



Message Design and Recipients' Perception in Intercultural Emails: Iraqi Non-Native English Speakers' Emails to Australian Native Speakers

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between English non-native speakers' linguistic behaviour in email communication and native speakers' attitudinal reactions. Authentic email messages were collected from Iraqi non-native English speakers and evaluated by Australian English native speakers in terms of clarity, style, structure and appropriateness. The email messages were analysed at the discourse level and matched with Australian participants' evaluations. The results showed that in addition to canonical moves of *subject line*, *opening*, *request* and *closing*, non-canonical moves, such as *establishing the background*, *introducing self*, *promoting further contact* and *thanking/appreciating the recipient*, were used more frequently in positively evaluated emails than in negatively evaluated ones. The results were discussed in terms of the limitations of email as a text-based communication channel and the role of non-canonical moves in adding positive effect to the email message.

KEYWORDS:

Computer-mediated communication, non-verbal cues, impression-formation, textual cues, intercultural communication

1. INTRODUCTION

Electronic mail (email), a prominent form of computer-mediated communication (CMC), has become a widely adopted tool for human interaction, quickly evolving and replacing certain traditional communication methods. The rapid expansion of email usage can be attributed to its numerous advantages: it offers a fast, cost-effective, flexible, and resilient means of communication across various locations and time zones. These benefits have made email a valuable tool for intercultural communication across diverse contexts and borders. However, its use in interactions between individuals from different cultural backgrounds can lead to tensions sometimes, stemming from both technological limitations and differing cultural assumptions and expectations regarding appropriate linguistic behaviour in this mode of communication.

In contrast to face-to-face interactions, email communication offers users significantly reduced access to non-verbal and contextual cues, which are essential for conveying intentions and forming accurate impressions of interlocutors. Hancock and Dunham (2001) contend that in face-to-face encounters,

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linguistic behaviour is complemented by paralinguistic and non-verbal signals, allowing participants to gather sufficient information for impression formation. These interactions are also influenced by autonomous cues, such as physical appearance and social markers present in the interactional context. However, as noted by Sproull and Kiesler (1986), in text-based computer-mediated communication, such as email, the cues necessary for impression formation are either absent or altered, potentially rendering this medium less suitable for effective interpersonal communication.

To compensate for the limitations inherent in email communication, users must be mindful of the message structure and the linguistic cues they employ to convey their intentions. They rely entirely on the text within the message to express emotions and intentions, which demands a sufficient level of linguistic and pragmatic competence. Walther (1993) suggests that users of computer-mediated communication may need to employ subtle textual cues and paralinguistic devices as substitutes for non-verbal signals to form impressions and foster productive interpersonal relationships. However, email users, particularly non-native speakers, may struggle with determining the most appropriate and effective language to achieve their communication goals in specific contexts. This challenge is further heightened in intercultural settings, as non-native speakers often face uncertainty regarding the social values and norms governing the style and language of emails in the target community.

Mohammed T.A., Message Design and Recipients' Perception in Intercultural Emails: Iraqi Non-Native English Speakers' Emails to Australian Native Speakers

This study aims to explore the relationship between the structure of email messages composed in intercultural settings and the potential attitudinal reactions of recipients. Specifically, it investigates how Australian English native speakers (AENSs) perceive email messages sent by Iraqi non-native English speakers (INNESSs), seeking to explain these perceptions based on the discoursal structure of the emails. The central research questions guiding this investigation are:

- How do Australian native English speakers perceive email messages from Iraqi non-native English speakers in intercultural communication contexts?
- How can the perceptions of Australian native English speakers be explained through the discoursal structure of messages?

The significance of this research lies in its potential to deepen our understanding of how language and structure in intercultural email communication influence recipients' attitudes, which is especially relevant in globalised professional and academic contexts. The study begins with a review of relevant themes from literature, followed by a description of the research methods, the presentation of findings, and a discussion of these results.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Intercultural email communication

Within the fields of cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has emerged as a significant area for examining users' pragmatic behaviour within an online community characterised by diverse cultural and individual traits (Taylor, 2009). This diversity may lead to variations in the linguistic and pragmatic practices of CMC users, as they may operate under differing assumptions about appropriate conduct in CMC contexts, shaped by their own cultural values, beliefs, norms, and conventions (cf. Chang and Hsu, 1998; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Email, as an important CMC medium, has become a prevalent communication channel among internet users (Dürscheid and Frehner, 2013). Its widespread adoption across social, educational, and professional domains has been driven by the inherent advantages this medium offers (Crystal, 2006; Byron and Baldrige, 2007; Vignovic and Thompson, 2010). Email language represents a hybrid form, blending characteristics of both written and spoken language; however, the extent to which it aligns more closely with either mode may depend on the context and the socio-cultural background of the sender (Chang and Hsu, 1998; Gains, 1999; Murray, 2000).

Studies examining email usage among individuals from different cultural backgrounds reveal notable differences in email style and structure. In their analysis of emails written by Chinese English learners and American English native speakers, Chang and Hsu (1998) found that Chinese participants tended to structure their emails similarly to formal letters or telephone conversations, whereas American

participants approached email as they would written memos. Chang and Hsu suggest that the hybrid nature of email—combining elements of both writing and speech—along with the contrasting stylistic preferences of American and Chinese users, may account for the observed differences in email layout. Gains (1999) further illustrates that variations in email format are evident across different communication contexts. His study of email exchanges within a UK insurance company and within and between UK universities identified format differences between commercial and academic settings. While emails from the insurance company adhered to standard written English, those in the academic context included conversational elements. These findings support Murray's (2000, p. 400) assertion that "in CMC, the complex interaction of contextual aspects results in specific bundles of linguistic features, the medium being only one aspect of the context." According to Murray, email users may adopt either a formal writing style or an informal speaking style depending on the communication context, including the topic, participants, and setting.

