

A Study of Politeness Strategies in Japanese Students' L2 English Emails

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Introduction

The research project reported in this paper was motivated by a journal article the authors came across that discussed L2 English student emails in terms of their politeness (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2015). Amongst the emails presented in the article, there appeared one that particularly touched a nerve. It was a request from a student to a professor to open an attached document and to review and offer help with its contents. The email is produced here in its entirety.

Subject: questionnaire

ATTACHMENT

Please note what changes should be made.

From Economidou-Kogetsidis (2015: 419)

The reaction of many teachers to this message might be one of (perhaps familiar) dismay at the brevity of the email, its bluntness, lack of gratitude or even a basic greeting. We too recalled having been on the receiving end of emails like this, whose inappropriate tone could make us feel reluctant to even respond. Of course, most teachers acknowledge that the student does not necessarily *mean* to sound impolite, and that it is necessary to shift our

interpretation and consider to what extent non-native English speakers are familiar with politeness strategies in formal or semi-formal communication.

The topic of L2 English email politeness is of interest not only at Japanese universities, where the authors are based. Researchers in educational settings across the world have investigated student-produced emails and online communication in terms of politeness acts. Almoaily (2018), working in Saudi Arabia, uncovered a strong tendency among the L1 Arabic students in his study to omit any kind of email greeting when writing emails in English. Etaa et al (2016) reported that Thai students, exchanging informal online forum messages with a teacher, were strongly influenced, initially at least, by their own cultural environment into using an overly formal style of English. In Iran, Karimkhanloo and Vaezi (2017) found that learners with higher English proficiency made greater use of politeness strategies in written communications between Iranian EFL students and their teachers, compared to less proficient learners. Chen (2015) showed that teaching politeness strategies had a positive effect on L1 Chinese students' email literacy in Taiwan, but that more improvement was seen in formulaic elements such as greetings and closings compared to ways in which students made specific requests in the main body of emails.

1. Politeness, face and mitigation

We will return to the specific discussion of email politeness below, but a useful starting point to consider the nature of politeness in general is Brown and Levinson's (1987) taxonomy, which explores the concept in terms of negative and positive face. Negative face is connected to letting people do what they want, when they want. Interrupting another person's actions, commonly by asking them to do something, may cause friction in this area and might make people feel imposed upon. Positive face is connected to building personal relations and how someone's positive self-image is acknowledged, praised or

criticized. A problem here might make people feel ignored, embarrassed or offended. When we communicate with others, face-threatening acts (FTAs) inevitably arise – toward others if we make an imposition or give a judgement – or toward ourselves in the case, say, of apologizing or making excuses for our own actions.

We mitigate problems associated with FTAs by incorporating formal and functional features into our language. A minor act may require very little mitigation (asking the time) while others may require much more (breaking a promise). Meier (1997) cautions that mitigating features of language, and the idea of face itself, will differ between cultures and communities, but in the way that Brown and Levinson's work has been generally applied to mitigation of FTAs, linguistic means are employed to reduce the imposition of a request, or to respect the social distance between interlocutors, "characterized by forms expressing self-effacement, formality, restraint, deference, with the use of honorifics, hedges, indirect speech acts, and impersonalizing mechanisms like pluralization of pronouns, nominalization, and passive" (Brown, 2015: 327).

1.2. Mitigation and email correspondence

When writing an email to a professor or other teacher, especially in the L2, students run the risk of failing to use adequate linguistic mitigation and, as a result, disappoint or irritate the recipient. The requirement to deal with FTAs in email correspondence applies to both positive and negative face.

As regards positive face, it is easy to imagine friction occurring if a student fails to use appropriate address terms or fails to recognize status-marked identifications. The use of a first name in a greeting as part of a first contact email might well be viewed as too informal.

In one of the student-produced emails presented to teachers for evaluation in the study by Economidou-Kogetsidis (op. cit.), one teacher commented on an

email that lacked any salutation: “this email is not addressed to me or not signed by the student... therefore abrupt and to a good degree impolite” (p.422). On a similar point, in Chen's study (op. cit.), all of the students included a salutation in email greetings they produced for a pre-instruction phase of an email literacy task. However, 60% of students failed to use academic titles appropriately. To take one example, Chen criticizes the use of ‘Dear Professor’ as it too fails to address the teacher personally, and is more appropriate in writing to a group of professors (p.140).

An interesting example of positive face orientation is reported by Tseng (2015) in what she terms ‘sweeteners’ where a student compliments a teacher as a strategic move to gain a favor: “I have heard you are very considerate and kind” (p.18). Sweeteners like these appeared in some 13% of the emails written by higher proficiency students in her study of politeness strategies among Taiwanese EFL learners.

