

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF E-MAIL LITERACY: FROM WRITING TO PEERS TO WRITING TO AUTHORITY FIGURES

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### ABSTRACT

Though e-mail has become a common interpersonal communication medium, it does not mean that this medium is used without difficulty. While people can write e-mails to peers in any manner they like, writing e-mails to authority figures requires higher pragmatic competence and critical language awareness of how discourse shapes and reflects power asymmetry in an institutional context. For L2 learners, the challenge of composing this type of e-mail can be greater due not only to their limited linguistic ability but also their unfamiliarity with the target culture's norms and values. To provide a deeper understanding of how an L2 learner develops e-mail literacy in the target language environment, this paper presents a longitudinal case study of a Taiwanese graduate student's e-mail practice in English during her studies at a U.S. university for two and a half years. Using a critical discourse analysis approach, the study reveals the complexity of an L2 learner's evolving e-mail practice and struggle for appropriateness, particularly in her e-mail communication with professors. Her development of e-mail literacy is discussed in relation to her evolving understanding of the e-mail medium, changing performance of student identity, increasing knowledge of student-professor interaction and realization of culture-specific politeness.

### INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology along with the widespread use of the Internet has rapidly promoted e-mail as a common interpersonal communication medium. With its high transmission speed and less intrusive nature, e-mail has been widely used for both personal communication and institutional communication, particularly in academic and business institutions (Baron, 2000; Crystal, 2001). The wide use of the e-mail medium, however, does not necessarily mean that it is used without difficulty. While people can write e-mails to peers in any manner they like, research has shown that people in the workplace tend to feel uneasy writing e-mails to those perceived as higher in status when initiating communication, suggesting new ideas, making requests, and expressing disagreement or criticism (Baron, 1998, 2000; Kling, 1996; Murray, 1988, 1995). They usually need to spend more time planning and composing such status-unequal e-mails in which various face-threatening acts are involved.

An important reason for the challenge of using this medium, particularly for status-unequal communication, is that e-mail, unlike face-to-face talk, lacks paralinguistic cues such as vocal inflection, gestures, facial expressions, and a shared mental and physical context (Murray, 1995). These paralinguistic cues usually constitute metamessages that convey social meaning (e.g., relationships between and attitudes toward each other) and serve as social lubricants. Without these paralinguistic cues, the metamessages sent via e-mail are revealed solely by how the written words are chosen, expressed, and organized. Wording and message structuring, thus, become more crucial in e-mail communication than in face-to-face talk.

However, there seem to be no fixed, standard e-mail writing rules for users to observe, especially since e-mail is a hybrid discourse inheriting features of both written and spoken language. On one hand, e-mail users may feel liberated from the restriction of traditional letter writing rules; on the other, they may

struggle to produce an appropriate e-mail to meet the recipient's standards. Though the appropriateness of language use in e-mail may differ from person to person, it is generally determined by those who have more power, like any other communication medium. As Fairclough (1995) points out, "appropriateness is an 'ideological' category, which is linked to particular partisan positions within a politics of language" (p. 234). That is, appropriateness is ideologically situated in different sociocultural contexts and those who have less power need to observe standards of a dominant sociocultural group. This critical perspective on language use implies that e-mail users do not always have freedom in writing when they are in a position of lower power; instead, they have to follow the standards of appropriateness set by those who are on the dominant side in order to communicate successfully.

For nonnative speakers, writing status-unequal e-mails can pose an even greater challenge because they need to have sophisticated pragmatic competence in the second language (L2) and critical language awareness of how discourse shapes and is shaped by power relations, identity, and ideologies established in the target culture. Due to their limited linguistic ability and unfamiliarity with the norms and values of the target culture, confusions or problems can occur in their L2 communication, including e-mail communication. In Shetzer and Warschauer's (2000) discussion of electronic literacy, they have placed strong emphasis on the importance of L2 learners' pragmatic competence for computer-mediated communication, such as the ability to perform speech acts and use appropriate communication strategies in the online environment, yet they did not address how L2 learners develop such pragmatic competence for producing electronic discourse. The development of pragmatic competence and critical language awareness in using the e-mail medium, which I would like to term as "e-mail literacy", is a pressing issue in the digital era and needs to receive greater attention in second language research and education.

To gain a deeper understanding of how an L2 learner develops e-mail literacy, I conducted a longitudinal case study of a Taiwanese graduate student's e-mail practice in English during her studies at a U.S. university for two and a half years. This case study particularly focused on a type of status-unequal e-mail practice in the academic context: the student's e-mail communication with professors. Using a critical discourse analysis approach (Fairclough, 1995), this study aimed to uncover the complexity of an L2 learner's developing e-mail practice and to explore sociocognitive and sociopsychological factors affecting her language use via this medium in relation to power relations, identity construction, and culture-specific ideologies.

## **STUDIES ON L2 LEARNERS' E-MAIL PRACTICE – A PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVE**

Studies on L2 learners' e-mail practice have mostly focused on how e-mail exchange, either between L2 learners and native speakers or between L2 learners of diverse linguistic backgrounds, facilitates second language learning and encourages collaborative writing (e.g., Cummins & Sayers, 1995; Lapp, 2000; Li, 2000; Liaw, 1998; Pennington, 1996; Singhal, 1998). A number of studies compared how L2 learners' e-mail discourse differed from L2 oral discourse (Chapman, 1997; Warschauer, 1996) or differed from L2 offline written texts (Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth, 2001). However, not many studies investigated how L2 learners use e-mail from a pragmatic perspective, as a day-to-day communication medium to carry out a variety of social functions.

Concerning the few studies on L2 learners' e-mail practice, I would like to focus on a common type of e-mail practice that most L2 learners who study in higher educational institutions need to do – e-mail communication with professors. This type of e-mail practice has received increasing attention from researchers and educators because they found that the e-mails that L2 learners write often contain some inappropriate language use and may even produce a negative impact on their studies. Probably the earliest study on L2 learners' e-mail communication with professors was conducted by Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig (1996). They compared how international graduate students and U.S. graduate students made requests to professors via e-mail and reported four important findings: (a) international students used fewer mitigating forms in their request e-mails that produced a negative impact; (b) they used institutional

explanations less frequently for their requests; (c) they mentioned their personal needs and time frames more often for their requests; and (d) they acknowledged imposition on the faculty members less often than U.S. students. The authors concluded that the L2 students' use of these discourse forms and strategies reflected an overestimation on the part of the student of the faculty member's level of obligation to comply with their requests and that they seemed not to recognize the different status that the student and the professor assumed in the academic context. This study points out crucial pragmatic problems in L2 students' request e-mails sent to professors, yet it does not explain why they used these socioculturally inappropriate discourse strategies.

