Communicative Purposes in Student-Faculty E-mail Interactions: The Case of Iranian Nonnative Speakers of English

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Abstract

During the recent decades, Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) has gained huge importance throughout the world and has been the subject of a wide range of studies and a dynamic site for research. The development of Information Communication Technology (ICT) along with the widespread use of the internet has made e-mail a common personal and institutional communication tool and e-mail has been accepted as one of the most frequently used medium for students to consult with their instructors and is thus replacing, to some extent, the more traditional face-to-face office hours. The present study was an attempt to examine 230 e-mails sent by 114 Iranian undergraduate non-native English speaking students majoring in English Translation/English Literature at Islamic Azad University, Khorasgan Branch and University of Isfahan to their instructor which were collected during 2006-2008. The messages were examined for communicative purposes and categorized into two main categories: 1) *requestive* e-mails including a) request for appointment, b) request for explanation, c) request for extension on due date, d) request for feedback, e) request for grade, f) request for help, g) request for information, h) request for something such as a CD or a book, i) request for translation; and 2) *non-requestive* e-mail messages including a) apology, b) congratulations, c) creation of interpersonal relationship, d) submission of assignments, e) suggestion and f) thanking. Then the frequency and

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percentage of these e-mail messages were reported. The data suggested that the students use e-mails for variety of purposes but almost half of the e-mails contained request for different purposes. Finally, the implications of the study were discussed.

Key words: Computer- Mediated Communication (CMC), Information and Communication Technology (ICT), e-mail interactions, communication purposes.

Introduction

Over the recent decades, Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) has gained huge importance throughout the world. The development of Information Communication Technology (ICT) along with the widespread use of the internet has made e-mail a common personal and institutional communication. Communication via e-mail has revolutionized business, academic, and personal communication. The advantages of e-mail including breaking down the limitations on space and time (Bloch, 2002), facilitating personal reflection (Warschauer, 1999), speedy delivery, ease of communication, cost effectiveness, geographical independence, and the portability of mailboxes (Gupta, Mazumdar & Rao, 2004) has made this medium of communication very popular for every purpose.

At universities, student-instructor interactions via e-mail haves been accepted as one of the most frequently used ways for students to consult with their instructors and is replacing, to some extent, the more traditional face-to-face office meetings. Many students send e-mail messages to their instructors for a variety of purposes (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005; Martin, Myers & Mottet, 1999, Bloch, 2002). Therefore, the study of student- faculty interaction has recently attracted considerable attention. In L2 classes, the primary focus for using e-mails has been on developing fluency (Li, 2000; Warschauer, 1999); facilitating teacher-student interactions (Crystal, 2001), obtaining clarification (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007), attracting instructors' attention and leaving good impression on them or challenging grades (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007), asking for help (Gee, 2002), building relationship and dissolving traditional barriers between teachers and students (Bloch, 2002), soliciting face-to-face appointments or arrangements of meetings and input on projects (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005; Payne, 1997), showing interest in and understanding of course materials, (Marbach-Ad & Sokolove, 2001; Poling, 1994), making excuses for missing classes and late work (Martin, Myers & Mottet, 1999; Poling 1994) giving

opportunity to interact and negotiate meaning with an authentic audience (Gaer, 1999).

Review of Literature
As an asynchronous medium, e-mail has received lots of attention during the past decades. Research on e-mail has focused on various subjects including the language of e-mail (Baron, 1998; Li, 2000; Crystal, 2001, 2006) or e-politeness, the strategies and discourse choices employed by students in their e-mails (Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth, 2000; Wong, 2000; Chen 2001, Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2002; Lee, 2004; Bou-Franch 2004; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006, 2007; Duthler, 2006) but due to ethical issues and concerns, research on e-mail interaction between students and faculty has been scarce (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006). One of the earliest studies on e-mail interaction in academic domain is Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig's (1996) study which investigates the effect of e-mail on faculty members. Some of these studies have examined the level of in/directness used in electronic messages (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006; Bloch, 2002; McCracken, 1990). Rod & Eslami (2005) have studied openings in e-mail discourse of native and nonnative TESOL graduate students. Eslami & Eslami Rasekh (2007) have studied openings and closings in e-mail discourse of Iranian non-native English speaking and native English speaking TESOL graduate students while other studies such as Li (2000) and Lewis and Donner (2002) have focused on linguistic flexibility, lexical and grammatical modifications. Some other studies have just examined the main types of e-mail requests and identified them as appointment, extension of due date and feedback (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005, 2007; Martin, Myers and Mottet, 1999).

