


Pragmatic Proficiency in Hospitality Emails: Hotel Management Students' Language Politeness and Message Effectiveness

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A B S T R A C T

Effective email communication is essential in a hospitality business as it exhibits service professionalism and influences guest satisfaction. However, research into hospitality students' pragmatic competency in producing guest service emails remains limited, especially in the context of EFL vocational education in Indonesia. By comparing two groups in terms of formality, politeness, mitigation techniques, message effectiveness, grammatical accuracy, and the use of native-like polite language, this study seeks to assess the pragmatic quality of guest service emails written by hospitality management students. This study used a quantitative descriptive-comparative design enhanced with qualitative content analysis. It comprised 43 hospitality management students from an Indonesian vocational higher education institution. Data were collected using a guest service email writing assignment and analyzed using pragmatic and linguistic assessment criteria. The study found that Class A exhibited significantly higher levels of formality and politeness by frequently employing professional registers, mitigating devices, and service-oriented language. Instead, both groups revealed almost identical patterns of grammatical errors, most of which were non-fatal and had no substantial impact on communication. The study further discovered that polite emails were not always more effective if they lacked a straightforward response or sufficient follow-up information. These findings underline the significance of pragmatic competence in hospitality communication and recommend that English for Hospitality teaching should emphasize a professional register, politeness strategies, and authentic service-oriented email practices.

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INTRODUCTION

In the hospitality industry, written communication plays a crucial role in building professional relationships between hotels and guests (Asmara et al., 2024). One of the most frequently used forms of communication is email, particularly for handling reservations, information requests, service confirmations, and handling customer complaints (Sulasmini & Benu, 2026). Unlike verbal communication, which is supported by intonation, facial expressions, and body language, email communication relies heavily on word choice, formality, politeness strategies, and clarity of message delivery. Therefore, the quality of language in guest service emails not only reflects the writer's linguistic abilities but also demonstrates the professionalism of the hotel's service and influences perceptions of customer satisfaction (Gofar & Ilmiyah, 2024; Van Bruinessen, 1990).

In the context of professional communication, particularly in the service industry, pragmatic competence is a crucial aspect. Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to use language appropriately according to the social context, communication goals, interpersonal relationships, and specific cultural norms (Kasper et al., 1993). In hospitality communication, pragmatic competence is reflected through the ability to use a professional register, choose polite expressions, implement mitigation strategies, and effectively convey solutions to hotel guests. Thus, the success of service communication is determined not only by grammatical

accuracy, but also by the writer's ability to adapt language to the demands of professional communication.

Brown and Levinson's (Brown & Levinson, 1987) politeness theory explains that professional communication generally requires negative politeness strategies, namely strategies aimed at maintaining "face" or the comfort of the interlocutor through the use of indirect, careful, and respectful language. In the context of customer service emails, this strategy can be realized through the use of formal modals such as would, could, and may, expressions of apology, and expressions of appreciation towards customers. In addition, (Leech, 1983) emphasized that the principle of politeness in business communication aims to reduce the impression of being pushy and increase positive interpersonal relationships. Therefore, the ability to use politeness strategies appropriately is an important indicator of communication professionalism in the hospitality industry.

In addition to politeness, email communication in the context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) also requires mastery of professional registers and rhetorical structures appropriate to industry needs. In the hospitality industry, guest service emails typically include speech acts such as providing information, apologizing, offering assistance, and providing solutions to customer problems. Therefore, the ability to write professional emails involves not only linguistic accuracy but also the ability to structure messages effectively, clearly, and service-orientedly. Previous research has shown that the use of polite language, mitigation strategies, and service-oriented diction can improve perceptions of service quality and strengthen relationships between customers and service providers (Li, 2017; Zou & Wu, 2023). In professional business communication, the use of diplomatic, efficient, and empathetic language is also considered essential for maintaining the quality of service interactions (Buhaieva, 2025; Thongtong, 2022).

