



EFL Student Perceptions of Email Communication in the Academic Context in Taiwan

台灣英語學習者對學術語境中以電子郵件溝通之觀點研究

Li-jung Daphne Huang¹ · Yuan-shan Chen²

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Abstract

In the past three decades, email has become one of the most widely used forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in student-professor interactions in the academic context. In particular, language use in email writing by English as a foreign language (EFL) learners has been studied extensively. This research investigates the students' perceptions of email communication and the social factors which are perceived as influential to email communication. In this study, we implemented a questionnaire and focus-group interviews. Two-hundred and one Taiwanese EFL learners from a university located in central Taiwan were recruited for the questionnaire, and 20 learners were selected from the larger group to participate in the interviews. The questionnaire investigated the students' perceptions of email usage and their evaluation of emails. The interviews, on the other hand, were conducted to gather in-depth information. The findings from both the questionnaire and interviews indicated that the students tended to recognize the university context and email medium as formal. Furthermore, power asymmetry in the student-professor relationship played a more important role than social distance, which led to a choice of formal language style in the email correspondences. However, despite the fact that the students recognized email as a formal medium of communication and called for a formal style of language, they did not seem to be equipped with sufficient pragmalinguistic resources to perform appropriate requests. Instruction is therefore suggested for EFL learners to conduct form-function-context mapping to achieve appropriateness.

摘要

電子郵件在過去三十年來已經成為學生與教授在學術互動溝通中最廣泛使用的電腦媒介傳播之一。其中又以英語為外語的學習者在電子郵件寫作中的語言使用研究最為廣泛。本研究旨在探討大學英語學習者對電子郵件使用的觀

點以及影響其觀點的因素。研究方法為問卷調查及焦點團體訪談法，共有201名台灣中部一所大學的英語學習者參與問卷調查，而其中有20名為訪談對象。問卷和訪談的結果皆顯示大學生認為大學環境為一個正式的情境，而電子郵件本身為一個正式的溝通媒介。此外，在學生與教授的關係中，與「社會距離」相比，「社會地位高低」更容易導致大學生在電子郵件通信中選擇正式的語言溝通形式。然而，儘管學生認為電子郵件是一種正式的溝通媒介且必須使用正式的語言文體，他們似乎沒有足夠的語用能力來透過電子郵件執行適當的要求。本研究建議電子郵件語用教學的方法以達到語用能力中語言形式、功能及情境的匹配。

Keywords Email · Request · Formality · Politeness · Directness

關鍵詞 電子郵件 · 要求 · 正式文體 · 禮貌 · 直接程度

Introduction

Over the past two decades, email has become one of the most widely used forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in student-professor interactions in the academic contexts [3]. According to Hinkle [29], email has been “increasingly becoming the preferred means of communication between students and faculty” (p. 27). As such, the ubiquitous use of email has attracted the attention of CMC researchers, educators, language professionals, and the like. Research on email communication started in the 1990s, and plentiful studies addressed the hybrid nature of email language, featuring a mix of spoken and written features (e.g., [2, 17, 36]). More recently, research on email communication has centered on email discourse [27, 28], L2 email pragmatics (e.g., [7, 12, 19]) and perceptions of emails in both the L1 and L2 contexts (e.g., [26, 32, 39, 47]).

In terms of email perceptions, previous studies have been conducted to understand how authoritative figures such as native speakers of English and university faculty and staff view student emails. In the L1 context, for example, Bolkan-Holmgren [6] investigated how native English speakers perceived student-staff email communication. Stephens, Houser and Crown [41] and Lewin-Jones and Mason [32] compared professors’ and students’ perceptions of emails. These studies indicate that the professors and staff prefer a more formal style, so the students’ use of casual style [41] in the email correspondences is usually negatively evaluated by the faculty or staff [32].

In the L2 context, most research examined how university professors evaluated emails written by L2 learners (e.g., [19, 25, 26, 33, 39]). For instance, Hendriks [26] researched how native English speakers perceived emails written by Dutch EFL learners in terms of comprehensibility and personality of the email senders. Li and Chen [33] and Savić [39] investigated professors’ perceptions on emails written by Chinese EFL learners and Norwegian EFL learners, respectively. However, studies which focus on the professors’ perceptions fail to provide a complete picture of

student-professor email correspondences in academia. More research on students' perceptions seems to be needed to offer the other half of the puzzle (cf., [21, 47]).

To fill this gap, this study investigates email perceptions from the perspectives of students in the Taiwanese EFL context. Two research questions are raised:

- (1) How do university EFL students in Taiwan perceive email communication?
- (2) What social factors are perceived as influential to email communication?

Literature Review

The topic of perceptions of email communication in the academic contexts has drawn the attention of researchers. Some of the works were conducted to probe native English speakers' perceptions on the use of email communication in the L1 context, while others addressed how emails written by L2 learners were perceived by native and non-native speakers of English. These studies are reviewed as follows.