Elements of an email that mitigate negative face seek to reduce the sense of imposition on the recipient. Butler (2012) describes how the English native/expert speakers in her study mitigated imposition by using indirect requests with a modal verb as the main element, whereas her L1 Japanese students over-relied on words such as ‘please’ paired with an imperative. The main title of Butler's paper, “Politeness is more than ‘please’” neatly spotlights this weak spot in many students' pragmatic awareness. An overestimation of the effectiveness of ‘please + imperative’ in terms of mitigation is mentioned in other reports on English L2 student emails (Kamimura, 2022; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2015). In the latter study, university lecturers evaluated student emails and reacted negatively to the ‘please + imperative’ structure, commenting that it “sounds like a command” and “always sounds harsh even when a ‘please’ is added” (p.421).

Depending on the degree of imposition, further elements of mitigation may

be necessary. In a study by Savic (2018), 10 authentic emails written by Norwegian university students were assessed in terms of politeness by 32 academic staff from Norwegian higher education institutions. One email in the study that requested feedback on a lesson plan with the following wording received a low score: “Would you look at it and give me some feedback?” (ibid.: 61). Although this is an indirect directive with a past-tense modal, it was deemed too abrupt and lacking hedging (such as ‘possibly’ or ‘perhaps’).

So, to produce appropriate politeness in email writing is no straightforward task and a failure to do so can negatively affect the goodwill of the recipient. In order to gauge our own students’ pragmatic knowledge regarding requests, we set up an email production task similar to the study by Kamimura (2022) in which students produced a notional email to a professor. We were interested in the moves the students made both in structuring their email and in modifying their language to mitigate FTAs.

1.3. The purpose of the current study

In this small study, our aim was to identify the politeness strategies employed by Japanese EFL learners with low-intermediate proficiency. Specifically, we investigated their knowledge of the formal structure of emails and their use of appropriate linguistic mitigation strategies (both syntactic and lexical) for the level of imposition involved in making a request to an unknown professor.

Our research questions were twofold:

1. What kinds of structural and lexical mitigation strategies do students employ, or fail to employ, when making an email request?
2. Which structural and linguistic features contribute to making a request email sound more polite to the recipient, thus successfully mitigating the imposition force?

To address the first question, we produced a numerical count of strategies employed by the students. For the second question, we analyzed a selection of student produced emails line by line, commenting on the various features found within them.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

Sixty-eight Japanese EFL students participated in the study, comprising twenty-seven males and forty-one females. At the time of the study, they were second-year undergraduate students majoring in law, ranging in age from 19 to 21. They were enrolled in a required intermediate-level English communication and reading course at a university in Tokyo during the fall semester of 2021. Their English proficiency was assessed to be intermediate, with a range of TOEIC® scores roughly between 480 and 540.

2.2. Data collection

We asked the students to complete a writing task to set up a 10-minute interview with an unfamiliar professor. Since making a request to an unfamiliar and higher-status professor constitutes a face-threatening act, we anticipated that students would employ certain politeness strategies, including adhering to formal email structures and making suitable syntactic and lexical choices to mitigate the request's imposition on the professor.

In class, students were instructed by one of the authors to handwrite an email on paper without using dictionaries or the internet. They received a sheet of paper with the following instructions written in both English and Japanese and were allotted approximately 20 minutes to complete the task.¹

¹ We would like to thank Prof. Nozomi Takano for her support with previous data collection for this project's pilot study.

Scenario N.B. This is just an imaginary scenario

As part of a class you must have a 10-minute interview with a native-speaker professor about her view of Japan. The professor's name is Professor Cortes. You have never met this professor before.

Your classroom teacher has given you contact details for Professor Cortes.

Write the professor an email to arrange to meet her some time in August.

2.3. Data analysis

In our analysis, we largely followed the methodology used in Kamimura's (2022) 'move structure analysis' (see also Chen, 2001). Moves are semantic units that contribute to the coherence of a text as a whole (Kamimura, 2022: 7). Emails generally consist of three parts: opening, body, and closing, and there are two types of moves involved: framing moves and content moves. Framing moves comprise the opening and closing parts, while content moves correspond to the body of the email.

We first conducted four types of quantitative analyses: one on framing moves and three on content moves. Specifically, we identified: i) semantic features, ii) language forms, iii) the use of modifiers in the content moves of email requests.

For all the analyses, the two authors independently conducted the initial coding and then compared the results. Whenever there were coding mismatches, we discussed and confirmed the coding criteria to reconcile the discrepancies. Therefore, the results reported in this paper are based on the consensus of both authors.

The quantitative analyses address the first research question, while the qualitative analysis answers the second research question, as outlined in section 1.3.

2.3.1. Quantitative analysis: Framing moves

Framing moves consist of an opening salutation, a complimentary close, and a named sign-off. Framing moves play an important role in FTA mitigation. A clearly constructed email saves the reader from having to spend time unpacking its contents.

