

Email Literacy in Higher Education Institutions: A Case Study on Student-Instructor Email Communication at Dhofar University in Oman

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Abstract

Email is one of the means via which students in higher education institutions (HEIs) liaise with instructors to enquire about course materials, assignments, upcoming assessments and seek advice on personal or academic matters. The current study is an attempt to investigate student-instructor email communication focusing on the problematic aspects in students' emails that affect the process of communication. The study is based on the analysis of one-hundred email messages composed and sent by undergraduate students to their instructors at Dhofar University in Oman. It is concluded that student email messages are often characterized by lack email etiquette rules, linguistic inaccuracies and traits of texting and instant messaging mediums. Several student messages, for instance, lack proper email layout and contain grammar, spelling and punctuation mistakes, indicating that reviewing emails before sending them to teachers does not take place. In addition, informal features such as use of informal vocabulary, excessive use of punctuation marks, non-standard spelling, emojis and emoticons, which reflect unawareness of formality, professionalism and university setting etiquette, are noticeable in students' email messages. Therefore, pedagogical intervention with respect to acquisition of skills required for writing and perceiving emails is recommended. Education and guidance on the conventions governing email communication can help students communicate more effectively and professionally via email in HEIs, which will promote not only decent practices but also future employability opportunities.

Keywords: email communication, email etiquette, higher education, professionalism, Oman

1. Introduction

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is defined as 'predominantly text-based human-human interaction mediated by networked computers or mobile telephony' (Herring 2007, p. 1). EMC forms include email, instant messaging and texting. This type of communication provides a considerable amount of data on human behavior and use that has been the subject of research recently. Crystal (2001) distinguishes different modes of text-based CMC: electronic mail (e-mail), chat groups (either synchronous or asynchronous), virtual worlds and world wide web, instant messaging (IM) and blogging. However, e-mail is considered the most popular and widely used mode of CMC as it is, to a great extent, replacing traditional letters and telephone calls in both academic and commercial environments.

Communication by electronic mail has become the dominant means of communication in commercial and academic institutions (Gains, 1999). As a regular means of internal office correspondence, e.g. at workplaces and higher education institutions, email, as pointed out by Davidson (2010), is steadily replacing both letters and telephone calls. This is mainly so because email is considered a quick, reliable and more convenient medium of communication (Crystal, 2011). As a consequence, a considerable number of academic and commercial institutions have developed their own in-house email systems for their national and international communications.

In HEIs, email is used as the official channel for interaction and dissemination of information between teachers, students and management. Educators, for instance, use email for various purposes such as communication with students, sending of CVs, job applications, articles, proposals and other types of form-filing (Crystal, 2006). Likewise, students can easily communicate with their instructors outside class hours via email (Haworth, 1999). It is not surprising to say that most students tend to prefer to liaise with teachers via email rather than face-to-face communication (Kelly et al., 2004).

Students frequently send emails to their teachers asking about assignments, assessments and other personal or academic matters for which they seek help or advice (Dürscheid & Frehner, 2013). Thus, the purpose of student-teacher email communication, as pointed out by Biesenbach-Lucas (2007, p. 61), among others, is to achieve facilitative and academic functions such as 'building a relationship, getting information/advice about course materials and quizzes, addressing late work and missed classes, challenging grades, showing interest in and understanding of course material'.

Taking into account the importance of email communication, it has been observed that a large number of students at Dhofar University seem to lack the sufficient knowledge of how to compose professionally adequate emails, resulting in uninformative and poorly constructed messages. This may be because students are unaware of email etiquette and/or are not taught explicitly how to write adequate email messages. Such unawareness of email etiquette and how to encode communicative intent in email communication ‘tend to surface especially in hierarchical relationships, such as between students and faculty, and in situations involving impositions on the addressee.’ (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007, p. 60). More importantly, ill-formed emails may generate some sort of dissatisfaction between faculty and students as teachers resent students’ emails as they perceive them not only as poorly written but also as disrespectful (Aguilar-Roca et al. 2009; Kim et al., 2016).

