

# **Issues and Negotiations of Taiwanese Students' Email Communication: Implications for Teaching Online L2 Writing**

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## **Abstract**

A qualitative study was conducted to investigate Taiwanese students' negotiations when communicating with native English-speaking students via email. The findings showed that Taiwanese students strove to negotiate four issues to maintain cross-cultural communication—power, writing style, social distance and rhetoric. Focusing on the Taiwanese students, the study identifies discursive and non-discursive strategies used by these students in dealing with the four issues that they encountered during their email communication.

Key Words: L2 writing, email communication, computer assisted language learning (CALL), negotiation strategies

## INTRODUCTION

As digital technologies have become increasingly available to both language teachers and students, the teaching and learning of L2 writing can take place across geographic boundaries. Despite the introduction of new computer-mediated-communication (CMC) tools such as electronic bulletin boards, instant messaging, and social networking into writing classrooms, email, with its fast transmission speed and low intrusive nature, continues to be one of the most widely used interpersonal communication media for teaching collaborative writing across cultures and languages (Barson, Frommer, & Schwartz, 1993; Leahy, 2001; Li, 2000; Liaw & Johnson, 2001; Stockwell & Levy, 2001; Warschauer, 1995). As a form of asynchronous writing communication, email allows L2 learners to comprehend texts and to compose drafts at their own pace (Absalom & Marden, 2004; Warschauer, 1997; Warschauer & Kern, 2000). Most research on email has investigated the advantages and disadvantages of its applications in language/culture teaching and learning as well as on issues caused by NNES students' deficient knowledge in culture and linguistics (Barson et al. 1993; Leahy, 2001; Liaw & Johnson, 2001; Stockwell & Levy, 2001; Tella, 1991; Warschauer, 1995). However, research into NNES students' negotiation with NES correspondents from the perspective of sociopragmatics is scarce. Since email is one of the most popular digital applications used in the teaching of L2 writing (Bloch, 2007), and NNES students have increasing opportunities to communicate with NES peers via email, this present study attempted to investigate

Taiwanese students' discursive and non-discursive strategies of negotiation in email communication with American students.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Due to its decontextualized and text-based nature, email has been found to have the potential for triggering unique power relations (Spears, Postmes, Lea, & Wolbert, 2002). Proliferating CMC studies have explored issues of power in various aspects, such as gender (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003; Herring, 2001, 2002; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Savicki, Lingenfelter, & Kelley, 1996), pauses and response latencies (Kalman, 2006), politeness (Liao, 2000; Murphy & Levy, 2006), turn taking (Freiermuth, 2001), and hierarchical teacher-student relationships (Bretag, 2006; Chen, 2006; Columb & Simutis, 1996; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Sunderland, 2002). Although some studies have suggested that many social constraints, such as race, age, gender and other social cues are absent or significantly reduced through computer-mediated communication (CMC; Bloch, 2004; Ma, 1996; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991; Sullivan & Pratt, 1966; Warschauer, 1996), some researchers have found that new social factors and norms of communication reconstruct power structures in cyber contexts (Herring, 2001; Matsuda, 2002; Panteli, 2002; Reeder, Macfadyen, Roche, & Chase, 2004). For example, Reeder et al. (2004) studied 24 participants who were categorized into three cultural groups: non-aboriginal Canadian, aboriginal Canadian, and adult immigrants to Canada. Reeder et al. assigned pseudonyms to the participants to mask their cultural backgrounds when they were communicating on the WebCT bulletin board. A total of 453 online

communications were later analyzed. The researchers observed that the Internet is not a value-free context because (1) Communicative cultural values were embedded in the design of the WebCT. (2) The greater the cultural gap that existed between online participants, the greater the possibility for miscommunication. (3) The Canadian-born Canadian participants were more likely to interact than the aboriginal learners. Thus, Reeder et al. proposed that the embedded values of the Internet and power relations resulted in unequal participation.

Bjorge (2007) studied the level of formality of L2 students' emails corresponding with two professors in Norway. The research corpus consisted of 344 emails written by 110 international students from 34 countries. Bjorge found that students from high power distance (PD) cultures, such as China and Malaysia where people acknowledge and accept unequal power relations based on their hierarchical or social position, are more likely to choose a formal greeting and complimentary closing than students from low PD cultures, such as Austria, Denmark, or the USA, where people accept that power relations are consultative and expect more egalitarian relations among people. Therefore, she suggested that culture, in terms of high/low PD, influences students' rapport management and discursive choices.

Taking power and cultural factors into account, Chen (2006) found in her longitudinal study that her Taiwanese informant, Ling, applied different discursive strategies to communicate with her peers and her NES professors via email. Using critical discourse analysis, Chen discovered that Ling used an informal and conversational style, which consisted of simplified/reduced forms, symbolizations and more surface errors, to communicate with her peers, but she adopted a

more formal writing style with epistolary discourse to communicate with her NES professors. Ling also adopted a lengthy inductive structure in her request emails to show her indirectness and politeness; moreover, she preferred to use “Want Statement” to increase the importance of her requests. Although Ling was able to strategically employ discursive formality to communicate with peers or professors, she was not aware of her ineffective communication resulted from inappropriate rhetorical use. Chen’s research suggests that maintenance of interpersonal relations through email is more complicated than that through face-to face communication.

