Chapter XVI
Politeness in Intercultural E-Mail Communication

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ABSTRACT

This chapter argues that politeness is an important component of e-mail language. Many people are uncertain about how to make their e-mail polite according to the norms of the receiving culture. Different views on the nature of politeness in e-mail can contribute to personal offence and online miscommunication. As a result, an instrument was designed to assess politeness in e-mail communication. The Tool-Kit, An Instrument to Assess Politeness in Intercultural E-Mail Communication, provides a common ground among e-mail users to discuss and evaluate politeness in English e-mail communication, as well as the metalanguage necessary to reflect on the use of politeness indicators. It also provides clear guidelines to consider politeness protocols. This innovative instrument promotes a practical approach for assessing politeness in e-mail which could then assist the effective online interactions in e-learning methodologies. Its limitations are discussed here, as well as its pedagogical applications for online teaching to second language learners.

INTRODUCTION

E-mail is an important aspect of many e-learning methodologies. Often, it is the exclusive means of communication between students and teachers in online education. Many teachers and students, however, are not trained in how to use e-mail effectively or how to manage the interpersonal dynamics of the medium. Little research has been done to date to assess how people can better communicate via e-mail.
The use of e-mail can present a communication challenge due to the lack of immediate verbal cues and feedback that we normally have in face-to-face encounters. It is harder to link our message to reference points during e-mail communication. For example, aspects of a previous discussion cannot quickly be drawn into the current e-mail or to clarify what we want to say. Moreover, we cannot use body language or voice tone to support our construction of meaning. In many cases, e-mail communication may lead to misunderstandings among those involved in constructing meaning in an online environment. Effective communication is developed and maintained by constructing meaning through dialogue (Bakhtin, 1993). The Bakhtinian notion of dialogism interaction shows the importance of building meaning through dialogue to maintain effective communication (Bakhtin, 1986, 1993). In Bakhtinian thought, all characters, writers or speakers are given voices to actively engage in dialogue with other voices. In the context of this chapter, the communication is not just the words on the screen, but the dialogue that the two writers (sender and receiver) have actively engaged in to make the meaning.

However, as Murphy (2003, 2006a, 2006b) has documented, many e-mail writers are unsure about how to attain appropriate levels of politeness in order to generate effective e-mail dialogues. Thus in e-mail communication, there is uncertainty as to appropriate levels of directness or indirectness, suitable format, and language use in an e-mail message. Many people are also unsure about selecting the appropriate level of formality or informality in an e-mail interaction in order not to offend the receiver. The choice of appropriate cultural level of formality or informality in e-mail language may also be problematic for some users. Lack of knowledge about culturally appropriate response times to e-mail requests, and how to use e-mail language to connect the receiver to the process and encourage her or him to respond may also pose a challenge to those writing or responding to an e-mail. Writing e-mails that promote effective interactions is an area that concerns native speakers as well as those writing in a second language. Uncertainty about such issues was revealed in the recent research study on intercultural e-mail communication (Murphy, 2006b).

Effective and polite e-mail communication also concerns online language teachers and students. Nowadays, there is an increasing flow of e-mail messages between second language learning students and their teachers in many universities worldwide due to an increase in computer-mediated communication (CMC) and e-learning. Geographical isolation is no longer a restraining factor in education and language learning, as tertiary institutions are able to offer language courses to anyone worldwide within a networked connection (Murphy, 2003, 2006a). The most common communication channel between teachers and their overseas students is e-mail. But the majority of the university teachers and second language learning students are not trained in how to use e-mail effectively or how to manage the interpersonal dynamics of the medium (Murphy, 2003; Walther, 1992, 1997).

In the past when teaching language, we have been able to speak face-to-face to students who could better understand our body language and linguistic cues to arrive at the meaning we wanted to communicate. Language teachers and their students, however, have not had training in how to construct meaning via e-mail interactions, which offer no verbal or non-verbal cues. Such meaning is vital for effective second language learning. The difficulty is exacerbated when the e-mail dialogue occurs across cultures, as people from different cultural groups may not share the same language, e-mail dialogue style, or belief systems. As a result, the e-mail interactions that support many e-learning environments could become problematic because online teachers and learners may be unsure about the elements that contribute to effective e-mail interactions.
LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on linguistic politeness has been built mainly from face-to-face studies (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Eelen, 2001; Lakoff, 1973, 1989, 1990; Locher & Watts, 2005; Spencer-Oatey, 2000b; Watts, 2003). Within these studies, there are also important differences and lack of consensus among researchers on the concept of politeness (Byram, 1997, p. 3; Fraser, 1990; Spencer-Oatey, 2000a, p. 2; Watts, 2003, p. 251). Such diversity of views does not promote or advance a full understanding of the complex phenomenon of politeness (Haugh, 2003).

