

Teaching Email Writing to Non-Native Speakers of English

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While email writing is a necessary subject for today's ESL writing classroom, it is rarely addressed in textbooks. ESL teachers and programs often recognize that international students are at a disadvantage without email writing skills, but without the aid of materials or research do not know where to begin assisting them. This paper attempts to summarize the limited research which is available on email writing and supplements this with a teacher survey. Finally, some lesson suggestions based on the research and survey are presented. The lesson suggestions are designed to be easily adaptable for any age of student at any level.

For a teacher, the challenge of teaching email writing is increased by the lack of research on the subject. "Researchers are often hesitant to ask colleagues - or strangers - for logs of their email correspondence, perhaps for fear people will say no" (Baron N. , 2008, p. 16). This adds to the difficulty of the teacher in deciding what information to convey to students, as the only resources available are etiquette guides, business books, and websites, some of which are written about the theory of email writing as opposed to its practice.

As a result, this literature review is divided into two sections. In the first section, pertinent linguistic information is discussed, specifically that related to email writing. In the second section, sources which are designed specifically to teach email writing, but not from a linguistic perspective, are examined.

LINGUISTIC INFORMATION

Baron's (2008) discussion of email lends some insights into the types of email which exist and the different "rules" that each type seems to have. Baron points out that grammar issues abound even for native speakers of English, perhaps from a lack of proofreading or even ignorance of the rules of written English. The medium has become so common that many forms of writing are no longer formal or special. Despite the greater permissibility of errors in email because of its increased use, there are still types of email which require careful editing. A quick message to a friend asking about lunch might contain nonstandard grammar without the reader noticing or caring, but an important message to a supervisor about the budget requires more care. Different types of email require

different levels of formality and different vocabularies, as well as different attention to their grammar. The number of types of email is tremendous, and each has its own set of unwritten rules.

On a note related to the formality of email, Stephen, Howser and Cowen's (2009) study on email demonstrated that students who compose email which their professors see as overly casual, using the techniques previously described, are more likely to receive a negative response from their professors in regard to the specific request of their email, as well as negatively damaging their long-term relationship, which could have led to mentoring and recommendation letters.

Part of the reason that non-standard grammar is permissible in some types of email writing is the speech/writing line. Knowing where speech and writing are separated and where they intertwine is a key point of Baron's (2000) research. Baron has made an excellent case for the idea that email is a creole language. It shares many of the features of creole languages, including quick development, its first-generation status, and its mix of spoken and written English. This evolution has been quite rapid. In Baron's own research as little as 10 years ago, email greatly resembled formal written English, but when she published her ideas about email being a creole two years later she had already decided that email did not as closely resemble formal written English (Baron N. S., 2000, pp. 250-259). In 2011, eleven years later, it has doubtless evolved even more.

ETIQUETTE SOURCES

Teachers have a number of options available to them in researching email etiquette. They could turn to the plethora of etiquette books on the market, or, more likely, they could conduct an Internet search to see what is appropriate for email. Following is a survey of three popular email etiquette sites, according to a Google search.

A popular site for email etiquette (<http://www.emailreplies.com>) contains a list of tips for email writing. The tips do not really tell a writer how to properly open and close an email, beyond telling them that the "e-mail (should) be personally addressed" (Why do you need email etiquette?, 2008). Beyond this, the site offers a number of tips for the content of messages, such as its number one tip "be concise" and advice to answer all questions and keep paragraphs short, perhaps even using numbers for each item. Other advice is more general, such as not forwarding chain letters, and deals more with email in general than the composition of an appropriate email that will be well received in a workplace or higher education setting.

Another email etiquette resource (http://careerplanning.about.com/od/communication/a/email_etiquette.htm) is an about.com guide site. This website forgoes the list format to offer some basic email tips in paragraph form. Again, it advises writers to be concise, and then goes on to lambast poor spelling and

grammar. “Please” and “thank-you” are strongly encouraged. Beyond this, the only specific advice for the content of email messages themselves is to use titles until the other person doesn’t:

“When in doubt, use Mr., Mrs., or Dr. (if appropriate). When you are replying to an email and the sender of the original message has used his or her first name only, then you could safely assume it’s okay to use that person’s first name as well.” (McKay)

Only titles are discussed, and not what comes before them. Closings are not discussed at all.

The Purdue OWL (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/636/1/>) is a third website offering email etiquette tips. It follows a different format from the first two, preferring several subject headings with tips underneath each one. The first subject heading is the most applicable to the content of email and offers five tips which can be summarized as follows:

1. Apply an appropriate subject
2. Greet with Dear Mr./Ms./Dr.
3. Do not use all capital letters
4. Use short paragraphs and be concise
5. Do not try to make jokes (Stolley & Brizee, 2010).

This site by far had some of the most concrete tips at the top of its page, including a specific way to open, or begin, email. Again, no suggestions are offered on closings, but some similar suggestions are offered for the body of the message.

