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'HELLO FROM MALAYSIA!': LANGUAGE USE IN EMAILS FOR INTERNATIONALISATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The study aimed to analyse language use in emails in the context of internationalisation that took place in higher education. In particular, it concentrated on language structures and language patterns of the email exchanges between a local university and international institutions located in Europe. This case study applied in-depth analysis of the language use in the email communication between institutions. 150 emails were collected and analysed to investigate the language structures and patterns of the emails. Thematic analysis of the data collected revealed that most of the emails were chain emails and of the hybrid genre category. It can be concluded that email users have the freedom to combine different genres and writing styles to fit their purposes and accomplish their tasks. The findings also showed that social distance and positive politeness strategy played a significant role in the choice of language features applied in the emails despite the differences of nationality of the email writers.

Keywords: Emails, internationalisation, new media communication, language use, higher education

1. Introduction

The use of email for organisational communication is considered unavoidable particularly when an organisation forms partnership with international companies or institutions. Educational institutions in Malaysia have international reputation and their ranking in international level are improving each year. These universities conduct business as other organisations but their emphasis is on education. The main communication medium between both parties; the local universities and international institutions happen via emails. This also helps to form partnership between these organisations. However, even though emails are considered as the main and formal platform of communication in the workplace, no fixed standard email writing rules seem to be made for users to follow as guidelines. Although emails practitioners might consider the restriction of traditional writing rules to be freeing, they may find difficulties and struggle to construct emails that are 'appropriate' to recipients' standards.

The studies made by previous researchers were focused on the communication made via emails within an institution in Malaysia. None of the past research investigated the language structures and patterns found in emails between any Malaysian universities and institutions abroad. Due to the values reached from the partnership formed by these organisations, it is deemed beneficial to conduct this study. This study emphasises on language use in email communication that took place between an institution of higher learning in Malaysia and those abroad. Specifically, the study focuses on two main objectives as follows:

(i) to analyse the language structures found in email exchanges between institutions.
(ii) to investigate the language patterns used in email exchanges between institutions.

1.1. Studies on emails

Studies in the past have shed some insights into email communication among English as second language (ESL) learners. For instance, in a study by Chen (2015) on emails of request written by 30 Chinese students to the faculty, it was found that students systematically planned the structures of their emails in framing orders like the greeting, message and closing parts of the emails. Explicit attention was given to the grammatical, lexical and situational features of the email task. The students also implemented reasoning strategy and degree of politeness in their communication. Meanwhile, in a study involving ESL Greek Cypriot university students, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) discovered that students' emails were generally categorised by outstanding directness, exclusion of greetings, the lack of lexical or phrasal modifiers, and the variant forms of address used. All of these led to a brusque effect on an email that imply impoliteness. It would seem that writing appropriate emails to authority figures is still considered a challenging task for ESL students as they struggle with English language use to fulfil the intended communicative goals while maintaining degree of politeness.

1.1.1. Genre analysis

Bhatia (2010) asserts that in providing a critical perspective on language, texts analysis must be done beyond the patterns that are apparent in the body of texts; it should also entail the institutional practices and its disciplinary agreements including the relationship of the texts and the interactions

between genres. In other words, it should put into consideration the social relations and social structures which encompass class, ideology and power relations (Bhatia, 2012). Study on the relationship of texts and interactions of genres need to be carried out in a way that allows investigation of "relationships involving texts and contexts" (Bhatia, 2010, p. 391).