Table 1: Framing moves in the students' emails

Framing moves		Examples
Opening	Salutation	Dear Professor Cortes,
Closing	Complimentary close	Best regards, Sincerely, Thank you
	Formal sign off	Writer's name (eg. Taro Aoyama)

2.3.2. Quantitative analysis: Content moves

For the analysis of content moves, we conducted three types of quantitative analyses focusing on: i) semantic features, ii) language forms, and iii) syntactic and lexical modifiers. The first analysis aimed to capture the semantic features encoded in all the content moves, while the second and third analyses dealt specifically with the request head act of the content moves. Below, we introduce the categories used for each analysis.

2.3.2.1. Semantic features of content moves

In analyzing semantic features, we largely followed Kamimura (2022) and adopted eight of her categories: 1) greeting in content, 2) apology, 3) self-introduction, 4) grounder, 5) general request, 6) specific request, 7) acknowledging the imposition, and 8) thanking.

Although Kamimura uses nine categories, we excluded one category, 'appeal for action.' Her example for this category is 'I am looking forward to your reply.' However, it is not always clear whether students are indeed appealing

for the recipient's action with expressions like 'I am looking forward to (your reply/seeing you).' The expression 'I am looking forward to...' is formulaic and part of the closing, and does not always reflect the writer's intentional appeal for action. Additionally, unlike the other categories, which generally increase the degree of politeness, 'appeal for action' sentences such as 'please reply as soon as possible' may sound rude and offend the addressee. Furthermore, this kind of appeal seems no longer formulaic and appears to reflect the writer's conscious intention. Therefore, we decided to exclude this category from the current analysis.

The key part of content moves is making the request. The eight categories include two kinds of request semantic features, referred to as 'general requests' and 'specific requests.' According to Chen (2001: 12), as cited in Kamimura (2022: 7), making a request in cases like this involves two parts: i) asking for

Table 2: Semantic features of content moves

Semantics	Examples
Greeting	Hello Nice to meet you.
Apology	I'm sorry that send such rude e-mail to you.
Self-introduction	My name is I'm a Aoyama Gakuin University student. I am I am second grade in the law department of Aoyama Gakuin University.
Grounder	As part of a class, I must have a 10-minute interview with a native speaker professor about her view of Japan.
General request	Can you take time for this interview?
Specific request	Do you have available dates in August? May I have some time for the interview in August?
Acknowledging the imposition	I'd happy if you could spare me time. I'm sorry for taking your time while you are busy.
Thanking	Thank you for reading this email.

an appointment itself and ii) inquiring about a convenient time for the professor. Therefore, following Kamimura, we treated these two parts of the request as independent categories in our analysis, referring to them as general and specific requests.

Table 2 above illustrates the eight semantic features we used in our analysis, with examples taken from our students' emails.

For this analysis, we disregarded spelling and grammatical mistakes as long as the intended message of the student was clear (see the example for the category 'Apology' in Table 2).

2.3.2.2. Language forms of content moves

We analyzed the language forms of the content moves (i.e. the body of the email) by classifying them into seven categories: (i) imperatives, (ii) performatives, (iii) direct questions, (iv) want statements, (v) need/must statements, (vi) expectation statements, and (vii) query preparatory. According to Kamimura, the first six categories convey direct messages, while the last one conveys an indirect message.²

Table 3 below provides the categories used for the analysis of language forms.

Note that we analyzed statements like '*You tell me...*' as imperatives. Furthermore, statements with the first-person subject coupled with action verbs, such as '*send*,' '*ask*,' or '*write*,' were categorized as performatives, regardless of their tense (i.e., present, past, present progressive, future). Additionally, statements containing both '*want*' and '*would like to*' were classified as 'want' statements.

We restricted our analysis of language forms to request head acts. However,

² Kamimura (2022) includes another category, unconventionally indirect hints (e.g., 'attached is my resume'), but since we did not encounter such examples in our students' emails, we did not include that category in our analysis.

Table 3: Language forms in content moves

Directness	Language forms	Examples
Direct	Imperatives	Please send me an e-mail and tell me when you have time.
	Performatives	So I ask you to do this.
	Direct questions	Would you give me your time for my class? Would you meet me and answer some questions?
	Want statements	I want to have a 10-minute interview about your view of Japan. I would like to interview in August.
	Need/must statements	I need 10 minutes for the interview in August. As a part of a class I must have a 10-minute interview with you about your view of Japan.
	Expectation statement	I hope to do a 10-minute interview about your view of Japan.
Indirect	Query preparatory	May I ask you a favor?

what counts as head acts are not always straightforward, since students sometimes added grounders to their requests. In such cases, we regarded the statements as request messages and included them in our analysis. However, when a statement was general and not directly addressing the addressee, we considered it a grounder and did not include it in this analysis. For example, the statement ‘*I must have a 10-minute interview with a native-speaker professor about her view of Japan*’ is a grounder and thus was not counted as an instance of “need/must.”

Furthermore, we categorized inquiries like ‘*May I...?*’ and ‘*Would you {tell me/like to}...*’ as examples of ‘Query preparatory.’

