


## REVIEW OF *THE INBOX: UNDERSTANDING AND MAXIMIZING STUDENT-INSTRUCTOR E-MAIL*

<p><b>The Inbox: Understanding and Maximizing Student-Instructor E-mail</b> Jennifer D. Ewald 2016 ISBN: 978-1781791141 US \$27.95 162 pp. Equinox Publishing Sheffield, UK</p>	
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### Review by [Lee B. Abraham, Columbia University](#)

Students frequently use technology-mediated tools to communicate with instructors outside of class to ask questions about course content or homework, to explain absences from class, and to submit assignments. Technology-mediated communication continues to be a critical component of student-faculty interactions before and after class (Dahlstrom, Christopher Brooks, Grajek, & Reeves, 2015). Moreover, a comprehensive understanding of the characteristics of student-faculty communication is particularly important since such interactions have been found to impact students' learning and achievement (see Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2010). However, to date, very few studies have analyzed students' language use with instructors in language classes outside of the classroom using technology-mediated tools (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Ewald's book addresses this gap in research by providing a thorough corpus-informed analysis of pragmatic features of students' messages written in English and Spanish in authentic student-faculty email communication.

The *Inbox* consists of eleven chapters, and each chapter includes useful and specific pedagogical recommendations for faculty and directions for future research. The first chapter provides an overview of student-teacher email use in higher education and in language learning and teaching. Chapter 2 describes the methodology and the corpus, comprised of naturalistic data (i.e., not elicited through the use of a data collection instrument), which is analyzed in subsequent chapters. The next chapter qualitatively analyzes students' email messages from which Ewald reveals their beliefs about email etiquette and the extent of students' awareness of norms governing email interactions with instructors. Chapter 4 examines student email messages that were sent in order to submit assignments. The next five chapters analyze students' expression of requests, apologies, excuses, gratitude, and complaints. Chapter 10 investigates students' use of English and Spanish in the corpus, and the last chapter summarizes the principal findings of the book and discusses implications for future research on student-instructor technology-mediated communication outside of the classroom.

In Chapter 1, Ewald highlights previous research on linguistic features and characteristics of email. She also describes previous studies on faculty concerns about students' informal language use in email and then she discusses research on technology-mediated student-faculty communication both in general and in

language learning and teaching. Ewald rightly concludes that there have been very few corpus-informed studies of authentic language in student-faculty technology-mediated communication beyond the language classroom.

Chapter 2 describes in detail the methodology that resulted in a corpus of 1,403 email messages—based on actual emails and not elicited data—written by 338 students enrolled in beginning, intermediate, and advanced courses in Spanish and in linguistics courses taught either in English or in Spanish. Since emails could be written for more than one purpose, the corpus analyzed in *The Inbox* focuses on 1,478 speech acts produced by students. Ewald's thorough explanation of the procedures for collecting and analyzing the data is useful for researchers using corpus-informed approaches to the study of language use in electronic discourse.

In the next chapter, Ewald presents results from a qualitative analysis of the corpus in order to shed light on students' email etiquette and the extent of their awareness of pragmatic norms. Overall, the analysis reveals that students recognize norms of email netiquette and that they understand pragmatically appropriate language for writing emails to instructors. However, students sometimes made requests too directly and they also wrote emails with overly informal language, which aligns with findings from previous studies of faculty concerns about students' inappropriate language use that Ewald reviewed in Chapter 1. The last section of the chapter reports on the overall distribution of the pragmatic and linguistic features that resulted from the coding scheme briefly explained in Chapter 2. Throughout this chapter, Ewald makes useful recommendations to faculty for managing their email interactions with students.

The fourth chapter investigates the pragmatic functions and forms of address of messages in the corpus whose primary purpose was the submission of an assignment by attachment (or copied and pasted into the same message) and in which students wrote to ask the instructor to acknowledge the receipt of an assignment previously submitted by email or as a hard copy. Ewald discusses several examples of students' messages that indicate that they mitigated the imposition of submitting a late assignment in order to save face. In addition, the results indicated that students expressed gratitude (52%), apologized (28%), made requests (11%), and gave excuses (9%). Less than half (44%) of the messages had some form of polite opening or closing and 59% included some form of address. Ewald recommends that faculty explicitly teach politeness norms and strategies for writing email messages. She also suggests that faculty design assignments for which students analyze examples of actual email messages (with personal information redacted) for both pragmatically appropriate language use and cases of pragmatic failure.