Subsequent studies on student-to-professor e-mail communication have similar findings. Biesenbach-Lucas and Weasenforth (2000) found that L2 students used fewer modal constructions and hedged expressions in their e-mails than did U.S. students; instead, their e-mails often contained inappropriate pleading for help from the professor. In addition, L2 students employed negotiation moves less frequently and solicited professor responses less explicitly, which indicated that they lacked effective negotiation skills, which might hinder them from achieving their communicative goals. Examining the same e-mail data, Biesenbach-Lucas (2005) further pointed out that L2 students demonstrated less initiative and weaker capability in using e-mail to interact with professors than did American students, particularly in providing progress reports, negotiating project topics, requesting professor responses, and offering potential response points for the professor. Both studies attributed the deviation of L2 students' language use in e-mail to their adoption of an inappropriate cultural model that might be acceptable within their native cultural experiences but not acceptable within the U.S. academic culture. Furthermore, Biesenbach-Lucas (2005) speculated that some L2 students' limited experience with the e-mail medium in their home countries might also make their e-mail use ineffective or problematic. Hence, she suggests that L2 students need to learn appropriate ways of both interacting with professors and using the medium.

Bloch (2002) examined how L2 students used e-mail initiatively to interact with their instructor and found that they were generally able to employ a variety of rhetorical strategies depending on context. Yet some of the rhetorical strategies that L2 students used for making requests and excuses were not institutionally appropriate because the degree of power in their e-mails was not properly distributed, and the reasons that they provided for their purposes were not persuasive, which reflected a lack of respect for or resistance to the instructor's authority. He concluded that writing a successful e-mail requires more than simple fluency in the target language; rather, it requires the ability to express oneself using a variety of linguistic forms and rhetorical strategies, and most importantly, to know when it is appropriate to use them.

With a focus on Chinese-speaking students' e-mail interaction with U.S. professors, both Chang and Hsu (1998) and Chen (2001) found that the request strategies that Chinese students used in e-mails differed from what U.S. students did. U.S. students tended to structure their request e-mails in a direct sequence placing the request act at the beginning of the message, but their linguistic forms of the request act were more indirect involving more lexico-syntactic mitigating forms. In contrast, Chinese students tended to structure their request e-mails in an indirect sequence using many pre-request supportive moves and placing the request act at the end, while their linguistic forms of the request act were more direct with fewer lexico-syntactic modifications. These findings are consistent with studies on Chinese speakers' oral and written requests (Kirkpatrick, 1991, 1993; Nash, 1983; Zhang, 1995a, 1995b), which indicates that Chinese speaking students probably transfer the request strategies that they normally use in Chinese to the English request e-mails written to professors.

Such an indirect Chinese rhetorical style is also evidenced in Warschauer's case study of academic e-mail discourse (1999, chap. 3). He found that the e-mail messages that a Chinese graduate student, Zhong, wrote to his Swedish colleague were too general and indirect in purpose, thus resulting in confusion and misunderstanding. Another problem in Zhong's e-mails is that he presented himself not as an experienced professional writing for publication but rather as an English student writing for his teacher, which reflected an inappropriate academic identity and produced an unfavorable image of himself. Zhong's case

highlights the challenge of using the e-mail medium for intercultural communication and suggests that to write an appropriate e-mail one needs to be aware of how language is used in relation to sociocultural norms and identity construction.

The above studies have demonstrated a variety of L2 learners' pragmatic problems occurring in their e-mail practice, particularly in student-to-professor e-mail communication. The pragmatic problems consist of not only the pragmalinguistic type such as modal use, hedged expression, and information sequencing, but also the sociopragmatic type such as status maintenance, politeness realization, and identity construction. These studies all point out the importance of developing pragmatic competence for L2 learners to carry out successful e-mail communication. However, there are several limitations in these studies. First, they are descriptive studies without adopting a critical approach. Although they examined L2 learners' e-mail practice from a sociocultural perspective, they seemed to focus on the deviations or problems in L2 learners' language use but ignore how L2 learners' language use is an agentic choice made from multiple cultural and discourse resources available to them. Second, most of these studies are cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, which is likely to present L2 learners' language use in a preset, static manner rather than as a dynamic, evolving process. Third, most of these studies provide analyses for L2 learners' e-mail practice from the researcher's perspective, not including the participants' viewpoint. This etic view may not precisely reflect how the participants use e-mail and the second language in actual situations. More research in L2 learners' e-mail practice needs to be conducted with an emic and a critical approach, so that we can obtain deeper insight into the complex process of their development.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **The Participant**

The participant, Ling (a pseudonym), was a Taiwanese graduate student who majored in education in her master's studies and then transferred to linguistics for her Ph.D. studies at a U.S. university. Ling had received her education from elementary school to college in Taiwan and had never had any work experience before studying in the US. Ling was purposefully chosen from a pool of 31 Taiwanese graduate students participating in a pilot study on student-to-professor request e-mails (Chen, 2000) for two reasons. First, Ling's language use in e-mail was identified as distinctive because her e-mails normally contained a wide variety of discourse strategies. Second, she used e-mail to communicate in English more frequently and more diversely compared to the other Taiwanese graduate students. Moreover, she had a year of e-mail exchange experience with international pen-pals when she was a college student in Taiwan. This early pen-pal e-mailing experience made her more interested in using this medium to communicate with others. Ling's e-mail practice, thus, constituted an information-rich case for the present study.

### **Data Collection**

The data consisted of two kinds: (a) 266 e-mails that Ling wrote during her graduate studies in the US over two and a half years (from August, 1999 to December, 2001), including 168 e-mails sent to friends/classmates and 98 sent to professors; and (b) three face-to-face in-depth interviews conducted at the beginning, middle, and end of the data collection process, along with several online interviews via e-mail and online chat when immediate clarification or elaboration was needed. These two kinds of data sources were used for triangulation not only to establish validity but also to gain a more holistic understanding of the case.

