"Dear Pro.", an Examination of the Format Used in Chinese Students' E-mails

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The Asian Conference on Language Learning 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013

Abstract

Email has become a widely used medium of communication in the academic and business communities. As language educators, we need to ensure that learners acquire successful language skills in these contexts.

This study investigates the format used by Chinese university students when writing e-mails in English to their professors. Most of the previous research has been concentrating on the content and communicative functions (e.g. Al-Ali and Sahawneh, 2008; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007) rather than on the overall structure of emails. The general layout is however the first impression the recipient gets when they receive an e-mail, so it is essential that L2 learners adopt an appropriate format.

The analysis examines the punctuation, subject line, "opening" and "closing" of 185 emails sent to one professor, by undergraduate students with advanced English language skills, from one of China's top universities.

Despite the prevalence of formal greetings, expected in a high power distance culture like China (Hofstede, 2001), the results show considerable variation among students, who have not acquired enough socio-pragmatic competence (e.g. when sending an attached file) and generally combine formal greetings with emoticons or inadequate punctuation marks. Furthermore, a lack of consistency in the use of openings and closings is noticeable, indicating that some students are still uncertain about how to organize their communication. With the development of smartphones, the trend to overlook email formatting is likely to become even more prevalent; it is crucial to teach the fundamental communication techniques which can be applied to different settings.

1. Introduction

Rise of the use of email messages

Over the past years, the nature of the communication between students and teachers has changed as email has become a major means of communication, through which students submit their homework, ask for information, or make appointments.

Despite its increasing role in academia, email communication is largely absent from EFL courses and remains confined to the scope of business English. As language educators, it is essential we provide students with the necessary tools to communicate effectively and efficiently as they use this medium not only with their teachers but also with scholars from different universities, to apply for jobs or graduate programs across Europe and the United States.

Writing "status-unequal" emails is a difficult task for learners (Chen, 2006: 36), in particular the writing of email requests, which have been the main focus of research on email. Email constitutes a unique hybrid method of communication. It "tends to use more casual lexicon, to be less carefully edited, and to assume a greater degree of familiarity with the interlocutor" (Baron, 1998:47). But the content and structure have also preserved many features of written communication. Depending on the context and communication purposes of the message, the sender must find the appropriate tone and style. There are many considerations when composing an email but the general layout is the first impression the recipient gets when they receive an email, so it is essential for learners to adopt the right format. The present study investigates the style and structure of emails sent by students to one professor, looking in particular at the subject line, the opening and the closing. Students must be made aware of the different choices they face when they write emails and of the importance of editing; misspelling the name of a prospective employer can seriously compromise one's chances of being further considered for a position. In China, the National English tests evaluate the students' English level but only examine their general English proficiency and do not focus on their sociopragmatic competence. This research will help evaluate whether it is in balance with their proficiency skills.

Improving the structure of students' emails is also important for teachers (and any potential recipient) who spend an increasing amount of time managing emails from an average of 300 students. Although many universities now offer different platforms for students to submit their work or contact their teachers, reducing some of the issues mentioned in the study, it is not always the case. Besides temporarily removing the issue does not solve the problem since, as mentioned above, with the internationalization of education, students are more and more likely to communicate with other scholars and institutions.

Previous research

Whilst an increasing number of studies have been carried out on email, most of the research has concentrated on the body of the email and its content, rather than its overall structure, studying in particular request speech acts (Lee 2004; Zhu 2012) and comparing the request strategies chosen by native and non-native speakers of English (Al-Ali and Sahawneh, 2008; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2001, 2006, 2007; Chen, 2001, 2006). For instance, Chang and Hsu (1998) analyse the differences in request emails between American English speakers and Chinese learners of English. As opposed to native speakers who perform direct requests in an indirect way, Chinese speakers tend to formulate indirect requests, using direct linguistic devices.

No work has been carried out on analyzing the format of emails, and if mentioned, it often only concerns the use of greetings. The different opening and closing lines are generally listed, organized according to their degree of formality, along with their frequency in the corpus (Al-Ali and Sahawneh, 2008; Bjørge, 2007). The present research reveals however that analyzing greetings from this perspective does fully reflect the level of formality of a message. Openings and closings need to be analyzed together rather than independently. Besides, past studies only consider the choice of greeting forms to evaluate the degree of formality, but ignore other important features that need to be taken into account. Finally this investigation offers to look at other elements which are part of the fixed structure of emails, namely subject line and punctuation, to determine whether students communicate efficiently and appropriately. By focusing on the subject line (for relevance, efficiency, identity), the greetings (for misuse, Chinese transfer and mismatch), and to some extent style (punctuation, smileys, spacing), this work aims to bring to light the ways in which Chinese students structure their English emails in unequal power relationships. In particular, the study aims at answering the following research questions:

1) How do students structure "status-unequal emails"? What is the first impression conveyed?
2) Do students know email etiquette?
3) Do they use the linguistic tools (e.g. subject line, salutations) appropriately to write effective and efficient emails?

