

**Investigating Students' Politeness Strategies in Email Requests: Master Two
Students of English at Ziane Achour University Djelfa**

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ABSTRACT: *In a university setting, emails provide students with a convenient and accessible means of communication to reach their teachers for questions, concerns, or requests outside of class hours, ensuring continuous support and guidance. However, such a means of communication is prone to potential pitfalls due to the nature of written language. Hence, the current research aims to understand students' use of politeness strategies and teachers' perception of their language. The study deploys the mixed-method approach through quantitative analysis of emails from students and interviews with teachers of English in the department of foreign language in Djelfa University, Algeria. The findings indicate that although impolite or rude emails constitute less than half of the total, their detrimental effects on teachers are more substantial than the positive ones.*

KEYWORDS: Email, Students, Politeness, Requests, Pragmatics

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1. Introduction

Student-teacher face-to-face communication at the level of the university is often limited because of the nature of university lectures and the environment in general. The situation renders the utilization of emails rather necessary and sometimes it could be the only viable option. Consequently, teachers often deal with a large number of email requests from students. Emails' topics can range from a simple inquiry about lectures to complex matters such as complaints and problems. The issue that drives this paper emanates from the fact that writing pragmatically felicitous emails is arduous, particularly for students who have not mastered the language (Winans, 2020). Written communication is challenging and even tricky as it is highly prone to pragmatic failure. The inability to perceive body language in communication can result in misinterpretation of the tone of the voice or the intention behind the message.

Teachers frequently complain that some students' emails can cause upset or even provoke anger. Sadly, answers to such kinds of emails are often negative and can lead to some unwanted consequences. Thus, the current study examines students' writing language and politeness strategies deployed in an attempt to understand and evaluate students' ability to vary their speech act according to the context of formal requests via emails. The aim is help to facilitate interaction between teachers and students by avoiding potential conflicts and mitigating the directness of their speech act.

Recently, the subject of politeness has been dealt with extensively as a standalone field of research that has connections to sociolinguistics, socio-pragmatics, ethnography of communication, and second language teaching/acquisition (Escandell Vidal, 1998). While studies might well share the same theoretical background, the analysis of conversations is context-specific and depends on interlocutors, their backgrounds, the time, and other variables. Hence, this paper tries to scrutinize students' emails in an endeavor to understand the degree of politeness/impoliteness and the reasons behind the choice of words and the perception of teachers. The latter is translated into the following research questions:

- 1- What kind of politeness strategies do students of English in Djelfa use?
- 2- What is the teachers' perception of students' language in terms of politeness?
- 3- How can students ensure writing effective emails that conform to proper politeness strategies?

The answers to these questions are undoubtedly available in the literature, still, the sociopragmatic dimension of the topic dictates the inclusion of several factors such as sex, ranking of imposition, social distance, and types of interaction, all of which are context-specific, in this paper, it is related to Djelfa, a city in north-central Algeria about 300 km from the capital city Algiers. To study the interplay of these factors and arrive at answers, this research starts by investigating the current research in the area of politeness. Then, the methodology opted for will be discussed. Lastly, results and analysis with the final conclusion will be divulged.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Email Requests

Emails offer several advantages that make them the preferred mode of communication in most professional and academic settings. Sending an email helps maintain a high degree of formality by avoiding getting caught up in lengthy conversations and small talk. Emails allow recipients to respond at their convenience, making even the time spent to reply or even not replying part of the response. However, these advantages are also met by some shortcomings as they are not ideal for complex topics in which so many questions are anticipated. Furthermore, emails also carry a tone of voice that can be easily misunderstood, thus, a conversation would collapse and break off. (Escandell Vidal, 1998)

The subject of the whole research is centered around the idea of establishing successful communication through emails focusing mainly on politeness. Although the talk is restricted to written language, the same principles driving spoken language are applied. When a person sends an email, he/she attempts to create optimum conditions for the communication to be successful. The latter requires according to Livet & Ridel

(1994) three aspects. First, the intention of the sender has to produce an effect and also elicit a response from the receiver. Second, the intention of the sender has to be recognized by the receiver. Finally, both parties have to be satisfied, that is the sender's satisfaction is partly dependent on the receiver's. In a spoken conversation, a certain amount of negotiation is always present that would allow balance to avoid misunderstanding, the same can be said about written communication.

