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Comparative Analysis of Email Request Strategies Used by Native and Non-native Speakers of English in Academic Settings

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Abstract

Even though in traditional college education most of the student-professor interactions occur in classroom or during the office hours, research shows that there are a number of communicative purposes for which students use email when interacting with their professors, most of them is related to the delivery of assignment, or the procedures of the course (Poling 1994; Shetzer, 1998; Worrel, 2002). Many of these email interactions involve request speech acts (e.g. asking for a make up exam, negotiating late work policy, setting up an appointment, requesting additional resources etc.).

A number of studies have been conducted to examine how non-native speakers of English produce request in their emails (Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Weasenforth and Biesenbach-Lucas, 2000; Chen, 2001). The results of these studies suggest that request strategies used by non-native speakers of English deviate from the request strategies used by native speakers of English. Some researchers suggest that this variation in the request strategies might be influenced by different perceptions of directness and indirectness shared my members of different cultures (Tannen, 1981). In my research, I compare request strategies used by native speakers of American English and Brazilian Portuguese English as second language speakers who are pursuing their degrees at the University of Montana. In particular, I investigate lexical and syntactical devises that the students use when writing email requests.

The data for this study was collected through an online survey. The survey consisted of three parts. In the first part of the survey, the students were asked to state

their gender, age, level of study and major at the University of Montana, if English is their native languages, and what languages other then English they have studied. The second part of the survey was designed for non-native speakers of English only. In this section of the questionnaire, the non-native speakers of English had to state their native language; their most recent TOEFL score as well as its date; how long they have been in the U.S.; and how the size of the university they attend at their home country compares to the size of the University of Montana. In the third part of the survey, both native and non-native speakers of English were asked to compose two emails to a University of Montana professor in their major according to the scenarios. In the first scenario, the participants were asked to compose a draft of an email requesting an extension on a course assignment that is due soon. In the second scenario, the participants were asked to compose a draft of an email asking to borrow a book that they know the professor has that is not available in the library. After each scenario, the participants had a space to write the draft of their email. In this section, the participants were also asked to rate the degree of imposition (determined by the time and effort required by the professor to perform the desired action) on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 is the lowest imposition and 5 is the highest imposition). The participants were also asked to estimate the amount of time it took them to write each email, as well to rate the likelihood of them writing such email requests to their professors.

The drafts of the emails collected through the online survey are analyzed with a help of a coding manual used in Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) conducted by Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989). This framework allows an in-depth analysis and classification of lexical and syntactic devises used in to compose a

request. First, I analyze the data in terms of three possible components of the request sequence: Alerters, Supportive Moves, and Head Act. Second, I focus on Head Act (also referred to as a 'core request'), a minimal unit through which the request can be realized. Then, I compare the core requests produced by native and non-native speakers in terms of (1) degree of directness of specific linguistic structures, (2) lexical items and syntactic elements that modify request realization, and (3) request perspective (from hearer or speaker viewpoint).

The results of the research provide a valuable contribution to the field ESL/EFL instructions. They identify syntactic and lexical devises native and non-native speakers of English use when composing email requests to their professors. This type of information can be used by ESL/EFL instructors for developing effective classroom materials for teaching non-native speakers of English how to write appropriate emails in academic settings.

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