Lack of consensus surrounding the connection between politeness and formality is also evident in the literature. Some researchers consider formality of writing to be a negative politeness strategy (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Along with self-effacement and restraint, formality can denote negative politeness, as it attempts to minimize a face threat in some way. Other researchers believe that the more grammatically complex the language and structure, the more polite it is considered (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Thomas, 1995), while Fraser (1990, p. 221) asserts that a higher degree of formality implies greater politeness. Higher levels of formality in writing include a greater proportion of such lexical elements as nouns, adjectives, articles, and prepositions (Heylighen & Dewaele, 1995). Recent research in e-mail communication, however, suggests that informality of writing may be the norm (Baron, 1998, 2001; Crystal, 2001).

Importantly, the politeness theory of Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1978, 1987) posits that the degree of politeness is determined by three sociocultural factors: (1) the power difference between the communicators, (2) the social distance between them, and (3) the weight of the request that is being asked (Scollon & Scollon, 1995; Ting-Toomey, 1988, 2005; Watts, 2003).

The degree of politeness in e-mail communication, therefore, may be linked to information such as the status of the sender in relation to the receiver and the weight of the request in the e-mail message. Consequently, the amount of politeness may also be explained, in terms of Brown and Levinson (1987)'s theory, by referring to those variables of power and social differences as well as looking at the nature of the request. In this way, information across several social dimensions could be cross-checked and linked to give a more holistic portrait of politeness in e-mail communication. However, Brown and Levinson's politeness theory has never been applied to the domain of e-mail communication until the doctoral research study described here was implemented.

Cultural theory and cultural communication patterns, as well as their effects on the use of politeness indicators, have received much attention over many decades (Hofstede, 1997; Holtgraves & Yang, 1990; Ji, 1999; Saville-Troike, 2003; Ulijn & Campbell, 2001). However, the majority of the studies on intercultural communication are related to verbal interaction modes (Fraser, 1990; Saville-Troike, 2003; Ting-Toomey, 2005). The studies reviewed in this area show that there is still much uncertainty surrounding this complex and abstract area.

Many studies have been conducted on e-mail communication (Crystal, 2001; Dandi, 2003; Lee, 1994; Lee, 2004; Rice, 1997; Wallace, 2002). Most of them, however, are from single cultural environments (Baron, 2001; Biggiero, 2003; Fang, 1998; Holmes, 1994). E-mail communication in intercultural contexts has largely escaped the attention of e-mail researchers to date (Bunz & Campbell, 2002; Mak & Yeung, 1999; Ross, 2001; St. Amant, 2002). Despite the current focus of research on e-mail communication, many uncertainties surround communication via this medium (Baron, 1998, 2001; Crystal, 2001; Ma, 1996; Simmons, 1994). No protocols are currently available that could guide us in our attempts to communicate efficiently and politely to language learning students, especially to those in other cultures (Crystal, 2001; Pincas, 2001; Rogers & Albritton, 1995; Xu, 1996).
Overall, a review of the literature suggests that we are only just beginning to understand the role of politeness in e-mail and its effect on online communication (Murphy, 2006a, 2006b). Importantly, three major gaps were identified. Firstly, there is no instrument that could explain to second language learners or other learners the elements contributing to politeness in e-mail in everyday language. Secondly, there is no instrument to assist learners to evaluate e-mails for politeness in a systematic way. Thirdly, there are no guidelines to assist online learners to incorporate politeness before sending off their e-mails. As a result, an instrument was created as a way of responding to those gaps. The instrument, called The Tool-Kit: An Instrument to Assess Politeness Intercultural E-Mail Communication, was an outcome of the doctoral research study conducted in Australia.

THE STUDY

Murphy (2006b) conducted a research study in Australia between 2002 and 2006, using principally an inductive methodological approach (Merriam, 1988; Travers, 2001). It combined quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis procedures (Creswell, 2003; Wolcott, 2001). Three research instruments were used to collect data to investigate intercultural e-mail communication among academics and general staff members of universities both in Australia and Korea. These instruments were questionnaires, interviews, and e-mail thread content and interaction analysis.