In analysing communicative purposes of emails in the workplace, AlAfnan (2014) adapted the CARS Model by Swales (1990) as illustrated in Figure 1. Fourteen moves used by professionals in the educational sector were identified, of which six were framing moves and eight content moves. The major four content moves indicated the main purposes of email communication which are enquiring about issues, discussing issues, delivering documents and informing academic or organisational issues. The framing moves contain the "identifying topic", "salutation", "opening", "pre-closing", "closing" and "signature" moves. According to AlAfnan (2015a), the framing moves were used the most as compared to content moves.
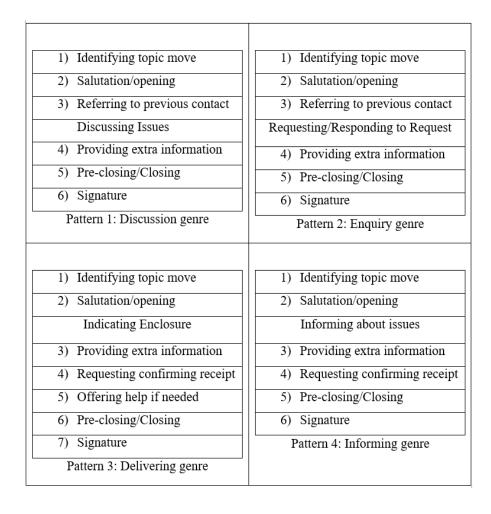
Pattern 1: Discussion genre	Pattern 2: Enquiry genre
1) Identifying topic move	1) Identifying topic move
2) Salutation/opening	2) Salutation/opening
3) Referring to previous contact	3) Referring to previous contact
Discussing Issues	Requesting/Responding to Request
4) Providing extra information	4) Providing extra information
5) Pre-closing/Closing	5) Pre-closing/Closing
6) Signature	6) Signature
Pattern 1: Discussion genre	**Pattern 2: Enquiry genre**
1) Identifying topic move	1) Identifying topic move
2) Salutation/opening	2) Salutation/opening
Indicating Enclosure	Informing about issues
3) Providing extra information	3) Providing extra information
4) Requesting confirming receipt	4) Requesting confirming receipt
5) Offering help if needed	5) Pre-closing/Closing
6) Pre-closing/Closing	6) Signature
7) Signature	**Pattern 4: Informing genre**
Pattern 3: Delivering genre	

Figure 1. Structure of Emails

1.1.2. Language structures and patterns in emails

In an analysis of the rhetorical, typographical and paralinguistic features of emails in the workplace, AlAfnan (2015b) discovered that chain-type messages mostly incorporated spoken language technique while solitary-type emails incorporated more written language. The chain-type emails were

viewed as less formal than solitary-type emails since the former included more participation and needed recurring exchanges. The study also revealed two factors that affected the use of spoken language features, namely the regularity of email exchange and the degree of participation between the writers. It was reported that the email users were alert with the appropriateness and inappropriateness of certain language features or techniques in emails. The formality and informality of emails were determined by how the task was used to be performed traditionally.

In a recent study on language patterns and structure, AlAfnan (2017) investigated the email exchanges in a public institution in Malaysia and outlined four types of email genres: (1) discussion email genre, (2) requesting email genre, (3) delivery email genre, and (4) informing genre. He also reported that three types of intertextualities, namely generic intertextuality, referential intertextuality and functional intertextuality were used by professionals to accomplish numerous communication purposes. The mixing of two types of email genres also resulted in 'hybrid discourse', comprising of two different purposes which were found in chain-type messages.

1.1.3. Culture relation to email communication

Email communication is different from face-to-face communication with the absence of paralinguistic cues like facial expression, gestures, vocal infection, and a shared physical and mental context in the former. According to Murray (1995), the paralinguistic cues help create metamessages that function as social lubricants and help deliver social meaning. This includes the relationship and attitudes between and toward each communicator. The absence of the paralinguistic cues made the metamessages can only be discovered by how the written words of the emails are expressed, chosen and organised.

2.   Research Methods

This study adopted a case study design with qualitative approach in data collection and analysis. It applied an in-depth analysis of language use in the email communication between institutions. The researchers collected a number of emails from a rich informant and analysed the emails exchanged between the selected informant and international institutions. For specification of the scope and analysis purposes, the researchers selected 150 emails focusing on emails exchanged from the university and institutions from Europe. The data were analysed using thematic analysis. The analysis of the data and the categorisation of the items into themes and sub-themes in the findings of this study were based on the four types of email genres (AlAfnan, 2015a) and the generic structures of emails (AlAfnan, 2017). The two research questions of the study are as follows:

   i.   What are the language structures found in email exchanges between institutions?

   ii.   What are the language patterns used in email exchanges between institutions?

