Oatey 2008). Accordingly, and depending on the context, face(work) is sensitive and can be gained, lost, threatened, saved, preserved, enhanced or challenged (Holtgraves 1992, Eslami & Ko 2015). Because of these concerns, it is often argued that face(work) is constitutive of interaction in that (a) it materializes in the evaluation by others of the behavior of individuals as well as groups (Arundale 2006) and (b) it constitutes a joint accomplishment of interlocutors in a given interaction (Huagh 2009).

The present study aims to examine face(work) as displayed by both the students and the teacher in email interaction in students’ requests for consideration (e.g., on the late assignments submission and non-attendance). To this end, it analyzes face(work) in 20 sets of teacher-student interactions. *Set of interactions* is used here to refer to the emails that are shared between the student and the teacher in one instance of interaction. These emails were initiated by second-year Business Administration students. The students were enrolled in English for specific purposes (ESP, hereafter) a subject within the Business Administration Bachelor’s degree program at Universidad Europea de Madrid (UEM, hereafter). The students’ average English level was a B2. Based on their backgrounds, the group involves national and international students. The international students came from different countries, including Italy, Venezuela, Colombia, Argentina, Ecuador, Peru, Panama, Morocco, and China. The teacher, on the other hand, has been teaching ESP for over 5 years of experience. The 20 sets of emails were sent in the following order. 3 sets were initiated by Peruvian students; 5 sets – by Spanish students; 2 sets – by Italian students; 6 sets – by Venezuelan students, 1 set – by a Chinese student, and 3 sets – by Panamanian students. The multicultural nature of the data allows for an analysis that combines face1 (i.e., the way the participants show sensitivity to face concerns) with face2 (i.e., the theoretical interpretation of what face(work) is), as well as an exploration of how cultural differences play a role (if any) in the management of face(work). In terms of face1, the analysis focuses on the way the participants themselves invoke face concerns in the interaction. In terms of face 2, the analyst provides an interpretation of face(work) against the backdrop of face-constituting theory.

The highlight in the literature is the fact that different cultures involve different approaches to face concerns in teacher-student email communication (Sifianou 2013, Lü 2018, Bou-Franch 2011). Studies often approach face(work) as related to both politeness and impoliteness. It has, for example, been shown that whereas Chinese students avoid confronting directly the face of their western teachers as a way to show respect, their actions are misunderstood by their western teachers as backstabbing or secretive manipulation (Lü 2018). Furthermore, depending on the level of imposition of their emails, the students may opt for directness or indirectness (Bou-Franch 2011, Salazar-Campillo 2023). For example, it has been indicated that Spanish students may initiate emails in a formal way, but tend to decrease the level of formality in their responses to the teachers in the follow-up emails. The growing preference for the use of *tú* (instead of *usted*) has been observed in student-to-teacher emails (Salazar-Campillo 2023). Similarly, it has been demonstrated that Greek students are less likely to use informal language with faculty (Sifianou 2013). Bjorge (2007) uncovers the cultural role of power differences and asymmetric relationship in the use of formality in emails, asserting that students with high power distance culture origins would employ more formal opening strategies than those from low power distance ones. Comparative studies on native and non-native students' emails to teachers have questioned the argument that computer-mediated communication is a lean medium in which it is difficult to achieve interpersonal communication, arguing that students attend to relational goals in their email communication in the same way they do in face-to-face communication (Eslami & Ko 2015). Gordon and Luke (2012:113), for example, identify discursive strategies that play a role in building professional identity for supervisees via accomplishing facework. These strategies, as the authors contend, are “productive because they honor both positive and negative face – which [is understood] as competence and connections to others, as well as individual autonomy”.

The issue with previous studies exploring face(work) in education is, however, that they put focus on the students' display of face(work) alone, while neglecting the teacher's counterpart, which the present paper intends to redress. It may be argued that because teachers and students are the two main actors in the teaching process, the display of face(work) by the students through emails sent to the teacher will likely prompt the enactment of face(work) by the teacher, since face(work), as has been evidenced, is inherent in human interaction (Goffman 1982, Spencer-Oatey 2008, Arundale 2013, Ting-Toomey 2015).

What is specific about the present paper is that it analyzes face(work) in interaction dealing with issues directly connected to the guideline governing the subject as described below. The guideline is a document that provides the students with specific dates to submit assignments carried out at home. It also requires the students to attend at least 50% of the classes in order to have the right to take the final exam at the ordinary call. Failure to abide by this guideline may lead to the loss of the right to do the ordinary final test, leaving the extraordinary call as the

last and only option to pass the subject. This paper analyzes emails revolving around the issues regarding class attendance and assignment submission deadlines. These emails are sent either on the wake or the aftermath of assignment submission deadlines and/or the exam. To comply with the University ethics commission guidelines, personal information related to the participants stays confidential, and S and T will be used to refer to student and teacher, respectively.

Drawing on face-constituting theory, the paper examines how face concerns arise from teacher-student interaction as well as how face(work) is managed by the students as opposed to the teacher. Thus, this paper intends to provide an answer to the following question:

- How is face(work) managed in the teacher–student interaction?

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section two reviews literature on teacher–student relationship in the classroom. Section three contextualizes face-constituting theory. Section 4 describes the unit of analysis. The results are analyzed in section 5. The last section discusses the findings before providing concluding remarks.