The primary and secondary instruments—the questionnaire and the follow-up interview—collected the perceptions and opinions on politeness in e-mail from a large sample of 125 academic and general staff members at a large metropolitan Australian university. The aim was to understand the nature of politeness in e-mail from the viewpoint of the participants themselves (Wolcott, 2001, p. 120). As the study had an intercultural dimension, opinions were also sought from academics living overseas and who spoke English as a second language. As such, a smaller group of 12 Korean academics living and working at various universities in South Korea formed the second group of participants. The third instrument used in this study was the content analysis of authentic intercultural e-mail threads between Australia and Korea (Creswell, 2003). The threads took place between a single sender and receiver. There were no e-mails sent to multiple receivers. This third instrument made possible a triangulation of results which complemented other findings obtained from the questionnaires and interviews (Creswell, 2003; Denzin, 1997). The e-mail analysis also helped to show how different politeness indicators mentioned in the literature and by the participants could contribute to or interfere with effective intercultural e-mail communication.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND APPLICATION

The results of the analyses showed that there was a clear uncertainty among the participants about what constituted polite e-mail communication (Murphy & Levy, 2006). As well, many participants expressed a need for assistance in composing appropriate and polite e-mails, especially when attempting to communicate across cultures. Moreover, it was revealed that there was a lack of common ground to discuss, identify, and evaluate politeness. As a result, the authors developed an instrument to assess politeness in intercultural e-mail communication to help users to understand how politeness indicators could contribute to writing effective e-mail messages. Three sources of data helped to formulate the theoretical framework and the content of the instrument being developed. These were: (a) theoretical input, (b) Australian and Korean participants’ input, and (c) academic scholars’ input. As such, the first politeness indi-
The development and piloting of this instrument provided an interesting opportunity to test the new application of Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory to written e-mail language. Although some of the concepts outlined in this theory were included in the framework of the instrument, it was felt that the language used to describe them was too complex. In keeping with the practical nature of the instrument being developed, certain concepts were renamed with more user-friendly language. For example, Brown and Levinson’s (1987) terms “positive politeness” and “negative politeness” were changed to “relationship-building politeness” and “respect for the receiver’s time and space politeness” respectively. It was felt that these new terms represented more clearly the intended meanings, and they avoided ambiguities with the word “negative.” Simplifying complex concepts and the language behind them was a prime consideration in the study.

Figure 1 illustrates the elements that contribute to politeness in intercultural e-mail communication. It shows the three variables mentioned by Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory and how they fit within the context of e-mail communication. The variables that function as an overall umbrella of the e-mail communication process are the power and social differences between the sender and receiver. These are co-constructed through interaction and the weight of imposition of request in the e-mail message. By using different politeness strategies in the e-mail interaction, the sender or receiver is able to alter or at least influence the power and social differences between him or herself and the e-mail partner. The variables illustrated in Figure 1 thus impact on the language in a cascading effect, as illustrated by the arrows. In other words, the power and social differences between the sender and receiver impact on the language used in the request articulated in the e-mail, which in turn impacts on the amount and type of politeness indicators needed in the interaction.
As a caveat to their theory, Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 23) caution that any quantitative data on politeness must be complemented with qualitative data. That is why the second and third sources of input used to develop the instrument came from the Australian and Korean participants as well as academic scholars. Suggestions were given by many academic peers from the fields of linguistics, education, science, and engineering which were carefully and methodically recorded in the field notes book carried by Murphy (2006b, p. 73). For example, many academic colleagues indicated that they preferred the reply e-mail to include the history of the negotiation, as it gave a context for subsequent interactions. As a result, they recommended recipients use the “Reply with History” option for their e-mail negotiations, allowing that the flow and exchange of ideas and suggestions as such contributed to peer validation, an important component of rigorous research practice (Merriam, 2002).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN INSTRUMENT TO ASSESS POLITENESS IN INTERCULTURAL E-MAIL COMMUNICATION

The conceptual framework of the e-mail politeness instrument evolved from the information reviewed previously. In addition, all the views and perceptions from the participants, as well as suggestions from academic colleagues, were mapped onto the framework. These views and perceptions were classified into the five different strategy types: (1) E-Mail Characteristics Strategies, (2) Time Factor Strategies, (3) Language Style (including requests) Strategies, (4) Relationship-Building Strategies, and (5) Respect for Time/Space Strategies. The various strategies within each of those sections are shown in Figure 2. This concept map diagrammatically lists those strategies, which, according to the participants, the literature, and suggestions from academic colleagues, best convey politeness within the context of intercultural e-mail communication. Figure 2 visually displays the breaking down of the invisible