Email Perceptions in L1 Context

Research on perceptions of student-professor emails in the L1 context have been conducted by Stephens et al. [41], Bolkan and Holmgren [6], and Lewin-Jones and Mason [32]. Stephens et al. [41] investigated the impacts of students' email messages by probing instructors' and students' beliefs in email writing in a southwestern university in the USA. In this two-part study, they found that the students, influenced by technology use, favored an "overly casual style" (p. 307) and considered the lack of email training as irrelevant to the attributions of such a style. However, the instructors tended to perceive students negatively on their use of overly casual email messages in terms of credibility, evaluation of message quality, and willingness to grant the request. Overly casual emails were found to cause "the instructor to like the student less" and to view the students as being "less credible," having "lesser opinion of message quality" and making the instructors "less willing to comply with students' simple email requests" (p. 318).

Similar to Stephens et al. [41], Bolkan and Holmgren [6] examined the impact of student emails on the lecturers' perceptions and their motivations to comply with students' requests. One hundred and twenty-five instructors from a southwestern university in the USA were recruited. It was found that the politeness strategies used in the emails were associated with affect toward students, motivation to work with students, and attitudes towards students' competence and academic potential. Polite emails elicited more positive affect toward the students and hence motivated the lecturers to work with the students. Moreover, the lecturers would have higher expectations of the students' competence and academic potential.

Lewin-Jones and Mason [32] focused on the attitudes towards stylistic features of emails from the perspectives of university staff and students in the UK. They found that there were not only mismatching perceptions of what constituted appropriate academic email communication between students and staff but also divergent

perceptions among the staff members themselves. The students tended to perceive email communication a reflection of offline interaction, thus allowing for more informal features. They considered email as an extension of face-to-face interaction and suggested that informality developed over time in student-professor emails as the relationship became closer, mirroring face-to-face interactions to a greater extent. On the other hand, although the professors seemed to prefer a formal style, requiring more letter-like features in emails, this view was not always shared by all the faculty members. While some professors expected formal emails from their students, others allowed more flexibility dependent on their relationship with the students. This study not only indicated the differences between professors and students in how they perceived emails, but also revealed divergent views among the professors themselves. Lewin-Jones and Mason therefore suggested that there was a need to investigate the nature of email communication to gauge the different expectations about email style and etiquette.

Email Perceptions in L2 Context

In the L2 context, Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig [25] was one of the earliest studies on how native English-speaking faculty evaluated students' email requests written by both native and nonnative speakers of English. The results showed that the linguistic forms used by the students were not a reliable predictor of the affective response of the faculty members. A number of factors tended to elicit a negative evaluation, including the underuse of mitigation, little to none acknowledgment of the degree of imposition, failure to address time frames or unreasonable time-frames, and providing personal explanations instead of institutional ones.

Hendriks [26] probed native English speakers' perceptions of email requests written by Dutch EFL learners. She investigated how native-speaking staff, aged 21–60, perceived emails in terms of comprehensibility and personality of the email writer through an online questionnaire. This study found that the Dutch EFL learners tended to underuse modifiers (both lexical and syntactic modifiers), which, resulted in “negative stereotyping” by native speakers of English [30], p. 156). However, variations in request modifications were found to have little effect. Hendriks therefore concluded that it was difficult to know about the effect on sender evaluation based on the use of both internal and external modifiers. She suggested that future research should examine the influence of situational and contextual variations on determining required politeness for requests among language learners. In addition, more research is called for to measure perception of L2 learners' pragmatic behavior.

Economidou-Kogetsidis [19] examined email requests of Greek-Cypriot university students to their professors in terms of degree of directness, amount and type of external and internal modifications of requests, and the forms of address used in the emails. In addition, this study investigated how native English-speaking and Greek-speaking professors evaluated students' emails in terms of politeness and abruptness by using a perception questionnaire. Generally speaking, the professors evaluated negatively emails which lacked mitigations (e.g., “please” and “thanks”) or included upgraders (e.g., “as soon as possible”) or imperatives (e.g., Please V) (p.

3207). Despite this tendency, however, Economidou-Kogetsidis speculated that culture may play an important role in the variations of professors' views about etiquette in student-professor email correspondences. It was because some of the professors in this study were native speakers of English living in the Greek culture for some time, while others were native speakers of Greek living in the British culture for some time. Such a representation of "hybrid culture" may impact how professors perceived students emails differently to a certain extent.

