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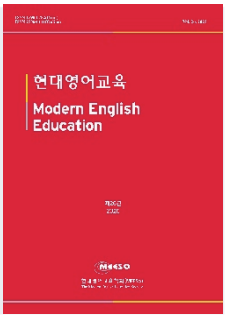

The Effects of ChatGPT on Politeness in L2 University Students' Email Requests to Faculty

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ChatGPT, L2 email to faculty, politeness, pragmatic competence
챗지피티, 교수에게 보내는 제2언어 이메일, 공손성, 화용 능력

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Abstract
This study investigated how ChatGPT can enhance L2 email writing, specifically focusing on politeness. Twenty-nine Korean university students were asked to draft an email in class requesting a recommendation letter from an English-speaking professor. For the assignment, they submitted their initial drafts to ChatGPT to receive guided feedback. Subsequently, they revised their drafts based on the politeness features observed in the ChatGPT-generated model email. Four days later, the participants wrote the same email again in class without ChatGPT's assistance. The three versions of the emails were analyzed for address forms, levels of directness in the requests, and external modifications. The results indicated that ChatGPT had a significant immediate impact on the use of politeness features in the emails; however, many of these improvements diminished in the delayed post-task, except for sustained gains in email closings. These findings suggest that while ChatGPT can lead to immediate enhancements in L2 email politeness, explicit instruction may be necessary for ensuring long-term retention of these features.

INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized university environments, it is common for students and faculty members to come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Even within Korean higher education institutions, Korean university students may find themselves needing to request recommendation letters from English native-speaker (ENS) faculty members. The same situation may also arise in English-speaking academic settings where Korean ESL students ask for recommendation letters from professors. Since email serves as the major mode of communication on university campus, the learner's first step is usually to send an email requesting the faculty member's support and compliance. However, L2 learners are often faced with uncertainties regarding style and politeness strategies in writing an email (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007).

Writing emails to authority figures, particularly when making requests, is a task that requires a high level of pragmatic competence, including an awareness of power asymmetry in an institutional context (Chen, 2006) and target politeness conventions (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2015). However, as previous research has shown, even highly proficient L2 learners

tend to lack sufficient pragmatic competence (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998). L2 learners often produce grammatically correct but pragmatically inappropriate utterances. Unfortunately, when pragmatic failures occur, they are often not recognized as language-related errors by ENS faculty members. Instead, native speakers are likely to interpret such pragmatic failures as signs of impoliteness or personality flaws rather than limited pragmatic awareness of L2 learners (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2015; Hendricks, 2010; Thomas, 1983).

More concerning is the fact that L2 learners themselves are often unaware of how their messages are perceived. They may not realize that their emails come across as overly direct or impolite, leaving unintended negative impressions to the recipient (Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996). As the title of Economidou-Kogetsidis's (2011) article suggests, when a student ends an email to faculty with the phrase, "Please answer me as soon as possible" (p. 3193), she may not realize the high degree of imposition she delivers in this English expression.

In fact, adhering to appropriate politeness strategies in email requests is crucial for learners, as faculty members' compliance can significantly affect students' academic or professional futures. If an ENS recipient perceives an email unfavorably, it may bring detrimental consequences for the learner. Given that writing a recommendation letter demands considerable time and energy, such requests place a high degree of imposition on faculty. In other words, this request act is face threatening (Brown & Levinson, 1987) because it attempts to get the recipient to do something that he or she would not do otherwise. Therefore, students should employ a high degree of politeness and engage in face work to maintain a positive social relationship and enhance the effectiveness of their request.

However, composing polite email requests poses considerable challenges for L2 learners (Baron, 2000; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Chen, 2006). Previous research has shown that learners tend to prioritize their own wants and needs (Chang & Hsu, 1998; Félix-Brasdefer, 2012; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996), often overlooking the degree of imposition their requests put on faculty members. They also tend to use imperative forms to make direct requests, which are usually perceived negatively by the recipient (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2015). In addition, L2 learners have been found to emphasize urgency, provide limited acknowledgement or appreciation, omit greetings and closings, and use inappropriate forms of address (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011, 2015; Economidou-Kogetsidis et al., 2021). When combined, these elements can make L2 learners appear unintentionally rude and impolite as a person.