In Chapter 5, Ewald analyzes the topics and strategies in requests, which was the most frequently occurring pragmatic function in the corpus (50%, 745 of 1,478 uses). More than half (61%) of students' request emails asked for advice, information, or help regarding assignments, tests, and quizzes. The second most frequently occurring category was to request a meeting (17%). Other categories included requests for teachers to send homework assignments (12%) and to postpone, change or reschedule exams, presentations, or other assignments (10%). Although students rarely included *please*, the analysis revealed that their messages still came across as polite because they used other politeness strategies, including lexical modifiers such as *I was (just) wondering...* to mitigate the imposition of their requests (see also Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007).

The next two chapters, *Repair Work: Apologies* and *Repair Work: Excuses*, focus on speech act formulas and pragmatic strategies that students used to repair their image for different reasons (i.e., being absent from class, arriving late, submitting unacceptable work). In general, Ewald's analysis of non-absence-related email apologies indicates that students frequently offered reasons for their actions. They used strategies to save face by accepting blame for their actions and they offered to make up for them. In Chapter 7, Ewald investigates the extent of students' pragmatic awareness in their absence excuse emails. She explains the strategies that they incorporated to account for lateness (past or future), missed assignments, assessment, and appointments. Although students were permitted to have a certain number

of absences for which they did not have to submit documentation, Ewald's analysis reveals that students attempted to save face. Most (96%) of students' absence emails included a reason or justification for not attending class.

In Chapter 8, Ewald analyzes emails in which students expressed gratitude for areas for which instructors are generally responsible, such as helping with course material or advising, and for those actions for which they are not obligated to do so. As Ewald points out, thanking teachers in a sincere way is quite complex since their messages could be misinterpreted as unnecessary or only motivated by a concern for grades. Overall, the results reveal that students frequently used more than one expression of gratitude in a message and that they included a specific reason for doing so.

Chapter 9 investigates students' patterns of complaints, the least frequently occurring speech act in the corpus. Students used several pragmatic strategies to mitigate complaints such as expressing complaints with the modals *could* or *should*. In addition, students included first-person pronouns (*I, my, me*) with positive evaluations of themselves and their performance rather than addressing or accusing the instructor directly. Ewald provides a detailed rationale for distinguishing complaints from requests and excuses. She gives a thorough explanation of the coding scheme for such distinctions that could guide future research of these pragmatic functions in student-teacher email interactions.

Chapter 10 examines students' use of English, Spanish, or both languages and the communicative contexts in which they chose to write emails in Spanish. Although students composed their messages in Spanish much less often than in English, Ewald's analysis shows that students did use Spanish successfully to make requests, provide excuses, and to apologize. In Chapter 11, the last chapter, Ewald summarizes the principal findings and pedagogical implications examined throughout the book.

Although there have been studies of other pragmatic features such as openings and closings and forms of address in students' emails, Ewald's book is one of the first corpus-informed investigations of students' expression of requests, apologies, excuses, and complaints in student-faculty communication outside of the classroom. *The Inbox* addresses an important gap in research in pragmatics and technology-mediated discourse, and the findings will serve as an important baseline for comparison with future studies. Ewald identifies several crucial directions for research that would shed further light on patterns of student-faculty communication outside of class using email and other technologies.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lee B. Abraham is a lecturer in Spanish and he currently serves as co-director of the Spanish Language Program in the Department of Latin American and Iberian Cultures at Columbia University. His research interests, closely aligned with his teaching and language program administration, focus on assessment, multiliteracies, linguistic landscape, concept-based instruction, and technology-mediated communication.

**E-mail:** [lba2133@columbia.edu](mailto:lba2133@columbia.edu)

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