1.1 Email Messages: Structure and Language

The term e-mail refers to ‘the use of computer systems to transfer messages between users’ (Crystal 2001, p.11). Emails are generally shorter than traditional letters. Immediate response emails to requests or queries, for instance, may consist of one-sentence paragraph. However, email has a standard layout that professional emails are expected to follow. The standard email layout includes a subject line, salutation, body of the email (stating the reason for writing supported with explanation) and a closing (Whitmell, 2014). It is commonly mentioned that email is an ‘informal’ medium of communication. Despite the fact that this seems true, this statement, as pointed out by Trask (2005, p. 12) ‘is often badly misunderstood’. This may be because the style considered appropriate for email messages is not similar to the style adopted for other formal kinds of writing such as scholarly journals, for instance. However, being described as informal does not mean casual, hasty, sloppy, cutesy and jokey. Being informal does not mean departing from standard language and ignoring common courtesy (ibid.). So, for instance, when we read an email message that contains misspellings and punctuation errors, we automatically perceive the person’s (sender) writing as sloppy. Thus, email messages are expected to have proper composition with respect to sentence structure, grammar, spelling and punctuation (Trask, 2005).

1.2 Features of Email Communication

While some researchers, e.g. Crystal (2001), argue that the language of email is a unique form of language, others such as Dürscheid & Frehner (2013) oppose such a concept arguing that email communication practices have their own features. Androutsopoulos (2006) points out that identifying the linguistic features characterizing email messages is a difficult task due to the fact that the ‘vast diversity of settings and purposes of use outweigh any common linguistic features’ (p. 420). However, there are several linguistic features of email and computer-mediated communication that have been identified in the literature (e.g. Petrie, 1999; Crystal, 2001).

In the context of email and computer-mediated communication practices, Petrie (1999) proposed the term ‘emialisms’ to refer to linguistic features noticeably pervasive in such modes of communication. Petrie (1999) provides types of emailisms such as trailing dots, capitalisation, excessive use of exclamation and/or question marks, email abbreviations, lack of conventional punctuation, non-standard spelling, use of non-alphanumeric characters, and the use of smileys. Likewise, Crystal (2001) puts forward the term “Netspeak” to refer to the features of CMC. He mentions that email messages display various linguistic features including abbreviations, use of lower case, non-standard spellings, minimalistic use of punctuation, and unusual combinations of punctuation marks. However, as pointed out by Dürscheid & Frehner (2013), the terms emailism and Netspeak are attempts to identify email and its linguistic features, suggesting that ‘the language of email is a new, previously unknown language with unique features, thus deserving its own term’ (p.8). Thurlow (2001, p.288) states that in computer-mediated communication people make ‘minimal to no use of capitalisation’, indicating a tendency to use lower case. Thurlow attributes this to the fact that people avoid using capital letters to reduce the typing effort and to worry less about the proper upper-case and lower-case spelling.

Lexical reductions such as homophones, consonant spellings, the omission of apostrophes, and ad hoc abbreviations are also considered features of email communication. Letter and number homophones are frequently used in CMC such as the use of the letter homophone u for the pronoun ‘you’, and the homophones ‘c’ for ‘see’, ‘r’ for ‘are’, ‘2’ for ‘to/too/two’, and ‘4’ for ‘four/for’. In addition, words are shortened by using consonant spelling which involves spelling words without vowels. To exemplify, the lexical item ‘from’ becomes ‘frm’ and ‘can’ becomes ‘cn’ in several email communications (Frehner, 2008).

Having identified the linguistic features of email characterizing non-professional, i.e. personal, emails, it is worth noting that professional email messages such those used in HEIs are expected to abide by the conventions of formal writing such as those of traditional letters. As mentioned in the previous section, the standard email layout contains a subject line that has to be brief, precise and informative, telling the reader what the email is about; a salutation, a body in which the sender states the reason for writing the email and precisely and concisely explains the topic or the issue; and finally a closing which can be expressed via using a variety of expressions.

1.3 Studies on Email Communication

There have been several attempts to study email communication from a variety of perspectives. Gains (1999) examined the textual features of email messages to determine whether or not academic and commercial emails had observable new genres of written communication. The study found out that commercial emails followed the normal conventions for standard written business communication, whereas academic emails took the form of conversational communication, suggesting that they may include a new genre of written communication (Gains, 1999). Furthermore, a study conducted by Waldvogel (2007) investigated greetings and closings in the emails of two workplaces in New Zealand, namely a manufacturing plant and an educational institution. The study showed that greeting and closing formulas were not commonly used in academic email messages, and that there is a preference of using styles that show social

distance. However, the emails used in the manufacturing plant made extensive use of greetings and closings, reflecting friendly workplace culture and good relationships between staff and management.

Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) carried out a study to examine e-mail requests sent by native and non-native English-speaking graduate students to professors focusing on pragmatic clarity and politeness devices. The study revealed that native speakers were successful in producing more pragmatically acceptable and polite requests. On the other hand, non-native students' emails showed 'lack of linguistic flexibility and idiomatic expressions, unawareness of letter conventions transferable to email, and inability to select appropriate lexical modification' (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007, p. 74). In addition, Cho (2010) analyzed the linguistic features of email messages and written memoranda in a university department in Australia. The study was based on a comparison between email messages and samples of memoranda provided by the same academic department. Cho concluded that email messages differed from memoranda in several aspects such as the use of structural reductions, expressive features and linguistic innovation. Similar to Li's findings (2000), the study also revealed that emails tend to be 'less formal than other varieties of written workplace communication' and contain features traditionally regarded as features of oral communication (Cho 2010, p. 1). In the same vein, Crystal (2011) notes that though emails, instant messaging and texting are expressed via the medium of writing, they exhibit 'several of the core properties of speech' (p. 20). Barron (2000) also points out that in email communication the defining line between written and spoken language continues to fade away.

Kim et al. (2016) investigated medical students' competency in composing professional emails in order to explore the strengths and weaknesses of students' emails through studying a number of 210 student emails. The results of the study revealed lack of understanding among medical students of the functions of several email components, which left negative impressions on faculty members. In the same vein, Al-Momani (2016) addressed email communication to identify its general and linguistic patterns. A number of 750 emails sent by and to the researcher during her master's and PhD studies at a Jordanian university were analyzed. The findings showed that the emails sent to and by professors followed the conventions of traditional formal letters, while the emails sent by students to students were written in nonstandard language, and did not follow any conventions. In addition, Al-Sayyed and Rababah (2020) examined email opening and farewell formulas used in Arabic and English. Their study was based on the analysis of 100 Arabic and 100 English academic emails. The findings of the study indicated that the students were more aware of the formalities when writing emails in English. For instance, several of the email written in Arabic included one word as an opening and farewell expression, whereas others lacked opening and farewell formulas.

Finally, Lewin-Jones and Mason (2014) investigated the attitudes of academic staff and students towards email style and etiquette. The study showed that academic staff and students seem to have differing perceptions of email communication especially with respect to style, language and etiquette. Students tend to view email as texting, and consequently use informal features of texting which academic staff consider unwelcome. Inappropriate email formulation causes frustration and annoyance for faculty members, who often judge students on their email style and content (Lewin-Jones & Mason 2014; Trask 2015). Therefore, guidance about the conventions of email communication is needed to help students communicate more effectively and professionally via email in HEIs, which will promote not only decent practices but also future employability opportunities.

2. Objectives of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to shed light on the importance of student-teacher email communication in HEIs and to raise awareness about the problematic aspects in students' emails that negatively affect the process of communication. Such an investigation is expected to help teachers become aware of the education needed to improve their students email etiquette and maintain it in order to promote not only good practices but also prospective employability. To achieve these aims, an investigation that looks at these specific areas is carried out to:

1. determine whether or not students are aware of email etiquette in higher education settings.
2. identify the problematic aspects in student-teacher email communication.

3. Research Questions

The study is framed by the following research questions:

1. Are students aware of email writing conventions used in academic settings?
2. What are the common linguistic inaccuracies found in student email messages?

4. Significance of the Study

The rationale for investigating student-teacher email communication is to raise awareness about the importance of proper student-teacher email communication. Such a skill not only enhances students' written communication for academic and professional purposes, but also prepares them for future workplaces as such a communication skill is often linked to professionalism, employability and workplace communication skills. The study is significant as it supports the view that by analysing students' emails and identifying the errors they contain, adequate pedagogical intervention regarding the acquisition of skills needed for writing and perceiving emails can be achieved. Thus, teachers are expected not only to pay attention to teaching students how to write proper emails, but also to show them the effects of using stylistically inappropriate language on the interpretation and perception of email messages. Equally important, students will be familiar with the inappropriate language forms they often use when communicating via email as well as the effects of emails that lack

respect, professionalism and awareness of university setting etiquette.