2.3.2.3. Syntactic and lexical modifiers used in content moves

The request head acts (both general and specific requests) were further analyzed in terms of the use of syntactic and lexical modifiers. These modifiers are

generally used to mitigate the imposition of a request, making them good indicators of politeness. Table 4 shows the categories of modifiers used in our analysis, with examples taken from Kamimura (2022: 11).

Table 4: Syntactic and lexical modifiers

Modifiers		Examples
Syntactic	Past tense	I was wondering...
	Progressive aspect	I'm hoping...
	Biclausal	I would appreciate it if you could...
Lexical	Polite markers	please
	Subjectivizers	I think...
	Consultative devices	Do you think you will.. Do you mind if..
	Downtoners	possibly, perhaps, maybe
	Understaters	a little, a bit, just...
	Hedges	somewhat, somehow, kind of

Among the nine categories Kamimura (2022) used, we changed the name of one category, 'Embedding' (syntactic modifiers)—to 'Biclausal', which encompasses a wider variety of subordinate clauses, headed by reason adverbs like 'because,' temporal 'when,' conditional 'if,' as well as clausal conjunctions such as 'so' and 'but.'

This change was made because not only embedding but also biclausal statements in general seem to make the message slightly more polite, as exemplified in '*if you can answer for it, I want to know when you can meet me.*'

The use of conditional '*if*' clauses was also counted as 'consultative devices' (lexical modifiers). Additionally, questions with modals, such as '*May I...?*' and '*Would/Can you tell...?*', which were categorized as 'indirect: query preparatory' in the previous analysis on language forms (see Table 3), were categorized as

consultative devices.

2.3.3. Qualitative analysis

For the qualitative analysis, the students' emails were holistically rated by the two authors, with 1 representing the lowest score and 9 representing the highest score. Six email scripts were chosen based on the results of the holistic scoring: two emails that received high scores, two intermediate scores, and two low scores by both authors. In Section 3.2. we present these emails with a commentary on their politeness strategies.

3. Results

In this section, we present the findings of the quantitative analyses of framing moves and content moves, along with the results of the qualitative analysis. Again, in our analysis, spelling and grammatical errors were not penalized, provided that the intended messages were clear.

3.1. Results of the quantitative analysis

3.1.1. Framing moves

In our study, only 20 out of 68 students (approximately 30%) adhered to the formal structure of an email, including an opening salutation, body (request), and closing (complimentary close and signature). If we consider only those emails with 'appropriate' openings and closings, including 'proper' complimentary closes and students' full names, this number reduces to 10 (even though all emails contained a body/request). This highlights a significant lack of knowledge regarding how to compose a formal email in English, indicating a need for explicit instruction in this area.

Regarding the opening part, 57 students (approximately 84%) included some form of salutation. However, among them, 11 students addressed the recipient

with the wrong gender (i.e., *Mr. Cortes*), with one student using '*Hi*,' which is too casual and inappropriate, and another using '*For*' instead of '*Dear*,' which is an incorrect opening. Additionally, 11 students (around 16%) failed to start the email with a salutation.

Since our task instructions did not specify the first name of the professor, we were unable to assess the possibility of students using the first name or full name in the salutation. We referred to the addressee as 'Professor Cortes,' a gender-neutral title, in the instructions. Therefore, it was noteworthy that 11 students used '*Mr. Cortes*' as the salutation, despite the female gender of the professor being signaled by the use of the pronoun 'her' in the task instruction.

Regarding the closings, 28 students (approximately 41%) included some form of complimentary close. However, two of them used an inappropriate casual close, '*See you*.' Excluding these instances, the remaining 26 emails featured more formal complimentary closes, such as '*Sincerely*,' '*Thank you*,' '*Best regards*,' and '*Cheers*' (including one student who used '*Greatly*,' the wrong word, yet a clear attempt at a formal complimentary close).

Furthermore, 48 students (approximately 71%) ended the email with their name. Among them, 42 students (approximately 62%) signed off with their full name, while six used only a first name, too casual for a formal request email to an unknown professor. Additionally, 16 emails (approximately 24%) lacked a closing, with neither a complimentary close nor a signature, and abruptly ended the email after making a request. Among these 16 emails, four (approximately 6%) also lacked an opening salutation, containing only the body of the email.

Although the tasks and methodology we used were quite similar to Kamimura's, the results differed. For instance, a majority of Kamimura's students followed the formal structure of an email, unlike ours. This disparity may be attributed to the higher English proficiency level of her students compared

to ours and the larger number of students in our study (68 compared to Kamimura's 25).