In intercultural email communication, non-native speakers' capacity to make linguistically and contextually appropriate choices relies on their understanding and awareness of the values, norms, and conventions of the target culture and language. Such choices are informed by interlocutors' assessment of social and contextual factors governing language use in specific situations. However, as Schauer (2004) observes, selecting language that is suitable for a given context poses challenges, particularly for foreign language learners with limited exposure to authentic language use. Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) emphasise that learners in foreign language settings often lack awareness of the importance of pragmatic knowledge for appropriate language use in social interactions. This lack of pragmatic awareness can lead to pragmatic failure, potentially resulting in negative outcomes in intercultural communication. According to Thomas (1983), pragmatic failure can substantially impede non-native speakers' ability to communicate effectively in the target language and may negatively influence perceptions of them, fostering unfavourable attitudes and stereotypes. Misuse of language within context can lead to miscommunication, misunderstandings, and even adverse judgments (cf. Beal 1990). Zarobe and Zarobe (2012) further argue that pragmatic errors frequently result in misunderstandings and strained social relationships, as such errors are often perceived as impolite or rude. Moreover, the limitations of email technology—such as the absence of non-verbal cues and real-time feedback—can exacerbate pragmatic failures, making effective intercultural communication even more challenging.

2.2. Impression formation in email

The absence of non-verbal cues is a defining feature of email language and other forms of CMC. While some scholars (e.g., Nowak, 2003; Byron & Baldrige, 2007) argue that the lack

Mohammed T.A., Message Design and Recipients' Perception in Intercultural Emails: Iraqi Non-Native English Speakers' Emails to Australian Native Speakers

of non-verbal cues in CMC can benefit participants by minimising the influence of social differences, some research findings underscore the importance of non-verbal cues in conveying emotional and social messages. Byron and Baldrige (2007) suggest that CMC users actively seek non-verbal cues to form impressions of their communicators, aiding in their understanding of communicative intent. In email communication specifically, recipients utilise any available information—such as signatures, communication style, emoticons, punctuation, and spelling or typing errors—to form impressions and judgments about the sender. Walther and D'Addario (2001) note that email users adapt to the constraints of this medium by using various textual strategies, including emoticons, to foster relational communication. According to Walther (1992), the limited availability of non-verbal cues compels email users to rely exclusively on linguistic content and text-based cues to convey meanings and intentions effectively. This task can be challenging for non-native speakers composing email messages in a second or foreign language, particularly if they possess an insufficient level of pragmatic competence in the target language.

In intercultural email communication, non-native speakers may face challenges in structuring messages in alignment with native speakers' expectations, potentially leading to misinterpretations of the sender's intentions and negative perceptions of their linguistic behaviour. Chang and Hsu (1998) investigated American English native speakers' perceptions of emails written by Chinese non-native English speakers. Their findings indicated that emails composed by Chinese participants were often perceived as impolite or unclear. A primary factor contributing to these negative perceptions was a divergence in email style and the sequence of information within each message. Similarly, Murphy and Levy (2006) observed that Australian email recipients tended to view emails from international sources as impolite due to inadequate text structure, a lack of formality and clarity, and incorrect use of titles.

Moreover, Hendriks (2010) contends that non-native speakers may face negative evaluations of their personality traits due to their linguistic choices in email communication. In her investigation into how Dutch non-native English speakers' use of request modification in emails influences native speakers' perceptions, she highlights that a lack of elaborate modification adversely affects the recipient's perception of the sender's agreeableness. Similarly, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) suggests that non-native speakers' limited understanding of politeness norms in email communication may lead native speakers to view their messages negatively. Her study, which examined request emails written by Greek Cypriot students at a British university and analysed lecturers' evaluations of these messages, reveals that the students' emails often display considerable directness, a scarcity of lexical or phrasal

mitigations, omissions of greetings and closings, and the use of inappropriate forms of address. These features collectively prompt lecturers to perceive these emails as impolite and abrupt.

The problematic structure of non-native speakers' email messages can be attributed to a lack of pragmatic competence, particularly an insufficient awareness of the conventions governing style and structure in English email communication. In a study by Economidou-Kogetsidis (2016), the perceptions of British English native-speaking lecturers and Greek Cypriot EFL university students were analysed regarding direct and unmodified request emails. The findings revealed a distinct evaluative contrast: while EFL students assessed the emails positively across evaluation criteria, the lecturers rated the same messages negatively. Economidou-Kogetsidis attributed this discrepancy to the divergence between the students' pragmatic competence and the lecturers' native pragmatic knowledge. The students demonstrated an unawareness of the potentially adverse effects of pragmatic errors present in the analysed emails.