Since pragmatic competence is often acquired through natural exposure and interaction in the target language community, it is often considered much more difficult to acquire, particularly for EFL learners, than linguistic competence. However, with the advent of AI-powered tools like ChatGPT, educators have begun to explore effective ways to integrate them into the L2 writing classroom. ChatGPT can generate and model human-like language across diverse contexts and has the potential to function as an ENS teacher or tutor (Godwin-Jones, 2023). In particular, email is a unique genre with distinctive conventions (Hoermann, 2018), and identifying and modelling conventional politeness features in email may be one of the tasks ChatGPT can perform the best.

Despite ChatGPT's educational value, little research has examined its use for enhancing pragmatic competence, specifically, for improving the politeness level of email to higher status figures. While previous research has persistently reported L2 learners' challenges in using appropriate forms of address, request directness and external modifications, there is limited empirical evidence on how AI tools such as ChatGPT can address these gaps. Given the growing role of AI in L2 learning, it is important to examine not only its immediate benefits but also its potential for facilitating sustained improvement in learners' sociolinguistic competence. Thus, the present study intends to investigate the immediate and delayed effects of using ChatGPT to improve the politeness level in Korean EFL university students' email requests to faculty in terms of address forms, request directness, and external modifications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous Studies on L2 Email Requests to Faculty

Writing email requests is perhaps one of the most common forms of communication in the university setting. Yet, circumstances that involve power-unequal requests are pragmatically complex and they demand greater politeness strategies. Therefore, writing appropriate and polite email requests poses a great challenge for L2 learners. It has been shown that email requests made by L2 learners differ significantly from those of ENSs in terms of directness and politeness strategies in general.

First, the concept of directness can be discussed from two perspectives: organizational structure and linguistic form. The directness in organization goes back to the influence of learners' first language writing conventions, as posited in Kaplan's

(1966) contrastive rhetoric theory. According to Kaplan, each language has a distinctive rhetorical tradition that shapes how ideas are organized in writing. For instance, many Asian languages tend to follow a spiral structure where the writer avoids mentioning the main point directly, whereas the English language typically follows a linear structure where the writer states plainly and explicitly what he or she tries to say. This contrast is evident in Chang and Hsu's (1998) study that examined email requests in status-unequal relationships. It was found that the ENSs tended to structure their emails using a direct and linear sequence while the Chinese English learners favored a more indirect organizational pattern. This observation is consistent with Chen's (2006) longitudinal case study of a Taiwanese graduate student in the U.S., which confirmed a tendency to delay or obscure the purpose of the message and to lengthen the message with seemingly irrelevant details.

Interestingly, however, the linguistic forms used revealed the opposite nature. In interlanguage pragmatics, request strategies have been categorized into three types based on their level of directness, which are direct (bald-on-record) strategies, conventionally indirect strategies, and hints. Direct strategies are bald-on-record because they express the speakers' intention clearly and without mitigation. According to Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) framework (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989), direct strategies include 'performatives' (e.g., *I request that / I ask you to*), 'want statements' (e.g., *I want you to*), 'need statements' (e.g., *I need you to*), 'expectation statements' (e.g., *I expect you to*), and 'imperatives/mood derivable' (e.g., *Write me a letter*). Conventionally indirect strategies use modal verbs (i.e., could, would, can) and are often framed as questions. They are considered more polite and less imposing than direct strategies because they provide options or possibilities not to comply. Hints are non-conventionally indirect strategies and here, the speaker implies the request without saying it explicitly. In Chang and Hsu (1998)'s study, while the ENSs used more indirect linguistic forms to make requests, Chinese English learners employed more direct linguistic forms. These L2 learners frequently used unmodified "want" statements, which are typically regarded as more direct and less polite in English email pragmatics. The prevalence of "want" statements (e.g., *I want / I would like / I would like you to*) by L2 learners has been consistently documented in previous research (Chang & Hsu, 1998; Félix-Brasdefer, 2012; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996). Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996) noted that 'I want' and 'I need' forms may negatively influence the recipient's perception of the request. These forms tend to emphasize the requester's desires or sense of entitlement while imposing an obligation on the recipient, thereby undermining politeness. As well as want and need statements, the use of imperatives has been pointed out as pragmatic infelicities. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2015) observed that L2 learners frequently employed the 'please + imperative' structure in their email requests, which was perceived negatively by ENS evaluators. This structure was seen as overly direct and demanding, as it left the recipient with little room to decline the request. In this study, one professor remarked that such a construction would not normally appear in a student email.

