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Electronic Etiquette during the Pandemic: Theory and Practice of Teaching

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Abstract

In 2020 the coronavirus pandemic reached almost every country in the world and challenged their educational systems. This situation forced educators to shift to an online mode of teaching overnight. Many academic institutions that were earlier reluctant to change their traditional pedagogical approaches had no other option but to shift entirely to online teaching and learning. Thus, the role of ICTs in education, and email communication, in particular, has increased dramatically during the pandemic. A significant part of the educational process has turned to correspondence of students and teachers by corporate mail, to communication in chats and during online conferences. At the same time, students' lack of knowledge of electronic etiquette was revealed. They do not realise that writing status-congruent emails is a skill that requires high pragmatic competence and awareness of politeness conventions and email etiquette (also known as 'netiquette'). It turned out that most students had no ideas of electronic communication rules and did not observe even basic rules of electronic communication. So, students of two universities (teacher training and technical) were given a questionnaire on electronic etiquette. Then the authors analysed and compared students' answers and came up with recommendations on teaching electronic etiquette to students based on the test results. These recommendations can be further used in teaching practices, during English classes mostly.

Keywords: higher education, online learning, technology, information and communication technologies, email, electronic etiquette.

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Introduction

In 2020 the coronavirus pandemic reached almost every country in the world and challenged their educational systems. This situation forced both well-known universities and other smaller higher educational institutions to shift overnight to an online mode of teaching. Most educational organisations which were earlier reluctant to change their traditional pedagogical approaches had no other option but to shift entirely to online teaching and learning. Thus, information and communication technologies role in education in general, and email communication, in particular, has increased dramatically during the pandemic. A significant part of the educational process has turned to correspondence of students and teachers by corporate mail, to communication in chats and during online conferences. At the same time, students' lack of knowledge of electronic etiquette was revealed.

Though students are well-versed in correspondence (emailing being part of it alongside chats, text messaging, etc.), their correspondence has been predominantly in the personal sphere. In this sphere they are accustomed to dialogue, not to longer utterances. Communication in messengers is in chunks, mostly reflecting peculiarities of oral speech. Before the pandemic and consequently distant learning they did not trouble themselves with emailing their teachers but with the transfer to online communications they had to do it. On receiving emails from students, we faced their utter disregard for netiquette, one of the elements of which is taking into account the difference in status and age of students and teachers. Therefore, we decided to find out their command of email etiquette and their attitude to general politeness rules.

Literature review

Email correspondence is treated as a transition genre occupying the place between a letter, a chat and a telephone conversation (Schmitz, 2004, p. 99). Email letter is characterised as a social and informative genre having a special structure (theme, greeting, body of the letter, signature and attached file (optional), small length and special type of hypertextuality – a unilateral connection between the body and attachment(s)). Interactive character of email letters is displayed by means of integrating quotations from the previous letter into the answering letter. Shortening the distance between communication partners brings about the "democratic" aspect and levels to a certain extent the hierarchy of their role and status (Kostrova, 2015, p. 119).

Earlier research shows that some twenty years ago university students often chose to write emails to their teachers on their own initiative. Bloch in (2002) analyzed students' emails sent to their teachers during the course and further divided these messages into four groups.

To the first group he attributed phatic communion, the second email group included messages asking for help, the third group related to making excuses, and the fourth – with making formal requests. Thus, he came to the conclusion that students followed different strategies, including politeness strategies, to communicate with their teachers out of class, and electronic communication as a means of interaction seemed important for them, which is quite significate as this research was carried out almost twenty years ago. Later, politeness strategies in emails were investigated by Bunz and Campbell (2004) who pointed out that responses to emails including either verbal politeness cues or structural politeness cues were significantly more polite than those that did not include such cues.

Electronic communication between students and teachers in higher education may be considered a peculiar domain for two reasons. Firstly because of the fact that in the past decades, email correspondence has become a dominant channel in this type of interaction. This contrasts with the earlier practice whereby teachers and students resolved organizational matters during contact hours and office hours rather than through written communication. As for the Soviet Union and the post-Soviet Russia, correspondence between teachers and students did not exist at all, whereas in Europe there was such a mentoring technique as 'alternative assessment'. It involved a student writing a letter to their tutor where they dwelled upon their work, results, achievements and failures. The tutor replied to this letter commenting on the student's performance and giving advice and recommendations (Busorgina, 2005). That might have been the only form of existing correspondence in the pedagogical discourse.