To study the strategies that are often used to maintain interpersonal relations via email, Canary, Stafford, Hause, and Wallace (1993) investigated 579 adult participants who enrolled in undergraduate interpersonal communication classes at two Midwestern universities in the U.S.A. Their email counterparts consisted of friends (36.9%), dating/married partners (22.1%), family members (32.2%), co-workers (1.9%) and others, such as roommates (6.9%). Based on the participants’ articulation of their specific maintenance behaviors, an exhaustive taxonomy was inductively derived in which ten strategic approaches and 35 specific behaviors were identified, including: (a) positivity, “attempts to make interactions pleasant;” (b) openness, “direct discussions, offering and listening to one another;” (c) assurances, “assuring each other;” (d) sharing tasks, “performing routine tasks;” (e) creating multiple communication channels, “use of various channels to keep contact” (pp. 9-10). Canary et al. (1993) found that maintenance strategies vary according to relational types, but these strategies can be seen as the indicators of rapport management.

Johnson, Haigh, Becker, Craig, and Craig (2008) investigated email communication on relationship maintenance. In their study, 216 participants, including Caucasian, African-American, Hispanic and the other ethnic groups selectively turned in records of email communication written over a one-week period. The data was analyzed based on the maintenance topology proposed by Canary and Stafford (1994). Johnson et al. found that emails to family members and friends were most likely to manifest the maintenance behaviors of openness, social networks and positivity. Moreover, Johnson et al. reported no significant differences for geographically close and long-distance friends. This finding suggests that email helps maintain interpersonal relationships and close distance.

Reeder et al. (2004) believed that the Internet is socially produced, which implies that not only power and cultural issues but also the social-interpersonal issues may penetrate from face-to-face contexts into virtual contexts. However, interactional distance emerges through interpersonal negotiations (Knapp & Hall, 2010) and is shaped by culture, gender, language style, personal expectations and other social-contextual factors (Aliakbari, Faraji, & Pourshakibae, 2011). That is, perceptions of social distance and appropriate relational maintenance behaviors are social-cultural specific. Lack of related social-cultural and social-pragmatic knowledge may result in misunderstanding.

The above studies have suggested that email communication may cause power relations, invite rhetorical inappropriateness and complicate maintenance of interpersonal relations. However, how NNES students negotiate these difficulties with NES correspondents is still a question that has not been investigated fully. This study

attempted to explore the issues that Taiwanese students might encounter during cross cultural email communication and to investigate the strategies used by Taiwanese students to negotiate these issues.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants and Contexts**

A qualitative research study was conducted at a university in Taiwan and a state university in the United States. Participants consisted of 17 Taiwanese juniors from the College of Business and Social Sciences and 12 American juniors and seniors from the Department of English. Among the 29 participants, 8 were male and 21 were female. The Taiwanese students, taking the course “Cross-Cultural Communication,” were honors students<sup>1</sup> of English with high-intermediate to advanced English proficiency. The American students, all native speakers of English, were honors students<sup>2</sup> taking the course “World Rhetorics.” Both of the courses were writing intensive, requiring the completion of several papers during the semester. An email writing activity was incorporated into both courses to encourage cross-cultural communication and learning. Instruction on email writing conventions was given to Taiwanese students beforehand. In addition, various issues of cross-cultural communication were discussed in class with the Taiwanese students,

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<sup>1</sup> The participants of the Taiwanese honors students are students whose English scores on the university entrance exam were in the top 15%.

<sup>2</sup> The participants of the American honors students are those who had a minimum high school grade-point average of at least 3.2 or minimum SAT scores of 1,650 or higher.

such as intercultural differences, essentialism and high/low contextual communication styles. In the class of American students, topics relating to cultures and contrastive rhetorics as well as traditional Chinese rhetorics were discussed. The curriculum was designed based on the belief that the email exchanges would allow both parties to acquire knowledge of the rhetoric and culture of a foreign country through authentic communication and contextual language use. This email activity was counted for 10% of the total grade in both the courses. The teachers in both two locales had reached a consensus about this email activity and communicated frequently to minimize differences in treatment to both the Taiwanese and the American students. Due to differences in the academic calendars of the two institutions, the duration of this activity lasted about 3 months. Students chose their key-pals according to self-introduction emails shared on the class website. To ensure the quality of the activity, the teachers monitored the students' communication interactions by reading the students' journal reflections in order to provide assistance in time. Both the Taiwanese and American students were encouraged to correspond with their key-pals as often as possible. Although fundamental instruction about cross-cultural communication and the email activity were provided, in order to study students' interactions in a natural milieu, as a teacher-researcher, I tried to minimize my involvement. I did not monitor the students' correspondence or set deadlines for the email exchange, nor were the students assigned any particular topics or required to write a certain numbers of emails. Students were free to discuss whatever topics they were interested in. The purpose was to make the students' email exchange come as close as possible to natural peer communication. It was hoped that when the



students performed spontaneous and self-directed correspondence, interactive negotiations would develop more naturally. Due to the unequal numbers of students on the two sides, one American student was paired with one to two Taiwanese students as key-pals for the email writing activity.