3.1.2. Semantic features of content moves

Table 5: Results of the semantic features of content moves

Semantics	Number of Students	%
Greeting	44	65%
Apology	9	13%
Self-introduction	64	94%
Grounder	53	78%
General request	68	100%
Specific request	42	62%
Acknowledging the imposition	4	6%
Thanking	11	16%

A majority of students (44) initiated the body of the email with a greeting. Specifically, 33 students (about 49%) used ‘*Hello*’ to begin the body of their email. This count excludes cases where ‘*Hello*’ was used in the opening salutation, as in ‘*Hello, Professor Cortes.*’ Additionally, three students used the informal greeting ‘*Hi,*’ five used ‘*Nice to meet you,*’ one used ‘*Good afternoon,*’ and two used an inappropriate greeting ‘*Excuse me.*’

Nine students included an apology for suddenly sending the email to the professor. A typical example is: ‘*I’m sorry to send an email suddenly.*’ This apology, particularly the word ‘*suddenly,*’ seems to be a direct transfer from a customary opening sentence used in Japanese letter-writing. Among these apologies, eight students used ‘*I am sorry,*’ while one student used the phrase ‘*Please forgive...*’

Most of the students (64) included a self-introduction: 61 provided their full

name, and among them, 28 specified their status as a student, along with the name of their university or department. However, three students mentioned only their student status without providing their names.

Furthermore, 53 students included some form of a grounder, explaining how they obtained the professor's email address and why they needed to interview the professor.

All of the students made a general request by inquiring about the possibility of an interview. Hence, all students achieved at least one of the main purposes of the email. Given that the task instruction specified the need to conduct the interview in August, we expected the students to ask the professor about available dates in August. However, only 42 students made such a specific request about her availability. We will further analyze the language forms, syntax, and lexical modifiers used in these requests in the next section.

Only four students acknowledged the imposition. One student used the expression '*...spare me time...*', while another stated, '*Interview is ten minutes, so it is not long.*' Three students explicitly acknowledged that the professor might be busy; for example, one mentioned, '*you may be busy, but...*' and another said, '*I'm sorry for taking your time while you are busy.*'

Expressing gratitude towards the addressee, i.e, our 'thanking the addressee' category, is typically expected in an email request written by a native English speaker. However, in our study, only 11 Japanese students (16%) thanked the professor. Among them, six expressed gratitude for taking the time to read the email, while one thanked the addressee for agreeing to the interview. Furthermore, four students simply wrote '*Thank you,*' right before the complementary close, such as '*Sincerely.*' It is difficult to determine their intention behind the phrase '*Thank you,*' as it could be part of the formal closing for them. If we exclude these instances of '*thanking the addressee,*' the total number for this category reduces to seven (about 10%).

According to Nakakawaji (2019, as cited in Kamimura, 2022), requesting an appointment, but then leaving the ball in the addressee's court to negotiate a specific date or time, forces the addressee to take the lead in a fresh email exchange in order to set up the meeting. So in this case, an initial specific request from the student is therefore more polite as it reduces the work expected of the professor.

In our study, 26 students (approximately 38%) did not make a specific request. The students might have felt that making a specific request was too imposing to ask an unknown professor in the initial email before receiving a positive response to the interview request. Although making specific requests in addition to the general request can save time in terms of email exchange, it might indeed add pressure and a further imposition for the addressee, especially if they are inclined to refuse the general request.

Let us now compare our results with Kamimura's findings. Kamimura (2022) reported that all of her students included both a self-introduction and a grounder in their emails. In our study, most students included a self-introduction (94%), and a majority included a grounder (78%), but not all. The lower number of students who mentioned the grounder compared to Kamimura's study might be attributed to the nature of the task. In our scenario, the students' English teacher directly introduced the professor living in Japan, who is likely an acquaintance of their teacher. Consequently, our students might have assumed that Professor Cortes was already informed about the interview and its purpose, leading some students to omit the grounder. In contrast, in Kamimura's study, the students were instructed to send a request email to an unknown professor abroad, making it more likely for them to provide a grounder.

Interestingly, in Kamimura's study, only 68% of the students made a general request, with 36% making specific requests. In our study, however, all students

made a general request, and 62% made specific requests. Kamimura suggested that her students might not have been aware of the social convention that when requesting an appointment, one should ask for the appointment (general request) and inquire about specific dates and times (specific request).

Does this imply that our students were more familiar with these social conventions compared to Kamimura's students? This is unlikely. Two factors may explain the differing results between the two studies. First, all of Kamimura's students included grounders, which were sometimes quite detailed. They may have believed that the grounder alone served the purpose of making a general request. Kamimura (2022) believes this reflects a tendency among Japanese students to use indirect communication strategies, providing only contextual background information without making direct requests. They might have expected the professor to infer the intent of their emails, adhering to a reader-responsible writing style rather than a writer-responsible one (Hinds, 1987).

Second, the instructions and scenario we provided may have been more straightforward, facilitating the students' ability to frame their requests. Our instructions included phrases that the students could directly use to compose their requests. Additionally, by specifying that the interview should take place in August, we may have encouraged students to make specific requests regarding the interview dates.

Lastly, similar to Kamimura's students, few of our students expressed gratitude at the conclusion of their emails, which indicates a lack of proper politeness strategies.

