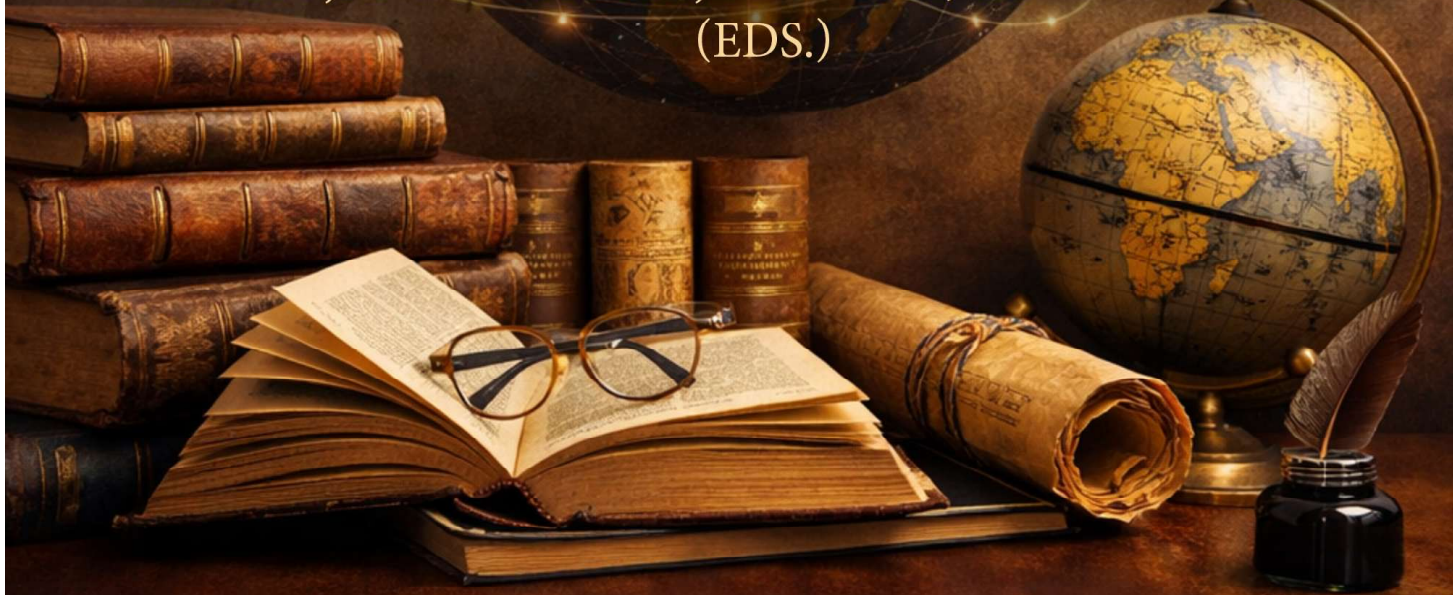


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(EDS.)



Contemporary Approaches to
Intercultural Pragmatics Research and its
Application in Language Teaching



From Scientific Concepts to Practical Implementation

*Contemporary Approaches to
Intercultural Pragmatics Research
and its Application in Language Teaching –
From Scientific Concepts to
Practical Implementation*

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***Contemporary Approaches to Intercultural Pragmatics Research
and Its Application in Language Teaching –
From Scientific Concepts to Practical Implementation***



Goce Delcev
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Ministry for Education and
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South East European
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**POLITENESS IN ACADEMIC EMAILS: PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE AND
POWER IN TEACHER - STUDENT COMMUNICATION**

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Abstract

Politeness is a fundamental aspect of human communication, functioning as a core pragmatic principle that guides appropriate language use, facilitates mutual understanding, and sustains interpersonal relationships across diverse cultural and linguistic contexts. Politeness strategies are employed to manage social distance, power relations, and degrees of imposition, enabling speakers and writers to adapt their communication to specific social and institutional settings. Email communication has become one of the most common forms of interaction between university students and professors, making pragmatic competence and politeness strategies essential for effective academic discourse. This study investigates the use of politeness strategies in academic email communication, focusing on how students formulate requests, apologies, a teacher survey and a dataset of authentic students' emails collected from two higher education institutions in North Macedonia—South East European University (SEEU) and students' emails collected from two higher education institutions in North Macedonia—South East European University (SEEU) and “Goce Delcev” University. The findings reveal that while many students demonstrate awareness of basic email conventions, their application of politeness strategies is inconsistent. Students frequently employ basic markers such as greetings and expressions of

gratitude; however, more complex mitigation strategies—such as indirect requests or hedging—are used less consistently. Faculty perceptions further indicate that pragmatic issues related to tone, clarity, and contextual appropriateness often lead to misunderstandings in email communication.

Keywords: *politeness strategies, pragmatic competence, academic email communication, student–professor interaction, EFL*

1. Introduction

At universities worldwide, email has become the primary channel of communication between students and professors, requiring not only linguistic accuracy but also pragmatic competence. Politeness strategies, particularly in speech acts such as requests, apologies, and expressions of thanks, are central to maintaining respect and negotiating power relations in academic settings. While research has addressed politeness in computer-mediated communication, fewer studies have examined how these strategies operate in student-professor emails within specific institutional contexts. Several previous studies have shown that email communication often reflects hierarchical relations (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007).

Nevertheless, there is a clear research gap in understanding how politeness strategies are used in academic email exchanges in the Balkans, particularly in North Macedonia, where multilingualism and diverse academic cultures intersect. Regarding research on pragmatics, little attention has been given to how students at institutions such as Goce Delcev University (UGD) and South East European University (SEEU) navigate politeness in email communication with their professors. Addressing this gap is important, as pragmatic competence in email communication is a crucial skill for students in an increasingly global academic environment and their future teaching careers.

Therefore, this study seeks to investigate politeness in academic email communication by analyzing a corpus of authentic, anonymized emails collected from the aforementioned higher education institutions in North Macedonia. The analysis focuses on how students employ politeness strategies and how hierarchical roles influence the formulation of speech acts.