The collected e-mails were written in English and volunteered by Ling. She pre-selected the e-mails that she wished to let me use for the study. The e-mail data, though not representing all kinds of her e-mail practice, were the ones that she considered appropriate and important to record. These self-selected e-

mails reflected Ling's view of her e-mail writing in the L2 and guided me into her e-mail practice as reconstructed by herself.

### **Data Analysis**

The analysis of the e-mail and interview data was an ongoing and iterative process. The two types of e-mail data (i.e., Ling's e-mails sent to peers and professors) were first sorted chronologically and coded according to communicative purpose. The analysis of e-mail messages consisted of two parts. The first part examined Ling's general e-mail discourse features, including discourse style, message length, and message structure. The second part focused on her use of request strategies since 83% of her e-mails sent to professors involved requesting purposes, such as requesting information, advice, assistance, permission, and appointments. The request strategies were analyzed in terms of request acts and supportive moves used in the request e-mails. All the discourse features and request strategies were then compared between these two e-mail types and within each type from a historical perspective to see if any changes occurred over time. I gave greater attention to Ling's language use in the e-mails sent to professors and chose the time she started her doctoral studies (i.e., she had studied in the US for one and a half years) as a dividing point for comparison since changes were more noticeable after that point.

Guided by Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional framework of critical discourse analysis – analysis of text (i.e., linguistic features in e-mails), discourse practice (i.e., process of e-mail writing), and sociocultural practice (i.e., e-mail use in situational, institutional, and wider societal or cultural contexts), the study analyzed not only Ling's e-mail messages but also her e-mail discourse practice through the interview data, thus providing insights into her use of discourse features and request strategies from her own perspective. Further, Ling's e-mail practice was analyzed and explained from sociocultural perspectives, focusing on the issues of identity performance, power relations, and culture-specific ideologies, particularly regarding student-professor interaction and politeness realization.

### **Research Questions**

In order to find out how a second language learner develops e-mail literacy in a target language environment with a particular focus on asymmetrical communication, the study examined Ling's e-mail practice in communicating with peers and professors respectively and addressed the three overarching research questions:

1. Did Ling's language use, including general e-mail discourse features and request strategies, differ between the e-mails sent to peers and the e-mails sent to professors? Did her use of these discourse forms and strategies change over time in her e-mail practice?
2. From Ling's perspective, what made her change or remain unchanged in her language use in e-mail communication?
3. How can change or resistance to change in her e-mail practice be explained from sociocultural perspectives?

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **General E-mail Discourse Features**

Ling started to use e-mail in English as a day-to-day communication medium after coming to the US for her graduate studies. Though she had used e-mail for penpal exchanges in Taiwan, it was a new experience for her to use this medium to carry out a variety of communicative purposes in the target language environment, particularly in interacting with authority figures – professors. Due to having had no such prior experience, she often experimented with new ways in her language use in this status-unequal e-mail communication. [Table 1](#) shows a comparison of Ling's language use in terms of style,

length, and structure in her e-mails sent to peers and the one sent to professors. It also shows several stylistic changes that Ling made after she started her doctoral studies.

Table 1. General Discourse Features of Ling's E-mails

	<b>E-mails sent to Peers</b>	<b>E-mails sent to Professors</b>	
		During Ling's master's studies	During Ling's doctoral studies
Discourse style	Informal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• conversational style</li> <li>• simplified/reduced forms</li> <li>• symbolization</li> <li>• more surface errors</li> </ul>	Formal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• epistolary style</li> <li>• few simplified/reduced forms</li> <li>• few symbols (only dots "... " showing hesitation)</li> <li>• few surface errors</li> </ul>	Formal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• conversational style to those who she was more familiar with, particularly in the openings and closings</li> <li>• few simplified/reduced forms</li> <li>• no symbols</li> <li>• few surface errors</li> </ul>
Message length	Usually long, like journal entries	Usually long, including many personal details	Shorter than before with reduced personal details
Message structure	Mostly inductive	Mostly inductive	Mostly inductive

### Discourse Style

Ling's discourse style in the two types of e-mails differed to a considerable degree. She employed an informal, conversational style with many simplified or reduced forms in the e-mails sent to peers, such as opening greetings ("Hi" or "Hey"), closings ("talk to you later" or "see ya"), interjections ("yeah," "oh" and "Wow"), conversational markers ("well," "ok" and "you know"), reduced forms ("wanna" and "gonna"), phonetic spellings ("u" for "you" and "thru" for "through"), abbreviations ("sth" for "something" and "pic" for "picture"), acronyms ("asap" and "btw"), contractions ("I'll" and "can't"), subject "I" deletion ("Just wanna ask you"), and verb "be" or modal deletion in questions ("Everything ok?" and "Done your paper?"). In addition, she used paralinguistic symbols (upper case "PLEASE," multiple vowels "sooooo," multiple punctuation marks "???", "!!!," dots "...") and emoticons (\*^\_ ^\*) to further indicate her feelings and attitudes.

Ling noted that she used such an informal style for two reasons. First, from the second language perspective, this style helped her to express herself in English more easily and fluently, for she did not need to spend much time pondering what words and forms to use. Second, from the interpersonal perspective, this style helped her to create a sense of group belonging, for her friends all wrote e-mails in this style. As she remarked, "We like to use this way to write e-mails to each other. It makes me feel we're very close and belong to the same group." Her choice of such an informal style, therefore, functioned as an in-group identity marker and carried a strategic meaning to enhance solidarity with her friends.

In contrast, these conversational, simplified forms along with symbolizations were rarely found in Ling's early e-mails sent to professors. Instead, she used a relatively formal style with epistolary conventions for the openings with formal address terms ("Dear Professor Smith") and closings ("Sincerely" or "Best regards") to show deference to her professors. Moreover, she also made fewer typos and fewer grammatical mistakes in this type of e-mail than in her personal ones. These stylistic differences between the two e-mail types indicate her language ability to use different degrees of formality in communicating

with peers and higher-ups. Ling was also aware that her language use needed to reflect the asymmetrical power relations, as she noted, "We surely need to use more formal, respectful language when writing e-mails to professors because they have power over us. We have to show respect to them and make a good impression on them too."