The studies referenced above offer valuable insights into the potential for English native speakers to develop negative attitudes toward non-native speakers and their messages within intercultural email communication. They also illuminate key factors contributing to these negative perceptions. A primary factor appears to be the deviation from native speakers' norms and expectations that define appropriate email communication within specific contexts, which can elicit negative attitudinal responses. Notably, most of the emails analysed in these studies were sent by students to academics, thus reflecting communication in contexts of power imbalance. To gain a broader understanding, assessing email exchanges from various contexts could further reveal the influence of additional social and contextual variables on evaluators' perceptions. The present study aims to investigate the effect of email discourse on recipients' perceptions by analysing authentic email samples from diverse intercultural settings.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Email corpus

The email corpus collected for this study comprises 228 authentic email messages sent by Iraqi non-native English speakers (INNESs) to Australian recipients. To investigate how Australian native speakers perceive these emails within various social contexts, the corpus encompasses messages composed across academic, workplace, and service-related settings. The academic emails were directed to lecturers, faculty staff, and academic advisors at three universities in Melbourne, Australia, typically for purposes such as organizing meetings, seeking feedback, or requesting academic or administrative information. The workplace emails were authored by participants employed in diverse professional settings in Australia and were addressed to

Mohammed T.A., Message Design and Recipients' Perception in Intercultural Emails: Iraqi Non-Native English Speakers' Emails to Australian Native Speakers

colleagues or superiors, often involving requests for a work shift change, information, sick leave, payment, or documents. Finally, the service encounter emails were directed to various Australian offices and service providers, including real-estate agencies, police licensing offices, city councils, and telecommunications companies, to request services or obtain service-related information. The email messages in this study were collected from 40 Iraqi participants aged between 25 and 45 years, all of whom were Australian residents who had lived in Australia for a minimum of seven years. The participants were employed or studying in various Australian workplaces and educational institutions, where they engaged in frequent verbal and written communication with Australian native speakers in professional or academic contexts.

Following the collection of these emails, the researcher conducted interviews with the Iraqi participants to gather contextual information regarding the situations in which the emails were sent. This contextual data was essential for analysing and discussing the discourse within the email corpus, as it provided clarity on the meaning and function of specific expressions and segments within each message. Additionally, the contextual information facilitated a detailed description of each email for evaluation surveys distributed to Australian participants, who were asked to assess the emails in their original contexts. This approach enabled Australian participants to gain a comprehensive understanding of each email's content and structure, thereby allowing for more accurate evaluations. Data collection for the contextual analysis involved a structured face-to-face interview. The interview questions aimed to gather general demographic information about the sender and recipient—such as age, gender, role, status, and the relationship between them—as well as detailed descriptions of the circumstances prompting each email. These descriptions covered the purpose of the email, the sender's expectations, their perception of the recipient's obligations, and, if available, the nature of any response received and their satisfaction with it.

3.2. Email evaluation

This study utilised a Likert scale questionnaire with four evaluative statements to examine Australian English native speakers' perceptions of INNESS' emails. Each participant evaluated seven email messages based on these statements. For each email, the questionnaire provided contextual details, including information about the sender and recipient, their roles, relationship, communication setting, relevant background information, and the purpose of the interaction. Participants were asked to assess each email's clarity, style, language, and appropriateness using a 5-point scale, with ratings ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

A total of 105 Australian evaluators (49 males and 56 females) were recruited, ranging in age from 25 to 50 years, with diverse educational and professional backgrounds. Participants included university students and staff as well as

employees in various institutions and businesses across Australia. To ensure the reliability and validity of the evaluations, the email messages were distributed on three types of questionnaires—academic, workplace, and service encounter—and each email was assessed by at least three Australian evaluators. Academic emails were evaluated by participants with academic roles, including staff members and postgraduate students from Australian universities. Workplace emails were reviewed by participants employed in various professional settings within Australia, while service encounter emails were assessed by participants familiar with the conventions of email communication within Australian cultural contexts. This distribution strategy ensured that each evaluator possessed relevant background knowledge and experience, qualifying them to accurately assess the emails in their respective contexts.

3.3. Data analysis

The data analysis process was conducted in three stages. In the first stage, data from the evaluation questionnaires was analysed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The Rasch analysis model (Bond and Fox, 2007) was employed to produce a detailed examination of the ratings for each email message across all evaluative statements, with the analysis run through ConQuest software (Adams, Wu, and Wilson, 2015). The Rasch model enabled the construction of a scaled representation of evaluators' attitudes toward the email messages. For each of the four evaluative statements, it generated comprehensive statistical data, including frequency, percentage, p-value, and mean ability of responses. Additionally, evaluators' comments on the email messages were subjected to qualitative analysis through interpretive approaches grounded in discourse analysis of the email corpus.

In the second stage of data analysis, INNESS' email messages were analysed at the discourse level to identify the types and frequencies of rhetorical moves included in these messages. This stage employed a genre analysis approach and utilised an analytical framework based on prior research in email analysis. As presented in Table 1, categories adapted from previous studies included *subject line* (Mehrpour and Mehrzad, 2013), *opening* (Al-Ali and Sahawneh, 2008; Hayati et al., 2011), *introducing self* (Al-Ali and Sahawneh, 2008), *establishing the background* (Ho, 2009; Hayati et al., 2011), *request* (Hayati et al., 2011; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011), *indicating intentions* (Mehrpour and Mehrzad, 2013), *promoting further contact* (Mehrpour and Mehrzad, 2013), *thanking/appreciating the recipient* (Hayati et al., 2011; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011), and *closing* (Al-Ali and Sahawneh, 2008; Hayati et al., 2011). The framework was further refined with new moves—*expressing courtesy*, *adding information*, and *referring to attachment*—to accommodate discursive functions of segments not addressed by previous frameworks.