In the field of applied linguistics, the findings of this study will contribute to a better understanding of pragmatic competence in academic discourse, while also offering practical implications for developing EFL students' email writing skills. By highlighting context-specific features of politeness in email communication, the study provides insights that may inform academic writing instruction and intercultural communication training in higher education and raise students' awareness of this issue.

2. Literature Review

Politeness, as a fundamental concept in pragmatics, is not merely concerned with etiquette; rather, it involves the strategic management of interpersonal relationships through language. In academic contexts, language is carefully constructed and disseminated; therefore, politeness becomes a crucial linguistic resource for navigating

activities that are inherently face-threatening in academic settings.

Within this framework, Brown and Levinson's model (1987) stands out as one of the most influential approaches in academic discourse. According to this model, all competent members of society possess both a positive and a negative face, that is, the desire for autonomy and freedom, as well as the desire to be approved of, liked, and respected. Complementing this perspective, Leech (1983) proposed an approach based on the principles of tact, generosity, approbation, and modesty. More specifically, he argued that the most relevant maxims in academia include generosity, tact, approbation, modesty, sympathy, and agreement. To achieve broader explanatory coverage, four additional maxims were later introduced: obligation by the speaker and hearer, opinion reticence, and feeling reticence.

From a communicative competence perspective, Bachman (1990) put forward the Communicative Language Ability (CLA) Model, in which language competence is considered one of its indispensable components. Within this model, pragmatic competence refers to the knowledge of language that enables users to achieve communicative goals in context. This includes, among other aspects, functional and sociolinguistic knowledge, such as imaginative and ideational functions, as well as knowledge of registers, genres, and dialects.

Expanding further on interpersonal dimensions, Spencer-Oatey (2000, 2008) introduced the Rapport Management Model (RMM), which encompasses not only face and identity but also social rights, obligations, and interactional goals. This model is particularly applicable to academic settings, where managing professional relationships is of paramount importance. Spencer-Oatey defines "rapport" as individuals' subjective perceptions of harmony or disharmony, smoothness versus turbulence, and warmth versus antagonism in interpersonal relations. Importantly, the RMM takes interpersonal relations as its starting point rather than focusing solely on linguistic strategies; as a result, it offers a broader and more multidisciplinary perspective than many earlier politeness models. Despite the prominence of these theories, Locher and Watts (2005) argue that Brown and Levinson's framework should be viewed not as a theory of politeness per se, but rather as a theory of facework. Specifically, they contend that it focuses primarily on face-threatening acts, while neglecting situations in which face-threat mitigation is not a priority, such as aggressive, abusive, or rude behavior. In response to this limitation, Locher and Watts (2005, 2008) propose the concept of relational work, defined as the ongoing process of constructing and negotiating relationships in interaction. Their model further distinguishes between first-order politeness and second-order politeness in order to account for notions of polite, impolite, and appropriate behavior. Accordingly, this approach emphasizes how members of socio-cultural groups perceive, evaluate, and talk about politeness, focusing on how language is used to index good manners in interaction.

Nevertheless, the increasing use of email as a standard mode of communication between university students and faculty has generated growing concern among professors regarding both the frequency and the nature of messages they receive. In particular, faculty members have reported a range of issues, including excessive or inappropriate

requests—such as asking professors to review draft papers, provide notes for missed classes, or repeat information already clearly stated in the syllabus. In addition, concerns have been raised about the linguistic and stylistic quality of student emails, including informal greetings, the use of abbreviations, spelling and grammatical errors, and an overall lack of politeness or professionalism (Glater, 2006; Inside Higher Ed, 2006; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996). Notably, such issues are rarely reported in relation to students' use of professors' phone lines or voicemail systems.

Several explanations have been proposed to account for this perceived inappropriate use of email. Professors and researchers alike suggest that it stems from the “eras[ed] boundaries that traditionally kept students at a healthy distance” (Glater, 2006, para. 3), a generally more relaxed attitude toward stylistic norms among younger generations (Baron, 2002), and the influence of characteristics associated with modern technologies—such as instant messaging—on other forms of writing (Baron, 1984; Halliday, 1990). Similarly, Cameron (2003) speculates that contemporary communication is increasingly characterized by a preference for directness over indirectness, as well as by interactional styles that signal more egalitarian social relationships. Another frequently cited explanation concerns the absence of social context cues in computer-mediated communication (CMC), which can mask status differences between participants (Baron, 1984). Consequently, students may be temporarily unaware of whom they are addressing, either due to a genuine lack of awareness or to the decontextualized nature of the medium, resulting in language that fails to reflect appropriately the hierarchical student–professor relationship (Herring, 2002; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986, 1991).

Alternatively, students' perceived misuse of email may result from limited familiarity with appropriate email conventions, as such conventions are rarely taught explicitly. As a result, students often experience uncertainty regarding how to convey communicative intent effectively within the constraints of a text-only medium. This uncertainty is particularly pronounced in contexts characterized by power asymmetries, such as student–faculty interactions, and in situations involving requests or potential impositions. Moreover, students frequently lack access to effective models for composing emails to faculty, since such messages are not typically shared among peers. At the same time, they seldom receive explicit feedback on how their emails are perceived by professors (Chen, 2006), although Brenner (2006) notes that such feedback is more common in corporate contexts. Consequently, students often model their email practices on messages received from peers rather than authority figures (Crystal, 2001). Taken together, these factors contribute to the considerable uncertainty involved in composing appropriate and effective emails to individuals in positions of authority.

Nevertheless, several studies indicate that students—including non-native speakers of English—are aware of stylistic differences required in email communication with authority figures as opposed to peers and act upon this awareness (Chen, 2006; Danet, 2001; Herring, 2002). In most student–faculty email interactions, students are familiar with the professor they are addressing; therefore, when users are not anonymous, differential status may attach to email messages, and communication does not necessarily become

egalitarian or non-hierarchical (Herring, 2002). Similarly, Danet (2001) observes that the relative status of the sender and recipient influences linguistic choice, with upward-directed messages tending to be more formal, more polite, and more closely aligned with conventional norms.

