

PRAGMATIC USAGE IN ACADEMIC EMAIL REQUESTS: A Comparative and Contrastive Study of Written DCT and Email Data

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Abstract - This project investigated requestive patterns in elicited vs. spontaneously produced emails sent by students to faculty. We collected 52 emails by 12 Chinese graduate students majoring in Engineering at a university in the southwestern United States and classified them by topic into five categories (Appointment, Committee, Registration, Updates, and Signature). These 12 participants also took a written DCT whose design was based on spontaneously produced emails, and therefore meant to elicit the same kind of requests. We compared the spontaneously produced emails and the elicited texts in term of length, supportive moves, and request perspectives. Descriptive analysis, T test, and Chi square test were performed to investigate the differences. The results showed that participants generated statistically significant longer requests in the spontaneously produced emails than in the written DCT emails, while using similar patterns of supportive moves. The usages of request perspectives were also observed as significantly different in certain situations.

Keywords: request; students to faculty; elicited emails; spontaneously produced emails.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research on Written DCTs

Kasper and Dahl (1991) defined the written discourse-completion test (DCT) as “written questionnaires including a number of brief situational descriptions followed by a short dialogue with an empty slot for the speech act under study” (p. 221). Written DCTs were originally developed to compare the speech act realization of native and nonnative Hebrew speakers (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989), and they have been used extensively in the field of pragmatics as primary elicitation instruments of speech act production since they were formally applied in the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realizations Projects (CCSARP) (Sasaki, 1998; Billmyer & Varghese, 2000; Chaudron, 2005; Woodfield, 2008). Written DCTs’ frequent use has raised researchers’ interest in the verification and assessment of its validity and reliability.

Written DCTs have some advantages. They help researchers gather plenty of data within a relatively short time (Beebe & Cummings, 1985; Houck & Gass, 1996; Yamashita, 1996). Moreover, written DCTs do not require transcription, which causes easier and faster data analysis process (Chaudron, 2005; Johnston, Kasper & Ross, 1998). Also, written DCTs enable researchers to control contextual variables to obtain instances of specific speech behaviors (Beebe & Cummings, 1985; Houck & Gass, 1996; Kasper, 2000). Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989) vouched for the written DCTs, stating, “using written elicitation techniques enables us to obtain more stereotyped responses” (p. 13). Hill, Ide, Ikuta, Kawasaki and Ogino (1986) also pointed out that written DCTs revealed the prototype of the variants occurring in the individual’s actual speech.

However, written DCTs are also questioned and criticized for their artificiality. Some researchers were skeptical about the authenticity of written DCTs. They believed that written DCTs have low validity and could not convey enough information about the relationship (e.g., status, positional identities) between the speaker and the hearer (Rose, 1992; Zuskin, 1993; Martinez-Flor & Uso-Juan, 2011). Furthermore, Woodfield (2008) stated that participants do not face real-life situations in written DCTs. Another shortcoming is the lack of turn-taking and interaction, and thus, as Johnston et al. (1998) claimed, the absence of discourse-level phenomena. In addition, because of its paper-and-pen data collection method, written DCTs are considered as tests rather than natural discourses; and therefore, distort what participants actually want to say (Kasper & Dahl, 1991; Rose, 1994; Sasaki, 1998). Finally, Kasper and Roever (2005) pointed out that, although DCT data is easy to collect, it is not easy to design appropriate written DCTs.

Because of the controversial characteristics of written DCTs, researches have reached various conclusions on the validity and reliability of the DCTs. Golato (2003) observed striking differences between the DCT data and the naturally occurring data, and he did not recommend that researchers use DCTs to describe actual language use. This conclusion is in accordance with Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig's (1992) finding that there were enough differences in strategies, politeness, and length between the DCT data and the naturally occurring data to demonstrate the inappropriateness of DCTs. Similarly, in an EFL setting, researchers who compared the production of requests through DCTs and role-plays found big differences in types and number of request strategies as well as length (Safont & Alcón, 2001; Safont, 2005; Salazar-Campillo, 2008). Nevertheless, some researchers, such as Martínez-Flor (2012), argued that these differences might be due to the interactive turn-taking nature of the role-play, and the comparatively sufficient time given to finish the DCT.

On the contrary, other researches have come to the conclusion that the DCT is a reliable pragmatic instrument. Kasper and Rose (2002) observed that the DCT could reflect particular forms and strategies employed in a certain situation. Martínez-Flor (2012) compared interactive written DCT data and oral role-play data, and found no statistically significant difference in lengths, types, and numbers of refusal strategies. In addition, Rose (1992) compared two forms of DCT data – one with Hearer Response (HR DCT) and the other without (NoHR DCT) – and observed that the inclusion of Hearer Response had little effect on request making in DCT data.