The majority of the information on other sites which appear in a Google search of “email etiquette” is the same as the information when appears in the three websites discussed earlier in this paper. Even the information on these three sites overlaps greatly. It seems that, while email etiquette is fairly universally acknowledged, no site has significant new insights for readers wishing to write better emails.

In summary, email etiquette websites say that email greetings should at least contain Mr./Ms./Dr. and perhaps “dear,” unless a relationship was established with the recipient. They do not indicate how to close an email message. The content of the message should be as short as possible with as few mistakes as possible, and the subject line should be as specific as possible.

TEACHER SURVEY

While etiquette sources do tend to agree on some of the basics of email writing, they lack detail and are not specifically applicable to a classroom situation, much less an ESL classroom situation. In an effort to supplement this information with actual ESL teacher perspectives, a survey was taken of 11 teachers in an Teaching Email Writing

intensive English institute (IEI) at a mid-sized midwestern university.

The 11 teachers received a survey via email containing ten questions. The teachers simply responded to the survey by replying to the email, usually with their answers after each question. A method of response was not specified. For confidentiality purposes, teachers are not identified by name and the full responses are not included, but the answers to each question are summarized below.

Question 1

Do you teach students about email writing specifically, in lessons only on email, or in general, such as when questions arise, or both?

In the survey, 6 of the 11 teachers responded that they did teach specific lessons on email writing, but only when the content of the course was appropriate for such a lesson, for example in an upper-level writing course or a computer skills course. Otherwise they only taught email writing if students had questions about it. On the other hand, 5 of 11 teachers had never specifically taught an email writing lesson at all.

This is an interesting response as it indicates that teachers do see a need for email writing lessons, and perhaps some of them would teach email writing more if they had materials on the topic. It is a subject that some teachers view as valuable for teaching to students.

Question 2

What kinds of settings do you consider in teaching email? Business settings? University settings? Casual settings?

While 10 of 11 teachers responded that they teach email for university settings, only one teacher had considered business settings because of a special project her students did.

However, many students in a university IEI will probably need to send business related email in the future. Perhaps these teachers do not feel knowledgeable about teaching this type of email, or perhaps are not looking beyond the immediate needs of their students.

Question 3

How do you teach students to open email? There are many combinations to choose from, how do you help students to understand what to use in each situation? For example: “Dear Mr. John,” “Professor Smith,” “Jane,” or “Hi Sara” might all be appropriate in certain situations – as would no salutation in some situations.

All of the teachers agreed that starting an email with “Dear Mr./Ms./Miss/Mrs./Professor Last Name” (though they did not all mention all of the

options) was the way to teach openings to students. Some teachers said they would go farther than this in their lessons, teaching students about when they could use other types of openings. For example, teachers wrote: “I usually introduce the concepts of social distance and relative power...” and “[I]...try to help [students] acquire strategies/skills that allow them to find out what the appropriate opening in a specific situation is.” These teachers are focusing on concepts that go beyond email writing in order to explain when a formal opening is not necessary. One teacher even used the opportunity to explain the interesting Ms./Miss/Mrs. distinction which occurs in English; others emphasized that a mere “Teacher” or “Dear Teacher,” while polite and acceptable in some cultures, is not polite in the United States.

Question 4

How do you teach students to close email? For example, “Sara,” “Sincerely, John,” and “Thanks, Jane” would all be appropriate in some situations – as would no closing in some situations. What do you teach students is appropriate in different situations?

All of the teachers seemed to agree that “Thanks” and “Sincerely” are the best ways to close email. Only one of them addressed in class how much of the sender’s own first name to sign or if it was OK to sign only the sender’s name, without “thanks” or another closing. She said: “In the spirit of formality, I would also not tell them to simply write their name as a closing.” Most teachers noted that their responses were based on the idea that these were formal email messages.

Question 5

What do you teach students about the bodies of email? Etiquette books address the following topics: length, spelling and grammar; and organization strategies. Do you address these topics? If so which and how? What do you say?

In the survey, 8 of 10 teachers (not all responded to this question) commented on how they tell students to be concise with their email, especially not including unnecessary details such as symptoms when sick – apparently many of the teachers had received student email in the past with more details about illnesses than they desired. One teacher commented that “[email] should be clear and concise.” This sentiment was echoed by many of the respondents. The teachers also said that as they are teaching a foreign language they do emphasize proper spelling and grammar. One teacher commented that “I do discuss with them the fact that spelling and grammar are often ‘looser’ in email” and went on to state that this varies by social distance, something the teacher tries to explain to students. While 7 of 10 teachers seemed to focus more on standard spelling and grammar than explaining when spelling and grammar could perhaps be less standard, none of the teachers made any comments about Teaching Email Writing

organization strategies, beyond the already mentioned brevity.

Question 6

Do you teach students about subject lines? What do you teach them?