A later study conducted by Economidou-Kogetsidis [21] investigated email perceptions from both the perspectives of the students and professors. Specifically, this study looked at if Greek-Cypriot university L2 learners and their professors had similar or different perceptions of student-professor emails through a questionnaire. The findings showed that there were different perceptions in terms of appropriateness. Overall, the students tended to have a more positive evaluation of the same email in comparison with the lecturers. For example, the students may evaluate a direct request as somewhat appropriate while the lecturers may consider the same email as "imposing" and "annoying." Such divergent perceptions often led the lecturers to consider the students as being "rude," "direct," or "too casual." In addition, the two groups of participants also rated email politeness differently. To determine the degree of politeness, the students tended to emphasize the use of formulaic expressions while the lecturers focused on the acknowledgement of the imposition¹ (e.g., recognizing the request as an imposition on the lecturer's time and availability) and the recipient's autonomy (e.g., respecting the lecturer's freedom of choice). In order to further understand student-professor email communication, Economidou-Kogetsidis [21] therefore suggested that "additional research is also needed in order to investigate further the learners' beliefs and choices and why they risk negative perceptions" (p. 15).

Savić [39] explored the perceptions of student-professor emails produced by Norwegian EFL learners from the professors' perspectives via a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Student emails were selected and evaluated by the participating professors in terms of appropriateness and politeness. Individual differences existed among the professors in the perceptions of inappropriateness and impoliteness. While some professors considered institutional email communication had to be formal, others had a more relaxing attitude towards the informality of emails. Unlike Lewin-Jones and Mason [32] and Economidou-Kogetsidis [21], Savić found that Norwegian teachers were more tolerant with informal features in email communication in comparison with native English-speaking faculty. This study also highlighted the influence of three contextual factors—email as a medium, expectation of institutional email communication, and the Norwegian university context—on email users' perceptions. Finally, Savić [39] urged the need for future research on

¹ According to Brown and Levinson [8], three contextual variables influence the degree of appropriateness of a speech act realization. They are power, social distance and degree of imposition. Power refers to the relative hierarchy of the hearer over the speaker; that is, the power relationship between the interlocutors in an interaction. Social distance is understood as differing degrees of familiarity between interlocutors. Imposition refers to the severity of the thing that imposes on others.

investigating “the other side of the coin” (p.70), referring to students’ perceptions of email communication.

In the Taiwanese context, Li and Chen [33] investigated the perceptions of 13 Taiwanese professors on what constituted email politeness and email effectiveness through interviewing 13 professors in Taiwan. The professors regarded form-related features (i.e., address terms, self-identification, and appropriate tone of voice significant) to email politeness, and request event (i.e., rationality and clarity of the requests) and student attitudes (i.e., showing appreciation) important to the appropriateness of email content. The Taiwanese professors considered the formal, letter-like features the most appropriate email style in student-professor email writing. Li and Chen concluded that attitudes were subject to expected social hierarchy and social distance. The findings suggest that the professors expect formal features in email communication with their students, which, in turn, raises the question: what is expected in student-professor emails from the students’ perspectives?

Different from previous studies of email perceptions which emphasized professors’ perceptions or compared student-professor perceptual differences, Zheng and Xu [47] conducted a study on email perceptions exclusively from the perspectives of the L2 learners by using a matched-guise test. They investigated the effects of two sociopragmatic² factors (i.e., power and degree of imposition) and one pragmatolinguistic factor (i.e., the use of modifiers) on the email perceptions of EFL learners in China. They found that the students were aware of the pragmatolinguistic factors in relation to email appropriateness and politeness; that is, they displayed awareness of various forms of internal and external modifications. However, the students were less conscious of the effects of power and imposition on email appropriateness. In other words, they did not map the language forms onto the sociopragmatic factors. Zheng and Xu concluded that the EFL learners’ perceptions in China varied from those of native speakers and that such mismatching perceptions could be due to different sociocultural norms.

In sum, the above-mentioned studies show that in both L1 and L2 contexts, previous research has primarily focused on email perceptions from the perspectives of native speakers of English or authoritative figures in the academic contexts such as lecturers and staff (i.e., [6, 19, 25, 26, 33, 39]). Although a few studies have gone a step further to compare professors’ and students’ perceptions of emails [21, 32, 41, 47], it seems that the only study to date which exclusively probes L2 students’ perceptions is Zheng and Xu [47]. Furthermore, individual differences in the perceptions of email etiquette appear to exist, indicating that email use in academia lacks clearly defined conventions [3]. Despite the fact that students grow up in the digital world with emails and other CMC technologies, they are “left to their own devices” when crafting an email message to professors because there is “no generally agreed-upon conventions for institutional email communication” [3], p. 62). To put simply, writing an email that a professor would consider as

² Leech [31] distinguishes pragmatolinguistics and sociopragmatics in the discussion of pragmatic competence. Pragmatolinguistics refers to the linguistic resources available for conveying communicative intent while sociopragmatics refers to learners’ knowledge of social norms and conventions.

status-congruent, appropriate and polite would be like shooting at a “moving target” [2], p. 142) to L2 learners. Given the paucity of research on students’ perceptions of email, it is therefore important to have a deeper understanding of how students perceive email as a medium to bridge the gap between professors’ and students’ perceptions.

