Erzsébet Balogh

University of Debrecen
balogh.erzsebet@arts.unideb.hu
ORCID: 0000-0001-8973-4665

Student-initiated e-mails in a bilingual context

The paper's main aim is to examine the language choice and the motives of 74 e-mails written by university students to their instructor in a bilingual setting. The analysis shows that the predominant language of choice in the e-mails is Hungarian (85%), regardless of the objectives of the e-mails and the gender of the students. However, the latter variable seems to play a role in the differences in the motives of the e-mails. Further analysis of a follow-up questionnaire completed by 27 students attempts to reinforce the reasons behind respondents' language choices by requesting participants to justify the benefits of choosing one language over the other. While both female and male students recognize Hungarian and English as assets in student-teacher communication, there are minor differences in why they consider them advantageous.

Keywords: student-initiated e-mails, language usage, motives, gender

1. Introduction

The introduction of e-mails to academic institutions has enabled researchers to investigate written communication within the context of education to a greater extent than before (Baron 1998). These studies generally examine naturally occurring, student-initiated e-mail conversations directed to the students' instructors (see, for example, Bloch, 2002; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005; Pinto, 2019; Balman & Lee, 2020). At the same time, student e-mails under investigation might be directed to other faculty members of an academic institution (for instance, Bjørge, 2007; Pham & Yeh, 2020; Caldero & Sun, 2021), or the corpus that the analysis is based on might be compiled of written samples elicited from students with the help of discourse completion tasks (see, for example, Nguyen, 2018; Dombi, 2019).

Student-teacher e-mail messages have been examined from many different epistemological and methodological aspects in the past two decades, considering different variables. From a sociolinguistic point of view, the language the students use in their e-mails, what communicative goal they want to reach, why they choose this form of communication, and their gender are the most relevant issues in these studies to review.

Regarding language, the question arises whether the language students use in the e-mails is their native or non-native language and whether they have a choice or can make a conscious decision about which language to choose in a bilingual context where both the students and the instructors speak the same two languages.

English is the most frequently investigated language in many cases as a native language of the students (see, for instance, Myers et al., 2002; Pinto, 2019), but studies focus on it predominantly as a language used by non-native English speaker students (see, among others, Bjørge, 2007; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011; Danielewicz-Betz, 2013; Nguyen, 2018; Dombi, 2019; Balman & Lee, 2020; Pham & Aiden, 2020; Codina-Espurz, 2021; Velasco, 2023). In addition, some research attempts to make comparisons between e-mails written by native and non-native English speaker students (Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996) as well as between e-mails written in English as a non-native language and the students' native language (for Spanish, see, for instance, Campillo, 2018). Apart from English, Greek (Bella & Sifianou, 2012), Czech (Chejnová, 2014), Spanish (Salazar-Campillo, 2023), and Hungarian (Domonkosi & Ludányi, 2019, 2020, 2021; Ludányi & Domonkosi, 2020) have all been analyzed based on native language usage, whereas research regarding Spanish (Velasco & Ainciburu, 2020) and Hungarian (Pap, 2020) as non-native languages has also been conducted. Nevertheless, these studies, especially the ones that investigate student e-mails in non-native contexts, seem to disregard the fact that in a bilingual or multilingual environment, students and instructors can communicate in more than one language; therefore, from a sociolinguistic perspective, the language choice they consciously make when writing e-mails is or should be equally crucial to examine.

In general, e-mails as forms of communication have been analyzed from various angles. Firstly, research might focus on the differences between the oral and written forms of communication (Baron, 1998), predominantly by examining the level of formality or informality of student e-mails (Bjørge, 2007; Stephens et al., 2009). Another aspect of analysis can reveal the variety of reasons why students choose this form of contacting faculty members (Bloch, 2002; Martin et al., 2002; Myers et al., 2002; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005). They can write to their instructors to develop and support their relationship with them, to ask them for help, to make requests or excuses, to ask questions about the course and its requirements, to show their interest in the course, and to ask for appointments. Finally, the investigation of student e-mails may entail various sociopragmatic analyses based on theories of politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and speech acts (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). By analyzing how students use different linguistic devices to express politeness and level of directness, these studies examine either the general correspondence between students and faculty members (Bella & Sifianou, 2012; Danielewicz-Betz, 2013; Campillo, 2018; Domonkosi & Ludányi, 2019; Ludányi & Domonkosi, 2020; Caldero & Sun, 2021; Salazar-Campillo, 2023), or the e-mail messages written by students with specific objectives in mind, for example, requests (Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011; Chejnová, 2014; Dombi, 2019; Balman & Lee, 2020; Pham & Aiden, 2020; Codina-Espurz, 2021; Pap, 2020), excuses (Pinto, 2019) or disagreements (Velasco & Ainciburu, 2020; Velasco, 2023).

