Teaching Register to EFL Writers: Formality and Deference in Written Communication

by RICHARD SCHLIGHT

While teaching written communication to international business school students in Korea last year, I received the following email: *I am Judy.Why my grade so low???? i study hard. please help me professor!!!!!!!* I didn't despair because my course would soon cover email formatting, thoroughness and clarity, and common surface-level errors to avoid. Nonetheless, I decided to use the email as a learning opportunity and, having changed the sender's name, gave my students a few minutes of class time to rewrite it. In addition to following appropriate email conventions, they were expected to supply the real or contrived details required for a meaningful and coherent message.

Generally, the results were good. Many students managed to provide specific details about why they were writing the email. Some asked that they be permitted to retake the quiz that had led to the initial email. Students were also more careful with case and grammar than the original sender had been, and most supplied the requisite email components.

I found it more interesting, however, to analyze the range in tone. Several students noticed that the initial email had been too informal and came off as aggressive. Some overcompensated by writing excessively formal missives; one addressed the recipient as "Your Excellency"! A few included flatteries that were just plain obsequious (e.g., "All of the other professors here should learn from you"). A few students used imperatives like "Let me take the quiz again" or declaratives like "I want to take the quiz again." These constructions would have worked well in the L1, with an appropriate honorific attached, but seemed too blunt for English language communication.

The problem, of course, was an inability to write in a register that was appropriate to the communicative task and cultural context. Register is an amorphous construct, but for our purposes, it describes the balance between formality, deference, and the appropriateness of a writer's style to a given text. Finding the correct register for a text is a complex endeavor that includes, among other factors, sentence structure and word choice. But it also involves decisions about formality and whether to assume a deferential tone or to take a more authoritative stance.

One problem that quickly emerged when I introduced the topic of register was that students had difficulty distinguishing between formality and deference. One student asked, "Aren't they the same thing?" Her question made sense because, in many languages, deference is so closely linked to formality. For example, the Korean honorifics pronounced *yo*, *seyo*, and *imnida* illustrate a progression from everyday polite, but not deferential usage, to usage that is both very polite and very deferential. Deference in English, on the other hand, requires no system of honorific suffixes and can be expressed with informal and even impolite constructions. With this in mind, I designed a lesson and an assignment

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around formality and deference in American English with a focus on writing. What follows is a general outline that may, of course, be altered as you see fit.

Both formality and deference are easier to identify than to define, but it's a good idea to initially define *formality* as a rigid adherence to social conventions and *deference* as an attitude of submission displayed by one party to another. Before you move into the sphere of writing, it might help your students to discuss formality in clothing, ceremonies, speech, and other realms. Mention to your students that many manifestations of formality serve little or no purpose beyond following established custom. Provide examples such as the necktie and the phrase "ladies and gentlemen."

When you feel ready to narrow your discussion of formality to language, forms of address make a good place to begin. Ask your students to explain how, in their countries of origin, an employee would typically address his or her boss. How would a university student address a professor? Explain that, in the United States, the informal first name is often used but that the general assumption is that the person being addressed, be it employer, professor, or even employee or student, is in many cases entitled to determine how he or she is addressed. If students are curious, you can introduce a question such as, "How would you like to be addressed?" and a possible response: "Please call me Sally."

A good way to introduce deference is to explain that it functions within social hierarchies. Children typically show deference to their parents and to their elders in general. Students show deference to their teachers, employees show deference to their employers, and so on. As soon as your students understand this concept, however, it is important to introduce the nuances. Deference can be situational, and you may try asking your students to imagine situations in which deference is temporarily inverted (that is, when the person who is higher in the social hierarchy defers to a person who would, in usual circumstances, occupy a lower rank). I give the examples of a boss asking an employee to work all weekend and the professor who must apologize to a student for missing an appointment.

Economic relationships play a huge role in deference levels. A company president may show deference to a lower-level worker employed by that company's customer. Borrowers often show deference to lenders, and salespeople show deference to potential customers. Ask students to consider situations in which they may show deference when interacting with friends in their L1. In what situations does this arise? In what ways is deference shown? My own students provided the examples of asking for a loan from a friend and (jokingly, I hope) begging to copy a classmate's homework assignment. Tone of voice was cited as the most common way of showing deference in conversation.

The next activity is intended to activate schema and serve as a comprehension check. It should also get students thinking about the many ways in which levels of formality and deference are expressed through language.

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Show film clips and ask your students to rate the interactions in terms of formality and deference (high or low). If you'd like more than just spoken assurances that your students understand the concept, you might consider designing a simple graphic with an *x* and *y* axis on which learners could gauge characters' deference and formality levels, marking the spot. I find it useful to show clips in which there is a great disparity between the two characters. One scene from the 1964 film *Goldfinger* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DoQwKe0lggw), for example, depicts the villain addressing James Bond as "Mr. Bond" and using other formal language as he prepares to slice Mr. Bond with a laser beam. Ask your students whether the Goldfinger character's speech is high or low in deference and formality and, more importantly, what makes it so. Another clip you can play is from the 2010 movie *The Losers* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Ihxdc2RbIE). In this scene, a couple of commandos show informal deference while apologizing to each other.