5. Methodology

5.1 Research Context and Participants

This research has been carried out at Dhofar University in the Sultanate of Oman. The research samples consisted of a corpus of 100 real e-mails written and sent by undergraduate students to their teachers. It should be noted that the participant students, whose emails were used in this study, are second, third and fourth year students enrolled in different academic programmes taught in English.

5.2 Research Data and Procedure

Email exchanges between students and faculty members during the period from 2020 to 2022 were collected. To identify the problematic aspects in student-teacher email communication, emails that contained grammatical, lexical, punctuation and stylistic errors and those that were not composed according to the conventions of email writing were selected. Students’ consent for using their emails for this research has been obtained prior to the commencement of this work. For privacy and ethical considerations, the participant students were informed that their identity and details will be hidden in the sample emails used in the study. Given that the language of instruction at Dhofar University and other HEIs in Oman is English for the majority of study programmes (Al-Jardani, 2007), the email messages, which were composed by second, third and fourth year students, were randomly selected. The rationale behind choosing this student category is that at these stages students are expected to be able to communicate effectively in written language. The key text features of student e-mails are examined and analysed under headings emerging from the features characterising the email messages under study that deviate from the standard conventions of email writing.

6. Findings

Based on the analysis of students’ emails sent to teachers, some findings have been reached. In general, the findings show that the majority of email messages are characterised by lack email etiquette rules, linguistic inaccuracies and traits of texting and mediums of instant messaging. The findings are presented as themes derived from the features characterizing students’ emails.

6.1 Finding One: Students’ Awareness of Email Etiquette

6.1.1 Improper Structure and Layout

The analysis of data reveals that a large number of students’ emails do not abide by the standard format of formal professional emails. For instance, several emails lack the essential email components such as a subject heading, greeting, or proper closing, indicating unawareness of the functions of email components. The email in Figure 1, which was sent by a student to a teacher, lacks proper email structure and layout as the entire message is written in the subject line.

```

From: [redacted]@du.edu.om>
Sent: Monday, December 21, 2020 5:57:35 PM
To: [redacted]@du.edu.om>
Subject: Good evening mr .. Can I get my marks from 60 in detail ??
    
```

Figure 1. Lack of proper email structure and layout

6.1.2 Lack of Essential Information

The findings show that some email messages lack essential information that helps the recipient to understand the message or identify the sender. A simple example is the case of emails that lack sender’s self-identification, or meaningful information in the subject line or in the body of the email message. The example in Figure 2 illustrates this finding.

```

From: [redacted]@du.edu.om>
Sent: Friday, January 15, 2021 7:14:55 PM
To: [redacted]@du.edu.om>
Subject: Re: Good evening .. Can I see my mark in the final exam?

!! please

Outlook ل iOS
    
```

من: [redacted]
 تم الإرسال: Thursday, January 14, 2021 6:40:26 PM
 إلى: [redacted]@du.edu.om
 الموضوع: ?Good evening .. Can I see my mark in the final exam?

Figure 2. Lack of sender’s self-identification

6.1.3 Use of Emjois and Emoticons

It is a noticeable feature in students' emails that they contain features popular in instant messaging mediums such as the use of emoticons and emojis that are not appropriate for a university setting, especially in student-teacher communication. The use of emojis and emoticons in student-teacher email communication can negatively affect the image of the sender as emails containing emoticons and emojis are perceived as unprofessional and inadequate for higher educational settings. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate this point.



Figure 3. Use of emojis and emoticons



Figure 4. Use of emojis and emoticons

6.1.4 Email Timings

The study found out that some students' emails were sent to teachers at inadequate times, i.e. outside working hours. To exemplify, some emails were sent out at night, early in the morning or during weekends, as the email in Figure 5 shows.