2. Note on teacher–student relationship and classroom practices

Teacher–student relationship is not just critical for the success or failure of the teaching and learning process, but it is also a form of relationship in which interaction revolves around power asymmetry (Sudzina et al. 1997, Eslami et al. 2023). As an educator, the teacher holds an institutional power that turns him/her into a leader of the activities in the classroom and an authority responsible for the students' feelings, wellbeing, transparency as well as conflict management and adequate treatment. The student, on the other hand, is not just expected to carry out their actions according to the norms of the institution (which are usually reinforced by the teacher in the classroom), but also, the student expects the teacher to be supportive, understanding, caring and fair (Sudzina et al. 1997, Lü 2018, Salazar-Campillo 2023, Alemi & Maleknia 2023). Thus, the teaching process has to be negotiated through interaction. In this asymmetric and interpersonal relationship, any interaction, however, becomes an opportunity for face(work) to operate as a sensitive matter for both the students and the teachers in the sense that any activity or action that is involved in the teaching and learning process (i.e., rules enforcement, classroom management, lectures, feedback, announcement) revolves around self-presentation, competing identities, competence, etc., all of which are key in the success or failure of teaching practices (Eslami & Ko 2015).

Moreover, it is also important to point out that student-teacher interaction revolves around the premises of *community of practice*, defined by Eckert & McConnet-Ginet (1992: 464) as “an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices emerge during this mutual endeavor”. In and out of the classroom, both the students and the teacher are actors responsible for a positive or negative teaching and learning atmosphere (Economidou-

Kogetsidis 2016). Teaching/learning activities are often carried out under the understanding of shared values and practices. Fairness in the education process is often the collected good for both the teacher and the student. As any community of practice, teaching/learning is a practice conditioned by time as academic modules are often taught in a semester period (Gordon & Luke 2012). This creates a temporal community or practice. This is why, following Arundale (2006, 2013), this paper relies on both first- and second-order understandings of the interactions so as to interpret face(work) as an emergent outcome arising in the student and the teacher's producing and interpreting not just sequences of emails, but situated their interpretation within the context of the interaction.

3. Note on face-constituting theory

Face-constituting theory grounds the analysis of face(work) in the ethnomethodology and conversational analysis in a way that allows researchers to study face(work) as something accomplished by individuals within interaction (Arundale 2013). Face(work) is what individuals have a fairly good understanding of and their turns in interaction become determinant in the display of face(work). It is in this sense that face-constituting theory is often seen as a social constructivist approach that explains face(work) as “the product of a process by which social actors negotiate the meanings for actions and situations” (Haugh 2009: 16). In other words, any manifestations of face(work), including face threatening, face saving, face enhancing, face loss or face redressing, come to existence not as an interactional prerequisite, but as the result of social engagement in which individuals evaluate one another. These manifestations are emergent outcomes of the production and interpretation of sequences of turns. The implication of this is that face(work) involves evaluation and is an evaluative outcome of social interaction, accomplished interactively by the interactants.

The issue with face-constituting theory is, however, that its focus on interaction alone disregards not just the idea that interaction is always dependent on a myriad of factors, including context, time, background, the relation between interactants, etc., but also the fundamental role of social norms such rights and obligations which often shape the way interactants manage face concerns (Locher 2013, Spencer-Oatey 2008). As will be argued, when a student writes an email to the teacher, he/she relies on the context of the interaction as well as the existence of teacher-student relationship in the projection of their image. All of this happens under the framework of rights and obligations that govern students' and teachers' actions in a teaching/learning environment.

4. Data and methodology

The lack of research on teacher's and students' interaction in the language department at UEM, where the students are mostly international, is a matter of concern in that it hides a good understanding of the different ways both the students

and the teachers approach interaction which is key in the teaching/learning process. As explained earlier, the corpus analyzed here is composed of 20 sets of email interaction between the teacher and the students. While the present paper focuses on the data gathered from one teacher, the long-term goal in the future is to expand knowledge and explore data from more than one teacher. The paper is therefore exploratory in nature. The conclusions are drawn to the extent to which the corpus allowed, thus avoiding speculation and extrapolation. This is also the reason why this study is merely qualitative research that relies on the ethical approval from the university ethics committee.

As pointed out earlier, the students' English level was B2. This level is determined by the university policy which requires the students to possess a B2 level in English in order to attend the ESP subject, which is a subject taught in the second year of a four-year bachelor's degree program. Evidently, having a B2 level in English may not imply that the students are fully proficient in English, which explains the mistakes found in some emails.

The unit of analysis adopted in this paper is every email in its entirety regardless of its length. This is in tune with previous studies (Bou-Franch 2011, Salazar-Campillo 2023). Accordingly, I differentiate between the emails that deal with issues regarding assignment submission deadlines from the emails that deal with the final test. The first category, which represents 20% of the data, includes emails in which the students describe and explain the reason behind the delay in the submission of the assignment and argue over why the teacher should grant them an extension. This category also includes emails in which the students request a change to the schedule of interventions for oral presentation assignments. The second category, which represents 80% of the data, includes emails that deal with the issue regarding attendance to class. These emails are designed to explain the reason why the students failed to meet the requirement. The teacher's emails are responses to the students' requests.

In order to examine this teacher-student dynamics, the study draws on a conversation analysis approach (Haugh 2009, Arundale 2013). The mere idea is that participants attend to talk not for the talk's propositional content, nor as a simple medium of information, but because the participant always care about (a) the fact that their actions are done through talks and (b) the real consequences of those actions. Accordingly, no utterance is inherently face threatening or face enhancing, rather, any threat or support to face is both (a) achieved by the interpretation and evaluation of utterance in a particular interaction and (b) is therefore co-constituted in that given moment. It is in this sense that face(work) involves among other things (a) the awareness of one's position within a network of relationships, (b) the association with groups as well as individuals, (c) face may be given or gained as well as sacrificed in interaction (Haugh 2007).

