"I Want to Know…": A Study on the Application of Corpus-based Approach in Teaching Request Expression in Email Writing

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Abstract

Nowadays, the use of e-mail in after-school communication between teachers and students is very common. However, for second language (L2) learners, sending e-mails in the target language to native speakers faces many challenges. In order to investigate a more effective and innovative way to guide L2 learners' email writing, Chinese EFL undergraduates were included in the study. Students' emails were collected and incorporated into a corpus, and the method of using the corpus to modify email writing by students was explored. Results show that using the corpus helped students in applying more appropriate expressions in their emails, and students had a general positive attitude towards it. Follow-up research could further discuss the pedagogical implications of using corpora to guide EFL learners' writing.

Keywords: email writing, corpus, request expression, EFL learners

1. Introduction

Nowadays, the use of email in academia has changed the limited face-to-face traditional mode of communication, providing convenience for teacher-student interaction. However, email writing raises new challenges for second language (L2) learners. When sending emails to teachers, how to use appropriate wording in different situations not only raises challenges on L2 learners' language proficiency, but also puts forward requirements for L2 learners' pragmatic competence. Given the difficulty of email writing and its importance in daily communication, guidance has been provided to L2 learners through writing classes. However, time-consuming tutoring only received limited effect. Therefore, there is an urgent need for a more effective and innovative method to guide L2 learners.

Corpus-based pedagogy has received attention in the field of L2 writing in recent years. "Corpus" refers to the collection and storage of electronic resources on personal computers (Hunston, 2002). By using corpus-based teaching, the common language structures in the database can be analyzed and used as examples in subsequent teaching for different aspects. Corpus-based teaching is considered to be one of the most effective resource utilization methods (del Mar Sánchez Ramos, 2020) and technology-based language teaching methods for promoting language learning. Learners are reported to have a general positive attitude and feel motivated in language learning towards the use of corpus-based method since they can lead and fully participate in the learning process, and improve their cognitive thinking abilities (Alsaraireh, 2020).

In order to verify the role of corpus-based teaching and try to apply it to future email writing teaching practice, in this study, I collected and stored the emails sent by Chinese undergraduate

students to one of their foreign lecturers in a corpus. By using corpus-based approach, the pattern of students' expression of requests is summarized. A further discussion will be conducted for analyzing the availability of this method in subsequent teaching, hoping to provide new ideas for subsequent teaching of email writing.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Using Email as A Communicative Tool

The advancement of information technology has changed people's daily lives. With the advent of computer-mediated communication (CMC), email, online chat, instant messaging, online meeting, and other modes have gradually replaced traditional communication methods. Among all these methods, email, as a long-lasting and the most popular electronic communication method (Chen, 2015), has been widely used in various fields. In academia, the application of email has also changed the traditional way of communication between teachers and students. Online Q&A has gradually been adopted (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006). When sending emails to teachers, especially when making a request, students need to consider the hierarchical relationship between them and their teachers and adopt strategies which are suitable for the particular content, so that their requests can be successfully approved (Chen, 2015).

However, dealing with speech acts such as requests and refusals may be more complicated for L2 learners. When making such culturally sensitive behaviors that may threaten the recipient's negative face, social variables such as gender, social power, and social distance need to be considered. If interlocutors lack practical knowledge of the target language culture, their behaviors may cause offense or misunderstanding, because the expressions which are applicable in one culture may not be suitable for other cultures (Satiç & Çiftçi, 2018). For L2 learners, in email writing, it is needed to overcome language barriers and take social factors into consideration, which pose challenges to them (Thi, 2018).

Among the research on expressing requests in emails, one of the earliest pragmatic studies on L2 email requests was conducted by Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996). Emails of native (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) of English were collected and evaluated by faculty members. The result showed that NNSs' emails only focused on expressing their wishes, lacking mitigation devices and status-congruent language. Subsequent studies also reached similar conclusions: even if L2 learners reached a high level of L2 proficiency, they still lack pragmatic awareness and competence in email writing, resulting in the inability to communicate properly (Chen, 2006; Economidou- Kogetsidis, 2011).