1.2 Research on request emails from students to faculty

In most studies on requests, data was collected primarily through either DCTs or oral role-plays. However, only a few studies have focused on authentic emails encoding requests addressed by students to faculty (Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Chen, 2001; Lee, 2004; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Most of these studies employed concepts, principles and categories of the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper, 1989) as their coding framework.

Some of these studies (Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Chen, 2001; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Samar, Navidinia, & Mehrani, 2010) have compared requestive emails written by native English speakers with those written by non-native English speakers from a pragmatic perspective, revealing that non-native speakers used fewer supportive moves and more rigid syntactic structures than the native speakers. Other studies focused on exploring non-native speakers' emails to faculty (Bloch, 2002; Bou Franch, 2006). Zhu (2012) compared requestive emails written by English majors and non-English majors Chinese EFL learners. Some studies showed that nonnative speakers preferred to use more

direct strategies and requestive hints than conventionally indirect strategies, especially in lower imposition situations (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Lee, 2004; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) observed that the openings and closings were also missing in the nonnative speakers' emails. Overall, these studies suggested that nonnative speakers' request emails might not be pragmatically appropriate.

The purpose of the present study is to investigate written DCTs' degree of validity by comparing and contrasting the written DCT data and the spontaneously produced email data from male Chinese students who attended graduate programs in the United States. The authors propose three research questions: Do students (1) produce statements of similar length, (2) use similar supportive moves, and (3) employ the same request perspective both in written DCT responses and spontaneously produced emails?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The target population in the present study was male Chinese graduate students. A convenience sampling method was conducted to recruit potential participants. We sent invitation email letters to fourteen students who were members from the target population, and twelve of them were willing to participate. The study was approved by the institutional review board at Texas A&M University.

These twelve participants attended engineering graduate programs at a university in the southwestern United States. All of them had completed their undergraduate studies in China, and their native language was Mandarin. Most of them had never been to the United States before they started their graduate studies in the US. They were either in the first or second year of their engineering graduate programs, and four of the participants were PhD students, while the remaining eight were masters students. None of them enrolled in English language courses at the university because they all met the university's English proficiency requirements (scoring at least 80 on TOEFL iBT, 6.0 on IELTS, 400 on GRE Verbal, or 22 on GMAT Verbal). Additionally, they had never received any specific instructions on pragmatics or written DCTs.

2.2 Spontaneously produced email data collection

We asked all the participants to forward the requestive emails that they had sent to faculty members during the last six months, and the resulting sample consisted of 52 spontaneously produced emails. The first author analyzed the contents of each email classified them into 10 categories depending on the situations, listed in Table 1.

| Situations | Number of emails |
|---|------------------|
| Making an appointment | 16 |
| Inviting faculty to be chair/committee member | 10 |
| Course registration | 5 |
| Asking for file update | 5 |
| Asking for signature | 4 |
| Checking proposal/assignment | 3 |
| Joining a research team | 3 |
| Time negotiation | 2 |
| Request for recommendation letters | 2 |
| PhD application | 2 |
| Total | 52 |

Table 1
Requestive content of spontaneously produce emails.

2.3 Written DCT data collection

As shown in Table 2, we selected five situations, which were the most common among the spontaneously produced emails collected from the 12 participants, and we developed these five situations into the written DCT. Each comprised a short description of the situation, specifying the setting, and the social distance between the participants and their status relative to each other. The social distance (familiarity) dimension varied from familiar (+SD; situations 1, 2, 4 and 5) to unfamiliar (-SD; situation 3). In the former, the students were represented as having taken at least one course with the faculty member; in the latter, as having taken no courses with him/her. The dominance (social power) dimension was kept constant, with the student (the email sender) having lower social status than faculty (the email receiver).

| Request Situations | Social Distance | Dominance |
|---|-----------------|-----------|
| 1.Making an appointment | +SD | S<R |
| 2.Inviting faculty to be chair/committee member | +SD | S<R |
| 3.Course registration | -SD | S<R |
| 4.Asking for file update | +SD | S<R |
| 5.Asking for signature | +SD | S<R |

Table 2
Requestive content of written DCTs.

We sent the written DCT (see Appendix) to participants and asked them to complete the tasks with recognizable handwriting. The participants returned the sheet back to us after completion.

2.4 Data analysis

The first author investigated the differences between the spontaneously produced email data and the written DCT data by comparing their length, supportive moves, and request perspectives. We coded supportive moves and request perspectives following the CCSARP Coding Manual (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989). According to the Coding Manual, supportive moves include Preparatory (announcing he or she will make a request, or

asking for the hearer's permission to make the request), Precommitment (checking on a potential refusal), and Grounder (giving reasons for the request). Also, the Coding Manual identifies request perspective as Speaker Oriented (e.g., Can I make an appointment with you?), Hearer Oriented (e.g., Could you update the notes?), Inclusive (e.g., Could we meet sometime?), or Impersonal (e.g., Can one ask for suggestion?). We performed descriptive statistics, T test and Chi square test to investigate the differences between the spontaneously produced email data and the written DCT data.