### **Data Collection**

Except for the reflection papers, most of the data was collected at the end of the semester to minimize the teacher-researcher's influence. Both the Taiwanese and American students were asked to turn in their emails voluntarily (Chen, 2006), having been informed that whether they did or not would not affect their final grades. Sixteen Taiwanese and ten American students selected emails to submit to the study. A total of 122 emails were collected, 65 submitted by the Taiwanese students and 57 by the American students. The limitation of the self-selected emails can be compensated for by the other types of data gathered in the study, including reflections and interviews. Both the Taiwanese and American students were required to turn in 4 and 2 reflection papers respectively during the semester. The reflections, which could only be read by the teacher, were designed to elicit students' personal thoughts about their email exchange experience, including what they had encountered, learned and observed through the activity. To answer the research questions and understand the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic issues that Taiwanese students might encounter, both Taiwanese and American were surveyed twice via email. Taiwanese students were surveyed in Chinese, their mother tongue, at the end of the semester to reduce language variables. The survey questionnaires were designed to elicit

students' perceptions of problems, behaviors and strategies (see Appendix A and Appendix B). All the students returned the first survey ( $N = 29$ ), but two American students did not respond to the second survey ( $N = 27$ ). Two semi-structured and text-based interviews (Appendix C) were conducted with all the Taiwanese students at the end of the semester in order to know more about the students' underlying reasons related to problems, behaviors and negotiation strategies. The students were asked to check teacher researcher's interpretations about the data concerning discursive and nondiscursive behaviors. Due to technical difficulties, the American students were not interviewed face-to-face but were asked about the aforementioned issues through email.

### **Procedure and Data Analysis**

Regarding the research procedure, first, all the data were sorted chronologically. I examined the survey results to categorize the salient phenomena. Second, focusing on the elicited elements, I compared Taiwanese and American students' email texts, reflections and interviews to have types of issues emerged inductively. Third, I checked my data interpretations with the individual students in the second interview to ensure the reliability of my data analysis. Further, responding to the emerged types of issues, Taiwanese students' strategies of negotiation were identified based on their reflections and interviews. Lastly, under each type of negotiation, the Taiwanese students' emails were triangulated with their reflections, interviews, and their American key-pals' data to get a holistic view of their evolving negotiation strategies. Because texts can be interpreted differently by different readers, email discourses were interpreted

within the texts and contexts as well as re-confirmed by individual students during their interviews.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was used to analyze Taiwanese students' interpersonal relations through email discourse in this study. CDA is a method used to analyze linguistic elements and to reveal hidden determinants of social-power relations because language is a representation of "social practice" and "social process" (Fairclough, 1989, p. 21). To avoid CDA's deterministic view that linguistic behavior reflects or defines identity, this study regards intertextual relations, identity construction and discourse transformation as ongoing and dynamic rather than static and monolithic. Moreover, to understand how students rhetorically maintained interpersonal relations, the most widely recognized typology of relationship maintenance proposed by Canary et al.'s (1993) was also adapted to examine students' discursive choices. In addition to discursive strategies, non-discursive strategies, such as emoticons, the visual cues denoting personal emotions and informal communication (Danet, Ruedenberg-Wright, & Rosenbaum-Tamari, 1997; Rezabek & Cochenour, 1998; Tompson & Foulger, 1996; Utz, 2000) were examined within the contexts. Other nondiscursive strategies that create multiple communication channels, such as sending pictures, sharing audio-visual links and interacting through other CMC tools were also considered.

## **RESULTS**

To the survey questions in regard to interpersonal relations and social distance, the majority of the Taiwanese students (82%) and all

of the American students (100%) reported that they liked to share their personal life with their key-pals. Only 30% of the Taiwanese students said they would like to keep in touch with their key-pals after the activity ended, and 46% of the Taiwanese students said they would not be likely to do so. In terms of anxiety, the problems most frequently reported by the Taiwanese students were worries about their English expression or inappropriate wording, difficulties responding to their key-pals' questions, being too busy to correspond and receiving procrastinated emails. The common problems that the American students encountered were receiving email late, experiencing misplaced email or technical problems (e.g., email that was filtered into junk folders or email that could not be opened), reading unclear ideas or blunt expression and keeping up with key-pals' schedules due to the time difference between Taiwan and the United States.

