# Identifying and Addressing Pragmatic Failure in a Learner Corpus of Request-Based Emails

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**Abstract**

Email remains the pre-eminent form of written communication in academic and professional contexts. However, few learners receive support for the *pragmatic* aspect of communication- the need to adapt language according to varying social contexts. A first step is to systematically identify pragmatics-related problems that occur in learner emails. A corpus-based approach is one possible way of achieving this; to date, however, few corpora identify learner pragmatic failure, due to the inherent degree of subjectivity in identifying pragmatic failure in texts, making automatic corpus annotation challenging. This paper reports on an ongoing project regarding Japanese learners' English L2 request email writing with the purpose of identifying instances of pragmatic failure, frequency of failure types, and perceived severity. Approximately 1,300 email texts were elicited from undergraduate participants (n=426) at a public university in Japan. Participants carried out four email tasks in class, with each task scenario varying in the values of *power* (P), *distance* (D) and *rank of imposition* (R). A coding scheme was manually applied to the text data by expert English-speaking annotators, adapted from the Cross-Cultural Study of Speech Act Realization Patterns project for use with email texts. Preliminary results show high-frequency pragmatic failure categories to include failure to follow generic conventions regarding formatting and expected rhetorical moves, such as opening and pre-closing statements. Pragmatic failure related to directness, such as the inappropriate usage of imperatives in the head act, was also frequent. A ranked list of failure categories was created based on frequency and perceived severity by the annotators. This list can help teachers of email writing focus on helping learners avoid these errors and develop their pragmatic competence.

**Keywords:** pragmatics, email writing, corpus

## 1. Introduction

In this study, we report on the creation of a specialized learner corpus of English L2 email texts, manually annotated for instances of perceived pragmatic failure. We provide an overview of the corpus development process, and preliminary findings from analysis of a sample of the corpus data, with possible classroom implications.

## 2. Background

Email remains a primary mode of digital communication in both academia and professional contexts (Chen, 2015; Cho, 2010; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Emailing in English has also been identified as a key task students should be able to carry out at the institution in which the current study takes place (Kaneko et al., 2018). It can be a challenging form of communication for many Japanese EFL learners. Social context can influence language choices, with varying norms regarding levels of directness and formality. Further, described as a "hybrid medium" of communication (Baron, 2010), with elements of both spoken and written communication, emailing requires knowledge of mode-specific norms and expectations.

Learners, then, may need assistance when constructing English L2 email texts. However, there is little support available for the pragmatic– the interplay between context and language choices– element of email communication. Failure to adhere to pragmatic norms may have negative social consequences (Economidou-Kogetisidis, 2015; Savic, 2018).

In order to address this issue and provide support for the learner, it is first necessary to identify the specific aspects of email writing that learners find most challenging.

In this current ongoing project, we describe a corpus-based approach to identifying perceived instances of pragmatic failure in Japanese EFL learners' emails. While corpora have been used to identify formal features of language, few have focused on pragmatics or pragmatic failure in learners. This is in part due to the difficulty in automatically annotating a corpus for pragmatic features, due to their subjective nature. Manual annotation is, therefore, necessary, though may be time-consuming and resource-intensive.

## 3. Method

### 3.1 Context

Data was collected at a Japanese computer science university. Approximately 40% of faculty are non-native Japanese speakers, with English as a lingua franca. Being able to write pragmatically appropriate English L2 emails to faculty, therefore, is important for students. Participants were undergraduate Japanese students enrolled at the institution, aged 18-22 years.

### 3.2 Data collection

Data collection focused on request-based emails specifically. As an inherently face-threatening act (FTA; Brown & Levinson, 1987), requesting can be particularly challenging for learners. Data was elicited via a set of tasks administered via Google Forms in the classroom. In creating tasks, initially an exemplar generation questionnaire was administered to a sample of the student population, asking respondents for examples of times they have needed to make a request in their academic or daily lives. Results were ranked by frequency, with the most frequent scenarios used

as task templates. Tasks were assigned – or + values for *Power* (P), *Distance* (D), and *Rank of imposition* (R; Brown & Levinson, 1987; see Table 1) by the researchers, and were moderated by expert English users to ensure validity and agreement on assigned P, D and R values. Four final tasks were selected, each with differing P, D and R values to vary the challenge. Tasks were administered to 426 participants, with approximately 1,300 usable texts elicited.

### 3.3  Data analysis

As part of the ongoing study, an initial 10% of the corpus text data was analyzed, using a coding scheme based on the Cross-Cultural Study of Speech Act Realization Patterns (Blum-Kulka et al., 1984) framework for speech act analysis, adapted request-based emails. The coding scheme was applied manually by two expert English users, and inter-rater agreement checked. Identified instances of perceived pragmatic failure were then analyzed in terms of frequency and perceived severity by the researchers. Results are shown in Table 1, ranked overall for highest combined scores of severity and frequency.

**Table 1**
*Perceived severity of identified instances of pragmatic failure and their frequency in participants' request-based emails*

| Error type | S | F | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| No recipient name | 5 | 5 | 10 |
| No closing salutation /name | 4 | 5 | 9 |
| No pre-closing | 3 | 5 | 8 |
| Imperative used | 5 | 3 | 8 |
| No or insufficient external modifiers | 3 | 5 | 8 |
| No title | 5 | 2 | 7 |
| Head act- 'want' statement | 5 | 2 | 7 |
| No greeting | 4 | 3 | 7 |
| No self-introduction when needed | 4 | 2 | 6 |
| No self-introduction & no name in closing | 4 | 2 | 6 |
| Body runs on from greeting | 2 | 4 | 6 |
| Head act- 'would like' statement | 4 | 1 | 5 |
| Head act- 'need' statement | 4 | 1 | 5 |
| Head act- 'would/ could /can' | 3 | 2 | 5 |
| Greeting- 'hello' | 2 | 3 | 5 |
| No or insufficient internal modifiers | 1 | 4 | 5 |
| Greeting- 'nice to meet…' | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| Inappropriate closing | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| Inappropriate pre-closing | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| Head act- performative | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| Opening- inappropriate name, office | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Greeting- 'dear my friend' | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Greeting- given name | 1 | 1 | 2 |

*Note: Severity (S) is assigned a score of 1-5, with 5 being most severe. Frequency (F) is assigned a score of 1-5, with 5 being most frequently identified in the analyzed portion of the corpus data.*

## 4.  Discussion and Conclusion

Preliminary analysis of the corpus text data provides an insight into the types of perceived pragmatic failure identified in the participants' emails. By assigning scores for severity and frequency, and then combining those scores, we can show a ranking in terms of importance for educators in the language classroom.

Identified pragmatic failure of high importance can be grouped into two main types- i) those relating to openings and closings, and ii) those relating to the realization of the request itself. Openings, for example, may include a greeting and the recipient's name and title. Closings refer to the final portion of an email, which can include a closing salutation and/or the sender's name. In Table 1, then, we can see that a number of high-importance instances of pragmatic failure relate to openings and closings- "no recipient name" relates to the opening, for example, while "no closing salutation/name" refers to the closing. These types of pragmatic failure may be amenable to classroom instruction (Chen, 2015; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2015). However, a number of highly ranked instances of pragmatic failure relate to content moves regarding requesting- these include the use of an imperative and the use of a "want" statement to realize a request. Research to date shows these aspects of L2 English email writing to be less responsive to instruction (Chen, 2015; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2015).

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