2.2. Politeness Theories

The gist of politeness theories is that they account for the strategies interlocutors deploy to achieve a comfortable environment for communication. Traditionally, these theories relied on the pragmatic approach in linguistics. The work of P. Brown and S. Levinson "Politeness: Some Universals on Language Usage" (1987) is often regarded as a landmark regarding research about politeness. In their work, they rely on the idea that everyone has a "face" as a basis of their theory. A speech act or any utterance that conveys a speaker's intention and affects the listener can threaten face. In an ideal situation, a speaker attempts to minimize face-threatening acts that would inherently damage the face of the addressee since these acts will be in opposition to the desire of the listener. Successful communication, or in our context, a polite conversation depends on the speaker deploying linguistic strategies to maintain the addressee's face.

The concept of the "face" was first introduced by Erving Goffman who defined "face" as the individual's self-image which mirrors the way a person wants to be perceived by others. According to Brown & Levinson (1987, p.61), one's face is "something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction". The notion of face has two sides, it can be positive or negative. The former denotes the self-image or personality claimed by interactants. It is that appreciation and approval everyone seeks from their social groups. On the other hand, a negative face corresponds with the need to be independent, to have control and freedom of action, and not be obliged or imposed on by others.

2.3. Face threatening acts

In an interaction, any act that damages the addressee's or speaker's face either positively or negatively is referred to as a face-threatening act (FTA). These acts can be divided into two, those who hurt the speaker's face and those that threaten the hearer's face. Orders, advice, requests, reminders, and warnings are all acts that can threaten the addressee's negative face, thus affecting their desire to be left alone. Promises and offers also exert pressure on the hearer to accept or reject. Furthermore, promises and offers lead to incurring debt. Compliments and other expressions of envy, admiration, and strong emotion often require the hearer to respond and take action, subsequently threatening their negative face. On the other hand, disproving, criticizing, contradicting, or disagreeing with a speaker might trigger discomfort in communication. Therefore, they are all considered a direct threat to face. Lack of respect in a conversation whether because the speaker is profane, irreverent, or performing a bluntly non-cooperative act is another reason to threaten the hearer's desire to be respected and their wants to be fulfilled.

At the other end of an interaction, the speaker's face wants to be minded too for successful communication. In this regard, the speaker looks for approval, acceptance (positive face), and also independence, and freedom (negative face). For instance, expressions that are related to apologies, accepting compliments, self-humiliation, and emotional leakage can all affect the positive face of a speaker. Needing to express or accept thanks, giving excuses either to refuse or even accept offers, as well as making promises are all acts that can interfere with the speaker's freedom; therefore affecting their negative face (Aijmer, 2013).

2.4. Politeness Strategies

While it might be logical to avoid face-threatening acts altogether and use only neutral language, often FTAs are part of our daily interaction and most likely they occur. In this vein, Brown and Levinson (1987) advance four types of positive politeness strategies: bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off record. Bald on record means that the speaker is not trying to minimize the threat to the hearer's face. The act here is unambiguous, direct, and in a concise way. Bald on-record is associated with a sense of urgency toward conducting a task rather than minding the addressees' face.

In positive politeness strategies, parties involved in an interaction attempt to attend to the hearer's and speaker's wants, interests, and goods. These strategies are deployed among friends and people who are acquainted with each other. Reciprocity is assumed and asserted as there is cooperation in positive polite conversations since each side tries to fulfill the other's positive face. On the side of the spectrum, negative politeness involves indirect questions, minimizing imposition, and giving respect. Negative politeness strategies ensure the smoothest interaction between interlocutors.

Off-record strategies imply that the speaker deploys tactics to avoid accountability. In this case, the speaker relies on the hearer's ability to infer the intended meaning through conversational implicatures. Off-record strategies are accomplished by giving hints, clues, tautologies, metaphors, and understatement. Hence, in this type, the desired meaning does not reside within the speaker's utterance but it is implicitly understood. Being off record alleviates the pressure on the hearer's face allowing the latter freedom and independence but it might well fail to convey the needed meaning.

2.5. Rudeness

According to Beebe (1995), "rudeness is defined as a face-threatening act (FTA) - or feature of an FTA such as intonation- which violates a socially sanctioned norm of the interaction of the social context in which it occurs". Therefore, rudeness does not come from face-threatening acts but when interlocutors go against social norms or what is deemed to be expected as an appropriate and acceptable behavior. Rondina and Workman (2005, p. 3) see that rudeness is "basically anything you say or do— or don't say or do—that offends someone else, making them feel uncomfortable or inconvenienced". Rondina and Workman's definition distinguishes between rudeness and face-threatening acts by affirming that with the former there is a deliberate and stated intention to cause discomfort.