Furthermore, the asynchronous nature of email may actually facilitate appropriately polite communication, as writers have time to construct and revise their messages in order to optimize self-presentation (Duthler, 2006). If this is the case, students can reasonably be expected to produce status-congruent email messages characterized by greater formality, or what may be termed e-politeness. More specifically, student email requests to faculty are likely to exhibit indirectness, as well as lexical and syntactic strategies that mitigate the force of the request. However, some earlier studies have tended to conflate different request types (e.g., Chen, 2006; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996), thereby overlooking the fact that different requests may impose varying degrees of burden on faculty members (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006). Accordingly, issues of e-politeness are likely to become more salient as the level of imposition increases.

3. Recent Studies

Politeness in academic email communication is a multidimensional construct shaped by linguistic, cultural, technological, and institutional norms. In higher education, email functions as a primary medium through which students and faculty negotiate authority, professionalism, and interpersonal rapport. As such, politeness is not merely a stylistic choice but a core component of effective academic communication.

Early research by Duran et al. (2005) highlighted the largely utilitarian role of email in faculty-student communication. Their study found that faculty primarily use email for administrative purposes such as announcements, scheduling, and clarifying course-related issues. While email was valued for its efficiency, concerns were raised about reduced face-to-face interaction and declining relational depth, particularly in smaller institutions where personalized contact is traditionally emphasized. More recent research has shifted attention toward the relational and affective dimensions of academic email communication. Heim (2024) demonstrated that encouraging and supportive email messages from instructors positively influenced professor-student rapport. Although gains in academic self-efficacy and resilience were mixed, rapport emerged as a key factor in fostering student motivation and persistence, underscoring the interpersonal power of polite and welcoming email communication.

At the institutional level, Simpson et al. (2025) examined the consequences of using email as a mass communication tool. Their findings revealed that students experience email overload and tend to disregard impersonal, generic messages, often perceiving them as irrelevant or “spam.” In contrast, emails from known teaching staff were more likely to be read and positively received. This study emphasizes that politeness, personalization, and relevance are crucial for maintaining effective communication in digitally saturated academic environments.

From a literacy and competence perspective, Konuk (2021) investigated email

literacy in higher education and identified widespread challenges in both student and staff email practices. Despite relatively high awareness of email conventions, students' actual emails frequently displayed issues related to formality, tone, punctuation, and politeness. The study concludes that explicit instruction in academic email etiquette is necessary for developing effective digital communication skills.

Similarly, Ghafar (2024) analyzed student–instructor email exchanges and found persistent problems related to informality, grammatical errors, and inappropriate pragmatic choices, such as the use of emoticons and excessive capitalization. These features often undermined the perceived professionalism of students' messages and influenced faculty responses. The study strongly recommends pedagogical interventions targeting socio-pragmatic competence and email etiquette to better prepare students for academic and professional communication.

4. Research Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods research methodology combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to investigate politeness strategies in academic email communication between students and professors. Data were collected during the Fall 2025/2026 semester from two higher education institutions, Goce Delcev University and South East European University in North Macedonia.

4.1. Research Questions and Hypotheses

The study focuses on the following research questions:

Research question 1: What are the most frequent politeness strategies used by EFL university students in academic emails?

Research question 2: What type of opening and closing moves are applied by EFL university students in academic emails?

Research question 3: To what extent do student perceptions of politeness in academic emails align with professors' perceptions of politeness and appropriateness?

4.2. Research Design

This study adopts a combined research design informed by pragmatics and discourse analysis. The study incorporates survey-based insights from professors, making it a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach. The focus is on identifying and interpreting politeness strategies used by students in academic email communication with professors, particularly how these strategies reflect pragmatic competence and respond to institutional power dynamics.

The study also incorporates quantitative and qualitative insights gathered through a survey administered to university professors. The survey data provide an additional perspective on how instructors perceive students' email communication in terms of politeness, tone, appropriateness, and professionalism. The integration of survey findings allows for a broader understanding of the expectations and evaluations of academic email etiquette from the instructors' viewpoint.

The qualitative component of the study involves a discourse-pragmatic analysis of student emails, with particular attention to linguistic features such as speech acts, forms of address, mitigation strategies, and structural organization of emails (e.g., subject line, greeting, message body, and closing).

4.3. Population and Sampling

The primary data consist of email exchanges between university students and their professors from two higher education institutions: “Goce Delčev” University in Štip and South East European University (SEEU) in Tetovo, North Macedonia. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select 50–60 authentic email interactions that contain key speech acts, including requests, apologies, and expressions of gratitude. The sample was designed to reflect a range of academic contexts—such as different faculties, courses, and levels of study—in order to enhance the relevance and contextual representativeness of the findings within the participating institutions. In addition, a survey administered to 20 university professors was used to gather their perceptions of politeness and appropriateness in academic email communication.

4.4. Data Collection Methods

Two types of data were collected in this study: perceptual data from professor surveys and textual data from student emails. First, surveys were distributed to 20 university professors across different departments to gather their perspectives on students’ use of politeness, tone, and appropriateness in academic email communication. The survey instrument was self-designed based on an extensive review of the literature on academic email communication, politeness strategies, and pragmatic competence (e.g., Duran et al., 2005; Konuk, 2021; Ghafar, 2024). It follows a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree) and consists of seven sections, combining both closed-ended and open-ended items.

Second, textual data were collected from a corpus of student emails. The email dataset was compiled through voluntary submissions from students and professors, and all emails were fully anonymized prior to analysis to ensure confidentiality and ethical research practices.

5. Results

This subsection presents the findings from the teacher survey, which explored professors’ perceptions of students’ politeness, pragmatic competence, and overall appropriateness in academic email communication. The results are organized according to key themes, including background information, general email conventions, politeness strategies, speech acts, pragmatic competence, power dynamics, and cultural influences. Quantitative responses from the Likert-scale items are analyzed alongside qualitative insights from the open-ended question to provide a comprehensive understanding of faculty perspectives.