Method

A mixed-method approach with a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews was employed for the purpose of the research. The questionnaire was designed to elicit EFL learners’ perceptions of email use in the university setting, and the interviews were conducted to explore more details about their perceptions and use of email.

Participants

The participants were recruited from an English department in a university located in central Taiwan. Most of them were freshman and sophomore English-majors, with a few English minors from other disciplines, including the Chinese, Cosmetic Science, International Business Administration, Japanese, and Mass Communication Departments. There were 161 females and 40 males, making a total of 201 students. Their ages ranged from 19–22. All the participants took the university’s English placement exam in their freshman year with an average of CEFR B1 level³ (corresponding roughly to the intermediate level). In addition, based on a 2006 survey on digital literacy of junior high school students in Taiwan (Executive Yuan [24], more than 80% of them were familiar with how to send and receive emails in L1. A more recent survey on internet use conducted by Taiwan Communication Survey [9] indicated that email communication was common among the general population. Both surveys suggest that the participants are familiar with the email medium.

Instrument

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was designed as the main instrument. The questionnaire included three sections. Section 1 was designed to gather background information, including study major, gender, age and first language(s). Section 2 included 12 statements on a five-point Likert Scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The first

³ The university requires all the freshmen students to take an English placement test, placing them according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). B1 level places language learners as “independent users”. Students of CEFR B1 level are expected to produce “simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest” and to “describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans” in terms of writing [16].

11 statements address four dimensions which are crucial in email writing: (1) the medium (Statements 1–3); (2) the recipient (Statements 4–6); (3) the context (Statements 7–9), and (4) the student-professor relationship (Statements 10–11). Statement 12 asks the participants to give an overall evaluation of email writing style.

Section 3 required the participants to evaluate four selected request emails (Appendix 1). Being one of the most common functions in email communication (c.f., [10]) in student-professor interactions, request emails were chosen as samples in the questionnaire. Four emails written by university students to the first author were selected. These emails were chosen from the first author's email corpus to ensure authenticity and pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity of the email writers. The four emails were then sorted along the continuum of formality, determined by mutual agreement between the two authors, with email (4) being the most formal and email (1) the least formal. For each email, there were five statements evaluating the formality, appropriateness, directness, and politeness on a 5-point Likert Scale [11] (Appendix 2).

The initial version of the questionnaire was proofread by two experts in the field of email pragmatics and revised according to their suggestions. The questionnaire was then tested by a group of ten EFL learners to see whether the questions were designed in a clear, concise, and comprehensive manner and whether the time required for implementation was appropriate. Finally, an online version of the questionnaire was designed to facilitate implementation in class through QR code.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were designed to provide in-depth information about the perceptions of L2 learners in the form of focus groups in the students' L1, Mandarin Chinese. The interviews were used to triangulate the questionnaire data we collected. The questions were: (1) What style of language is appropriate in emails? (2) What style of language in emails is appropriate in student-professor interactions? (3) What is considered a formal style of email? and (4) Which social factors (power and distance) are considered important when writing an email to university professors?

Data Collection

The online version of the questionnaire was distributed to all the participants in class via QR code. They were required to scan the QR code which allowed them to access the questionnaire and then to fill out the questionnaire online. This session lasted about 30 min. Among the 201 participants for the online questionnaire, 20 students (13 females and 7 males) volunteered to participate in the interviews. These participants formed five groups according to their class schedules. The interviews were conducted after the implementation of the questionnaire. The length of each interview session ranged from 28 to 55 min. Table 1 shows the number of each group and the length of each interview session.

The questionnaire data was analyzed via SPSS. As for the interviews, we employed content analysis, which included five phases: (1) transcribing the data, (2)

Table 1 Information about focused group interviews

Session	Duration of time	No. of participants
1	55 min	5
2	32 min	3
3	45 min	4
4	42 min	5
5	28 min	3

generating initial codes, (3) comparing and discussing coding results, (4) searching for themes, and (5) reviewing themes (see also [23]). The first author and her research assistant agreed on 90% of the coding. After that, they resolved the divergences through discussion.

Results

The results of this section include two parts: results from the questionnaire and from the interviews.

Results from the Questionnaire

The following reports the results from the questionnaire in two sections: (1) perceptions of email medium and (2) evaluation of student emails.

Perceptions of Email Medium

Table 2 presents the raw frequencies and percentages of each statement regarding the students' perceptions of the medium, context, and student-professor relationship in the email correspondences. In Table 2, responses 1 and 2 ("strongly disagree" and "disagree") are merged as "disagree" and responses 4 and 5 ("agree" and "strongly agree") are merged as "agree" with the statements. The following reports on the extent to which the participants agreed or disagreed with each statement.

Regarding the email medium as a means of communication (Statement 1), 53.73% of the participants considered email to be a formal medium, as opposed to the small minority who considered it an informal medium (5.47%). Statement 2 concerns email writing in comparison with that of other social media. About half (54.23%) of the students considered the medium to be different from other social media, and a small portion considered it similar to other social media (16.91%). The results for Statement 3 further showed that 62.68% of the students expected a formal writing style in email, and only 8.46% regarded it as not required. From Statements 1–3, it can be observed that the students tended to consider the email medium as a formal one and required a formal writing style.