In order to improve the writing ability and pragmatic competence of L2 learners, researchers explored ways to effectively enhance learners' email writing. However, although the importance of email writing is acknowledged, research on exploring the effectiveness of guiding email writing in teaching practice is limited (e.g. Alcón-Soler 2015, Chen 2016, Nguyen, Do, Pham & Nguyen, 2018). Previous research has concluded that many email writing rules are defaulted due to the appropriateness of particular cultures. In this case, the effect of unguided implicit learning is slow and limited (Chen, 2016). Under this claim, the study of Nguyen, et.al (2018) adopted a genre-based approach, using explicit teaching and scaffolding theory to gradually guide students to produce more appropriate emails. After raising students' awareness of the importance of email, corrective feedback (CF) was used for making up students' current deficiencies in knowledge and develop their independent writing abilities. Research findings proved the effectiveness of this approach, but the author also pointed out the limitation: the premise to ensure that this method is feasible is that students have acquired pragmatic knowledge and form-conscious in previous English learning. If these factors are not strictly considered, it would be difficult to generalize the results. Moreover, this study fully emphasized teachers' roles, and teachers are required to fully participate throughout the process. If it is used for a class with many students, the teacher would be stressed. Therefore, it is necessary to explore a method that is more universally effective and has long-term applications.

2.2 Introducing Corpus-Based Approach

In the past few decades, corpus-based approach is not only regarded as the focus of linguistic research, but also influential on L2 learning and teaching. However, the current corpus tools have not been fully implemented in teaching, and effort is still needed in the process of transforming theory into practice. At this stage, corpus teaching has not been generally accepted, not only because of the lack of awareness or resistance to the use of corpora, but also because the current resources are relatively limited (Römer, 2011). Meanwhile, because the method does not provide learners with clear guidance or distinguish between right or wrong, sometimes the lack of clear explanation would make learners feel confused and demotivated (Granath, 2009).

Nevertheless, many researchers are still in favor of the use of corpus-based approach in teaching since considering the purpose of using languages for communication, context needs to be considered in language learning. Compared with the traditional decontextualized method that only focuses on grammar, corpus-based learning enables students to have a more critical understanding of the language learning process and the importance of context in vocabulary and grammar learning (Liu & Jiang, 2009). It also provides language background knowledge (Gardner & Devies, 2007) and unlimited language usage for different languages (Kessler, 2016), which is worth trying to apply to language teaching.

Previous research also provides us with good examples in the implementation of corpus-based

approach. The application of corpus in L2 writing teaching has changed the original phenomenon of only relying on grammar books. Richer and more diverse texts are included other than just confined to the native teachers in front of the classroom (Lee & Swales, 2006). In Charles' (2012) research, students use their essays to construct their own corpus to improve the writing level in specific disciplines. It turned out that students have a high degree of recognition for the use of the corpus. They think it is helpful and plan to continue using it in the future. Other studies have expanded the source of the data contained in the corpus. The corpus used in Lee and Swales' (2006) study included doctoral students' own written texts, as well as authoritative articles selected from published journals in various fields, so that students can compare their own work with experts' and improve their writing awareness.

Research in recent years has mainly focused on the use of corpora for frequency and correlation analysis of certain types of errors (Lan & Sun, 2019, Satake, 2020). It is recognized that the use of corpora in L2 writing can help learners summarize and correct previously missed mistakes, and guide learners to choose appropriate reference resources. However, Satake (2020) pointed out that in order to better develop corpus-based teaching, the proficiency level of learners and the long-term influence of the use of corpus should be considered more comprehensively in future research.

Previous research has rarely involved the use of corpus-based approach in improving learners' pragmatic awareness in writing, especially in email writing. As a teacher, after reading my students' emails, I found that although email writing was taught, the teaching content was mainly on addressing and closing. Students still feel struggling in writing emails to their foreign teachers, especially when they want to make a request. In that case, I suppose that some modifications in teaching are needed to better serve the students, so the research question is posted for this study:

By building students' corpus, will corpus-based approach be helpful for learners in learning how to express requests in email writing?