Figure 1: Years of university teaching experience

The distribution of teaching experience suggests that the surveyed faculty are predominantly highly experienced, with 60% of respondents having 16 or more years of teaching. This concentration implies that the survey responses are likely influenced by long-established perceptions of academic email norms and politeness strategies, reflecting practices shaped over decades of higher education. Conversely, the smaller proportion of early-career professors (1–10 years, 30%) may indicate that newer faculty perspectives on email communication, potentially more aligned with contemporary digital norms, are underrepresented. This imbalance could affect the findings by emphasizing traditional or formal expectations of email etiquette over evolving student-centered approaches.



Figure 2: University affiliation of respondents

The distribution of respondents by university shows a moderate imbalance, with a majority (60%) affiliated with Goce Delcev University and the remaining 40% from SEEU. This overrepresentation may influence the survey results toward the perspectives and institutional norms of Goce Delčev University, potentially reflecting its specific academic culture, email expectations, and approaches to politeness. Consequently, while the sample captures insights from both institutions, the findings may be somewhat weighted toward the practices and experiences of faculty at Goce Delcev University.



Figure 3: Frequency of student emails received

The data indicate that the surveyed professors experience high levels of student email interaction, with 80% receiving emails on a daily basis and the remaining 20% several times a week. This pattern suggests that email is a primary channel of communication between students and faculty, highlighting its central role in academic interactions. The absence of weekly or rarely receiving responses indicates that email communication is consistently frequent across the sample, which may increase the relevance of professors' perceptions regarding politeness, tone, and pragmatic competence, as they are constantly exposed to students' email practices.

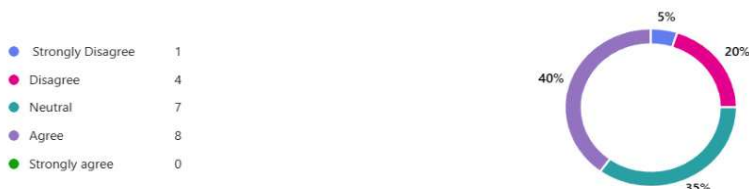


Figure 4: Adherence of student emails to academic conventions

The survey results indicate a mixed perception among professors regarding students' adherence to academic email conventions. While 40% of respondents agreed that most student emails follow appropriate conventions, a notable portion remained neutral (35%), suggesting uncertainty or variability in students' email practices. A smaller group, comprising 25% of respondents (5% strongly disagree, 20% disagree), perceived that student emails often deviate from expected norms. Overall, these findings suggest that while some students are able to meet conventional academic email standards, inconsistencies remain, highlighting the need for targeted guidance on email etiquette and pragmatic competence.



Figure 5: Students' awareness of politeness norms in emails

The survey findings indicate that professors perceive a moderate level of student awareness of politeness norms in academic emails. Half of the respondents (50%) agreed that students generally demonstrate such awareness, suggesting that many students are able to apply basic conventions of respectful communication. However, the substantial proportion of neutral responses (35%) points to variability in students' email politeness, implying that practices may differ across individuals or contexts. Additionally, 15% of respondents expressed disagreement, indicating that some students still fail to observe expected norms of courtesy.



Figure 6: Respectfulness of students' email tone

The survey results indicate that professors generally perceive students' email tone as respectful. A majority of respondents (70%) either agreed or strongly agreed that the overall tone of student emails is courteous and appropriate. The 25% of neutral responses suggest some variability in tone, indicating that not all emails consistently reflect respectful communication. Negative perceptions were minimal, with only 5% disagreeing and none strongly disagreeing, highlighting that instances of overtly disrespectful email tone are rare. Overall, these findings suggest that most students are able to convey respect in their academic email correspondence, though some inconsistencies remain.



Figure 7: Variation in students' politeness levels

The survey findings indicate that professors observe variability in the level of politeness among students' emails. A majority of respondents (55%) agreed or strongly agreed that differences in politeness are noticeable, suggesting that while some students consistently apply appropriate politeness strategies, others are less consistent. The 35% of neutral responses imply that the variation is not equally salient to all faculty, possibly reflecting differences in individual expectations or the diversity of student writing styles. Disagreement was minimal (10%), indicating that few professors perceive uniformity in politeness across all students. These results highlight the heterogeneous nature of students' email etiquette, emphasizing the need for clearer guidance and training in academic communication.



Figure 8: Effect of email tone on professors' interpretation of messages

The survey results indicate that a clear majority of respondents (70%) agreed or strongly agreed that emails with an unsuitable tone adversely affect their perception, highlighting the importance of politeness and professionalism in academic correspondence. The 25% neutral responses suggest that in some cases, faculty may be more tolerant or less affected by minor deviations in tone, while disagreement was minimal (5%), indicating that almost all professors recognize the potential influence of tone on message reception. Overall, these findings underscore the critical role of email tone in shaping faculty perceptions and the importance of training students in appropriate email etiquette.



Figure 9: Use of appropriate forms of address in student emails

The survey findings suggest that half of the respondents (50%) agreed or strongly agreed that students generally apply correct titles and greetings, indicating that many students follow expected conventions. However, a significant proportion (30%) expressed disagreement, highlighting that the use of appropriate forms of address remains a common challenge for some students. The 20% neutral responses further suggest variability in practices, reflecting inconsistencies across individuals or contexts.



Figure 10: Politeness of students' email requests

The survey results indicate that professors generally perceive students' requests in emails as polite, with a clear majority of 11 respondents (55%) agreeing or strongly agreeing. Six respondents (30%) remained neutral, suggesting that while many requests are considered polite, there is some variability in perception, possibly due to differences in phrasing or context. Only a small minority (15%) disagreed, indicating that instances of impolite requests are relatively rare. Overall, these findings suggest that most students demonstrate awareness of polite request strategies in academic email communication, though inconsistencies persist across the student body.



Figure 11: Students’ employment of polite strategies in requests

The survey findings indicate that the use of indirect language to soften requests is moderately observed among students. Most respondents were either neutral (45%) or agreed (35%) that students employ polite mitigation strategies such as “*Could you...*” or “*I would appreciate...*”, suggesting that indirect phrasing is somewhat common but not universal. A smaller portion of respondents (20%) disagreed, indicating that some students still use more direct language in their requests.

