Developing Chinese EFL learners' email literacy through requests to faculty

Yuan-shan Chen *

Department of Applied English, National Chin-Yi University of Technology, Taiwan, ROC

Abstract

This study followed a pre-test-instruction-post-test design to examine the effectiveness of teaching email requests to faculty to a group of 28 intermediate-level Chinese students of English. Drawing on the genre-based pedagogy developed by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the six-hour instruction was structured in the order of setting the context, modeling, joint construction and independent construction. A total of 224 email scripts collected before and after the instruction were analyzed quantitatively by paired *t*-test and qualitatively by move analysis. The quantitative analysis showed that the students made overall progress after the instruction. However, the qualitative analysis revealed that the students made greater improvements in framing moves (i.e., subject, greeting and closing) than in content moves (i.e., request strategies and request support). It is because framing moves are interpersonally oriented and formulaic in nature, thus more controllable in an instructional setting and easier for the students to acquire. On the other hand, content moves are informationally loaded and idiosyncratic in nature, thus less controllable in an instructional setting and more difficult for the students to acquire. These findings are discussed with implications for classroom practices and future research.
© 2014 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Email; Request; Instruction

1. Introduction

Advances in information and technology have brought about a new era of computer-mediated communication (CMC), which takes various forms, including email, listservs, chat, computer conferencing, instant messaging, and so forth (Baron, 2010). Of all the forms of CMC, the medium of email has the longest history (Cho, 2010; Hafner and Lyon, 1996), and it is the most popular electronic means of communication. The widespread application of emails in academia for the past decades has revolutionized student–faculty interactions from face-to-face communications to cyber-consultations (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006). For L2 students of English, such a shift may reduce their pressure of conducting spontaneous interactions with their professors (Bloch, 2002). However, they need to face the challenge of composing an appropriate email to achieve their communicative goals successfully.

Considering these facts, a small number of L2 pragmatists combined interlanguage pragmatics and speech act theory with computer mediated communication to investigate L2 students' email discourse in academia (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006, 2007; Chen, 2001, 2006; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011; Hardford and Bardovi-Harlig, 1996). The findings of their research revealed that these email interactions usually contain a wide range of pragmatic infelicities. With respect to email requests, the failure includes a significantly high level of directness, insufficient lexical and syntactical mitigation devices, inappropriate or unacceptable address forms, unreasonable time frames, an absence of greetings and closings, no acknowledgment of

---

 * Tel.: +886 423924505-8601.
   E-mail address: yuanshan@ncut.edu.tw.

imposition, no room for negotiations, unclear statement of problems, or non-credible reasons/explanations for the requests Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) attributes such failure to students' unawareness of email etiquette because ''typically it is not explicitly taught'' (p. 60). To solve these problems, she suggested that explicit instruction of email pragmatics be implemented in an L2 curriculum. However, despite the multitude of studies on instructional effectiveness in speech acts (e.g., Rose, 2005), implicatures (e.g., Bouton, 1999), and conventional expressions (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig and Vellenga, 2012), empirical studies on the effect of teaching email pragmatics are rare (cf. Ford, 2006). This study therefore adopted a pre-test-instruction-post-test design to test 28 Chinese EFL students in an undergraduate Advanced Writing class in order to determine whether explicit instruction increased the appropriateness of their email requests to faculty.

2. Background

2.1. Email requests to faculty in academia

As an asynchronous medium, email has become a viable alternative of communication at a university level. By examining native and non-native speakers' emails to faculty, Bloch (2002) categorized four communicative functions for student-initiated emails—(1) phatic communication for rapport building, (2) making excuses for leave of absence or homework delays, (3) asking for help for particular assignments, and (4) making formal requests to unknown professors for course enrollment. In addition, Biesenbach-Lucas (2005) pointed out that these student–faculty emails basically include three different functions—(1) a facilitative function, which involves ''scheduling appointments, submission of work, class attendance, self-identification, and message confirmation'' (p. 29); (2) a substantive function, which involves ''clarification of assignments, content and format of work, resources, and evaluation of work'' (p. 30); and (3) a relational function, which serves to grease the hierarchical relationship between students and faculty. Overall, it seems that requests constitute the majority of student–faculty email interactions, as realized primarily through the facilitative and substantive functions (Chang and Hsu, 1998; Chen, 2001).

Previous research has shown that L2 students' email requests to faculty contain a variety of pragmatic infelicities. For example, Hardford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996) collected a total of 34 NS and 65 NNS emails written to them over a period of one year. They found that the negative affect responses produced by the L2 students were often caused by infrequent use of syntactic and lexical downgraders, employment of an imposed, unreasonable personal time frame, no acknowledgment of the cost of requests to the faculty recipients, and the provision of student-centered explanations for faculty recipients to grant their requests. Biesenbach-Lucas (2006, 2007) compared American and international students' request behaviors in their emails to faculty. The findings showed that although both groups employed a similar range of request strategies, they differed in the use of syntactic constructions, lexical modifiers, and request perspectives. The Americans tended to use embedded constructions, have a greater range of lexical modifiers, and employ the speaker perspective while the international students tended to use imperatives and present tense constructions, have a limited range of lexical modifiers, and employ the hearer perspective in their email requests. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) examined 200 emails produced by Greek Cypriot university students over a period of 18 months. The findings showed that these students resorted mostly to direct request strategies such as *mood derivable* and *want statements*. Most students did not employ any lexical or syntactic modifiers to reduce requestive force. Even if they did, most of them simply added the word ''please'', which in fact did not change the overall coercive tone. Furthermore, the students' use of address forms showed a great variation, ranging from zero form of address to the more formal ''Dear + title + last name'', which demonstrates that the students in general did not know the preferred style for communicating with faculty via email.

One possible explanation for the aforementioned infelicities is the lack of appropriate models of emails from students to authority figures (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007). L2 students may be aware that writing to their peers and writing to members of the faculty call for different discourse styles (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Chen, 2006), but since making requests is a face-threatening act, it requires sophisticated pragmatic competence on the part of the student to maintain institutional asymmetry to ensure compliance from the faculty recipient. Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) argued that the books on business email correspondence in commercial circulation provide little help, so the more efficient avenue to enhancing L2 students' email literacy in the academic domain appears to be explicit instruction.

Nevertheless, there is a problem as to *what to teach*. Until now, email language has been regarded as a mixed modality of written and spoken language. On the one hand, email language resembles speech due to large use of first and second person pronouns, present tense, and contractions; low level of formality; and existence of flaming behaviors. On the other hand, email language resembles writing due to more complex syntax and vocabulary items than in speech (Baron, 1998, 2010; Gains, 1999; Gimenez, 2000). This explains why Biesenbach-Lucas (2007) argues that determining the appropriateness of a student–faculty email is like shooting at a ''moving target'' (p. 62). Luckily, the efforts along this line of research over the past 15 years seem to have gradually formulated a consensus of what constitutes an appropriate email request to a faculty recipient, which will be presented in detail in the following section.

2.2. Essentials of email requests to faculty in academia

Email styles are subject to cultures. For instance, Bjørge (2007) found that when writing emails to faculty recipients, students from countries such as Japan and Taiwan are more likely to use formal address terms (e.g., Dear + title + last name) while students from countries such as Britain and Germany tend to use less formal alternatives (e.g., Hi + first name). Such variations can be interpreted by Hofstede (2001), who created a power-distance index to evaluate ''the extent to which less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally'' (p. 98). In high power-distance countries, teachers are treated with respect, and education is usually teacher-centered and fact-oriented. On the other hand, education in low power-distance countries is generally student-centered, and teachers can be challenged in class (Bjørge, 2007). When it comes to writing emails to faculty, Hofstede's power-distance index explains why a formal, epistolary email style is expected in high power-distance countries like Japan, Taiwan, China, and Singapore (Chejnová, 2014; Chen, 2001) whereas a less formal email style is expected in low power-distance countries such as Britain, Germany, and the United States.

Generally speaking, emails consist of two major moves—the framing moves and the content moves (Kankaanranta, 2006). The framing moves contribute to the physical layout of the message. Although they are seen as optional structural elements, emails sent up to the institutional hierarchy usually contain such moves (Bou-Franch, 2006, 2011). On the other hand, the content moves are obligatory structural elements, which contribute to the key communicative purpose of the message in an email.