The overall aim behind deploying politeness strategies is to maximize the chance of successful communication, yet, there is always the possibility for unintended meaning or linguistic accidents especially if the speaker or even the hearer does not master the language. In this regard, Terkourafi (2008) avows that impoliteness could be both deliberate and accidental but rudeness is always intentional. In academics, there is a tendency for utilizing the terms impoliteness and rudeness interchangeably but there is a clear difference between the two quantitatively and qualitatively.

3. Methodology

The central aim of the paper is to investigate students' politeness strategies used in their emails. The goals are: to reflect on the type of language used and whether students have the intention to be polite or not and also investigate whether there is any intention to be impolite or rude. Second, the research attempts to come to a solution to mitigate the situation by asking about teachers' perceptions. The research makes use of the mixed-method approach by using three data-gathering tools.

From the students' side, data is divided into two sections. The primary data is gathered from students' emails. The latter has been sent to the researcher over two years from Master 2 students of English. All emails that fit this category were analyzed so there is no selection process.

Emails Subject	Number	Male	Female
Requests	22	5	17
Complains	55	28	27
Total	77	33	44

Table 1. Population distribution of the research with Email types

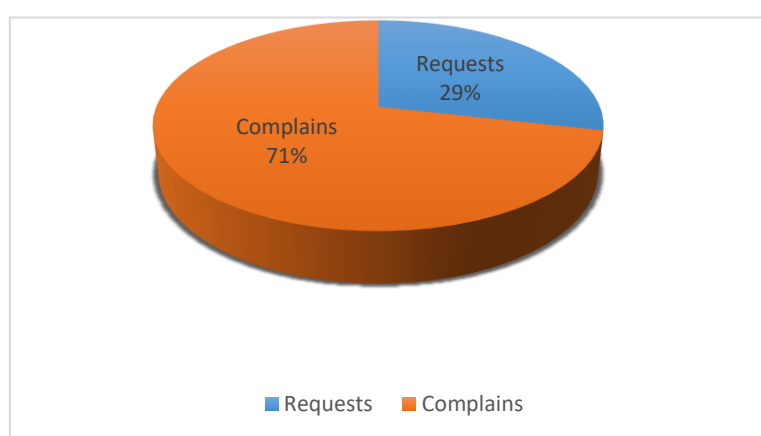


Figure 1 the distribution of the types of emails received

Table 1 divulges the participants in the research as well as the types of emails sent. Emails are categorized according to their content. Overall, 77 emails have been used in this research 33 were sent by males while 44 were by females. The uneven distribution is mostly due to the fact that the majority of students of English in the department are females.

Figure 1 indicates the distribution of the types of emails received. The two dominant kinds of emails are complaints and requests with 71 % and 29 % respectively. Requests are often those emails that students just want to confirm a matter. Emails containing questions were added to the last category of requests.

The second part of data collection is to reach out to the students who sent emails for two purposes. Explicit and formal consent has to be provided by the students. Furthermore, students are requested for an interview which can provide significant insight into the true intention behind the intended meaning of the email. Since the nature of the conversation can be highly embarrassing, many refused to do an interview and settled for a questionnaire. Therefore, they were sent the interview schedule. Initially, 24 students agreed to have a formal interview, however, this number shrunk to 5 only. Thus, 52 students were sent questions via email. The issue is that there can not be one set of questions for all participants. There are clear differences in the politeness strategies utilized by students. Therefore, questions have to be tailored in accordance with the language of the email received.

The last data collection tool is interviews with teachers of English in the Department of Foreign Languages Djelfa University specifically. Probing into teachers' perspectives necessitates a deeper insight into their attitude and perception of students' emails in terms of politeness. Interviews are more suitable for open-

ended questions which in turn help the researcher to delve deeper into details and in the same avoiding nuanced information. The need for flexibility and adaptability in the questions meant that all the interviews were unstructured. Given the nature of the topic, a sense of trust and comfort is required. Hence, there is a need to foster a personal connection and rapport between the researcher and the teachers which allows for a relaxed and conversational atmosphere. The total number of the teachers interviewed is 8, 3 males and 4 females. The choice of the participants is not random since the researcher opts for those with whom he can establish successful interviews.