3. Method

3.1 Participants
Participants in this study are 21 Chinese first-year undergraduate students majoring in Mathematics in a Chinese public university. Reasons for choosing them as participants in this study are not only because of the convenience of data access, but also, some of them will move to Australia after completing two years of undergraduate study in China. In order to enable students to better adapt to their overseas studies, most of the students' EAP teachers are native teachers of English. Therefore, students need to communicate with foreign teachers frequently via email. These students had high

English scores in their college entrance examinations (over 120 with a full score of 150). Given that previous research claimed that the corpus-based approach is more suitable for high-level students, they seem to be ideal candidates. Moreover, the students have an urgent need for email writing, which theoretically makes them more motivated to accept new teaching methods.

3.2 Data Collection Procedure

The data used in this study came from the emails that students sent to their foreign teachers before. I sent a request to students in the same class, and 21 of them gave acceptance to use their emails for data collection. After receiving their emails, I briefly browsed the content, which includes many different topics, such as self-introduction at the beginning of this semester; asking the teacher about the curriculum design, homework, and other issues. All emails were typed in and numbered from 1 to 21.

3.3 Data Analysis Procedure

Using AntConc for summarizing patterns

First, in order to summarize the most commonly used patterns of request expression by participants, their emails were imported into a database called AntConc for data analysis. It is a free online corpus tool that can generate personal corpora. 21 emails were uploaded to AntConc and were ready to be used for subsequent analysis.

When writing to different readers, emails mainly contain two moves - the framing moves (including changes in subject, opening and closing) and the content moves (Kankaanranta, 2006). Since the content of framing moves has been explicitly taught in previous writing classes to the participants, this study focused on the content moves, that is, how to express needs in the body of the email, because it is seen as the element for achieving key communicative purposes (Chen, 2015). When making a request, content moves are mainly implemented by requesting strategies and requesting support. According to Bou-Franch (2006, pp.85) and Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011), request strategies and request moves can be divided into the following categories (see *Table 1* and *Table 2*).

Table 1

Request strategies

Strategies	Category	Example
Indirect strategies	Query preparatory	Could I visit you tomorrow?
Direct strategies	Imperatives	Please give it to me tomorrow
	Want/need statements	I'd like to see you tomorrow.
	Direct questions	When you do have time tomorrow?
Syntactic modifier	Tense, aspect, lexical modifier	Please, do you think…

Table 2

Request moves

Category	Example
Grounder	Give reasons, explanations, etc.
Disarmer	I know the test is important…
Preparator	I really need your help.
Promise	I promise to finish it before the end of tomorrow.
Apology	I am really sorry.
Orientation move	I have some questions about the first assignment.
Compliment/ sweetener	Your opinion counts.

Since the collected emails were sent by students to the same teacher, variables such as social distance, social power involved in email writing here are relatively controllable. Based on this, I entered the keywords of request strategies and request moves that I thought might appear in Antcont according to my predictions (e.g. 'could you', 'I'd like to…' and so on). The frequency and form are counted. After that, I also randomly browsed some emails in case there were expressions that I did not predict.

4. Results and Discussion

Using AntCont helped to summarize the expressions that are frequently used by learners. Searching through keywords was also helpful in locating in a specific context to judge whether the learner's use is reasonable and appropriate. Previous studies have shown that when Chinese students are not exposed to instructions, most of them use direct strategies, and want/ need statement is the most

frequently used one, followed by expectation statements (e.g. I hope…) (Chen, 2015). So, I searched the keywords and got the following results.

Among the several direct request strategies mentioned above, the most commonly used in the data being collected is 'I want'. (see *Figure 1*). The emergence of this usage is mainly affected by first language (L1) transfer. In Chinese, expressing one's wishes in this way is considered to be soft and tentative. However, native English speakers would regard that to be impolite (Chen, 2015).

Figure 1: the use of 'I want'

Secondly, keywords for indirect requests were entered in AntConc, such as 'could', 'would'. The usages of indirect requests appear less frequently than direct strategies. Basically, the results are 'I would appreciate it if you could…' and a syntactic error existed (see Figure 3). Maybe students have learned this fixed expression before, but there are still some problems in flexible use. Moreover, this expression can be regarded as another kind of want/need statement, but expressed in a politer way.