However, teachers all over the world are witnessing a dramatic change in the teacher-student communication paradigm nowadays. This change in modern education has happened over the last 20 years the reason being the increasing availability of the internet. We can say that the COVID-19 situation 'finished' the process and the teachers who used to be reluctant to switch to the use of technologies were forced to do it. Several everyday activities including such matters as the sharing of teaching material and the organization of course attendance have been relocated into the domain of written communication. Moreover, since the new technology allows for the fast and frequent exchange of messages, student-teacher communication became more intense (Domonkosi & Ludányi, 2020).

Undoubtedly, English as well as most other languages is at the moment being affected by new digital communication technologies. Consequently, special terms have appeared to refer to this new form of language: 'Netspeak' or 'e-grammar'. This 'e-grammar' has manifested itself 'from the micro-levels of typography and orthography, through morphology at the word level, to syntax at the utterance level' (Herring, 2012).

While most educators don't characterize 'Netspeak' / 'e-grammar' effects as detrimental' (Herring, 2012), there is one issue of computer-mediated communication that most linguists and teachers agree upon: students often fail to stick to the norms of social etiquette.

Now it is generally acknowledged that students use too much of informal language in electronic communication then it is acceptable, and this is considered to be a serious problem. As early as 2003 it was clear for some university teachers that it is absolutely necessary to teach students to properly write emails for purposes other than informal communication (Porter, 2003: 443). During the pandemic, more and more researchers insist on developing clearer rules of teacher-student online interaction (Kubina, Bareicheva, Stepanova & Brown, 2020). Analysing, understanding and be aware of netiquette rules is vital in the society in which information and communication technologies changed the way of socialising and communicating (Soler-Costa, Lafarga-Ostáriz, Mauri-Medrano & Moreno-Guerrero). Teachers educated in a pre-ICT time subconsciously expected their students to follow the rules of traditional written correspondence with all the politeness strategies. Thus, an elderly university professor (at the age of about seventy) admitted in his interview that he had been quite astonished when he had received an otherwise very polite email from one of his students with the greeting *Kedves András!* 'Dear Andrew!'. Other teachers noted the missing of greetings and other expressions of politeness in most students' emails; the use of greetings and other phrases characteristic of spoken discourse; and the use of inexplicit, insufficiently elaborate messages as impolite, strange and new aspects of students' written communication (Domonkosi & Ludányi, 2020). Here it is expedient to recollect the famous seemingly paradoxical observation made by M. McLuhan, a Canadian communication theorist (McLuhan, 1964): "the medium is the message". The underneath meaning of this statement is that the nature of a medium (the channel through which a message is transmitted) is more important than the content (or, in other words, the meaning) of the message itself. It also means that the medium is not neutral in itself, it influences people making them change their behaviour. In the present case it is a shift from the written to oral speech.

Writing status-congruent emails is a skill that requires high pragmatic competence and awareness of the politeness conventions and email etiquette that need to be followed (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2015). It is also stressed that with the growing use of email, the potential negative influences from unprofessional emails, and the distinctive characteristics of student–faculty relationships in education, the importance of proper etiquette in email writing cannot be emphasised enough (Kim et al., 2016). What researchers agree upon is (Crystal 2007, Dyakova et al., 2018) that the recommendations of email style guides tend to be very similar to older guides of how to write traditional letters. One frequent piece of advice is that messages should be concise, ideally readable without scrolling down the screen, and an analysis of typical paragraph length appears to confirm this.

The practical outcome of this research is a set of recommendations suggested by some universities and schools to help their students correspond with their professors observing politeness rules (Email Etiquette Guide, 2018).

Methodology

The researchers carried out their experiment in two Russian universities. The first was Samara State University of Social Sciences and Education (the Faculty of Foreign Languages, both senior and junior students studying for a bachelor degree either in Education (teacher of two foreign languages) or in Linguistics (translators / interpreters to-be). Samara State Technical University was chosen as the second university for the experiment. Mostly first- and second-year students of engineering departments (the Department of Civil Engineering, the Department of Engineering and Technology, the Department of Environmental Engineering, the Department of Food Production, the Department of Water Supply and Wastewater Disposal and the Department of Heat Power) took part in the survey.