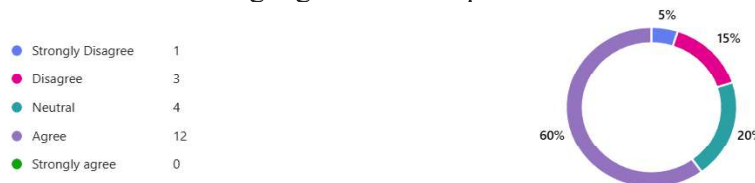


Figure 12: Use of gratitude expressions in student emails

The survey results indicate that most professors perceive students as appropriately using apologies in emails related to missed deadlines or mistakes, with 60% of respondents agreeing. The presence of neutral responses (20%) suggests some variability in perception, possibly due to differences in the clarity or sincerity of the apologies. A minority of respondents (20%) disagreed, indicating that some students still fail to consistently apply this aspect of email etiquette. These findings suggest that there remains room for improvement in consistently applying polite and accountable language in academic correspondence.



Figure 13: Students’ Expressions of gratitude (e.g., “thank you”)

The survey results suggest that students generally demonstrate awareness of proper email etiquette through expressions of gratitude, with a majority of respondents (65%) agreeing or strongly agreeing that students appropriately include phrases such as “thank you” in their emails. A smaller proportion of respondents (15%) disagreed, indicating that some students still omit or misuse expressions of gratitude, while 20% remained neutral, reflecting variability in practice.



Figure 14: Perceived directness or demanding tone in student emails

The survey results indicate that professors perceive a notable portion of student emails as overly direct or demanding, with 60% of respondents agreeing. The remaining 40% were neutral, suggesting that while this issue is recognized, it may not be consistently salient or problematic across all emails. The absence of disagreement underscores that faculty generally acknowledge the existence of emails lacking tact or mitigating language, though it is not considered a pervasive issue. Overall, these findings highlight that some students still struggle with softening their requests or phrasing messages diplomatically, emphasizing the importance of instruction in polite and appropriately mitigated email communication.



Figure 15: Students' pragmatic competence in academic email writing

The survey results indicate that professors have mixed perceptions regarding students' pragmatic competence in academic email writing. Seven respondents (35%) agreed that students demonstrate adequate competence, while six (30%) disagreed, suggesting that a substantial proportion of students struggle to consistently apply appropriate language, politeness strategies, and contextual norms. An additional seven respondents (35%) were neutral, indicating variability in email quality or differing faculty expectations. Overall, these findings suggest that while some students show proficiency in pragmatic aspects of email communication, there is considerable inconsistency, highlighting the need for targeted guidance and instruction to enhance students' pragmatic competence in academic correspondence.



Figure 16: Students' awareness of formal email communication

The survey results indicate that most professors perceive students as aware of the need for formality in email communication, with 60% agreeing that students recognize that emails require a more formal style than spoken interaction. A smaller proportion of respondents (20%) disagreed, while another 20% were neutral, suggesting some inconsistency in students’ understanding or application of formality. Overall, these findings imply that while students generally grasp the importance of formal email conventions, not all consistently implement them, highlighting an area where additional guidance and practice may be beneficial.



Figure 17: Perceived improvement of students’ pragmatic competence

The survey results indicate that professors overwhelmingly perceive students’ pragmatic competence in email writing as improving with academic experience, with 80% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing. Only a small number of respondents were neutral (15%), and a single respondent (5%) strongly disagreed, highlighting that most faculty recognize the role of exposure and practice in developing effective and polite communication. These findings suggest that students’ ability to apply politeness strategies, and formal conventions strengthens over time.



Figure 18: Role of pragmatic competence in email misunderstandings

The survey results suggest that professors perceive pragmatic issues as the primary source of misunderstandings in student emails, with 70% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing. Only a small number disagreed (10%), and 20% were neutral, indicating some variation in perception. These findings highlight that problems related to tone, politeness, indirectness, and overall pragmatic competence are viewed as more significant than grammatical errors in shaping the effectiveness of academic email communication.



Figure 19: Students’ awareness of power dynamics in email communication

The survey results indicate that professors generally perceive students as aware of the hierarchical power difference in academic email communication, with 50% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing. A substantial portion (40%) remained neutral, suggesting that this awareness is not consistently evident across all students or emails. Only a small minority (10%) disagreed, indicating that few students completely overlook these dynamics.



Figure 20: Instances of students challenging academic authority in emails

The survey results indicate that challenging academic authority through email is perceived as relatively uncommon. A majority of respondents (35%) disagreed that students exhibit such behavior, while nearly half (45%) remained neutral, reflecting uncertainty or variability in faculty observations. Only a small portion (20%) agreed that students challenge authority through tone or wording. Overall, these findings suggest that while some instances may occur, most students generally maintain respectful communication in their emails, and faculty are often unsure about the prevalence of authority-challenging messages.



Figure 21: Influence of students’ politeness on professors’ reply style

The survey results indicate that professors’ adjustment of their response style based on students’ email politeness is variable. While 45% of respondents agreed that they modify their replies according to the tone and politeness level of emails, 35% disagreed, and 20% remained neutral. This suggests that adapting responses to email politeness occurs in some cases but is not a consistent practice across all faculty, reflecting differences in personal communication style, workload, or perception of the importance of politeness in shaping responses.



Figure 22: Role of politeness strategies in negotiating respect and authority

The survey results indicate that professors generally perceive politeness as important for demonstrating mutual respect in emails, with 45% agreeing that it plays a significant role. However, 35% of respondents (15% strongly disagree, 20% disagree) did not fully share this view, suggesting some variation in perceptions of its impact. An additional 20% were neutral, indicating uncertainty or mixed experiences. Overall, these findings suggest that while most faculty recognize the importance of politeness in fostering respectful communication, there is not complete consensus, highlighting that the effectiveness of politeness in conveying respect may depend on individual interpretation or situational context.



