

Register, Face and Email: A Writing Lesson for the Electronic Generation

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When writing email messages, politeness strategies can be extremely important. Because we cannot negotiate meaning and politeness in writing quite the same way we do in speaking (recasting, eye contact, etc.), great care must be taken when crafting electronic messages.

In English, clarity and brevity often come first. But it is also important to use grammatical structures that convey respect and politeness. This is even more true when making requests and, depending on the relationship between the sender and recipient, politeness strategies can change drastically if the request is considered an imposition.

Such politeness strategies are called strategies of *Independence*. They establish distance between interlocutors and show that the person being given respect has greater choice and power. Thus, such strategies require a different register, or style of communication.

Such strategies include:

- | | |
|------------------------|---|
| a. Modal verbs | f. Attention to punctuation and structure |
| b. Buried requests | g. Formal salutations |
| c. Honorifics | h. Signatures |
| d. Academic vocabulary | |
| e. Escape routes | |

In contrast *Involvement* strategies show solidarity and kinship or togetherness by using less formal language and more direct, ambiguous speech. This means not couching requests in formal language, but also relying on shared knowledge to negotiate meaning.

Involvement strategies can be:

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|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| a. Imperative verbs | e. Informal requests |
| b. Very short messages | f. No capitalization or punctuation |
| c. No salutation or signature | g. First names |
| d. Basic vocabulary | h. Some language errors |

When students write emails in English, especially to their professors, they tend to make one of two mistakes. Either they 1) use too many involvement strategies and come across as rude or excessively intimate or 2) they use too many independence strategies and come across sycophantic or overly polite.

What follows is an exercise that can be modified for use with students as a way to raise their awareness that such strategies exist in all languages and must be paid very close attention to.

Activity

On your own paper, write as many grammatical structures or vocabulary that you can think of which are used to show politeness or respect.

Now, read the following email messages from a student to a professor. Do you think the students are being mostly polite or impolite? Why? Discuss your answers with your groupmates.

Message No. 1:

From: Tatiana
To: John Mark King

Good evening again.

I remember that on the condition that we failed the quiz we should do extra 15 vocabulary words, but if we were absent does it mean that we failed it?

Anyway it's not a problem if it is, we will certainly do it. My first message was a sort of excuse for not being in your class. We are not used to do it, but I remember that you said that we should inform you if we are missing your classes.

Sorry for disturbing you twice.

Message No. 2:

From: Ekaterina
To: John Mark King

Good evening Mr. King! Here is my first draft of business letter. I'm sorry for being late again, I tried to do everything in time but the amount of homework on all the subjects is really too big for one week.

Respectfully Yours,

Katya.

Now, answer the following questions in your group:

1. What is the purpose of each of the above messages? In other words, what do the students want?
2. What strategies of politeness does each of the students use? Are they same strategies you would use in these situations? Explain your answer.
3. In your group, choose one message to re-write. Try to make it more effective and appropriate for the situation.
4. Imagine the student in example No. 1 is writing a similar message to her classmate. How do you think the message might be different? Explain your answer.
5. What kinds of assignments could you assign to your students to give them practice with politeness when writing email messages? Think about only *raising your students'* awareness rather than teaching specific skills.

Recommended text: *Email English* by Paul Emmerson, Macmillan Press