2. Methodology

Participants
The study investigates a collection of 185 emails sent by 51 students to one foreign teacher, over the course of a semester. For ethical reasons, only email messages sent to one professor, the author of this paper, were considered, also minimizing the influence of other variables (age, sex, status).

The subjects were all Chinese students at Tsinghua University (Beijing, China). Tsinghua is one of China's top universities, ranking 35th worldwide in the 2013 higher education worldwide university ranking. The participants were undergraduate students (1st and 2nd year) from different departments with advanced (highest level) English skills. Chinese undergraduate students will have usually studied English for about 10 years when they enter university. Over their first two years at university, they are required to take a minimum of eight credits in English. One class is worth two credits. Courses range from level 1 to 4, 4 being the most advanced. The students whose emails were examined were all attending a level 4 debate course. At the beginning of the semester, students chose to use their Chinese (pinyin) or English name (if they have one) in class. A personal 10-digit ID number was also attributed to each student when they first entered university.

Corpus
The sample consists of 185 authentic emails written by 51 students. More data could have been elicited by setting a written task; however students would have been able to control their use of format, greetings and editing once aware of the task, and

potentially falsify the results of the study. In addition, only students from a same level (viz. 4), following a same course (viz. debate) were considered, restricting the overall number of participants. The professor to whom the email messages were sent was a 29 year-old female with experience in teaching and a PhD in linguistics. Students were encouraged to call her by her first name, and although friendly, the communication style remained formal. To control the variability of the sampling, the communicative purpose of the emails was also taken into account as a preliminary analysis of the data showed that emails written for different purposes displayed a different format. It was decided to organize the messages into two sets: 1) emails with attachment(s) (in this case, homework), 2) other unique emails.

3. Data analysis

Subject line
One striking feature in both sets of emails is the 100% occurrence of a subject line. Students systematically used a title in all 185 emails. The rule of thumb for subject lines in email writing, as advised online, is to be relevant, ultra-specific and identifiable. Below are the data from the first set, viz. emails with attachment(s), which contains 136 emails. The titles are divided into four categories.

Titles	%	Number of emails
Assignment	47	(n= 64)
Assignment + Name/ID (or both)	39	(n= 53)
Assignment + Name/ID + class name/time	7	(n= 10)
Other / Irrelevant	7	(n= 9)
	100	(n= 136)

Figure 1. Subject lines in emails with attachment(s)

Relevance

Titles	%	Number of emails
Assignment	47	(n= 64)
Assignment + Name/ID (or both)	39	(n= 53)
Assignment + Name/ID + class name/time	7	(n= 10)
Other / Irrelevant	7	(n= 9)
	100	(n= 136)

Figure 2. Relevance in subject lines (emails with attachment(s))

In the first set of emails, a great majority of titles were relevant with only 7% of "Other/Irrelevant" titles. "Other" included titles which did not match any other categories, for instance students providing their name (English or Chinese) or ID number. "Irrelevant" titles were titles which either did not match the content of the email or, in most cases, which should have been part of the body of the email, not the subject line (e.g. *Sorry teacher, I need to explain sth to you*[1]).

Be ultra-specific

Titles	%	Number of emails
Assignment	47	(n= 64)
Assignment + Name/ID (or both)	39	(n= 53)
Assignment + Name/ID + class name/time	7	(n= 10)
Other / Irrelevant	7	(n= 9)
	100	(n= 136)

Figure 3. Specificity in subject lines (emails with attachment(s))

Fig.3 shows that in emails with attachment(s), 47% of students chose to include the name of the assignment as title of their emails, while 39% of them were even more specific and added their name or ID number in the subject line. Although relevant, the names employed for the assignments were rather vague, e.g. *homework*. Considering

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[1] After analyzing both the title and first line of these emails, it was clear that they were not mistakes, whereby the first line of the email would have been written by mistake in the subject line.