Figure 2: the use of 'could'

Figure 3: the use of 'would'

Concordance Hits	8	
Hit	KWIC	File
1	x and IELTS through learning EPA? I would appreciate it if you could give	3.txt
2	prove my writing and reading skills. I would appreciate it if you can give m	16.txt
3	can make full use of it. I would appreciate it if you could tell m	18.txt
4	helpful if I do some exercise? I would be appreciate if you would g	19.txt
5	ectly. That\xA1\xAFs my problem. I would be appreciated it if you can do	20.txt
6	? I would be appreciate it if you would give more information about m	19.txt
7	best to discover the area which I would like to devote myself into it. B	17.txt
8	Overy\xAOclearli.So\xAOI\xAO would\xAOappreciate\xAOit\xAOif\xAO	13.txt

When it comes to request moves, I tried the above keywords and expressions, but found that only the direct expressions - 'to ask some questions/ have some questions/ here are the questions' are used. Other methods were not found in the emails.

In all, most of the expressions in participants' email writing are in a direct manner. Sometimes it seemed to be inappropriate, and also, there are some mismatches when I looked through the emails (e.g. started with Dear xx, closed with sincerely but expressed in a very direct and somewhat impolite way for the content, see Appendix I). Correlating with previous studies, this corpus provides a preliminary diagnosis of errors in commonly used structures and specific contexts (Liu & Jiang, 2009). This corpus was piloted in my teaching classroom to allow students to modify their emails. Results show that students' pragmatic competence improved in the modified version. I suppose that the database can be applied to future classes. Through the analysis of real corpus with students, more targeted corrections can be made.

After diagnosing the problem in writing, other corpora can be used for error correction. For example, Enron email corpus (https://aws.amazon.com/datasets/enron-email-data/), which is a standard email corpus used for research purpose. It includes a large range of authentic resources and is available publicly. In view of the fact that the key to improving writing has shifted from repeated learning to repeated use, the use of corpus also provides resources and references for students' after-class learning and self-editing. In future teaching, teachers could recommend some online corpora and provide instruction on the use of corpora for students' self-studies.

5. Conclusion

This research initially confirmed the feasibility of applying the corpus-based approach to the teaching of email writing. It can be used as a supplement to current teaching. For example, after getting the teacher's explicit teaching, it can be used for the test of learning achievements or the follow-up self-learning resources. However, this study has certain limitations. For example, the choice of participants is relatively simplex, and the number of participants is limited, and the conclusion may not be generalized before being further verified. Also, when applying corpora to language teaching, it is necessary to consider the acceptance of students, the time-consuming training of employees and students, and other related issues, so that it can play a better role.

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Appendices

Appendix I: Example Learner Emails
Note: expressions of request are highlighted.

Email #7
Dear xx,

My name is xx, a freshman majoring in mathematics, from Class x.

The purpose of writing this article is that I want to offer some suggestions for the EAP class after attending several classes. The online class definitely has its unique superiority. However, every coin has two sides, when it comes to its defects, it's doubt the online class is lack in the entire personnel participation. Besides, the class's progress is a problem, for its low efficiency. From my perspective, I'm reluctant to waste my time on meaningless things. Time is life. Therefore, I hold the view that this problem is urgently required to be settled.

Here're some advice as followed. For one thing, vocabulary is a fundamental factor determines whether we can command English, as a consequence, we're supposed to expand our vocabularies. For another, oral expression and writing bother masses of undergraduates a lot. Hence, the class ought to provide us with some linking aids about speaking and writing.

Goodbye

xx

Email #12

Dear xx,

Hi xx! My name is xx from Class Math x. I'm wondering how will you test us student at the end of this semester.

Looking forward to your reply. Best wishes!

xx

Email #19

Hi, xx:

It's good to write to you. I'm xx from class x- Mathematics. And my Chinese name is xx. To be honest, my English is poor. So I afraid to fail the exam. At that reason, I want to know more about our exams. When will they hold? What kind of exams I will meet? Is it helpful if I do some exercise?

I would be appreciate it if you would give more information about my question.

The best wishes for you!

Yours,

xx

Appendix II: A Summary of Commonly Used Request Patterns by Students

No.	Pattern	Directness
1	I want to know/ I wonder…	Direct
2	I hope you can…	Direct
3	I'm writing to ask you…	Direct
4	I'd like to ask…	Direct
5	I would appreciate it if you could…	Direct but politer