In the field of applied pragmatics and tourism communication, several studies have addressed politeness strategies, responses to customer complaints, and the structure of digital service communication. (Purnomo & Widarwati, 2025) examined politeness strategies in WhatsApp-based tour cancellation messages in the Central Java tourism sector. Other studies have focused on customer perceptions of digital service quality (Economidou-Kogetsidis et al., 2021), the structure of speech acts in hotel complaint handling (Thongtong, 2022; Wang, 2022), and discourse patterns in technology-based service communication (Jang et al., 2025). However, most of these studies focus more on professional communication conducted by practitioners or on customer perceptions of service.

Although research on politeness and service communication has been growing, there is still limited research specifically examining the pragmatic competence of hospitality vocational students in writing guest service emails, especially in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Indonesia. Furthermore, previous research rarely combines quantitative-comparative analysis with qualitative content analysis to evaluate how students use formality, politeness strategies, mitigation, service-oriented diction, and message effectiveness in professional emails. However, hospitality vocational students are future service industry practitioners who are expected to produce written communication that satisfies worldwide professional standards.

Based on these gaps, this study aims to analyze the pragmatic competence of hotel management students in writing guest service emails. Specifically, this study compares the linguistic performance of two groups of students in terms of formality, politeness, mitigation, message effectiveness, grammatical accuracy, and the use of polite expressions that resemble native speakers. This study uses a descriptive-comparative quantitative design enriched with qualitative content analysis of guest service emails written by students of the Hotel Management Diploma Program at a private university in Surakarta, Indonesia.

This research provides both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, this study expands the study of applied pragmatics in the field of English for Hospitality by highlighting the relationship between pragmatic competence, professional register, and the effectiveness of written service communication. This study also enriches the literature on professional email communication in the context of EFL vocational education in Indonesia.

Practically, the results of this study are expected to form the basis for developing an English for Hospitality curriculum that emphasizes mastery of politeness strategies, the use of service-oriented language, and the rhetorical structure of professional emails according to the needs of the international hospitality industry.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive-comparative quantitative design (Siedlecki, 2020) enriched with qualitative content analysis to investigate the pragmatic competence of hospitality management students in writing guest service emails. The quantitative approach was used to compare linguistic performance across student groups, while content analysis was used to identify patterns of politeness, mitigation, professional register, and language errors in the emails produced by the participants.

Research Participants

The study was conducted in the odd semester of the 2025 academic year in the Diploma III Hotel Management Program at a private university in Surakarta, Central Java, Indonesia. Participants consisted of 43 sixth-semester students who had completed the English for Hospitality and Front Office Communication courses. Because the population size was relatively small and all students met the research criteria, a total sampling technique was used in this study.

Participants were divided into two natural groups based on the academic class divisions established by the study program: Class A and Class B. The group division was not based on English proficiency level, but rather on the regular class administration applicable at the institution. Both groups received the same curriculum, learning materials, and courses throughout the study period. Thus, comparisons were conducted to identify variations in pragmatic and linguistic performance between student groups in the context of professional email assignments. In general, participants' English proficiency levels ranged from A2 to B2 based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This information was used as supporting data to describe the general characteristics of the study participants.

Research Instruments

The primary research instrument was a guest-service email writing task. Each student was asked to write a professional email based on a hotel service scenario involving information requests, complaint handling, or responding to guest needs. The assignment was designed to represent authentic communication situations commonly found in the hospitality industry.