Gender is a significant variable in the field of sociolinguistics that reinforces our understanding of how female and male language usage differs. It enables sociolinguistics research to observe the differences between women and men in, for example, the usage of standard varieties (Coates, 1993) or stylistic variants (Holmes, 1997). Further investigation also sheds light on differences between women and men regarding pragmatic politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Holmes, 1995; Furkatovna et al., 2021). Indeed, gendered variation is not limited to spoken communication. Evidence suggests that differences between female and male language usage appear in written interactions, including digital communication (Herring, 1994, 1996, 2010) and student e-mails. Although some papers on the latter issue acknowledge the existence of gender as a variable, they do not investigate it within the framework of their own research (Chejnová, 2014; Codina-Espurz, 2021; Salazar-Campillo, 2023). Studies also considering this variable argue that gender does account for certain differences between female and male students' e-mails. That is, while female students tend to contact their instructors for information and clarification regarding the course material and the requirements, male students write e-mails to maintain their relationship with the instructors (Myers et al., 2002). Also, unlike male students, female students demonstrate a higher degree of formality (Pham & Aiden, 2020) and more frequent use of politeness strategies (Jakučionyté, 2020).

Based on the previously reviewed literature findings, the present study aims to investigate how university students prefer to communicate with their instructors. In particular, the investigation attempts to examine what language and what issues Hungarian university students choose when they write e-mails to their professor in a context that is argued to be bilingual from a sociolinguistic point of view since both the instructor and the students frequently participate in bilingual discourses (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015). They use both Hungarian and English predominantly outside, but in certain instances in the classroom as well. The dominant or marked language of a university classroom where students study English is supposed to be traditionally only English (Dobinson et al., 2023); nevertheless, such post-structuralist notions as, for example, translanguaging, enable the instructor to facilitate learning by utilizing all the linguistic resources the students possess (Tódor, 2021; Han, 2023). As a matter of fact, students in the courses of the instructor in question, i.e., the author of the present paper, are not only encouraged but also expected to rely on, transfer, and apply their background knowledge acquired through their native language when they discuss issues of English grammar, linguistics, or sociolinguistics, thus constructing bilingual discourses in the classroom. Outside of it, the instructor's policy is to simultaneously send messages or make announcements using both languages and reply to student-initiated conversations or messages in the language the students choose to use. That allows students to communicate in any or both languages they speak, hoping that their autonomy in deciding what language they prefer in

various communicative situations can foster a more positive relationship between them and the instructor (May, 2011). Apart from students' language preference and their motives for contacting the teacher in writing, the research also considers gender as a variable and intends to infer differences between female and male students in their e-mail messages. The current study, however, does not include the analysis of the level of politeness or directness in student-teacher communication as it is beyond the scope of this paper and will form the basis of further investigations in the future.

2. Methodology

The study's primary goal is to answer the following research questions: 1) In what language will university students write e-mails to their instructors in a bilingual setting where both students and instructors speak Hungarian as well as English? 2) With what subject matters do they turn to their instructors through e-mail communication? 3) To what extent is gender relevant as a variable in student-teacher communication?

Two analyses were conducted to answer the research questions. Firstly, a corpus of student e-mails was compiled containing 74 e-mails that students wrote to one of their instructors, i.e., the author of this paper, during one academic year from September 2022 to July 2023. As for gender, 49 messages were written by female and 25 by male students. From the more than 100 e-mails the instructor received during this period, only those messages written by Hungarian university students studying in the English BA or the teacher training program were included. Overall, the corpus consists of only student-initiated e-mails that neither reply to a previous inquiry from the instructor, nor form any further parts of a chain of messages that follow the original e-mail.

Secondly, as only 11 out of the 74 students whose e-mails were selected in the first analysis took a course with the instructor in the following academic year, a follow-up questionnaire (see the Appendix) was designed to collect data from a more significant number of respondents. More specifically, it required students to indicate their motives when choosing to communicate with their instructors by e-mail and their preferences regarding language use in general and in more specific contexts. The questionnaire was filled in anonymously and voluntarily in September 2023 by 27 Hungarian university students who were studying English in either the BA or the university's teacher training program at the time of the data collection. As for the gender variable, 17 female and ten male students completed the questionnaire. Due to the anonymous nature of this inquiry, the extent of the overlap in the cohort of students who participated in both parts of the investigation cannot be clearly indicated.