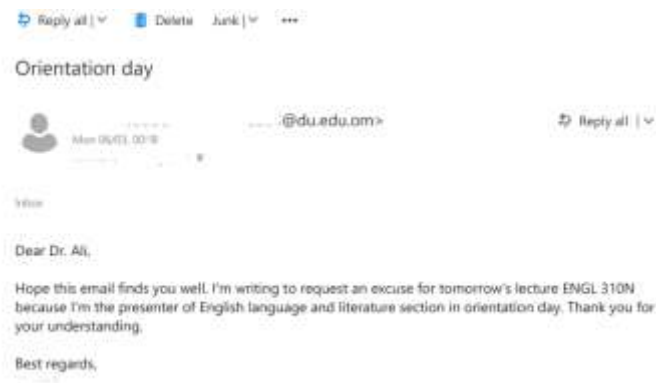


Figure 5. An example of emails sent at inadequate times

6.2 Finding Two: Linguistic Inaccuracies in Student-Teacher Email Communication

6.2.1 Grammar, Spelling, and Punctuation Errors

Language problems such as grammar, spelling, punctuation errors, improper use of vocabulary and lack of coherence are widespread in student emails. Such errors may affect communication and hinder understanding the intended message. The analysis of data shows that language issues arise mainly from lack of linguistic competence and heavy reliance on machine translation tools. Figures 6 is example of emails with language issues.

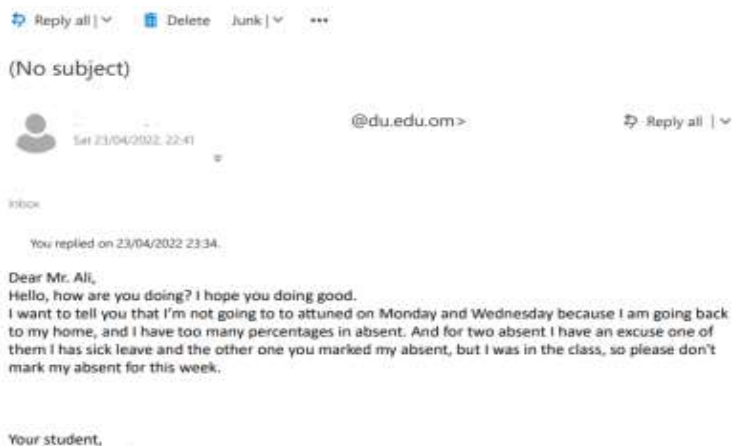


Figure 6. An email with language issues

6.2.2 Register Related Issues

The use of informal language is a noticeable feature in student-teacher email communication. Such emails are perceived by faculty as unprofessional and inappropriate for an organizational setting, which affects the image of the sender. Figure 7 illustrates this point.

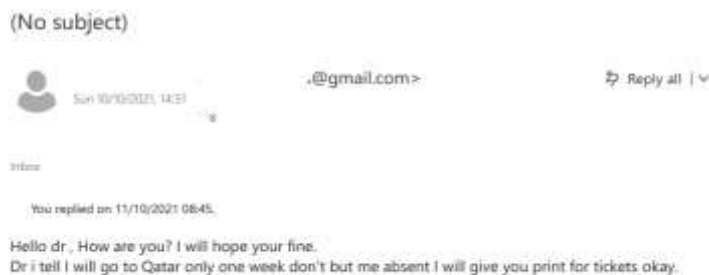


Figure 7. An email written in informal language

6.2.3 Code-mixing and Code-shifting

Learners use communication strategies to overcome lack of linguistic competence needed in certain situations. Code-mixing is one of such strategies that non-native learners of English use. One of the findings of this study is that some students' emails contained cases of code-mixing and code-switching between English and Arabic, as illustrated in Figure 8 in which the English words 'grammar' and 'vocabulary' are transliterated, i.e. written in Arabic characters according to how they are pronounced in English.



Figure 8. An email with code-switching between English and Arabic

7. Discussion

The study focused on a relatively small representative sample of student-teacher e-mail communication. The findings of the study indicate that several email messages lack proper email structure and layout, which is consistent with previous studies such as those of Kim et al. (2016), Biesenbach-Lucas (2007), Al-Sayyed and Rababah (2020), etc. The main components of an effective email include a subject line, greeting and sign-off. As pointed out by Raman and Sharama (2015), both the structure and the format of an email message are important for

smooth reading and processing of the message. For instance, the subject line, which is supposed to provide a concise and precise summary of the aim and content of the email message (Kim et al. 2016; Crystal, 2006), is often left blank by students, indicating lack of understanding of the function of this email component. This finding is further evidenced by email messages written entirely in the subject section, as illustrated in Figure 9. It is worth noting that since there is a limit on the number of characters to be written in the subject line, lengthy subject descriptions are often truncated and thus become not only unclear, but also informationally empty.