Student emails were analyzed using a pragmatic and linguistic assessment rubric developed based on (Brown & Levinson, 1987) politeness theory, principles of professional communication in ESP, and international hotel service communication standards. The assessment rubric consisted of six main aspects as follows:

Table 1. Assessment rubric

Assessment Aspects	Description	Scales
Formality Score	The level of use of professional registers, formal capitals, and business email structures	1-5
Politeness Score	Using politeness markers, empathetic expressions, and politeness strategies	1-5
Mitigation Frequency	Number of mitigation or hedging devices used	Frequency
Effectiveness Score	Clarity of solution, completeness of information, and organization of message	1-5
Grammar Errors	Number of grammatical errors	Frequency
Native-like Polite Expressions	Using polite expressions commonly used in the international hospitality industry	Frequency

Formality, politeness, and effectiveness were scored using a five-point scale, with higher scores indicating better professional communication quality. Grammatical errors were classified into several categories, such as tense errors, articles, prepositions, tenses, singular-plural, and omission of be-verb. Meanwhile, native-like polite expressions were identified based on their occurrence in professional hotel communication, such as "Should you need further assistance," "We sincerely apologize for the inconvenience," and "We would be pleased to assist you."

To increase the reliability of the assessment, all emails were evaluated by two evaluators with experience in teaching English for Hospitality and professional communication. The assessments were conducted using a linguistic checklist agreed upon before the evaluation process began.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted during regular lectures. Students were asked to write individual guest service emails based on scenarios provided by the lecturer. All emails were collected as digital documents and then analyzed using a predetermined assessment rubric. In addition to quantitative data in the form of assessment scores, this study also collected qualitative data in the form of examples of politeness strategies, mitigating expressions, professional register choices, and examples of grammatical errors that appeared in the students' emails. Qualitative data were used to strengthen statistical interpretations and provide a more in-depth picture of the characteristics of students' pragmatic communication.

Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics included the mean, standard deviation, minimum score, and maximum score for each research variable. Prior to the comparative test, data distribution was tested using the Shapiro-Wilk normality test. Based on the results of the normality test, normally distributed data were analyzed using the Welch's t-test, while non-normally distributed data were analyzed using the Mann-Whitney U test (Sundjaja et al., 2020). This analysis was used to identify differences in linguistic performance between Class A and Class B in terms of formality, politeness, mitigation, message effectiveness, grammatical errors, and the use of polite expressions similar to native speakers. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Meanwhile, qualitative content analysis was conducted by identifying linguistic patterns that emerged in student emails, including the use of formal modals, mitigation strategies, email rhetorical structure, politeness markers, and error patterns. Data interpretation was carried out by integrating statistical results with linguistic examples to gain a more comprehensive understanding of students' pragmatic competence in guest service email communication. To increase the validity of the findings, this study applied data triangulation through a combination of statistical results, content analysis, and evaluator interpretation of the quality of students' email communication.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Before discussing the findings in more detail, Table 2 presents descriptive statistics and comparative test results for all study variables. This table displays the mean, standard deviation, and statistical significance (p-value) for comparing linguistic performance between Class A and Class B in terms of formality, politeness, mitigation, message effectiveness, grammatical errors, and the use of polite expressions similar to native speakers.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Comparative Test Results

Variables	Class A Mean (SD)	Class B Mean (SD)	p-value	Interpretations
Formality Score	3.95 (0.62)	3.29 (0.88)	0.008	Significant
Politeness Score	4.24 (0.58)	3.67 (0.71)	0.018	Significant
Mitigation Frequency	2.31 (0.91)	1.95 (1.02)	0.211	Insignificant
Effectiveness Score	3.05 (0.73)	2.89 (0.81)	0.437	Insignificant

Grammar Errors	3.18 (1.92)	3.67 (2.11)	0.512	Insignificant
Native-like Expressions	2.43 (0.76)	1.76 (0.83)	0.090	Nearly Significant

Note: SD = Standard Deviation; $p < 0.05$ indicates a statistically significant difference.

An analysis of 43 guest service emails revealed variations in pragmatic and linguistic performance between Class A and Class B. The most prominent differences were found in formality, politeness, and the use of native-like polite expressions. Meanwhile, grammatical errors and message effectiveness showed more varied patterns and did not always correlate directly with politeness levels. In general, the most prominent differences between the two groups were found in formality and politeness, while message effectiveness and grammatical errors showed relatively smaller variations. These statistical findings were then further analyzed through linguistic content analysis in each of the following subsections.