Figure 2. Politeness strategies

Use of politeness/impoliteness strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Email Characteristic Strategies</th>
<th>Time Factor Strategies</th>
<th>Language Style</th>
<th>Relationship Building Strategies</th>
<th>Respect for Time/Space Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject Line</td>
<td>Minimising time delay</td>
<td>Title Use</td>
<td>Giving time to respond</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reply Function</td>
<td>Minimising time pressure</td>
<td>Greeting</td>
<td>Being indirect generally</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Font</td>
<td>Acknowledging requests</td>
<td>Leaving-taking</td>
<td>Giving options</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length</td>
<td>Answering requests</td>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>Giving apologies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signature Block</td>
<td></td>
<td>Punctuation</td>
<td>Admitting error</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>Minimising imposition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Paraphrasing</td>
<td>Avoiding demanding lang.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Models</td>
<td>Avoiding too many requests</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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and unquantifiable elements of written linguistic e-mail politeness into tangible and visible parts. This process thus facilitates the identification of the different elements contributing to politeness, and as a result the development of an instrument to assess them (see Figure 2).

In designing the instrument, the challenge was to combine data from all three knowledge bases (theory, participants, and peer scholars) into a succinct, culturally inclusive, user-friendly, and objective tool, which could, hopefully, quantify the invisible and seemingly unquantifiable concept of politeness. The instrument developed contains nine different sections. In addition, the instrument contains an overall performance report section used to collate the results of the different sections. All these are introduced next, as well as discussion on how it can be applied in educational contexts.

THE INSTRUMENT (THE TOOL-KIT) AND ITS PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATIONS

What is the Tool-Kit?

*The Tool-Kit* is an innovative instrument designed for anyone who writes e-mails in English. It aims to provide clear guidelines to online users on how to incorporate politeness in their e-mail communication. It explains in easy-to-understand language the elements that contribute to politeness. The instrument contains a set of principles, ideas, phrases, lexical items, and so on that people may refer to when guidance is needed regarding politeness in e-mail. Importantly, it can also give a quick, practical tool to estimate the level of politeness in extant e-mail. The instrument, however, is not an exhaustive taxonomy, as it is understood and accepted that in any e-mail interaction, as in any face-to-face interaction, negotiation of more subtle politeness elements may be further required. This innovative practical instrument represents a starting point towards the intersection of politeness and e-mail communication, which, to date, has been ignored in the literature and was found from the data to be needed.

How Can the Instrument Be Used in Different Educational Contexts?

This tool can be used by various people in many educational contexts to assist online second language learning and teaching. It can also assist in the education of people from many other diverse contexts such as schools, government, and the corporate world. In fact, anyone who writes e-mails in English can benefit from the use of *The Tool-Kit*. More specifically, the pedagogical applications of *The Tool-Kit* are classified into two categories. The first category, deductive applications, shows how the use of this instrument can help to raise awareness of politeness in e-mail by considering the protocols provided in the content. Further deductive applications show how the instrument can help to assess and evaluate politeness in e-mail communication in a systematic way. The second category, inductive applications, refers to the ways in which the instrument can provide online learners and their teachers with ideas to explore further elements not covered in *The Tool-Kit*. However, as the development of this tool is still in its infancy, creative and new refinements of the instrument are sought to extend further its pedagogical applications to e-learning.

Nonetheless, by providing a clear set of protocols, *The Tool-Kit* acts as a starting point in providing a sharper focus of the elements of politeness in e-mail. *The Tool-Kit* can help teachers of a second language and their students become aware of the elements that contribute to polite and effective e-mail communication. This is important for e-learning as it can lead to more successful online e-mail interactions in educational contexts.

The use of the instrument can also shed more light into possible politeness patterns in e-mail in
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a formative way. This could be helpful for different types of learners. For example, if the use of *The Tool-Kit* shows that low scores are apparent with online students in the section, “Language Style of Polite Requests,” then online teachers may want to offer their language students some strategies on how to write requests on e-mail in a polite way. If higher scores are apparent for requests for information than requests for services, then online teachers may instruct their students on the difference between those two language functions.