4. Results and interpretation

4.1. Analysis of Emails

Number	Student (Random ID)	Email Politeness	Reason	Politeness Strategy
1	ABC123	Polite	Proper Greeting	Bald on Record
2	XYZ789	Impolite	Complaint about grading system / Negative tone	
3	DEF456	Polite	Inquiry about the class schedule	Positive Polite
4	GHI789	Polite	Thank you for email for the professor's help	Positive Polite
5	JKL012	Polite	Request for an extension on assignment / Proper Etiquette	Positive Polite
6	MNO345	Negative Polite	Disagreement with a professor's grading decision, seeking clarification	Negative Polite
7	PQR678	Polite	Question about the exam format	Positive Polite
8	STU901	Polite	Request for recommendation letter	Positive Polite
9	VWX234	Polite	Inquiry about internship opportunities	Positive Polite
10	YZA567	Rudeness	Harshly complaining about exam marks	Negative Polite
11	BCD890	Polite	Request for a meeting with the supervisor	Positive Polite
12	EFG123	Polite	Thank you email	Positive Polite
13	HIJ456	Polite	Inquiry about the scholarship application	Positive Polite
14	KLM789	Negative Polite	Expressing frustration and dissatisfaction with marks without seeking a resolution politely	Negative Polite
15	NOP012	Polite	Question about course prerequisites	Positive Polite
16	QRS345	Polite	Request for research assistance	Positive Polite
17	TUV678	Polite	Thank you for email for the professor's guidance	Positive Polite
18	WXY901	Polite	Inquiry about study abroad programs	Positive Polite
19	ZAB234	Polite	Request for syllabus	Positive Polite
20	CDE567	Rudeness	Blaming the class leader	Negative Polite
21	FGH890	Polite	Question about office hours	Positive Polite
22	IJK123	Polite	Request for reference letter	Positive Polite

Table 2. Analysis of Students' Email (Requests) in terms of politeness

Table 2 indicates the classification of students' request emails in terms of politeness. The table shows that out of 22 emails, 16 are deemed polite (72.7%), 1 impolite (4.5%), 2 negative politeness (9.1%), and two rude emails (9.1%). The data obtained from Table 2 reveals that requests are often framed in a polite manner because no pre-context would affect the message. The sender is trying to adhere to social norms. Therefore, in general, the tone deployed is polite demonstrating a positive approach which can increase the likelihood of the request being fulfilled.

Number	Student ID	Email Politeness	Reason	Politeness Strategy
1	ABC123	Polite	Late assignment submission	Positive Polite
2	DEF456	Impolite	Technical issue with the online platform	Negative Polite
3	GHI789	Polite	Miscommunication regarding the exam schedule	Positive Polite
4	JKL012	Polite	Grade discrepancy	Positive Polite
5	MNO345	Polite	Request for a deadline extension	Positive Polite
6	PQR678	Impolite	Instructor unresponsiveness	Negative Polite
7	STU901	Polite	Group project coordination issue	Positive Polite
8	VWX234	Neutral	Confusion over assignment instructions	Bald on Record
9	YZA567	Polite	Class scheduling conflict	Positive Polite
10	BCD890	Impolite	Request for additional study materials	Negative Polite
11	EFG123	Impolite	Grading error in a quiz	Negative Polite
12	HIJ456	Polite	Difficulty accessing course materials	Positive Polite
13	KLM789	Polite	Concerns about course content	Positive Polite
14	NOP012	Polite	Absence policy clarification	Positive Polite
15	QRS345	Polite	Incomplete feedback on an assignment	Positive Polite
16	TUV678	Polite	Technical difficulties during an online exam	Positive Polite
17	WXY901	Impolite	Complaints about the course structure	Negative Polite
18	ZAB234	Polite	Request for a meeting with the instructor	Positive Polite
19	CDE567	Polite	Clarification on grading criteria	Positive Polite
20	FGH890	Neutral	Unsatisfactory teaching methods	Bald on Record
21	IJK123	Polite	Concerns about the textbook choice	Positive Polite
22	LMN456	Polite	Request for course syllabus update	Positive Polite
23	OPQ789	Impolite	Unresolved assignment feedback issues	Negative Polite
24	RST012	Polite	Difficulty accessing online lectures	Positive Polite
25	UVW345	Polite	Request for office hours availability	Positive Polite
26	XYZ678	Impolite	Complaint about a group leader	Negative Polite
27	ABC901	Polite	Technical issue with assignment submission	Positive Polite
28	DEF234	Polite	Request for lecture recordings	Positive Polite
29	GHI567	Impolite	Grading delay concerns	Negative Polite
30	JKL890	Polite	Attendance policy inquiry	Positive Polite
31	MNO123	Polite	Request for a tutoring session	Positive Polite
32	PQR456	Neutral	Dissatisfaction with the course pace	Bald on Record
33	STU789	Impolite	Late announcement of the assignment deadline change	Negative Polite
34	VWX012	Impolite	Unsatisfactory response to a query	Negative Polite
35	YZA345	Polite	Concerns about grading fairness	Positive Polite
36	BCD678	Polite	Request for lecture slides	Positive Polite
37	EFG901	Impolite	Unavailability of study materials	Negative Polite
38	HIJ234	Polite	Difficulty understanding assignment instructions	Positive Polite
39	KLM567	Polite	Request for clarification on exam format	Positive Polite
40	NOP890	Impolite	Dissatisfaction with the course registration process	Negative Polite
41	QRS123	Polite	Concerns about group project grading	Positive Polite
42	TUV456	Polite	Request for additional office hours	Positive Polite
43	WXY789	Impolite	Lack of response to the previous email	Negative Polite
44	ZAB012	Impolite	Inadequate teaching materials	Negative Polite
45	CDE345	Polite	Request for assignment feedback	Positive Polite
46	FGH678	Polite	Clarification on the final exam structure	Positive Polite
47	IJK901	Impolite	Concerns about grading consistency	Negative Polite
48	LMN234	Polite	Request for reference materials	Positive Polite
49	OPQ567	Polite	Difficulty accessing online discussion forum	Positive Polite
50	RST890	Impolite	Complaints about exam marks	Negative Polite
51	UVW123	Polite	Concerns about course prerequisites	Positive Polite
52	XYZ456	Impolite	Unavailability of the instructor during office hours	Negative Polite