In addition, other features are found to contribute to the perceived inappropriateness of L2 learners' emails in a power-asymmetrical institutional setting. These included an emphasis on urgency, insufficient amount of acknowledgment or appreciation toward the recipient, the omission of greetings and closings, and inappropriate or unacceptable address forms. Collectively, these elements tended to make students' emails appear impolite or overly assertive to faculty members.

In the study by Economidou-Kogetsidis (2015), 24 British English NS lecturers assessed six authentic emails written by Greek-Cypriot EFL university students. The lecturers were asked to assess each message on a 5-point Likert scale on politeness and to provide reasons for their ratings. The email that received the most negative evaluation was characterized by a complete absence of essential politeness markers, such as address forms, greetings, external modifications, closing, and acknowledgment of the imposition. This specific message was perceived as rude, bad-mannered, abrupt, imposing and self-centered.

On the other hand, British English NS lecturers in Economidou-Kogetsidis's (2015) study responded positively towards emails that included 'Dear' in the salutation, 'thank you' as pre-closing, and a reason or explanation for the request. The salutation, which is the opening greeting used to address the recipient at the beginning of an email, was found to play a very important role in establishing tone and politeness. A formal email typically begins with "Dear + appropriate title + last name" (e.g., *Dear Professor Spolsky*), while informal emails may use "Hello + title + last name/Hi + first name". As simple as it may seem, an appropriate salutation significantly contributes to the perceived politeness of the message. According to the same study, the absence of a salutation, more specifically, the absence of 'Dear' was evaluated as most inappropriate. In addition, the use of the appropriate title was found to be important because using 'Mrs.' instead of 'Dr.' can cause potential trouble (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011, p. 3203). Interestingly, however, the ENS lecturers did not take issue with the use of "Dear + title + first name" (e.g., *Dear Dr. John*) because at least they knew the student had tried, or they were not bothered too much to be called by their first name in the UK culture. Also, without 'Dear', 'Hello + title + last name/Hi + first name' was an absolute must. In short, an appropriate salutation was essential, and without one, an email looks inappropriate, abrupt, and rude (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2015).

Although it may seem as a minor detail, the use of *thank you* as pre-closing was also found not that simple. In Economidou-Kogetsidis' (2015) study, expressions of appreciation and acknowledgement prior to closing were perceived

positively. However, the specific expression "*Thank you in advance*" (p. 421) was viewed unfavorably because it gives the impression that the request is granted. L2 students were also found to use intensifiers before closing. For example, the phrase "*Answer me as soon as possible*" (p. 422) resulted in pragmatic failure, as it failed to consider the recipient's time and placed undue pressure on the professor (Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996).

Using ChatGPT to Improve Politeness in Writing Email

As widely recognized, EFL learners often have a hard time developing pragmatic competence, as it typically happens outside of one's consciousness through frequent exposure to authentic language in the target culture. Therefore, researchers have emphasized the need for explicit instruction in pragmatic aspects of language (Bardovi- Harlig, 1992; Zhao, 2021). However, in EFL environments where grammar and vocabulary instructions are prioritized, pragmatic instruction is "often overlooked in the classroom and underrepresented in teaching materials and teacher education courses" (Siegel, 2016, p. 12). Furthermore, it is common that many English teachers, who are EFL learners themselves, often lack sufficient pragmatic knowledge and confidence to teach pragmatics (Economidou-Kogetsidis et al., 2021).

With the advent of generative artificial intelligence (AI), however, the landscape of teaching L2 writing in general and L2 pragmatics in particular has been undergoing rapid change. The potential to use AI chatbots like ChatGPT in teaching pragmatics is getting explored. First, Lee and Cook (2024) examined the pragmatic competence of ChatGPT in requests, refusals, and apologies, and evaluated its suitability as a model for L2 learners. In their study, human raters generally evaluated ChatGPT 3.5's generated requests and refusals as appropriate. Yet, the politeness level of its apologies was rated significantly lower than that of other two speech acts. Despite some differences across speech acts, ChatGPT's overall pragmatic competence was assessed as relatively high because its verbal behavior displayed human-like patterns. That is, ChatGPT was found to be sensitive to contextual variables such as social distance and degree of imposition. For example, it tended to produce longer responses when the social distance was closer in order to preserve interpersonal relationships. Similarly, in situations of greater imposition, ChatGPT employed a wider range of pragmatic strategies to mitigate the force of the utterance. These patterns generally aligned with human expectations and communicative behaviors.