Another aspect of conversation analysis is the importance of the context of the interaction. An examination of any talk must therefore account for not just the interaction in which the talk occurs, but also the importance of the context in which

the whole interaction takes place (Nikleva 2018). This is why face-constituting practitioners often see conversation analysis as a suitable approach to prioritize emic (first order) interpretation over etic (second order). This allows researchers to explore the relations among participants not as a summative property as often assumed in other theories (Spencer-Oaty 2008), but as a non-summative property that is created in situated interaction. In this sense, face(work) manifests as an “individual’s interpretation of our-relationship-at-this-moment” (Arundale 2013: 110). In other words, the interpretation of face(work) shall match the participants’ own understanding of their actions and the actions of their peers in interaction (Arundale 2006, Haugh 2009). Bearing this in mind, I analyze the student email and the teacher’s responses as two turns of interaction so as to provide a sequential analysis that takes into account “aspects of the currently invoked identity of the participant’ and ‘the history of their particular relationship, not only within the course of, but also prior to the conversation being examined” (Haugh 2007: 311). Finally, I also rely on Gordon and Luck’s (2012) approach which consists of repeatedly reading the data to identify strategies oriented toward facework.

5. Results of analysis

A data-driven examination of the 20 sets of emails allows to quantitatively categorize them in three different groups (Cf. table 1). The first group includes emails that expose emotional circumstances. Accordingly, the students highlight circumstances such as an illness or death to be the reason for their absence or delay in fulfilling an academic task in accordance with the guideline. The second group includes emails in which the students opt for self-promotion as an approach to make their case and justify their disregard for the guideline. The last group revolves around emails in which the students engage in deception where, for example, a fake document is sent to the teacher to justify the delay in the assignment submission or the absence to class.

Table 1. Motives behind the students’ requests

Emotional circumstances	Self-promotion /self-validation and excuses	Fake documentation
8	7	5

In what follows, I will zero in on the qualitative analysis of face(work) in each of these categories. For the sake of space, 4 illustrative excerpts will be analyzed. The analysis of the excerpt is provided as follows. First, the initial email from the student is provided. Then, the reply from the teacher is displayed. Finally, when there is another reply from the student, this is displayed last.

5.1. Dealing with emotional circumstances

Context: The schedule of the presentations corresponding to assignment 4 was made public by the teacher. After consulting the list, a student from Spain found out that their group was scheduled as the last to be presenting. As a result, the

student initiates an email in which he asks the teacher to rearrange the schedule and allow this student and his group to be the first to make the presentation. Face(work) in this interaction arises in terms of the student's approach to presenting their plea and the teacher's approach to providing an appropriate response.

Excerpt 1

S. Tomorrows presentation 11 Mayo 2023 en 18:14

Good afternoon, XX,

I write this message to ask you if my group (X & me) could be the first ones presenting because I need to go by 6 pm because I have to go visit my grandfather who is ill to the hospital in Toledo. Thanks in advance for your comprehension.

Your sincerely, XX

T. 11 Mayo 2023 en 18:56

Dear XX,

Thank you for your email. As much as I understand your case, I cannot make you present first at this point because the official schedule has been made available and all the students are already aware of their interventions. It would not be fair to the rest of the classmates.

The only option left is that you talk to your class who are scheduled to present first and if they agree to let your group present first, let me know and I will grant the change.

Best,

XX,

In this exchange, the relevance of facework is notable. The student projects an image of an individual in need of the teacher's favor. He/she wants to make the presentation as quickly as possible so as to be able to go visit the sick grandfather. The mention of his/her grandfather's illness is strategic in that it foregrounds emotion and projects an image of someone whose life circumstances require a special treatment from the teacher. Perhaps in the student's culture it is normal for a student to miss class due to a loved one's illness. The university attendance regulations, however, do not contemplate this. On the grounds that the teacher has the responsibility to be fair to not just one, but all of the students, the request could be seen as challenging the teacher's face, especially after the list of interventions has already been released. One may argue that the request here intends to test the teacher's authority in the sense that for the change to happen, it requires the teacher to review the premises on which the original list was issued.

In the response to the request, the teacher attempts to preserve face, first, by denying the student's request on the grounds that the program of the presentations has already been made public and that the class as a whole is aware of it. This rejection and refusal to grant the request, however, while preserving the teacher's authority face, may be outright face threatening to the student. Second, the teacher invokes the idea that any change made to the program after its publication would not be fair to the class as a whole. Third, the teacher offers a remedy to the student's request by allowing the student to seek the classmates' approval of the request. The image projected by the teacher here is threefold. First, the teacher creates a sense of understanding of the student's case (i.e., *as much as I understand your case*). The

teacher attempts to be sensitive to the student's face. Second, the teacher wants their authority to go unchallenged regardless of the circumstances, thus preserving and saving face. Third, by allowing the student to make a case before the rest of the classmates, the teacher diverts the responsibility and allows the rest of the class to have a say so as to restore credibility and faith in the teacher's decision. The harmony in teaching and learning activities resides in the teacher's ability to make balanced decisions for the students. The loss of trust in the teaching and learning process can be detrimental for both the teacher's and the students' faces. By giving the student the opportunity to make a case before the classmates, the teacher attempts to preserve harmony, save face and enhance mutual understanding and fairness among the students. It may be argued that the teacher is here aware that changing the schedule because of one student's request may create a negative atmosphere and potentially threaten the rest of the students' mood.

