

# ***An Investigation into Academic Email Practices of Arab Female Undergraduate Students and Their Attitudes Towards Correction of Errors in Their Email Messages***

**Sadia Ali**

Zayed University, Abu Dhabi

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## **Abstract**

Students' assignments are often much better in style and organisation than the email messages they send to their teachers. Some teachers, including myself, often 'covertly' correct students' email messages for style, organisation, content, or correctness. While some students appreciate this extra effort from the teachers, others see it as an inhibiting intrusion. However, I have frequently noticed that students who are corrected repeatedly improve in writing emails. My research concerns both the use of academic email writing and the correction of errors in student emails, and concludes the following: students usually write only formal emails to their teachers; those instructors who correct email errors do not offer explicit error correction; and if email writing were taught to the students, it would offer variety in the writing genres students currently compose.

## **Rationale for study, research questions, and working hypotheses**

*"Take care that you never spell a word wrong. Always before you write a word, consider how it is spelled, and, if you do not remember, turn to a dictionary. It produces great praise to a lady to spell well (Thomas Jefferson to his daughter Martha)."*

Many people argue that email writing should not be treated like any other form of writing and that the development of email language resembles process of creolization (Baron in Bloch, 2002:120): the development of a fresh means of expression unlike traditional writing taught in schools. Nevertheless, email has been used continuously to supplement composition courses and encourage fluency in writing. Applied Linguists may argue that focusing on accuracy in email is contrary to the very idea of email, which is a quick and informal medium focusing on fluent communication rather than correctness. However, focusing on fluency alone (a principle underlying the Communicative Approach) is fruitless because breakdowns in accuracy can sometimes severely impede communication as can be seen from a real student email in Example 1 below:

Dear,  
i need to know all the romin numbers i don't know them and i got confused :) unforchintly i dont have the lap tob today and i dezzy  
  
thank-you,

### **Example 1**

"Email is more conversational than traditional paper-based media" because the 'turnaround' time is fast (Sherwood, 1994). However, with the increase in Internet usage (according to Nua Internet Surveys, 2005, by December 2001, 36.79% of adults in the United Arab Emirates were on-line), email is fast replacing more traditional modes of communication such as letters, postcards, faxes, and even telephone calls. It may not be long before letter-writing becomes obsolete and replaced by email. Today email is used to advertise, vote, apply for jobs, interview, even to consult doctors, as well as to interact socially. Therefore, where once letter writing was taught in schools, it seems more relevant in today's e-environment to emphasize teaching "email writing skills", focusing on both fluency and accuracy.

At Zayed University in the UAE (where this research was conducted) all students are taught the basics of Novell GroupWise, the e-mail/groupware application used at the University. In addition, students of Business take a Business Writing course in the final year of their study where they learn how to compose and reply to 'professional' emails, while email conventions are taught in a technical writing course offered to students majoring in the College of Information

Systems. However, students are not taught how to compose or reply to 'academic' emails in lower-level undergraduate courses (description of these courses can be found [here](#)). Not surprisingly, instructors often receive poorly composed emails from students. Reading, making sense of, and then replying to such emails can be a time- and energy-consuming activity. A recent study found that the amount of time it takes a person to "recover from an email interrupt and to return to work at the same rate at which they left it" averages 64 seconds (Jackson et al. reported in Burgess et al, 2005:73). The time taken by such interruption and 'recovery' would presumably be even longer if the email was weakly composed like the student email reproduced in Example 2 below:

hi MISS.

I wanted to ask you about the assignment you asked us to do for the English COmposition2 class, Is it the waise description + The draft for the coin description?.. & for the coin Description where can i find the information you talked about in the calss regarding the history of this coin and the symbols meaning?

SORRY FOR DESTERBIN' U  
Thanx

### Example 2

Before email writing can become a part of any course at the University, and before error correction can develop into a systematic practice, it is important to explore students' attitudes towards email error correction. This is what I attempted to research. I hypothesised that email was a very important part of my students' academic life at Zayed University (which is a laptop university). I also hypothesised that students cannot recognise indirect correction of their errors in emails, and would prefer direct error correction.