As Ling had institutional e-mailing experience, she made a few changes in style in her later e-mails sent to professors. She changed her use of epistolary openings and closings to conversational greetings ("Hi") and leave-takings ("See you next week" or "Have a nice weekend") and added some small talk ("How are you?" or "I'm sorry to know you're sick. Hope you feel better now") in the e-mails sent to the professors whom she had contacted before. This change reveals that she no longer regarded using epistolary conventions as a must for institutional e-mails; moreover, she learned to use conversational language to signal solidarity with a few professors she was more familiar with. However, Ling also pointed out that she adopted this style in her e-mails only when writing to the professors who had used this style in their e-mails to her. If the professors had not used this style, she did not. Her use of e-mail style, therefore, was not simply a personal choice but mainly depended on the way those authority figures wrote e-mails to her. This indicates that she chose her e-mail style carefully to maintain both power structure and the social distance determined by her professors.

### Message Length

Ling's e-mails sent to peers were usually lengthy since most of them were like personal journal entries detailing her own feelings, thoughts, or experiences. This penchant for lengthiness seemed to be carried over to her early institutional e-mails sent to professors, in which she gave a lengthy narrative involving superfluous personal details in addition to her institution-related purposes; moreover, many of the details seemed unnecessary in terms of her purpose (see the e-mail example in the [Appendix](#)). This suggests that she was not aware of the importance of being concise in institutional e-mail practice.

From Ling's perspective, providing more personal details allowed professors to better understand her situations, particularly because she was a new student at that time; thus, lengthiness functioned as a strategy for her to increase the likelihood of getting help from them. In addition, she pointed out that giving such details could increase "a sense of personal touch" and help to state her purpose in an "indirect" manner because she could put her purpose after those lengthy details.

In fact, Ling had long deemed short e-mails impolite despite the fact that most of the institutional e-mails she received were short. She showed me an e-mail that her advisor wrote to her at the beginning of her studies: there were only two sentences with no opening greeting or closing and no address term or signature either.

The courses you have signed up for seem fine, if they are ones that interest you. The program allows you considerable flexibility to meet the degree requirements.

She reported that many of the e-mails that she received from professors were like this one and she thought that these e-mails were "cold, direct, and impersonal." This negative view on the brevity of e-mail messages strengthened her preference for lengthiness.

The brief, task-oriented e-mails that her professors sent to her, however, still had a slow, gradual influence on her e-mail practice. A change happened more noticeably after she had about two years of institutional e-mail practice. Her e-mails became shorter but still contained opening greetings, closings, and other politeness expressions. What she shortened was the reasons, explanations, or personal details that she provided for her purpose.

A number of reasons can account for Ling's change in e-mail message length. First, she learned through her emailing experience that institutional e-mails were usually used to transfer business-oriented

information but seldom to convey personal feelings or thoughts. Second, she found that sending brief e-mails to professors was to show consideration for their time, as she remarked, "Professors are very busy, so it's better to let them quickly grasp my points and save their time in reading my e-mails." She gradually recognized "time" as a precious commodity in the institutional context and learned to show respect for her professors' time. Third, being a doctoral student, she felt a need to have more offline interaction with her professors to develop an apprenticeship relationship, which she noticed that many doctoral students had established. She then chose face-to-face interaction with professors more frequently and used e-mail mostly as an appointment-making tool and a medium to exchange simple information. Fourth, this change was also due to her improved oral English language skills. She became more comfortable and competent in speaking English to professors compared to when she had been a master's student; thus, she did not need to rely on e-mail so heavily as before to convey all the details.

It is of note that Ling's change in e-mail message length was not just a change in the form of e-mail discourse, but more significantly, a change in the function of using this medium. Her change did not happen quickly but required time and gradual socialization into institutional e-mail culture, resulting from a complex interplay of her evolving understanding of institutional e-mail practice, different notions of politeness, the change in student identity and relations with professors, and her development of oral language skills in English.

### **Message Structure**

Ling tended to use an inductive, or story-telling, approach to structure her messages in all her e-mails. This inductive structure was particularly evident in her request e-mails. She usually started a message with a self-identification (e.g., "This is Ling. I'm in your xxx class.") followed by an abstract or pre-request without giving a specific purpose (e.g., "I need help from you" or "I have some questions I need to ask you"). Then she provided lengthy personal details or contextual information explaining why she needed to make the request, and finally she placed her request act or purpose statement (e.g., "I want to ask you to write a recommendation for me") at the end of the message (see the [Appendix](#)). This inductive structure was an important discourse feature that remained unchanged in her long-term e-mail communication with both peers and professors.

From Ling's perspective, she chose this inductive structure intentionally for the sake of indirectness. She explained, "I'm an indirect person, and I don't feel comfortable saying my purpose right at the beginning. I like to explain my reasons first and then I feel ok to ask them to do things for me." With such a strong sense of "indirect self," she usually chose a "reason + request" sequence and used some other moves to gradually steer her request while demonstrating her indirectness. Moreover, she also thought this sequence beneficial to her e-mail interlocutors as it allowed them to be prepared for the ensuing request but not to get a request abruptly, which she considered a way to show politeness as well.

Such an inductive approach, however, is likely to be viewed as an ineffective discourse structure by those working in an institutional context where e-mails are often read quickly. As Crystal (2001) notes, "an e-mail writer should assume that information located at the end of the message might never be seen, if the reader decided not to scroll down any further" (p. 109). Thus, it is probably more effective to structure an e-mail message in a deductive approach; that is, to place the most important information or the purpose at the beginning, as many e-mail writing books (e.g., Booher, 2001; Flynn & Flynn, 2003) recommend. As a novice e-mail user, Ling did not seem to realize the importance of using this approach to compose e-mails, particularly long e-mails.

Ling's continued use of the inductive approach to structure her e-mails is probably not just an idiosyncratic practice but a common cultural practice for Chinese native speakers in making requests. Studies on Chinese speakers' (L1) oral requests (Zhang, 1995b) and business request letters (Kirkpatrick, 1991, 1993), as well as studies on Chinese English learners' (L2) oral requests (Scollon & Scollon, 1995), business request letters (Perotti & Bridges, 1993), and request e-mails in English (Chang & Hsu, 1998;



Chen, 2000, 2001), have evidenced that Chinese speakers tend to employ this inductive structure to demonstrate indirectness and politeness through a series of preceding supportive moves and a delayed purpose statement. In Ling's case, her request e-mails reflected the imprint of her native cultural practice. This influence of the L1 cultural conventions as well as her emphasis on being an "indirect self" strengthened her resistance to the change from her preferred discourse approach to the one that was used in the target culture.