In this student-teacher interaction, face is more a sociopsychological property than a cognitive one (Goffman 1982, Arundale 2006). It shows the positive social values that the student and the teacher effectively and respectively claim. Another way to look at this exchange is an exploration of the relevance of connectedness and separateness dialectic (Arundale 2013). Drawing on grandfather's illness, the student engages in separateness and exhibits an attitude that shows differentiation, independence, detachment, autonomy, dissociation, divergence and distance to the rest of the class. It also implies to some extent that if it was not for the grandfather's illness, the student would go along with the original schedule. By allowing the students to consult with peers, the teacher engages in connectedness and exhibits an attitude that shows integration, interdependence, involvement, solidarity, association, congruence, closeness, and so on among relational partners.

5.2. Dealing with students' self-promotion, self-validation and excuses

Context: The following interaction comes about as a student from Venezuela becomes aware that he/she had failed to reach the 50% attendance record required to partake in the final exam. As such, the student initiates an email asking the teacher whether there is any alternative to overcome the low-attendance record and take the final exam. Although not all requests are face-threatening acts (Spencer-Oatey 2005), any request that implies a modification of the guidelines in the wake of the final exam can be perceived as face threatening in the sense that it requires the teacher to do something exceptional for the pleasure of the student.

In this interaction, the student recognizes that their attendance record does not allow them to partake in the exam. This projects an awareness and understanding of the norms guiding the teaching activities and a way to boost face in front of the teacher. Furthermore, the inability to formulate a justifiable reason leads the student to put up an offer, which is to do extra work so as to make up for poor attendance record before the exam date. The offer comes as a way to save face, assuming that not showing up to class throughout the semester is seen as the lack of consideration towards the teacher and the subject. It can also be seen as a marker of determination

if the offer is taken as implying that even though the student failed to attend a number of classes, he/she remains determined to do whatever it takes to amend the teacher's perception of them. However, even though the student indicates that there is no justification for missing the classes in the first line, he/she nevertheless gives an explanation to justify the request in a way that provides some background to the failure to show up to class. The student formulates their explanation around their English learning history (i.e., *I felt unmotivated throughout the course because of being doing english all my life 6 hours a week in a private school and I find the level a bit low in this class*). This is face threatening in that it implies that the English course taught throughout the semester was not worth the student's while.

Excerpt 2

S. Final Exam 17 Mayo 2023 en 20:09

Hi XX,

I am writing to you because i only have a 42% of attendance and i dont have any justification. I would like to know if i could any extra work to do the exam on may 26. I felt unmotivated throughout the course because of being doing english all my life 6 hours a week in a private school and I find the level a bit low in this class. Thats why i ve been missing to a lot of the classes. I understand that you cannot make any exceptions but i would like to know if i could do anything to take the exam on may 26.

T. 18 Mayo 2023 en 8:16

Dear XX,

Thank you for your email. Unfortunately, there is no thing I can do with respect to the attendance. According to the university norms, there no alternative rule with respect to attendance. The attendance cannot be compensated by any other work. The only provision when it comes to attendance is to go straight to extraordinary call (*convocatoria extraordinaria*). There is no thing I can do at this point. I do not think going to English class since one was 6 years old means that one has better level than others. I think we have done both difficult and easy stuff throughout the semester that could have allowed you to write much better, to speak more fluently, to listen more carefully, and to use English more adequately. Many of your classmates did exactly that. Look, for example, at the email you have just sent me, there is a couple of mistakes there that can be identified as B1 mistakes. That is why I do not think that the level of course was that low and yours was that high so that you can single-handedly decide not come to class. That is not how things work in academic settings.

I hope you understand,

Best wishes,

XX

S. 18 Mayo 2023 en 10:41

Okey XX,

¿Cuándo será la convocatoria extraordinaria? (When is the *extraordinay* call)

What is notable about this justification is twofold. On the one hand, there is a shift in terms of the projected image in the first sentence of the email. Even though the student seems to have a fair understanding of the norms of the subject, he/she quickly relies on their competences while attacking class level to justify the absence to class. The student values their competence positively and the class level negatively. This is consistent with Ting-Toomey's (2015: 325) argument that "the meaning of face is generally conceptualized as how we want others to see us and treat us and how we actually treat others in association with their social self-conception expectations". The attack on the contents of the subject can be

interpreted as a way to assert some sort of freedom of action. Arguably, what the student foregrounds is the idea that the teaching guideline can be overlooked on the basis of language competences. In other words, competent students would have the right to decide when to come to class, which in Brown and Levinson's (1987) model would be seen as both positive face, which is the desire to be appreciated and approved based on their competence, and negative face claim, which is the wish to be unimpeded by others, to be free to act as he/she chooses and not be imposed upon. However, the student ends the email recognizing the teacher's right and authority to grant or deny the request (i.e., *I understand that you cannot make any exceptions but i would like to know if i could do anything to take the exam on May 26*). Here, the student recognizes the teacher's power in terms of decision-making (see Bjorge 2007). In doing this, the student turns the table and relies on the teacher's decision. This is in a way a challenge that can threaten the teacher's face insofar as granting the request would imply overlooking and disregarding the guideline whereas granting it would show signs of favoritism toward potential high-flying students. A breach of the guideline by the teacher can be face threatening to the entire classroom. Moreover, foregrounding self-claimed competence as the reason for the absence to class brings face concerns for both the student and the teacher for the following reason. Self-promotion can become both a way to be vulnerable to any teacher's criticism and an opportunity to criticize the teaching planning, implying that if the teacher had designed high-level teaching contents, the students would have attended the classes. In this sense the student's stance here can be taken as not just a challenge to the teacher's teaching ability and planning, but that the course contents were inadequately designed and failed to meet the needs of all the students.