In Dimension 2, three statements (4–6) were created to determine the possible influences of the email recipients. The results of Statement 4 showed that 38.31%

Table 2 Raw frequencies and percentages of students' perceptions of email communication

Items	Statements	Raw frequencies and Percentages				Total			
		Disagree	Neutral	Agree					
1	Email is a formal medium of communication	11	5.47%	82	40.80%	108	53.73%	201	c.100%
2	Email writing is similar to writing of other social media (e.g., LINE and Instagram)	109	54.23%	58	28.86%	34	16.91%	201	c.100%
3	A formal writing style is required in email	17	8.46%	58	28.86%	126	62.68%	201	c.100%
4	Email is generally used with people you know well	77	38.31%	80	39.80%	44	21.89%	201	c.100%
5	I often write emails to my friends	156	77.61%	34	16.92%	11	5.47%	201	c.100%
6	I often communicate with university professors by email	36	17.91%	34	16.92%	131	65.17%	201	c.100%
7	University is a formal setting	7	3.48%	70	34.83%	124	61.69%	201	c.100%
8	I often use a formal style of language when talking to my university professors	20	9.95%	67	33.33%	114	56.72%	201	c.100%
9	I often use a formal style of language when writing emails to my university professors	19	9.45%	41	20.40%	141	70.15%	201	c.100%
10	I know my university professors well enough to use a casual (informal) email	68	33.83%	85	42.29%	48	23.88%	201	c.100%
11	It is appropriate to use a casual (informal) writing style when writing an email to university professors	87	43.28%	66	32.84%	48	23.88%	201	c.100%
12	In general, I use a formal style of language in emails	27	13.43%	81	40.29%	93	46.28%	201	c.100%

of the students did not use email to communicate with interlocutors that they knew well (i.e., interlocutors of high solidarity), while 21.89% of the participants did. For Statement 5, the results found that 77.61% of the students did not write emails to their friends, while only 5.47% replied that they did so. As for Statement 6, almost two thirds (65.17%) of the students indicated that they communicated with their university professors by email, while only 17.91% of them did not. These results suggest that email may not be a preferred medium when communicating with interlocutors of high solidarity. Nevertheless, it may be a preferred means of communication in student-professor interactions.

The third dimension concerns the influence of context in email writing (Statements 7–9). Statement 7 indicated that about 61% of the students considered university a formal setting while only 3.48% considered it an informal setting. Since most students regarded the university as a formal context, it would be reasonable for them to choose formal language when communicating with professors either face to face or through email, as shown in the results of Statements 8 and 9. In terms of Statement 8, about 57% of the students would use a formal style of language in face-to-face interactions as opposed to 9.95% who would use an informal style. As for Statement 9, 70.15% of the students preferred a formal style in email communication with university professors, while only 9.45% of the students did not. Such results indicate that the students regard university as a formal context, under which formal language is used in face-to-face as well as cyber communications.

The fourth dimension (Statements 10–11) addresses the student-professor role relationship in email writing. Around 33% of the students indicated that they did not know their university professors well enough to use an informal writing style (Statement 10). Further, 43.28% of the students did not find it appropriate to use an informal writing style when writing emails to their university professors, while 23.88% thought otherwise (Statement 11). Taken together, we can see that an assessment of power and social distance in the role relationship exerts an influence in email writing.

Statement 12 concerns the overall evaluation of the use of formal style in email discourse. Almost half of the students (46.28%) responded that they used formal language in emails, while 13.43% responded that they did not. This result echoes the findings that the students in this study perceive university as a formal context, thus framing a formal style of language when writing emails to their professors.

Evaluation of Student Emails

Four student emails were evaluated by the participants in terms of four dimensions: formality, appropriateness, directness, and politeness. Table 3 illustrates the mean values of the four emails. In terms of formality, both Emails (1) and (2) were evaluated as informal (Mean < 3), and Emails (3) and (4) as formal (Mean > 3). Email (1) was evaluated as the least formal, while Email (4) as the most formal. The degree of appropriateness and politeness corresponded to the degree of formality of the emails. That is, the more formal an email is, the more appropriate and polite it is.

Table 3 Mean values of the evaluation of emails

Item	Statement	Email (1) Mean	Email (2) Mean	Email (3) Mean	Email (4) Mean
1	The style of the email is formal	2.00	2.44	3.07	3.96
2	The email reflects a close relationship between the student and the teacher	2.95	3.24	3.05	3.23
3	The email uses an appropriate writing style for a teacher–student relationship	2.25	2.72	3.05	3.86
4	The student is direct when making the request in the email	3.75	3.50	3.49	3.74
5	The student is polite in the email	2.22	2.81	3.01	3.98

However, the students considered all the emails to be direct (Mean > 3), which, was in contradiction to our expectation that politeness usually implied indirectness [4].