To elicit both the Taiwanese and American students' perceptions of communication relations, one open-ended question in the survey asked: "For any reason, have you ever felt an unequal power relationship between you and your key-pal(s) during your communication? Or have you ever felt your key-pal as being superior/inferior to you? Why or why not?" (Appendix A). Students' answers were examined and organized into four categories: "explicit yes," "implicit yes," "explicit no," and "implicit no." It was found that the Taiwanese and American students had very different experiences. Eight of the 17 Taiwanese students (47%) explicitly reported that they felt underpowered than their American correspondents. Also, three Taiwanese students indirectly expressed feelings of a disadvantaged status, i.e., suffering from currying favor with their key-pals and feeling less mature or smart than their key-

pals. When these three students are included, 64% of the Taiwanese students viewed themselves as less powered than their American counterparts. By contrast, fewer American students felt underpowered. For example, of the twelve, only two (16%) reported feeling less knowledgeable than their Taiwanese counterparts in computer literacy and international affairs. In addition, three American students (25%) explicitly or implicitly expressed feelings of superiority in linguistic and cultural aspects, but none of the Taiwanese students perceived themselves as superior to their American key-pals in any way. Five American and six Taiwanese students perceived their relations as equal.

To understand participants' expectations of this cross cultural email exchange, two survey questions (Appendix B) were asked: "*What was your expectation **before** this cross cultural email exchange with your foreign key-pals?*" and "*What was your expectation **after** this cross cultural email exchange with your foreign key-pals?*" For both questions, students were asked to select either "learning culture" or "making friends." The choice of "learning culture" suggests that more proxemic distance may be expected, while the choice of "making friends" may suggest that the participant expects a closer relationship during the interactions.

Discrepancies in expectations between the American and Taiwanese participants can be seen from the survey. Two out of eight (25%) American students expected to make friends before this activity, while 65% of the Taiwanese students expected to do so. The three-month email exchange reduced two American students' social distance, for they changed their expectations from "learning culture" to "making friends." None moved to a larger distance by choosing

“making friends” to “learning culture.” In contrast, no Taiwanese students’ social distance was reduced during the three months. Instead, five Taiwanese students (29%) changed their expectation from “making friends” to “learning culture” at the end of the semester, which suggests feelings of greater distance.

After comparing the survey findings with students’ email texts, reflections and interviews, four types of issues emerged inductively: power, writing style, social distance and rhetoric.

### **Issue of Power**

The findings suggest that almost half of the participants perceived asymmetrical power relations in the email writing activity, with students in both locales identifying this issue. The following comments illustrate how Taiwanese students strove to adjust their communication discursively and non-discursively to negotiate perceived asymmetrical power relation.

Yi-An<sup>3</sup> reported to “feel inferior sometimes” because she considered her “English was not good enough” (Survey I). Yi-An’s early email discourse tended to be academic and polite. She often praised Erin, her American key-pal, for her knowledge of Chinese culture. However, Yi-An questioned herself later in her reflection:

I was surprised that she knew our festival .... Like we all know Christmas and Halloween .... Maybe these [Chinese] festivals are common known by American .... Why Taiwanese people usually are surprised if American know some Chinese or Chinese cultures? ... (Reflection 3).

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<sup>3</sup> All the participants’ names used in the illustrations are pseudonyms.

After realizing that she put herself in the subordinate position, Yi-An consciously modeled Erin's words that she perceived as more egalitarian in order to reposition herself; for example, "I hope that helps answer your question" (instead of apologizing for her English); "I am **glad** that you seem to know some Taoism already" (instead of showing surprise about Erin's knowledge of Chinese culture). Cross cultural communication can hardly be apolitical. Yi-An discursively repositioned herself to not sound derogatory, but issues of power are complicated social negotiations. Pin-Hen's case presents another type of interaction.

Undergoing dynamic discursive shifts, Ping-Hen was very excited about the "super interesting experience" (Reflection 1) at first. He adopted openness and sharing discourse (Canary et al., 1993) to share his personal interests, favorite TV programs, music, and travel experiences with his key pal, Ben. For example, "I like to explore the world and make friends with others, how about you? ... Maybe we can contact each other through MSN, Skype, or blog?" He used an informal style to invite Ben to talk about himself and tried to create multiple channels of communication via other CMC tools. However, he gradually felt frustrated by Ben's corrections of his word choice and Ben's cognitively demanding questions, such as the differences between Confucianism and Taoism, views about American foreign policy and opinions toward the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In response to Ben's impersonal questions and critique of his wording, Ping-Hen did research and used dictionaries to make his voice sound distant and academic. For example, Pin-Hen wrote, "regarding your question, in 1949 after the World War II ended, the communism force occupied the mainland China, causing the KMT government to retreat

to Taiwan.” At this stage, according to his survey and reflection, Ping-Hen reported perception of unequal relation with Ben due to Ben’s domination of the floor and “showing off himself” by making me “stupid” (Reflection 4). After being asked whether he had ever heard of “Shakespeare,” Pin-Hen felt insulted (Interview, Reflection 4). To negotiate power, Ping-Hen started to discuss things that he was skilled at such as, his “international volunteer program” and “the Lo-real marketing competition” he attended (Reflection 4). He also seemed to feel obligated to defend his “Chinese pride” to show that “Asian students also have competitiveness compared to American students” (Reflection 4); his discourse, then, became more opinionated. For example, “... everyone needs to learn Confucius discipline .... It is the western that the western can’t understand ....” Ping-Hen chose opinionated discourse to fight for his ego; however, it could be hazardous to induce cultural essentialism,

### **Issue of Writing Style**

In general, Taiwanese students’ email texts can be divided into two types: formal/academic or informal/personal. These two writing styles affect both the quality and quantity of their email communication.