3. Results

3.1 Data length

We counted the number of words in each email, calculating both the mean and the standard deviation of these values (see Table 3). The spontaneously produced emails were longer than the written DCT emails in all five situations, especially in the updates situation. Also, the lengths varied more significantly in the spontaneously produced emails than those in the written DCT emails across all the five situations.

| | Appointment | | Committee | | Registration | | Updates | | Signature | |
|-------------------|-------------|------|-----------|------|--------------|------|---------|------|-----------|------|
| | Real | DCT | Real | DCT | Real | DCT | Real | DCT | Real | DCT |
| Mean | 47.3 | 35.5 | 77 | 51 | 69.6 | 51.6 | 56.8 | 9.8 | 57 | 36.7 |
| SD | 25.4 | 7.9 | 32.3 | 13.6 | 31.8 | 9.2 | 33.3 | 13.9 | 23.1 | 12.7 |
| Minimum | 19 | 22 | 33 | 22 | 35 | 39 | 10 | 17 | 37 | 14 |
| Maximum | 113 | 48 | 129 | 70 | 121 | 71 | 83 | 63 | 89 | 48 |
| <i>P</i> (T test) | 0.049* | | 0.035* | | 0.28 | | 0.32 | | 0.168 | |

Table 3
Total numbers of words.

Participants generated spontaneously produced emails using more words than in their written DCT emails. The mean differences were statistically significant in Appointment and Committee situations ($p < 0.05$) – such difference is observable in the following two emails that were produced by the same participant:

Dear Dr. X,
I have integrated video transmission on wireless network. We are getting the results for normal MAC 802.11 layer with BER.
So, when we trying to run your scheduling code, it cannot work. We found that the file where "Agent/Realtime" has been implemented is missing. So, it will be a great help if you can send that file for successful implementation of video transmission on your scheduling policy. Waiting for your kind reply. Thanks a lot!
XX (Spontaneously produced email)

Dear Prof. X,
Could you please update the files on elearning so that we can revise the lecture in time?
Thanks,
XX (Written DCT email)

3.2 Supportive moves

A speaker may use supportive moves to mitigate or aggravate his or her request (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989). None of the participants used Preparatory in either the

spontaneously produced emails or the written DCTs, and only two emails used Precommitment (one in a spontaneously produced email and the other one in a written DCT email). Grounders were commonly used in both the spontaneously produced emails and the written DCT emails, as illustrated in Table 4. There was no statistically significant difference between the spontaneously produced emails and the written DCT emails in terms of conducting supportive moves.

| | Spontaneously | | DCT | | <i>P</i> (Chi-square) |
|--------------|---------------|------------|--------|------------|-----------------------|
| | Number | Percentage | Number | Percentage | |
| Appointment | 16 | 100% | 12 | 100% | 0.139 |
| Committee | 9 | 90% | 12 | 100% | |
| Registration | 5 | 100% | 12 | 100% | |
| Updates | 4 | 80% | 12 | 100% | |
| Signature | 4 | 100% | 11 | 92% | |
| Total | 38 | 95% | 59 | 98% | |

Table 4
Numbers of emails that conducted Grounders.

3.3 Request perspectives

Choice of perspective presented an important source of variation in requests. Requests can emphasize the role of the agent and be Speaker Oriented, the role of the recipient and be Hearer Oriented, both roles of the agent and the recipient and be Inclusive, or neither role and be Impersonal (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989). The participants never used the Impersonal request perspective, and only one spontaneously produced email implemented the Inclusive perspective. Meanwhile, most emails used either Speaker Oriented or Hearer Oriented perspectives.

Table 5 shows the numbers of emails performing Speaker Oriented and Hearer Oriented request perspective. The participants used more Hearer Oriented and Speaker Oriented request perspectives than Inclusive and Impersonal request perspectives. Note that in the Committee situation, the spontaneously produced emails and the written DCT emails had the same results. However, in the Registration and the Signature situations, there were some statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$). The spontaneously produced emails elicited more Speaker Oriented request perspectives (60% vs 75%) than Hearer Oriented perspectives (40% vs 25%), while the written DCT emails produced more Hearer Oriented request perspectives (83.3% vs 75%) than Speaker Oriented request perspectives (8.3% vs 16.7%). For example, one participant asked for his/her committee member's signature through this email:

Hello Dr. X,
How are you doing?
I have some course changes in my degree plan, and I need signatures from all the committee members to fill out the "petition for course changes" form.
Could you tell me when you are available in your office, so that I can stop by your office to get your signature?
Thanks!
XX

In the written DCT email, the expression changed to:

Dear Prof.
I finished my degree plan, please help to sign it. Thanks.
X

| | | Spontaneously | | DCT | | P-value (Chi-square) |
|--------------|------------------|---------------|------------|--------|------------|----------------------|
| | | Number | Percentage | Number | Percentage | |
| Appointment | Hearer Oriented | 9 | 56.25% | 5 | 41.7% | 0.46 |
| | Speaker Oriented | 6 | 37.5% | 6 | 50% | |
| Committee | Hearer Oriented | 5 | 50% | 6 | 50% | 1 |
| | Speaker Oriented | 5 | 50% | 6 | 50% | |
| Registration | Hearer Oriented | 2 | 40% | 10 | 83.3% | 0.029* |
| | Speaker Oriented | 3 | 60% | 1 | 8.3% | |
| Updates | Hearer Oriented | 5 | 100% | 11 | 91.7% | 0.5 |
| | Speaker Oriented | 0 | 0% | 1 | 8.3% | |
| Signature | Hearer Oriented | 1 | 25% | 9 | 75% | 0.039* |
| | Speaker Oriented | 3 | 75% | 2 | 16.7% | |
| Total | | 39 | 97.5% | 57 | 95% | |

Table 5
Numbers of emails that conducted Request Perspectives.

4. Discussion

Requests in the spontaneously produced email data were longer than those in the written DCT data. The spontaneously produced emails would have impacted student-faculty relationships consequently because the texts are real-world interactions, while the written DCT emails would have had no influence on student-faculty relationship due to the artificiality of the elicited texts. The students considered the written DCT emails as unimportant tasks; therefore, the participants paid much more attention in the spontaneously produced emails than the written DCT emails. Also, students tended to elaborate more about certain courses, research fields, or academic problems in authentic emails. However, they just made general requests in the written DCT emails. This was one of the major reasons for producing longer lengths in the spontaneously produced emails than in the written DCT emails. Edmondson and House (1991) described such length differences as the Waffle Phenomenon: non-native language learners do not trust simple utterances can successfully achieve their communicative goals, so they generate more words than needed. Martinez-Flor (2013) observed no statistically significant difference between the written DCT data and the oral role-play data in terms of length, but Rasekh (2012) found a significant difference in written DCT data and the role-play data.

Both settings provided justifications or explanations with the request. In the Registration and Signature situations, the spontaneously produced emails elicited more Speaker Oriented request perspectives than Hearer Oriented perspectives, while the written DCT data produced more Hearer Oriented request perspectives than Speaker Oriented request perspectives. Rasekh (2012) also received the similar finding that there were more Hearer Oriented request perspectives used in the written DCT data. Writing the authentic emails places students in a “higher stake” situation: if they use pragmatically and socially appropriate language, they were more likely to build a good student-faculty relationship; otherwise, their pragmatic failure would have led to misunderstanding with their higher-status interlocutor.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the authenticity of written DCT data by comparing elicited requests with spontaneous requests produced by Chinese students and addressed to faculty members. Results showed that although the request lengths in the spontaneously produced emails tended to be much longer, there was no statistically significant difference in the usage of supportive moves or request perspectives.

Potential limitations of the study may have influenced the results. First of all, the sample is relatively small, consisting of just 12 participants. In addition, the gender and the major variables of the participants were homogeneous. There is no guarantee that the gender and the major variables had no effect on the texts. Finally, the participants might not have adopted a serious enough attitude toward the DCT tasks, compared to the spontaneously produced emails, in which they had vested interests. The difference in attitude may have affected their writing style. These issues require further investigation.

Despite of its limitations, this paper suggests that the written DCT can be used as an effective instrument for eliciting email data.

Appendix

Written Discourse Completion Test

Please complete this task with recognizable handwriting.
Thank you for your participation and support!

- (1) You want to meet with Professor X to talk about your project. You are writing an email to him/her to make an appointment. What would you say in this email?

- (2) You are writing an email inviting Professor X (whom you had a course with during the last semester) to be your committee member. What would you say in the email?

- (3) You are registering courses for next semester on Howdy, but there is no vacant spot left for one course that you plan to take. Therefore, you cannot register that course through Howdy system. Professor X is the instructor of that course and this is the first course you are taking with him. You are writing an email to him/her and asking for help. What would you say in this email?

- (4) You need a signature from Professor X (your chair) for your degree plan. You are writing an email to him/her. What would you say in this email?

- (5) This semester, you are taking one course from Professor X. You are writing an email to Professor X to remind him/her to update related files/notes/papers of that course on Elearning. What would you say in this email?

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