At this stage, consolidate what you've covered and elicit from your students the various elements that constitute formality and deference. They should understand that formal language tends not to use casual or impolite vocabulary, that people address one another differently in formal speech, and that formal speech reflects verbal convention more than does everyday speech. Deference is more difficult to break down, but you can explain that expressions of gratitude and apology are often longer and less direct than they need to be from a strictly functional standpoint. Deference is common when a lower-status individual asks a higher-status individual for something. Your students should understand the difference between *may I* and *can I* (a construction like "May I leave work early?" is implicitly more deferential than "Can I go home now?"). They should likewise be familiar with constructions like "Would it be possible for me to leave work early today?" and "Is there any way you would be able to let me go early today?" Before moving on to the next segment, be sure that your students understand that standards of formality are not completely rigid and that they may encounter exceptions.

It's time now to narrow your discussion of formality and deference to written communication. Put students into groups and provide writing samples for discussion. I like to provide hypothetical scenarios and ask my students which of two texts, in a given context, functions better in terms of register. Here is the sort of scenario you might design:

> *Ted Smith and his family have just moved into a middle-class American suburb near the house of Jim Jones. Both men are 42 years old, and both work in the insurance business. Jim comes home one day to find that his expensive motorcycle is missing. He looks at the footage from his garage security camera and sees Ted's son breaking into the garage and sneaking out with the motorcycle. Jim considers telephoning the police but decides to first give Ted and his son the opportunity to return the motorcycle. Jim wants a record of the communication, so he finds Ted's email address and sends an email.*

Having read and understood the scenario, your students can now analyze the following excerpts from two emails Jim Jones might write. Students should discuss formality and deference levels, how they arrived at determining these levels, and which excerpt they think is more appropriate.

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… Mr. Smith, my security camera caught your son breaking into my garage and stealing my motorcycle. I will notify the police if the motorcycle is not returned immediately. …

… Mr. Smith, I know that raising a son nowadays can be a challenge. Unfortunately, it seems that yours took my motorcycle from my garage without permission. Would it be possible for you to return it to me? …

I'd like students to conclude, after considering the above examples, that a reasonable degree of formality is called for in this scenario, but that Jim Jones has a serious complaint to make and only the smallest amount of deference would be justified.

Before moving to the homework assignment, I'll provide a scenario for discussion from the business arena (depending on the size of your class, you could think about assigning students to smaller discussion groups). One person asks another to submit a tax form by a specified date. The two versions are as follows:

Dear Sir or Madam,

You are required to submit the H4 form by August 15. Failure to do so will result in legal action.

Sincerely yours,

Jack Straw

Hi Shannon,

I'm so sorry to bother you again, but I must remind you that your H4 form is due on August 15. I would hate to see you facing any kind of penalty for such a small matter.

Thanks,

Jack

After rating deference and formality in each of these messages, students can speculate about the nature of the relationships between the sender and recipient. You might want to use these examples to explain that ultimatums can be direct or tacit, informal or formal, and even deferential when constructed to be so. In the second tax-form example, point out the empathetic language and more indirect threat of penalty.

If you feel, at this point, that your students are ready to begin writing, then move on to explaining the assignment. If not, you can provide additional scenarios and ask them to practice writing short, appropriate messages. Delicate scenarios in which one party needs to complain work well. Consider an individual who wants her neighbor to do something about a relentlessly barking dog or a restaurant patron who wants his hospital bills reimbursed after suffering food poisoning.

The assignment is intended to give students an opportunity to exercise what they learned in the register segment and to help teachers assess the extent to which students understand and can apply the concepts covered. I change the assignment from semester to semester to discourage plagiarism, but the basic idea is that students are given a scenario card and asked to write an email in response to the hypothetical situation in which I have placed them. A sample scenario card for less advanced students is as follows:

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> *Yesterday, you received the new smartphone that you had ordered over the Internet. The make and model of your phone is Xanadu X35. You ordered the phone from Rainforest Electronics. You had ordered the blue version of the phone but received a pink model. More seriously, the phone's battery lasts for only an hour or so before requiring recharging. Write a complaint email to Rainforest Electronics asking them how they want to solve this problem.*

A scenario card for more-advanced students is as follows:

> *You are a successful architect. You have been approached by representatives of billionaire Mildred Moneybags. Ms. Moneybags wants you to design and build a castle on her recently acquired land in Tuscany. The problem is that Ms. Moneybags is notorious as an ill-tempered and dishonest client. Not only this, but you don't like her taste in architecture. Your task is to decline the job in such a way as to protect Ms. Moneybags' ego while leaving open the possibility that referrals to projects from her wealthy friends might be forthcoming. You are expected to come up with creative solutions, to tactfully decline the offer, and to draft complete and appropriate emails to be sent to your teacher's inbox as though he or she were Mildred Moneybags.*

Your grading rubric can contain many criteria. My rubrics allocate points for inclusion of the necessary components (e.g., subject line, pleasantry, salutation), level of deference, level of formality, clarity, creative solution, format, and mechanical soundness. The above exercise is intended for relatively advanced English writers, so be sure that your students know how to structure a simple and complete email before introducing them to deference and formality.

I hope that this lesson works for you and your students.

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