Ginny was the key pal of both Wen-Xin and Ru-Fei. Wen-Xin’s writing style was formal and academic but Ru-Fei’s was informal and personal. In the interview, Wen-Xin explained that because she considered herself speaking for Taiwan, she always spent 2-3 days to research information in order to present quality content with high language proficiency to Ginny. Wen-Xin said, “... she might believe whatever I said about Taiwan, so I couldn’t give her



wrong information.” Most of the topics they shared were academically oriented, such as the educational system, ethnic issues, sexism, etc. because Wen-Xin did not want to be considered as “shallow” (interview). For example, in one of her emails, Wen-Xin discussed media issues with Ginny, “... the American press such as New York Times, USA Today, CNN or ABC are highly respected in Taiwan .... In Taiwan, ‘Apple Daily’ has the number 1 sales number, but it is the representative of ‘yellow journalism’ ... only 1% people in Taiwan believe and depend on the press ....” In her message, she demonstrated her knowledge about the major media in the United States, adopted the professional term, “yellow journalism,” to describe the number one news source in Taiwan and researched the circulation of various newspapers and the percentage of people who believed in the media in Taiwan. However, Ru-Fei’s writing style was more conversational and informal than Wen-Xin’s. Ru-Fei’s corresponding topics were more casual, such as music, Japanese manga or comic books, traveling, movies, etc. Her writing had many grammar, spelling and punctuation errors; for example,

... A lot of Japanese animation **areso** great that I addicted to them. Such as ‘Naruto’ and ‘one Piece’ are my **favorite**. I don’t know that if America has such store that can provide **peole** to borrow comic books with 5 new Taiwan dollar per book but Taiwan has **very lots** of such stores ....

In the interview, Ru-Fei admitted that she usually shared things that had happened in her daily life and did not follow up with an in depth discussion because it might be too difficult for her to respond in a timely manner. Interestingly, Wen-Xin and Ru-Fei’s different writing styles resulted in Ginny’s different reactions. Ginny expressed

her perceptions toward her two Taiwanese key-pals in her reflection paper,

Wen-Xin's emails were written in more fluent English, indicating that she had likely spent more time trying to perfect her language skills .... Ru-Fei's, on the other hand, tended to be simpler and more personal in her replies ... [but] Ru-Fei and I had a much more cordial relationship than did Wen-Xin and I. The tone of Wen-Xin's emails was very polite—friendly, but distant—I think this led to coldness on my part as I tried to maintain this level of politeness. It led to me being frustrated and /or bored when talking to her, since I didn't know what I could or should say and thus, I procrastinated in my replies to her. In retrospect, Ru-Fei's lesser fluency in English may have made her seem more informal than she meant to be.

Style of formality generated various voices and textual identities, which can shape interpersonal relationships. In the interview, Ru-Fei reported enjoying her cordial email correspondence with Ginny, but on the contrary, Wen-Xin revealed more anxiety than pleasure about their email exchanges. This finding partially agrees with Bjorge's (2007) study where it was noted students from low PD cultures (Ginny) expect more informal communication than students from high PD cultures. However, the fact that Ru-Fei, who is from a high PD culture, adopted an informal writing style to maintain her conversation with Ginny, shows that a formal/informal writing style may be more likely to be associated with writers' writing strategies or negotiation than bounded to high/low PD cultures.

### **Issue of Social Distance**

One of the common issues experienced by many Taiwanese students is anxiety regarding closing social distance. Yin-Ting, Hu-Jung and Pei-Ning all reported similar concerns about maintaining interpersonal relations. For example, Hu-Jung disclosed in the interview that she sometimes was anxious about finding topics to email her key pal. However, this anxiety turned out to push her to take actions to find topics. Hu-Jung reflected, "... when I am with my [Chinese] friend, we don't have to find the topic on purpose. But when I wrote to Jessica, in order to write something or make her feel easy to reply me, I always ask her questions .... I always am the person who asked the question or find the new topic" (Reflection 3). Yin-ting considerably concerned about the distance between her and her key pal, but in contrast to Hu-Jung, she took a passive role. Yin-ting indicated in her interview that she was not sure what questions were appropriate to ask; therefore, to "be polite," she "tried not to touch upon personal matters" and simply "answered questions" raised by her key-pal or talking about herself (Reflection 2). To avoid asking personal questions but maintain a cordial relationship, Yin-Ting frequently used emoticons and adopted openness discourse to close the social distance. In one of her emails, she shared her travel experience in New York City, "One of the most impressive spots in New York was the Central Park where is the only place that things aren't in a rush in the city ^^// ... I've watched a few plays, Les Miserables, Hairspray ... I must say that I really enjoyed all of them :DDDD..." Yin-Ting self revealed her personal feelings about NY and various plays. As Canary et al.'s (1993) typology shows, Yin-Ting also tried to build multiple connections via other CMC tools.