To analyse students' knowledge of netiquette, the authors offered an online anonymous questionnaire (in Russian) made in Google Forms. Google Forms make it possible for everyone (and this is quite useful for both educational and research purposes) to make tests, quizzes, surveys or questionaries which can be marked automatically. The system also creates graphs that are quite useful in analysing or presenting the results. Google Forms is an excellent free option though some teachers prefer to use other online survey apps. Google Forms provide a fast way to create an online survey, with responses collected in an online spreadsheet and are easy to further analyse.

The authors adopted a 28-question questionnaire / survey (based on Electronny etiquette, 2018) for students of two universities to fill in. Then the authors collected the results and compared answers of students learning humanities and those studying engineering, assessed differences and tracked trends in their attitudes. Questions suggested to students were all similar in their type and required choosing one option out of three (e.g., *Choose the correct option:* … then three options were given). For example:

    a.   It is not recommended to leave an e-letter unsigned.
    b.   An unsigned letter may be sent to intimate friends.
    c.   Signing a letter with initials in enough.

We should note here that these 28 questions dealt only with emails because the staff of Samara State University of Social Sciences and Education have to communicate with their students only by corporate mail (the official SSUSSE online environment is created by Microsoft, so it is Microsoft Outlook; students and teachers also communicate via Microsoft Teams communication platform and via Yammer corporate social networking tool; all other apps and technologies are not encouraged) which is whereas the tutors of Samara State Technical University use the so-called 'personal study-room' ('lichny kabinet'), personal email, Zoom cloud platform for video and audio conferencing and also Viber messenger and VKontakte social network. Therefore, the notion of netiquette is wider – it also includes online conferencing platforms, chats in messengers or social networks. Although the latter are mostly on the sphere of personal intimate communication, we *do* use them as a means of business correspondence between teachers and students; therefore, acquiring habits of business etiquette in all types of written communication is indispensable.

At the moment, 118 students of Samara State University of Social Sciences and Education (SSUSSE) and 81 students of Samara State Technical University (SSTU) responded and answered the questions of the survey. We further analyse and compare these student answers inserting some graphical representations and diagrams for descriptive reasons.

Results

First of all, in general students of both universities achieved satisfactory results while answering the questions of the survey with SSTU students' average grade being 17.62 out of 28 (see Fig. 1) and SSUSSE students' average grade being 21.27 out of 28 points (see Fig. 2). Individually, a SSTU student who gave the worst answer earned 5 points only while the best possible response given by a SSTU student was 25 correct answers out of 28 (see Fig. 1). SSUSSE student' best results varied from 10 to 28, respectively (see Fig. 2).

It turned out that the simplest questions for the students of both universities were Question 24 (95.1% SSTU students and 97.5% SSUSSE students answered it correctly, choosing the option "It is absolutely necessary to sign your email with your name, surname and group number while communicating with your teachers"), Question 25 (87.7% and 96.6% students, respectively, decided correctly upon "Students are strongly discouraged from giving such names to the files as "My work", "Final version" or "First Part" when sending them to their teachers) and Question 10 (87.7% and 87.3 students chose "It is recommended to address someone you do not know personally by using his/her name and patronymic, if you know them").
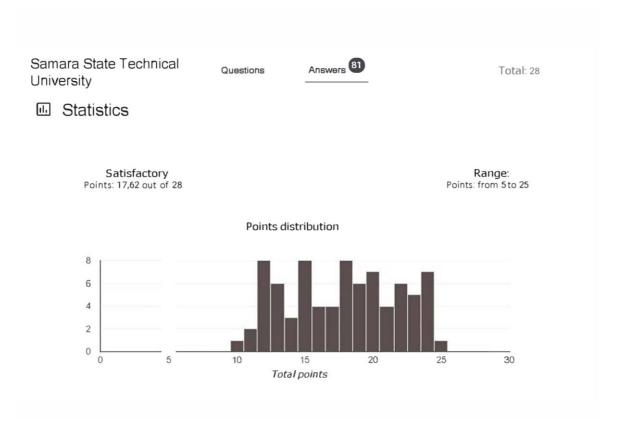
Samara State Technical
University

