POLITENESS IN UNIVERSITY STUDENT – TEACHER EMAIL COMMUNICATION: A CROATIAN TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Aim. The aim of the article is to get an initial insight into how Croatian university teachers perceive their students' e-mails in terms of politeness.

Methodology. The given study incorporates a small-scale qualitative and quantitative analysis of data collected via a meticulously designed questionnaire, administered to a group of Croatian university teachers focused on their perception of their students' emails.

Results. The study found that although Croatian teachers express general satisfaction with students' etiquette, they note problems that indicate insufficient development of students' communicative competence. This is due to students' lack of knowledge of politeness strategies and their lack of awareness of social distance and power distance. Thus, the author emphasizes the need for teaching electronic etiquette in the Croatian higher education system and proposes to introduce a special course on electronic communication etiquette into educational programs.

Research implications. Although the study is based on a rather limited amount of material, it provides an initial understanding of the problems that arise in the e-mail correspondence of students and teachers at Croatian universities and motivates for further research, justifying the introduction of comprehensive education in the field of netiquette at the university level. The importance of understanding the meaning of polite communication and mastering politeness strategies for the development of socio-cultural communicative competence, especially in the academic context, is emphasized, as well as the need for further research into the texts of Croatian students' e-mails in order to identify problems and formulate appropriate recommendations for their solution.

Keywords: politeness, email communication, netiquette, higher education, academic discourse, Croatia

Научная статья

ВЕЖЛИВОСТЬ В ОБЩЕНИИ ПО ЭЛЕКТРОННОЙ ПОЧТЕ МЕЖДУ ПРЕПОДАВАТЕЛЯМИ И СТУДЕНТАМИ – ВЗГЛЯД ПРЕПОДАВАТЕЛЯ

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Аннотация

Цель данного исследования – выявить, как преподаватели хорватских университетов воспринимают электронные письма своих студентов с точки зрения вежливости.

Процедура и методы. Исследование включает качественный и количественный анализ данных, собранных с помощью тщательно разработанной анкеты, заполненной преподавателям хорватских университетов и ориентированной на восприятие ими электронных писем своих студентов.

Результаты. В результате проведённого исследования выяснилось, что, хотя хорватские преподаватели выражают общее удовлетворение этикетом учащихся, они отмечают проблемы, свидетельствующие о недостаточном развитии коммуникативной компетентности учащихся. Это вызвано незнанием студентами стратегий вежливости и недостаточной их осведомлённостью о социальной дистанции и дистанции власти. Таким образом, автором подчёркивается необходимость обучения электронному этикету в системе высшего образования Хорватии и предлагается ввести специальный курс по этикету электронной коммуникации в учебные программы.

Теоретическая и практическая значимость. Хотя исследование выполнено на достаточно ограниченном материале, оно даёт первоначальное представление о проблемах, возникающих при переписке студентов и преподавателей по электронной почте в хорватских университетах, и мотивирует к дальнейшим исследованиям, обосновывает введение всестороннего образования в области сетевого этикета на университетском уровне. Подчёркивается важность понимания значения вежливого общения и владения стратегиями вежливости для развития социокультурной коммуникативной компетентности, особенно в академическом контексте, а также необходимость дальнейшего исследования текстов электронных писем хорватских студентов, с целью выявления проблем и формирования соответствующих рекомендаций для их решения.

Ключевые слова: вежливость, стратегии вежливости, общение по электронной почте, электронный этикет, академический дискурс, Хорватия

Introduction

In an era where education is increasingly embracing digital transformation [1; 2; 3; 4], and especially following the global COVID-19 pandemic, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has emerged as the cornerstone of interaction between teachers and students [5; 3]. As the landscape of education and communication evolve, the significance of adhering to a unique set of digital communication rules (i.e. netiquette) has become more pronounced. However, a lack of knowledge about these rules seems to be a key obstacle in digital communication, often leading to misconceptions or breakdowns [1; 6; 7; 8]. The repercussions of neglecting netiquette can extend beyond mere miscommunication, potentially leading to negative consequences, especially in academic settings, due to a palpable social and power distance and a status difference between university teachers and students across cultures [9; 10; 11, among many others].