Differences between Language Formality and Professional Register

The analysis results showed that Class A had a higher level of formality than Class B. The mean formality score in Class A was higher than in Class B, and the comparative test results showed a statistically significant difference ($p = 0.008$). This finding indicates that Class A students were more consistent in using professional registers in guest service email communications. Linguistically, emails from Class A more frequently used formal modals and professional email structures, such as *"We would be pleased to assist you," "Should you need further information,"* and *"Warm greetings from..."*. In contrast, some emails from Class B used more direct and less formal structures, such as *"I will inform you later"* or *"We will send the info soon."* Table 1 shows representative examples of the use of professional registers in both groups.

Table 3. Examples of Formal Register Usage in Guest Service Emails

Participants	Classes	Examples of Phrases	Formality Scores
P31	A	<i>"Should you need further information..."</i>	5
P06	A	<i>"We would be pleased to assist you..."</i>	4
P05	B	<i>"I will inform you later."</i>	1
P10	B	<i>"We will send you the info."</i>	2

Furthermore, some participants from Class B still tended to translate Indonesian structures directly into English, such as *"We hope you can understand us"* or *"Sorry for this problem."* While understandable in meaning, these structures did not reflect the professional register standards of international hotel communication. Overall, these findings suggest that differences in the quality of email communication between groups are more evident in the ability to use professional registers than in the structural aspects of the language alone.

Level of Politeness and Use of Mitigation Strategies

The politeness score analysis showed that Class A achieved a higher level of politeness than Class B. The statistical test results showed a significant difference between the two groups ($p = 0.018$). This finding indicates that Class A students were more consistent in applying politeness strategies in customer service communications. Emails from Class A showed a higher frequency of politeness markers, such as *"We sincerely apologize for the inconvenience," "Thank you for contacting us,"* and *"Kindly be informed..."*. In addition, the use of modals such as *would* and *could* was more frequently found in Class A emails as a form of mitigation in conveying information and requests. In contrast, emails from Class B tended to use shorter and more direct expressions, such as *"Sorry for this"* or *"Please wait for our info."* While still demonstrating basic politeness, these structures conveyed a relatively less professional and empathetic nuance compared to emails from Class A.

Table 4. Politeness Markers and Mitigation Strategies

Participants	Classes	Examples of Phrases	Politeness Scores
P12	A	<i>"We sincerely apologize for the inconvenience..."</i>	5
P15	A	<i>"Thank you for contacting us..."</i>	5

P25	B	"Sorry for this."	3
P30	B	"Please wait for our info."	4

In addition to the use of politeness markers, Class A students also showed a higher tendency to use mitigation strategies through indirect structures and diplomatic expressions. This suggests that more professional service communication tends to be characterized by the ability to manage interpersonal relationships through more careful and empathetic language choices.

Using Polite Expressions Like a Native Speaker

The results showed that Class A students used polite expressions that resembled international hotel communication standards more frequently than Class B students. Although the statistical test results showed a value approaching significance ($p = 0.090$), the pattern of expression use in both groups showed quite consistent differences. Emails from Class A contained various professional expressions such as "Warm greetings from...", "We would be happy to assist you," and "Should you need further assistance...". These expressions indicate the use of a more natural service register and are closer to the communication practices of the international hotel industry. In contrast, most emails from Class B only used basic expressions such as "Thank you," "Please," or "Sorry." While still pragmatically acceptable, the use of these expressions indicates a simpler level of pragmatic elaboration.

Table 5. Examples of Polite Expressions Imitating Native Speakers

Participants	Classes	Native-like Expressions	Examples of Phrases
P41	A	4	"Warm greetings from..."
P32	A	3	"Should you need further assistance..."
P23	B	1	"Thank you"
P28	B	1	"Please..."

These findings suggest that exposure to professional registers and authentic communication patterns has the potential to influence the pragmatic quality of students' emails, particularly in the use of expressions commonly found in professional hotel service communications.