The responses to this particular question varied greatly with 4 of 10 teachers not addressing this topic at all in their classrooms. One teacher commented that, since it had now been suggested, she would do so as teaching students about subject lines would greatly improve her inbox. Other teachers said that they did address the topic and specifically wrote that “Subject lines should be what the email is about in as few words as possible; not your name!” This is a strong way to express the sentiment, but it is apparently frustrating to many teachers when students do not use the topic of the email as the subject.

Questions 7 and 8

Do you think that email conventions change with familiarity? For example, does email change when a family member, colleague, supervisor or unknown person is addressed?

Do you teach your students to change the above discussed topics due to familiarity with your recipient? For example, does email change when a family member, colleague, supervisor or unknown person is addressed?

Teachers unanimously agreed that email conventions do change with familiarity, but most did not address this topic with their students, preferring to focus on formal email writing. Several expressed distaste for being addressed by their first names and the general informal tone of student email. They seemed to adopt an attitude that sending a professor an informal email has more negative repercussions than sending a peer a formal email, so they focused on the formal.

Questions 9 and 10

Do you think that exchanging multiple email back and forth (in a conversation) results in any changes in email conventions?

Do you teach your students that conventions change in an email conversation?

Once again teachers unanimously agreed that conversations result in more informal email, with openings and closings being dropped. However, as with familiarity, they did not necessarily convey this information to their students, though some said that they mentioned it.

SURVEY CONCLUSIONS

Some teachers do address email writing in their classrooms, but most seem to focus on formal writing, not mentioning informal email as much. Some information that they believe should be conveyed is:

1. When writing formal email, start with “Dear Title Last Name.”
2. When closing, use “thanks” or “sincerely” with your (the sender’s) name in some form.
3. Email should be concise, with no unnecessary details.
4. Email should have proper spelling and grammar, especially in formal situations.
5. Subject lines should briefly (1-2 words) summarize the email content.
6. Familiarity and conversation both change email writing, making it more informal.

LESSON SUGGESTION

Based on the research and teacher survey presented above a simple lesson suggestion was compiled. This lesson can be used with any level or age of student. For lower-level students, the rules can be presented as rules; students must always follow the formula in their email writing. For higher-level students, the rules can be presented more as suggestions, if the teacher chooses, resulting in classroom discussion of situations where there might be variation. For example, emailing a new professor is different than emailing a professor one has a close relationship with. Discussing variations might be confusing in a lower level class but could be interesting and stimulating for upper-level students.

1. Start with some freewriting or discussion. What is similar/different about email writing here and in your home country? This warm-up lets students connect a known and unknown topic.
2. Ask students what they think belongs in formal email, such as a message written to a professor or boss. Write the students’ suggestions on the board, modifying them as necessary. Write so that the suggestions are in order. If someone says “start with dear” put it at the top of the board. Ultimately these things need to be on the board:
 - Start with “Dear.”
 - Use a title, last name, comma (discuss appropriate title use at this point; when to use Dr. and the different forms of Mrs./Ms./Miss).
 - Keep the content of your message short and direct.

- Mention what class you are in if writing to a teacher.
 - Separate ideas in your content with space. People write very short paragraphs in email.
 - Finish with “Thank you” followed by a comma and your full name.
 - Proofread!
 - Use an appropriate, but short, subject. Your name is not a good subject.
3. Explain/discuss the above and provide an example.
 4. Practice this by having students write actual email with a partner then emailing the messages to the teacher. Use topics with a complexity appropriate to level. For example: “You are emailing your reading teacher to ask for an appointment to discuss your grade. Your reading teacher is John Smith.” This would be appropriate in a lower-level class, but might just be an opener in a higher level. In higher levels, you can also branch from the classroom to business world scenarios. Try to make some of the scenarios applicable to your setting. For example, use the name of an actual teacher or administrator.
 5. Look at some of the sent email using a classroom projector. Discuss what is good and what needs improvement. Ask for student input. If this is done professionally, students do not typically get upset especially if you remind them this is a learning exercise and remind them to be polite as they give suggestions to their classmates. If there is concern about students becoming upset, the email can be printed or projected without names attached to them, but this might require splitting the lesson into multiple days. Screen shots could also be used for this.
 6. The exercise can be continued for homework with new scenarios and into following days if desired. Students can also do this for part or all of a quiz with new scenarios. If further lessons are desired, the scenarios and discussion can start to branch into the differences between formal and informal email or what changes when emailing friends. This could also be the time to start discussing topics such as email conversations, where multiple emails are exchanged through replying. Again, such topics should probably be reserved for more advanced students.

CONCLUSION

Email writing is an interesting topic in that it is done every day yet there are few resources for teaching it to international students. These students need this important skill to succeed in academic and professional settings but teachers are often left without ideas on teaching it. Hopefully this compilation of research, a survey, and the resulting lesson suggestions will be helpful as a starting place for teachers in transmitting information about email writing in the classroom.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author of this article would like to extend a very special thanks to Dr. Elizabeth Riddle, who advised her in writing and editing it. Dr. Riddle's experience and advice were invaluable and greatly appreciated.

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