Cross-cultural comparisons of politeness may also be examined as well. For example, some native English speakers may do better in one variable and not another. In the example included in this chapter, the Australian e-mail writer has low scores for “Respect for Receiver’s Time and Space,” but has higher scores for “Language Style.” Politeness assistance can thus be targeted at areas in need, as shown by the results of *The Tool-Kit*. By contrast, non-native speakers may find some sections more difficult than others. In the example in this chapter, the Korean e-mail writer has low scores in “Language Style of Polite Requests” as seen by the many “Xs” (see Table 1), but has higher scores for “Respect for Receiver’s Time and Space.” Armed with this data, the online language teacher can target politeness and pragmatic assistance to students in the areas in need as shown.

*The Tool-Kit* could also be used to locate and assess language proficiency problems in a practical way, with second language learners. For example, low scores by non-English-speaking writers in the section “Language Style”—especially items on grammar, punctuation, and spelling—may pinpoint target areas for future teaching. Native English speakers as well could benefit from assistance in these areas. Problems with pragmatic proficiency, common with second language learners (Bardovi-Harlig, & Hartford, 1993; Spencer-Oatey, 2000b; Thomas, 1983), such as recorded in the section “Language Style for Polite Requests,” could also be detected. Thus, *The Tool-Kit* cannot only be used as a guide displaying preferred protocols in the area of intercultural e-mail communication, but it can also detect aspects of language proficiency in need of future improvement.

Importantly, cross-cultural comparisons can also be made with the use of *The Tool-Kit*. For example, it may be shown that certain cultures systematically display low scores for “Time Factors.” These cultures may prefer or expect replies to their e-mails within a shorter time span than other cultures. This information is important for more successful e-learning. This instrument can be used to assist both native as well as non-native English speakers. The user of *The Tool-Kit* should keep in mind that when communicating in English to a native speaker, unintentional offences may occur that may interfere with the construction of the online dialogue. This instrument, therefore, can help the native English speaker become more aware of language used in e-mail and its effect on the receiver.

Equally, the instrument can also help the non-native English speaker. The instrument takes into consideration that, in certain cases, some non-native English speakers when writing an e-mail in English to an English speaker may unintentionally offend that person through their inappropriate or incorrect use of the language, as well as through omitting certain politeness indicators. Use of *The Tool-Kit* enables the non-native speaker to become more aware of the elements contributing to polite and effective e-mail communication and thus avoid offence. By assisting both native as well as non-native English speakers in their word choice for e-mail interactions, *The Tool-Kit* is therefore contributing to more harmonious online communication.

Over a larger corpus of other e-mail threads, *The Tool-Kit* could also act as a scanner (or search engine) to assist the analysis of multiple e-mail threads in order to detect possible patterns of politeness within and across all sections. The scanning function would enable many important
analyses to take place across a range of variables, for example, cross-cultural, gender, and generational comparisons of politeness. It would also enable a ranking of politeness strategies, useful for pedagogical as well as corporate settings. Certain strategies of politeness may be more important in different contexts than others. The use of this instrument may identify which strategies are more important for certain communicative contexts and so on. The Tool-Kit is thus a valuable tool for assessing, in a tangible way, individual and cross-cultural politeness elements across a range of variables. By breaking down politeness in intercultural e-mail communication in such a visible way, The Tool-Kit can uncover important information and potential politeness patterns. It can also target areas in need of politeness proficiency assistance.

Importantly, second language students’ views on the content of The Tool-Kit could also provide valuable alternative cultural perspectives for further reviews, thus minimizing its limitation of potential cultural bias. Use of the instrument by online teachers and their second language students could provide further input into its contents.

**What Does the Instrument Look Like?**

The Tool-Kit takes the form of a tabulated grid over six A4 pages. It is designed to assess politeness in an e-mail thread of up to eight e-mails in length (E1 to E8). An e-mail thread may be defined as a series of e-mails sent back and forth as a dialogue between the same sender and receiver. Columns E1, E2, E3, and so on in the grid represent each e-mail in the thread, with E1 representing the first e-mail in the thread, E2 the second, and so on.

The Tool-Kit, however, may also be used to assess politeness in a single e-mail. The Tool-Kit may accommodate e-mail threads of less than eight e-mails, while those over eight e-mails in length require an extended version. Ticks (√) and crosses (X) are written, as appropriate, in the columns of the grid so that politeness patterns may be detected over entire threads. The Tool-Kit comes with a manual for use called the Glossary of Terms. This is a document explaining all terms used in The Tool-Kit by way of definitions and examples.