The broad research question for the study is as follows:

*"What are the academic email practices of my students and what are their attitudes towards the correction of errors in their email messages?"*

This broad question has been operationalised (Cohen et al, 2000:75) into the following three focused questions:

1. What are the academic email practices of my Arab female undergraduate students?
2. In what different ways do the teachers at Zayed University correct students' errors in emails?
3. Do the students have preferences in error correction?

## Literature Review

### ***Email and teaching writing***

Email has been established as a valuable device in language education and learners have benefited in numerous ways from this tool. Warschauer (2004) cites the work of St. John and Cash who used linguistic analysis to show the learning process and results achieved by a learner who exchanged email messages with a native speaker. This research concluded that the learner studied new vocabulary and grammatical structures from the native speaker's email and thus improved his own letter writing.

Frank & Toland (2002) show in their study how students from different cultural backgrounds use email to communicate with other students and teachers. Frank and Toland refer to students and educators from Western cultures as 'individualists', while those from Asian cultures are viewed as 'collectivists'. The study found that students from an individualistic culture used email more than students from a collectivist culture; furthermore, 'collectivist students tend to ask more questions than individualist students ... (and) were more likely to use email to interact socially with their peers, than they were to use it for contacting their lecturers'.

Burgess et al (2005) identify problems with email communication and reveal how email training can reduce what they call 'email defects' to improve email communication. They believe that since 35 billion emails will be sent every day by 2005 (International Data Corporation), 'even small improvements in the effectiveness and cost of our communication processes can have significant benefits'. Organizations would thus like greater focus on email education in terms of communication skills rather than merely on hardware and software issues. They go on to say that 'ambiguous, poorly written email can lead to misunderstandings...Messages can appear to be ambiguous if the sender fails to understand the context into which their messages are being received', and that 'the poor use of the subject line can magnify this issue. If the subject line of an email is empty or inappropriate then it is harder for the recipient to prioritise and process the message'. Their study concludes that effective email training improves communication, thus suggesting that email writing should be a taught 'skill'.

In Tella's study (in Warschauer, 2004), e-mail gave students a chance for 'practicing language in open-ended linguistic situations'. Furthermore, the quality of writing also improved because the writing transformed from teacher-led to 'real-

purpose writing with genuine audiences around the world', which was also 'personal, expressive and argumentative'. The added advantage of the email exchange was that students' reading skill also improved.

Atamian & DeMerville's (1998) study shows how they used email as a substitute for office hours. Their study suggests that 'e-mail is the best form of communication between students and instructors outside the class'. The teacher also commented on students' sentence structure, spelling, grammar, and punctuation thus making e-mail writing a 'formal way of communication'.

### **Error correction**

Lee (1997:465) begins the record of her study by following the history of error correction from strict avoidance of errors and hence quick and direct error correction before the 1960s, to the condemnation of error correction as harmful and unnecessary in the late 1960s, and to the more critical view of the need and value of error correction in the 1970s and 1980s

She then differentiates between the terms 'overt correction' and more covert 'error feedback' and concludes by stating that teachers should provide error feedback (varying the 'degree of salience of error feedback according to the proficiency of the learners') so that students can detect their own errors. She also suggests that teachers should re-evaluate the use of grammatical terminology in their feedback, since clarity for the student reader is more crucial in this feedback than technical accuracy.

Kubota (2001) studied the error correction strategies employed by Japanese learners when revising their written work. The study concludes that students find error correction through a coding system (whereby the teacher indicates the type of error and its approximate location) as 'extremely useful'. Similarly, Makino (1993) believes that learners are capable of noticing their own errors if given cues by the teachers. The study proposes that the 'more detailed the cues to the errors, the higher the ratio of learner self-correction achieved'. The cues trigger learners 'linguistic competence' to correct their own errors in English composition.

Feedback may focus on grammatical or spelling errors and/or on the content of students' writing. Robb et al, (1986) claim that 'highly detailed feedback on sentence-level mechanics may not be worth the instructors' time and effort'. They suggest that teachers should respond to student writing instead with 'comments that force the writer back to the initial stages of composing' (p. 91).