Figure 23: Cultural Background Influence on Students’ Expressions

The findings reveal a clear consensus among respondents regarding the impact of cultural background on students’ expression of politeness in emails. Specifically, 75% of participants (15 out of 20) agree that cultural factors influence how students convey politeness, while 25% (5 out of 20) remain neutral. Notably, no respondents disagreed. This indicates a strong perception that cultural norms and values significantly shape students’ communication behaviors in digital correspondence.



Figure 24: Students' Benefits from Explicit Instruction on Academic Email Etiquette

The results indicate a strong consensus among respondents regarding the value of explicit instruction on academic email etiquette and politeness strategies. Specifically, 80% of participants (16 out of 20) agree or strongly agree that such guidance would benefit students, while 15% (3 out of 20) remain neutral, and only 5% (1 out of 20) strongly disagree. This distribution suggests that most respondents perceive targeted instruction as an effective means to enhance students' email communication skills. The overwhelmingly positive response highlights the importance of incorporating structured teaching on politeness conventions and professional email practices into the curriculum to support students in developing clear, respectful, and culturally appropriate digital communication.

Open-Ended Questions

In your opinion, what are the most common problems you observe in students academic email communication regarding politeness and appropriateness?

Table 1: Most Common Problems in Students' Academic Emails

| No. | Name of the question | Responses |
|-----|----------------------|--|
| 1 | T1 | Politeness addressing through email is very important |
| 2 | T2 | being too informal and direct |
| 3 | T3 | Students rarely use expressions such as please, could you, I would appreciate it if, or thank you for your time, which are essential in softening requests and show respect in academic communication. However, with the increased use of AI students use if for writing emails as well. |
| 4 | T 4 | They should improve their grammar. |
| 5 | T5 | Students most commonly struggle with inappropriate levels of formality, missing polite openings and closings, overly direct or demanding language, and unclear tone that does not reflect academic respect or context. |

| | | |
|----|-----|--|
| 6 | T6 | / |
| 7 | T7 | Sometimes they are missing basic rules for writing an email. |
| 8 | T8 | Excessive familiarity ('Hi Prof') |
| 9 | T9 | Most students use ChatGPT so it is obvious that the text is directly copied from ChatGpt. The form of academic email communication is appropriate but it doesn't sound natural. |
| 10 | T10 | Lack of awareness, insufficient use of polite phrases (adequate formulation, opening statements, polite requests, expressing gratitude, etc.) improper timing (very frequently, the emails are sent in the middle of the night, during weekends etc.) and occasionally, inadequate formatting of academic email communication (the entire mail is written in the subject). However, these phenomena are being reduced significantly with increased AI implementation and communication strategies implementation in the language courses. |
| 11 | T11 | I think students are more polite when they communicate with foreigners, and less polite when they communicate among people who are from same nationality. Students want to sound more polite talking to foreigners. |
| 12 | T12 | Some students lack knowledge in pragmatic styles and writing formal letters. This is merely a consequence of the influence of social networks i.e. students consider their own way of communication as something normal. They should be informed and trained to communicate with the teachers in a more formal way. Along with the pragmatic styles the situation can be improved. |
| 13 | T13 | I have noticed a trend of sending emails in Macedonian lately. Generally the problematic areas in English communication through emails would be: indirect questions for politeness, using 'could', 'would', and probably proper introduction at the beginning of the email. |
| 14 | T14 | N/A |
| 15 | T15 | Some of the first year students have problems on how to address the issues at the beginning. |
| 16 | T16 | At times, students do not clearly articulate their request and fail to provide adequate contextual information, including appropriate self-identification, which can hinder effective communication. |

| | | |
|----|-----|--|
| 17 | T17 | Students overuse ChatGPT for writing emails, which leads to issues with authenticity and appropriateness. This reliance results in emails that sound very similar to each other. |
| 18 | T18 | In my opinion, the most common problems in students' academic email communication involve lack of clarity and sometimes layout as a result of inappropriate phrases and word choice. |
| 19 | T19 | Students often write academic emails the way they text or message friends. |
| 20 | T20 | Many students carry over informal texting habits (casual tone, abbreviations, lack of structure) into academic emails. |

Open-ended responses further illustrated common challenges in students' email communication. Professors reported issues with excessive informality, overly direct language, and inconsistent use of polite expressions such as "please," "could you," or "I would appreciate it if," which are essential for softening requests and demonstrating respect. Clarity and contextualization were also frequent concerns, as some students fail to articulate requests clearly or provide sufficient information about themselves or their purpose. The influence of digital habits, particularly the use of AI tools like ChatGPT and the transfer of casual texting styles into academic emails, was noted as contributing to formulaic, less authentic messages. Additionally, gaps in students' understanding of hierarchical norms and pragmatic styles were highlighted, suggesting the need for explicit guidance and training to ensure appropriate tone and formality. Positive trends were observed as well, with faculty noting that students generally improve their politeness and adherence to formal conventions over time and with increased experience or instructional support.

In conclusion, the findings indicate that students exhibit partial competence in academic email communication, with strengths in formal awareness and observable improvement over time, but significant variability in pragmatic skills, politeness strategies, and sensitivity to hierarchical dynamics. Faculty largely recognize cultural influences and the importance of explicit instruction in enhancing students' communication effectiveness. Common challenges identified include tone, clarity, formality, and overreliance on AI tools, all of which can be mitigated through targeted pedagogical interventions. The results suggest that structured guidance on academic email etiquette, combined with practice and reflection on cultural and contextual norms, can significantly enhance students' ability to communicate clearly, respectfully, and professionally in academic settings.

6. Textual Data Analysis

This study analyzes a corpus of 55 academic emails written by undergraduate students from two higher education institutions in North Macedonia: Goce Delcev University and South East European University. The participants were students enrolled in various courses offered by the English Departments at both universities. The aim of the analysis was to examine how students construct academic emails and how they employ different speech acts such as requests, apologies, and expressions of gratitude in communication with instructors.

The dataset includes emails written by students of both genders (male and female) and reflects the multicultural context of higher education in the country. The participants consisted primarily of Albanian and Macedonian students, representing the two largest ethnic groups studying at these institutions. This diverse student population provides valuable insights into how learners from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds engage in academic email communication in English as a foreign language (EFL).