Various studies have discussed the student- faculty interactions via e-mails and surveyed the topics for which students send e-mails to their faculty. The most extensive of these surveys is that of Martin, Myers and Mottet (1999). They introduced a measure of motives students use when interacting with the faculty and identified 5 main communicative reasons: a) *relational*- to develop a relationship with their instructors; b) *functional*- to get information about assignments and course materials; c) *excuse-making*- to explain late work or project or challenge grades; d) *participation*- to show interest in class and understanding the course material; and e) *sycophancy*- to make a favourable impression and get the instructor's attention and create a positive picture. Poling (1994) classified different categorizes for examining actual student e-mail

messages known as: asking questions about course content, making excuses for missing classes, asking for homework, upcoming quizzes or tests and asking for advice.

Bloch (2002), created 4 categories for grouping the e-mail messages. The categories were: a) *phatic communication*-to create and maintain personal relationships by exchange of words; b) *asking for help*- in particular assignment; c) *making excuses*-to give excuse for not coming to class or not handing in homework; and, d) *making formal requests*- to request formally when the parties don't know each other. Payne (1997) identified 2 categories: a) *facilitative*- to schedule appointment and meeting or conference calls, submission of work and study plans and evaluation of work; b) *academic*- to enquire about resources, organization and formats for written work and developing points of views or insights. Marabach-Ad and Sokolove's (2001) classification was based on two main categories:

procedural questions and *question/comments* about class content. Biesenbach-Lucas (2005) studied e-mail messages for three *communication topics* (facilitative, substantive, and relational) and *communication strategies* (requesting, negotiating, and reporting). In their study, Duran, Kelly and Keaten (2005) examined the motives that faculty perceive to be students' motives for initiating e-mail contacts and classified them as *excuse on late or missing work, concern for grades, excuses on missed classes* and *clarification of course content.*

Although the coding categories differ in these studies, they almost share one shortcoming. The frequency of usage for each category has not been made clear. Except Biesenbach-Lucas (2005) none of them have questioned whether these communicative topics or purposes are acceptable to address via e-mail. Moreover, most of the studies in this area have focused on e-mail requests sent by non-native speakers from different language backgrounds and have compared them with native speakers' e-mails. Few attempts have been made to focus on English learners who come from one language background to investigate the purposes for which they communicate with their instructors via e-mail.

While all around the world, some research has investigated the purposes for which university students communicate with their professors via e-mail, to the best knowledge of the researcher, a very limited number of studies have been conducted in Iran on e-mails or CMC studies (Abbasian, 2002; Amirian, 2002; Shakeri, 2004; Eslami-Rasekh &Eslami-Rasekh, 2007 Janghorban, 2008). However, none of

these studies has examined communication purposes for which Iranian non-native speakers communicate with their instructors via this electronic channel.

The present study focused on the students who come from the same linguistic backgrounds (Iranian non-native English speaking students; NNESs) and examined the motives and purposes for which Iranian Nonnative English speakers send e-mails to their instructors. The paper addressed the following question:

• For which communicative purposes do Iranian students send e-mails to their instructors?

Methodology
Participants

The target population of the study was Iranian undergraduate university students. From the accessible population including Iranian non-native English speaking students studying English Translation and English Language and Literature in Isfahan, a convenient sample was chosen to participate in the study. The participants were 114 (74 females and 40 males) Iranian under graduate non-native speakers of English studying at Islamic azad University, Khorasgan Branch and University of Isfahan during 2006-2008). The number of the female students is twice that of males because at undergraduate level in many majors females exceed males. To observe ethical issues, all participants were informed that their data would be used in the research but their names, addresses and any identifying features would be kept confidential and used only for the purpose of the research.

The instructor to whom e-mails were sent was an Iranian non-native English speaker, middle-aged female university instructor with nearly 15 years of teaching experience (10 of which was at university level) as an EFL teacher and very familiar with sending and receiving e-mail messages. Through inclusion of her e-mail address on her course syllabi the students were encouraged to be in contact with her via e-mail. Although she was sociable and friendly but she did not encourage her students to address her by her first name. Therefore, her communicative style could be depicted as formal rather than informal.

Data Collection

The data for this study comprised of 230 e-mail messages sent to the instructor by the participants. The e-mails sent in Persian or with English alphabets but in Persian were excluded from the process of data collection. The forwarded e-mail messages with no text were also excluded from the data. Therefore, the data were student-initiated messages and not chained or teacher initiated ones because chain e-mails exhibit a variety of discourse and features such as copying and pasting the part of the e-mail that is replied and though it may be different from student-initiated messages.