From: @du.edu.om>
Sent: Monday, December 21, 2020 5:57:35 PM
To: @du.edu.om>
Subject: Good evening mr .. Can I get my marks from 60 in detail ??

Figure 9. An email message written entirely in the subject line

Furthermore, the study shows cases of emails that lack a proper greeting and closing, which has a negative impact on how the message is perceived, interpreted and felt by the recipient. Such cases, which echo the findings of Al-Sayyed & Rababah (2020), Kim et al. (2016) and Lewin-Jonse & Mason (2014), reflect students' unawareness of email etiquettes, particularly with respect to the tone of the message and how it feels emotionally by the recipients. It is worth noting that written language on the screen is written and read differently. It is easy for one to be perceived as ambiguous, misleading, or offensive (Crystal, 2011). Given that internet exchanges, such as emails, as pointed out by Crystal (2011, p. 23) 'lack the facial expressions, gestures, and conventions of body posture and distance ... which are so critical in expressing personal opinions and attitudes, and in moderating social relationships', using proper (i.e. at a certain level of formality) greetings and sign-offs is required in order to avoid misunderstanding, or being considered unprofessional, unfriendly, or rude. This is simply so because 'speakers of a language must also master sociopragmatic and sociolinguistic norms to achieve communicative purposes appropriately' (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007, p. 63)

Reply all | Delete | Junk | ...

Re:

Wed 17/12/2021, 15:54 @du.edu.om> Reply all |

HiDoc

In the lecture the sound cut then i can't answer if you ask any question

Figure 10. An email lacking a greeting and closing

Another feature noticeable in student-teacher email communication is the use of emojis and emoticons that are popular in instant messaging platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Viber, ... etc. In computer-mediated textual communication, emojis and emoticons are universally considered as non-verbal indicators of emotion (Dresner & Herring 2010; Li 2000). Similar to emojis, the majority of emoticons used in email messages mimic facial expressions and are normally utilised to express a range of feelings and emotions such as the use of :-) to express happiness and :- (to express sadness. Given that emails are seen as an emotionless medium of communication, the use of emojis and emoticons, as pointed out by Raman & Sharama (2015, p. 406), is to 'compensate for the inability to convey voice inflections, facial expressions, and bodily gestures in written communication'. In other words, they are used to convey tone or emotion (Lewin-Jones & Mason, 2014). The email in Figure 11 is an example of emails including emojis.

Reply all | Delete | Junk | ...

Re: 305 مادة ف بليز نجحتي ف مادة English 🤗❤️ساعدني 🙏

Mon 10/01/2022, 21:47 @du.edu.om> Reply all |

HiDoc

Figure 11. An email containing emojis

This finding suggests that students in general tend to view the language of email as a casual or informal form of language characterized by the use of symbols as mentioned by Biesenbach-Lucas (2007). This in turn reflects unawareness of not only email etiquette and conventions, but also the sufficient knowledge of composed status-congruent email messages.

The findings also showed that student emails contained grammar, punctuation, and spelling mistakes, which indicates that student often do not review their emails before sending them out to their instructors. Given the (semi-)formal nature of student-teacher email communication, such a practice, as stated by Raman & Sharama (2015), gives a bad impression of the sender, and it may negatively affect conveying the message properly. In this respect, Davison (2010, p. 53) argues that writing email messages requires ‘as much care and mental effort as writing letters’, and failure to proofread emails, as pointed out by Trask (2005, p. 68), is ‘an expression of contempt for ... recipients’. In addition, lack or improper use of punctuation marks in written communication make the process of reading a text hard and can sometimes change the meaning of the text.