The analysis examined students' academic emails written for an Email Interaction Task, which required students to produce short academic emails containing at least one speech act (request, apology, or gratitude) and follow the structure of formal email communication. The emails were analyzed for speech acts, structural elements, politeness strategies, and language accuracy.

Overall, the findings indicate that students generally demonstrated an awareness of academic email conventions, particularly the use of polite language and appropriate speech acts. However, several linguistic and structural issues were also observed.

6.1 Types of Speech Acts in Students' Emails

Speech acts represent the communicative purpose of an email. The most common speech acts identified in the dataset were requests, apologies, and expressions of gratitude. Tables 2-7 present the analysis of students' emails in their communication with their teachers.

Table 2: Speech Acts Identified in Students' Emails

| Speech Act | Communicative Purpose | Example from Students' Emails |
|----------------------|---|---|
| Request | Asking for help, clarification, meeting, or extension | "I would greatly appreciate if you could advise me on how to catch up with the materials I missed." |
| Apology | Expressing regret for absence or late submission | "I sincerely apologize for missing class due to unforeseen circumstances." |
| Gratitude | Thanking the instructor for feedback or support | "Thank you for the helpful feedback on my recent assignment." |
| Combined speech acts | Emails containing more than one act (e.g., request + gratitude) | "Could you please provide clarification on the assignment instructions? Thank you for your assistance." |

The analysis in Table (2) shows that requests were the most frequent speech act, particularly in emails asking for extensions, feedback, or clarification regarding course requirements. This finding is expected, as students often rely on email communication to seek assistance or resolve academic concerns. Apologies were also commonly observed, typically in situations where students needed to explain absences or delays in completing assignments. Expressions of gratitude appeared less frequently but were often used to acknowledge instructors' feedback or support. Additionally, several emails contained combined speech acts, where students integrated multiple communicative purposes within a single message, such as making a request while simultaneously expressing appreciation. The presence of these combined acts suggests that students are beginning to develop greater pragmatic awareness and are learning how to structure their messages in a polite and socially appropriate manner within academic communication contexts.

Table 3: Academic Situations Addressed by Students

| Academic Situation | Purpose of Email | Example from Students' Emails |
|---------------------------------|--|--|
| Requesting assignment extension | Asking for more time due to personal circumstances | "I am writing to request an extension for the assignment due this week." |
| Apologizing for absence | Informing the instructor about missed class | "I apologize for missing yesterday's lecture and would like to know what materials I should review." |
| Requesting clarification | Asking for additional explanation of instructions | "I am unsure about the formatting requirements for the assignment." |
| Requesting meeting or advice | Seeking academic guidance | "Would it be possible to schedule a short meeting to discuss my progress in the course?" |
| Expressing gratitude | Thanking the instructor for support or feedback | "Your comments helped me understand how to improve my work." |

The situations presented in Table (3) reflect common and authentic academic communication scenarios that students are likely to encounter during their studies. These contexts encourage learners to practice writing emails with clear purposes, such as requesting assistance, explaining circumstances, or expressing appreciation. Engaging with realistic situations helps students understand how written communication functions in academic settings and how tone and structure should be adapted accordingly. Furthermore, these tasks promote the development of pragmatic and communicative competence, as students must formulate polite requests, provide explanations, and maintain a respectful tone when addressing instructors. By practicing these types of interactions, students gradually build confidence in using English for practical academic purposes and become more prepared for real-life communication within the university environment.

Table 4: Structural Components of Students’ Emails

| Email Component | Function | Example from Students’ Emails |
|-------------------|--|---|
| Subject line | Introduces the purpose of the email | “Subject: Request for Extension on Assignment” |
| Greeting | Polite opening addressing the instructor | “Dear Professor,” |
| Opening sentence | Establishes context | “I hope this email finds you well.” |
| Message body | Main purpose and explanation | “I would like to ask if it would be possible to receive an extension for the assignment.” |
| Closing statement | Shows appreciation | “Thank you for your time and understanding.” |
| Formal closing | Ends the email politely | “Best regards,” |

Table (4) indicates that most students were able to include the essential structural elements of a formal academic email. The presence of greetings, opening sentences, and polite closings demonstrates that students are generally familiar with the conventional format of professional email communication. However, the analysis also revealed some inconsistencies. In several cases, emails lacked a clear subject line, which may make it more difficult for the recipient to immediately understand the purpose of the message. Additionally, some emails contained very short message bodies that did not provide sufficient explanation or context for the request. While the structural framework was often present, the level of detail and clarity varied among students. These findings suggest that although students have a basic understanding of email structure, further instruction may help them develop more comprehensive and informative messages in academic correspondence.

Table 5: Politeness Strategies Observed in Students’ Emails

| Strategy | Function | Example from Students’ Emails |
|-----------------------------|--|---|
| Indirect requests | Softening requests to sound polite | “Would it be possible to receive an extension?” |
| Expressing appreciation | Showing respect for instructor’s time | “Thank you very much for your help and support.” |
| Acknowledging inconvenience | Demonstrating responsibility | “I apologize for any inconvenience this request may cause.” |
| Formal tone | Maintaining professional communication | “I would appreciate your guidance on this matter.” |

The analysis presented in Table (5) suggests that students are gradually developing pragmatic competence in academic communication. The use of indirect requests demonstrates an awareness of politeness conventions and the importance of mitigating

direct demands when addressing instructors. Expressions of appreciation further contribute to a respectful tone and indicate students' recognition of the instructor's time and assistance.

Table 6: Frequent Language Errors

| Error Type | Example from Students' Emails | Suggested Correction |
|--------------------|----------------------------------|---|
| Capitalization | "dear professor" | "Dear Professor" |
| Spelling | "absense" | "absence" |
| Sentence fragments | "Hope you are doing well." | "I hope you are doing well." |
| Informal tone | "Can you send me the materials?" | "Could you please send me the materials?" |

Table (6) illustrates several common language issues found in students' emails, which are typical among EFL learners when writing formal academic correspondence. Errors in capitalization often appear in greetings and titles, suggesting that students may not yet be fully familiar with the conventions of formal email writing. Spelling mistakes, such as "absence," indicate the need for greater attention to proofreading and vocabulary accuracy. Sentence fragments also occur frequently, reflecting learners' tendency to transfer informal spoken patterns into written communication. These findings highlight the importance of explicit instruction in email etiquette, grammar accuracy, and formal writing style for EFL students.