Grammatical Errors and Stability of Structural Competence

Analysis of grammatical errors showed no significant difference between Class A and Class B in the number or types of errors appearing in the emails. The error patterns in both groups were relatively similar and most did not hinder the overall understanding of the message. The most common types of errors included errors in the use of articles, prepositions, tenses, singular-plural errors, and omissions of be-verbs. Some examples of errors that appeared included "assist to you," "We are happy to inform...", and "the information."

Table 6. Examples of Grammatical Errors

Participants	Classes	Number of Errors	Examples of Errors
P12	A	2	"We happy to inform..."
P36	A	7	Article errors and mixed tenses
P18	B	6	"Assist to you"
P43	B	8	Be-verb omission and article misuse

Although grammatical errors were found in both groups, most of the errors were non-fatal and did not lead to communication breakdowns. This suggests that the quality of guest service emails is more influenced by the pragmatic and organizational aspects of the message than by grammatical accuracy alone.

Message Effectiveness Does Not Always Correlate with Politeness

The results showed that high levels of politeness did not always result in better communication effectiveness. Although Class A scored higher on formality and politeness,

there was no significant difference in effectiveness scores between the two groups. Content analysis revealed that some highly polite emails were still rated as less effective because they did not provide clear solutions, complete information, or adequate follow-up instructions. Conversely, some emails from Class B, which used a simpler structure, were rated as quite effective because they conveyed solutions directly and easily understood.

Table 7. Comparison of Politeness and Message Effectiveness

Participants	Classes	Politeness Scores	Effectiveness Scores
P31	A	5	2
P12	A	5	3
P23	B	4	4
P30	B	4	1

These findings suggest that effective service communication requires not only linguistic politeness but also clarity of information, good message organization, and the ability to provide relevant solutions to customers. Thus, the effectiveness of guest service emails depends on the balance between politeness strategies and the quality of information delivery.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the quality of hospitality students' guest service email communications is more influenced by pragmatic competence than by grammatical accuracy alone. This finding reinforces the view in applied pragmatics that the success of professional communication is determined not only by structural language skills but also by the ability to use language appropriately according to the social context and communication goals (Kasper et al., 1993). In the hospitality industry context, the ability to choose a professional register, use politeness strategies, and convey solutions effectively are important parts of service communication competence.

The findings regarding the differences in formality between Class A and Class B indicate that students with better pragmatic performance tend to be able to use professional register more consistently. The use of formal modals such as *would*, *could*, and *may*, as well as a more diplomatic business email structure, indicate a pragmatic awareness of the demands of professional communication in the service industry. This finding aligns with (Freytag, 2019) research, which states that professional business emails are generally characterized by the use of indirect strategies, mitigation, and a higher level of formality to maintain interpersonal relationships with customers. In the context of hospitality communication, professional register functions not only as a means of conveying information but also as a representation of service quality and institutional identity.

In addition, the results of the study showed that Class A students used politeness strategies more consistently than Class B. This finding supports Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, particularly the concept of negative politeness strategies, which are communication strategies aimed at maintaining customer comfort and face through the use of careful, non-pushy, and respectful language. The use of expressions such as "*We sincerely apologize for the inconvenience*" or "*We would be pleased to assist you*" indicates that students are not only conveying information but also trying to build positive interpersonal relationships with hotel guests.

This finding is also consistent with research by Purnomo and Widarwati (Purnomo & Widarwati, 2025b), which emphasized that mitigation strategies, apologies, and appreciative expressions are important elements in service communication in the tourism sector. In the context of guest service emails, politeness strategies function as rhetorical devices that help create a professional, empathetic, and customer-oriented impression. Thus, students' pragmatic abilities are not only related to linguistic understanding, but also to the ability to understand social and cultural expectations in international service communication.