3. Findings

3.1. Language structure

Language structures in emails refer to the interrelationship of the texts with one another. This includes the occurrence of existent texts or emails in new emails and the incorporation of some parts of the past texts as reference in forming new emails. The repeated rhetorical forms and situations that the emails occurred are also part of language structures.

3.1.1. The appearance of past texts

The findings of the study indicated that past texts appeared the most in the emails (50%). The occurrence of past texts came from informing genre emails and hybrid genres of informing + enquiry and informing + delivering genres. The past texts appeared in these emails include the mention of previous conversations, previous discussion and attached files. The number of appearance of the past texts occurred in hybrid genres are high (60%) as the email writers were replying with information or delivering a file or informing about something that can be related or already discussed in the past email communication. It is also notable that past texts occurred the most in chain emails as the senders and receivers discussed about certain issues that needed feedback. In addition, the past texts also occurred in the texts as a reminder of previously agreed matters.

For example, in one of the informing genre email, the sender wrote "as you remember from my previous email", implying that the number of student mobilities available in the project cycle 2018-2020 had already been stated before and the mentioned of it was to remind the receiver of it. Other language expressions that were used in the emails to show previous communication are "Thank you for your previous message", "as you know", "as I mentioned earlier", and "please find attached". All of these are considered as methods of evoking past texts that are mainly trailed by the notices of instruction for the receivers. The usage of "please find attached" in these emails was followed by documents or files attached to the emails. This is also defined as 'horizontal intertextuality' (Johnstone, 2008). It is used to bring up the intertexts which the writers used the construct to refer to the attached files (Chin, 2011).

Interestingly, senders also used previous communication to show their closeness with the receiver. For example, the sender tried to elicit the memories that they had together using sentences like "It was nice meeting you during AIE in Helsinki" and "By the way, I attached here our photo during AIE". The action of attaching a photo and personal feeling emphasised the closeness of the sender and receiver although they met at a formal setting.

3.1.2. The referential of past texts

The referential of past texts mostly happened in forming new emails. This kind of reference occurred mostly in informing genre, enquiry genre, hybrid genres of informing + enquiry and discussion + enquiry genres. The technique used was the 'cut and paste' and presenting in bullet points as to make it easier for receiver to comprehend the content. This type of language structure happened 50% in chain emails, where the sender and receiver were in the process of discussing about an issue which needed

constant feedback from each other. Consequently, this led into chain emails of different email genres since the chain emails incorporated discussion, delivering, enquiring and informing genres to suit the purpose of the conversations.

3.1.3. Repeated forms and situations

The rhetorical forms and situations that occurred repetitively in emails were analysed based on the occurrence in the use of some content moves and framing moves. Framing moves that are considered as compulsory moves are "identifying topic", "salutation", "closing" and "signature" moves. Based on the emails collected, 100% of the emails incorporated the compulsory framing moves like "identifying topic" and "salutation" and while only emails from Poland did not include "closing" and "signature" moves. This is hardly surprising; a study by Scheyder (2003) on American emails showed that there were no proper closing move used in around half of the emails collected. It was reported that the usage of closing move was determined by the purpose of the emails and the social distance between email users.

The sender used the compulsory framing moves like "salutation" with "Dear Prof. N.Y" and "identifying topic" with "Greetings from Poland" but did not put any closing remarks or signature at the ending of the email. This is not the case for the rest of the emails despite the nationality especially for "salutation", "closing" and "signature" moves. The most used "salutation" move used was "Dear" followed with the name of the receivers. While emails from Malaysian university used the same "opening" and "closing" line "Greetings from PJM University" and "Yours sincerely", email writers from Finland and Lithuania used various "opening/salutation" and "closing" moves. The most used "closing" moves used was "kind regards" and "best regards".

Meanwhile, the "opening" moves varies; the email senders like to associate the weather and seasons in their greetings, such as "Greetings from sunny Alicante!". For the "signature" moves, majority of the emails used auto signature, the writers' first name or both. The auto-signatures comprised information like sender's name, position in institution, the name of institution, office address and contact information. According to AlAfnan (2015a), the usage of the auto-signatures shows institutions' credibility towards the email receivers.