Mohammed T.A., Message Design and Recipients' Perception in Intercultural Emails: Iraqi Non-Native English Speakers' Emails to Australian Native Speakers

Table 1: The analytical framework used for analysing INNESs' email discourse

Moves	Examples
Subject line	Course start date
Opening	Dear [Recipient first name], Hi professor, Hello
Expressing courtesy	I hope you are very well.
Introducing self	I'm a new PhD student in the faculty of Arts and Education.
Establishing the background	I have accepted the offer, but I made the start date on the 25th of February. After a consultation with my supervisor, I found out that there is a conference that I need to attend on the 15th of February.
Request	I am wondering if I can change the start date to the 25th of January.
Adding information	I will send it to you chapter by chapter, because I haven't done the introduction.
Indicating intentions	I am going to call you tomorrow hopefully.
Promoting further contact	Looking forward to hearing from you.
Referring to attachment	My documents attached with this email.
Thanking/appreciating the recipient	Thank you so much
Closing	Regards Sender's First name and Last name

In the third stage of data analysis, findings from the evaluation data analysis conducted in the first stage were compared with the discourse analysis results from the second stage. This comparison aimed to identify the characteristics of INNESs' emails that received positive or negative evaluations and to provide evidence explaining these evaluations based on the discourse features of the emails. For each evaluative criterion (clarity, style, structure and appropriateness), a matching table was generated. Each table contained a list of rhetorical moves and their frequencies in emails that were rated positively or negatively on the specific criterion.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Evaluators' perceptions

As indicated in Table 2, the evaluators' responses to the first evaluative statement—*the content of this email is clear*—reveal that the majority of INNES's emails were assessed as having clear content, with fewer than one-quarter deemed unclear. A small proportion (4%) of the emails were rated as uncertain in terms of clarity. Regarding the formality of the message style—*the style of this email is formal*—more than half of INNES's emails were evaluated as lacking formality, while slightly over one-third were perceived as having a formal style. Additionally, the evaluators were not sure about the style of a small fraction (6.1%) of INNES's emails.

Table 2: The evaluators' responses to the evaluation statements

Response	<i>The content of this email is clear.</i>		<i>The style of this email is formal.</i>		<i>This email is well written.</i>		<i>This email is appropriate in this context.</i>	
	Number of emails %	Number of responses %	Number of emails %	Number of responses %	Number of emails %	Number of responses %	Number of emails %	Number of responses %
Agree & Strongly Agree	171 75%	528 71.1%	84 36.8%	260 35%	64 28%	228 30.8%	132 57.8%	418 56.2%
Not sure	9 4%	36 4.9%	14 6.1%	47 6.3%	14 6.1%	49 6.6%	22 9.6%	87 11.7%
Disagree & Strongly Disagree	48 21%	178 24%	130 57%	436 58.6%	150 65.7%	462 62.4%	74 32.4%	237 31.8%

Table 2 further illustrates that the evaluators' responses to the third evaluative statement—*this email is well-written*—indicate that the majority of INNES's emails were assessed as not well-written, while slightly more than one-quarter were rated as well-written. A small number of emails were

classified as uncertain in this regard. Concerning contextual appropriateness—*this email is appropriate in this context*—more than half of the emails were deemed appropriate, whereas fewer than one-third were evaluated as

Mohammed T.A., Message Design and Recipients' Perception in Intercultural Emails: Iraqi Non-Native English Speakers' Emails to Australian Native Speakers

inappropriate. The evaluators expressed uncertainty about the appropriateness of less than 10% of the emails.

4.2. Email structure

Thirteen distinct moves were identified in the analysis of the rhetorical structure of INNESs' email messages. These moves

include the *subject line*, *opening*, *expressing courtesy*, *introducing self*, *establishing the background*, *request*, *request 2*, *adding information*, *indicating intention*, *promoting further contact*, *referring to attachment*, *thanking/appreciating the recipient* and *closing* (see Table 3).

Table 3: Frequency of rhetorical moves in INNESs' emails

Moves	Frequency
Subject line	96.5%
Opening	97%
Expressing courtesy	18%
Introducing self	18%
Establishing the background	52%
Request	100%
Request 2	16.2%
Adding information	10%
Indicating intention	4.3%
Promoting further contact	10.5%
Referring to attachment	12.3%
Thanking/appreciating the recipient	24.6%
Closing	98.7%

Nearly all INNESs' emails begin with a subject line that introduces the content of the message. Some subject lines explicitly identify the action requested in the body of the email (e.g., 'checking thesis', 'fixing the grill', 'renewing a security license'), while others specify the entity or issue requiring action or information (e.g., 'enrolment', 'ESL teacher job', 'liability insurance'). Similarly, almost all emails feature opening moves in various forms, although certain formats are more prevalent. The most common opening formula is *Hi + first name*, followed by *Dear + first name*. The choice of opening formula appears to be influenced by contextual factors, including the nature of the relationship between the sender and recipient, as well as their respective statuses and roles.

The *expressing courtesy* move, observed in 18% of the emails, involves extending good wishes to recipients, such as 'Hope you are well and have a happy New Year' or 'I hope this email finds you well'. This move is predominantly found in emails sent to recipients who are familiar with the senders and have engaged in prior communication with them. Similarly, the *introducing self*-move, occurring with the same frequency as *expressing courtesy*, is typically present in emails sent to recipients with whom INNESs have not had previous contact. This move serves to introduce the sender by providing their name, position, and other identifying details, for instance, 'I'm the tenant of [sender's address]' or 'I'm

[first name and last name], a master's student at [University Name]'.

The *establishing the background* move is typically the fifth sequential element within the structure of INNESs' emails but may appear third or fourth in cases where it is not preceded by expressing courtesy or introducing self. This move, employed in more than half of the analysed emails, provides background information about the issue or topic being addressed. It is used to explain the context and support the request that usually follows this move.

The *request* move appears consistently in all emails sent by INNESs. It typically occupies the third position in emails where the body begins with a direct request following the subject line and opening moves. In cases where the request move occurs later—such as fourth, fifth, or sixth—it is usually preceded by expressing courtesy, introducing self and/or establishing the background. Additionally, in some emails, the sender includes a secondary request (*request 2*) to seek an additional service, action, or information.