teachers have about 300 students registered in different courses, *homework* alone is not specific enough. The screenshot below shows eight occurrences of the word *homework* as email title over the course of three days.
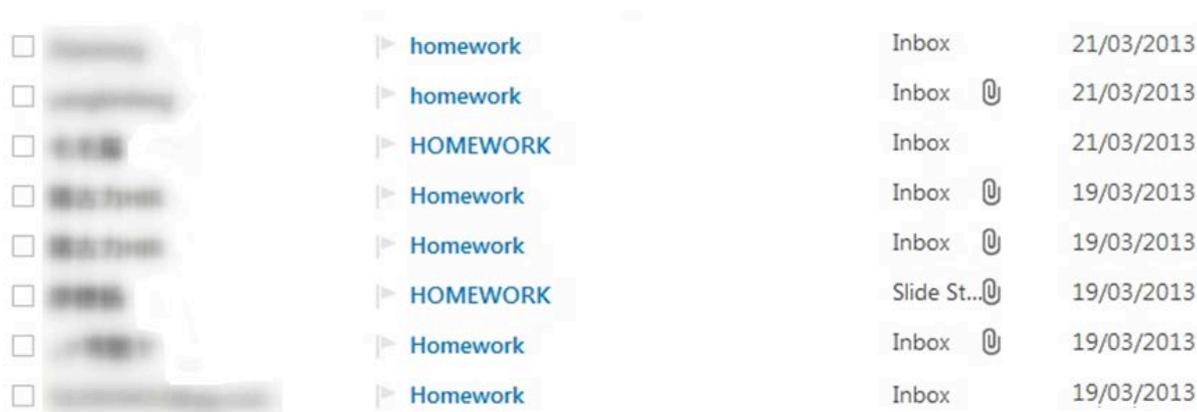
	homework	Inbox		21/03/2013
	homework	Inbox	📎	21/03/2013
	HOMEWORK	Inbox		21/03/2013
	Homework	Inbox	📎	19/03/2013
	Homework	Inbox	📎	19/03/2013
	HOMEWORK	Slide St...📎		19/03/2013
	Homework	Inbox	📎	19/03/2013
	Homework	Inbox		19/03/2013

Figure 4. Screenshot *Homework* title

Similarly, although specific on the surface, (1) still misses crucial elements for immediate identification of the nature and source of the email.

(1)   change for the last ppt[2]

On some occasions, it was even impossible to tell whether the email was an assignment without having to open the file, e.g. *negative*. Titles can also be misleading; students often use the preposition *about* to start their titles, sometimes inappropriately. (2) seemed to imply questions about the assignment, when the student was simply submitting the assignment.

(2)   About my presentation

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[2] The author reproduced each example respecting the stylistic choices made by the subjects in the source emails.

Identify yourself

Titles	%	Number of emails
Assignment	47	(n= 64)
Assignment + Name/ID (or both)	39	(n= 53)
Assignment + Name/ID + class name/time	7	(n= 10)
Other / Irrelevant	7	(n= 9)
	100	(n= 136)

Figure 5. Identity in subject lines (emails with attachment(s))

Only a few occurrences of emails (7%) containing a complete title, allowing for immediate identification of the source and content of the message, were found in the first set of emails.

The data from the set of unique emails display similar results.

Titles				
Emails		Per student		
Relevant	65%	(n= 32)	60%	(n=24)
Misleading	10%	(n= 5)	10%	(n=4)
Irrelevant	25%	(n= 12)	30%	(n=12)
	100%	(n= 49)	100%	(n=40)

Figure 6. Subject lines in unique emails

A majority of emails use relevant titles (65%), which also tend to be vague (e.g. *debate, the presentation*). (The data per student are also considered but show no significant difference). Although the feature subject line is known from the student, it is not being used efficiently or effectively.

Greetings

A prevalence of formal greetings is expected in a high power distance (PD) culture (Hofstede, 2001) like China as students from high PD cultures are more likely to use formal greetings than students from low PD cultures (Bjørge, 2007). In Confucianism, the teacher is the master of knowledge and is highly respected, promoting a high level of formality. Foreign teachers however tend to favour a more egalitarian relationship

with their students. In this context, students will need to balance and distinguish between egalitarianism, and informality and sloppiness.

The use of greetings is a fuzzy area, even for native speakers, who may not agree on the level of formality of the different forms. For instance, *hi* may not be perceived in the same way in the United States and Britain. As Biensenbach-Lucas (2007) points out, guidelines on politeness can be subjective and "often reflect professors' individual expectations and preferences rather than generally agreed-upon conventions" (p62). Therefore, an American teacher might have different standards of formality in comparison to a British teacher. A few studies have considered the use of closing in email communication by native speakers (Lan, 2000). Although native speakers may not use any closing in their emails, as "learners of the language," the expectations are different for non-native speakers. Thus, some basic rules are still needed for non-native speakers do not have the flexibility native speakers have to bend the rule and adopt their own greeting style. Nevertheless, the main issue may not be about the choice of greeting forms; there are other features EFL learners should pay attention to. In the present study, very few "informal" greetings (e.g. *hi, hey*) were found in both sets of emails, which is too be expected in a high PD culture like China. However, informality is not simply determined by the form employed. A formal greeting may be used informally. For instance, although there was a clear preference (60%) for a construction in "*Dear...*" the results also show a lot of variation (e.g. upper or lower case, font, title, name).