3.1.3. Language forms of request messages

The students in our study used a variety of language forms to convey their requests. If we arrange these forms in order of politeness, they intuitively follow this sequence: 1) imperatives, 2) need/must statements, 3) performatives,

4) direct questions, 5) want statements, 6) expectation statements, and 7) query preparatory. Understanding this hierarchy will help us gauge the students' awareness of politeness in email writing. Table 6 summarizes the distribution of the language forms used in the request messages, including both general and specific requests.

Table 6: Distribution of language forms

Directness	Language forms	Number of students	%	Frequency of use
Direct	Imperatives	36	53	37
	Performatives	13	19	13
	Direct questions	24	35	30
	Want statements	59	87	76
	Need/must statements	4	6	4
	Expectation statement	1	1	1
Indirect	Query preparatory	6	9	7

The most frequent language form used to request an interview was 'want' statements, which ranked fourth on the politeness scale. A total of 76 instances of 'want' (and 'would like to') statements were found: 'want' was used 57 times, 'would like to' 18 times, and the past tense 'wanted' once. To mitigate the FTA, we might expect the students to use 'would like to' more than 'want'; however, this was not the case, suggesting that 'would like to' is not as accessible as 'want' to the students. Nevertheless, the fact that 87% of the students used 'want' statements rather than imperatives or direct questions suggests they are generally conscious of this particular politeness strategies in email writing.

The second most frequent modifier used in our study was imperatives, which were used by 36 students (53%). All occurrences of imperatives were used with a polite marker 'please,' except for two students who used 'you tell me...'

instead of a pure imperative construction without an overt subject. One student used a *'please'* imperative twice in his/her emails, thus the total frequency amounts to 37. This high occurrence of imperatives, considered the least polite of all the language forms, suggests that Japanese students were impolite and did not know how to write formal emails, which is consistent with the findings reported by Butler (2012). However, a closer investigation reveals that out of 37, conditional *'if'* clauses were used 14 times with *'please'* imperatives (e.g., *'If you have free day in August, please send me by email'*) and two instances of the *'please'* imperative occurred with an adverbial *'when'* clause, which seems to make the imperative less impolite. Additionally, two instances of imperatives are used as in the phrase *'please let me know...'*, which differs from the imperative directly ordering to fulfill the request to the addressee.

The third most frequently used strategy was direct questions, with 30 instances found in total: *'can you'* (6), *'could you'* (10), *'would you'* (6), *'do you'* (5), *'will you'* (1) *'how about'*, (1) *'what fully day...'* (1). Addressing direct questions to a higher-status unknown professor is not very appropriate, and the students seemed largely unaware of this.

The performative strategy was used 13 times to make a request (e.g., *'I will hold the interview in August'*). The verbs used in these sentences were *'ask, choose, decide, hold, interview, take, have, do.'* This strategy is also direct and rather impolite, thus explicit teaching in class appears to be necessary.

Although *'need/must'* statements were often used in the grounder, explaining the reason for the appointment (e.g., *'I need to...'*), they were not frequently used in making a request. There were only four in total: one instance of *'need'*, two *'have to'*, and one *'must.'* Lastly, only one instance of an *'expect'* statement was found: *'I hope...'*

Let us now compare the results of our study with Kamimura's (2022). According to Kamimura, *'want'* statements were the most frequently used lan-

guage form, which is also the case with our study. The language form that shows the second highest frequency in her study was the query preparatory. Further, she reported that most students used interrogative sentences starting with modal auxiliary verbs, such as ‘could’ (e.g., ‘*could you tell me a convenient day for you?*’), and three students used embedding structures (e.g., ‘*I was wondering if you could meet me in two or three weeks*’). In contrast, our students only used the first type of query preparatory (e.g., ‘*If you have convenient time in August, would you like to come our class and answer my 10-minute interview.*’, ‘*May I ask you a favor?*’) but not the second embedding type, which seems to reflect the lower English proficiency level of our students.

3.1.4. Syntactic and lexical modifiers of request messages

Table 7 summarizes the syntactic and lexical modifiers used in the request messages in the students’ emails.

Table 7: Results of syntactic and lexical modifiers

Modifiers	Type	Number of stunts	%	Frequency of use
Syntactic	Past tense	36	53	48
	Progressive aspect	9	13	9
	Biclausal	42	62	58
Lexical	Polite markers	35	52	35
	Subjectivizers	5	7	5
	Consultative devices	32	47	39
	Downtoners	2	3	2
	Understaters	0	0	0
	Hedges	0	0	0

These modifiers can be regarded as politeness strategies. Among all the

modifiers, biclausal (syntactic) strategies were the most frequently used by our students. A total of 42 students (62%) employed these strategies, with some students using them more than once, resulting in a total frequency of 58 instances. The conditional *if* clause was used 26 times, conjunctions like 'so' (11), 'but' (2), 'because' (7), were also used.