53	ABC789	Polite	Request for grading rubric	Positive Polite
54	DEF012	Impolite	Late announcement of class cancellation	Negative Polite
55	GHI345	Polite	Request for assistance with assignment troubleshooting	Positive Polite

Table 3. Analysis of Students' Email (Complaints) in terms of politeness

Table 3 represents the analysis of complaints from students. The number of emails is 55, and approximately more than half of the students (58%) displayed a polite demeanor in their communication with the researcher. 36% of the emails are still considered to be impolite while 6 % are neutral, in this context, "neutral" refers to emails that do not lean towards being polite or impolite. These emails have a neutral tone without any strong expression of politeness or impoliteness.

The difference is clear between the numbers of the two tables as there is an increase in impolite emails from 10 % to 36 %. The reason behind this is that complaints are manifestations of dissatisfaction or grievances about a particular issue. The data obtained indicate that the tone of students is more assertive and often more direct highlighting the seriousness of the concern. However, these kinds of emails carry negative experiences and tones that render them impolite.

4.2. Students' Interviews

The interviews with the students focused primarily on the true intention of the emails. However, a notable issue was that the only students who agreed to be interviewed were those who had sent polite emails. This may have skewed the results of the study, as it is possible that students who sent impolite emails were less likely to participate. As a result, the data gathered from the interviews is deemed irrelevant to the research and is therefore discarded.

4.3. Students' Questionnaire Answers

Students who did not opt for interviews were sent the interview schedule. The same problem persisted with the questionnaire as only 3 students replied to the questionnaire. Again, only those emails are flagged to be polite have replied. Consequently, the data obtained are both severely limited in size and also not helpful in this context. It is clear that the majority of students exhibited shyness which translated into a lack of willingness to engage in interviews.

4.4. Teachers' Interviews

The purpose of conducting interviews with teachers was twofold: first, to understand their attitudes towards students' emails, and second, to gather recommendations for mitigating the issue in the future. The questions of the interviews are centered around the idea of whether students' emails are up to the standard in terms of politeness strategies. The interviews were unstructured providing the teachers only clues about the topic. The idea is to collect teachers' personal experiences with students' emails.

The answers of the teachers carry a negative attitude towards emails received from students. For instance, reviewee 1 states that "a lot of students' emails lack basic politeness, I am honestly shocked and also frustrated as emails are full of abbreviations, hastily written with many spelling mistakes, and what annoys me the most they are devoid of greeting or sign-offs". In alignment with the first interviewee, the second one stated that a large number of emails are rude. The interviewee feels disheartening to see a lack of respect and proper communication etiquette. Another interviewee referred to the absence of any sort of professionalism.