Additional moves identified in the corpus include: *adding information*, present in 10% of INNESs' emails, which provides clarification or elaboration on the sender's requests; *indicating intention*, utilised in 4.3% of emails to inform recipients about the sender's intended actions regarding the request; *promoting further contact*, employed in 10.5% to encourage recipients to reply or reach out for additional information or clarification; and *referring to attachment*,

Mohammed T.A., Message Design and Recipients' Perception in Intercultural Emails: Iraqi Non-Native English Speakers' Emails to Australian Native Speakers

found in 12.3% of emails, drawing the recipient's attention to an attached file. The *thanking/appreciating the recipient* move appears in nearly a quarter of the emails, expressing gratitude for cooperation or acknowledging compliance. This move varies in form, ranging from single words (e.g., 'thanks') and short phrases (e.g., 'thank you') to more elaborate expressions incorporating intensifiers and reasons for gratitude.

The final move in the sequence is the *closing*, which appears in nearly all emails. The most common closing formulas identified in the corpus include: expressions of good wishes (e.g., 'regards', 'best regards', or 'my regards') followed by the sender's full name; expressions of thanks (e.g., 'thanks') followed by either the sender's first name alone or their full name; and expressions of good wishes followed by the sender's first name only. Other closing variations range from minimal formats, such as expressions of thanks, good wishes, or the sender's first name only, to more detailed closings. These longer closings often provide additional information about the sender, such as their full name, position, company or faculty affiliation, and contact details. Such detailed closings are primarily used in emails addressed to recipients with whom the sender has had no prior interaction.

4.3. Matching Results

The evaluators' perceptions of INNESs' emails have been systematically compared to the discursal characteristics of these emails to reach an adequate explanation of these perceptions as presented in detail in the subsequent subsections.

4.3.1. Clarity

A comparison of the discursal characteristics between emails evaluated as having clear content and those with unclear content reveals notable differences in rhetorical organisation. Emails with unclear content tend to include fewer moves compared to those with clear content. As shown in Table 4, the rhetorical structure of most emails with clear content comprises five main moves: *subject line*, *opening*, *establishing the background*, *request* and *closing*. In contrast, the majority of emails with unclear content typically consist of only four moves: *subject line*, *opening*, *request* and *closing*. Notably, the frequency of the *establishing the background* move in clear-content emails is nearly double that in unclear-content emails. Additionally, other moves, such as *introducing self*, *adding information*, *indicating intention*, *promoting further contact* and *thanking/appreciating the recipient*, are more commonly employed in emails with clear content than in those with unclear content.

Table 4: Frequency of moves in emails evaluated on clarity of content

Moves	Frequency	
	Clear content	Unclear content
Subject line	97.6%	95.8%
Opening	97.6%	95.8%
Expressing courtesy	16.4%	22.9%
Introducing self	18.2%	16.6%
Establishing the background	57.6%	31.2%
Request	100%	100%
Adding information	9.4%	6.2%
Indicating intentions	5.2%	2%
Promoting further contact	12.3%	2%
Referring to attachment	11.1%	16.6%
Thanking/appreciating the recipient	25.2%	12.5%
Closing	98.2%	100%

4.3.2. Style

The discourse analysis of emails classified as formal in style reveals that they typically consist of five main moves: *subject line*, *opening*, *establishing the background*, *request* and *closing*. In contrast, emails identified as informal in style generally follow a structure comprising four main moves:

subject line, *opening*, *request* and *closing*, with the *establishing the background* move appearing in fewer than half of these cases. Additionally, other moves—such as *introducing self*, *thanking/appreciating the recipient*, *adding information* and *indicating intention*—occur more frequently in formal emails compared to informal ones (see Table 5).

Mohammed T.A., Message Design and Recipients' Perception in Intercultural Emails: Iraqi Non-Native English Speakers' Emails to Australian Native Speakers

Table 5: Frequency of moves in emails evaluated on formality of style

Moves	Frequency	
	Formal style	Informal style
Subject line	97.6%	95.3%
Opening	96.4%	96.9%
Expressing courtesy	17.8%	17.6%
Introducing self	22.6%	15.3%
Establishing the background	60.7%	46%
Request	100%	100%
Adding information	10.7%	9.2%
Indicating intention	5.9%	3.8%
Promoting further contact	9.5%	9.2%
Referring to attachment	10.7%	12.3%
Thanking/appreciating the recipient	33.3%	15.3%
Closing	98.8%	98.4%

4.3.3. Message structure

Emails evaluated as well-written predominantly follow the move sequence of *subject line*, *opening*, *establishing the background*, *request*, and *closing*. Among these, the *establishing the background* move, while present in over half of these emails, occurs less frequently than the other four moves. In contrast, emails assessed as not well-written typically include the moves *subject line*, *opening*, *request*,

and *closing*, with *establishing the background* appearing in fewer than half of these cases (see Table 6). Notably, the frequency of moves such as *thanking/appreciating the recipient*, *promoting further contact* and *indicating intention* is higher in well-written emails than in those evaluated as not well-written. However, moves such as *expressing courtesy*, *introducing self*, *adding information*, and *referring to attachments* occur at comparable rates in both sets of emails.