Despite the potential advantages of using AI in L2 writing classroom, few studies have explored the use of ChatGPT in writing L2 polite email. Romandhon (2024) examined the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) students' attitudes toward using ChatGPT in writing business email. They generally found ChatGPT easy to use, useful for developing their business email skills and helpful in offering personalized feedback. However, some of the students expressed a concern for over-reliance on ChatGPT for content generation.

In a recent study by Kusumaningrum et al. (2024), L2 undergraduate students first had ChatGPT write emails for them, and were then asked to refine the language and content to better align with their intentions. Even though there were only 6 participants in the study, their use of ChatGPT varied considerably. For example, two participants had multiple interactions with ChatGPT to deliver their intentions, giving various prompts (e.g., "beg for a professor to extend a deadline on an assignment, make it shorter, in 5 sentences" (p. 49)). In the end, these students did not spend much time revising the email on their own. Their submitted emails were copied from the AI-generated texts, lacking originality and covering their true language ability. In contrast, one participant submitted only a single prompt, "Write a short email to a professor for an extension on my assignments" (p. 49). This participant instead invested more time in adding more ideas and reorganizing the content on his own, minimizing reliance on ChatGPT. Like these, L2 students exhibited considerable variation in their use of ChatGPT throughout the writing process.

While Kusumaningrum et al. (2024) offers valuable insights, their research design, having ChatGPT first generate the initial draft for learners, may deprive L2 learners of opportunities for language production and development. It also raises concerns regarding educational ethics and misconduct. Therefore, the present investigation adopted a different design. In the present study, participants were first asked to produce their own email drafts. Then, ChatGPT provided a model which had been scaffolded based on their original draft. Using this model as a reference, participants were asked to notice politeness features and revise their initial email. This design positions ChatGPT as a provider of contingent input, which is delivered precisely when the learner needs it (Ellis, 2006). In other words, ChatGPT can offer a model when a learner wishes to be polite but does not know how to manipulate the language properly. This function also relates to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (1978), which refers to the gap between what learners can do independently and what they can do with guidance from a more knowledgeable other. In this study, ChatGPT is expected to function as a more knowledgeable other, providing personalized input. This scaffolded input is expected to help learners notice, compare, and revise, which would facilitate their language development.

METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study were 29 university students in Seoul enrolled in an English Teaching Methods course. The class consisted of juniors and seniors mostly (1 sophomore, 7 juniors, 21 seniors), with a nearly equal gender distribution (14 males, 15 females). Most participants were English majors except three students from the department of administration. Although participants' general English proficiency was not formally measured, English-major seniors in this school are required to achieve a minimum TOEIC score of 900 to graduate. Given that the present investigation took place during the fall semester, it is reasonable to assume that at least 21 seniors had met this requirement.

Procedures

For the first task, the participants were instructed during class to write an email requesting a recommendation letter for a study-abroad program. They were presented with the following prompt: "You are writing an email to request a recommendation letter from your native English-speaking professor. Please write the email as you would normally write to your professor, ensuring that it maintains a polite and respectful tone." The participants did the task directly on the school's LMS, and it took them about 15 minutes to complete the task.

As an assignment at home, the participants were instructed to enter the following prompt: "I'm trying to write an email requesting a recommendation letter from an English native professor. Please improve my writing in terms of politeness," followed by submitting their initial email draft to ChatGPT. After receiving ChatGPT's model, which had been tailored to their original writing, the participants were asked to compare it with their original writing. They were allowed to spend as much time as they wanted. To raise their awareness, they were asked to write down politeness features they had noticed in the ChatGPT's model. Then, they were asked to revise their original email as the immediate post-task.

Four days later, the participants were again asked to write the same email in class as a delayed post-task. This time, they wrote on paper without ChatGPT support. As in the first task, they were given approximately 15 minutes to complete the task.

Data Analysis

Each participant's three email versions (first task, immediate post-task, and delayed post-task) were analyzed for their use of forms of address, directness of request forms, and external modification. Firstly, in the context of email, forms of address refer to the expressions used to address the recipient, typically found in the salutation (e.g., "Dear Professor Spolsky"). These forms signal the sender's perception of the relationship with the recipient, level of formality, and sociocultural norms (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). The three versions of participants' emails were compared by type and frequency of address forms used.