In her first email, she introduced herself and invited her key pal to be her MSN friend. She also sent YouTube links and pictures to introduce Chinese holidays. Finding topics, self-revealing, sharing feelings and creating multiple communication channels are the common strategies adopted by Taiwanese students to reduce the social distance between them and their key pals.

Social distance is cultural specific and gender sensitive. Wen-Xing felt embarrassed (Interview) after sending pictures and asking Ben personal questions because she only received “perfunctory answers.” She complained that Ben often “sent late emails with an indifferent tone” (Reflection 3) and “kept a distance from [her],” which made her feel that she was being too aggressive for making friends (Interview). To “not lose face,” Wen-Xing switched to an academic style to negotiate the distance issue that she perceived. Regardless of Wen-Xing’s complain about his keeping a distance, in the self-report survey, Ben considered himself open to sharing his personal life. It seemed that Ben and Wen-Xing perceived the idea of social distance differently. In addition, Wen-Xing’s distance approaching (e.g., sending pictures/ asking personal questions) tangled with her ego which can be vulnerable when confronting someone of a different gender. This result, in a sense, may echo Hall’s (1966) claim that personal space can be seen as ego extension. Different expectations in relations, divergent perceptions of interpersonal distance and social distance that is gender sensitive apparently created a face threatening situation between the two correspondents.

Heng-Zhi, in his reflection, said he always strived to ingratiate himself with his key-pal Alexa (Reflection 3). However, Alexa only

answered questions and did not ask any in return. Heng-Zhi frankly pointed this out in the survey, “the communication always starts from me. If I don’t send an email, our exchange will end.” In his interview, he assumed that it was impolite to ask girls personal questions; therefore, most of the questions he asked were impersonal. However, Heng-Zhi did not know what he discussed in the emails frustrated Alexa. Alexa explained her passive response in her interview, “I’m not concerned with politics and global issues and saving humanity and all of that ... most of Heng-Zhi’s questions related to government laws or regulations or politics, I had no answers for him.” She further reflected,

Heng-Zhi wanted information about the United States and its global context; I wanted information about him as a person. I tried to facilitate our communication by disclosing parts of my life ... and he tried to get me to tell him more about the political climate, etc. Therefore, we missed each other somewhere along the line.

It seemed that both Heng-Zhi and Alexa tried to close the social distance between them through their own approaches, which each of them viewed as sensible, but ultimately did not work well. Gender may be one of the factors that contributed to the gap in their email exchanges. These cases suggest that the issue of social distance may be complicated in virtual contexts especially when politeness, face and gender are taken into account. In spite of the fact that online communication may reduce some of the social anxiety evident in face-to-face contexts (Absalom & Marden, 2004), the findings of

present study reveal that anxiety associated with the maintenance of relationships exists in cross-national communication.

### **Issue of Rhetoric**

One of the most common issues that can trigger miscommunication is inappropriate discourse used by Taiwanese students. As second language learners, most of the Taiwanese students lacked the linguistic flexibility and rhetorical knowledge of euphemisms. Some illustrations follow:

To learn more about Taiwanese opinions, Kelly asked her Taiwanese key-pal, Chen-Wei, about the Dalai Lama's visit to the United States. However, Chen-Wei's response seemed to be too opinionated and assertive for Kelly. Chen-Wei wrote, "To me, it is not a very big news ... sadly, Dalai Lama is too afraid of China and dare not to show his conviction of protecting dignity and independence for people in Tibet." Kelly later revealed her feeling in her reflection, "... Not only was I surprised that he didn't find the story to be big news, but I wasn't used to hearing such a frank and critical opinion of the Dalai Lama ...." Chen-Wei's discourse invited misunderstanding that eventually led to a decrease in motivation on both sides and resulted in email procrastination. However, Chen-Wei's discourse was rather typical among Taiwanese students.

Though Pei-Yi enjoyed her correspondence with her key-pal, Jill, her lack of rhetorical knowledge almost undermined their relationship. During their congenial conversations, Pei-Yi used few mitigating forms, such as modals or hedged constructions, to soften her tone. Her discourse contained inclusive modifiers or boosters ("all," "obviously," "very," "apparently," "always") (Chen, 2006) and

simple present tense, which would suggest facts, truths, or routines to her reader. For example, Hui-Yi opined on watching American TV shows in Taiwan, such as “America’s Next Top Model,” “From those reality shows, **all** of my friends are very surprised at **American’s** attitude ...?” Through the email exchanges, Pei-Yi noted that Jill’s replies were “nice and polite;” she admitted in the interview that she, thus, paid more attention to avoid objective wordings. Some hedging expressions appeared in Pei-Yi’s later emails, such as, “**Many** people don’t have chance to practice English in their daily life. Though we have learned English for over 10 years, a lot of people **may** still think English is very hard ....” Pei-Yi’s later discourse suggests that she might have taken Jill as her language model. Jill, as a native speaker, was able to craftily employ supportive moves that are linguistically more flexible, such as reasons and apologies to express personal opinions. In contrast, Pei-Yi simply adopted more lexicon-syntactic modifiers to qualify her statements.