As can be seen in the teacher's response, the first paragraph reviews the extent to which the teaching guideline contemplates the attendance issue in order to formulate the denial to the student's request. The teacher points out that the guideline does not allow the attendance (or the lack thereof) to be compensated by any other way than showing up for class. The reliance on the guideline in the production of the rejection as well as the highlight of the extraordinary call can be interpreted as a way to show concerns to the student's face in a way that foregrounds the idea that the teacher's decision does not preclude the student's opportunity to pass the subject.

In the second paragraph, the teacher disputes the student's fundamental reason to have missed classes. The teacher asserts that going to private classes does not imply single-handedly deciding not to follow the norms of the institution. To avoid face loss inherent to the student's challenging the contents of the subject, the teacher argues that both easy and difficult contents were taught throughout the semester. This statement can be seen, at least in part, as an acceptance of the student's statement which pointed to the low-level contents.

Notably, however, the teacher's choice of words in the last lines of the email appears to challenge the student's claim about their English competence. The teacher pinpoints the student's email as evidence that the claim of having a high English level is not substantiated in the view of the mistakes found in the student's email. This explicit evaluation of the student's email can be seen as face threatening as it shows disagreement between what the student asserts to have and what the teacher believes the student has. This student-teacher interaction underscores the importance of evaluation in the manifestation of face(work). The student evaluates the contents of the subject and relies on that evaluation to justify their absence from class. The teacher, on the other hand, evaluates both the student's actions to formulate the response. Even though email is considered as an asynchronous medium that offers affordances such as time to reflect and plan what to say and how to manipulate linguistic cues to optimize self-presentation and self-expression, the student did not seem to have taken the time to proofread the email before sending it, which allows the teacher to use language competence against the students. This may point to the absence of seriousness in writing (i.e., the lack of linguistic competence) can contribute to the effect of facework.

In the follow-up email, the student is brief. The use of okey, which is here interpreted as denoting approval and agreement, in this follow-up email is not just an acceptance, but can also arguably be an indication of face loss. It shows both an understanding of the teacher's point and the student's lack of counterargument to further support their earlier point. The student's question about the date of the extraordinary call here (i.e., *¿Cuándo será la convocatoria extraordinaria?*) becomes an opportunity to recover from the painful experience of face loss. Having failed to convince the teacher through self-promotion, the only way left is to reclaim their identity and recognize that, as a student who has failed to meet the requirements, he/she has the obligation to take the exam at the extraordinary call. It is also important to point out the role of codeswitching here. The use of Spanish here is indexical of the shared multilingual context in which Spanish is another mutual language of interaction between the student and the teacher besides English. Codeswitching is often seen as a verbal strategy by which multilingual speakers change a linguistic code within the same speech event as a claim to culture and sociolinguistic identity. The student may have resorted to Spanish because it is their L1 resorting to which can play an effective role and allow an individual to regain confidence in themselves after face loss, often seen as a painful and emotional experience (Spencer-Oatey 2008).

A similar case of self-validation is described below. The interaction was initiated by a student from Peru upon realizing their failure to reach the 50% attendance record required to take the final exam. The student engages in other-blaming so as to avoid taking responsibility for failure to comply with the 50% attendance requirement.

Excerpt 3

S. 24 Mayo 2023 en 19:40

Good evening, Teacher,

I'm writing you this email because I am not on the list of the people that can do the exam. I want to ask you to take into consideration please, I'm missing the 50% by one class that I thought we had today; my grades are good and I can assure you that I can communicate better than most of the class. Please Teacher, I need to go back home in June because I have squash tournaments.

Sincerely, XX.

T. 25 Mayo 2023 en 8:24

Dear XX,

Thank you for your email. First of all, the classes at university are taught with a starting and finishing dates. That is what is called an academic organization. You cannot assume or think that one class will be taught on just a day that pleases you or favors your attendance record. Last week, it was clearly announced that because of language exams this week, we cannot have class any more. Everyone knew these two weeks ago when the dates of language exams were made public. It was even reiterated throughout last week sessions. If you did not show up to class or did not read the announcement, that is your own responsibility.

Second, trashing your classmates as having lower English level than you is not an appropriate manner to conduct in an academic setting. That is unacceptable and it does not give a reason to have missed as many classes as you have. You are responsible for your own actions and I do not think having a better English level gives anyone the right to miss classes. It is unfair to drag your classmates' English level into this.

Third, there is nothing I can do at this point. The attendance is the requirement to do the exam. It is clearly mentioned in the "Guía de Aprendizaje". It would be unjust to go against what is written in the "Guía". Of course, there is an extraordinary exam in July, which you can always do.

Finally, throughout the semester, I have constantly sent out reminders about the risk of not showing up to class. Back on March 10, I expressed the concerns I had about you not attending as regularly as everyone did. Throughout April, I showed the percentages of attendance to all of you in classroom. Of course, I would understand if you did not see any of my email since you did not care about any of this.

Best wishes,

XX

S. 25 Mayo 2023 en 8:52

Good morning, Teacher,

I didn't know that and yes is my responsibility to know it. Please Teacher tell me in wich part I'm trashing my classmates level of english. I'm just saying that I speak better than most and that's true. I'm not saying anything bad or insulting them, please Teacher, you are taking my email the wrong way. I'm not trying to complain. I just want you to understand me because I can't stay in July for sports matter and the university knows. Please take me into consideration, I'm missing the 50% by one class.