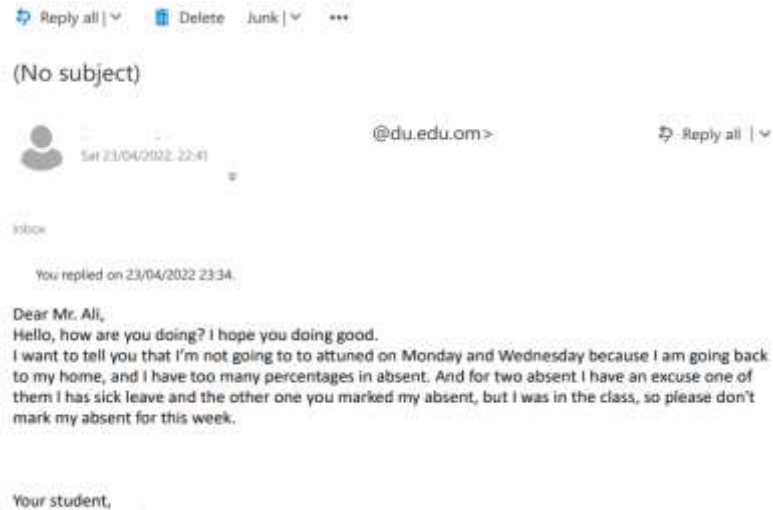


Figure 12. An email containing grammar, punctuation, and spelling mistakes

In addition, the results revealed that some students rely heavily on machine translation tools, e.g. Google Translate, which often results in awkward phrasing and poorly constructed emails, as evidenced in Figure 13. It is worth mentioning that students resort to translation technology tools for completing writing tasks for different reasons including lack of language proficiency and writing skills. It is known that several machine translation tools tend to translate literally, which leads sometimes to ill-formed and meaningless messages. In the email shown in Figure 13, it is obvious that the words ‘record’, ‘article’ and ‘chapter’ are literal translations performed by machine translation for the intended words ‘register’, ‘course’ and ‘semester’ respectively. Since the Arabic equivalent for the English two lexical items ‘chapter’ and ‘semester’ is the homophonic word ‘faSəl’, machine translation tools often pick it up as an equivalent for the two English words ‘semester’ and ‘chapter’ irrespective of the context, resulting in erroneous translations.



Figure 13. Use of machine translation tools for composing emails

Despite the fact that there has been substantial debate over the formal or informal nature of email style, the study shows that formality is not considered an important criterion by students when communicating with their instructors via email. This can be attributed to the fact that ‘there is a perception among university students that email in general is characterized by more casual language, truncated syntax, abbreviations, and symbols’ (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007, p.5). However, unlike in personal email messages, in student-teacher email communications, a level of formality should be maintained as this reflects respect, professionalism and awareness of university setting etiquette. It is noticed that students use abbreviations, clippings, decapitalisations, informal expressions, non-standard spellings as well as emojis which are considered features of informal written communication (Li, 2000; Cho, 2010; Lewin-Jones & Mason, 2014). This can be ascribed to the fact that ‘technology is changing the way we write’ (Baron 2008, p. 259). Baron also adds that in ‘the fast-moving world of email, content is far more important than spelling and punctuation’ and finds that ‘the line between the spoken and written language

continues to fade' (Baron 2000, p. 259).

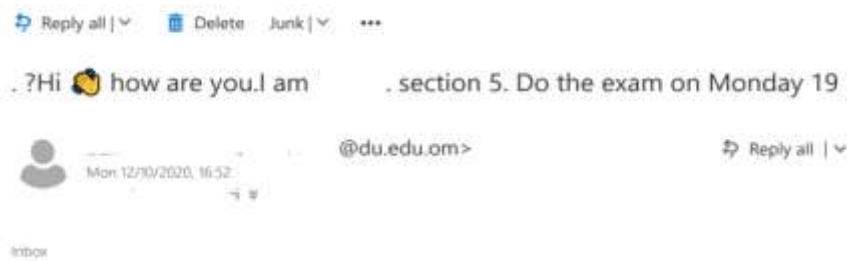


Figure 14. An email written in informal language



Figure 15. An email containing non-standard spellings

8. Conclusion

The study concludes that some students cannot communicate proficiently via email due to unawareness of email etiquette and lack of language proficiency, sociopragmatic competence and writing skills. Apart from the grammar, spelling and punctuation mistakes, lack of formality is also a remarkable feature in student-teacher email communication, indicating tendency towards using nonstandard language and features (e.g. emoticons and emojis) popular in instant messaging mediums. A pedagogical intervention targeting email writing and etiquette is, therefore, recommended to help students acquire the skills needed for writing professional email messages appropriate for university and workplace settings. Such skills should be part of the language-teaching process with special focus on sociopragmatic and sociolinguistic norms as this will enable students become familiar with this medium of communication and the norms that govern its use, particularly in situations where hierarchical relationships are involved.

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