Following Kankaanranta (2006) and Bou-Franch (2006, 2011), the framing moves consist of *Subject*, *Opening*, and *Closing*. The *Subject* appears in a header slot, in which an email writer needs to provide a description of the topic of a message to draw a recipient's attention. Faculty members in general receive a large number of emails every day, so a clear, brief, relevant, and concrete subject line helps quickly decide whether to open or delete an email (Crystal, 2001). The *Opening* is basically ''empty of content'', but ''phatic and interpersonally loaded'' (Bou-Franch, 2011, p. 1773), which is realized by greetings and self-identifications (Bou-Franch, 2006, 2011; Chejnová, 2014; Félix-Brasdefer, 2012). Greetings (e.g., Dear Dr. White) are the most common and salient feature in an asynchronous email communication, for it points to the sender's social relation with the recipient and determines the degree of politeness to be employed. However, empirical research has shown that greetings are usually realized by great variability of pragmalinguistic constructions in the student-to-faculty emails produced by native and non-native speakers of the target language. For example, Biesenbach-Lucas (2009) found that in her study, there were a total of 31 types of greetings in the emails produced by the American native speakers and non-native speakers with Asian backgrounds. Félix-Brasdefer (2012) also found that there were a total of 11 types of greetings found in the L2 Spanish and L1 English email productions sent up to faculty. Such variations may indicate ''both native and non-native email writers' uncertainty as to which greeting might be the most acceptable'' (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2009, p. 189). As for self-identification, Chen (2001) suggests that the provision of students' institutional information would render a more specific role relationship with faculty and possibly make a high-distance request more legitimate. Bou-Franch (2006, 2011) further contends that even if an email is written to the course teacher, it is still essential for students to identify themselves right at the beginning, since the teacher may be teaching a great number of students in several different classes. *Closing* indicates ''the transition from a state of communication to one of non-communication'' (Bou-Franch, 2006, p. 88). In an email request to faculty, *thanking* is the most common type of closing, since students in a requesting position are expected to show gratitude to compensate for the imposition placed upon the recipient. Other less common closings include leave-taking (e.g., ''See you soon''), apologies (e.g., ''Sorry for the delay''), good wishes (e.g., ''Happy New Year''), complimentary closes (e.g., ''Sincerely''), appeals for actions (e.g., ''Looking forward to hearing from you''), and signatures (e.g., Mary Wang) (Bou-Franch, 2006, 2011; Chen, 2001; Herring, 1996; Waldvogel, 2007). However, there seems to be a difference between native and non-native speakers in the use of the closing moves. For example, Biesenbach-Lucas (2009) found that in her study, the American native speakers preferred the use of a simple *Thanks* when closing the emails to faculty. Such a tendency could be interpreted as ''evidence of NSs' development of new e-mail conventions'' (p. 192). On the other hand, the non-native speakers in her study tended to follow conventional business letter templates by using more formal expressions such as *Thank you very much*, *Sincerely* and *See you next week* (p. 192). Such a tendency could be explained by their Asian backgrounds. As mentioned earlier, in the high power-distance countries like Korea, Taiwan and Japan, a formal, epistolary email style is more likely to be adopted to show deference to institutional hierarchy.

In an email request, the content moves are realized by *request strategies* and *request support*. *Request strategies* refer to ''the move that most clearly conveys the request proper'' (Bou-Franch, 2006, p. 85), which can be classified into conventionally indirect strategies such as *query preparatory* (e.g., ''Could I meet you tomorrow?''), as well as direct strategies like *imperatives/mood derivable* (e.g., ''Please extend the due date''), *want/need statements* (e.g., ''I'd like to make an appointment with you''), *elliptical constructions* (e.g., ''Any comments?''), *performatives* (e.g., ''I have to ask for an extension''), *direct questions* (e.g., ''When do you have time?''), and *expectation statements* (e.g., ''I hope you will help me'') (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007). The employment of syntactic modifiers (e.g., tense, aspect) and lexical/phrasal modifiers (e.g., ''please'', ''do you think'') helps to reduce the requestive force imposed upon the recipient. The other move

is *request support*, which generally consists of one or more supportive moves placed external to the major request strategy. The most preferred move is *grounder*, which allows students to give reasons, explanations, or justifications for their requests. Other moves include the *disarmer* (e.g., ''I know that this assignment is important...''), *preparator* (e.g., ''I really need a favor...''), *promise* (e.g., ''I promise I'll have the assignment ready by tomorrow''), *apology* (e.g., I'm very sorry''), *orientation move* (e.g., ''I have a question about the essay''), *compliment/sweetener* (e.g., ''Your opinion counts''), and so forth (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011).

Building on previous works, the present study incorporates email pragmatics into an L2 writing course and investigates the effects of explicit instruction on developing Chinese students' email literacy. Explicit instruction (with metapragmatic information) has been by and large demonstrated to be more beneficial than implicit teaching (without metapragmatic information), since it promotes the noticing and subsequent intake of target pragmatic features (Ishihara and Cohen, 2010; Rose, 2005). This leads us to pose the first research question: ''Did the quality of the students' email requests to faculty improve after explicit instruction?''

Furthermore, the present study adopted a qualitative analysis to examine the students' email performance on the pre- and post-tests. One important reason for such an analysis is that most studies on instructional pragmatics seem to be overly reliant on quantitative data (cf. Halenko and Jones, 2011; Nguyen et al., 2012), but in fact, deeper analysis of learner performances would provide valuable resources for researchers or teachers to understand the aspects that are amenable and resistant to instruction. This leads us to pose the second question: ''If the answer to the first question is positive, in what aspect(s) did the students' email requests to faculty improve?''

3. The study

3.1. Participants

Twenty-eight Chinese EFL students of English participated in this study, with four males and twenty-four females. All of them were third year undergraduate students majoring in English. The department encouraged all the students to use English when interacting with the classmates and the faculty. They were enrolled in a required Advanced Writing course at a university of technology in Taiwan in the fall semester of 2012. All their TOEIC scores fell within the range of 650–740 (the intermediate level).[1] Before the instruction, an informal survey was conducted in the classroom by asking the students how often and under what circumstances they normally wrote emails to faculty in English. The students reported that they wrote approximately 2–3 emails to faculty each semester for help with the course content, a leave of absence, an extension of an assignment, or a permission to add/drop a course.

3.2. Instruments

The major instruments in this study were a pre-test and a post-test written discourse completion task (WDCT). Despite the extensive use of the WDCT in interlanguage and cross-cultural pragmatics research, this instrument has undergone a great deal of methodological scrutiny regarding its construct validity to collect speech act data. Most criticisms concern the extent to which the WDCT data represents what subjects would actually say in spontaneous conversation (cf. Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2013; Golato, 2003). Such a doubt for construct validity arises primarily because different performance tasks induce subjects to draw on different sources of knowledge (Bialystok, 1982). When performing the WDCT, subjects, whether native or non-native, are more likely to draw on conscious, explicit knowledge (or declarative knowledge) (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013). On the other hand, they would rely more extensively on unconscious, implicit knowledge (or procedural knowledge) when carrying out spontaneous conversation because ''there is little opportunity for careful on-line planning'' (Ellis, 2004, p. 238). When it comes to authentic and elicited emails, however, the gap could be smaller because both may involve planning during the writing process and thus subjects may draw on explicit, or declarative knowledge that can be analyzed and/or articulated (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013).

The WDCTs were constructed by four hypothetical situations. Each situation was composed of a set of two similar items across the pre- and post-tests, making a total of eight (see Table 1). Such resemblance was intentional, with an aim to control the level of difficulty of the two items in each set, so that the students' progress (if any) could be attributed to the instruction itself and their pre- and post-test performance in each set could be more easily compared from a qualitative perspective.[2]

---

[1] In Taiwan, the TOEIC scores are officially categorized into five ability levels: 350–549 (beginning), 550–749 (intermediate), 750–879 (high-intermediate), 880–949 (Advanced), and 950↑ (superior) (The Executive Yuan, 2006).

[2] Although situational resemblance made it easier to compare and interpret the pre- and post-test performance, it should be handled with caution due to practice effect, which could be affected by the interval between the pre- and post-tests. In the present study, there was a five-week lag between the pre- and post-tests constrained by the school calendar. In the future research, however, longer intervals may be designed to keep practice effect to a minimum.

Table 1
Email request situations in the pre- and post-tests.

	Situations	Distance	Pre-test	Post-test
1	Paper extension	−D	Your professor asked you to hand in a research paper today, but you cannot finish it by the deadline. You decide to write an email to the professor to ask for an extension.	Your professor asked you to hand in a composition today, but you cannot finish it by the deadline. You decide to write an email to the professor to ask for an extension.
2	A favor for final scores	−D	You are expecting to graduate this semester. However, at the end of the semester before you graduate, you receive a final score of 58[a] for a required course. Since you need the credits in order to successfully graduate, you decide to write an email to the professor to reconsider your score.	You will be expelled from school if you fail one more course this semester. However, at the end of the semester, you receive a final score of 58 for a required course. Since you need the credits in order to stay in school, you decide to write an email to the professor to reconsider your score.
3	Leave of absence	+D	It's the beginning of a new semester. You are taking a course which is taught by a professor you do not know. However, you need to take sick leave for the first two weeks. You decide to write an email to the professor to ask for permission.	It's the beginning of a new semester. You are taking a course which is taught by a professor you do not know. However, you need to take personal leave for the first two weeks. You decide to write an email to the professor to ask for permission.
4	Invitation	+D	You are the head of the Student Association. At the upcoming School Anniversary celebrations, the association will organize an English Speech Contest for the students. To make the competition fair, you want to invite a professor who teaches English at another university to be one of the judges. You have heard about this professor, but you do not know him/her. You decide to write an email before calling.	You are the head of the Student Association. At the upcoming School Anniversary celebrations, the association will organize a series of speeches for the students. You want to invite a professor who teaches career planning at another university to deliver a speech on this topic. You have heard about this professor, but you do not know him/her. You decide to write an email before calling.