This study also showed that the use of polite, native-like expressions was more common in Class A students' emails. Although the difference was not statistically significant, the pattern of professional expression use suggests differences in pragmatic quality between

the groups. Expressions such as "Should you need further assistance" or "Warm greetings from..." reflect the use of formulaic expressions commonly found in international professional hotel communication. This finding supports Blum-Kulka's (Blum-Kulka, 1987) view that more conventional and indirect forms of communication are generally perceived as more polite and professional in service communication.

From an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) perspective, the ability to use authentic professional expressions is a crucial component of mastering the occupational register. This suggests that learning English for Hospitality should not simply focus on general grammar but also provide exposure to authentic communication patterns used in the industry. In other words, the quality of service communication is greatly influenced by students' ability to internalize professional language practices commonly used in hospitality communication contexts.

One important finding of this study is that grammatical errors were not a major factor in differentiating email quality between groups. Although both classes exhibited a number of structural errors, such as misplaced articles, prepositions, and omitted be-verbs, most of these errors were non-fatal and did not hinder message comprehension. This finding supports the concept of interlanguage in second language acquisition (Selinker & Gass, 2008), which explains that language learners at the intermediate level generally still produce stable linguistic errors without disrupting overall communication effectiveness.

The results of this study also reinforce the findings of Buhaieva (Buhaieva, 2025) and (Oandasan, 2021), who stated that in modern professional communication, professionalism is perceived more through politeness, clarity of information, and effectiveness of message delivery than absolute grammatical accuracy. In the context of hotel services, customers tend to value polite, clear, and solution-oriented responses more than emails that are grammatically accurate but less empathetic or helpful.

Furthermore, this study shows that a high level of politeness does not always guarantee effective communication. Some very polite emails were still deemed ineffective because they did not provide clear solutions or failed to provide specific follow-up steps. These findings suggest that professional service communication requires a balance between interpersonal communication and informational clarity. In other words, politeness without clarity can reduce service effectiveness, while overly direct communication without interpersonal strategies can also degrade the quality of the customer experience.

These findings are relevant to (Swales, 1990b) genre analysis approach, which emphasizes the importance of rhetorical structure in professional communication. Ideally, guest service emails should not only contain polite expressions but also have clear message organization, such as problem acknowledgment, explanation, solution, and offer of additional assistance. The results of this study indicate that some students still have difficulty integrating these two aspects in a balanced manner.

Overall, this study makes an important contribution to the study of applied pragmatics and English for Hospitality, particularly in the context of EFL vocational education in Indonesia. Unlike previous studies that focused more on customer perceptions or professional practitioner communication, this study highlights the pragmatic abilities of students as prospective service industry workers. Furthermore, this study offers a methodological perspective through a combination of quantitative-comparative analysis and qualitative content analysis in evaluating the quality of professional email communication.

From a pedagogical perspective, the results of this study indicate that English for Hospitality instruction needs to place greater emphasis on developing pragmatic competencies, including the use of professional registers, politeness strategies, mitigation, and the rhetorical structure of service emails. Hospitality ESP curricula should not only focus on general grammar and vocabulary but also provide explicit training in authentic communication practices in the international service industry. This way, students can be better prepared to face the demands of professional communication in the global hospitality workplace.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that pragmatic competence plays a more important role than grammatical accuracy in determining the quality of hospitality students' guest service email communication. Students who effectively employed politeness strategies, professional register, mitigation techniques, and customer-oriented language produced emails that more closely reflected hospitality industry standards. The findings indicate that minor grammatical errors did not substantially reduce communication effectiveness; instead, success depended on the ability to communicate clearly, empathetically, and diplomatically while offering appropriate solutions. The study contributes to applied pragmatics and English for Hospitality by highlighting the importance of pragmatic competence in professional written communication within EFL vocational education. Pedagogically, the findings suggest that English for Hospitality courses should emphasize authentic email communication, politeness strategies, professional discourse, and customer-service practices rather than focusing solely on grammatical accuracy. However, the study was limited by its small sample, single institutional setting, and simulated writing tasks. Future research should involve larger, more diverse samples, authentic workplace communication, and longitudinal designs to examine the development of pragmatic competence over time.

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