While existing research regarding netiquette in academic communication often delves into how netiquette is (mis)applied by students (or rather how students construct emails and (mis)use politeness in it), a critical aspect of it – namely, how teachers perceive such misapplication and communication in general – remains overlooked. While the usage and application of politeness is of crucial importance, focusing solely on observable behaviours may result in the presentation of one-sided, exclusively student-focused, results and views. To achieve a more comprehensive understanding of this topic, it is essential to explore both the application of communication etiquettes by students and the perception of this application by teachers.

Politeness is a culture-specific phenomenon. As it is a broadly accepted "the same verbal or non-verbal act can be considered polite in one culture and perceived as inappropriate or even rude in another" [12, p. 196]. While more interest has been developed and employed for the purpose of politeness research in various cultures, many (smaller) cultures, e.g. the Croatian culture, have been overlooked [13]. This investigation is a pivotal part of an on-going, broader study examining politeness in student-teacher email communication across diverse cultural contexts, including Croatia, Russia, and the United States [13].

This article aims to shed light on the largely unexplored territory of perception of students' politeness in email communication by teachers in Croatian universities. In other words, the article aims to find out how satisfied university teachers are with their students' email messages in terms of politeness. The hypothesis driving this study posits that besides the lack of communicative competence, potential differences and peculiarities of youth communication might also affect the perception of politeness in students' emails, as the teachers may not always see them as polite.

The research employs a dual-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analyses of data collected via a carefully designed questionnaire distributed on a small scale.

In particular, we believe these concerns might be especially connected to the students' perceived inability to navigate the delicate balance of social and power distance in their communication with teachers. The research questions we were interested in were as follows:

1. Are teachers overall satisfied or dissatisfied with their students' communication in the context of applied politeness?

2. How often do teachers come across dissatisfactory levels of politeness in email communication with their students?

3. What do the teachers think the main issues in student-teacher email communication are?

4. How can these issues be solved?

Politeness and politeness theory – general review and academic contexts

Politeness as a socio-linguistic phenomenon which varies in different contexts and

groups [14; 15; 16, and many others]. According to Watts [16], it is "one of the means by which we are able to adapt our behaviour to that which is appropriate to the social interaction type, which we are involved" [16, p. 143]. It is not something we are born with, "but something we have to learn and be socialised into" [16, p. 4].

The theory of politeness developed by Brown and Levinson [17] stands out as one of the most renowned and influential. It centres on the preservation of one's face, defined as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" [17, p. 61]. While this theory significantly contributed to the development of politeness-related ideas in linguistics, it faced substantial criticism, particularly for asserting the universality of politeness and exhibiting an Anglocentric bias [12; 15; 18; 19; etc.]. This critique highlights the disregard for cultural differences in the study of politeness based on their theory. Consequently, the politeness theory has evolved with a greater emphasis on a discursive approach to politeness [2; 18; 19 and many more] and a pragmatic socio-cultural context, particularly concerning cross-cultural disparities in various cultures [12; 19; 20].

According to Locher and Watts [19], politeness is a "discursive concept arising from interactants' perceptions and judgments of their own and others' verbal behaviour" [19, p. 13]. This concept is categorized into first order politeness (politeness1) and second order politeness (politeness2). Politeness1 pertains to how individuals perceive social behaviour and employ the term "polite(ness)," while politeness2 refers to politeness as a theoretical concept with varying degrees [19, p. 14-15]. Given that the focus in this article is on politeness1, i.e. the understanding of politeness in the Croatian academia, the politeness referred to here, is politeness1.

As mentioned in the introduction, understanding politeness is crucial for quality conversations, meaning research focused on politeness (in the linguistic sense, and particularly in digital communication) is of great importance. Therefore, the approach adopted here is grounded in Brown's and Levinson's theory, but with a pragma-discursive emphasis and focus on Croatian culture, particularly on the perception of politeness in student-teacher email communication.

