

Email vs. Zalo: Comparing Vietnamese Students' Digital Communication with Teachers

Thanh-Binh Tran, Ly Dinh
FPT POLYTECHNIC COLLEGE, FPT UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

Vietnamese students increasingly communicate with teachers through a mixture of institutional email and instant messaging (Zalo). The same request, such as asking to miss a class or submit an assignment late, must be designed differently depending on the platform. This difference creates a pragmatic learning opportunity for EFL learners. Grammatical accuracy alone does not ensure appropriateness; learners must judge the relationship, formal expectations, and resources available on each platform.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do students formulate requests to teachers in email and Zalo?
2. How do platform affordances and learner strategies shape the expression of politeness and respect?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Pragmatic Competence: Involves both pragmalinguistic resources (forms) and sociopragmatic judgments (appropriateness in context).
Email as an Institutional Genre: Asynchronous and persistent. Requires managing genre expectations like salutations, explanations, and relational closings (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007).
Zalo / Instant Messaging: Characterized by synchronicity, brevity, and multimodality. Emojis and stickers act as pragmatic tools to signal affect, soften requests, and manage face without removing the need for respect (Herring, 2013).

METHODOLOGY

Design: Exploratory, comparative qualitative study based on a communication task

DATASET	ANALYTICAL FOCUS
1. Email: 52 student-produced screenshots.	1. (1) Discourse organization.
2. Zalo: 43 student-produced screenshots.	2. (2) Degree of directness.
3. Interviews: Follow-up elicitations on formality and multimodality	3. (3) Relational work (apology/gratitude).
	4. (4) Platform-specific resources

KEY FINDINGS

Email: A Formal & Scripted Space
Strong orientation toward conventional request-letter structures (salutation, reason, request, apology, closing). High reliance on machine translation or memorized templates, often resulting in unnatural or overly formal phrasing. Respect is made visible through explicit genre conventions and formal wording.

Zalo: A Relational Space
Messages are conversational, segmented, and significantly shorter.

Multimodality: Emojis and stickers (e.g., illness-related symbols, prayer hands) are used actively to soften requests and prevent short messages from appearing demanding.

Respect is signaled through prompt timing, concise explanations, and relational warmth.

Adaptation over Inconsistency: Students do not use a single "formal" or "informal" register; they adapt their L2 pragmatic resources to fit the specific platform's conventions and audience.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Digital communication is a central site for pragmatic learning. EFL instruction should teach students how to adapt politeness strategies across mediums.
Platform-Comparison Tasks: Have students draft requests in both Email and Zalo to highlight audience design and affordances.
Pedagogical Mediation of Translation: Treat machine translation as an object of study. Teach students to critically edit output to ensure it matches their intended social meaning.

KEY REFERENCES

- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press.
- Chen, Y.-S., & Wu, H.-J. (2022). Developing sustainable email pragmatic competence for EFL learners through reformulation. *Sustainability*, 14(24), Article 16868. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su142416868>
- Kulyagina, A., & Sánchez-Hernández, A. (2026). Second language pragmatic competence in digitally mediated communication: Exploring requests and refusals. *Porta Linguarum*, (45), 43–58. <https://doi.org/10.30827/portalin.vi45.33005>
- Luong, M. H. (2025). Technology-supported English language learning for non-English majors at under-resourced Vietnamese universities. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 24(9), 694–712. <https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.24.9.34>
- Wang, C.-K., Lin, C.-Y., & Le, B. H. (2026). Dataset on social and behavioral factors influencing social commerce adoption among Gen Z university students in Vietnam. *Data in Brief*, 64, Article 112529. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dib.2026.112529>