

# Chapter XVI

## Politeness in Intercultural E-Mail Communication

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter argues that politeness is an important component of e-mail language. Many people are uncertain about how to make their e-mail polite according to the norms of the receiving culture. Different views on the nature of politeness in e-mail can contribute to personal offence and online miscommunication. As a result, an instrument was designed to assess politeness in e-mail communication. The Tool-Kit, An Instrument to Assess Politeness in Intercultural E-Mail Communication, provides a common ground among e-mail users to discuss and evaluate politeness in English e-mail communication, as well as the metalanguage necessary to reflect on the use of politeness indicators. It also provides clear guidelines to consider politeness protocols. This innovative instrument promotes a practical approach for assessing politeness in e-mail which could then assist the effective online interactions in e-learning methodologies. Its limitations are discussed here, as well as its pedagogical applications for online teaching to second language learners.*

### INTRODUCTION

E-mail is an important aspect of many e-learning methodologies. Often, it is the exclusive means of communication between students and teachers in online education. Many teachers and students,

however, are not trained in how to use e-mail effectively or how to manage the interpersonal dynamics of the medium. Little research has been done to date to assess how people can better communicate via e-mail.

The use of e-mail can present a communication challenge due to the lack of immediate verbal cues and feedback that we normally have in face-to-face encounters. It is harder to link our message to reference points during e-mail communication. For example, aspects of a previous discussion cannot quickly be drawn into the current e-mail or to clarify what we want to say. Moreover, we cannot use body language or voice tone to support our construction of meaning. In many cases, e-mail communication may lead to misunderstandings among those involved in constructing meaning in an online environment. Effective communication is developed and maintained by constructing meaning through dialogue (Bakhtin, 1993). The Bakhtinian notion of dialogism interaction shows the importance of building meaning through dialogue to maintain effective communication (Bakhtin, 1986, 1993). In Bakhtinian thought, all characters, writers or speakers are given voices to actively engage in dialogue with other voices. In the context of this chapter, the communication is not just the words on the screen, but the dialogue that the two writers (sender and receiver) have actively engaged in to make the meaning.

However, as Murphy (2003, 2006a, 2006b) has documented, many e-mail writers are unsure about how to attain appropriate levels of politeness in order to generate effective e-mail dialogues. Thus in e-mail communication, there is uncertainty as to appropriate levels of directness or indirectness, suitable format, and language use in an e-mail message. Many people are also unsure about selecting the appropriate level of formality or informality in an e-mail interaction in order not to offend the receiver. The choice of appropriate cultural level of formality or informality in e-mail language may also be problematic for some users. Lack of knowledge about culturally appropriate response times to e-mail requests, and how to use e-mail language to connect the receiver to the process and encourage her or him to respond may also pose a challenge to those writing or responding to an e-mail. Writing e-mails that promote effective

interactions is an area that concerns native speakers as well as those writing in a second language. Uncertainty about such issues was revealed in the recent research study on intercultural e-mail communication (Murphy, 2006b).

Effective and polite e-mail communication also concerns online language teachers and students. Nowadays, there is an increasing flow of e-mail messages between second language learning students and their teachers in many universities worldwide due to an increase in computer-mediated communication (CMC) and e-learning. Geographical isolation is no longer a restraining factor in education and language learning, as tertiary institutions are able to offer language courses to anyone worldwide within a networked connection (Murphy, 2003, 2006a). The most common communication channel between teachers and their overseas students is e-mail. But the majority of the university teachers and second language learning students are not trained in how to use e-mail effectively or how to manage the interpersonal dynamics of the medium (Murphy, 2003; Walther, 1992, 1997).

In the past when teaching language, we have been able to speak face-to-face to students who could better understand our body language and linguistic cues to arrive at the meaning we wanted to communicate. Language teachers and their students, however, have not had training in how to construct meaning via e-mail interactions, which offer no verbal or non-verbal cues. Such meaning is vital for effective second language learning. The difficulty is exacerbated when the e-mail dialogue occurs across cultures, as people from different cultural groups may not share the same language, e-mail dialogue style, or belief systems. As a result, the e-mail interactions that support many e-learning environments could become problematic because online teachers and learners may be unsure about the elements that contribute to effective e-mail interactions.

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