### Request Strategies in E-mail Practice

#### *Request Acts: Want Statements versus Query Preparatory*

Two types of request strategies at the lexico-syntactic level were identified in Ling's request e-mails: Want Statements and Query Preparatory (terms in Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989). Want Statements indicates the speaker's desire that the hearer carry out the act (e.g., I want/need/hope you...); Query Preparatory contains reference to preparatory conditions for the feasibility of the request, such as ability, willingness, and possibility (e.g., Can/Could/Would you...). The latter is generally considered more indirect, and thus more polite, than the former.

Table 2. Ling's Use of Request Acts in her E-mails

	E-mails sent to Peers	E-mails sent to Professors	
		During Ling's master's studies	During Ling's doctoral studies
Language Use for Request Acts	Mostly Query Preparatory (simpler forms)  Examples: a) <i>Can you</i> cancel my order please? b) <i>Can you</i> tell me what the professor did in today's class?	Mostly Want Statements (unmitigated forms)  Examples: c) (Pre-request): I <i>need</i> your suggestion to tell me what I should do. (Request act): I <i>really hope</i> you can give me a chance to... d) (Pre-request): I <i>want</i> to ask you some questions and <i>need</i> help from you. (Request act): I <i>really need</i> your help to give me some information about...	Mostly Query Preparatory (more complicated forms)  Examples: g) <i>I'm wondering if</i> you could give me some suggestions about choosing courses. h) <i>Could you please be so kind</i> to tell me...? i) <i>Would you mind</i> sending me the reading list?
		Some Query Preparatory (simpler forms)  Examples: e) <i>Could you please</i> tell me again about the assignment? f) <i>Can I</i> revise my paper this way?	Some Want Statements (mitigated forms)  Examples: j) I <i>may</i> need to talk to you about .... k) <i>If possible</i> , I'd like to talk about more details with you during your office hour.

As shown in Table 2, Ling used Want Statements more often than Query Preparatory in her e-mails sent to professors during her master's studies; moreover, she often put an intensifier "really" before the verb

"need" or "hope" and followed by the word "help" in both pre-requests and request acts to increase the illocutionary force (examples c-d). In contrast, in the e-mails that Ling wrote to professors during her doctoral studies, she used fewer Want Statements but more Query Preparatory. In the few cases where Want Statements were used, she mitigated these forms by using a modal auxiliary "may," a more indirect form "I'd like," and a hedge "if possible" (examples j-k). In addition, her Query Preparatory forms became more complicated by adding varied lexico-syntactic modifications (e.g., "Would you mind...", "I'm wondering if you could...", "Could you please be so kind to...") (examples g-i). Judging from Ling's use of request acts in her e-mails, we can conclude that her pragmalinguistic competence had increased over time.

One thing worth noting is that, in her early e-mail practice, Ling chose Want Statements, a more direct strategy, in making requests to professors while using Query Preparatory, a more indirect strategy, in making requests to her friends. Ling explained her choice between these two forms:

I used this form [i.e. Want Statements] to make requests to professors because I wanted to emphasize their help was very important to me. I think this way can let professors give more attention to my requests, so they would help me and reply to me more quickly ... I didn't use 'can you' or 'could you' because everyone uses it and this form doesn't make the request sound important or urgent. I don't think this form can draw their attention to my request.

Her explanation indicates that she used Want Statements as a strategy to increase the importance of her requests and solicit quicker response from professors, whereas she thought that the use of Query Preparatory could not achieve this goal since this form was too common. This explains why she chose Want Statements for more serious or important requests and Query Preparatory for minor requests in her early e-mails sent to professors (Table 2, examples e-f). She did not seem to be aware of the politeness or indirectness level associated with these two request forms.

Using Want Statement to convey a help-needed tone might help her to gain some attention from professors, yet this strategic choice is likely to cause two pragmatic problems from the target culture's perspective. First, her frequent use of Want Statements along with the word "help" is likely to project a negative image as a needy, helpless student, which is quite the opposite from the attitudes such as independence and confidence that a graduate student is expected to demonstrate in U.S. academic culture. Studies on L2 students' e-mail requests to professors (Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth, 2000; Chang & Hsu, 1998; Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1996) and face-to-face talk (Gee, 2002) have also found that many L2 students made requests with this tone. Gee (2002) particularly notes that the word "help" indicates a situated meaning of "charitable assistance" and the word "need" implies the student's neediness and inadequate ability, which projects the student as "a needy, problem-plagued suppliant" (p. 168). He suggests that students ask for "professional guidance" and "supplemented aid" from professors while showing their competence to do things well at a promising level (p. 169). If Gee's view represents most of the U.S. faculty's views, then Ling's and many other L2 students' requests with a strong help-needed tone indicate that they had not acquired this "hidden rule" when they entered the new institutional culture and thus a mismatched expectation of how students should act was realized.

The second problem is that her use of unmitigated Want Statements suggested a coercive tone, thus failing to show status-appropriate politeness in student-professor communication. She stated requests as her own wants or needs but did not give options to professors, which seemed to elevate her student rights. Using this direct, speaker-oriented request strategy could put her out of status in this asymmetrical communication, for she did not observe the principles of deference politeness (or "negative politeness," Brown & Levinson, 1987) – do not assume compliance on the part of the addressee and do not coerce the addressee – that are expected in Western societies especially when interacting with people in a superior position.

From a Chinese cultural perspective, however, using Want Statements in making requests to higher-ups does not necessarily indicate impoliteness. In Zhang's study (1995a) of strategies in Chinese requesting, he found that Chinese native speakers did not find Want Statements and Query Preparatory used in the Chinese language different in terms of indirectness or politeness. Instead, the level of indirectness or politeness was found to be associated with the type and the number of supportive moves employed before the request act. Therefore, this L1 pragmatic knowledge, politeness realized through external supportive moves (discussed in the next section) rather than internal lexico-syntactic forms of a request act, was likely to be transferred to Ling's L2 use, especially when she had not yet become familiarized with the target norms.