Additionally, as suggested, the topic of politeness in student-focused and academic communication, especially in digital formats, is not a new topic. With the heavy influence of digitalization, mentioned in the introduction, and the rising popularity and development of academic mobility, politeness has been explored from several university/school-focused points of view. For example, many linguists, including M. Alemi and Z. Maleknia [1], M. Almoaily [6], P. Salazar Campillo [9], and R. Eslami Zohreh, K. Wei-Hong [2] took a thorough look at the structural and grammatical application of politeness either through various politeness markers [1] or with a focus on facework in specific email parts and grammatical and syntactical elements used in them [2; 6; 9]. Such approaches have allowed us to delve into the perception and application of politeness in email communication on behalf of students from different cultures, in their native and non-native languages, and on a macro (structural) and micro (marker-based) level. Furthermore, plentiful research was conducted with a keen interest in how politeness is employed with regard to specific face-threatening acts [10], especially given the potential culturally-dependent power and social distance between teachers and students in various cultures [5]. Many of these studies, and other research, focused on various types of mistakes that student may make in digital communication, and certain research even focused on how netiquette in specific cultural contexts could be improved and addressed [8]. Indeed, these and many topics have been discussed, with a rising introspection in the context of new social media, class-performing options and environments, and multicultural classes. However, to the author's knowledge, there has not been research focused solely on teachers' take on

all of these topics, and particularly their opinion on politeness as applied by students. Additionally, apart from the research conducted by the author [13], there have been no studies focused on politeness in Croatia. This was exactly the reason for and the motivation behind this research, which is why the next several pages will be dedicated to the methodology used in this study (on the analysis of the perception of students' politeness in email communication from the point of view of their teachers), and the results received from it.

Methodology

For the purpose of data collection, a questionnaire aimed at assessing Croatian university teachers' level of satisfaction with their students' application of politeness in email communication was designed. It consisted of ten questions and a comment section, where participants could express anything they wished to add on the topic discussed. The questionnaire consisted of 2 parts. Part 1 contained three questions focused on the respondents' university-related work experience (the institution they work in, their position, and the length of experience they've acquired working in the higher education system). Part 2 had seven questions focused on the frequency of email communication with students, medium used for this purpose, most common issues in this context and their effect on the perception of politeness, as well as potential solutions for them (See Appendix 1).

Some of the questions were multiple choice questions, while some were open type questions. The results of the questionnaire (i.e. the responses to the questions) were then collected and analysed quantitatively and qualitatively, with the main focus being on gaining an initial insight into how satisfied university teachers are with email communication with their students and how they think potential issues in this regard might be resolved.

The questionnaire was completed by altogether 13 teachers from three Croatian universities: the majority (11/13) work at VERN' University, a private university in Zagreb, while one works at the University North, and one at the University of Zagreb, both of which are public universities. The overwhelming majority of participants have worked in the higher education system for 14 or more years, and the average duration of all participants' employment in the system is 16.35 years.

Results

The analysis of the results showed that 53.8% of participants use electronic media to communicate with their students daily, and 46.2% to do so weekly. Furthermore, 84.6% primarily use email for such communication, whereas 15.4% use other media (they used the comment section to mention they use Teams or their university's communication app).

While discussing their satisfaction level with their students' approach and politeness level in this type of communication, 53.8% of participants expressed they were mostly happy with how their students addressed them, whereas 46.2% said they were partially satisfied with it. When asked about the occurrence of emails perceived as dissatisfactory, 46.2% of participants stated they received (politeness-wise) unsatisfactory emails several times a year, 38.5% claimed this happened several times a month, and the remaining participants claimed they either never receive such emails (7.7%), or that they receive them less than once a year (7.7%).

Finally, when it comes to the questions in which the participants could express their concerns, causes for dissatisfaction and, in general, thoughts with regards to students' communication, their answers provided interesting information.

When asked what bothers them the most within the frames of communication with their students (politeness-wise and in general), 34.86% of participants expressed the main issues they have are related to students' poor structuring of email (no introduction

or initial greeting, messages containing attachments without any text, empty email subjects) and the usage of inappropriate/misleading email addresses, for which they blame the students' lack of understanding of how emails function.