I am not writing you this email to complaint if not to ask for compassion and I don't know why your email felt like an attack, like I said I'm not complaining, I'm asking you if I can take the exam on friday or if there is something I can do. Please don't taje this as a complaint, I'm just asking.

Sincerely, XX.

In the first email, the student makes reference to the class attendance. He/she recognizes the fact that their name not appearing on the list is an indication that the student will not be allowed to sit for the final exam. As a result, the student exhorts the teacher to consider their case in two different ways. On the one hand, the student points out that he/she is only short of one class to reach the 50% minimum attendance, implying that the student has clearly done the math as to how many classes are left for him/her to reach 50%. On the other hand, the student blames the academic institution for not allowing one more class to be taught. The projected image here entails showing the teacher that the student's failure to reach 50% was underpinned by factors external to the student's willingness to attend class. In other words, the student is not the one to blame for what happens. As a way to enhance

face and project a positive self-image, the student brings up their academic record and performance. He/she points to how good their grades have been and how much better at communicating he/she is in comparison to the rest of the classmates (i.e., *I can assure you that I can communicate better than most of the class*). This shows the extent to which the student relies on the notion of valence, often described as “the degree of attraction or aversion that an individual feels towards a given self-aspect” (Spencer-Oatey 2005: 641). In this sense, self-promotion can be face-threatening in the sense that it puts a focus on and evaluates more *self* than *others*. Finally, in order to reinforce the plea, the student brings up the pending trip back home and explains that he/she is expected to partake in the squash tournament.

What is interesting about this email is that (a) nowhere in the email does the student take responsibility for their actions, (b) nowhere in the email does the student mention the academic norms governing the subject from which the clause about attending at least 50% of the classes comes. What the student does, instead, is implicitly challenge the teacher’s face in the sense while the student boosts their face as a good student whose circumstances have disfavored him/her to reach the minimum required, he/she implicitly threatens the teacher’s ability to reinforce academic norms and objectively examine the student’s request. This tests the validity of academic norms governing teaching activities in that the student’s plea intends to persuade the teacher to address the request on an emotional basis rather than on the normative basis.

In the first paragraph of the email addressing the student’s request, the teacher attempts to restore their academic face through a reminder that teaching activities are regulated by the university norms. Additionally, the teacher highlights the student’s irresponsibility for not being able to read the relevant announcements. The teacher points out that the decision not to have any more classes was made based on the provision of the university. By doing this, the teacher attempts to save face and prevent the student from putting the blame on the teacher or the university, protecting both the teacher’s reputation and academic integrity.

Moreover, the teacher seems to have taken offense from the student’s mention of communication skills, as the teacher contends that self-validation claims do not only go against good academic conduct, but they do not give reasons to miss out classes. The teacher’s use of metadiscursive labels (i.e., *trashing, not an appropriate manner to conduct in an academic setting. That is unacceptable*) imply poor evaluation of the student’s claim. Resorting to these metadiscourse items is, in other words, a signal that that the student’s claim is seen as impolite and face threatening by the teacher. The teacher’s metapragmatic discourse here constructs the facework as the teacher relies on their authority to call the student to order. Such an order stems from the expectation of moral normality, which implicitly or explicitly shapes the understanding of what should be obligatory, permissible, or forbidden under the circumstances (Haugh 2009). The comparison the student draws between their abilities and the rest of the classmates’ is seen by the teacher as an attack on the integrity of the class as a whole. What the teacher does here is

take the student to account for having threatened the class's face by promoting self-centered behavior. The teacher's action shows the desire to hold the student responsible for their actions on the grounds of what is morally (in)acceptable or (in)appropriate in an academic setting.

In the third paragraph, the teacher issues a response to the student's plea to the exam. The teacher denies the student's request, pointing to the subject guideline which provisions 50% of attendance as a requirement to take the exam at the ordinary call. The teacher also points out that the student still rightfully has the option to make up in the extraordinary call. The teacher's face(work) revolves around the idea of fairness and the desire to enforce the guideline.

What is notable in the teacher's response is that it is designed in a way that shows the management of the different facets of their image as a teacher. First, as an employee of the university, the teacher stands as a representative of the university. Any activities and decisions are made and designed according to the university norms and planning. Any modification to the teaching activities must be motivated by these norms. Any attack to the integrity of the university's face is in a way an attack to the teacher's face. Second, as an educator of all the students, the teacher is driven by the idea of fairness. Any rule that applies to one, shall be applied to all. A face attack targeting some students (i.e., self-validation in the student's email) is to a larger extent an attack to the integrity of the class as whole. Finally, the idea of fairness is also projected by constantly reminding the student of the importance of attending classes not just at the end, but throughout the semester so that the students receive all necessary information before the final exam. These facets of the teacher's face can be seen as a driving force in the teacher's face management in the response.