Next, to assess request directness, the head act of the request in each email was identified. The head act of a request is the core utterance that directly conveys the speaker's request without any external modifications. The identified head acts were then coded according to Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) request taxonomy. Of the three categories, which are direct requests, conventionally indirect requests, and hints, hints were excluded from the analysis because a recommendation letter request cannot be made without mentioning it. Again, the types and frequencies of requests were compared across the three versions of emails.

Lastly, external modifications (supporting moves) were identified and coded according to the classification system proposed by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) and Economidou-Kogetsidis et al. (2021). External modifications appear outside the head act of a request and function to provide contextual support, mitigate or justify the force of the request, and thus enhance politeness. The types, definitions, and examples drawn from the present dataset are presented in Table 1. The frequency of each type was counted and compared across the three versions of email.

Two researchers, both Ph.D. holders in linguistics, participated in coding all email data following the established coding scheme. After a one-hour training session, they first conducted the categorization independently. Interrater agreement was 92%, and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion until an agreement was reached.

TABLE 1
External Modification

Type	Definition	Example
Self-introduction	Identifying oneself	*"My name is 000, a graduate of the department of public administration"*
Grounder	Giving reasons or justifications	*"I'm planning to apply to graduate school."*
Disarmer	Acknowledging potential imposition or inconvenience	*"I know you're busy, but…"*
Preparator	Indicating that a request is about to be made	*"I'm writing to ask if you would…"*
Precommitment	Asking for permission to make a request	*"Can I ask you something?"*
Imposition minimizer	Attempting to reduce the perceived burden of the request	*"If you have time…"* *"only if you are available…"*
Apology	Expressing regret for taking the recipient's time or attention	*"I'm sorry for contacting you suddenly."*
DOM (Discourse Orientation Move)	Transitioning politely	*"With this in mind…"*
Compliment/ Sweetener	Offering praise or positive remarks	*"I truly admired your class…"*
Pre-closing thanks	Thanking before closing	*"Thank you for considering my request."*
Email closing	Conventional closing expressions	*"Best regards" "Sincerely"*

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this section, the three versions of each participant's email are analyzed in terms of forms of address, directness of requests, and external modifications. These three versions are from the first task, the immediate post-task (with AI support), and the delayed post-task (without AI support).

Use of Forms of Address

First of all, the participants were found to employ a diverse range of address forms in their emails. Notably, nearly half of them used the form, 'Dear + title + last name (e.g., *Dear Professor Hong*)' most frequently across all three versions. Approximately 50% of the participants (n = 14) were already familiar with the most formal and appropriate form of address from the beginning, and there was little change in the number of using this address form in the immediate post-task and the delayed post-task (Table 2).

TABLE 2
Type and Frequency of Address Forms in Three Versions of Email

Type	First task	Immediate post-task	Delayed post-task
Dear + title + last name	14	15	15
Dear + title	8	6	5
Dear + title + first name	4	4	2
Dear + title + first + last name	3	2	1
Dear + last name	0	0	1

Type	First task	Immediate post-task	Delayed post-task
Dear + first name	0	0	1
Dear + first name + title	0	0	1
To + title + last name	0	0	1
Professor + first name	0	0	1
Professor + last name	0	0	1
Total	29	27	29

In contrast, the remaining 50% participants appeared to experience confusion regarding appropriate address conventions in English. In the first task and the immediate post-task, some variations were found such as 'Dear + title (e.g., *Dear professor*)', 'Dear + title + first name (e.g., *Dear professor Steve*)', and 'Dear + title + first + last name (e.g., *Dear professor Steve Moore*)'. This variability may partly stem from L1 (Korean) transfer, as the 'Dear + title' and 'Dear + title + first + last name' types are common in Korean. However, even though 'Dear + title + first name' is pragmatically inappropriate both in Korean and English, it appeared 4 times each in the first task and the immediate post-task. In general, the use of these three inappropriate address forms slightly decreased in the delayed post-task.