The past tense was used 48 times in total: 41 times with modals like 'would' and 'could', and seven times with regular verbs like 'sent,' 'wrote,' and 'wanted'. The progressive aspect was used 9 times, all in the present tense, with '*going to*' (6), '*writing*' (2), and '*emailing*' (1). The politeness marker '*please*' appeared 35 times, and all imperative statements were combined with '*please*.'

Subjectivizers were used 5 times: '*I think*' (3), '*I hope*' (1), and '*I promise*' (1). Consultative devices were used 39 times in total, including conditional *if* clauses (26), '*could/can you tell...*' (7), '*May I...*' (4), '*is it possible...*' (1), and '*would you like...*' (1). Downtoners were used twice: 'maybe' and 'probably.' No instances of understaters (e.g., *a little*) or hedges (e.g., *somewhat*) were found in our study.

It is difficult to compare our results of modifiers with Kamimura's due to differences in sample size and coding systems. In her study, very few students used modifiers. Further, we counted '*would*' in the phrase '*I would like to...*' as an instance of past tense, whereas she appeared not to count those examples as such. This is evident because, in her study, 24 students used '*want*' statements but only 3 instances were categorized under past tense, which would be an undercount if '*would like to*' had been treated as past tense. Additionally, as explained in section 2.3.2.2, we modified her category of 'embedding' to 'biclausal' to include subordinate clauses headed by '*if*' or '*because*' in our study.

Nevertheless, there are also similarities between the two studies. Kamimura reported that her students used the politeness marker '*please*' with imperatives (4 students), which is a pattern observed in our study as well. She points out

that although ‘*please + imperative*’ can serve as an order under certain circumstances (e.g., ‘*Sit down here, please*’), students seemed unaware of this nuance and believed that adding ‘*please*’ to an imperative always increases the degree of politeness. This seems to be the case with our students too.

Furthermore, Kamimura concluded that explicit instructions were necessary for EFL students to acquire the form of request using clausal embeddings (see also Takahashi, 2001). This is likely true, but the zero instances of embeddings like ‘*I wonder if you would...*’ in our study suggest that clausal embeddings are generally quite difficult for Japanese EFL learners to access or use, and not only in the context of writing a formal request email. This, of course, requires further investigation.

3.2. Results of the qualitative analysis

The authors holistically rated all 68 emails in terms of politeness, scoring them between 1 for the least successful and 9 for the most polite-sounding emails. We then looked through the emails that had received a high score, an intermediate score, and a low score from both authors and selected two emails from each of these levels. The resulting six emails are presented below. This serves to present concrete examples of framing moves and linguistic politeness strategies in context. They are presented simply in the order of the 68 emails that we received.

Student No. 20

Dear Professor Cortes.

Hello. I am [full name]. Aoyama Gakuin University student.

As part of a class I must have a 10-minute interview
with a native-speaker professor about her view of Japan.

So I would like to meet you and interview.

Do you have some time to interview in August? If you have some time, please send me a date. I am looking forward to meet you.

Thank you

[full name].

This email shows good use of politeness techniques and seems largely successful as a first contact. The email shows an appropriate opening address with a correct formal salutation (Dear Professor Cortes) although he also uses a less formal *'Hello'*. In many of the emails produced in this study, this *'Hello'* was used as the sole formal greeting. The student introduces himself and states the reason for writing (the grounder). After the general request of asking for a meeting, he makes a more concrete request, asking for the teacher to state times when she is able to meet. This makes it clear to the teacher what has to be done next and is in contrast to other emails where students leave it to the teacher to negotiate a date. The sentences are not complex and include a past tense modal verb *'I would like to'*. In his movement toward making an appointment, the student does not use language that presupposes the teacher will comply – *'Do you have some time...'* *'If you have some time...'* thus granting the teacher the option to refuse. Although the sign-off is a simple *'Thank you'*, this does not seem too inappropriate in this short email.

Student No. 21

Hello Professor Cortes,

I'm [full name].

I'm emailing you because I would like to interview with you about your view of Japan in August.

So, could you tell me the day you are available?

I'm looking forward to seeing you.

From [first name]

In this email, the student has succeeded in expressing politeness in various ways but at the same time the email comes over as somewhat abrupt and some reference to the classroom task would have helped the recipient to better understand the context of the mail. In the salutation, the '*Hello*' before the professor's name could seem overly informal, especially for a first contact. The grounder seems insufficient in this email and the email as a whole appears too brief. The request about availability with its initial '*so*' suggests an assumption that the teacher will comply. The student makes use of a past tense modal verbs ('*would like: could you*') and this gives a greater sense of distance and politeness. On the other hand, the three contractions ('*I'm*') could again be viewed as too informal.

Student No. 33

Dear Professor Cortes,

Hello. My name is [full name]. I'm an Aoyama Gakuin university student.

Thank you for giving me 10 minutes for my interview as part of a class.

I want to interview about your view of Japan.