In the follow-up email to the teacher, the student starts off by assuming their responsibility (i.e., *I didn't know that and yes is my responsibility to know it*). This ownership of fault is a mark of face loss which comes from the teacher's rejection of the plea. Additionally, the student seems to have taken offense at the teacher's use of "*trashing the classmates level of English*". Using metadiscourse, the student disputes the teacher on the grounds that what the student had written in the previous email was not meant as an insult in any way and that the teacher must have taken the email the wrong way. Here again, the student, who seems to have lost face as a result of what the student refers to as an attack from the teacher's email (i.e., *please teacher tell me in which part I am trashing my classmates' level of English*), tries to reclaim and save face by defending their earlier comments, insisting that the assertion about how good he/she communicates in English is a fact. Face concern is salient in the student's response as the student projects an image of a self-sufficient individual who is neither complaining nor in need of any favor from the teacher. Furthermore, the student wonders why he/she was being attacked (i.e., *I don't know why your email felt like an attack*). The way the student manages face(work) here is in line with the argument that face as image that must be "internally consistent" (i.e., what I think of me) and "supported by judgments"

displayed by others (i.e., what I think you think of me) (Goffman 1982). The student draws on the idea that the teacher may have an erroneous image of him/her. As a result, the student wants to keep what he knows about himself/herself consistent with what he wants the teacher to know about what the student really is. Metadiscourse in both the teacher's response and the student's follow-up email play a substantial role in the way both parties manage and project facework.

Both the teacher and the student take offense based on their readings of each other's emails reveals the different face concerns.

5.3. Dealing with deceitfulness and deceptiveness

Context: The interaction analyzed below comes about as the student from Panama, concerned with the lack of attendance record, attempts to justify their absences to classes throughout the semester. Face(work) concerns become relevant in terms of both the reason the student gives to justify the absences, the date put in the email as well as the discovery by the teacher of the discrepancies between what is asserted by the student and what is actually mentioned in the attachment.

EXCERPT 4

S. 24 Mayo 2023 en 0:00

Good night, professional

Sorry if I disturb you; excuse for my recent inactivity; I'm not having a good moment.

I wrote to you to explain why I was absent from class this semester from February 9 to March 7: I was homebound due to a knee injury I had while playing basket in my hood.

Today I connected as well, but I had a difficulty with the internet and my microphone, so I was unable to make myself known or communicate with anyone.

I've attached the document here.

P.S. Sorry if the document is in Spanish, I was unable to do anything.

T. 24 Mayo 2023 en 8:50

Dear XX,

Thank you for your email. It is my understanding that the justification you sent only reflects the fact that you were discharged from the hospital the same day you were admitted. That day is February 09 2023.

Nowhere is it said that you were ill from February 09 to March 07. One justification cannot cover the absences of the entire month. More importantly, you had the option to follow the classes online.

If you want, we can arrange a virtual meeting today at 10h00 so that we can talk about this.

Please confirm as soon as possible,

Kind regards,

XX

S. 24 Mayo 2023 en 8:57

ok prof for sure! on the same link of our course?

T. 24 Mayo 2023 en 9:01

Great!

Let's meet through the same link of the subject at 10h00. I will you see on there.

XX

In this interaction, the request is formulated by the student who starts the email by recognizing their inactivity in the course of the semester. This recognition entails understanding of the bad behavior as well as a way to open an explanation for why this had happened. Eventually, the student points to health issues as the motive for missing classes. This explanation intends to appeal to the teacher's knowledge and understanding that the student did not miss class willingly. The absence is the result

of factors affecting the student's physical, mental and emotional conditions. This is a rather positive image that the student projects. On the surface, this is common sense in that anyone sick is often unable to fulfill certain duties, including going to class, especially if the health issues have lasted over a month. Health issues are not, however, the only factors that affected the student's attendance. The student highlights further factors that had prevented them from attending classes as frequently and normally as possible. The student names, for example, the lack of good internet connection and the issue with the microphone to have affected their ability to follow classes. The student materializes their request by providing the teacher with an attachment that intends to be the physical proof of alleged health issues.

A request as issued requires the teacher to take actions beneficial to the student. In the email responding to the student's request, the teacher starts by recognizing receipt of the student email (i.e., *Dear XX, thank you for your email*), before elaborating on the resolution of the request. The teacher appears to have noted discrepancies between the alleged dates in the email and the date appearing on the attached document. The teacher thus confronts the student and sets grounds for distrust. Furthermore, the teacher elaborates on the different options available to the student (i.e., *More importantly, you had the option to follow the classes online*). However, the teacher offers the student an opportunity to meet up so as to discuss the issue further. This offer could be seen as an indication of face concerns in that by doing this, the teacher projects an image of someone willing to address the issue in a way that preserves teacher-student relationship. This meeting would thus be a prospect to face repair and a way forward for both the teacher and the student. This offer can also be seen as a way to redress a potential confrontation with the student. As Brown and Levinson (1987: 125) contend, "in order to redress some potential threat of some FTAs, a speaker may choose to stress their cooperation with the hearer in another way".

What is notable about this interaction is that face(work) is differently projected and displayed by both the teacher and the student. While the underlying motive of the student's email is to justify a whole month of absences to class and take the final test, the discrepancies in terms of the dates challenge the student's face and the teacher's face. The compassion around illness in earlier email lost its value by the discovery by the teacher of the student's willingness to exaggerate the dates in the email.

In the follow-up email, rather than addressing the issues raised by the teacher, the student picks up on the teacher's offer and agrees to a meeting. The absence of any contention in the student's email can be seen as a sign of face loss which can only be perceived when there is a mismatch between an attribute claimed and an attribute perceived as being ascribed by others. The claimed attribute here is the projection of the difficult time the student had had homebound suffering from an illness. The attribute ascribed to the student by the teacher revolves around the idea that the student has engaged in deception by purposefully exaggerating the dates in the email.