However, in the delayed post-task, six new variational forms emerged. They included: 'Dear + last name (e.g., *Dear Moore*)', 'Dear + first name (e.g., *Dear Steve*)', 'Dear + first name + title (e.g., *Dear Steve professor*)', 'To + title + last name (e.g., *To professor Moore*)', 'Professor + first name (e.g., *Professor Steve*)', 'Professor + last name (e.g., *Professor Moore*)'. Notably, none of these appeared in the first task and the immediate post-task, yet they appeared in the delayed post-task for the first time. Interestingly, these forms have not been reported in previous research on European learners of English (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011, 2015; Economidou-Kogetsidis et al., 2021), leading to speculation that Korean students may be more confused about using appropriate forms of address in email writing due to their L1 convention. Despite ChatGPT provided model input such as "Dear professor [Last Name]", about half of the participants were found to continue to struggle with choosing an appropriate address form. This implies that the participants did not have sufficient knowledge both on English name order conventions and the use of appropriate address forms in academic correspondence. It also suggests that the participants were not fully able to take advantage of the AI model, further highlighting the need for explicit instruction to support their learning.

Directness in Request Forms

In order to find out whether a ChatGPT scaffolded input affects the level of directness, the request forms in each email were analyzed using the CCSARP framework (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). In the use of direct strategies and conventionally indirect strategies, a striking result was found. In the immediate post-task, where the participants wrote their own revision after comparing their first email and the ChatGPT's revision, only conventionally indirect strategies were employed (Table 3). This suggests an immediate effect of ChatGPT on learners' pragmalinguistic choices. As can be seen in Table 3, conventionally indirect strategies (e.g., "I would be deeply grateful if you could kindly write a letter of recommendation for me.") appeared 28 times in the immediate post-task with no instances of direct strategies.

TABLE 3
Comparison of Three Email Versions in Directness of Request Forms

Request strategy	First task	Immediate post-task	Delayed post-task
Direct strategies			
performatives	0	0	0
want statements	1	0	1
need statements	18	0	15
expectation statements	1	0	2
imperatives (mood derivable)	1	0	2
sub-total	21	0	20
Conventionally indirect strategies	8	28	9

However, this dramatic shift toward more appropriate request forms did not persist in the delayed post-task, which was conducted four days later without AI support. The participants used the conventionally indirect requests 8 times in the first task and 9 times in the delayed post-task, indicating only a minimal delayed effect. The participants continued to rely heavily on direct strategies, particularly need statements (e.g., "I need a recommendation letter"). Need statements were the most frequently used in both the first task and the delayed post-task (*n = 18, n = 15,* respectively), indicating a consistent reliance on direct forms. Additionally, even though a small number, expectation statements (e.g., "I expect you to write my recommendation please") and imperatives (e.g., "Please write me a recommendation letter about 300 words") were also used once in the first task and persisted in the delayed post-task with a frequency of 2, respectively (Table 3).

In summary, while the participants' use of polite forms of requests immediately improved after being exposed to the ChatGPT input, they reverted to their initial pattern in the delayed post-task when asked to write independently without the AI support. The participants were able to notice more polite request forms from the ChatGPT's input and incorporate them into their own revision process; however, the use of the conventionally indirect request form was not retained in the delayed post-task.

External Modification

External modification is the use of supportive moves that occur outside the core request head act to soften, mitigate, or contextualize the request (Derakhshan & Shakki, 2023). These modifications are essential for making requests more polite and socially appropriate. The results showed that the total number of external modifications increased noticeably from the first task *(n* = 136) to the immediate post-task with the ChatGPT input (*n* = 176), but decreased again in the delayed post-task (*n* = 137). The result indicates that the participants actively incorporated supportive moves modeled by ChatGPT into their immediate revision. However, the general trend also suggests that while the students actively adopted pragmatic features in the revision stage, the extent of their retention remained limited in the delayed post-task.

TABLE 4
External Modification

Supportive moves	First task	Immediate post-task	Delayed post-task
Self-introduction	26	28	27
Grounder	25	28	24
Disarmer	1	5	2
Preparator	10	18	7
Precommitment	2	6	3
Promise	0	1	0
Imposition minimizer	8	15	10
Apology	6	6	4
Discourse orientation move	1	3	2
Compliment/Sweetener	4	10	6
Pre-closing thanks	23	28	25
Email closing	29	28	29
Total	136	176	137

In particular, such supporting moves as preparator, imposition minimizer, compliment/sweetener showed sharp increases immediately after ChatGPT input but declined in the delayed post-task. First, the use of preparators demonstrated the most notable increase in the immediate post-task (Table 4). A preparator refers to a sentence or phrase that signals the upcoming request, helping to ease the transition into the head act (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). Examples include:

"I am reaching out for your support" (Participant 2)
"I'm writing to kindly ask if you would be willing…" (Participant 16)

Preparators were used 18 times in the immediate post-task, which jumped from 10 instances in the first task. However, this upward trend did not last in the delayed post-task, where the frequency declined to 7 instances.