Data Analysis

The content of the e-mails were analyzed and categorized by two coders independently. The coders included the researcher and one of her experienced colleagues. It is worth mentioning that when the two coders did not agree, each case was discussed until agreement was reached.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of 230 e-mail messages sent by the students to their instructor revealed that the students used e-mails for different purposes. These purposes were categorized into two main categories: 1) *requestive* e-mails, 2) *non-requestive* e-mails which are reported as the following table:

Table1. Communicative Purposes in Students-Faculty E-mail Interactions

Categories	Purposes	Examples
Requestive	Request for appointment	"I apologize for my absence in today's class."
	Request for explanation	"Can you explain what is the difference between teaching *actives and instructional materials?"
	Request for extension of due date	*"*I'm* wonder if you'd let me to send my own part later."
	Request for feedback	"The story that I am going to translate is attached to this letter. Kindly, have a look at it and keep me informed."
	Request for grade	"Would you please correct my exam sheet one more time?"
	Request for help	"I was just wondering if you could help me with this mystery!"

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	Request for information	"How can I find a person whose major in BA and MA is english translation?"*
	Request for something (a book, paper or CD, etc.)	"Would you please bring that CD for me, I will make a copy out of it and bring it to you ASAP."
	Request for translation	"Could you please translate the following sentence? ……."
Non-Requestive	**Apology**	"Thanks for the CD that you gave me and sorry that I forgot to return it."
	Congratulations	*"*Congraduation*. I believe that you are going to achieve any higher degree u want."
	Interpersonal relationship	"Every time I think about this semester and your class I see that you are really nice. I cannot tell you how much I respect you."
	Submission of assignments	"A file is attached to this E-mail. It contains two word Files."
	Suggestions or comments	"As a matter of suggestion I want to say that if you bring texts with comprehensive questions………..it will be better"
	Thanking	"I want to honestly thank you for your manner of teaching and running the class."

It should be mentioned that the examples cited in Table 1 are from the collected data and spelling, punctuation and words have been preserved and not changed (In Table 1 some typos are shown in italics and by *).

The frequency and percentage of communicative purposes inspected in the students' e-mail messages are summarized in the following table.

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Table2. Frequency and Percentage of Communicative Purposes in Students' E-mail Messages

Purpose \ Descriptive Statistics	Requestive									Non-requestive						Total
	Appointment (A)	Explanation (E)	Extension (EX)	Feedback (F)	Grade (G)	Help (H)	Information (I)	Request (R)	Translation (T)	Apology (AP)	Congratulation (C)	Relationship (RE)	Submission (S)	Suggestion (SU)	Thanking (TH)	
Frequency	12	12	4	16	12	16	26	18	22	24	12	44	38	16	52	324
Percentage	3.70	3.70	1.24	4.94	3.70	4.94	8.02	5.55	6.80	7.41	3.70	13.58	11.73	4.94	16.05	100
Total (%)	42.59									57.41						

Table 2 conveyed that when students interact with their instructors via e-mail, they either use requestive or non-requestive e-mail messages. Nearly 43% of the messages sent by Iranian English students contained requestive e-mails for a variety of purposes such as request for scheduling appointments to visit the instructor face-to-face (3.07%), request for extra explanation via e-mail over a subject of the instructional material, textbook or topics covered in the class (3.07%), request for extension of a due date in submitting the term papers, projects or translations (1.024%), request for the instructors' feedback on their term papers, assignments, translations, presentation or their progress in the class and also evaluation of their works (4.094%), request for help in doing something or study skills, preparation or practical activities (3.70%), request for getting information about the course, MA entrance exam, extra sources (8.02%), request for something such as borrowing a book, a CD, a file, an article or a paper (5.55) and request for translation (6.80%). Almost 57% of the e-mails sent by students contained non-requestive purposes for apologizing because of misbehavior, absence, delay in submission of their assignments or delay in attending the class

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(7.41%); congratulations on different occasions such as New Year, Teachers' Day or instructor's achievements (3.70%); creating interpersonal relationships with the instructor and maintaining social relationships on course-related materials or leaving a positive impression on the instructor (13.58%) , submission of works, assignments and translations (11.73%), giving comments or suggestions about the class, the instructor or instructional materials (4.94%) and thanking the instructor, her behavior or teaching methodology (16.05%).