3. Results

First, the e-mails were analyzed based on their use of language and their objective. Regarding language in a bilingual situation where all the interlocutors speak both English and Hungarian, the results show that students predominantly use Hungarian (N=63, 85%) when they write to the instructor. Only 11 e-mails (15%) were written in English, five by female and six by male students.

Based on the reasons for writing, the messages can be divided into the following four categories: 1) making requests (N=48); 2) providing information (N=16); 3) apologizing (N=2); and 4) a combination of the previous three categories in two configurations (N=8). For a more detailed description of the subgroups in each category, see Table 1.

Table 1. The number of e-mails written by female (F) and male (M) students
in each category and subcategory

Categories and their subcategories of the e-mail objectives	Number of e-mails written by	
	F (N=49)	M (N=25)
1) making requests (N=48)	N=35 (72%)	N=13 (52%)
a) course administration (e.g., change in the course schedule)	8	2
b) coursework (e.g., deadline extension)	10	3
c) confirmation (e.g., presentation topic)	6	0
d) information (e.g., final grade, class cancellation)	10	8
e) appointment (office hours)	1	0
2) providing information (N=16)	N=6 (12%)	N=10 (40%)
a) absence from class	4	3
b) technical problems (regarding assignments)	2	3
c) individual study schedules ('egyéni tanrend')	0	3
d) late semester start	0	1
3) apologizing (N=2)	N=2 (4%)	N=0
4) combinations (N=8)	N=6 (12%)	N=2 (8%)
a) making request + apologizing	3	0
b) making request + providing information	3	2

Note: N=74

E-mails written by female students in English (N=5) belong to the following categories: two of them are written to make requests (for course work and for confirmation), one to provide information (technical problems), and two of them are a combination of each of the subcategories of category 4 (see Table 1). Three of the six English messages written by male students provide information (technical problems), two make requests (for information), and one e-mail combines making a request and providing information.

Second, responses to the first three questions in the questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively, while the last two underwent qualitative analysis. The number of answers on using Hungarian or English in student-teacher

communication can be seen in Table 2, with the responses separated based on gender.

Table 2. Self-reported frequency of Hungarian and English used in student-teacher communication with a gender divide (F: female students, N=17; M: male students, N=10)

	not at all		rarely		often		always	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
Hungarian	2	1	4	4	5	5	6	0
English	3	0	4	4	7	3	3	3

Concerning the objectives with which students would contact their instructors, only informing them about absences in the classes would elicit a written reaction from students (N=16). Instead of e-mails, they would choose face-to-face communication concerning small talk, asking for clarification and informing the instructor about how enjoyable or troublesome the class was (N=19, 16, and 14, respectively). In the case of the rest of the objectives, students would opt for both types of communication.

As far as the language is concerned, while Hungarian would be used predominantly for socializing (N=13), asking for clarifications (N=11), informing the instructor about being absent from the class (N=10), and apologizing (N=9), English would play a role in asking for information about course requirements (N=10) and the final grades (N=10) as well as asking for deadline extension (N=9). Students prefer using both languages when they want to have an informal conversation (small talk) with the instructor, when they ask for information about the assignment, when asking for confirmation, and when wanting to inform the instructor about how enjoyable or troublesome the class was.

The division of responses along the gender variable shows the differences between the female and male students in terms of preferences for the form (spoken or written) and the language of their conversation (Hungarian or English) with their instructors (for the details, see Table 3).

Table 3. Number of responses concerning form and language of communication in different settings (F: female students, M: male students)

	speak		write		Hungarian		English	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
small talk	11	8	0	1	6	3	2	5
socialize	1	2	1	3	9	4	1	4
ask for information (course requirements)	7	3	1	3	5	1	4	6
ask for information (assignments, homework)	6	1	3	5	6	2	3	6
ask for information (final grade)	8	2	1	6	5	1	4	6
ask for clarification	10	6	0	1	8	3	1	3
ask for confirmation	3	3	5	3	5	0	2	7
ask for deadline extension	2	0	5	6	5	3	4	5
apologize	4	1	2	4	8	1	2	6
inform them (not attending)	2	0	9	7	7	3	2	5
inform them (enjoyable class)	7	7	1	1	4	3	4	5
inform them (sg. incorrect/wrong in class)	7	7	0	2	5	1	4	5

Responding to the last two questions, students also reported the benefits of using Hungarian and English in interacting with their instructors. Based on the answers, the advantages of using Hungarian can be classified into the following three main groups: 1) it helps to avoid misunderstandings (see Example 1), 2) it eases communication (as shown in Example 2), and 3) it allows students to express themselves more easily (as in Example 3). For female students, using Hungarian seems to have more benefits regarding communication, not only for preventing miscommunication but also for facilitating its normal flow. Most male respondents perceive Hungarian as a tool for more straightforward self-expression.