Next, the participants seemed to notice the pragmatic feature of imposition minimizers from the ChatGPT input and adopted them in their revisions. Imposition minimizers are used to lessen the burden of a request by signaling the writer's awareness of the imposition and intention to reduce it (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). After reviewing the ChatGPT's scaffolded input, the participants incorporated expressions like the following:

"If you have the time and are willing…" (Participant 4)
"Only if it's not too much trouble…" (Participant 6)
"If you are available and comfortable with it…" (Participant 9)
"Should you be available…" (Participant 18)

These imposition minimizers are closely aligned with English politeness norms, especially in asymmetrical power relationships. Again, the frequency of imposition minimizers increased from 8 instances in the first task to 15 in the immediate post-task. However, this gain was partially lost in the delayed post-task, where the usage dropped to 10 instances, suggesting a limited retention of this pragmatic strategy.

A similar trend was observed in the use of compliments/sweeteners. They are positive remarks intended to praise or show appreciation to the recipient to create goodwill and soften the imposition of the request (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). The following examples illustrate how participants incorporated this feature in their immediate post-task after reviewing ChatGPT's scaffolded input.

"I truly enjoyed your lectures and appreciated your insights into public administration." (Participant 3)
"Your class was one of the most impactful experiences in my undergraduate studies." (Participant 8)
"I have always admired your expertise and your dedication to students." (Participant 13)
"I deeply respect your academic background and your guidance throughout the semester." (Participant 21)

In their revisions, the participants employed 10 compliments, an increase of 6 occurrences from the first task. However, this gain was not fully retained, as the frequency dropped again to 6 in the delayed post-task. This frequency shift suggests once again the immediate effect of ChatGPT use and its partial retention (n = 4, 10, 6 for the first task, the immediate post-task, the delayed post-task, respectively).

Lastly, the most frequently used supportive moves across the three versions of email were self-introduction, grounders, pre-closing thanks, and email closings. From the beginning, the participants demonstrated an awareness of self-introduction (e.g., *My name is*…), grounders (i.e., reasons/explanations), pre-closing thanks (e.g., *Thank you for your time*…) and email closing (e.g., *Sincerely, Gil-dong*) and employed them steadily throughout the three versions (Table 4).

TABLE 5
Email Closing

Type	First task	Immediate post-task	Delayed post-task
Nothing	5	0	1
Only name	5	0	4
Sign-off & name	15	28	23
From name	4	0	1
Total	29	28	29

Among these supporting moves, email closings warrant detailed analysis (Table 5). In English emails, a formal email closing typically consists of a sign-off expression such as "Best regards," "Sincerely," or "Warm wishes," followed by the sender's name (Sign-off & name). The use of this form increased markedly from 15 instances in the first task to 28 in the immediate post-task, indicating an immediate positive effect of ChatGPT on the learning of formal closings. Although this number declined to 23 in the delayed post-task, the high frequency suggests a sustained effect. In addition, the usage of less appropriate email closing types such as no name, only name, and from name decreased in the delayed post-task, which is an encouraging development. Overall, the analysis suggests that exposure to polite email closing via ChatGPT helped students use sociolinguistically more appropriate form.

CONCLUSION

Arguably, politeness levels are determined by the mutually perceived relationship between communicators based on factors such as social power, social distance, age, gender, cultural background. Thus, there may be no single norm for politeness in student emails to faculty members. Nevertheless, as Danet (2001) observed, emails directed to individuals of higher status tend to follow traditional expectations of greater formality. This tendency becomes more pronounced when students in the target academic community are making requests that could significantly influence their future. L2 learners often struggle to write email to authoritative figures with an appropriate level of politeness. However, with the development of technology, assistance from AI tools like ChatGPT has become increasingly accessible for learning email politeness strategies.