Results from the Interviews

In this section, we will report two themes from the interviews: email as a formal medium and elements in a formal email.

Email as a Formal Medium

All the interviewees agreed that the email medium was a formal one. In particular, the perception of the medium was influenced by two factors: function of email and recipient. They claimed that email communication served formal purposes, such as asking professor to write a recommendation letter or asking the professor to change the semester scores. Excerpts (1) and (2) display the students' opinions about the email as a formal medium.

- (1) "Email is a formal medium. When we compose an email to someone, we often think that [it] is a serious situation: to seek for help or ask the questions, so formal style is needed." (P1⁴)
- (2) "I think email is a formal medium... A lot of students usually send email to their professors so it has to be formal." (P6)

Furthermore, all the students agreed that email differed from other social media such as LINE and Instagram. In contrast with the expectation of a formal style in emails, a more casual style was expected in other social media, as illustrated in Excerpt (3).

- (3) "Email is usually used to contact the teachers for information or questions, so it has to be more formal. The style can be more casual in other social media like LINE." (P2)

Elements in a Formal Email

The interview protocols showed that a formal email required a specific format. Excerpt (4) illustrates that format overrides language or content in determining formality of an email.

- (4) "Format represents the appearance of a letter (or email). If the format is wrong, it makes the addressee feel disrespected, regardless of the content." (P20)

The interviewees also mentioned the features which constituted a formal email. Out of the 20 interviewees, 18 agreed that business letter-like elements were important in student-professor emails. These features included subject, greeting, self-introduction, purpose and signature, as shown in Excerpts (5) and (6).

⁴ Interview participants (P) are presented by the numbers 1–20.

- (5) “Students need to write the title [subject], self-introduction, and what they are going to talk about. And also they need to be polite and use the word appropriately.” (P4)
- (6) “The most important thing is to be polite, so greetings are necessary. After that, whether the main purpose is described clearly is important as well.” (P13)
 However, the other two interviewees mentioned that greeting and self-introduction could be omitted in a series of email exchanges, as shown in Excerpt (7).
- (7) “I think greeting and self-introduction are important [in an email], but if there have been a series of email interactions with my teacher, they are not necessary.” (P1)
 In terms of language style, 12 interviewees talked about the notion of (im) politeness in relation to colloquial language in an email, as shown in Excerpts (8) and (9). The consensus was that colloquial language should be avoided.
- (8) “The content [in an email] has to be polite and the language should not be too colloquial.” (P5)
- (9) “If the addressee is an elderly or a superior, the content of the email has to be cautious and avoids colloquial language. It has to be polite. If the addressee is a friend or a colleague, a more casual style can be used.” (P18)

Discussions

In this study, two research questions were raised, regarding the perceptions of email communication and the social factors guiding the email communication. The following will address the answers to each question.

To address research question (1) “How do university EFL students in Taiwan perceive email communication?”, the findings from the questionnaire showed that most students regarded email as different from other social media such as LINE, Instagram or Facebook (Item 2). More than half of the students regarded university as a formal setting (Item 7), and email was primarily used in student-professor interactions (Item 6) rather than peer-peer interactions (Item 5) (cf., [18]) in university. One note is appropriate here. Despite the tendency for the participants to consider email as a formal means of communication, around 40% of them still showed uncertainties about (in)formality of email. This finding echoes Biesenbach-Lucas’ [3] and Lewin-Jones and Mason’s [32] earlier claims that institutional email has no prescribed conventions.

In terms of the language style used in the email, over 60% of the students considered email writing as a form of traditional letter-writing (Items 3 and 9) [10]. The interviews showed that the formality of an email was represented by its format, requiring elements such as subject, greeting, self-introduction, purpose and signature (c.f., [33]). The students’ email evaluations further indicated that to these students, formality equaled to politeness and appropriateness in status-unequal interactions in the university context. Economidou-Kogetsidis [21] also found that L2 learners equated politeness with formality and that “politeness is achieved through the use of ‘polite’ formulaic utterances and forms of address” (p.12). However, the

Table 4 Analysis of request strategies in the student emails

	Request strategy	Example
Email 1	Want statement + Direct question	"I want to know our grade of the final exam" + "Do you have time tomorrow?"
Email 2	Bi-clausal request + Want statement	"Is it possible that I can ask for my final score on Wednesday?" + "I wanna know how you calculate my total score."
Email 3	Direct question + Want statement with mitigator	"Will you have time next week?" + "We would like to discuss about our group project."
Email 4	Reason + bi-clausal request	"I'm applying for the Master program recently." + "I am wondering if it is possible for you to write the recommendation letter for me."

students did not think that different request strategies represented varying degrees of directness. The analysis in Table 4 showed that the students considered that the request strategies used in the four emails expressed the same degree of directness. This contrasted with Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's [5] claim that *want statement* and *direct question* are more direct than the conventionally indirect *bi-clausal request*. This finding indicates that the students are unable to identify the degree of directness encoded in different request realization patterns (c.f., [21]).