Hyland (1990) offers 'alternative feedback methods' and asks teachers to 'persuade students to act on the feedback'. He holds the opinion that error correction develops the learners' proficiency only if it is done selectively. Hyland's article ends by asserting that feedback must be 'interactive to be genuinely effective' so that it encourages students and directs them to improve on their writing.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

This research was carried out at Zayed University (ZU) in Abu Dhabi, which offers various majors at undergraduate level. The research involved distributing a questionnaire to 43 female Emirati students in ZU's General Education programme. The mean age of the participants was 20 years. The participants' level of language proficiency varied from lower to higher intermediate to post intermediate. They had been learning English on average for almost 8 years and could easily understand and relate to the questions asked.

Sampling was done on the basis of non-probability convenience (what Cohen et al (2000:102) have called 'captive audience'). Twenty (20) participants were students in my Composition class while the other twenty-three (23) participants were students whom I had previously taught but were no longer in my class when the research was conducted. It should be noted that the sample does not attempt to make generalizations about the wider population since it is a convenience sample. In Cohen et al's words, 'the parameters of generalizability in this type of sample are negligible' (2000:103). However, the sample is 'appropriate' (Ibid, 115) and does not affect the research's validity for exploratory purposes.

### **Questionnaire**

I conducted the survey to generate opinions and attitudes, and to analyze the outcomes of error correction. Through the questionnaire, I aimed to find answers to the following three questions:

1. What kinds of emails do students write to their teachers?
2. How do the teachers at the University correct students' errors in emails?
3. Do students have preferences in error correction?

I sent the questionnaire by email, and students were asked thirteen questions (a mix of open-ended and closed-ended items). They were told that there is no right or wrong answer. In some cases I later clarified responses by verbal questioning.

## **Results and Discussion**

I 'post-coded' the questionnaire (Cohen et al, 2000: 265) for analysis of closed-ended questions and put them in the form of a table (as described by McDonough & McDonough, 1997:178) along with the responses to open-ended questions. The respondents' names were not put in the table while coding in order to avoid the 'halo effect' and to maintain validity (Cohen et al, 2000:116). Since students were not eager interviewees, verbal clarification was done informally after class, and because the participants did not want their discussions to be recorded, I wrote down important and interesting comments in short-hand for subsequent analysis. The discussions helped increase the validity and reliability of the research tool.

Thirty-six (36) participants returned the completed questionnaire. I linked quantitative figures with the open ended qualitative responses to produce a fuller picture of students' responses.

Zayed University's Readiness programme is an English language preparatory programme which students must pass to enter mainstream university programmes. Those students who score high on the TOEFL (the standard exam for admission in the University) are exempted from attending the Readiness programme. It was fairly evident from answers to Q. 1 (*Were you taught how to write emails in the Readiness programme?*) that these students had not been taught how to write emails in the preparatory programme. 55% respondents said that they were not taught email writing, while 28% did not go through the Readiness programme. Upon verbal questioning it was revealed that the 17% who mentioned that they were taught how to write email were actually referring to the IT training they received on the use of the university's email software.

It was interesting to note that the 10 (28%) students who did not go through the Readiness programme because they had scored high on the TOEFL answered the question, *Do your instructors ever correct your errors and/or make corrective comments on your emails?* in the negative. It could be that since their language proficiency was good, teachers have not found the need or the errors to correct. However, this issue needs to be explored further.

I began with no predetermined categories for grouping the types of email students write to their instructors. Based on students' responses and drawing on Bloch (2002), I created four categories in which the types of emails could be classified:

Asking for clarifications/making queries	36%
Asking for help	31%
Sending assignments	8%
Making excuses	25%

Students usually use the Blackboard and Turnitin applications to submit assignments and so, email is usually used for all other communication. The majority of email use (67%) is for asking for help or clarification, or for other queries. These findings are similar to Frank & Toland's (2002) observations that concluded that 'collectivist' students from Asian cultures asked more questions by email, basically focusing on reducing 'assignment ambiguity'.