Example 1: *It reduces the chances of misunderstandings.*

Example 2: *Easier to understand each other, I can ask almost everything in Hungarian if I don't understand something in English.*

Example 3: *I express myself better in Hungarian.*

Furthermore, the answers show that using English is beneficial for two main reasons: 1) it improves students' English language skills (see Example 4), and 2) as it is the primary language of their studies, it is more natural to use it in their communication with the instructors (as shown in Example 5). While both female and male students agree that using English can develop their language skills, only female respondents specify its usage as favorable when using it in and outside the classroom.

Example 4: *Since we are here to speak and learn in English it could be useful, in order to improve your speaking skills it could be good idea to do it in English.*

Example 5: *When we only speak English in class, it is easier to not switch in between languages and it is also easier to ask about assignments and details, since we talk about it in class in English.*

Besides these main categories, the same feeling, namely, the sense of comfort is expressed by one student towards Hungarian and by another student towards English (see Examples 6 and 7, respectively). Apart from this, using Hungarian is claimed to be more polite (see Example 8), while English is considered to be more friendly and to allow users to appear more professional (as shown in Examples 9 and 10, respectively).

Example 6: *It's easier to get my point across in Hungarian and I feel more comfortable speaking it.*

Example 7: *Maybe it can be more casual, therefore more comfortable.*

Example 8: *There is less chance that the teacher will misunderstand what I want to say. I feel like, I can be more polite towards them in Hungarian.*

Example 9: *Sounds more friendly.*

Example 10: *You seem professional, and foresign students can understand you as well.*

4. Discussion

In answer to the first research question, the primary language Hungarian students use when they write an e-mail to one of their instructors is their native language, i.e., Hungarian (85%), even when all the participants of the interaction are known to speak English as well. The e-mail messages written in English (15%) show considerable variation regarding their topics, and gender does not seem to play a role in students' language choice. At the same time, the outcome of the questionnaire study reveals a somewhat different picture. Based on students' self-reports (N=27), in a similar setting, English would be used just as frequently as Hungarian, with a mean score of 1.7 on the scale from 0 (not at all) to 3 (always) (see Table 2). In addition, students can emphasize the beneficial aspects of both languages when communicating with their instructors. They can clearly identify the possibilities of using Hungarian in unambiguous communication, first, to avoid misunderstandings, and second, to express themselves in a more clear-cut

way. At the same time, they consider English as an inherent means of interaction between students and teachers not only in the classroom but outside of it as well. Nevertheless, some aspects of these advantages appear more appealing to female students, for example, the opportunity of using English as a tool for language development (see Examples 1-5).

As far as the second research question is concerned, the main objective of student e-mails in this study is to make requests (65%) or to inform the instructor about certain issues (22%), and there are instances of apologizing among the e-mails as well (3%). The remaining e-mails (10%) combine these categories (for more details, see Table 1). This categorization corresponds partly with student e-mail classifications in previous research, where requests appear relatively frequently in student messages (Bloch, 2002; Martin et al., 2002; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2005; Bella & Sifianou, 2012; Pinto, 2019). Although the cited research comprises student e-mails requesting information from the instructors regarding a wide range of topics, the present study displays the appearance of a new type of e-mail in which students provide the instructor with information about their absences from class or about technical problems they encounter while doing their course assignments. Notifying the instructor about not attending a class is especially noteworthy since students are allowed to miss three classes over a semester without any obligation to justify their absence. Thus, this does not require any further action from the instructor's side – other than a potential acknowledgement. At the same time, it might be perceived as an instance of positive politeness behavior towards the instructor. Nonetheless, to understand the reasons behind this phenomenon accurately, additional inquiry is necessary with more examples of student e-mails of this kind from various contexts.

Further investigations are needed to analyze the level of politeness in the present corpus, especially since there is literature and research on request strategies in Hungarian (Szili, 2022; Veres-Guśpiel, 2021) as well as on Hungarian EFL learners' request strategies in English (Várhegyi, 2017). Also, the level of politeness in the e-mails of this investigation could be compared to and contrasted with the findings of similar research in the field (for example, Reder, 2007; Domonkosi & Ludányi, 2019, 2021). However, this type of analysis is beyond the scope of the present paper.

