What do you think? Requesting Responses from Professors

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Level: Intermediate university students

Time: 50 minutes

Resources: Survey (see Teacher Resource) and email access

Goal

To learn to make appropriate email requests for feedback from professors on course assignments.

Description

As part of a larger unit on the differences between direct and indirect communication in English, this set of activities focuses on student email requests for professors' responses to written assignments. The first activity asks students to consider factors involved in academic professors' impressions of such requests. Students are organized in small groups and provided a list of activities related to student-professor email communication, including "communicating with students by email", "accepting students' work by email (in-text addenda)", "accepting students' work as email attachments", "given deadlines by students" and "helping students edit their papers." Students discuss whether they believe professors would find these activities appropriate. This part of the lesson takes approximately ten minutes.

After the students have completed their small group discussions, a 5-7 minute class discussion follows in which the professor helps students synthesize the information from the small groups, also prompting a discussion of the levels of imposition engendered by the various activities. This discussion may be extended by asking about other possible factors, including cultural variations in student-to-professor requests for response.

Once students have a clear understanding of the contextual issues, a list of actual student requests for response are distributed in the form of a survey which also provides a brief description of the context (See Teacher Resource). The students are asked to rate the requests as "appropriate" or "inappropriate" or to indicate that they are not sure. Students complete the survey individually, then compare and discuss their ratings in small groups, applying the principles discussed in the earlier discussion. With ten requests to rate and discuss, this activity will take approximately twenty minutes.

A synthesis of the small group discussions is prompted in a class discussion. In addition to discussing students' ratings and reasons for their ratings, students are asked to provide more appropriate request forms for those they found inappropriate or questionable. Students may also provide additional forms for the appropriate requests. It is important, also, to ask the students what they think professors' responses might be to the requests, especially the inappropriate ones, and to discuss how a student who receives a negative response from a professor for sending an inappropriate request might repair the situation. This discussion takes approximately fifteen minutes.

To provide an opportunity for production, students are assigned a short writing assignment (perhaps a summary/response to this lesson) which they should email to their ESL/EFL instructor. The message should also include two requests for response to the assignment, one that they believe is appropriate and one that they believe is inappropriate. The instructor responds to each message and prompts students to repair the situation caused by the student's inappropriate request. Encouraging students to produce inappropriate responses provides them with the opportunity to receive an authentic response in an instructional environment. As repairs seem to be an inevitable part of communication, especially over e-mail, this provides valuable practice for learners.

Procedure

1. Discussion of contextual factors determining forms of requests for response

   a. Provision of list of factors for small group discussion

      Communicating with students by email,

      Accepting students' work by email (in-text addenda)

      Accepting students' work as email attachments

      Given deadlines by students

      Helping students edit their papers

   b. Small group discussion of factors

   c. Class discussion

      Synthesis of small group discussions

      Discussion of relative levels of imposition of factors

2. Ratings of actual requests

   a. Distribution of survey

   b. Individual completion of ratings

   c. Group discussion

      Comparison of ratings

      Discussion of reasons for ratings

   d. Class discussion

      Synthesis of small group discussions

      Identification of various forms of requests

      Discussion of exchanges prompted by requests

3. Production

   a. Assignment of short writing assignment

b. Assignment of email requests for response

c. Professor response to both requests

d. Student repair of situation prompted by inappropriate request

Rationale

The importance of this lesson is evidenced by three facts: students do request responses from professors via email, professors expect such requests, and students do not always use pragmatically appropriate forms of requests for response as exemplified by the examples listed in the survey. Student-to-professor requests for response have become commonplace with the incorporation of email in many traditionally conducted academic classes and even more so as distance learning courses, in which email is often the primary medium of communication between students and professors, have grown in number. The possible results of not using appropriate forms of requests underscore the importance of the lesson. As noted by Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford (1990) and Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996), by using pragmatically inappropriate requests, students risk denial of their requests as well as jeopardizing their relationships with professors.

The lesson incorporates essential elements of communicative exercises as identified by Bardovi-Harlig (1996). It provides opportunities for students to investigate the pragmatic determinants of language usage such as the levels of imposition engendered in sending attachments, setting time deadlines for professors and requesting editing help. There is also opportunity for students to identify variations in request forms and to associate these variations with various levels of imposition to help Ss understand the appropriateness of forms. Student production of requests is also an explicit part of the lesson.

The student requests used in this lesson and the basis for discussing the appropriateness of the requests from professors' perspectives come from an empirical study in which student-

to-professor requests for response were collected and rated by NS academic professors. Weasenforth & Biesenbach-Lucas (2000) collected over one hundred requests for response from both NS and NNS students. A sample of the requests, including those used in this lesson, were rated for appropriateness by thirteen NS professors.

Alternatives and Caveats

University students at an intermediate level of proficiency may not have experienced academic classes and may have had limited or no experience with American academic professors. They thus need to become familiar with general expectations (e.g., acceptance of attachments) and forms of address that will be necessary for appropriate communication with professors when they take academic classes.

Some students have friends in academic classes and have developed expectations based on discussions with those friends. Graduate students have had experience with professors and have some familiarity with communicating with professors, at least in their own culture. These students can share their knowledge and experience with those who may have none, thus drawing on personal experience/knowledge and raising other cross cultural differences (e.g., in class participation) which may be helpful to students.

Teacher Resource

Survey (General results from Weasenforth & Biesenbach-Lucas (2000) are noted under each request.)

Direct & Indirect Communication   Name: _____
Email Messages to Professors

Directions: You are submitting a piece of written work by email to your academic professor for him/her to read and you want to ask him/her to provide feedback. Which of the requests below would you use in your email? Which ones are appropriate? Which ones are inappropriate? Why do you think that they are inappropriate?

Request	Appropriate	Inappropriate	Not sure

1. Your thoughts on this? _____ _____ _____
   (Generally appropriate although a few found it too casual)

2. I do need to get your feedback on this. _____ _____ _____
   (Inappropriate because of emphatic "do")

3. I'm looking forward to any feedback you
   can provide. _____ _____ _____
   (Unquestionably appropriate)

4. Please notify me, hopefully before the
   weekend is over, on what I should do. _____ _____ _____
   (Generally inappropriate due to deadline imposition)

5. I need your advice. _____ _____ _____
   (Most found appropriate although use of "need" raised questions)

6. Please help me. _____ _____ _____
   (Most found appropriate although use of "help" raised questions)

7. If possible, please review the draft and reply
   me through e-mail tonight or early next
   morning. _____ _____ _____
   (Inappropriate due to deadline imposition)

8. Here is my essay. pls. help me to check it. _____ _____ _____
   (Most found appropriate although use of "help" raised questions)

9. I sent my research paper for you to put your
   comments on last Friday. Up to today, I do
   not receive any from you. _____ _____ _____
   (Generally inappropriate due to deadline imposition and apparent hostility)

10. I want to know the results of final exam so
    please let me know as soon as possible. _____ _____ _____
    (Generally inappropriate due to time imposition)

References

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