The Tool-Kit assesses the content of the e-mail through analyzing the following three sections: “E-Mail Classification,” “Social Variables,” and “Request Weight.” In addition, six sections were included in the tool to assess information related to the language used in the e-mail message. These sections collected information on the “E-mail Characteristics,” “Time Factors and Requests,” “Language Style,” “Language Style of Polite Requests,” and “Relationship-Building” and “Respect for Receiver’s Time and Space.” These language-related elements were included because impoliteness in e-mail communication can be conveyed, often inadvertently, through various language functions such as direct requests, criticisms, complaints, disagreements, non-compliances, threats, warnings, orders, and so on (Bou-Franch & Garces-Conejos, 2003; Culpeper, 1996). Moreover, the forms of language that convey these functions are often abrupt and assertive, sometimes with negative attitudinal predicates (Spencer-Oatey, 2000b, p. 25; Watts, 2003). Such impoliteness indicators do not build the face of either sender or receiver; rather they threaten face (Culpeper, 1996; Simmons, 1994; Ting-Toomey, 1988).

Finally, the tool included an “Overall Performance” section that collated the results of the different sections included in the tool to establish the level of politeness of an e-mail. Due to space restrictions, only excerpts of each section are briefly explained next.

**E-Mail Classification**

This first section elicits information concerning physical aspects of the thread, such as the time of the communication, the country of origin, and
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text length. It also collects information on the sender’s initials.

Social Variables

This section assesses the status differences and the social distances between the sender and receiver of the e-mail. The power difference between the sender and receiver, the social distance between them, and the weight of the request determine levels of politeness according to Brown and Levinson (1987). As a result, information concerning these three social variables is important to explain and assess the levels of politeness in an e-mail interaction. The social variables monitored by the use of this instrument include: (a) the opening and closing titles used, (b) whether the e-mail is the first in the thread, (c) whether there has been previous e-mail contact, (d) the status difference between the sender and the receiver, and (e) and the social distance between them. It was decided to focus on the speech act of requests in The Tool-Kit, as the results of the study indicated that this is a problematic area in e-mail, especially when the communication occurs across cultures (Lee, 2004; Suh, 1999; Yli-Jokipi, 1998). The instrument, however, can also be also used to assess levels of politeness in e-mails that do not contain requests.

The analysis of this section can show in how the opening and closing titles are used in e-mail thread, these titles may range from Professor (Prof) to Doctor (Dr) to individual first and last names. It also shows if there has been no previous e-mail contact between sender and receiver, and both the level of status and social differences between sender and receiver. This section shows how higher levels of politeness may be used in e-mail communication due to the high power and social differences between the two correspondents (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Request Weight

This part of the instrument assesses how much effort the request requires on the part of the receiver. A request may be defined as “an attempt by the speaker (sender) to get the hearer (receiver) to perform some action by virtue of the hearer (receiver) having recognized that such an attempt is being made” (Jacobs & Jackson, 1983, p. 287, cited in Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 1996, p. 640). Requests can be for information, services, goods, and clarification. The weight of imposition of the request determines levels of politeness needed (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

As a result, this section of the tool considers if the language function of the e-mail is a request, the number of requests included in a message, the type of request (e.g., services or goods), and the weight of the request (i.e., high, medium, or low). Normally if the weight of a request is high, then the levels of politeness would thus be expected to be higher in e-mails if the request involves greater effort on the part of the receiver than giving extra information and time to reply.

If the assessment of the social variables in the previous sections was high, then more politeness indicators would need to be built into the e-mail message (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Scollon & Scollon, 1995). Moreover, the authors found that more politeness indicators are used when there is high social and status differences, and high weight requests. The threat to face is thus lessened because of the use of politeness strategies.

E-Mail Characteristics

This section elicits information such as whether the subject line of an e-mail message is included and is relevant, whether the reply function is used, whether normal font is used, the length of the message, and whether a signature block has been included. Such information is important for assessing politeness levels.
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Time Factors and Requests

Issues to do with time were important factors for politeness in e-mail negotiations according to the participants and academic colleagues. Table 5 shows an excerpt of the various aspects relating to time such as acknowledging and answering requests that occurred over the e-mail thread. This section helps to analyze polite e-mail style, considering the country origin of the e-mail, the time delay in replying to the e-mail (under 3), if all requests in previous e-mail were acknowledged, and if all requests (in previous e-mail) were answered.