Could you tell me the dates you have time for the interview because I want to make an appoint.

Greatly,

[full name]

Despite utilizing some politeness techniques, this email seems much less successful as a first contact email for making a request. The salutation is appropriate, using the correct title. The grounder too gives enough information to explain the purpose of the email. The student has assumed the recipient's agreement but has at least expressed gratitude for it. The student uses a past tense modal (*'could you'*) to soften a direct request. On the other hand, the plain 'want' statement certainly has a negative effect on the impact of the mail. The request to receive possible times centers the student herself: the phrase following *'because'* signals the prioritization of the student's circumstances rather than the teacher's. The student has attempted a formal sign-off, which few students in this study tried, but unfortunately *'greatly'* is non-target-like and would probably confuse (or amuse) the recipient. The misuse of *'appoint'* may have the same effect.

Student No. 44

Dear Professor Cortes.

Hello, my name is [full name]. My classroom teacher gave me your email address, so I contact you. Nice to meet you.

I'm glad to interview for Professor Cortes. Then I want to ask you about her view of Japan at 10-minute. So I want to know what date is best for Professor Cortes.

I would like to Interview in August.

I wait to return the answer.

From [full name]

The friendly tone of the email does not quite make up for its lack of finesse

regarding politeness. The salutation is appropriate and, as with Student No. 20, is coupled with a more informal *'hello'*. The *'nice to meet you'* and *'I'm glad'* set an informal tone. Although the student explains the route of contacting the professor through her teacher, the grounder fails to clarify the actual request, and assumes the recipient has already agreed to the interview. The student does little to mitigate her specific requests. We have two *'want'* statements, and a final sentence that puts pressure on the recipient to reply, as it brings up the idea of the student waiting. There is no formal sign-off; the student employs a basic *'from'* and there are no words of thanks in the email.

Student No. 46

Dear. Ms Cortes

Hello.

My name is [full name]. I am Aoyama Gakuin University student.

The reason why I am writing this e-mail to you, I have to take an appointment to a ten-minutes interview. Please tell me your available day as soon as possible. I decide a day during the month of August.

Best Regards,

[full name]

This email is weak regarding politeness. The teacher's academic title has not been used. The grounder, as with Student No. 33, describes the student's own circumstances and fails to acknowledge any inconvenience to the teacher. The use of *'please'* slightly softens the student's specific request to agree a date but her use of *'as soon as possible'* seems pushy, especially coupled with her use of

'I decide a day'. The student has produced an appropriate formal sign-off which does not offset the lack of politeness strategies in the main mail.

Student No. 56

Hello, I'm [full name] from the law factory, I email you because I want to know when is it good for you to have a 10-minute interview, in August.

Please send me back as soon as you notice- your schedule.

This email would doubtlessly be viewed negatively by the recipient. It carries an assumed informality. The greeting is a simple *'hello'* with no mention of the recipient's name, and the student contracts *'I am'*. Additionally, the student's failure to attend to details such as the confusion of *'factory'* with *'faculty'* and the spelling of *'notice'* might be viewed as disrespectful. Slips like these might stretch the recipient's tolerance of accepting a certain level of non-native English. The student fails to sign-off the email and this was a rare oversight amongst the emails we received. As with Student No. 46, the student feels she can hurry the teacher for a reply. Even so, the email is not completely without politeness markers. There is a *'please'* and the student tries to center the teacher by asking when a time would be *'good for you'*.

Conclusion

Our examination of these 68 emails gave us a good insight into the strengths and limitations of our students' politeness strategies and revealed targets for future pedagogical interventions to help them improve.

The students had a decent grasp of some strategies and blind spots about others. In terms of the overall structure of an email, they seemed more aware of the need for a salutation compared to that for a formal sign-off. While they

were very likely to state a basic reason (grounders) for their request, and to make a general or even specific request, strategies such as acknowledging an imposition or indeed thanking the recipient seemed not to be a high priority among the emails in our sample. In terms of teaching email politeness, it is perhaps at the level of basic structure and within the semantic features of content moves that improvements might be easiest to attain. Students could be made aware that these details contribute a lot to the tone of the email and that they can be achieved even without necessarily having mastered a high level of English grammar. In contrast, points around language form and direct and indirect messaging hang on the students' overall L2 proficiency. In the emails, we saw an overreliance on imperatives and want statements and a complete absence of embeddings such as 'I wonder if you could' and of understaters and hedges. Clearly, some aspects of politeness are more conducive to teaching than others.

Language learners around the world will have their own particular blind spots with regard to politeness strategies. We recall that students in Saudi Arabia may fail to include a greeting line in their emails, whereas 84% of our Japanese students made use of a salutation. The 'sweeteners' described by Tseng may either appeal to the vanity of the recipient or be dismissed as insincere flattery. Further investigation in classrooms worldwide would doubtlessly reveal more cultural disparities around politeness strategies, and act as awareness raisers for students and teachers.

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