6. Discussion

The research question that guided the paper was: how is face(work) managed in the teacher-student interaction? The study allowed us to provide the following answers to this question. To begin with, face(work) plays an important role in the teacher-student communicative dynamics and it is managed differently by the students and the teacher. The emails analyzed are initiated in the form of requests which makes the students' emails potentially face-threatening acts at their face value in the sense that the requests may potentially impinge on another person's autonomy (Brown and Levinson 1987, Holtgraves 1992). In excerpt 1, for example, when the student asks the teacher to amend the schedule of an assignment, the teacher reacts by informing the student that any change to an already-published schedule would affect the harmony of the classroom.

From face-constituting theory, there is an emerging dialectical pattern in the management of face(work). On the one hand, students' actions privilege separateness over connectedness in the sense that their actions are carried out in complete disregard of both the teacher's face and the other students' face. They are only concerned about what is beneficial for themselves. In doing this, they are willing to self-praise (excerpt 1) or/and even deceive (excerpt 4). The students' actions here overlook the relevance of the interdependence relation between them, their peers and the teacher, which is critical to the harmony of the classroom. On the other hand, the teacher's actions tend to privilege connectedness over separateness. This opposition does not just characterize the relation that exists between the teacher and the student, it also shows the relevance of power and social distance in the interaction. The power invested in the teacher requires them to act in a way that upholds their authority as well as the norms of the university. Against any attempts to break the rules, the teacher uses their power as a social action to uphold the guideline and thus establish the rule of conduct. In other words, whilst the students are only concerned about their own face (in disregard of the course guideline), the teacher's face concerns revolve around the ability to cope with students' requests, upholding the course guideline and addressing student's concerns in the way that attends to their own face, the students' face and the classroom harmony.

The theoretical implication of these findings rests on the idea that the interaction alone is not the only factor affecting the manifestation of face(work). In formulating their emails, the students rely on the teacher-student relationship that underscores the background of the interaction. This interpersonal relationship allows the students in some cases to resort to emotional circumstances in their requests for a favor. It also allows them to codeswitch in the interaction. One may argue, as pointed out by one reviewer of this paper, that this happens because email interaction is a type of correspondence that occurs at the crossroads of a changing university culture in general, due to the interplay between the incoming global culture of therapeutic emotionalization and neoliberal educational practices. The awareness of the existence of such a relationship is constantly reflected in the

justifications put forward in the plea formulation (Excerpts 1 and 4). For their part, the responses from the teacher also rely on the importance of preserving the teacher-student dynamics. Arguably, the reason the students bring emotional circumstances is the need to rely on a personal teacher-student relationship, rather than on the policies of the university. The point here is that although the interaction is the center of face concerns, it is the relational work and the management of interpersonal relationships that play out in the background of the interactants. Even though some authors see the limits of relational work to explain face concerns (Haugh 2009), together face-constituting theory and relational work jointly used can portray a full picture of the basis, manifestation and implications of face(work). In the view of the findings presented in this paper, I agree with Locher (2013: 147) that “interactants do not approach other interactants in a particular speech event with a tabula rasa mind. They make analogies to previously experienced interactions and draw on expectations derived from their knowledge of these frames”. There is an interdependence of the students’ and the teacher’s face emerging in the interaction in the way the students (as individuals in need of the teacher’s favor) design their requests and the way the teacher formulates their decision.

7. Concluding remarks

This paper set out to examine the display of face(work) by both the student and the teacher. The findings show how critical face(work) is in the teacher-student interaction. Face(work) management training can provide better tools for conflict management, face concerns as well as self-presentation, especially now that teaching practices at the UEM are increasingly involving actors in intercultural interaction. Since fairness, upholding the class face, and harmony are critical in the student-teacher interrelation, good face management strategies can allow for a good teaching experience for both students and the teacher in a way that favors commitment to the goal of teaching. Good management of face(work) can also become a teaching tool that allows the teacher to get across to the students the importance of interpersonal relationships as well as the need for mutual consideration and respect.

To put it in perspective, the findings in this paper do not completely corroborate nor completely reject previous studies that have observed the absence of politeness in the student-teacher interaction (Nikleva 2018, Lü 2018, Salazar-campillo 2023). In excerpts 1 and 2, for instance, the teacher is addressed in an informal way through the use of *hi* plus the teacher’s first name. However, in excerpts 3 and 4, the teacher is addressed in a rather formal way through the use of good morning plus the teacher’s title. The presence or the absence of formality may be linked to the students’ limited awareness of the politeness rules or the struggle over what is appropriate in writing emails to a teacher as suggested by Almoaily (2018), Economidou-Kogetsidis (2018) and Alemi & Maleknia (2023). The presence or absence of formality does not, however, impede the manifestation of face(work). In itself, the language used did not seem to affect the understanding

between the teacher and the students even in the emails where grammatical errors were visible, as in excerpt 4. Furthermore, while there is a variation in the use of politeness strategies in the students' emails, there is consistency in the employment of politeness strategy in the teacher's responses as can be observed in the use of *Dear* in all the emails sent by the teacher. This favors the argument of the interdependence between face(work) and politeness since face(work) can clearly occur in the context or interaction in which politeness is present or absent.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that cultural specificities governing the backgrounds of both the teacher and the students did not seem to have any direct effect on face(work) as analyzed, which goes against Pham & Yeh's (2020) findings that show that Vietnamese language pragmatic knowledge is deeply ingrained and has tremendous influence on students' English email writing skills. The interaction in this paper revolves around face needs as related to the rights and obligations within the norms of the university. This is inconsistent with the argument that face(work) is always a cultural-specific phenomenon (Ting-Toomey 2015).

Future research should contrast these findings by analyzing other teachers' interactions with the students both in and out of the classroom.

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