Questions   Answers 81

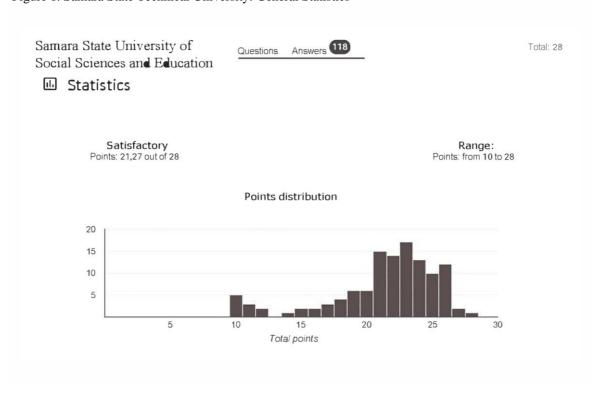Total: 28

Statistics

Satisfactory
Points: 17,62 out of 28

Range:
Points: from 5 to 25

Points distribution

Total points

Figure 1. Samara State Technical University: General Statistics

Samara State University of
Social Sciences and Education

Questions   Answers 118

Total: 28

Statistics

Satisfactory
Points: 21,27 out of 28

Range:
Points: from 10 to 28

Points distribution

Total points

Figure 2. Samara State University of Social Sciences and Education: General Statistics

All in all, 90% of SSTU students gave correct answers to no more than two questions while 90% of SSUSSE students gave correct answers to nine questions: fortunately, most students at least know that any email begins with a greeting and a direct address (e.g. "It is not recommended to ask a question without greeting your addressee first" – Question 4) or that one should check his/her email for misprints and errors before sending it to a teacher (Question 20) and name an attached file with his/her surname adding also what type of work it is (e.g. medvedev_course_paper or gorlova_conference_report, Question 23).

The most difficult questions for SSTU were Question 6 (16% of correct answers) dealing with (im)possibility of asking your teacher to send an extended answer to a complicated question, with a slightly better result for SSUSSE students (39%) (see Figures 3a & 3b); Question 18 where the best option is supposed to be "It is not recommended to sign your letter with your "domestic" name (e.g. Kate, Alex) while corresponding officially (see Figures 4a & 4b); Question 28 dealing with a delicate problem of asking teachers to send e-versions of their books or articles. The best option is "It is not recommended to do this". Only 22% of SSTU students and 43% of SSUSSE gave this answer (see Figures 5a & 5b).
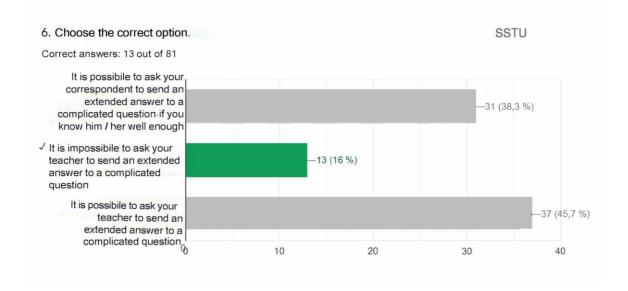

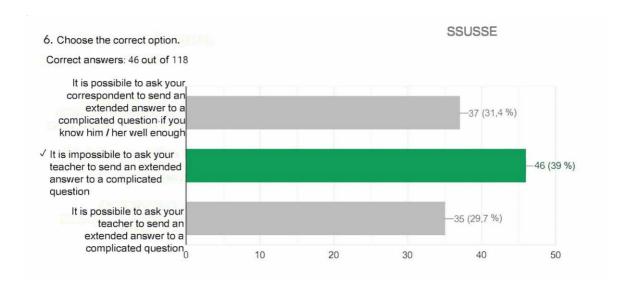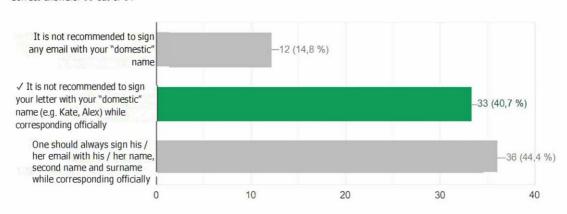Figure 3a. Samara State Technical University: Question 6 results
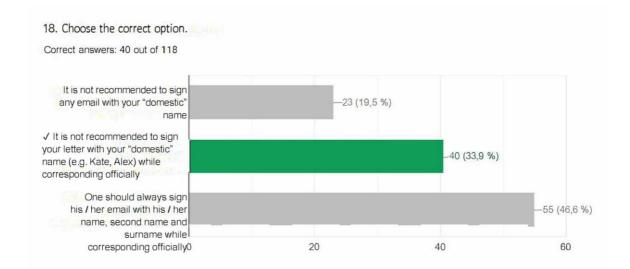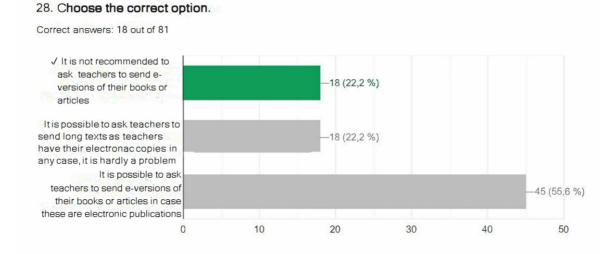
Figure 3b. Samara State University of Social Sciences and Education: Question 6 results