Table 6: Frequency of moves in emails evaluated on message structure

Moves	Frequency	
	Well-written	Not well-written
Subject line	100%	95.3%
Opening	95.3%	97.3%
Expressing courtesy	18.4%	19.3%
Introducing self	18.4%	17.3%
Establishing the background	58.4%	47.3%
Request	100%	100%
Adding information	9.2%	9.3%
Indicating intention	7.6%	3.3%
Promoting further contact	15.3%	8.6%
Referring to attachment	10.7%	13.3%
Thanking/appreciating the recipient	35.3%	19.3%
Closing	100%	98%

4.3.4. Appropriateness

INNESS' emails evaluated as appropriate for their contexts predominantly follow a five-move structure: *subject line*, *opening*, *establishing the background*, *request*, and *closing*. In contrast, those considered inappropriate for their contexts typically include only four moves: *subject line*, *opening*, *request*, and *closing*, with the *establishing the background*

move appearing in fewer than half of these emails (see Table 7). Additionally, other moves—such as *thanking/appreciating the recipient*, *promoting further contact*, *expressing courtesy*, *introducing self* and *indicating intention*—are employed more frequently in emails evaluated as appropriate compared to those deemed inappropriate.

Mohammed T.A., Message Design and Recipients' Perception in Intercultural Emails: Iraqi Non-Native English Speakers' Emails to Australian Native Speakers

Table 7: Frequency of moves in emails evaluated on contextual appropriateness

Moves	Frequency	
	Appropriate emails	Inappropriate emails
Subject line	97.7%	94.5%
Opening	96.9%	98.6%
Expressing courtesy	21.2%	12.1%
Introducing self	20.4%	12.1%
Establishing the background	61.3%	44.5%
Request	100%	100%
Adding information	8.3%	10.8%
Indicating intention	5.3%	2.7%
Promoting further contact	15%	4%
Referring to attachment	11.3%	12.1%
Thanking/appreciating the recipient	28.7%	14.8%
Closing	98.4%	98.6%

5. DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that nearly all of INNESs' email messages analysed in this study include four canonical rhetorical moves: *subject line*, *opening*, *request*, and *closing*. The high frequency of these moves, regardless of whether the emails were evaluated positively or negatively, underscores their role as fundamental components defining the structure of an email message. This observation aligns with the guidance provided in email etiquette manuals (e.g., Angell and Heslop, 1994) and studies on email language (e.g., Crystal, 2006), which suggest that a typical email comprises two primary sections: the header and the body. The header, located at the top of the message, includes essential elements such as the subject line, date, and the sender's and recipient's email addresses. The body consists of three main components: the greeting, the message, and the farewell. These elements correspond to the canonical moves identified in INNESs' emails: *subject line*, *opening* (greeting), *request* (message), and *closing* (farewell).

However, the discourse analysis shows that emails positively evaluated by Australian participants often incorporate additional moves beyond the four canonical ones. These additional moves—such as *introducing self*, *establishing the background*, *promoting further contact*, and *thanking/appreciating the recipient*—are more frequently employed in emails rated highly for clarity, style, structure, and appropriateness. Evaluators' comments indicate a clear preference for emails that provide sufficient detail and contextual information tailored to the communication setting. Notably, these additional moves have been identified in the literature (cf. Crystal, 2006; Hayati et al., 2011) as optional elements within email structure. It can therefore be inferred that the inclusion of these moves in email discourse enhances the recipients' perceptions and overall evaluation of the messages.

The positive role of optional moves in email communication may arise from the need to compensate for the absence of contextual and paralinguistic cues. In face-to-face interactions, participants rely on both direct and indirect contextual information to assess the interaction's situation accurately and form impressions of their interlocutors. According to Hancock and Dunham (2001), interlocutors use autonomous cues, such as physical appearance and social markers like age, gender, and status, as well as paralinguistic and non-verbal cues, including intonation, tone, and facial expressions, to convey and interpret information essential for impression formation. In contrast, text-based computer-mediated communication, such as email, is limited in these resources due to its decontextualized nature. Consequently, email recipients depend on textual cues within the message to form impressions and understand its content (Byron & Baldrige, 2007).

Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Berger & Bradac, 1982) posits that individuals in social interactions aim to reduce uncertainty by forming impressions of others, enabling more accurate predictions of their attitudes and behaviours. In the context of email communication, Byron and Baldrige (2007) argue that recipients interpret textual cues in the message to infer the sender's attitudes, intentions, and behaviours. They contend that the absence of non-verbal cues drives recipients to rely heavily on textual elements for impression formation. Similarly, Walther (1992) challenges the notion that non-verbal cues are the sole means for forming impressions. He asserts that participants in CMC can form impressions based on the textual cues present in the message. Accordingly, the optional moves employed in INNESs' emails provide crucial textual cues that aid recipients in understanding the message's content and forming positive impressions of the sender's linguistic behaviour, provided these moves are appropriately structured to align with the email's contextual characteristics.

Mohammed T.A., Message Design and Recipients' Perception in Intercultural Emails: Iraqi Non-Native English Speakers' Emails to Australian Native Speakers

Based on the analysis of email structure by Woodfield and Economidou-Kogetsidis (2010), the non-canonical moves identified in this study serve as either discourse orientation moves or affective moves, depending on their function within the email message. Specifically, the moves *introducing self* and *establishing the background* operate as orientation moves. The *introducing self*-move is employed as an initial unit, where senders provide their names, positions, and other identifying details. *Establishing the background* offers contextual information, outlining the circumstances necessitating the email and any relevant details essential for achieving its purpose. The effectiveness of these moves lies in their ability to enhance the clarity and coherence of the email content. Additionally, they reduce the imposition caused by ambiguous emails, which might otherwise demand time and effort to interpret. For instance, both moves are utilised in the email in Text 1, which was sent by a student to a faculty admission officer.