Note: Situations 1 and 3 represent the "making excuses" function, situation 2 the "asking for help" function, and situation 4 the "making formal requests" function in Bloch's (2002) study.

[a] In my institution, teachers tend to use a hundred-point system to score students. The minimum passing score is 60 out of 100.

In the present study, each situation reflects one of the major communicative functions of student–faculty cyber-consultations proposed by Bloch (2002)—asking for help, making excuses and making formal requests. Although the power variable (i.e., low to high) was held constant in these situations, the distance variable was manipulated. Half of the situations were marked by −*Distance* (i.e., the learner knows the recipient) whereas the other half were marked by +*Distance* (i.e., the learner does not know the recipient). The imposition variable, however, was not manipulated in the present study because the judgment of whether a given situation is of high or low imposition is usually subjective.

In addition to comparing the students' email performance, their level of confidence in felicitousness/appropriateness of email message on the pre- and post-tests can serve as rough estimations of change in L2 students' pragmatic ability. Rose and Ng (2001), Takahashi (2001) and Martinez-Flor (2006) found that after instruction, L2 students' level of confidence/satisfaction improved either in producing the given speech act or in judging the appropriateness of speech act performance. Therefore, each situation was followed by one perception question as shown below:

I am confident in what I wrote in this situation

1	2	3	4
Totally disagree			Totally Agree

3.3. Procedures

Before the instruction, the students were required to respond to the pre-test situations within one class hour in a computer lab. For each situation, they were asked to fill in an email template designed for the present study to simulate authentic email writing conditions. This email template has two sections. In the upper header section, the students needed to imagine the faculty member they would write to and then to type the information into the *From:*, *To:*, *CC:* (if any), and *Subject:* slots. In the lower body section, the students were asked to type the message they intended to convey based on the given situation (Crystal, 2001).

The treatment began two weeks after the pre-test. According to Baron (1998), email is seen as a new, particular genre embedded in the larger context of computer mediated communication. In view of this, the genre-based approach proposed by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) was adopted in the present study. Under the SFL framework, writing is seen as a social activity in which goal, audience, and language must come into being simultaneously to create a coherent text (Hyland,

2003, 2007). In an email, the goal and audience are clear, and the language used to achieve the goal is usually identifiable, so the SFL genre-based approach is considered a suitable framework for developing L2 students' email literacy.

The teaching–learning process in this approach is a cycle consisting of four major sessions: (1) *Setting the context*, (2) *Modeling*, (3) *Joint construction* and (4) *Independent construction* (Hyland, 2007). In the first stage, the students were divided into small groups, each of which was assigned to discuss a different authentic email request to faculty recipients and then fill out a perception questionnaire. This questionnaire asked the students to judge on a four-point Likert scale formality, tone of voice, relationship with the faculty, clarity and informativeness, organization and coherence, rights to make the request as well as likelihood of the faculty's compliance of the request. The students also needed to evaluate the sender's personality and the appropriateness level of the email as a whole. Finally, they were asked to give general comments (see Appendix I). This session lasted 1 h. In the second stage, the teacher (i.e., the researcher) introduced the essentials of an email request to a faculty recipient. These essentials were presented in the order of *Subject*, *Openings* (greeting + self-identification), *Message* (request strategies + request support), and *Closings* (thanking, leave-taking, etc.). The presentation of each essential was followed by exercises such as *Fill-in the blanks*, *Multiple choice* and *Matching* to reinforce the pragmalinguistic constructions that the students had been taught. This session lasted three hours. In the third stage, the teacher worked with the students to wrap up all the essentials they had learned to respond to two email requests derived from the pre-test—Paper extension (−D) and Leave of absence (+D). This session lasted one hour. Finally, in the *Independent construction* session, the post-test was administered to the students. The students were told to do the same thing as they did on the pre-test. Unlike the pre-test, however, the post-test was carried out under exam conditions because it was the midterm week according to the school calendar. This session lasted one hour. Overall, the entire course lasted six hours, meeting two hours per week.

3.4. Data collection and data analysis

A total of 224 (28 students × 4 situations × 2 times) email scripts were collected before and after the instruction. To answer the first research question, all the email scripts were rated by one native speaker of English and one native speaker of Chinese. Both of them had taught writing at a university level for more than five years, but they had no previous experience in assessing students' email requests to faculty. The raters were asked to evaluate the students' email scripts against a holistic scale with four ability levels (4: *Appropriate*, 3: *Somewhat appropriate*, 2: *Somewhat inappropriate*, 1: *Inappropriate*) designed to evaluate L2 students' email pragmatics (Ishihara, 2010). However, to make this scale fit the present study more closely, minor changes were made, as indicated in italics below (For the complete revised version, see Appendix II).

Appropriate level

Original version:
Reflects a fine-tuned awareness of sociocultural norms and/or understanding of the cultural reasoning of the norms in the community; well-organized and coherent; appropriate in the levels of politeness, directness, and formality; contains an appropriate range of grammar structures, semantic moves and word choice with minor errors (if any) that do not cause misinterpretation; *carries a tone that is preferred in the community*.

Revised version:
Reflects a fine-tuned awareness of the student–professor relationship in the community; well-organized and coherent; appropriate in the levels of politeness, directness, and formality; contains an appropriate range of grammar structures, semantic moves and word choice with minor errors (if any) that do not cause misinterpretation; *carries a tone that is preferred in the student–professor relationship in the community*.

To enhance reliability, a short training session was conducted for the raters. First, the raters were given a manual containing a set of benchmark samples for each ability level. Then they were asked to evaluate a smaller corpus of 10 email scripts against this rubric to develop common interpretations of the scale contents. Any questions regarding the scale and rating discrepancies were fully discussed during the session. After that, the raters assessed all the data respectively in its entirety (cf. Rose, 2001). The final score of each script was the average of the two raters' scores. The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation analyses showed that the interrater reliability coefficients were 0.81 on the pre-test and 0.85 on the post-test. These values seem satisfactory, since Pollitt (1991) suggests that an interrater agreement value of 0.8 is adequate for a writing test. Then, paired *t*-test was run to see if there was a statistically significant difference between the students' pre- and post-test email productions. Paired *t*-test was also run to examine if there was a statistically significant difference in the students' pre- and post-test confidence level.[3]

To answer the second research question, the email scripts were subjected to move structure analysis proposed by Bhatia (1993). Table 2 illustrates the moves which are the most representative in an email request to faculty.

The raters coded all the email scripts based on the moves presented in Table 2. The interrater reliability was 0.87.

---

[3] The data satisfied the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance for paired *t*-test.

Table 2
The moves of email requests to faculty.

Framing moves	Examples
Subject	
Abstract	Hi, I'm Kelly
Concrete	Paper extension
Opening	
Greeting	
Incorrect	Dear Professor Linda
Correct	Dear Professor Huang
Self-identification	
Zero	X
Incomplete	I'm Kelly.
Complete	I'm Kelly Hsu in your writing class.
Closing	
Thanking + complimentary close + signature	Thank you. Sincerely, Kelly Hsu
Thanking + other moves (or other moves + thanking) +complimentary close + signature	Thank you in advance. Have a nice day! Sincerely yours, Kelly Hsu

Content moves	Examples
Request strategies[a]	
Direct	Please give me an extension.
Conventionally indirect	Could you please give me an extension?
Request support	
Vague	I had something when I was writing my paper.
Specific	I have had a serious cold these days, so I couldn't finish the paper on time.

[a] According to Biesenbach-Lucas (2006, 2007), the request strategies found in emails are usually classified into direct strategies, conventionally indirect strategies and hints. However, no hints were found in the present study. Instead, the students used either direct or conventionally indirect strategies to make requests in their emails. One plausible reason is the students' concern for clarity, which has been documented in previous studies (e.g., Ren, 2013; Taguchi, 2012). For L2 learners, the production of hints may call for more cognitive processing, which would increase their burden if they have not developed complete control over sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic knowledge (Ren, 2013).

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative findings

The quantitative analysis addresses the first research question: "Did the quality of the students' email requests to faculty improve after explicit instruction?" The answer is positive, as presented by the pre- and post-test email scores in Tables 3 and 4 as well as by the pre- and post-test confidence levels in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 3 summarizes the paired *t*-test results. The entire measure indicated that the mean scores were 2.39 on the pre-test, and 3.18 on the post-test, a statistically significant change at the *p < 0.01* level of confidence. This means that the raters' assessment of the students' overall email performance progressed from the *Somewhat Inappropriate* level on the pre-test to the *Somewhat Appropriate* level on the post-test. Such gains can also be observed across the four email situations. Situation 1 had the highest gains (1.23), followed by Situation 2 (0.82), Situation 4 (0.71), and Situation 3 (0.39). A visual presentation of the means on the pre- and post-tests appears in Fig. 1.

Table 4 shows the comparison of the students' pre- and post-test email scores in ±Distance situations.

Table 3
Pre- and post-test email scores.