Figure 1 shows the percentage and frequency of the communicative purposes in students' e-mail interactions with their instructors.
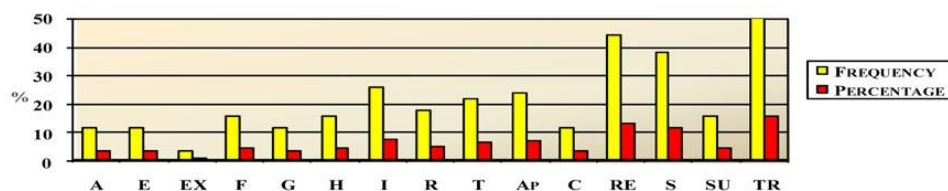

Figure 1. Frequency/percentage of Communicative purposes

As it is shown in Figure 1, thanking with the frequency of 52 e-mails out of 324 messages, creation of interpersonal relationship (44/ 324) and submission of assignments via e-mail (83/324) are the highest communicative purposes in non-requestive purposes; however, but request for information (26/324), request for translation (22/324) and request for borrowing a book, a CD or a paper (18/324) are the most frequently used requestive purposes by the students. The point worthy of mention is that almost 43% of the e-mail messages sent by students to the instructor included requests which show the importance of this category of speech act. The high frequency of the requestive e-mails sent by Iranian NNESs may have pedagogical implications and significance which will be discussed below.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Research

With its high speed and less intrusive nature, e-mail is the most popular use for the internet (Nie & Erbing, 2000) and communication via e-mails has increased in all domains of social interaction, interpersonal

communication, business and academic institutions. Although student-faculty e-mail interaction has not been very common for every English student in Iran but it can be considered as a viable channel for students to consult with their instructors and it is rapidly increasing; particularly among students and young instructors because e-mail interactions can add an additional medium to facilitate teacher-student interactions, build relationship, dissolve traditional barriers between teacher and students and break down the limitations on space and time.

The goal of the present study was to examine the communicative purposes for which Iranian NNESs interact with their instructors via e-mail messages. The findings of the study suggest that students send e-mails to their instructors for either requestive or non-requestive purposes. The requestive purposes found were a) *request for appointment,* b) *request for explanation,* c) *request for extension on due date,* d) *request for feedback,* e) *request for grade,* f) *request for help,* g) *request for information,* h) *request for something such as borrowing a book, a CD or a paper* and i) *request for translation.* The non-requestive purposes were a) *apology,* b) *congratulations,* c) *creation of relationship,* d) *submission of assignments,* e) *suggestion or comments* and f) *thanking.*

Knowing the reasons why students communicate with their instructors not only can help practitioners in the field to get familiar with the motives of the students to interact with their instructors but also can lead them to design a framework or a preplanned sketch for the students to help them understand which purposes are suitable to pursue while composing e-mails and which ones are inappropriate, impolite or create high levels of imposition on their instructors.

Categorizing e-mails sent by students to their instructor showed that 42.59% of the e-mail messages contained requests for different purposes. This can show the importance of requests as a general category in communication for which students send e-mails to their instructors. The way students write to their instructors in order to request needs some attention because in most of the cases students are not aware of the rules to write or compose the e-mails.

The findings of the present study can have pedagogical implications for syllabus designers, teachers and practitioners in the field. It can help the syllabus designers to design adequate and efficient syllabi adaptable with CMC. They could develop e-mail conventions and appropriate models for writing e-mails which could become the accepted norm in a

given e-mail request situation. Developing e-mail conventions could help students to avoid inappropriate use of language.

The research findings could also benefit the EFL teachers and the students in different academic contexts. Pre-academic writing instructions could provide direct instruction in e-mail composition and teachers could include activities related to composing e-mails in their lesson plans and procedures. These activities could help students make polite and appropriate requests. They must be taught how to write in order not to be impolite, violate their instructors' privacy or impose on them. Therefore as Bloch (2002) claims "it may be necessary, to include e-mail as a major component of composing courses" (p.132).

Whether, or not students use e-mail to interact or consult with their instructors may be related to other factors such as students' preferred personality and learning styles. This could be an interesting topic for further research.

One limitation of the study is that all the e-mails are sent by undergraduate students to one female university instructor. This could be worth investigating to compare communicative purposes of students both at undergraduate and graduate levels because the level of proficiency and the power status or relationship between the students and their instructors at the graduate level may not be the same as undergraduate level. This may be because of many factors such as age, number of students at these two levels, kind of relationship. Another useful venue of research could be comparing students in one major with other majors and also at different universities because the findings of the present study are applicable only to the participants of this study and its particular setting. Studying other universities and other participant majoring in other fields of study over a programme and analyzing their e-mail messages could shed more light on the issue under investigation.

Further research on student-faculty e-mail interactions could also investigate more than one faculty member, to examine the probable effect of age, gender and personality on the realization pattern of e-mail messages. Whether there are differences between the e-mails sent by students of different genders to different instructors need investigation. On the other hand, tracing the development and changes of e-mails sent by one student to a specific faculty over the course of a programme may also be interesting. All these topics could help instructors, EFL teachers and syllabus designers in providing more comprehensive courses for composition classes.

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