Research question (2) asked: "What social factors are perceived as influential to email communication?" In the student-professor email correspondences, power seems to be a more salient attribute in determining language style in student-professor email communication in comparison with social distance. Items 10 and 11 in the questionnaire showed that less than 25% of the participants agreed that a casual style was appropriate when writing an email to university professors. As identified in previous studies, professors are perceived as of higher status, leading to status-unequal interactions (e.g., [26, 39, 47]). Even though students and professors may have regular interactions in the university context [3], the asymmetrical power relationship still prevails over degree of social distance, or degree of familiarity [41].

In summary, the above findings indicate that the students tend to regard email as a formal medium of communication, realized primarily through the email's format. This suggests that the students may have the sociopragmatic knowledge of what an email should look like in student-professor correspondences. However, they may not have the pragmalinguistic competence to differentiate levels of directness of a given request strategy, which, can be a hindrance to appropriate email writing. As a "digital native" generation [38], they may be confident in using LINE, Instagram or Facebook to interact with peers in daily lives, but writing emails to status-incongruent faculty members for high-imposition requests presents great challenges for these young people. Fortunately, research has shown that students' email literacy can be developed through instruction [13, 34, 35, 37], as indicated in the following pedagogical guidelines.

Previous research in instructional L2 pragmatics suggests that exposure alone is insufficient for L2 pragmatic development and instruction is therefore necessary. In her review of studies on instructional L2 pragmatics, Taguchi [42] addressed two main issues: (1) Is instruction effective in learning pragmatics? and (2) What methods are effective in learning pragmatics?. The review shows that instruction is effective in the development of L2 pragmatics (e.g., [1] and "linguistic simplicity and opaqueness of the pragmatic rule seem to be aspects of pragmatic features that are more amenable to instruction" (p. 16). In terms of teaching methods, two main approaches were discussed: explicit instruction and implicit instruction (see also [43]. The former refers to intentional language learning through drawing learners' attention to target features [22] while the latter involves learning without awareness of target features (i.e., teaching not involving metapragmatic discussion) [43]. Out of the 10 studies reviewed by Taguchi [42], nine of them showed that the explicit instructed group outperformed the implicit instructed group. Therefore, research suggests that there is a need for explicit instruction of pragmatics in language classrooms [20].

Studies in L2 email pragmatics have witnessed the effectiveness of explicit instruction in raising students' pragmatic competence. For example, Chen [13] used a written discourse completion task to investigate if a genre-based pedagogy to teaching Taiwanese university EFL learners was effective in the development of email request writing. She found that the learners made overall progress but benefited more in framing moves (i.e., subject, greeting and closing) than in content moves (i.e., request strategies and request support). The study showed that explicit instruction was effective, especially the format-related features. Lin and Wang [34, 35] examined the effects of explicit instruction among Taiwanese EFL learners focusing on email apologies. Their studies discussed the effectiveness of explicit instruction in terms of the development of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence. In both studies, the learners demonstrated overall progress in the development of pragmalinguistic awareness at the level of comprehension, production, and cognitive processes. The learners were found to use clearer subject lines, more appropriate openings and self-identification, and more proper closings. In particular, they paid more attention to pragmalinguistic features than sociopragmatic features. The former refers to linguistic strategies and email moves while the latter refers to severity of offense and politeness (i.e., the assessment of contextual factors in relation to degree of politeness expressed) [34]. Lin and Wang [35] therefore suggest that instructional activities should lead the learners to attend to the sociopragmatic variables in the interactional contexts in order to facilitate the development of sociopragmatic competence, thereby achieving "form-function-context mapping" [43]. Nguyen [37] conducted a longitudinal study to investigate the long-term impact of explicit instruction on the learnability of L2 email requests by Vietnamese university students. Two classes were recruited: one class received explicit instruction comprising four steps: consciousness-raising, meta-pragmatic explanation, repeated output practice and teacher feedback while the other one followed the usual syllabus. It was found that the instructed class not only obtained greater gains but also retained such gains better. The study provides further support for the need of explicit instruction in L2 email pragmatics and "advocates an explicit approach to raising students' awareness of email pragmatics" (p. 248).