Situations	Pre-test		Post-test		Pre-post-test gain	t	df	Sig.
	M	SD	*M*	SD				
Entire measure	2.39	0.336	3.18	0.592	0.79	6.37	27	0.000[**]
Situation 1	2.41	0.624	3.64	0.621	1.23	6.43	27	0.000[**]
Situation 2	2.38	0.741	3.20	0.966	0.82	3.54	27	0.001[**]
Situation 3	2.59	0.653	2.98	0.887	0.39	2.07	27	0.048[*]
Situation 4	2.18	0.581	2.89	1.066	0.71	3.24	27	0.003[**]

[*] $p < 0.05$.
[**] $p < 0.01$.

Table 4
Pre- and post-test email scores in ±Distance situations.

Situations	Pre-test		Post-test		Pre-post-test gain	t	df	Sig.
	M	SD	M	SD				
−D situations	2.39	0.525	3.42	0.620	1.03	6.25	27	0.000[**]
+D situations	2.38	0.400	2.94	0.821	0.55	3.31	27	0.002[**]

[*] $p < 0.05$.
[**] $p < 0.01$.

Table 5
Pre- and post-test confidence level.

Situations	Pre-test		Post-test		Pre-post-test gain	t	df	Sig.
	M	SD	M	SD				
Entire measure	2.67	0.425	3.17	0.385	0.50	5.55	27	0.000[**]
Situation 1	2.57	0.504	3.32	0.476	0.75	6.78	27	0.000[**]
Situation 2	2.54	0.637	2.93	0.663	0.39	2.38	27	0.025[*]
Situation 3	2.96	0.637	3.29	0.637	0.33	2.20	27	0.036[*]
Situation 4	2.61	0.737	3.14	0.591	0.53	3.38	27	0.002[**]

[*] $p < 0.05$.
[**] $p < 0.01$.

Table 6
Pre- and post-test confidence level in ±Distance situations.

Situations	Pre-test		Post-test		Pre-post-test gain	t	df	Sig.
	M	SD	M	SD				
−D situations	3.13	0.444	3.21	0.460	0.57	5.79	27	0.000[**]
+D situations	2.55	0.458	2.79	0.552	0.43	3.58	27	0.001[**]

[*] $p < 0.05$.
[**] $p < 0.01$.

As shown in Table 4, the mean scores of the −D situations were 2.39 on the pre-test and 3.42 on the post-test, a statistically significant difference at the $p < 0.01$ level of confidence. The mean scores of the +D situations were 2.38 on the pre-test and 2.94 on the post-test, also a statistically significant difference at the $p < 0.01$ level of confidence. This means that after the instruction, the raters' assessment of the students' overall email performance progressed to the *Somewhat Appropriate* level in −D situations but still remained at the *Somewhat Inappropriate* level in +D situations. The higher mean on the pre-test and larger gain on the post-test in the −D situations indicate that it was easier for the students to write to professors they knew than to professors they did not know.

Furthermore, the students' progress in writing email requests can be supported by the gains in terms of confidence on the post-test, as shown in Table 5.
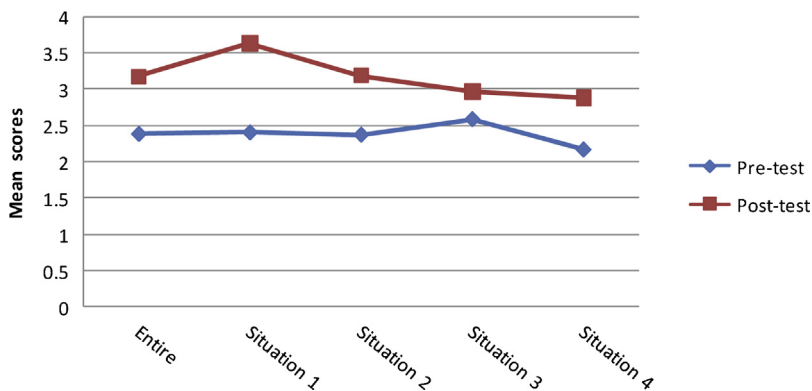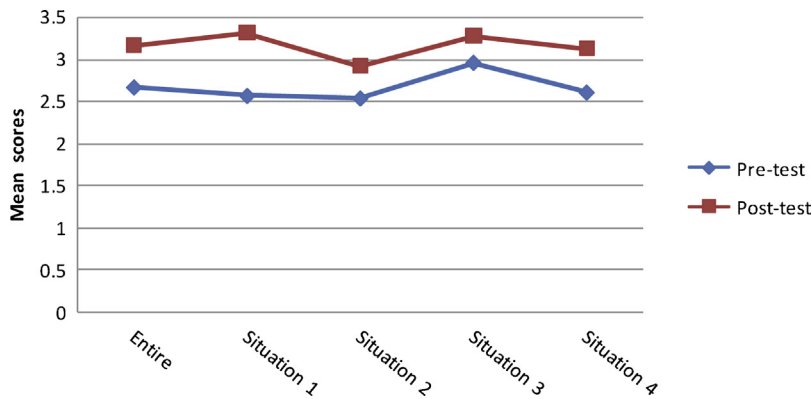

Fig. 1. Pre- and post-test email scores.

Fig. 2. Pre- and post-test confidence levels.

Table 5 shows that for the entire measure, the mean scores were 2.67 on the pre-test and 3.17 on the post-test, a statistically significant change at $p < 0.01$ level of confidence. For situations 1 and 4, the post-test gains were 0.75 and 0.53 respectively, a statistically significant change at $p < 0.01$ level of confidence. For situations 2 and 3, on the other hand, the post-test gains were 0.39 and 0.33 respectively, a statistically significant change at $p < 0.05$ level of confidence. A visual presentation of the means appears in Fig. 2.

As can be seen in Table 6, the mean scores in −D situations were 3.13 on the pre-test and 3.21 on the post-test, a statistically significant change at $p < 0.01$ level of confidence. The mean scores in +D situations were 2.55 on the pre-test and 2.79 on the post-test, also a statistically significant change at $p < 0.01$ level of confidence. The higher pre-/post-test gain in −D situations (0.57) than in +D situations (0.43) further confirms that the students had more confidence in felicitousness/ appropriateness of email message when writing to professors they knew than when writing to professors they did not know.

In short, the quantitative analysis showed that the students made significant progress in their email productions and confidence level on the post-test over the pre-test. Such gains demonstrated the effectiveness of the instruction, which coincide with previous research in instructional pragmatics (c.f., Halenko and Jones, 2011; Li, 2011; Martinez-Flor, 2006; Narita, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2012). In the following section, each essential will be examined in detail with respect to the students' pre- and post-test performance to see in what aspects they made progress in the productions.

4.2. Qualitative findings

The qualitative analysis addresses the second research question: ''If the answer to the first question is positive, in what aspect(s) did the students' email requests to faculty improve?'' The findings will be presented in terms of framing and content moves.

4.2.1. Framing moves

As mentioned previously, framing moves include *Subject*, *Opening* and *Closing*. First, a concrete subject can facilitate immediate recognition of the email's purpose and further serve as a contextualization cue for intertextual reference or information retrieval at a later date (Crystal, 2001; Frehner, 2008). As a result, the subjects in the present study were classified in terms of degree of concreteness, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7 indicates that even though more than half of the subjects (69%) were concrete on the pre-test, 31% of them were abstract, as shown in (1):

(1) Dora from E3A (S15, Situation 3, pre-test)

Example (1) was coded as abstract because it does not relate to the theme of the email message. In fact, 90% of the abstract subjects found in the present study were similar to (1). The students might have assumed that by identifying

Table 7
Subjects on the pre- and post-tests.

Types	Pre-test	Post-test
Abstract	35 (31%)	10 (9%)
Concrete	77 (69%)	102 (91%)
Total	112 (100%)	112 (100%)

Table 8
Greetings on the pre- and post-tests.

Types	Pre-test	Post-test
Incorrect	60 (54%)	12 (11%)
Correct	52 (46%)	100 (89%)
Total	112 (100%)	112 (100%)

themselves in the subject line, it would be easier for them to draw the faculty recipient's attention. Chang and Hsu (1998) also found that when writing email requests to faculty recipients, the Chinese students would supply abstract subjects such as ''Hi'', ''I'm Edward'' and ''Season's Greetings''. On the other hand, the American students would provide more concrete subjects such as ''Advice'' to echo the theme of an email request.

After the instruction, however, abstract subjects were reduced to 9%, and 91% of the subjects were coded as concrete, as shown in examples (2)–(5):

(2) Request for an extension (S25, Situation 1, post-test)
(3) Reconsideration of semester scores (S2, Situation 2, post-test)
(4) Asking for a personal leave (S11, Situation 3, post-test)
(5) An invitation for a speech in XXX [school name] (S16, Situation 4, post-test)

The next move is the *Opening*, which is realized by *greeting* and *self-identification* (Bou-Franch, 2006, 2011). The choice of greeting is usually decided by how email correspondents perceive their relationship (Bjørge, 2007). In the present study, all the emails contained greetings, which was in line with Biesenbach-Lucas' (2009) study. In her study, 87% of the native and 93% of the non-native emails preferred to include greetings in their emails to faculty. In addition, the strong tendency for the students to use Dear + title + last name in the present study corroborates Biesenbach-Lucas' (2009) findings that non-native speakers of English with Asian backgrounds tended to adopt such a greeting construction to address their professors.[4] This construction as the most preferred greeting realization could be interpreted as these students' heavy reliance on the business letter template (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2009) and obedience to the Chinese Address Maxim for respectfulness in status-unequal encounters (Gu, 1990). Nonetheless, some of these titles were not used correctly, as presented in Table 8. It shows that before the instruction, more than half of the greetings contained incorrect constructions. Among them, *Dear + incorrect academic title + first name* had the highest frequency of occurrence (60%), followed by *Dear + correct academic title + first name* (15%), *Dear + incorrect academic title + last name* (14%), and *Dear + title* (11%), as illustrated in the examples (6)–(9) respectively.