3.2. Language patterns

Language patterns deals with the interactions between and across genres (Bhatia, 2010) and the writing styles of the emails collected. This includes the four types of email genres adopted from AlAfnan (2015a); discussion genre, enquiry genre, delivery genre and informing genre. This study also investigated the occurrence of hybrid genres and hybrid styles which focus on the combination of writing and speaking language styles such as the usage of repetition, substitutions and ellipsis in email. The analysis also focus on the non-verbal cues in emails writing such as the use of capitalisation, colours, font and print choices and emoticons in emails collected.

3.2.1. Four types of genres

Table 1 indicated the distribution of emails based on the four types of genres. While informing genre was used the most (55%), both discussion and enquiry genres were used more or less the same amount and delivery genre was used the least by senders. This reflected the kind of tasks the senders and receivers of the emails were trying to accomplish and the kind of messages they tried to deliver. As the email communication across the institutions was considered formal, these institutions mostly were in email communication about their partnership, programmes or site visits that were or about to take place in their institutions or countries. It is also noteworthy to state that most of the email communication happened between and across institutions were chain emails. This shows that these institutions were always in some ongoing discourse related to organisational or academic issues (AlAfnan, 2015a). This contradicts with the past study by Kankaanranta (2005) that implied that informing messages are not used by majority of email users as it only used to give information to the receiver about a general issues or to notify them. It is argued that this type of genre only functioned as a 'noticeboard'.

Table 1. Types of genres

Genre	Percentage (%)
Informing genre	55
Discussion genre	20
Enquiry genre	15
Delivery genre	10

3.2.2. Hybrid genres

Hybrid genres are the combination of two email genres in one email text (Bhatia, 2012). From the findings, the email users used informing + enquiry and discussion + enquiry email genres. The sender used a mixture of the genres as to combine the tasks or enquiry that they had in one email. This served as the main purpose of the mixing of these genres as it is fitting to the settings. These hybrid genres were used to cut off waiting time for the replies from the other party. It is not peculiar especially when the email user wanted the responds to enquiries in shorter notice. For example, in an informing + enquiry genre email, the sender used this type of hybrid as to combine two tasks, namely enquiring and informing at the same time. The sender wrote "It would be nice to know when the exchange would take place so that I could plan my spring accordingly" as a form of a request to the receiver to give immediate response on the date of exchange visit to the institution. The sender then proceeded with declarative sentence "Here in Finland we are celebrating Eastern from the 19.4-22.4, this time I would like to be here with my family" as to inform the receiver that the sender would not be available for the exchange visit during that specific period of time.

3.2.3. Hybrid styles

Hybrid styles entail the mixture of language features of spoken and written styles in the emails (AlAfnan, 2015c). The findings of the study indicated that the language features used in the emails were a mix of spoken and written styles. The email users used both styles as to draw closeness and to make the

texts more polite and less demanding or autocratic. Emails that incorporated formal written features were mostly straightforward and showed passive relationship and involvement between the senders and receivers of emails (AlAfnan, 2017). On the contrary, the email users in this study were engaged with each other to create and maintain healthy relationship. This probably due to the need to ensure that the institutional visits, programmes and all other academic and organisational partnership built between the institutions run smoothly.

Taking example of one of the emails, the sender did not use a direct question but sent the request using indirect expression, "It would be nice to know when the exchange would take place so that I could plan my spring accordingly". This made the request sounded less demanding. The sender hinted with the expression, "If you have any information about when it could take place it would be very helpful for me" to request that the response to a date for the exchange visit to be announced at the earliest convenience of the receiver. It also made the sender sounded polite. The sender also used declarative sentence "Here in Finland we are celebrating Eastern from the 19.4-22.4, this time I would like to be here with my Family" as way of informing the receiver that during the particular date, the sender would not be available. This made the tone of the sentence to be more informal. Email writers also used personal tone in conveying their message such as in the sentences like "I just finished meeting", "they now went to the class where she will be teaching" and "I was talking with Prof N and he said". The senders were constantly used active voice clauses and writing in first and second pronouns such as the usage of "I" and "you". This were to show close relationship and that the senders were personally involved with the text.