Text 1

Subject: Course start date [*Subject line*]
Dear [Recipient's first name] [*Opening*]
I am a new PhD student in the faculty of Arts and Education [*Introducing self*]. I have accepted the offer and returned all forms, but I made the start date on the 25th of February. After a consultation with my supervisor, I found out that there is a conference that I need to attend on the 15th of February [*Establishing the background*]. Now, I am wondering if I can change the start date to the 25th of January 2013 instead. That will help me to attend the above occasion and to start using the university facilities [*Request*].
Best regards
[Sender's first name and last name]
ID [Number] [*Closing*]

Before making the request, the message in Text 1 begins by introducing the sender as a new PhD student in the faculty. It then provides background information about their situation and the reasons prompting the email. Including these elements enhances the clarity and comprehensibility of the email. The recipient is more likely to identify the sender and understand the rationale behind their request. As a result, the recipient may find it easier to assess and respond to the request. Additionally, the background information minimises the need for the recipient to seek clarification, saving time and effort. Thus, the email in Text 1 was evaluated as well-structured, clear, and contextually appropriate.

In their comparative study of request emails by native and non-native students, Woodfield and Economidou-Kogetsidis (2010, p. 101) highlight the positive impact of orientation moves on email interpretation due to their critical role in email discourse. They explain:

The orientation move in this native speaker's request functions not only to establish the focus of the request but also operates at an interpersonal level, serving to establish the extent of shared knowledge between the speaker and hearer and in doing so, decreasing the sense of social distance and increasing a sense of solidarity and involvement in the discourse.

Woodfield and Economidou-Kogetsidis argue that non-native speakers may struggle to effectively manage shared knowledge in email communication, potentially leading to negative impressions. These impressions often stem from the absence of background-setting elements that facilitate interpersonal connection, as emphasised in the above quotation. The importance of orientation moves is further reinforced in business communication guides, which recommend opening emails with moves that identify the sender and provide contextual information to establish a clear and engaging tone (cf. Angell and Heslop, 1994).

The lack of discourse orientation moves, particularly the omission of *establishing the background*, has negatively impacted the evaluation of some INNESs' emails. Feedback gathered in this study highlights the evaluators' preference for emails that include contextual information to set the scene and clarify the purpose and circumstances of the message. Emails missing this crucial information often received unfavourable assessments, as demonstrated in the case of the email presented in Text 2.

Text 2

Subject: Log in issue [*Subject line*]
Good Morning [The Organization's name] IT [*Opening*]
Hope you are well [*Expressing courtesy*].
Could you please assist me with my login issue? [*Request*]
Thanks a lot
[First name Last name] [*Closing*]

The email in Text 2 was sent by an employee to the company's Information and Technology (IT) office seeking assistance with a login issue on the company's website. However, the sender failed to include key details, such as their name, position, identification number, or a clear description of the problem and the specific help needed. This lack of identification and contextual information significantly impacted the evaluators' perception of the email. The message was criticised as unclear, informal, and poorly written. One evaluator deemed it unclear, stating it provided "no details of the issue". Another offered a similar critique:

"It is not clear what the nature of the log in issue is nor is any context given around the problem logging in. We can infer that it is

Mohammed T.A., Message Design and Recipients' Perception in Intercultural Emails: Iraqi Non-Native English Speakers' Emails to Australian Native Speakers

likely the author's user name and password is not working for them”.

The inclusion of background information is essential for helping recipients understand the issue at hand and determining how they can assist the sender in addressing it. As highlighted in the above evaluators' comments, the absence of such information often compels recipients to infer the issue and the action being requested. Flynn and Khan (2003) emphasise the importance of providing contextual details in email communication, noting that the sender's intended meaning is at risk of being misconstrued or misinterpreted when an email lacks context. Including the necessary background information not only clarifies the message but also reduces the imposition on the recipient, as they do not need to expend additional effort deciphering the sender's intent or seeking clarification.

This issue is exemplified in the evaluators' feedback on a student's email to a lecturer in an Australian university, which sought permission to change an assignment topic. One of the evaluators' comments states:

“This is too short with no explanation as to the precise nature of the proposed topic. Also, some explanation was needed to set the request in context so the lecturer has the best possibility in understanding what the student was asking. Such brevity forces the lecturer to seek clarification and increases the imposition on her”.

The email from the student lacked critical contextual details, such as the unit the student was enrolled in, the specific assignment being referenced, the relevance of the proposed topic, and the student's reasons for choosing it. This omission placed an undue burden on the lecturer to seek additional information, thereby increasing the imposition of the student's email.

Similarly, prior research on email communication has highlighted the negative implications of insufficient contextual information on recipients' perceptions of the message and its sender. Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996) found that request emails from both native and non-native speakers that fail to provide adequate explanations often result in negative perceptions of the politeness and appropriateness of the messages, reducing the likelihood that the requests will be granted. Carmel (1999) observed that American English native speakers perceive overly concise emails as impolite, while Vignovic and Thompson (2010) demonstrated that unusually brief messages can lead recipients to form unfavourable impressions of the sender's personality traits. These findings underscore the importance of thorough and considerate email composition in fostering effective and respectful communication.

Expressing courtesy, promoting further contact and thanking/appreciating the recipient moves function as affective strategies within email discourse, contributing to

positive impressions and fostering interpersonal relationships. Courtesy is often demonstrated through well-wishing phrases directed at the recipient, such as “I hope this email finds you in good health and spirits”. Similarly, promoting further contact includes statements that invite continued communication or specify how further contact can be made, such as “Looking forward to hearing from you”. These rhetorical moves positively influence recipients' perceptions by fostering a sense of friendliness and solidarity between the sender and recipient. Merrison et al. (2012), in their comparative analysis of emails written by Australian and British English native speakers, identify these moves as markers of solidarity and describe their role as “doing ‘being friendly’” (p. 1088).