(6) Dear Teacher Naomi (S27, Situation 1, pre-test)
(7) Dear Professor Julie (S1, Situation 3, pre-test)
(8) Dear Teacher Lin (S20, Situation 2, pre-test)
(9) Dear Professor (S14, Situation 4, pre-test)

Notice that while (7) may result from a lack of knowledge about the address system in English, (6) and (7) seem to be direct transfer from Chinese. In Chinese, the word *teacher* can be used as an address term (Gu, 1990). However, such an organizational title cannot be used to refer to institutional hierarchy in English. The problem with (9) is that the use of *Dear Professor* implies writing to a general group, which is not considered appropriate in these request situations calling for writing to a particular faculty member.

After the instruction, 89% of the emails used the correct construction *Dear + correct academic title + last name* (e.g., Dear Professor Huang). However, 11% of the address terms were still coded as incorrect for their use of *Dear Professor*. This shows that some students had not acquired the functional distinction between *Dear Professor* and *Dear Professor + last name*.

Self-identification refers to the provision of institutional information such as the student's name and the course he/she is taking with a particular professor (Bou-Franch, 2006, 2011). The preference to include self-identification in the emails written by the Taiwanese students is also evident in Chen's (2001) study. In her study, 60% of the emails written by the Taiwanese students contained self-identification while only 9% of the emails written by the American students contained this move. Table 9 shows the percentages of zero, incomplete and complete self-identifications. It shows that before the

---

[4] In Biesenbach-Lucas' (2009) study, the native speakers of American English tended to use *title + last name* as their most preferred choice, followed by *hi + title + last name*. The word *dear* was usually omitted in their emails to faculty.

Table 9
Self-identifications on the pre- and post-tests.

Types	Pre-test	Post-test
Zero	14 (13%)	0 (0%)
Incomplete	50 (45%)	9 (8%)
Complete	48 (42%)	103 (92%)
Total	112 (100%)	112 (100%)

instruction, 58% of the emails contained either zero or incomplete self-identifications while only 42% of them included complete self-identifications. The incomplete/complete distinction lies primarily in the existence of course/institution information in addition to the student's name. Such information is particularly important in Situations 3 and 4 because the student and professor do not know each other in these two situations. (10) and (11) are two examples of incomplete self-identifications on the pre-test:

(10) I am Shelly in your course this semester. (S1, Situation 3, pre-test)
(11) My name is Sophie. I am the head of the Student Association. (S11, Situation 4, pre-test)

In (10), the student did not indicate which course she was enrolled in. In (11), although the name and position were provided, the student did not indicate which school she represented. Both cases were coded as incomplete because of insufficient information provided to the faculty recipient.

   After the instruction, all the emails contained self-identifications, including 103 (92%) complete ones and only 9 (8%) incomplete ones. (12) and (13) are typical examples of complete self-identifications:

(12) My name is Helen Yang, one of your students in your listening course in this new semester.
      (S13, Situation 3, post-test)
(13) My name is Tom Chen. I am the head of the Student Association of XXX [school name].
      (S25, Situation 4, post-test)

   The last component of the framing moves is *Closing*, which generally reflects a great deal of stylistic variations (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2009; Bjørge, 2007; Félix-Brasdefer, 2012). In the present study, however, the students tended to structure their closings in a more fixed way, as shown in Table 10. This table shows that before the instruction, 87% of the students tended to end their emails in the sequence of *Thanking + complimentary close + signature*, as in (14):

(14) . . .
      Thank you very much.
      Sincerely yours,
      Lucy Liu
      (S10, Situation 2, pre-test)

   After the instruction, while the majority (63%) still indicated such a preference, the closing sequence of *Thanking + other moves + complimentary close + signature* increased from 13% to 37%. An analysis of these moves reveals that they are subject to situational contexts: *Leave-taking* (e.g., ''See you soon'') occurred exclusively in Situation 3, where the student needs to take a leave for two weeks; *Good wishes* (e.g., ''Have a nice weekend'') appeared evenly across the four situations to express well-being to the faculty recipient; *apologies* (e.g., ''Sorry to have bothered you'') were observed

Table 10
Closings on the pre- and post-tests.

Types	Pre-test	Post-test
Thanking + complimentary close[a] + signature	97 (87%)	70 (63%)
Thanking + other moves (or other moves + thanking) + complimentary close + signature	15 (13%)	42 (37%)
Total	112 (100%)	112 (100%)

[a] The students' frequent use of complimentary close corroborates Chen's (2001) findings, which reveal that 53% of the emails produced by the Taiwanese subjects contained *Sincerely* or *Regards* whereas only 22% of the emails produced by the American subjects used such forms. The infrequent use of *Sincerely* by native speakers of American English in their emails to faculty is also demonstrated by Biesenbach-Lucas (2009).

Table 11
Request strategies on the pre- and post-tests.

Types	Pre-test	Post-test
Direct strategies	91 (65%)	83 (58%)
Conventionally indirect strategies	48 (35%)	60 (42%)
Total	139 (100%)	143 (100%)

mostly in Situations 1, 2, and 3, wherein the students asked for paper extension, score reconsideration, and leave permission; and *appeals for action* (e.g., ''Looking forward to your reply'') was found mostly in Situation 4, where a definite reply to an invitation is expected. (15) is a typical example:

(15) . . .
      Thank you in advance. I'm looking forward to hearing from you.
      Sincerely,
      Mark Chou
      (S26, Situation 4, post-test)

In short, the above analyses indicate that the students did make significant progress in the framing moves after the instruction. Such progress is demonstrated by large percentages of concrete subjects, correct greeting constructions, complete self-identifications, and finally, a greater variety of closing moves on the post-test.

4.2.2. Content moves

The content moves in the present study include *request strategies* and *request support* (Bou-Franch, 2006). The request strategies found in the present study were categorized into direct[5] (e.g., *imperatives*, *performatives*, *want statements*, *need statements*, and *expectation statements*) and conventionally indirect strategies (e.g., *query preparatory*) (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006), as shown in Table 11.

Before the instruction, about two-thirds (65%) of the request strategies were direct strategies, and only about one-third (35%) of the strategies were conventionally indirect strategies. Greater use of direct strategies in L2 students' email requests to faculty was also found in Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011). Of all the direct strategies, *want/need statements* constituted the majority (58%), followed by *expectation statements* (21%), *explicit performatives* (15%), and *imperatives* (6%), as illustrated in the examples (16)–(19) respectively.

(16) I want to take sick leave for the first two weeks. (S15, Situation 3, pre-test)
(17) I hope you can come to our school and be one of the judges. (S20, Situation 4, pre-test)
(18) I request professor to rethink my situation and give me score again. (S16, Situation 2, pre-test)
(19) Please give me one more day to finish the paper. (S1, Situation 1, pre-test)

Examples (16) and (17) can be explained by L1 transfer. In Chinese, the use of subjectivizers *I want* in a request situation is perceived as soft, tentative and polite, and the use of *I hope* to a higher status person indicates solidarity politeness (Zhang, 1995; Yu, 1999). However, such expressions indicating the speaker's wants or wishes would be considered as impolite or rude by native speakers of English. As for (18) and (19), the offensive tone of these two examples is very likely to cause negative affect on the part of the faculty recipient (Hardford and Bardovi-Harlig, 1996).

After the instruction, there was a moderate 7% of change in the percentages of direct (65–58%) and conventionally indirect strategies (35–42%). The use of mitigation devices also increased in variety. Before the instruction, the marker *please* constituted almost 90% of the mitigators used by the students, which coincides with previous research showing that *please* is preferred by most non-native students to soften requestive force (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2006, 2007; Chen, 2001; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011; Hardford and Bardovi-Harlig, 1996). After the instruction, there was an emerging use of mitigation devices other than the marker *please*. The majority of these devices was syntactical (83%), primarily realized by the use of embedded constructions while the rest were lexical/phrasal (17%), primarily realized by the use of downtoners and consultative devices, as illustrated in the examples (20)–(22) respectively:

---

[5] The numbers for each type of direct strategies on the pre- and post-tests are as follows: imperatives (pre-test: 20, post-test: 18), performatives (pre-test: 15, post-test: 10), want statements (pre-test: 30, post-test: 25), need statements (pre-test: 10, post-test: 12) and expectation statements (pre-test: 16, post-test: 18). Therefore there were a total of 91 direct strategies on the pre-test and 83 on the post-test.