Not unexpectedly, majority of students (29) worry about the formal emails they write to their instructors. However, 21 out of these 29 students responded that they did not revise their language and grammar before sending the email. I believe that formal training in writing academic emails and systematic error correction would educate the students to make an effort to revise their emails prior to sending them.

Another trend that emerged is that students wanting to correct their emails would type their email in MS Word and then cut and paste the text into GroupWise rather than using the email programme's spell check capability. Students found Word to be easier and more reliable with in-built dictionary and thesaurus options and spell check facility. One respondent observed, *'i type on word and cut & paste bcoz that is more easy. Also if my groopwise not work i have my email save in word. Also word has dictionary and synonyms.'*

In response to the question, *Do your instructors correct your errors and/or make corrective comments on your emails?* almost 81% (29) respondents said that their instructors never correct errors in their emails. During the verbal discussion it was revealed that most students thought their instructors never corrected their errors, and so they assumed that they either did not make significant errors, or that the errors did not matter much in emails. Since it is known that a few instructors (like me) do covertly correct errors, it could be interpreted that students have not understood hints offered in the form of covert error correction. This assumption is further validated as only one (1) respondent recognized covert error correction (e.g., in response to student's – "it say it is too havey to sand", the instructor indirectly substitutes/rephrases, "Oh, so the computer says it is too heavy to send? So, why don't you try compressing the file?"). The minority (6) that identified error correction did so only if the error was directly pointed out, with or without offering the correct form. They also mentioned that teachers mostly corrected errors of vocabulary and grammar.

Almost all students (34) said that they would prefer for various reasons that their instructors tell them what errors they made in emails. One respondent wrote that she would prefer to know her errors because she would like *'to be perfect student and to learn from my mistakes'*. Another appealing response was *'it makes me feel better, so I know he/she cares about my language and want me to have good language'*. One more wrote *'I can learn how to deal with everyday life. Its very important'*. A student who definitely likes to play safe wrote *'I will memorize the mistakes and never make them again if I know that the teacher will follow this way and there is none way out'*. One skeptic, however, responded *'No, its an email not an essay'*.

Six (6) respondents wrote they would like their instructors to directly point out the error without offering the correct form. These students appear not to prefer the easy way and were willing to make an effort to learn. However, the majority (25)

preferred that instructors directly point out their error and offer the correct form. One interesting response pointed out the dangers of direct error correction

*"I think the best way is to point the mistake & do not answer the students email, till he send her mail back, so she do correct her mistake by her own & send it back, because I think if he answered her mail and pointed mistake, she wont send him back the correction, she won't care, also if he just direct give her the correct form, she might not even notice that".*

While some students wrote the obvious like 'I will definitely learn from my mistakes', and 'I will learn new vocabularies', others had more interesting answers; sharing that

'I will feel shy when the instructor replays the formal email with errors. Therefore, I will learn not to make those mistakes again'

'I will learn to take more time writing the email and to read it more carefully before I send it'

'I think I will learn to slow down and check what I'm writing'

'It will make me realize that nothin' can be taken for granted. Not even emails'

'I will definitely learn to make errorless requests and excuses :-)'

'We are here to learn, so we should not feel impress or shame if we had mistakes in our mails, I think the person could never be successful if he hadn't make mistakes & learn from it...'

75% of students (27) thought it would be a good idea to have email writing as part of the writing courses in at least the preparatory programme while others considered otherwise. Those in favour of email training wrote that it should be part of the writing courses for several reasons

'It teaches us how to write formal emails and it is easier , we can get more points on it'

'Students mostly don't care about the way that they write when the are not writing for an English composition course. In this way student will learn more and will be aware that they must write correctly always'

'I can correct my mistakes directly in the computer. It will be much easier to correct the mistakes than if it was on paper. But it will be a problem if GroupWise is not working'

'It would be so interesting, Miss. We can do much more then only writing summary and essay'.