Two teachers interviewed for this study expressed their frequent disappointment in the students' consistent use of impolite emails. They firmly emphasized that such language often incorporates slang and carries a negative tone, which, in their opinion, should not be a part of the academic and professional world. They

strongly believe that the utilization of impolite language in emails can strain the delicate professional relationship between teachers and students, making it increasingly challenging to seek assistance or foster future collaborations. Moreover, the teachers highlighted the potential long-term consequences of such communication habits, suggesting that it can hinder students' overall growth and hinder their ability to establish meaningful connections in their respective fields.

5. Triangulating Results

The initial plan was to triangulate data collected from emails, students' interviews, and questionnaire answers as well as teachers' interviews. With students' interviews and questionnaires discarded, the focus is on enhancing the credibility of the research by looking at the findings from the perspective of the actual data from emails and teachers' attitudes. The two data collection tools basically yielded similar results confirming the reliability of the findings that can be summarized in the following.

First, teachers are frustrated by students' emails. Although data analysis of emails shows that the students still adhere to politeness strategies, teachers assert that the language remains inappropriate. The lack of proper greetings like the use of "Dear sir or last name" or omitting a closing, such as "Sincerely" or "Best regards," can give the impression of indifference or disrespect. Conversely, teachers greatly appreciate when students demonstrate proper email etiquette by including a respectful salutation and closing. The inclusion of a polite greeting and closing not only reflects a level of professionalism but also sets a positive tone for communication.

On the idea of tone, the utilization of a demanding tone without consideration in making a request can render the latter as a command or an entitlement. Such a situation has been confirmed by the emails gathered and also by teachers' attitudes. On the latter, they confirm that the tone used in emails plays a significant role in how a message is perceived by the recipient. A demanding tone can easily create an imbalance in the relationship between teachers and students. Thus, establishing constructive communication requires from the side of the students to mind their language to convey humility and appreciation.

Finally, email etiquette also encompasses professional boundaries that can be exhibited in writing with formal language, making reasonable demands with consideration for the teachers' workload and availability. The latter entails that students should not be hasty in expecting immediate responses, understanding that teachers have multiple responsibilities and may need time to address inquiries and requests. Thus, students have to be patient and respectful allowing time for teachers to respond especially during periods of exams and busy work or holidays. Teachers ensure that fostering positive communication can be achieved with patience and respect from both parties.

6. Revisiting Research Questions

The first question the research attempts to address has to be answered as objectively as possible. The data obtained indicate that statistically more than half of the students' emails investigated remain polite, polite (72.7%), 1 impolite (4.5%), 2 negative politeness (9.1%), and 2 rude emails (9.1%). The slightly different result with complaints emails still indicates the presence of polite emails. The answer to the question lies in the same aspects that render an email impolite. It is often the absence of some aspects that will be flagged by teachers. Therefore, politeness has been revealed through the use of proper language, greetings, direct and very concise and precise, and with the required etiquette.

The response to the second question, however, reveals a contrast in objectivity compared to the first inquiry when it comes to teachers. While the percentage of impolite or rude emails remains below the halfway mark, the significant negative impact they have on teachers outweighs the positive ones. This was revealed through the answers of the teachers. The same answers also address the third research question.

In this regard, teachers believe that students need to be careful when sending emails as they play a vital role in establishing successful communication that would greatly affect their academic career. They believe that

a good email has to be characterized by the following: correct language in terms of grammar and style, proper formatting, relevance, clarity, conciseness, a good tone, professionalism, and politeness.

7. Conclusion

Emails serve as a primary means of communication that facilitates quick and efficient information exchange between students and teachers. Emails have several advantages, accessibility, convenience, timely updates, and professionalism, rendering them favorable for teachers and administration staff. However, the mode of communication in emails is also susceptible to misinterpretation. Lack of nonverbal cues, ambiguity in the text, and the lack of immediate feedback all can result in negative consequences.

The research findings highlight a significant observation regarding the determinants of email politeness. Interestingly, the same aspects that contribute to the overall politeness of an email can also render it impolite or, in some cases, even rude. This underscores the delicate nature of email communication and the importance of understanding the implicit aims behind it. With the implicit aim being to foster effective and respectful communication between students and teachers, it becomes crucial to address the factors that influence the perception of politeness in emails. By acknowledging these findings, we can develop strategies and guidelines that enable students to navigate the intricacies of email etiquette, ensuring their messages are conveyed with the desired level of politeness and facilitating positive and harmonious interactions with their teachers.

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