(20) *I wonder if* you can give me an extension for the composition. (S12, Situation 1, post-test)
(21) Can you *possibly* allow my leave? (S11, Situation 2, post-test)
(22) *Would it be possible* for you to deliver a speech in our school? (S13, Situation 4, post-test)

The increased use of embedded constructions like (20) lent support to Takahashi's (2001) claim that explicit teaching is the most effective approach to assist L2 students' acquisition of bi-clausal request forms. The occurrences of downtoners and consultative devices like those in (21) and (22) are similar to Economidou-Kogetsidis' (2011) findings that the marker *please*, consultative devices, and downtoners were the top three lexical/phrasal mitigators most frequently used in the email requests by Greek students of English.

Request support provides the ground for the request (Bou-Franch, 2006). Even though there is a wide range of request support reported in previous research as shown in Section 2.2, only the grounder was analyzed in the present study because it constituted about 90% of the support found in the students' email performance. The extensive reliance on the grounder coincides with Woodfield and Economidou-Kogetsidis (2010), who compared email requests to faculty made by 89 advanced-level ESL learners and 87 British English native speakers in terms of internal modifications, external modifications and request perspectives. In their study, they found that the grounder occupied more than 68% of the external modifications (or request support) in the emails produced by both groups. The grounder needs to be specific enough in order for the faculty recipient to grant his/her request in these situations. Table 12 shows the distributions of vague/specific grounders on the pre- and post-tests.

As can be seen in Table 12, the distribution of vagueness and specificity on the pre- and post-tests changed by only 3%, indicating that the students still did not have a good mastery of grounders even after the instruction. This finding corroborates previous studies showing that providing specific grounders could be an area of difficulty for L2 students (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, 1993; Bardovi-Harlig and Griffin, 2005; Beebe et al., 1990).

Since vagueness/specificity varies from situation to situation, each pair of pre- and post-tests is examined in detail here. The first pair of situations asks for a paper extension. A grounder coded as vague in this pair is generally characterized by the words such as *some* or *something*. On the other hand, a grounder coded as specific usually appeals to the need for more time to fix the problems in the assignment. Compare (23) and (24):

(23) I cannot hand in the paper today because something happened. [Vague] (S18, Situation 1, pre-test)
(24) When I checked through the composition, I found several mistakes, so I need more time to correct them. [Specific](S20, Situation 1, post-test)

The second pair of situations asks for a reconsideration of a score. A request of this kind lacks legitimacy, so a grounder coded as specific usually resorted to empathy on the part of the faculty recipient by stressing that it would be impossible for the student to graduate or stay in school with this failing score, only two points below passing. Compare (25) and (26):

(25) I got a trouble with my final scores. I really need you to help me. [Vague](S13, Situation 2, pre-test)
(26) I noticed that I need two more points for your listening course. It is very important for me because if I do not pass this course, I will be kicked out of school. [Specific] (S16, Situation 2, post-test)

The third pair of situations asks for leave permission for the first two weeks at the beginning of a new semester. Two weeks is a long time, so a grounder coded as specific normally referred to the illness and/or doctor's advice to certify the need for sick leave, or to a particular matter which must be taken care of to gain credibility for personal leave. Compare (27) and (28):

(27) Because of sickness, I have to take leaves for the first two weeks. [Vague] (S11, Situation 3, pre-test)
(28) My grandfather passed away yesterday. My family and I have to go to the States to deal with the funeral. It will take us about two weeks. [Specific] (S21, Situation 3, post-test)

Table 12
Grounders on the pre- and post-tests.

Types	Pre-test	Post-test
Vague	51 (46%)	48 (43%)
Specific	61 (54%)	64 (57%)
Total	112 (100%)	112 (100%)

The last pair of situations extends an invitation to the faculty recipient. A grounder coded as specific should include the theme, time, and place of the activity, as required by an effective invitation (Wolfson et al., 1983). Without such information, it would be difficult for the faculty recipient to decide whether to accept the invitation or not. Compare (29) and (30):

(29) Our association is going to hold an English speech contest next week. [Vague] (S7, Situation 4, pre-test)
(30) To celebrate the upcoming school anniversary on November 22, 2013, our association is organizing a speech on career planning for the senior students in the auditorium of XXX [school name].
      [Specific] (S20, Situation 4, post-test)

In short, compared to framing moves, the students made modest progress in content moves after the instruction. Such progress is demonstrated by the increased occurrences of conventionally indirect strategies, mitigation devices, and specific grounders on the post-test.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the efficacy of instruction to develop intermediate-level Chinese students' literacy in email requests to faculty recipients. Two research questions were posed. The first question aimed at exploring whether explicit instruction promoted the overall quality of the students' email performance. The answer to this question is positive, as evidenced by the quantitative findings showing that the students had significant gains in both post-test scores and confidence level after the instruction. The second question addressed the respects in which the students' performance improved as an instructional outcome. It appears that the students improved greatly in terms of the framing moves, as demonstrated by the greater use of concrete subjects, correct greeting constructions, complete self-identifications, and closing moves on the post-test than on the pre-test. On the other hand, it seems that the students made only modest progress in terms of the content moves, as evidenced by slight increases in the use of conventionally indirect strategies and mitigation devices, and in the provision of specific grounders.

Considering the first research question, the present study indicates that the students benefited from explicit instruction and adds further weight to previous research investigating the effects of explicit instruction at a pragmatic level (Ishihara and Cohen, 2010; Rose, 2005). What sets the present study apart from previous intervention studies is that it adopted SFL genre-based pedagogy, which has been demonstrated by L2 writing research to be effective in teaching a "school-sponsored genre" (Yasuda, 2011, p. 113) such as argumentation, exposition, or narration. Hyland (2007) further claims that this pedagogy is "the most clearly articulated approach to genre both theoretically and pedagogically" (p. 153). Theoretically, this approach draws on Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1994), which proposes three metafunctions to realize the construction of genres. The *ideational* function construes experience (*field*), the *interpersonal* function enacts social relations (*tenor*), and the *textual* function weaves together the first two functions to produce discourse in a text (*mode*). As mentioned earlier in Section 3.3, this approach is suited to structure email lessons because when writing an email, the writer needs to consider at the same time the purpose of the message, the person addressed to and the pragmalinguistic expressions used to convey the writer's intent. However, it seems that the only study to adopt such an approach in email instruction was conducted by Yasuda (2011), who designed syllabi that incorporated various types of email tasks (e.g., gratitude, apology, request) in a semester-long writing course. The results of her study showed that the students were more goal-oriented, developed clearer audience awareness, and became more conscious of the language choices of each email type after the instruction.

Pedagogically, what raises SFL genre-based approach above other approaches is that it outlines an explicit teaching–learning cycle for classroom application. *Setting the context* is similar to the awareness-raising activity in most intervention studies in L2 pragmatics research. In the present study, the students were asked to respond to a perception questionnaire (see Appendix I) by evaluating authentic email requests to faculty recipients. This activity is meaningful because the students would start to notice how a given email would leave an impression on its recipient (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Hardford and Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Hendriks, 2010). Such *noticing* raises the first level of awareness, which is a starting point for all learning to take place (Schmidt, 1990). In *Modeling*, the teacher analyzed the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic information about the framing and content moves. This stage is said to promote the students' second level of awareness, *understanding*, which refers to whatever features of the input in the system to be learned (Schmidt, 1990). In *Joint construction*, the teacher worked with the students so that they could learn to write appropriate emails from the teacher as a more competent person. Such teacher-student cooperation helped bridge the gap between the student's current knowledge and his/her potential achievable level, as posited by Vygotsky's (1978) notion of zone of proximal development. In the last stage, *Independent construction*, the students worked on the emails as a post-test without the teacher's guidance. In a nutshell, the overall instructional effectiveness shown in the present study can be attributed to the support offered to the students. On the one hand, the students gained confidence and took control of the tasks given through step-by-step scaffolding. On the other hand, the students became independent email writers in the end through the gradual removal of teacher support.

Despite their overall progress, the students were found to show greater improvements in the framing moves than in the content moves, which could be explained by the functional distinction between these two moves. According to Bou-Franch (2006), the framing moves are more interpersonally oriented and highly formulaic. On the other hand, the content moves are more informationally loaded and highly idiosyncratic. The fact that the formulaic features are more amenable to explicit instruction than the idiosyncratic ones can be supported by Bouton (1999), who worked with a group of international graduate students on the acquisition of implicatures. Before the instruction, the relevance-based implicatures were more easily interpreted by these students while *POPE Q*, *sequence implicatures*, *indirect criticism*, and *irony* seemed to be more difficult for them. However, after six hours of instruction, no progress was found in their interpretations of relevance-based implicatures, but significant changes were observed in their interpretations of *POPE Q*, *sequence implicatures*, *indirect criticism*, and *irony*. Bouton attributed this to the idiosyncrasy/formulaicity distinction between these two types of implicatures. He explained that relevance-based implicatures are idiosyncratic, which would have prohibited student progress because the teachers were unable to provide all the background information on situations in which such implicatures may occur. In contrast, *POPE Q* and the others were easier for the students to acquire because the formulaic nature made these implicatures more controllable in an instructional setting.