One doubter of the usefulness of such a course wrote:

'No, writing emails is not possible for some students with no internet at home, It might also be a waste of time since not a lot of students check or write emails on a regular basis. A lot of students use emails to provide excuses, so emails becoming part of the course would not be sufficient in making them improve their writing skills. Finally, there would be too many complaints about how emails are not adequate in determining how good a student is. It would be a bother to some teachers to have to adjust to the tens and hundreds of "fan mail" they would be getting.'

## Conclusion

Three main findings have emerged from this initial study:

1. Students usually write only formal emails to the teachers, mainly asking for clarifications, making queries, or asking for help.
2. Those instructors who correct email errors do not offer explicit error correction and rely solely on covert error correction which is not recognised by students. Students prefer explicit error correction.
3. Academic Email writing is not taught to students in their early semesters at the University, if at all. If it is taught, it would offer variety to the writing genres students currently compose in colloquy courses.

The following are my recommendations in reaction to the observations summarised above.

All faculty at Zayed University (not only language teachers) could give feedback on the accuracy of students' email since faulty emails are a problem that all teachers face. Appendix I shows a simple Email Grading Rubric developed for a Business Writing course by Kate O'Neill and others in ZU's College of Business; similar criteria could be used to grade formal 'academic' emails by students at an earlier stage in their studies.

Feedback on emails could be made more systematic so that it is more beneficial to the students. Ancker (2000:25) points out that teachers should keep in mind student variables which make it difficult to generalize error correction; what constitutes effective useful feedback to a student obviously depends on the situation as well as on the student involved. However, Semke (in Robb et al, 1986) discovered that overt correction' in general was likely to have harmful effects on 'both the quality of subsequent compositions and on student attitudes toward writing' (p.84). In another study Lalande (1982) established that students whose teachers used an error code to highlight errors and prompt self-correction showed significant improvement over those students whose written work was corrected explicitly. Based on these suggestions (and even though students appear to prefer explicit correction), it seems that significant language errors that may hamper communication in students' emails should be corrected indirectly. A simple correction code like the one proposed by Wood

(1993: 38) (reproduced in Appendix II) could be used for correction if needed. Kubota (2001) advocates the use of correction code which he finds very useful. I give this code to my students at the beginning of each term and they use it to revise their writing so they can understand the code if I use it for email correction. The email exchange in Example 3 below shows how the code is used for correction of email language offering cues to the student for correction as recommended by Makino (1993).

In the following email exchange the aim of the student was to request me to send her a web link on Roman numerals, and inform me that since she was dizzy and did not have her laptop with her she would not attend the class. It took me three email exchanges with the student over the course of 40 minutes to understand the meaning!

### Example 3: Error correction using a correction code

#### Student's original email:

dear,  
i need to know all the romin numbers i don't know them and i got confused :) unforchintly i dont have the lap tob today and i dezzy  
thank-you,

#### My first response (highlighting spelling errors and coherence):

Hi [student's name],  
I honestly don't understand what you wrote in your email. Please check your spellings and grammar and send me the email again. You must always run spell check before sending an email.  
S

#### Student's second email (revision of spelling):

I need to know all the roman numbers I don't know them and I got confused. unfortunately I don't have the lap top today and I dizzy.  
thank-you,

#### My second response (highlighting remaining specific errors with error code, using VT = verb tense, cap = capitals and ^ = word missing):

**You wrote: I need to know all the roman numbers I don't know them and I got (VT) confused. unfortunately (cap) I don't have the lap top today and I (^) dizzy. thank-you,(cap)**  
Hi again,  
Yes, you must know them by now. So you are dizzy and you don't have your laptop on you today? How can I help you?  
S

#### Student's third email (expressed in more specific terms and without errors of capitalization):

No miss I know I have to know them but can you send me the link on roman numbers you give yesterday. I won't go to class today bcos I'm dizzy and I don't have my laptop so please send me the link now.  
Thank-you,

Makino (1993) proposes that ‘the more detailed the cues to the errors, the higher the ratio of learner self-correction achieved’. Students should also be taught email etiquettes and the importance of running the spell-check facility before sending formal emails to the faculty at the University. Insignificant language errors could be ignored to avoid discouragement to students and teacher burnout. Moreover, like Robb et al (1986) assert that detailed feedback on sentence-level may not be worth the instructors’ time and effort. Depending on the context, error correction could be very subtle and student-initiated as can be seen from Example 4 below

#### Example 4: Indirect error correction

In the following email exchange the student who is a UAE national misspells the proper names of all four places (in UAE) that she had visited. I wanted her to realise that she had made the spelling error without pointing this out directly, so I made use of the fact that Google suggests a corrected spelling if a user enters a mis-spelled search term.