The data analysis suggests that the use of courtesy expressions in some INNESS' emails contributes significantly to positive evaluations of their appropriateness. Evaluators' comments reinforce the importance of such strategies in shaping their perceptions. For instance, in Text 3, a postgraduate student's email to their thesis supervisor requesting a follow-up on delayed results exemplifies how courteous language can enhance the perceived politeness and effectiveness of the communication.

Text 3

Subject: my thesis result [*Subject line*]
Hi Dr. [Recipient's First Name] [*Opening*]
Happy new year. I hope you are fine [*Expressing courtesy*]. Please if you can contact with the examiners of my theses because it is take it long time [*Request*]. Just one examiner left, so please if you can check and let me know [*Request 2*].
Thanks [*Closing*]

The body of the above email begins with a courteous expression: “Happy New Year. I hope you are fine”. This opening appears to have positively influenced the evaluators' perceptions, as reflected in their comments. One evaluator noted that the pleasantries “Happy New Year, I hope you are fine” demonstrate consideration for the recipient. Another described the email as “reasonable and is part of respecting academic work of supervisors”. A third evaluator observed that “the sender seems to be asking for this information in a friendly manner”. These comments highlight a preference for including well-wishing expressions at the start of email messages. This finding aligns with Merrison et al. (2012), who noted that Australian participants tend to favour such expressions in email communication.

Similarly, the use of a *promoting further contact* move appears to promote the positive evaluation of emails where it occurs. For example, the phrase “looking forward to hearing from you”, frequently used in INNESS' emails, not only expresses the sender's willingness to receive a response but also serves as a polite conclusion to the message. Al-Ali and Sahawneh (2008) categorise such expressions as strategies

Mohammed T.A., Message Design and Recipients' Perception in Intercultural Emails: Iraqi Non-Native English Speakers' Emails to Australian Native Speakers

for crafting polite endings, borrowing conventions from traditional letter writing. They argue that these expressions enhance the level of politeness in email communication and foster positive impressions among recipients.

The inclusion of thanking or appreciating expressions in INNESS' emails seems to be another factor contributing to evaluators' positive perceptions. This effect can be attributed to the role of such expressions as positive politeness strategies, which acknowledge and value the recipient's time, effort, and willingness to fulfill the requested action. According to Murphy and Levy (2006), expressing appreciation aligns with positive politeness strategies that appeal to the recipient's positive face and their desire to feel valued and respected. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011) highlights that thanking recipients demonstrates an awareness of their time, which can positively influence perceptions. In her study of academics' responses to students' request emails, she found that even when requests were phrased imperatively, the inclusion of "thank you" as a pre-closing led to favourable evaluations. Conversely, emails lacking such expressions were often perceived as rude, inconsiderate, and ungrateful. Similarly, Al-Ali and Sahawneh (2008) argue that thanking and appreciating expressions enhance the perceived politeness of emails, as they acknowledge the cost of the request to the recipient and bolster their positive face.

The use of the optional moves discussed above may address the limitations of email by providing textual cues that help recipients form positive impressions of the sender's intentions and linguistic behaviour. Without these moves, misinterpretations and negative impressions may arise if the sender fails to assess the situation adequately. To ensure that the moves included in an email effectively convey the intended cues and foster positive perceptions, email writers must carefully consider the social and situational factors shaping their communication. However, this can be particularly challenging for non-native speakers writing emails in a second language. As Merrison et al. (2012: 1081) observe, unlike in face-to-face interactions, email writers lack the opportunity to refine their message across multiple turns. Instead, they must craft their message and mitigate potential offence within a single speech event, leaving little room for adjustment or clarification.

6. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate how email messages written by Iraqi non-native English speakers influence Australian native English speakers' perceptions of clarity, style, structure, and appropriateness. The findings indicate that short email messages containing only basic rhetorical moves (subject line, opening, request, and closing) are particularly susceptible to misinterpretation and negative perception, especially when the message content is unintelligible or conveys a high level of imposition. Including optional moves, such as orientation and affective elements, significantly

enhances the intelligibility and positive perception of these messages. These additional rhetorical moves help establish shared background knowledge, build a sense of solidarity, reduce social distance, provide necessary context, and mitigate the perceived imposition, thereby fostering more favourable evaluations.

The inherent limitations of email as a decontextualized, text-based medium lacking sufficient social and contextual cues heighten the risk of pragmatic failure and negative perceptions in intercultural communication. The absence of nonverbal and contextual cues prevents senders from accurately assessing the communication context and expressing their intentions clearly. Similarly, it restricts recipients' ability to interpret the message content and sender's intent effectively. To address these challenges, email users—particularly non-native speakers—must carefully structure their messages and incorporate textual cues to compensate for the medium's constraints, fostering positive impressions. Importantly, email composition should account not only for the sender's intentions but also for the recipient's expectations and cultural norms.

This study is not without limitations. The email data were collected exclusively from male participants due to challenges in recruiting female contributors. Furthermore, while evaluating these emails, it would have been advantageous to involve the original recipients of the INNESS' messages. However, ethical considerations and practical challenges prevented their recruitment. Future research should address these limitations to provide a more comprehensive understanding of miscommunication and language attitudes in intercultural email exchanges. Such investigations could offer deeper insights into improving clarity, appropriateness, and mutual understanding in digital communication across cultures.

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Mohammed T.A., Message Design and Recipients' Perception in Intercultural Emails: Iraqi Non-Native English Speakers' Emails to Australian Native Speakers

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