## DISCUSSION

### Strategies for Negotiating Power

Most students, regardless of their nationalities, believe that the ownership of English and American culture afforded expert power. Although all the Taiwanese participants were the honors students of English, and no American students complained that their Taiwanese key-pals’ English interfered with their communication, most of the Taiwanese students were anxious and diffident about their English expression. In addition, students from both locales, particularly the Taiwanese students, had the intention of maintaining good relations

and continuing the email exchanging activity. This desire created asymmetrical relations and made many Taiwanese participants perceive inferiority (e.g., Yi-An, Ping-Hen, Heng-Zhi, and Wen-Xin).

According to the analysis, asymmetrical relations affected correspondents' discursive and nondiscursive communication strategies. Once perceived or stranded in unequal power relations, the students, particularly the under-powered (Taiwanese students), seemed to prefer to adopt discourses that were formal, polite, reconciliatory, academic, fact-oriented or question-and-answer based emails in their conversations with the American students. Moreover, if the power relation became more threatening, more drastic or defensive moves were taken. For example, Ping-Hen tended to be polite at first, but after perceiving and suffering from an imbalance in power with his key-pal, his discourse moved from openness and personal to more opinionated language. In terms of non-discursive strategies, he preferred to talk about what he was familiar with and ignored what he was not, which seemed to help him gain confidence to negotiate power.

### **Strategies for Negotiating Writing Style**

According to the case analysis, some Taiwanese students regarded a more formal, academic style as a way to show politeness, demonstrate knowledge, and express their eagerness to engage the American students. Many Taiwanese students consulted dictionaries to reduce linguistic errors, did research on the topics they planned to discuss in their emails, and adopted formal academic writing style to project a "positive" or "knowledgeable" image (e.g., Ping-Hen and Wen-Xin). Some Taiwanese students discussed formal or academic



oriented topics in order to show respect for their American key-pals' social distance (e.g., Heng-Zhi and Wen-Xing). On the other hand, American students also adopted a formal writing style to keep their textual identity or retain their privilege (e.g., Ben). Contrary to what Bjorge (2007) proposed, that style of formality is culturally bound, the findings of the present study show that writing style can be strategically used by students from both high and low PD cultures to negotiate identities and issues of power, language and social distance.

### **Strategies for Negotiating Social Distance**

Most of the students who would like to close the social distance between themselves and their key-pals usually discursively asked/answered questions (e.g., Hu-Jung, Yi-Ting, and Heng-Zhi), adopted emoticons (e.g., Yi-Ting), or shared personal experiences (e.g., Ru-Fei, Pei-Yi, Hu-Jung, and Yi-Ting). The common non-discursive strategies used to negotiate social distance were choosing topics that key-pals might be interested in (Heng-Zhi), sending audio-visual attachments or Internet links, providing emotional support (Hen-Zhi and Ru-Fei), carefully expressing disagreement (e.g., Yi-An) and establishing email exchange routines (e.g., Ru-Fei, Heng-Zhi, and Yi-Ting). However, those who wanted to keep a distance due to differences in expectations for the communication usually discussed topics which were impersonal or more culturally and politically related in order to keep a polite distance (e.g., Wen-Xing) or in order not to offend their key-pals (e.g., Pin-Hen). Some of them procrastinated on sending emails (e.g., Chen-Wei) or wrote more opinionated messages (e.g., Pin-Hen).

### **Strategies for Negotiating Rhetoric**

One of the distinctive features of most of the Taiwanese students' email discourse was insufficient social-pragmatic knowledge of rhetorical euphemism—their discourse sometimes lacked hedges or mitigations and might have at times sounded blunt or assertive to the American students. Those Taiwanese students who were aware of their rhetorical limitations usually took measures to model their American correspondents' discourse, added modal auxiliaries (e.g., may, would or could) or used lexico-syntactic modifications (e.g., It could be ... if you would like to ...) in order to soften their voice or create rhetorically appropriate discourse.