(3)   Dear Marianne
        dear marianne:
        DEAR MARIANNE:
        dear marianne:
        Dear Madam Marianne:
        Dear Teacher Marianne Collier
        (title) Dear Marianne~ / Dear Marianne,

Besides the choice of greeting, there are other considerations which can affect and lower the degree of appropriateness and professionalism of a message; namely punctuation, mismatch and multiple greetings.

Multiple greetings

Consider (4),

(4)   see you tomorrow,
                best wishes
                sincerely

In (4), three closing lines are used instead of one. This triple use lowers the degree of formality of the email. Choosing the "right" form, in (4) *best wishes*, does not guarantee its correct use.

The sampling also displayed instances of literal transfer from Chinese usage, e.g. (5) and (6)

(5)   Dr Marianne Collier:
                    Hello!

(6)   Best wishes!
        2013-9-12

Compare (5) and (6) with (7) below, which represents the standard format for formal Chinese emails:

(7)   Zunjing de Li xiansheng:
        (Respectable Mr Li)

        Nin hao!
        Hello! (formal)

        ****
        ****
        ******************. Ci zhi
        Jing li
        Yours respectfully

        Liu Yang
        2013-2-10

Note that in *Ci zhi Jing li*, *Ci zhi* should be written like in (7), next to the last words in the message, while *Jing li* should be placed below. In Chinese business letters, it is also common to centre some information (e.g. sender's name in the header); this particular format might explain why students tend to centre or isolate their closing or name at the end of an email, such as in (8)[3]

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[3] The layout of the message was modified to fit onto the page but the original format remains intact.

(8)

Dear Marianne:

As I asked for absence this week in Listening and Speaking for Academic Purpose:Debate on Wednesday.So I want to know the brief contents of the class and shall I do the homework or wrirte assignment this week?Besides, can I know the score of my quiz?I have some confusion in this quiz.

2012.10.18

Punctuation

Consider the following examples in (9),

(9)   Hi~
        Hi,Marianne,!
        Best wishes.
        Best wishes!
        Best Wishes =)

The Chinese writing system does not facilitate the manipulation of its written forms; deviation is limited with Chinese characters (viz. upper and lower case, font and shape). In China, punctuation as a sign of expression is widely employed. Students like to add smileys, exclamation marks or symbols[4] to their messages instead of using lexical (e.g. *I am happy*) or grammatical structures (e.g. conditional). They are generally not aware that these extra linguistic features may be viewed as unprofessional and are discouraged in formal communication. In the data collected, all three features were particularly present (only nine students out of fifty one did not use any inappropriate punctuation signs[5] in their emails) but they were almost only used in the opening or closing lines.

Mismatch

Mismatch in formality can occur within the salutation itself; in (10) and (11), an informal greeting is used formally, along with an honorific title:

(10)   Hi Dr. Marianne

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[4] The only symbol used was the tilde ~, in China it is used to express happiness, students explained they put it around the salutation or sign off because they are "happy to email."
[5] i.e. smiley, tilde, or misuse of the exclamation mark.

(11)   Dr. Marianne Collier:
                    Hello!

Mismatch can also occur between the salutation and the close off. In past studies, opening and closing lines have always been interpreted independently. This study argues that it is crucial to analyze them as a pair, to be able to assess the level of formality in a message. Consider (12), (13) and (14):

(12)   Dear Ms. collier,   [Nothing]

(13)   Hi Dr. Marianne   Best regards,

(14)   Hi~   Best regards!

Looking at the salutation alone, (12) is very formal (besides the omission of the capital letter at the beginning of the family name); however, when combining it with the closing (viz. no closing line), the pair is no longer as formal.

Emails with attachment(s)

When examining the sample of emails with attachment(s), one striking feature was the absence of greetings in the majority of emails. 63% of the emails in this set had no opening and 75% had no closing. 30% of them were blank emails. Furthermore, only a third of the emails referred to the attached file(s) sent in the email, often very briefly (e.g. (15) and (16)). There was only one example of full acknowledgment of the attached file (17) that also included greetings.