Regarding motives, differences can be observed between female and male students' e-mails (as shown in Table 1). While the majority of objectives is to request (72% and 52%, respectively), as opposed to a much lower number of e-mails written by females providing information (12%), a proportionately high number of male students (40%) send e-mails with the purpose of notifying the instructor. This finding contradicts the results of the study conducted by Myers and his colleagues (Myers et al., 2002) as the present investigation shows, first of all, that both female and male students write requestive e-mails. Secondly, male students choose to inform rather than maintain their personal relationship with the

instructor. Another difference is that only female students write e-mails to request confirmation from the instructor or to apologize. This outcome is confirmed by previous research on the issue (Holmes, 1995; Furkatovna et al., 2021), according to which the act of apologizing is more frequently performed by women than men, implying that women are more insecure than men in social interactions. Following this, the present study sheds light on some female students' insecurities who asked the instructor to confirm their choices regarding, for example, a presentation topic or to forgive them for being late with their course assignments.

The topics of the e-mails are also substantiated by the questionnaire data (as seen in Table 3). Students claim they prefer spoken interaction with the instructors to written e-mails regarding informal conversations, asking for clarification, or providing information about their being (dis)content with the classes. They also state their preference for notifying the instructor in writing when they have to be absent from a class. These claims seem to be validated by the concrete e-mails the students wrote, as they do not contain elements of small talk or reflection on the classes at all. Similarly, as previously mentioned, some students also contact the instructor when they are absent from a class.

5. Conclusion

With all its limitations, the present study attempts to focus on why university students decide to communicate in e-mails with their instructor and which language they choose in a bilingual context where all speakers can interact in two languages, Hungarian and English. Unfortunately, the investigation does not enable a much more detailed comparison of the usage of the two languages in the e-mails since most of this type of student-teacher communication occurs in Hungarian. Further research is needed for a better understanding of student-initiated interactions in e-mails.

The current investigation also displays limitations regarding the gender variable. First of all, the gender of the instructor the students address might also affect the communication in terms of objectives and language used. As the instructor's gender was also disregarded in the questionnaire, further research is necessary to see how the receiver's gender influences students' choice of topic and language. Finally, students self-identifying as non-binary makes the question of gender as a variable even more complex than the present study could have handled.

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Appendix

Questionnaire on student-teacher communication

Please indicate your gender: _____

1) If your instructor speaks both English and Hungarian, to what extent do you use Hungarian and English when you write an e-mail to them?

Hungarian	0 (not at all)	1 (rarely)	2 (often)	3 (always)
English	0 (not at all)	1 (rarely)	2 (often)	3 (always)

2) Read the following situations and indicate whether you would rather speak to the instructor personally or write an e-mail to the instructor in each case.

	speak	write	both	neither (I wouldn't discuss that with them)
small talk (saying hello, asking how they are)				
socialize (inviting them to a social event)				
ask for information about the course requirements (how to complete the course)				
ask for information about assignments, homework (what to do, with what deadline)				
ask for information about your final grade				
ask for clarification (to ask them to explain sg. you did not understand in class)				
ask for confirmation (to check if, for example, a topic for your presentation is acceptable)				
ask for deadline extension (for an assignment, test, presentation)				
apologize for not submitting an assignment, homework in time				
inform them about not attending class				
inform them about how enjoyable the classes are				
inform them about sg. incorrect/wrong in the class				

3) If your instructor spoke both English and Hungarian, in which language would you communicate with them in the following situations?

	Hungarian	English	both
small talk (saying hello, asking how they are)			
socialize (inviting them to a social event)			
ask for information about the course requirements (how to complete the course)			
ask for information about assignments, homework (what to do, with what deadline)			
ask for information about your final grade			
ask for clarification (to ask them to explain sg. you did not understand in class)			
ask for confirmation (to check if, for example, a topic for your presentation is acceptable)			
ask for deadline extension (for an assignment, test, presentation)			
apologize for not submitting an assignment, homework in time			
inform them about not attending class			
inform them about how enjoyable the classes are			
inform them about sg. incorrect/wrong in the class			

4) If your instructor speaks both English and Hungarian, what are the **advantages of using Hungarian** when you communicate with them?

5) If your instructor speaks both English and Hungarian, what are the **advantages of using English** when you communicate with them?