Furthermore, 30.07% of participants claimed they do not like the tone and style some of their students use (which they described as "demanding", "aggressive", "passive-aggressive", or "too nonchalant"). Finally, 15.38% were dissatisfied with the students' orthography skills and the verbiage they use (including many orthographic mistakes and misspelling). Only 15.38% stated they were happy with their students' communication. However, one of the respondents from the last group stated that, "while they had no issues with their students' communication, their colleagues probably would have" (potentially referring to the relaxed tone of their correspondence). Having said that, it is safe to conclude that the issues participants observe mostly arise from the students' lack of understanding with regard to politeness and communication competence on the one hand, and literacy on the other.

The next question required the participants to discuss what they believe is the biggest/most common issue in the communication between Croatian university students and teachers (within the frames of politeness, and in general). Firstly, 30.07% of participants stated that the biggest issue in their opinion stems from the fact that students do not understand and respect the difference between themselves and their professors status-wise, resulting in a lack of proper politeness and communication competences. These responses address that there is a certain social and power distance between university teachers and students in Croatia, which is supposed to be upheld and understood – which the students either do not understand, or do not know how to apply in email context. In fact, one of the respondents in the questionnaire went as far as to say that "respect towards university teachers, the authority they (should) hold and the financial aspect of their work is not recognized, not only in email and by their students, but in general", even further emphasising how the social distance that is expected is often not respected.

On the other hand, 23.07% of respondents cited students' lack of attention (in the construction of emails, but also in class), which results in faulty literacy levels, as the main issue in student email communication. While a lack of attention may not be a direct sign of impoliteness, it could result in being viewed as such. This is emphasised by one of the participants in this group who suggested that "not putting effort and taking your time while doing something", thus leading somebody else to waste their time, "can definitely be seen as impolite".

Moreover, 15.38% of respondents emphasised orthography and wording (i.e. students' issues in this regard) as the prevailing issue, whereas the remaining 15.38% of participants, interestingly, gave opposing responses. To be more precise, 7.69% of participants believe the issues in student-teacher email communication stem from a generational gap (between students and university staff). The remaining 7.69%, on the other hand, simply stated that students in general tend to be impolite and "each new generation of students acts more impolitely", although they previously claimed they were somewhat satisfied with the students' communication. Thus, we could conclude that the main source of issues for these participants is also age difference, which may reflect a potential shift in the perception of politeness in Croatia.

Finally, when the participants were asked how issues in university student-teacher email communication could be resolved and whether they thought email standards should be taught, the majority of participants (61.55%) responded they believe university students should be taught (academic) email standards, either within the frames of an individual course or as a part of an already existing course (e.g. communication courses, sociology courses, media courses etc.). Out of the remaining respondents, 23.07%

believe students learn enough about email standards through other courses, whereas 15.38% are not sure if a course would be helpful, as they also partially think students are already taught enough.

Discussion

On the basis of this small-scale, but informative questionnaire, we believe several points should be discussed. Once again, we must emphasise that, since this is the first research of this kind and the number of respondents is very limited, we shall consider their responses as preliminary results and a first insight only.

First and foremost, it seems that, email correspondence has become a popular medium for academic communication between teachers and students, which corresponds with the research [2; 4; 7; 20]. The popularity of this media is further corroborated by the fact that all respondents in the questionnaire communicate with their students via email at least once a week.

Secondly, it has been concluded that, while there are no official courses on email communication intended for university students (at least not in the universities the respondents teach), on average, teachers seem to be more or less satisfied with their students' level of email communication. However, the majority of respondents also believe there is significant space for improvement with regards to the quality of students' email communication with teachers. This especially applies to the students' ability to structure emails, use proper wordage and phrasing, and, in general, be more careful and observant, so as not to miss or disregard any fields etc. Additionally, it would appear that, while some Croatian students seem to understand and respect the social and power distance between themselves and their teachers, some either do not or struggle to project this distance in their emails, resulting in dissatisfying communication scenarios, as predicted in the introduction. This might be explained by a few reasons both personal and social: (1) the lack of communicative skills and ignorance of politeness strategies by students, (2) democratisation of communicative norms in asymmetrical contexts, (3) changes in teacher – student roles in Croatian academy [10]. However, given that no real-life examples of such issues were given, discussed or analysed, for more specific and detailed results further research on the topic is needed, so as to establish how the given issues can be resolved.