Language Style

This part of the instrument elicits information concerning various aspects to written e-mail styles, which several data sources identified as polite. It assesses if the receiver’s full title is used in the address, if the sender’s full title is used in the sign off, and if the greeting “Dear” is used to convey politeness.

Language Style of Polite Requests

It has been found that requests worded indirectly can convey more politeness (Holtgraves, 1997; Lakoff, 1990; Meier, 1995, 1997; Sifianou, 1997). Added forms of politeness—for example, simple formulaic expressions such as please, thank you, could you, and so on—can also act as softening agents, the result of which is to lessen the threat to face, inherent in requests (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The evidence of requests worded directly in the example in Table 1 gives support to the horizontal politeness pattern (many “Xs”) showing a poor result. In this table, different linguistic structures that contribute to articulating polite requests have been included. These structures include the use of modals in the request included in the e-mail, the use of the passive voice, and the length of the sentences used to articulate the requests included in the e-mail communication.

The next section on “Relationship-Building” collates all the strategies for building relationships in e-mail communication.

Relationship-Building

“Relationship-Building Language” may be defined as language which tries to find common ground between the sender and receiver of an e-mail (as distinct from face-building language which is used to validate the receiver and his work/world or culture). “Relationship-Building Language” corresponds closely to Brown and

Table 1. Assessment of language style of polite requests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>E 1</th>
<th>E 2</th>
<th>E 3</th>
<th>E 4</th>
<th>E 5</th>
<th>E 6</th>
<th>E 7</th>
<th>E 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aust</td>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>Aust</td>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>Aust</td>
<td>Aust</td>
<td>Korea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Modals used in request (e.g., would, may)</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Use of passive voice (e.g., Is it possible for me to have...?)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Longer sentences used for request (10 words or more)</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Politeness in Intercultural E-Mail Communication

Levinson’s (1987) positive politeness. Table 2 shows an example of a thread in which e-mails 2 and 4 did not refer to the previous e-mail. This is considered impolite according to the three data sources. E-mails 7 and 8 were the only ones to thank the receiver for the previous e-mail. All e-mails except e-mail 4 responded to points made previously.

Overall, the analysis of the e-mail thread in Table 2 shows politeness levels could be improved, especially in relation to thanking and referring to previous e-mail.

Respecting Receiver’s Time and Space

“Respecting Receiver’s Time and Space” language may be defined as the many uses of language in a way that shows respect for the privacy, time, and own world of the receiver. The aim of the use of this language is to allow the receiver as much freedom to be unimpeded as possible, while at the same time making a request. “Respecting Receiver’s Time and Space” language corresponds closely to Brown and Levinson’s (1987) negative politeness. As a result, this section of the tool assesses if time has been given to the receiver to respond, if the sender is being indirect in general, and if the sender provides the receiver with options, as well as if, in the cases when it is needed, the sender gives apologies to the receiver.

The Overall Performance Section

The final section of the instrument, “Overall Performance,” sums up and assesses data from all sections. However, due to space restrictions in this chapter, a brief description only of this section is included here. This part of the tool tabulates the individual scores for all key sections on politeness described above. Politeness scores for each of these sections range from a minimum of 0 to a maximum of 10. In this chapter, excerpts only were given so not all of the items for each section were included. The mean, or the average, for each of the politeness sections can also be calculated. If a section records N/A (Not Applicable), this will not be included in the calculations. These individual scores can then be added up and converted to give the Total Politeness Percentage for each e-mail in the thread. A space is also provided to record the mean, or the average, for each of the sections including the Total Politeness Percentage across the whole thread. In this way, politeness patterns both down the individual e-mails (vertical patterns) as well as across the entire thread (horizontal patterns) can be detected. Scores, including means, also provide an avenue for further analysis and discussion.

Table 2. Assessment of relationship-building strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of Origin</th>
<th>E 1</th>
<th>E 2</th>
<th>E 3</th>
<th>E 4</th>
<th>E 5</th>
<th>E 6</th>
<th>E 7</th>
<th>E 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Referring to previous e-mail(s)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thanking for previous e-mail(s)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responding to points made in previous e-mail(s)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Limitations of the Tool-Kit

A major limitation of the instrument is its subjective nature. Even though objectivity was attempted by referring to the three knowledge bases for its construction and content, subjectivity inevitably becomes a component when creating a tool to assess social and cultural factors. Moreover, the instrument has a potential cultural bias, in that it was created principally by one of the authors, an English-speaking, white, Anglo-Western female. In addition, the instrument is based on data drawn largely from an Australian audience.