After Ling became a doctoral student and had studied in the US for one and a half years, her e-mails sent to professors contained fewer Want Statements but more Query Preparatory forms in her request acts. This change can be explained by two main reasons: implicit learning through interaction with native speakers and a change in student identity. Ling reported that from her constant oral and e-mail interaction with native speakers she noticed that Query Preparatory request forms were mostly used and "the bigger a request is, the more complicated the form is." She also learned to use some new lexico-syntactic forms to further mitigate her request acts and make them sound more polite. For example, she pointed out that the request form "Could you please be so kind (as) to...?", which she had not known before, was learned from the request e-mails that her U.S. friends wrote to her. In addition, her new identity as a doctoral student also affected her choice of request strategies. As she said, "I'm a Ph.D. student now and I need to show myself as a more capable and independent person, so I don't want to sound so help-needed." Therefore, she reduced the use of Want Statements and chose more appropriate, polite linguistic forms to display her desired identity.

### ***Supportive Moves for Requests***

An oral or written request normally contains a request act and a few supportive moves given either before or after the request act. Supportive moves are external modifications used to aggravate or mitigate the request force. Aggravating supportive moves, such as giving reasons and emphasizing urgency, are employed to enhance the persuasiveness of complying with the request act, while mitigating moves, such as making apologies, giving options, and indicating reluctance to impinge are used to reduce the imposition of the request act and to demonstrate politeness (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). If the supportive moves are not employed appropriately, the request may not be successfully complied with or may produce a negative impact on the requester.

Table 3 lists the types of supportive moves that Ling employed in her request e-mails sent to peers and professors. Her use of supportive moves differed in quality between the two e-mail types and varied with time as well. Also, we can see that most of the supportive moves used in her e-mails occurred before her request acts. With this inductive sequencing she demonstrated her indirectness, as discussed earlier.

Among various types of supportive moves, giving reasons is normally an obligatory one in making requests, and the success of a request will be affected by the persuasiveness of the given reasons. In Ling's early request e-mails sent to professors, the reasons that she gave for her request acts were not always effective. Some of the reasons were superfluous and not relevant (see the [Appendix](#)), some revealed a weakness that put her at a disadvantage ([example 1](#)), and some tended to overestimate her right as a student to make requests of professors ([example 2](#)).

Table 3. Ling's Use of Supportive Moves in Request E-mails

		E-mails sent to Peers	E-mails sent to Professors	
			During Ling's master's studies	During Ling's doctoral studies
Aggravating Supportive Moves		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>giving personal detailed reasons (pre)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>giving student-oriented reasons and personal details (pre)</li> <li>emphasizing urgency or seriousness (pre)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>giving institutionally-oriented reasons (pre)</li> <li>showing ability or initiative (pre or post)</li> </ul>
Mitigating Supportive Moves	Positive Politeness (solidarity)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>small talk (pre)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>small talk (pre) (only to the professors she was familiar with)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>small talk (pre) (only to the professors she was familiar with)</li> </ul>
	Negative Politeness (deference)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>apologizing (pre)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>apologizing (pre or post)</li> <li>self-humbling (pre)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>apologizing (pre)</li> <li>asking about availability (pre)</li> <li>indicating reluctance to impinge (pre)</li> <li>self-humbling (pre)</li> </ul>

(\*Note: "pre" refers to a move placed before the request act; "post" refers to a move placed after the request act)

Example 1.

Date: Aug 19, 1999

Subject: Need your help!

Dear Professor H,

This is Ling Wang from Taiwan, I am a new international graduate student in xxx, I am right in General Education program, but I really want to transfer my major into TESOL program. I need your help to tell me if this is possible and what I can do for this plan.

The reason why I didn't apply to TESOL program when I was in Taiwan is because my TOEFL score was not high enough to get into TESOL program, so I applied to General Education instead. I hope you give me a chance to get into your program. I promise I will try my best to reach all the required standards of your program. Thanks a lot for your help.

Sincerely,

Ling Wang

Example 1 shows that Ling exposed her weak ability in English in the second paragraph, "The reason why I didn't apply to TESOL program when I was in Taiwan is because my TOEFL score was not high enough to get into TESOL program." Also, note that she did not provide any positive academic-related reason for transferring to the TESOL program but only used two unmitigated Want Statements along with the word "help" to state her purpose. "I *really want* to transfer my major into TESOL program. I *need*

*your help to ...*," which further projected a weak, incompetent student image. As a result, the professor who received this e-mail rejected her request.

Example 2.

Date: August 23, 1999

Subject: from Ling Wang

Dear Professor S,

This is Ling Wang from Taiwan. Because you are my initial academic advisor, I need you to help me about the questions of my required credits.

[A long description of her questions in three paragraphs ]

Thanks a lot for your help.

Best wishes,

Ling Wang

[Example 2](#) shows another type of inappropriate reason given for making requests to professors: lacking status-appropriate politeness. This e-mail was the one that Ling wrote to request assistance from her advisor for the first time. She explicitly pointed out the advisor's role and used this as a reason for her request with an unmitigated Want Statement, "Because you are my initial academic advisor, I need you to help me ...," which suggests that she presumed the advisor had an obligation to help her. Using such a reason followed by a Want Statement indicates that she overestimated her student right and did not demonstrate sufficient status-appropriate deference to her advisor.

This example is similar to the one that Gee (2002) gave to show an inappropriate request made by a Korean student to her professor: "It is your job to help me, I need to learn" (p. 168). Gee points out that this request was made without due consideration of rights and obligations between students and professors. He claims that faculty members are not "morally obligated" to assist students; rather, their assistance is based on their "willingness," which depends on whether students can "produce good work" and "become a credit to the faculty member" (p. 168). Hence, students cannot assume that professors have an obligation to comply with all their requests.

From Ling's perspective, she thought that pointing out her advisor's role was simply to get attention and emphasize her need to get help from her advisor. However, such requests made by Ling and the Korean student may have also been influenced by the Asian view of rights and obligations between students and teachers, which differs from the U.S. view. As Scollon and Scollon (1991) observe, "the teacher and student relationship is felt by Asians to be as permanent and all-pervasive as that between parents and children or that between elder and younger brothers" (p. 121). The comparison of a teacher to a parent or an elder sibling reflects a teacher's grand position as well as a heavy moral obligation to students. Therefore, Asian students may show a high level of deference to teachers (e.g., using formal address terms, honorifics, and indirect moves) while taking for granted their rights to ask for teachers' help. It is possible that Ling adopted this traditional "teacher-as-parent" ideology without self-awareness when interacting with U.S. professors at the start of her graduate studies.