Overall, this study found clear evidence of ChatGPT's immediate effects on participants' learning of email politeness features in their revisions; yet, many improvements diminished in the delayed post-task. Despite the general trend, these findings should be interpreted with caution. In the case of address forms, 50% of students who were initially uncertain about appropriate forms of address in the first task continued to struggle and experiment with less appropriate forms in both the immediate post-task and the delayed post-task. This means that ChatGPT input alone did not help very much in learning address forms, leading to a speculation that Korean students may lack sufficient understanding of English name order and the cultural conventions for addressing recipients in email. It is also possible that students may not even be able to distinguish the first name from the last name in English.

For directness level of request forms, the immediate effect of using ChatGPT was evident because all participants employed the conventionally indirect form in the immediate post-task. However, nearly half of students reverted to direct "need" statements in the delayed post-task. This implies that a single noticing of conventionally indirect request forms is insufficient for sustained learning. Teachers need to explicitly explain the unintended force of direct request forms and provide learners with a variety of conventionally indirect request alternatives suitable for different contexts.

Finally, for external modifications, ChatGPT's effect was again visible in the immediate post-task, but improvements tended to revert to students' initial patterns in the delayed post-task. This underscores the need for explicit instruction on a wide range of supporting moves that can soften and mitigate requests. Yet, the delayed effects of ChatGPT was observed in the use of the formal email closing, which is 'Sign-off & name'.

The findings of the study yield some important points for discussion. First, although the research method was designed to raise L2 learners' consciousness on politeness features by having them compare their emails with the ChatGPT model, the evidence for a sustained effect was relatively modest. This means that a single use of ChatGPT as a consciousness-raising activity is insufficient for learning to last. In a way, it is natural because the purpose of consciousness-raising activities is not to elicit perfect target forms, but rather to increase learners' awareness of those forms. From a pedagogical perspective, this highlights the need for repeated and varied practice. L2 learners should be encouraged to engage in email writing across different recipients and topics while using ChatGPT as a scaffold. Such multiple exposure can lead to greater familiarity with context-sensitive politeness markers and facilitate the acquisition of pragmatic rules. Additionally, as many researchers (Bardovi-Harlig, 1992; Zhao, 2021) pointed out, coupling such practice with explicit instruction can further enhance the acquisition of politeness features.

For a short-term, it can be argued that ChatGPT is more efficient for language 'users' than for language learners. The immediate effects of using ChatGPT in this study proved AI being a highly efficient and effective tool to provide real-time corrections, enabling users to produce more appropriate and refined language on the spot. From the perspective of language use, the tool definitely offers valuable and immediate support. For future research, it is necessary to examine whether repeated use of ChatGPT over an extended period can foster not only improved usage but also, ultimately, language acquisition.

In relation to using AI tools, L2 learners should be guided to engage in critical evaluation of AI-generated suggestions, assessing their appropriateness before incorporating them into their writing. Digital literacy includes not only the ability to access and use digital tools but also the ability to critically analyze, interpret, and ethically apply digital information (UNESCO, 2018). Encouraging learners to adopt this attitude can help them become autonomous users of AI feedback, and thus enhancing their L2 development.

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Appendix

1. A sample of student email to faculty: Pre-writing

> Dear Professor Choi [pseudo-name].
> I'm Changwon [pseudo-name], a University of 000 student and I've taken your class last semester.
> Now, I am going to apply for a company in the United States. And I need a recommendation letter from my former professor.
> So I'm now writing you an email.
> Could you write a recommendation letter for me? Based on my attitude and character in the class I took last semester, please write about 300 words. Thank you

2. A sample of student email to faculty: Revision with ChatGPT model

> Dear Professor Choi [pseudo-name],
> I hope this email finds you well. My name is Changwon [pseudo-name], and I had the pleasure of taking your class last semester at the University of 000.
> I am currently applying for a position at a company in the United States and would be truly grateful if you could write me a recommendation letter. Your insights on my attitude and character during the class would be invaluable for my application. If possible, could you please write a letter of approximately 300 words?
> I understand this is busy time, so I genuinely appreciate your consideration. I look forward to your positive response.
>
> Best regards,
> Changwon [pseudo-name].

3. A sample of student email to faculty: Delayed post-writing

> Dear Choi [pseudo-name],
> I'm Changwon [pseudo-name], who took your class last semester. I'm now considering to apply for a company in U.S. and it is requiring a recommendation letter from my professor.
> I'm very grateful if you would write me a recommendation letter about 300 words. Thank you for your time for reading my email.
>
> Best regards,
> Changwon-Kim [pseudo-name].