An offset to this limitation involved input from the second author (a non-Anglo-Western scholar) and other researchers in an effort to create a more culturally sensitive tool. As well, there was inclusion of data from the Korean participants and also certain intercultural theoretical viewpoints from the literature. Further uses of the instrument in future research projects could help to overcome this limitation. Therefore, the authors acknowledge that at this stage further research is needed before generalizations across cultures can be made.

The difficulty of not being able to quantify certain important variables was also a limitation. It is not always accurate or even possible to assess such complex and abstract notions as, for example, “being indirect generally.” There remains uncertainty and doubt as to the reliability and validity of both defining and quantifying such abstract and subjective concepts.

CONCLUSION

It is important to choose the right language and style in our e-mail communications to enable suitable and educationally rewarding relationships to be established and maintained. Online teachers and their students need to be aware, among other things, of differing constructions and interpretations of politeness, differing e-mail interactional styles, as well as ways to manage the medium efficiently, so that they can feel more comfortable communicating online. The educational benefits of successful intercultural e-mail communication cannot be underestimated.

The first section of this chapter discussed the literature in the areas of politeness, e-mail communication, and intercultural communication. The literature review revealed several gaps such as a lack of instruments to help learners to assess politeness in a systematic way or to assist learners to write a polite e-mail. This chapter has highlighted the need for second language learners to be aware of e-mail politeness protocols in order to communicate effectively with their teachers and peers online. As a result, The Tool-Kit described in this chapter was created to address this need.

Developed over a four-year period, The Tool-Kit represents a starting point in trying to objectively evaluate politeness levels in e-mail communication. Described as a metaphorical bridge linking theory to practice, The Tool-Kit was created as a way of dealing with the uncertainty about e-mail politeness which was revealed during the construction of the tool described here. The instrument also represents a practical attempt to discuss online politeness. Constructed from a synthesis of empirical data and theoretical frameworks from the literature, the innovative instrument can assist online users on how to write more polite e-mails, especially to those in other cultures. Knowledge of the pragmatics of politeness could also be assisted with the aid of this instrument, and consequently assist e-learning between online teachers and their non-native students.

Excerpts from the 10 different sections included in The Tool-Kit were explained in this chapter, as well as how each one of them operates. Throughout the excerpts from the different sections of The Tool-Kit, it was explained how the instrument can be applied pedagogically to assist e-learning between students and their online teachers. It also discussed how the instrument can
provide a sharper focus on elements contributing to politeness in e-mail communication. As such, use of the instrument could help online learners locate problem areas of pragmatic proficiency, common in second language learners (Thomas, 1983).

The innovative instrument described in this chapter presents a new step in our research into intercultural e-mail politeness and the way in which this affects e-mail interactions. It provides a useful tool that can support e-learning and advance our research in the area of e-mail interactions in e-learning environments. However, this instrument is still in its infancy. Further research needs to be conducted on its application in different e-learning contexts to monitor and assess its subsequent impact on online learning and teaching.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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REFERENCES


Politeness in Intercultural E-Mail Communication


KEY TERMS

**E-Mail Thread:** A series of e-mails sent back and forth between two communicators in a dialogue style on a particular subject over a certain period of time.

**Glossary of Terms:** A document explaining terms used in *The Tool-Kit* by way of definitions and examples.

**Linguistic Politeness:** Language used in a communication act to consider and respect the well-being of others.

**Politeness Protocol:** A set of language structures which considers and respects the well-being of others.

**Power:** The degree that a person is able to control the behavior of another (Brown & Gilman, 2003), or freedom of action to achieve one’s goals, regardless of whether or not this involves the potential to impose one’s will on others to carry out actions that are in one’s interests (Watts, 2003, p. 276).

**Relationship-Building Language:** Language that tries to find common ground between the sender and receiver of an e-mail (as opposed to face-building language, which is used to compliment the receiver).

**Respect for Receiver’s Time and Space Language/Respecting Receiver’s Time and Space:** The many uses of language in a way that shows respect for the privacy, time, and own world of the receiver.
**Social Distance:** The sense of like-mindedness with one another (Brown & Gilman, 2003).

**Status:** One’s position relative to that of others.