Another type of supportive move found in Ling's request e-mails that may be problematic to U.S. professors is self-humbling. [Example 3](#) shows an e-mail in which Ling asked a professor to write a recommendation for her. Prior to her request, she employed a self-humbling strategy by belittling her academic and work performance: "I know I'm not an outstanding student, and probably my assistance

toward your research project is limited; but if possible, could you please write a recommendation letter for me?" The intention of using such a move, deprecating her own performance and contribution, however, may not be understood by native speakers of English. Moreover, these moves do not seem to support her purpose of requesting a recommendation that was supposed to comment on her ability and strengths. From the target culture's perspective, this move is likely to be viewed as an ineffective strategy since it projected her performance as insignificant, which did not help to justify her request for a recommendation.

### Example 3.

Date: Aug 21, 2001  
 Subject: Need your help!  
 Hi Professor D,  
 This is Ling. I have something need your favor.  
 As you know, I am right now in D.A. program with major in linguistics. [A long explanation of her interest in studying in another Ph.D. program] ...Therefore, I want to give myself a try to transfer or apply to other universities such as xxx. I know I'm not an outstanding student, and probably my assistance toward your research project is limited; but if possible, could you please write a recommendation letter for me? Thousands of thanks if you can help.  
 Best,  
 Ling

For Ling, humbling herself was a common Chinese cultural practice to show modesty and thereby to show politeness because Chinese politeness emphasizes the value of humbling or denigrating oneself (Gu, 1990). Also, this strategy allowed her to distinguish herself from her U.S. peers. She explained, "It's natural for me to be humble because I was taught to act this way in my culture. There's no need to tell others how good you are. In fact, sometimes I even have to say I'm not good at something even though I'm good ... I know American students will tell you directly what they are good at, but I just don't feel comfortable to do so." This remark reveals an agentive act that she carried out in this request event: she intentionally chose an L1 culturally-valued discourse strategy in using L2 because it helped her to present herself more naturally and comfortably, even though she knew what was valued in the L2 culture. It is also of note that this strategy was used even after she had been in the US for two years.

In Ling's later e-mail practice, her use of supportive moves for requests had some changes that helped her to construct a more competent student identity as well as to demonstrate a higher level of deference to professors. One significant change is that she framed her reasons from an institutionally-oriented perspective, rather than a student-centered one. As shown in [Example 4](#), she first stated that the request arose from an institutional need: "For that information they [the graduate admission office] gave me, I am supposed to contact you for advisement." Using this institutional explanation with the pronoun "they" helped her to avoid directly imposing on the professor, and it also suggested that her request was based on an institutionally required practice – consulting with the student's advisor before taking courses.

## Example 4.

Date: December 6, 2001

Subject: new admitted student

Hi Professor J,

I was informed by the graduate admission office that I am admitted to the PhD program of Anthropology. For the information they gave me, I am supposed to contact you for advisement. I'd like to know what is good time for me to go to your office to talk with you? Thank you.

Ling Wang

In addition, Ling employed two new types of mitigating supportive moves to demonstrate deference politeness which she had not used before: asking about the professor's availability for carrying out the request (Example 5, "I don't know if you have time to do this now") and indicating reluctance or inappropriateness to impose on the professor (Example 6, "I'm afraid it may be inappropriate to ask you about my paper when you feel not so well"). Both strategies are highly valued in Western culture since the requester makes no assumption about the addressee's wants to comply with the request and shows an understanding of the potential difficulty for the addressee in complying with the request (Brown & Levinson, 1987), thus helping to mitigate the imposing force.

## Example 5.

Date: September 10, 2001

Subject: recommendation

Hi Professor M,

I am sorry that I have to remind you about my recommendation letters. I don't know if you have time to do this now. But, since the deadline for xxx University is Sep15, if it's not too much trouble, could you please send out a letter to xxx University before the deadline? Thank you very much.

Ling Wang

## Example 6.

Date: December 13, 2001

Subject: my paper

Hi Professor B,

I'm sorry to know you're sick. Hope you feel better now. I'm afraid it may be inappropriate to ask you about my paper when you feel not so well, but I am kind of worried about this paper. I need to make sure the paper I've done so far is fine to be taken as the final paper for both Syntax class and my independent study.

If the paper needs to be further revised, could you please let me know soon? Thank you so much and sorry for making everything in haste.

Ling Wang



For Ling, the use of institutionally-oriented reasons and deference politeness strategies in her later request e-mails seemed to be a naturally developing process. It is plausible that both her online and offline prolonged interaction with various native speakers in the target language environment gradually enriched her L2 cultural knowledge and affected her language use. However, one thing that needs emphasis is that Ling made these changes not because she had known or learned that some of the forms or strategies she employed before were inappropriate (because no one would tell her what was wrong), but because she noticed that some other forms or strategies were more frequently used by native speakers, and she thus adopted them. For example, she pointed out that, based on her long-term observation, native speakers were always concerned with "occupying the other's time" when they made requests; thus, they would explicitly address it by asking about availability of the addressee and showing appreciation for the time being given. She recalled that she was unaware of this as an important politeness strategy in the early part of her studies. Therefore, many of Ling's changes in request forms and politeness strategies can be viewed as a result of her implicit learning of the culture-specific values through her gradual socialization into the target culture.

## CONCLUSION

This longitudinal case study allows us to see how a second language learner used e-mail for interpersonal communication and developed her e-mail literacy in the target language environment, particularly in communicating with authority figures in the academic context. Of particular interest in this case is how Ling made changes in her institutional e-mail practice in relation to her developing understanding of the e-mail medium, changing performance of student identity, evolving knowledge of appropriate student-professor interaction, and realization of culture-specific politeness. Three important points in addressing the development of e-mail literacy can be concluded from this study.