### **IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

When communicating with NES peers via email, Taiwanese students usually encounter issues of power, style, social distance and rhetoric. All the four issues may interplay with one another and result in complicated variables in online communication. The findings of the present study bear important implications for the use of email and other digital technology to teach L2 writing cross-nationally. First, most of the Taiwanese students strategically modeled or borrowed the American key-pals discourse to negotiate communication issues, which can encourage interactive learning and language acquisition in terms of “appropriateness” of email language use, etiquette of email writing and pragmatic competence in the target language and culture. Perceptions of linguistic insufficiency motivated many Taiwanese students to use dictionaries, revise drafts and search for topic-related information to compensate for their writing limitations. These

findings confirm that incorporating email into language classrooms encourages acquisition of the target language and culture in an authentic context (Absalom & Marden, 2004; Beavois & Eledge, 1995; Fedderholt, 2001; Warschauer, 1996). It is noteworthy that “academically correct” or formal discourses may not always interest American students who expect to close the social distance. In traditional academic writing classrooms, most L2 writing teachers teach academically appropriate rhetoric and conventions, and when email activity is incorporated into a writing course, teachers may expect students to use standard English to write emails. However, not all NES correspondents favor a formal academic style in email communication because formal academic discourse may create a sense of distance. Second, EFL students should develop effective discursive and nondiscursive strategies of negotiation in online communication. For example, being sensitive about correspondents’ expectations, taking an appropriate and egalitarian approach, and applying multiple communication channels via various CMC tools, such as MSN, YouTube, blogs, or message boards, may facilitate online communication (Bloch, 2002; You, 2007). Third, Taiwanese students seem to have limited pragmatic knowledge in formality, politeness, and social distance; furthermore, their writing seems to lack mitigations, hedges or downgraders. Social-pragmatic instruction in L2 writing, which assists students to employ culturally appropriate and contextually effective discourse is imperative. Last, people from different cultures seem to perceive social distance differently. Chinese students usually regard sharing personal feelings and their lives as being open and friendly, but American students may define openness and friendliness in a broader way.

This present study has made an important contribution to investigation of emergent issues in the teaching of L2 writing for online communication. However, issues of identity were not discussed due to limitations in the research design; moreover, issues related to gender were not explored in-depth because of the discrepant gender distribution of the participants and insufficient information obtained from the students' emails, reflections or interviews. Thus, further studies are suggested to explore identity and gender issues of NNES and NES students' online communication. Moreover, whether the notion of social distance in face-to-face contexts affects virtual social distance is also an issue that deserves attention and needs to be further explored.

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## APPENDIX A

### Questionnaire for the Email Writing Activity (I)

1. Are you a native speaker of English? 1) Yes 2) No
2. During the email exchange activity, did you enjoy sharing your personal interests and/or feelings with your key-pals?  
1) Yes 2) No
3. During your email exchange activity, did your key-pal enjoy sharing his/her personal interests or feelings?  
1) Yes 2) No
4. Except writing emails, what were the other channels you adopted to communicate with your key-pals? (sending photos, audio-visual files, MSN, FB and etc.)
5. For any reason, did you ever feel unequal power relations between you and your key-pal(s) during your communication? Did you ever feel that your key-pal was superior/inferior to you? Why or why not?
6. Did you notice any identity changes during your email communication? What identities did you create behind the screen to communicate with a foreign friend?
7. What identities or images of your correspondents did you perceive?
8. What problems did you encounter during the email exchange activity?
9. What have you done in order to facilitate your cross-cultural communication? Please describe all the efforts made or strategies used to facilitate your communication, such as using a dictionary,

researching information, asking questions, sharing personal interests...etc.

## APPENDIX B

### Questionnaire for the Email Writing Activity (II)

1. Do you prefer to use computer-mediated tools to build a more personal relationship with your foreign key pals?  
1) Yes                      2) No
2. Would you like to keep in contact with your key-pals after the activity end?  
1) Yes                      2) No
3. What was your expectation coming into this cross-cultural email exchange with your foreign key-pals?  
1) Making friends    2) Learning culture
4. What's your expectation after this cross-cultural email exchange with your foreign key-pals?  
1) Making friends    2) Learning culture
5. Did you have difficulty understanding your key-pal's English?  
1) Yes                      2) No
6. What strategies did you use to improve communication?

## **APPENDIX C**

### **Interview Questions**

1. What are the issues that you encountered when communicating with your key-pals via emails? How did you solve the problems?
2. Have you ever felt asymmetrical power relations between you and your key-pals? Why did you feel inferior/superior/or equal to your key-pals?
3. What are your power negotiation strategies to deal with this issue?
4. How did you identify yourself when communicating with your key-pals?
5. How did you identify your key-pals during your email communication?
6. What were the most significant rhetorical changes of your email writing during the period of email exchange?
7. What instruction do you think can benefit your cross cultural email communication?

## 臺灣學生與美國學生電子郵件溝通時的問題 與交涉策略：網路寫作教學之啟示

### 摘要

本質性研究探討臺灣學生在與美國學生電子郵件往返時所使用的交涉策略。本研究共有二十九位臺灣與美國學生參與，多元資料收集了學生的電子信件、反思日記、面談與問卷資料。透過文辭分析與資料交叉比對結果顯示，臺灣學生在與美國學生互通電子郵件時面臨了四大問題：權力、文體、社交距離、與修辭。聚焦於臺灣學生，本研究根據資料，分析出臺灣學生慣用的文字與非文字的交涉策略，並對第二外語網路寫作教學提出建議。

關鍵詞：第二外語寫作 電子郵件溝通 電腦語言  
教學 交涉策略