Table 7: Word Count Compliance

| Category | Observation |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Fully compliant emails | Provided detailed explanations and met the word requirement |
| Short emails | Contained fewer than 80 words and lacked elaboration |
| Adequate structure but short content | Included all structural elements but minimal explanation |

Table (7) indicates that students who followed the required word count generally produced clearer, more complete, and more informative messages. Their emails tended to include fuller explanations, supporting details, and a more logical flow of ideas. In contrast, shorter emails often lacked sufficient elaboration, which reduced the clarity of the communication and sometimes left the reader without enough information. Even when students used the correct email structure, limited content affected the overall effectiveness of the message. These findings suggest that meeting the word requirement encourages students to expand their ideas and improves the quality of written communication.

In conclusion, the textual analysis shows that students demonstrate basic competence in writing academic emails, particularly in using appropriate speech acts such as requests, apologies, and expressions of gratitude. Most emails followed the conventional structure of academic correspondence and used polite language suitable for communication with instructors. However, several areas require improvement, including grammatical

accuracy, elaboration of ideas, and adherence to word count requirements. Continued practice with academic email writing can help students strengthen both their pragmatic competence and formal writing skills, which are essential for effective communication in academic contexts.

7. Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the ways EFL university students employ politeness strategies in academic email communication and how these strategies are perceived by professors. Overall, the results suggest that students demonstrate partial pragmatic competence in constructing academic emails; however, their use of politeness strategies remains inconsistent and influenced by multiple contextual factors. One of the most prominent findings concerns the frequent use of basic politeness markers such as greetings, expressions of gratitude, and apologies. Many professors indicated that students commonly include phrases such as “thank you” or “I appreciate your time,” which aligns with previous research highlighting the importance of gratitude expressions in maintaining respectful academic communication (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Konuk, 2021). These expressions contribute to positive politeness strategies by signaling appreciation and fostering rapport between students and faculty members.

Nevertheless, the findings also reveal that students often rely on minimal politeness markers rather than employing more elaborate mitigation strategies. Survey responses indicated that indirect language used to soften requests (e.g., “Could you...”, “Would it be possible...”) was present but inconsistently applied. This observation supports earlier studies suggesting that students may possess basic awareness of email etiquette but lack deeper socio-pragmatic competence required to formulate appropriately mitigated requests (Chen, 2006; Ghafar, 2024). As a result, some emails may appear overly direct or demanding, which can negatively influence professors’ interpretation of the message.

Another important aspect emerging from the results is the role of hierarchical awareness in student email communication. Although many professors believe that students generally recognize the power difference between students and faculty members, this awareness is not always reflected consistently in their email tone or structure. In some cases, informal greetings such as “Hi Prof” or casual phrasing influenced by digital messaging practices were reported. This finding corresponds with earlier research indicating that computer-mediated communication often reduces perceived social distance and may blur traditional hierarchical boundaries (Baron, 2002; Herring, 2002).

Cultural and technological influences also appear to play a significant role in shaping students’ email practices. Professors emphasized that students’ cultural backgrounds may affect how politeness is expressed, particularly in multilingual and multicultural academic environments such as those found in North Macedonia. Additionally, the increasing use of artificial intelligence tools in composing emails was repeatedly mentioned by faculty members. While AI assistance may help students produce grammatically correct and structurally appropriate emails, it can also lead to formulaic or impersonal messages that lack authenticity.

Another key finding relates to the development of pragmatic competence over time. A large majority of professors agreed that students' ability to write appropriate academic emails improves with increased academic experience. This suggests that pragmatic competence is not static but develops gradually through exposure to academic discourse and interaction with faculty members. Such findings are consistent with the communicative competence framework proposed by Bachman (1990), which emphasizes the dynamic nature of pragmatic knowledge.

Finally, the study highlights the importance of explicit instruction in academic email writing. The strong consensus among faculty regarding the benefits of teaching email etiquette indicates that many of the challenges observed in student emails stem from limited awareness of institutional communication norms rather than intentional disrespect. Therefore, incorporating structured instruction on academic email conventions, politeness strategies, and pragmatic competence into language or academic writing courses could significantly enhance students' communication effectiveness.

8. Conclusion

This study examined politeness strategies and pragmatic competence in academic email communication between university students and professors in two higher education institutions in North Macedonia. By combining discourse analysis of authentic student emails with survey data from faculty members, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of how politeness is expressed, interpreted, and negotiated in digital academic communication.

The findings indicate that students generally demonstrate awareness of basic email conventions, particularly in the use of greetings, expressions of gratitude, and apologies. However, the results also reveal considerable variability in the application of politeness strategies, especially in the formulation of requests and the use of indirect language to mitigate imposition. In some cases, emails were perceived as overly direct or insufficiently formal, which could affect professors' interpretation of the message.

The study further highlights the importance of contextual factors such as hierarchical awareness, cultural norms, and technological influences. In particular, the growing use of AI-assisted writing tools appears to shape the structure and tone of student emails, sometimes resulting in standardized or impersonal communication. At the same time, the findings demonstrate that students' pragmatic competence improves with academic experience, suggesting that exposure to academic communication practices plays an important role in developing effective email writing skills.

From a pedagogical perspective, the results strongly support the need for explicit instruction in academic email etiquette and pragmatic competence. Integrating such instruction into EFL or academic writing courses could help students develop greater awareness of politeness strategies, hierarchical norms, and professional communication practices.

Overall, this study contributes to research on pragmatics, computer-mediated communication, and EFL pedagogy by providing empirical evidence on politeness

strategies in academic email communication within a multilingual university context. Future research could expand the dataset to include larger email corpora, comparative cross-cultural analyses, or longitudinal studies examining how students' email practices evolve throughout their academic careers.

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