3.2.4. Non-verbal cues

The findings revealed that the email users did not follow any standardised or formal styles for these non-verbal cues, especially the emails from Finland and Lithuania as compared to Malaysia. Some email users did not find the usage of correct capitalisation as important in emails and used lower cases and upper cases according their own styles of writing. Some used lower case first letter of the first word of the sentences. This occurred especially in the greetings or opening of the emails. This could also be the outcome when the email users hesitant to proofread or edit the emails before sending.

Writers used the mixture of capital and lower-case letters such as in "Thank You and Have a Nice Day! :)" to sound friendly to the receiver. Some email users used capitalisation as a way to emphasise particular message or part and capitalised the word "GREETINGS" as to emphasise the intention of the email. The findings differ with Turnage (2007) who implied that the capitalisation in email writing can be a sign of the writers' 'shouting'. It is comprehensible that the usage of capitalisation was solely to show emphasis. Apart from that, email writers used bold printed, italicised, underlined or capitalised words to show emphasis towards certain words, keywords or issues. For example, the names of the professors were bold in emails as to direct reader's focus on the information.

Email users used exclamation marks in the emails to make the message or words sounded friendlier and put a cheerful tone to it. Examples of this are "Thank you and have a nice day!", "have a nice weekend!" and "I hope you're doing fine!". The usage of ellipsis also appeared in the emails. Ellipsis however were used as an informal way of greeting the receiver such as in "Hello F..." and "Hi again..". The sender used the informal approach in greetings and the ellipsis was used to fit the writing-like-

speaking style. Ellipsis only used in internally exchanged discussion and enquiry email genre texts, which mirrored the awareness of the spoken and informal nature of the writers (Kennedy, 1998). As mentioned by Halliday (1994), substitutions and ellipsis are mostly utilised in oral communication. This can be related as email users like to use oral or spoken communication techniques as compared to written techniques.

Email users also used emoji ":)" in the email collected in this study. The emoji was used in "(see in copy:) for check-up before signing" and "Thank You and Have a Nice Day! :)". The usage of this emoji can imply different intentions of the senders. The first emoji used as a plea to the request that the sender was asking the receiver to do. The sender tried to ask the receiver to look up at the attached files for check-up without sounding demanding. The sender simply wanted to minimise the request with a friendly facial expression. The second emoji was used to wish the receiver to have a good day. Both of the reasons implied positive politeness strategy.

4.   Conclusion

On the whole, the language structures of the emails entailed the occurrence of past texts or the usage of past emails as a reference in forming new ones. In the context of this study, the email users were in need to constantly engage in communication with each other to answer institutional needs such as discussing about joint programmes and exchange visits. Emails, being the main communication platform, naturally turned into a series of chain messages until the organisational issue were resolved or when the request/tasks were completed. The four types of genres in email mirrored the four purposes of communication. As the nature of the email communications between and across the institutions happened mostly in series of chain emails, the purposes changed accordingly.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that email users have the freedom to combine both the genres and writing styles of the emails to fit their purposes and accomplish their tasks. The email users mix two genres, using the hybrid genres, combining the content moves at the same time especially as a way to save time. Email users also shared the same unspoken rules for the patterns of the compulsory framing moves which are the identifying topic move, salutation, closing and signature framing moves. Almost all email users followed the patterns for the identifying topic move and salutation whether in formal or informal styles of approach.

The findings established that email communication between these educational institutions included both written and spoken features of language and incorporated many nonverbal cues in their writings. It is significant to note that email users mainly went for informal approach and used the writing-like-speaking features and non-verbal cues because of the social distance between the email senders and receivers. This study discovered that it may not only be the case for Malaysian email users but those from international institutions as well. The email users used these language features as to appear friendly and polite towards other institutions that were partnered up and worked together. The email users were not close colleagues in real life but the image of the respective institutions that they carried showed that social distance and positive politeness strategy played a big role in the choice of language features applied in the emails.

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