Figure 4a. Samara State Technical University: Question 18 results

18. Choose the correct option.

Correct answers: 40 out of 118

Figure 4b. Samara State University of Social Sciences and Education: Question 18 results

28. Choose the correct option.

Correct answers: 18 out of 81

Figure 5a. Samara State Technical University: Question 28 results

28. Choose the correct option.
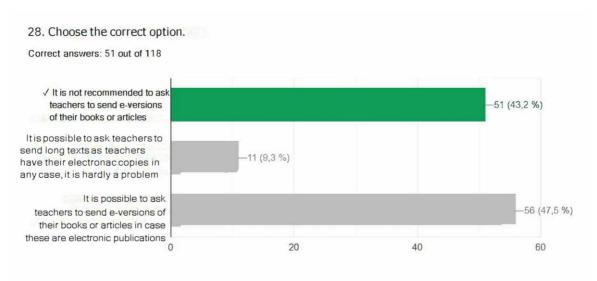
Correct answers: 51 out of 118

Figure 5b. Samara State University of Social Sciences and Education: Question 28 results

These three questions turned out to be the most problematic for all students, but they were the only questions which collected less than 50% of correct answers from SSUSSE students. Results of SSTU students were less impressive – eight questions produced less than 50% of correct answers.

Discussion

As the results of the questionnaire show, students of both universities are acquainted with some elements of email etiquette: most of them know that it is necessary to sign a letter with one's full name because it is not always possible to identify a person by email address (Question 7 – 82% gained by students of Samara State Technical University, 92% – by students of Samara State University of Social Sciences and Education); that it is recommended to use name and patronymic (Question 10 – 92% SSTU, 87% SSUSSE); that it is not recommended to name the attached file sent to a teacher or a scientific advisor in an obscure way (course paper, summary to X, Word document, etc.) – Question 25 – 87% SSTU, 96% SSUSSE. Overall results of SSUSSE students are higher. A possible explanation may be that at the Faculty of Foreign Languages of SSUSSE academic groups are rather small as compared to SSTU and tutors are the same throughout the academic year. Constant communication with tutors provides feedback and correction of student e-behavior.

Conclusion

Most students do not observe even basic rules of electronic communication.

They do not follow the rule of answering a letter in two days at most; they disregard the rule of explaining how you got a person's email address if the addressee did not give it themselves; they do not know that the attached file(s) should be mentioned in the body of the letter.

To rectify this attitude and lack of student knowledge the authors suggest a set of recommendations based on the test results. These recommendations are to be versed in the following terms: indispensable (obligatory rules of netiquette), customary (rules observed according to tradition by the majority of people), desirable (on observing these rules you will appear polite and respectful), not recommended (non-observance of these rules will produce unfavorable impression on the addressee). The recommendations/instructions are to be given out to students in their first term of study. These recommendations can be further used in teaching practices, during English classes and classes on Written English in Samara State University of Social Sciences and Education and during Russian and Communication Culture classes in Samara State Technical University. We consider this matter to be of great importance, since the process of electronic communication has come to stay, and all teachers will have to adapt to it. Meanwhile, just a few higher education institutions include such a course in their curriculum. For instance, a research done by Kozík and Slivová from Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia, shows that only a quarter of universities they contacted teach Netiquette (2014). As for Samara State Technical University, 2 academic hours are given to Business Correspondence within the course of Russian and Communication Culture, but it is certainly not enough. In Samara State University of Social Sciences and Education the situation is better, though netiquette should definitely become a separate topic at least in classes on Written English.

Further research may consider this correspondence in the focus of the Speech Acts Theory: what speech acts are predominant in students' letters (request, excuse, explanation, promise, enquiry and others) and in teachers' letters (instruction, warning, comment, praise and others).

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