(15)   *Part 1*

(16)   *self-presentation*

(17)   *Pro. Marianne:*
        I'm [studentname] *from the 2nd class Wednesday, attached is my debate outline.*
        Best wishes,
        [studentname]

Fig. 7 below compares the use of greetings in the two sets of emails (omitting all blank emails from the first sample)

	51 students	40 students
	Set 1: Emails with attachment(s) (only emails with content)	**Set 2 : Unique emails**
Openings	**49% [nothing]** 51% other	**13% [nothing]** 87% other
Closings	**65% [nothing]** 35% other	**31% [nothing]** 69% other

Figure 7. Comparison of the use of greetings in the two sets of emails (minus the blank emails)

4. Discussion

On the surface, the analysis of the format in the present study suggests formality and professionalism. This is further corroborated by the use of an impersonal and official embedded signature for 37% of the students. Considering they were undergraduates, not yet doing research, this is a rather large number. The omnipresence of a subject line in both sets of emails shows that the participants are aware of the importance of this feature. However, its functions have not been fully assimilated and students did use titles efficiently. The results showed that titles tended to be relevant, but not specific enough.

It was also often difficult to identify the sender, with only a very small percentage of students identifying themselves efficiently. Students should remember their status (one of 300 possible senders) and make sure they identify themselves. They have different ways of doing so: through their email address, sender's name or subject line. However, subjects in this study often used non-explicit emails addresses (e.g. 100000000@qq.com) and the sender's name was often not informative. The sender's name is the name that appears to the left of the email title in the inbox, for instance below *missyou*

| ☐ missyou | ▶ student information slide | Inbox 📎 20/09/2012 |

Only 12% of the students used the name they had in class (whether English or pinyin), the rest either used Chinese characters (55%), another name (pinyin or English) than the one used in class (20%) or the sender's name used a qq address or left the name blank (13%).

Sender's name	
Chinese characters	55%
Name used in class (pinyin or English)	12%
Blank or qq number	13%
Other name (pinyin or English) not used in class	20%

Figure 8. Sender's name in unique emails

With regard to greetings, the study pointed out the necessity to consider both the opening and the closing lines together to assess the degree of formality of the message and suggested to focus on other considerations than the greeting form itself (viz. punctuation, mismatch, multiple greetings) to reduce informality.

Analyzing the emails according to their communicative purposes highlighted another interesting feature. The analysis of emails with attachment(s) revealed that students did not treat these emails as regular emails. The set of emails with attachment(s) contained minimal elements of formality and only a third of the students referred to the attached file(s), often with a simple word or sentence (e.g. *homework, here is my presentation*). Since it is an assignment and the work is expected, students did not feel it was necessary to acknowledge for the attached file unless they needed to mention something specific (e.g. submitting an electronic version instead of a hardcopy, lateness etc.)[6]. Considering the high number of blank emails and looking at the distribution of greetings across the two sets of emails, it is clear students did not apply the sociopragmatic rules when sending emails with attachment(s).

5. Conclusion

Based on empirical data, this study investigated the format used by Chinese students when writing English emails to one of their foreign professors. Although the students know about the different features necessary to structure their emails, they are still uncertain about email etiquette. This "external frame" of emails is very important for teachers, as it can help them prioritize and categorize the emails they receive.

Although they seem aware of the features traditionally associated with formality and professionalism (100% subject line incidence, use of an embedded signature, formal greetings), the study raised an interesting question: Are these features fully integrated? The analysis revealed they were often not used correctly (cf. blank emails, use of

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[6] This trend is being confirmed this semester with a weekly journal students have to write. The percentage of students not mentioning the attached file when submitting their journal is even higher, presumably since they assume that the teacher is aware of the content of the message

smileys with formal greetings and mismatch between the opening and the closing), making us wonder whether the concepts of formality and efficiency (cf. titles) are really assimilated.

Two types of emails were identified (viz. emails with attachment(s) and unique emails), each with their own set of conventions. Looking at the sociopragmatic principles involved in the writing of emails, it was revealed that students did not seem to be aware of the rules when writing emails with attachment(s) and often neglected the content of such emails, omitting greetings and the acknowledgment of the attachment (presuming that the email was expected anyway).

Furthermore, emails were often composed "on the fly" with little editing or proofreading (spacing, lowercase, use of *Dear Sir* although they were aware the recipient was female). In emails with attachment(s), it was noticed that very little attention was paid to spelling and to punctuation. The importance of editing should be stressed; with the development of smartphones, there is a risk this trend could be further enhanced.

Features contributing to reducing the level of formality and professionalism were identified in this research; they should be pointed out to the students who are probably not aware of them.

Further research could investigate whether the age, sex, origin (foreign or Chinese), or status of the recipient affect the email pattern of students. It would also be interesting to collect more emails per student to be able to investigate consistency and see whether they have a preferred email pattern.

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