The mixture of formulaic and idiosyncratic features in an email suggests that a combination of deductive and inductive approaches may be more beneficial at the Modeling stage. The deductive approach adopted in the present study seems to have worked well with the framing moves, as indicated by the students' great improvements in terms of the *Subject*, *Opening*, and *Closing* moves. This approach is primarily teacher-centered. During the instruction, the teacher spent much time analyzing how each of the framing moves manifests itself in the email samples. Such an analysis of knowledge helped the mental representations of the framing moves become more explicit and organized (Bialystok, 1993).

However, the deductive approach alone did not appear to have worked as well with the content moves. Even after the instruction, 43% of the students still had difficulty in providing specific grounders. In addition, the tendency to use a very limited range of mitigations from an array of possibilities could have resulted from teaching induction if more time was unintentionally spent on certain types of mitigators than on the others (Kasper, 1982; Takahashi, 2001). Since content moves are subject to situational contexts, the inductive approach may serve as a complement to the deductive approach. In this approach, students are regarded as ethnographers or researchers (Ishihara and Cohen, 2010). They are encouraged to collect email requests from naturally occurring resources, analyze the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic features inherent in these emails, and/or compare these features with what has been taught in the classroom. By controlling attention to the prominent features (Bialystok, 1993) in the email, students can gradually generate or even confirm hypotheses about what counts as an appropriate email request to a faculty recipient in various contexts. Such a self-discovery process is not only applicable in an instructional setting but also beneficial in raising students' email awareness outside the classroom.

There are two limitations to the present study. First, if independent construction had not been carried out under the exam conditions, the students could have had more time to discuss the situations before writing email messages individually, which, would be more beneficial to their productions. Second, this study failed to measure the students' delayed post-test performance due to time constraints set by the school calendar and the fixed syllabus. Even though most intervention studies, like this one, have been demonstrated to have an immediate effect on developing L2 students' pragmatic proficiency, it is still controversial as to whether such instructional effects are retained after a certain period of time (cf. Chen, 2011; Halenko and Jones, 2011; Koike and Pearson, 2005; Narita, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2012).

In conclusion, for L2 pragmatists who are interested in following up this line of research, probing the cognitive processes of L2 students engaged in an email activity may be taken into consideration in future research. By detecting students' thought processes through verbal reports, whether concurrent or retrospective or both, it would be possible for the teacher to uncover what sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic aspects students would normally attend to when constructing emails, and to understand the gap between what they want to express and what they actually write in an email (Cohen, 1996). Cohen and Olshtain (1993) point out three advantages of using verbal report when L2 learners carry out roleplay tasks. First, learners may experience a more difficult time in producing complex speech act behaviors than expected by teachers. The assessment of students' end products only would be doing them ''a disservice'' (p. 50). Second, through verbal reports, learners may become aware of the strategies they tend to employ when carrying out a given task and become more systematic in their future use of these strategies. Finally, notice that not all the tasks call for the same amount of processing demands on the part of learners. Through verbal reports, teachers may know the level of demands of different tasks. Such knowledge is able to help teachers to explain more easily students' success or failure at completing tasks and to sequence classroom exercises and test tasks more effectively. All these advantages are believed to be applied to verbal reports when used in combination with email tasks.

Acknowledgement

Appendix I

Perception questionnaire for *Setting the Context* stage.

Dr. D,

I would like to make an appointment with you to discuss my courses and obtain the advisement numbers for the summer and fall semesters. Also, I would like to find out more about teaching EFL abroad in Moscow and China, which you mentioned to me recently. When would it be convenient for you to meet with me?

Thank you,

CG

(from Chen 2001, p. 14)

Statements	Totally disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Totally agree
1. I think the style of this email is formal.	1	2	3	4
2. I think this email carries an appropriate tone in such a student-professor relationship.	1	2	3	4
3. I think this email reflects a close relationship between the student and professor.	1	2	3	4
4. I think this email is clear and informative.	1	2	3	4
5. I think this email is well-organized and coherent.	1	2	3	4
6. I think the student who wrote this email has the right to make this request.	1	2	3	4
7. I think it is likely that the professor will comply with this request.	1	2	3	4
8. I think the person who writes this email is: (You may circle more than one answer) *reliable, competent, intelligent controlling, authoritative, dominant sympathetic, tactful and considerate*				
9. I think this email is in general	Inappropriate	Somewhat inappropriate	Somewhat appropriate	Appropriate
	1	2	3	4
10. Comments				

Appendix II

Holistic assessment rubric.

Level	Score	Descriptors
Appropriate	4	Reflects a fine-tuned awareness of student–professor relationship in the community; well-organized and coherent; appropriate in the levels of politeness, directness, and formality; contains an appropriate range of grammar structures, semantic moves and word choice with minor errors (if any) that do not cause misinterpretation; carries a tone that is preferred in the student–professor relationship in the community
Somewhat appropriate	3	Reflects some awareness of student–professor relationship in the community; adequately organized and coherent; reasonably appropriate in the levels of politeness, directness, and formality; good or average use of grammar structures, semantic moves and word choice with some errors that do not usually cause misinterpretation; carries a tone that is moderately appropriate in the student–professor relationship in the community
Somewhat inappropriate	2	Reflects little awareness of student–professor relationship in the community; some problems with organization and coherence; sometimes problematic in the levels of politeness, directness, and formality; fair use of grammar structures, semantic moves and word choice with some major errors that can at times cause misinterpretation; carries a tone that may sometimes be perceived as inappropriate in the student–professor relationship in the community
Inappropriate	1	Reflects very little awareness of student–professor relationship in the community; lacks organization and coherence; inappropriate in the levels of politeness, directness, and formality; poor use of grammar structures, semantic moves and word choice with some major errors that can often cause misinterpretation; carries a tone that can most likely be perceived as inappropriate in the student–professor relationship in the community

References

Bardovi-Harlig, Kathleen, 2013. Developing L2 pragmatics. Lang. Learn. 63, 68–86.

Bardovi-Harlig, Kathleen, Griffin, Robert, 2005. L2 pragmatic awareness: evidence from the ESL classroom. System 33, 401–415.

Bardovi-Harlig, Kathleen, Hartford, Beverly S., 1993. Learning the rules of academic talk: a longitudinal study of pragmatic change. Stud. Second Lang. Acquis. 15, 279–304.

Bardovi-Harlig, Kathleen, Vellenga, Heidi E., 2012. The effect of instruction on conventional expressions in L2 pragmatics. System 40, 77–89.

Baron, Naomi S., 1998. Letters by phone or speech by other means: the linguistics of email. Lang. Commun. 18, 133–170.

Baron, Naomi S., 2010. Discourse structures in instant messaging: the case of utterance breaks. Language@Internet 7 article 4.

Beebe, Leslie M., Takahashi, Tomoko, Uliss-Weltz, Robin, 1990. Pragmatic transfer in ESL refusals. In: Scarcella, R., Andersen, E., Krashen, S.D. (Eds.), On the Development of Communicative Competence in a Second Language. Newbury House, Cambridge, MA, pp. 55–73.

Bhatia, Vijay K., 1993. Analyzing Genre: Language Use in Professional Settings. Longman, London.

Bialystok, Ellen, 1982. On the relationship between knowing and using forms. Appl. Linguist. 3, 181–206.

Bialystok, Ellen, 1993. Symbolic representation and attentional control in pragmatic competence. In: Kasper, G., Blum-Kulka, S. (Eds.), Inter-Language Pragmatics. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 43–57.

Biesenbach-Lucas, Sigrun, 2005. Communication topics and strategies in e-mail consultation: comparison between American and international university students. Lang. Learn. Technol. 9, 24–46.

Biesenbach-Lucas, Sigrun, 2006. Making requests in e-mail: do cyber-consultations entail directness?: toward conventions in a new medium. In: Bardovi-Harlig, K., Felix Brasdefer, C., Omar, A. (Eds.), Pragmatics and Language Learning, vol. 11. University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, HI, pp. 81–107 (National Foreign Language Resource Center).

Biesenbach-Lucas, Sigrun, 2007. Students writing e-mails to faculty: an examination of e-politeness among native and non-native speakers of English. Lang. Learn. Technol. 11, 59–81.

Biesenbach-Lucas, Sigrun, 2009. Little words that could impact one's impression on others: greetings and closings in institutional emails. In: Leow, R.P., Campos, H., Lardiere, D. (Eds.), Little Words: Their History, Phonology, Syntax, Semantics, Pragmatic, and Acquisition. Georgetown University Press, Washington, DC, pp. 183–195.

Bjørge, Anne, 2007. Power distance in English lingua franca e-mail communication. Int. J. Appl. Linguist. 17, 60–80.

Bloch, Joel, 2002. Student/teacher interaction via e-mail: the social context of Internet discourse. J. Second Lang. Writ. 11, 117–134.

Bou-Franch, Patricia, 2006. Solidarity and deference in Spanish computer-mediated communication: a discourse-pragmatic analysis of students' emails to lecturers. In: Bou-Franch, P. (Ed.), Ways into Discourse. Comares, Granada, pp. 61–79.

Bou-Franch, Patricia, 2011. Openings and closings in Spanish e-mail conversations. J. Pragmat. 43, 1772–1785.

Bouton, Lawrence, 1999. Developing non-native speaker skills in interpreting conversational implicatures in English: explicit teaching can ease the process. In: Hinkel, E. (Ed.), Culture in Second Language Teaching and Learning. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 47–70.