First, Ling's case illustrates that an L2 learner's frequent use of e-mail to communicate with peers does not indicate that she is able to use the medium appropriately and effectively for institutional status-unequal communication. Although Ling demonstrated her ability to shift between formal/epistolary and informal/conversational styles in her e-mails depending on power relations and familiarity levels with her addressees, her language use in student-to-professor e-mails was not without problems. A number of pragmatic problems were found particularly in Ling's early e-mails sent to professors, such as unclear, delayed purpose statements with many irrelevant details, requests framed from a student-oriented perspective and with a strong help-needed tone, failure to demonstrate status-appropriate politeness, and ineffective use of reasons or explanations as supportive moves. These problems, however, have also been identified in many other international students' e-mail practice as evidenced in the literature, which suggests that Ling and other L2 learners did not have sufficient pragmatic knowledge that enabled them to write e-mails appropriately to authority figures when entering a new institutional culture in the target language environment, even though their linguistic ability was at an advanced level.

Second, this study reveals that the development of L2 learners' language use in composing status-unequal e-mails is neither an easy nor a simple process. In Ling's e-mail practice, we see her constantly struggling with language use in order to achieve her communicative purpose while demonstrating politeness as well. The difficulty arose from the fact that there were no models for her to imitate and no explicit rules to follow either. She could not completely imitate the way her professors wrote e-mails to her due to the power asymmetry and neither could she imitate the way native speaker students wrote e-mails to their professors since she had no opportunity to read those e-mails. Moreover, she was unable to find out what part of her e-mails was problematic or inappropriate because her e-mail interlocutors did not tell her. Thus, she established her own rules in writing these status-unequal e-mails by either guessing what might be appropriate or observing how native speakers interacted in other types of communication practice. Such implicit learning without guidance made the acquisition of the hidden rules not only slow but also limited. In addition, this acquisition process was rather complicated as Ling's language use was



intertwined with the change of her identity construction and value choices. Her use of several discourse features in her early e-mails, such as lengthiness, inductive structures, Want Statements, and self-humbling, did not result from a lack of linguistic knowledge about native speaker norms, but from a strategic choice of using these forms to construct an identity that she desired to perform (e.g., an indirect, humble self and a help-needed student) and to demonstrate a value that she deemed appropriate (e.g., lengthiness with a delayed purpose statement means politeness). She made changes in her later language use. Though partly because her pragmalinguistic competence had increased (e.g., better use of lexico-syntactic mitigating forms for the request act), more importantly it was because her identity changed from a needy, self-centered master's student to an independent, competent doctoral student, and because her conception of politeness in student-professor interaction had been reconstructed through socialization into the target culture. An L2 learner's development of e-mail practice (and other types of communication practice, too), thus, needs to be understood from both socio-psychological and socio-cognitive perspectives.

Third, this study demonstrates that appropriateness is not a one-dimensional notion in status-unequal e-mail communication. It consists of an interplay of three kinds: language appropriateness, culture (including institutional culture and target language culture) appropriateness, and medium appropriateness. As revealed in this case, to perform appropriately in e-mail communication with professors, Ling would need to know how students are expected to act in the academic institutional context, how politeness is realized in the target culture, and how the e-mail medium is used for institutional communication. While this study investigated only one L2 student's e-mail practice, she is probably not the only one who struggles with language use for appropriateness. Many L2 students, based on other studies and my informal observations, encountered similar difficulties in e-mail communication, though their exact struggling process may not be the same. It is important for L2 students to learn how to use appropriate discourse forms and strategies to demonstrate those socioculturally appreciated values, as well as to perform their desirable identities. More crucially, they need to be made aware, particularly in asymmetrical communication, that every discourse practice is socioculturally value-laden and that the appropriateness of every practice is determined by a dominant sociocultural group, not by individual preference (Fairclough, 1995).

Such critical language awareness along with pragmatic competence is imperative for L2 learners to develop their e-mail literacy. I advocate that L2 learners be taught explicitly in the L2 classroom how to communicate appropriately with higher-ups via e-mail, due to the fact that those appropriateness rules are usually hidden and difficult to acquire. They need to learn how power, identity, and culture-specific ideology are constantly intertwined with communication practice and how they can use appropriate discourse forms and strategies to shape and reflect their power relations and situated identities in various sociocultural contexts. In fact, developing this critical language literacy is essential for students using the L1 as well, but it requires greater emphasis in learning and using an L2. Teaching students academic institutional e-mail practice can be a good starting point for the development of e-mail literacy since this type often involves unequal power positions and requires students to demonstrate their academic identity. In Swales and Feak's (2000) book *English in Today's Research World*, they included a chapter especially written to show L2 students how to use e-mail for academic communication in support of their studies and research processes. As e-mail is used more and more frequently in today's society and by a large number of non-native speakers, further research can expand the inquiry scope of L2 learners' e-mail practice involving other kinds of power relations and identity construction.

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## APPENDIX

A lengthy e-mail written by Ling in her early master's studies in the US.

Date: October 4, 1999

Subject: need your help

Dear Professor M,

This is Ling Wang from Taiwan, a new international graduated student in the education department. I am sorry to bother you, but I really got some questions and hope to get help from you.

When I was in Taiwan, I thought a lot about what to major in for my master's degree. I hesitated between education and linguistics for a long long while.... Finally, I choose education as my further study because I was not challenging enough that time.(I am not looking down on the field of education, but I think the reason I choose it to be my major is not for interest, but frankly speaking, I do it for I think educational program is easier to get into.) After I really got here and started studying in educational program, I took some classes in TESOL program. But after few weeks, I found that the most interested part in the classes I take is the theoretical part about linguistics, sometimes related to language and social concerns. Therefore, I started to think thoroughly what's the subject I really feel interested in, then I recalled how much fun I had gotten in the linguistic classes I took when I was still a undergraduated student in Taiwan.... then I decided to do something for myself. After all, the reason I came to the United States for studying is not only "being an independent thinker", but I hope I can really learn something I feel interested in and do more research about it. Consequently, *I wrote this e-mail to ask you some information about transferring to graduated linguistic anthropology program.*

I know it's not that easy to get the permission to study in your program. But once I know certainly what's the thing I want to pursue, I will just go for it.

Sorry for bothering you, and waiting for your reply.

Sincerely,

Ling Wang

(\* Note: The italicized sentence indicates Ling's request act.)

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