Finally, the responses in this questionnaire confirm there is a need for more extensive education in the context of academic email communication, ideally in the form of a course on this topic. According to the responses, it could be concluded that, while students do learn about email guidelines within the frames of other courses, a separate course dedicated to email standards would be useful, as it might help them develop communicative competences. For this purpose, research focused on emails by Croatian students, including their level of grammatical knowledge, the politeness markers they used and the politeness strategies they applied, should be conducted to see the issues pointed out by their teachers first hand. While there is some introductory research on the topic of email politeness strategies by Croatian students [13], we call for research focused on real-life emails, as it would create more objective and realistic image of their linguistic abilities. With such results, comprehensive guidelines could be constructed for distribution and potential usage in the higher education system in Croatia,

While indicative of certain ideas, this research has limitations which need to be addressed. Firstly, a wider audience should be addressed. Furthermore, apart from the quantity of respondents, their "quality" (or rather their educational characteristics and place of employment, as well as age and gender characteristics) should be taken into consideration, too. Finally, teachers' age and students' year of study should also be taken into consideration. This would additionally elucidate what issues persist in university student-teacher communication, what areas

should be improved, what areas lost quality etc. Therefore, this research could be used as a mere introduction to a much wider topic.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article delves into the underexplored realm of politeness and etiquette in email communication within the frames of Croatian higher education system, more explicitly, on the teachers' perspective of their students' level of politeness. In the wake of the digital transformation of education and the pivotal role of computer-mediated communication, the study emphasizes the importance of understanding and navigating the digital surrounding in which such communication takes place, giving special attention to delicate balance of social and power distance in student-teacher interactions.

The findings reveal that, while teachers are overall satisfied with their students' email etiquette, a notable percentage identifies issues dealing with scarcity of communication competence. The findings suggest a lack of awareness regarding social and power distance between teachers and students, which confirms our hypothesis. Additionally, the majority of respondents believe that a course dedicated to email etiquette or a more thorough integration of this topic into existing curricula would contribute to enhancing students' understanding of proper email communication in academic settings. Importantly, thus, this research advocates for the incorporation of explicit education on email standards into the Croatian higher education system and a creation of guidelines on the topic for better understanding of the application of these standards with the purpose of reducing dissatisfaction and creating more comfortable communication scenarios. Additionally, and for this to be realised, the research also calls for studies focused on (Croatian) students' politeness-based and, in general, linguistic abilities, with the purpose of establishing potential issues teachers emphasises in this research and, thus, creating the said guidelines.

This research will hopefully also lead to more thorough studies and insights into the given topic, helping students develop communicative competences and eventually providing them with a set of guidelines they could use for a higher-quality communication. Thus, it also call for a more detailed introduction of this topic to the Croatian higher education system, as well as a motivation for future studies of this relatively uncharted area.

Appendix 1: Questionnaire – Part 2 (translation)

1. How often do you communicate with your students electronically?
2. Which medium do you use the most while communicating with your students electronically?
3. If you use email to communicate with your students, how satisfied are you with the approach your students apply during such communication (especially politeness-wise)?
4. How often do you get emails from your students which you consider to be of unsatisfactory level (with regards to their approach and politeness-wise)?
5. What bothers you the most within the frames of communication with your students (politeness-wise and in general)?
6. In your opinion, what is the biggest/most common issue in the context of university student-teacher communication (politeness-wise and in general)?
7. In your opinion, how could this issue be solved? Do you think there is a need for guidelines on the standards of (academic) email communication or for structured teaching on such communication (e.g. for this topic to be covered within the frames of various courses)?

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