#### Student’s original email

Thanx Ms.  
i just wanted to tell you that i had 3 weeks off, and the third week was fine, i had a nice time with my big family, we went to trips in al Fujarah, Deba, masafy & khorfikhaan and the weather was great, it was raining so much [^\_^]  
Yours,

#### My response

Wow! It seems like you had great fun. Can you send the class one web link to the 4 places each you visited? We will use those 4 links for a class activity on tenses next week. Simply put the name of the place you visited in Google and copy the link to the best site you see.  
  
Thanks

#### Student’s second email (note that the spellings of the place names have been corrected):

Hi Ms.  
  
How do you doing? Sorry i couldn't reply earlier, because i wasn't at my home in AD, i was in my old home, in Ajman, and there i have no internet, i just arrived yesterday. Here are the links you asked for:  
Fujairah: <http://www.fujairah-tourism.ae/>  
Dibba: <http://www.barwil.com/wbch3.exe?p=400765>  
Masafi: <http://uk.multimap.com/wi/156144.htm>  
Khorfakkan: <http://www.geocities.com/TheTropics/7415/KHOR.HTM>  
  
Yours, [student’s name]

Drawing on Jackson et al’s study (in Burgess et al, 2005:73), if students are taught email writing it could become an effective means of interacting with teachers without consuming unnecessary faculty time. It is not always necessary to work on an informal message for hours to ensure that the spelling, words, and grammar are flawless. But an inefficient, unclear, and consequently ineffective email can give instructors the impression that students are not taking them seriously. Students “need to be aware of when you can be sloppy and when you have to be meticulous” (Sherwood, 1994). I believe that all students and teachers at the University would benefit if academic email writing were taught more systematically at least in the Readiness programme, and if a special focus on the content, structure, and language of formal and informal emails. This would also give students a chance to practice their English in “open-ended linguistic situations” (Tella in Warschauer, 2004). The ability to write clear, comprehensible and accurate emails is essential for the female Emirati students who are expected to be the global leaders of tomorrow. After all, it “produces great praise to a lady to spell well”!

#### Discussion/Reflection Questions

1. How accurate and comprehensible are your students’ emails?
2. Have they had any instruction in writing emails?

3. What kind of 'covert feedback' could you provide in future when replying to your students' emails?

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## Appendix 1: Email Grading Rubric (Kate O'Neill)

5 4 3 0

### Content

Is the information effectively organized?	A	B	C	F
Is all the necessary information included?	A	B	C	F
Is the information accurate?	A	B	C	F

### Language

Is the grammar accurate?	A	B	C	F
Is the spelling accurate?	A	B	C	F
Is the tone appropriate?	A	B	C	F

### Format

Is the subject line meaningful?	A	B	C	F
Are dates written in a universally recognizable manner?	A	B	C	F
Are the fonts appropriate?	A	B	C	F



Does it look professional?

A B C F

## Appendix 2: Sample Correction Code

Abbreviation	Type Of Error
cap	capitalization
P	punctuation
SP	spelling
^	add a word
()	optional
#	singular/plural
SV	subject-verb agreement
VT	verb tense
VF	verb form (-ing, -ed, etc.)
WC	word choice
WF	word form (noun, verb, adjective, adverb, etc.)
WO	word order
frag	sentence fragment (incomplete sentence)
RO	run-on sentence
?	unclear

### Contact

Sadia Ali can be contacted at [Sadia.Ali@zu.ac.ae](mailto:Sadia.Ali@zu.ac.ae).