Chang, Yu-Ying, Hsu, Yi-Ping, 1998. Requests on email: a cross-cultural comparison. RELC J. 29, 121–151.

Chejnová, Pavla, 2014. Expressing politeness in the institutional e-mail communications of university students in the Czech Republic. J. Pragmat. 60, 175–192.

Chen, Chi-Fen Emily, 2001. Making e-mail requests to professors: Taiwanese vs. American students. In: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association for Applied Linguistics, St. Louis, USA.

Chen, Chi-Fen Emily, 2006. The development of e-mail literacy: from writing to peers to writing to authority figures. Lang. Learn. Technol. 10, 35–55.

Chen, Yuan-shan, 2011. The effect of explicit teaching of American compliment exchanges to Chinese learners of English. Engl. Teach. Learn. 35, 1–42.

Cho, Thomas, 2010. Linguistic features of electronic mail in the workplace: a comparison with memoranda. Language@Internet 7 article 3.

Cohen, Andrew D., 1996. Verbal reports as a source of insights into second language learner strategies. Appl. Lang. Learn. 7, 5–24.

Cohen, Andrew D., Olshtain, Elite, 1993. The productions of speech acts by EFL learners. TESOL Q. 27, 34–57.

Crystal, David, 2001. Language and the Internet. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Economidou-Kogetsidis, Maria, 2011. ''Please answer me as soon as possible'': pragmatic failure in non-native speakers' e-mail requests to faculty. J. Pragmat. 43, 3193–3215.

Economidou-Kogetsidis, Maria, 2013. Strategies, modification and perspective in native speakers' requests: a comparison of WDCT and naturally occurring requests. J. Pragmat. 53, 21–38.

Ellis, Rod, 2004. The definition and measurement of L2 explicit knowledge. Lang. Learn. 54, 227–275.

Félix-Brasdefer, César, 2012. Email openings and closings: pragmalinguistic and gender variation in learner-instructor cyber consultations. Utrecht Stud. Lang. Commun. 24, 223–248.

Ford, Shawn, 2006. The use of pragmatics in e-mail requests made by second language students of English. In: Nakayama, M., Minami, M., Morikawa, H., Nakamura, K., Sirai, H. (Eds.), Studies in Language Sciences, vol. 5. Kurosio, Tokyo, pp. 141–158.

Frehner, Carmen, 2008. Email – SMS – MMS: The Linguistic Creativity of Asynchronous Discourse in the New Media Age. Peter Lang, New York.

Gains, Jonathan, 1999. Electronic mail – a new style of communication or just a new medium?: an investigation into the text features of e-mail. Engl. Specif. Purp. 18, 81–101.

Gimenez, Julio, 2000. Business e-mail communication: some emerging tendencies in register. Engl. Specif. Purp. 19, 237–251.

Golato, Andrea, 2003. Studying compliment responses: a comparison of DCTs and recordings of naturally occurring talk. Appl. Linguist. 24, 90–121.

Gu, Yueguo, 1990. Politeness phenomena in modern Chinese. J. Pragmat. 14, 237–257.

Hafner, Katie, Lyon, Matthew, 1996. Where Wizards Stay Up Late: The Origins of the Internet. Simon & Schuster, New York.

Halenko, Nicola, Jones, Christian, 2011. Teaching pragmatic awareness of spoken requests to Chinese EAP learners in the UK: is explicit instruction effective? System 39, 240–250.

Halliday, M.A.K., 1994. An Introduction to Functional Grammar, second ed. Edward Arnold, London.

Hardford, Beverly S., Bardovi-Harlig, Kathleen, 1996. At your earliest convenience: a study of written student requests to faculty. In: Bouton, L. (Ed.), Pragmatics and Language Learning, vol. 7. Division of English as an International Language, University of Illinois, Urbana-Campaign, pp. 55–69.

Hendriks, Berna, 2010. An experimental study of native speaker perceptions of non-native request modification in emails in English. Intercult. Pragmat. 7, 221–255.

Herring, Susan, 1996. Two variants of an electronic message schema. In: Herring, S. (Ed.), Computer-Mediated Communication: Linguistic, Social and Cross-Cultural Perspectives. John Benjamins, Philadelphia, pp. 81–106.

Hofstede, Geert, 2001. Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors. Institutions and Organizations Across Nations, Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage.

Hyland, Ken, 2003. Genre-based pedagogies: a social response to process. J. Second Lang. Writ. 12, 17–29.

Hyland, Ken, 2007. Genre pedagogy: language, literacy and L2 writing instruction. J. Second Lang. Writ. 16, 148–164.

Ishihara, Noriko, 2010. Assessing learners' pragmatic ability in the classroom. In: Tatsuki, D.H., Houck, N.R. (Eds.), Pragmatics: Teaching Speech Acts. Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages. Alexandra, Virginia, pp. 209–228.

Ishihara, Noriko, Cohen, Andrew D., 2010. Teaching and Learning Pragmatics: Where Language and Culture Meet. Longman, London.

Kankaanranta, Anne, 2006. ''Hej Seppo, Could You Pls Comment on this!'': Internal Email Communication in Lingua Franca English in a Multinational Company (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Jyvaskyla.

Kasper, Gabriele, 1982. Teaching-induced aspects of interlanguage discourse. Stud. Second Lang. Acquis. 4, 99–113.

Koike, Dale April, Pearson, Lynn, 2005. The effect of instruction and feedback in the development of pragmatic competence. System 33, 481–501.

Li, Shuai, 2011. The effects of input-based practice on pragmatic development of requests in L2 Chinese. Lang. Learn. 62, 403–438.

Martinez-Flor, Alicia, 2006. The effectiveness of explicit and implicit treatments on EFL learners' confidence in recognizing appropriate suggestions. In: Bardovi-Harlig, K., Félix-Brasdefer, C., Omar, A.S. (Eds.), Pragmatics Language Learning, vol. 11. National Foreign Language Resource Center, University of Hawai'I, Manoa, pp. 199–226.

Narita, Ritsuko, 2012. The effects of pragmatic consciousness-raising activity on the development of pragmatic awareness and use of hearsay evidential markers for learners of Japanese as a foreign language. J. Pragmat. 44, 1–29.

Nguyen, Thi Thuy Minh, Pham, Thi Hanh, Pham, Minh Tam, 2012. The relative effects of explicit and implicit form-focused instruction on the development of L2 pragmatic competence. J. Pragmat. 44, 416–434.

Pollitt, Alastair, 1991. Giving students a sporting chance: assessment by counting and by judging. In: Alderson, C., North, B. (Eds.), Language Testing in the 1990s. Macmillan, London, pp. 46–59.

Ren, Wei, 2013. A longitudinal investigation into L2 learners' cognitive processes during study abroad. Appl. Linguist. 1–21. http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/applin/amt019

Rose, Kenneth, 2001. Compliments and compliment responses in film: implications for pragmatics research and language teaching. Int. Rev. Appl. Linguist. Lang. Teach. 39, 309–326.

Rose, Kenneth R., 2005. On the effects of instruction in second language pragmatics. System 33, 385–399.

Rose, Kenneth R., Ng, Connie, 2001. Inductive and deductive teaching of compliments and compliment responses. In: Rose, K.R., Kasper, G. (Eds.), Pragmatics in Language Teaching. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, MA, pp. 145–170.

Schmidt, Richard W., 1990. The role of consciousness in second language learning. Appl. Linguist. 11, 129–158.

Taguchi, Naoko, 2012. Context, Individual Differences and Pragmatic Competence. Multilingual Matters, Bristol.

Takahashi, Satomi, 2001. The role of input enhancement in developing pragmatic competence. In: Rose, K., Kasper, G. (Eds.), Pragmatics in Language Teaching. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, MA, pp. 171–199.

The Executive Yuan, 2006. English Proficiency Tests for Government Employees. Retrieved May 5, 2014 from http://cec.ntust.edu.tw/UploadFiles/FormDownload/102-6-1.pdf.

Vygotsky, Lev, 1978. Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Waldvogel, Joan, 2007. Greetings and closings in workplace email. J. Comput. Mediat. Commun. 12, 456–477.

Wolfson, Nessa, D'Amico-Reisner, Lynne, Huber, Lisa, 1983. How to arrange for social commitments in American English: an invitation. In: Wolfson, N., Judd, E. (Eds.), Sociolinguistics and Language Acquisition. Newbury House, Rowley, MA, pp. 116–130.

Woodfield, Helen, Economidou-Kogetsidis, Maria, 2010. 'I just need more time': a study of native and non-native students' requests to faculty for an extension. Multilingua 29, 77–118.

Yasuda, Sachiko, 2011. Genre-based tasks in foreign language writing: developing writers' genre awareness, linguistic knowledge and writing competence. J. Second Lang. Writ. 20, 111–133.

Yu, Mingchung, 1999. Universalistic and culture-specific perspectives on variation in the acquisition of pragmatic competence in a second language. Pragmatics 9, 281–312.

Zhang, Yangyin, 1995. Strategies in Chinese requesting. In: Kasper, G. (Ed.), Pragmatics of Chinese as Native and Target Language. University of Hawai'i, Manoa, pp. 23–68.