There is no doubt that explicit instruction is effective in raising students' pragmatic awareness and competence [20]. What then is the role of implicit instruction? Taguchi [42] suggests that implicit instruction can be effective in the teaching of pragmatics (e.g., [44, 45]) when implicit instructional activities guide the learners to attend to target pragmatic features and reinforce processing of these features. That is, for implicit teaching to be effective, activities involving noticing and processing are required. Therefore, in addition to explicit instruction, we propose "reformulation" as a corrective feedback strategy to be incorporated into the classroom activities. Reformulation is a strategy used to provide written feedback to language learners [14]. It requires "having a native writer of the target language rewrite the learner's essay, preserving all the learner's idea, making it sound as nativelike as possible" ([14], p. 6). The traditional approach of corrective feedback on students' writing involves teachers to directly mark on their essays, which, can be face-threatening and discouraging. Reformulation activities require students to produce their own text, compare their writing to the reformulated version, and discuss the

differences so that they are able to attend to both lower-level language problems and higher-level phenomena such as stylistics, cohesion and coherence [15]. Grounded in Schmidt's [40] Noticing Hypothesis, reformulation activities guide L2 learners to consciously attend to the target-like forms to facilitate learning.

The reformulation strategy applied in L2 email instruction can involve the following stages: (1) students collaboratively respond to an email writing prompt; (2) the student email is reformulated by a native speaker of the target language to make it more native like without changing students' original ideas; (3) students are asked to work in pairs to compare the reformulated text to their own and to notice the differences between these two versions; and (4) students are asked to rewrite the original text based on what they have noticed from the reformulated version. The peer-to-peer collaborative work in stage (3) facilitates the comparison and discussion of metapragmatic features [42], thereby consolidating the knowledge students learn from explicit instruction. This corresponds to Taguchi's [42] suggestion of effective implicit instructional activities which need to be sequenced to "ensure attention to forms first, followed by noticing the forms in context, and finally processing them to induce rules from input" (p. 28).

To sum up, to maximize effective L2 email pragmatics instruction, we propose a sequence of explicit instruction for the learning of metapragmatic awareness and knowledge, followed by practice and production of emails to enhance such learning. Finally, reformulation is used as a corrective feedback strategy to reinforce the learning of email pragmatics. Taken together, L2 learners will be able to "benefit from explicit email instruction as well as activities that involve discovery and raising of meta-pragmatic awareness" [3], p. 75).

Conclusion

This study examined the EFL university students' perceptions of email. The majority of the 201 students perceived university as a formal context. In such a context, email became a primary means of communication in student-professor interactions. Power was found to play a more important role than social distance when the students wrote to their professors. Furthermore, the students considered the formality of an email was determined by its business-like letter format, but they failed to differentiate the request strategies in terms of varying degree of directness, leaving much room for instruction. Previous research demonstrated that explicit instruction such as the genre-based approach was effective in developing students' email literacy. Implicit instruction, however, could be as effective as explicit instruction if the students were given opportunities to carefully notice and process the input they receive [42]. Therefore, reformulation, a form of written recast, was suggested to be used as a corrective feedback strategy to consolidate the knowledge students learn from explicit instruction.

There are two limitations to the present study. First, this study did not investigate the EFL students' historical records of email usage. Future research should address this issue before analyzing students' perceptions of email. Second, this study did not examine if students' language proficiency would affect their perceptions of email

discourse (see [7] as the current research involved only learners of B1 level. It is suggested that future research should consider the impact of L2 proficiency level on perception of email discourse in order to “reach its [email] full potential as a meaningful instructional tool for inquiry and learning” [46], p. 48).

Appendix 1 – Email requests samples

Email (1).

I want to know our grade of the final exam. Do you have time tomorrow?

Thank you.

Email (2).

Dear Professor,

Hello ~ ~ ~ I am Mary from Class 2. Is it possible that I can ask for my final score on Wednesday? Thank you. And also I wanna know how you calculate my total score. Thank you.

Mary.

Email (3).

Dear Teacher,

We are Class3 students. Will you have time next week? We would like to discuss about our group project. Our group has four members. Hope you can reply to us as soon as possible.

Thank you.

Email (4).

Dear Professor Huang,

This is Ron Chen from Class 4. Sorry for interrupting your summer vacation.

I’m applying for the Master TESOL program recently. I am wondering if it is possible for you to write the recommendation letter for me.

The attachments are my Study Plan and Autobiography.

Thank you so much.

Sincerely,

Ron.

Appendix 2 Questionnaire of email evaluations (Section 3)

Statement	Circle the number				
1. I think the style of this email is formal	1	2	3	4	5
2. I think this email reflects a close relationship between the student and teacher	1	2	3	4	5
3. I think this email uses an appropriate style in a student–teacher relationship	1	2	3	4	5
4. I think this email is in general appropriate	1	2	3	4	5
5. I think the student is direct when making the request in the email	1	2	3	4	5
6. I think the student is polite in the email	1	2	3	4	5

Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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Authors and Affiliations

Li-jung Daphne Huang¹ · Yuan-shan Chen²

✉ Yuan-shan Chen
yuanshan@ncut.edu.tw

Li-jung Daphne Huang
ljhuang@pu.edu.tw

¹ Department of English Language, Literature and Linguistics, Providence University, Taichung, Taiwan

² Department of Applied English, National Chin-Yi University of Technology, Taichung, Taiwan