

Digital literacy and netiquette: Awareness and perception in EFL learning context

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Abstract. With the growing popularity of digital technologies and computer-mediated communication (CMC), various types of interactive communication technology are being increasingly integrated into foreign/second language learning environments. Nevertheless, due to its nature, online communication is susceptible to misunderstandings and miscommunications, which necessitates online learners' awareness of existing netiquette (i.e. network etiquette) rules (Shetzer & Warschauer, 2000). This paper, therefore, reports on a comparative study on the degree to which 75 English as a foreign language (EFL) learners and their 53 native English counterparts were familiar with netiquette rules and perceived them as useful. A netiquette familiarity test consisting of ten questions and a netiquette attitude questionnaire consisting of 30 Likert scale items were developed by the researchers based on Shea (1994), Hambridge (1995), and Gil (2006). It was pilot tested, validated, and administered to the participants. Results indicated that familiarity was low among the EFL learners and that they were not as much convinced of the necessity and usefulness of netiquette rules as the other group. The results suggest that despite the significance of the issue, scant attention is paid to preparing students for a 21st century language learning environment and integrating the ethics of CMC and netiquette into educating digitally literate EFL learners. The findings of this study are relevant to language teacher education, materials development, and interlanguage pragmatics.

Keywords: netiquette awareness, digital literacy, communication breakdown, e-politeness.

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1. Introduction

Since communication via email, due to its cost-effectiveness and ease of access, has become a prevalent channel of communication, dealing with netiquette issues and the concept of e-politeness has immensely grown in significance, particularly among language learners (Chen, 2006). This is mainly because the netiquette of any particular online group embodies the culture and values of that group (Herring, 1996), and “the convenience brought by the computer-mediated communication does not guarantee effective intercultural communication” (Hsieh, 2009, p. 1). Therefore, to maintain successful communication, one should have a practical knowledge of norms of behaviour and adhere to specific patterns of social interaction and netiquette rules (Hymes, 1974; Saville-Troike, 2003). Notwithstanding the concern that such international “rules” have been formulated without consideration of the “beliefs/culture/comfort” of all stakeholders (Marandi, 2013), if language learners aim at being successful communicators, they have to become familiar with the online culture of the target language they are learning. Hence, this research aims at measuring the familiarity, awareness, and attitudes of online EFL learners and their native counterparts towards the online behaviour rules.

2. Method

A netiquette familiarity test (Reliability: 0.746) and a netiquette attitude questionnaire (Reliability: 0.827) are the instruments used in this study. The former consists of 17 questions: seven in the form of multiple-choice items, two true/false questions, and the remaining eight are open-ended essay-type questions. The overall format and content of the questionnaire was adapted from netiquette quizzes and web pages (Gil, 2006; Hambridge, 1995; Shea, 1994), originally designed for online applicants to test their netiquette knowledge. The questionnaire encompasses a wide range of diverse issues related to online communication such as observing email symbolism, respecting communicators’ privacy, adopting an appropriate subject line, and avoiding personal or flaming emails.

The netiquette attitude questionnaire attempts to elicit participants’ attitudes towards and beliefs about the necessity, adequacy and significance of netiquette rules. This questionnaire is composed of 30 six-point Likert scale questions. The first 13 questions deal with the adequacy of certain online behaviours and netiquette rules. The remaining questions deal with the necessity of performing particular actions or following particular rules. The questionnaires were administered to 75 non-native and 53 native speakers of English who were members of different online ESOL and language learning communities and mailing lists. Participation

was voluntary and data collection was carried out in accordance with the human ethics requirements.

3. Discussion

3.1. Familiarity

The results of the familiarity of the participants with netiquette rules revealed that direct correlation existed between the level of scores and the participants' netiquette familiarity.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics results of the native/non-native English students on the netiquette familiarity scores

Score	English Language Learners (non-native)		Native English Speakers	
	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Mean	3.51	.203	6.70	.215
Median	4.00		7.00	
Variance	3.091		2.446	
Std. Deviation	1.758		1.564	
Minimum	0		3	
Maximum	7		9	
Skewness	.012	.277	-.603	.327
Kurtosis	-1.062	.548	-.255	.644

According to [Brown \(1997\)](#), the amount of skewness and kurtosis are considered acceptable if their standard error times two is more than the absolute value of their statistics. According to the above assumption and based on [Table 1](#), it can be observed that for both native and non native speakers the distribution is normal since the amount of skewness and kurtosis are considered acceptable as $0.277 \times 2 > |0.012|$ and $0.548 \times 2 > |1.062|$ and $0.327 \times 2 > |0.603|$ and $0.644 \times 2 > |0.255|$. As the majority of the results supported the normal distribution of scores of both groups, an independent samples t-test was conducted on the native and non-natives' netiquette familiarity test results to see if a significant difference exists between the two sets of scores. Since Levene's Test for Equality of Variances in [Table 2](#) did not indicate a significant difference in the variances ($F=2.686$, $p>0.05$), the equal variances assumption was accepted and the top line value was used. The results revealed that there was a significant difference between the non-native and native participants,

$t(126)=10.582$; $p<0.05$, and based on Table 1, since the mean score of the native English speakers was higher than that of English language learners ($6.70>3.51$), it can be concluded that the native participants were significantly more familiar with netiquette rules than the Language learners.

Table 2. Independent samples t-test on the familiarity netiquette test scores for English language learners and native English speakers

Score	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
								95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	2.685	.104	10.582	126	.000	3.191	.302	2.595	3.788
Equal variances not assumed			10.798	119.427	.000	3.191	.296	2.606	3.777

3.2. Necessity and adequacy

The Chi-square test results on the attitude questionnaire (Table 4) revealed that there was a significant difference between both groups ($2=55.51$, $df=5$, $p<0.05$) and native participants gave significantly more weight to the necessity and adequacy of the netiquette rules (Table 3).

Table 3. Total results on the members' attitude towards the adequacy and necessity of netiquette rules

Group		Options						Total
		Very Appropriate/ Necessary	Appropriate/ Necessary	No Difference	Inappropriate/ Unnecessary	Totally Inappropriate/ unnecessary	Undecided	
Non-native	Count	463	698	203	230	47	159	1800
	Expected Count	533.8	685.0	211.5	203.3	39.3	127.1	1800.0
	% within Group	25.7%	38.8%	11.3%	12.8%	2.6%	8.8%	100.0%
	% within Options	50.8%	59.7%	56.2%	66.3%	70.1%	73.3%	58.6%
Native sp.	Count	448	471	158	117	20	58	1272
	Expected Count	377.2	484.0	149.5	143.7	27.7	89.9	1272.0
	% within Group	35.2%	37.0%	12.4%	9.2%	1.6%	4.6%	100.0%
	% within Options	49.2%	40.3%	43.8%	33.7%	29.9%	26.7%	41.4%
Total	Count	911	1169	361	347	67	217	3072
	Expected Count	911.0	1169.0	361.0	347.0	67.0	217.0	3072.0
	% within Group	29.7%	38.1%	11.8%	11.3%	2.2%	7.1%	100.0%
	% within Options	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 4. Chi-Square test results on attitudes towards netiquette

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	55.514 ^a	5	.000
Likelihood Ratio	56.577	5	.000
N of Valid Cases	3072		

Based on the results, the non-native speakers have a higher rate of unfamiliarity with netiquette rules and depicted less of a sense of necessity and usefulness for such rules in online environments. Therefore, it can be argued that the perceived usefulness of netiquette rules is positively related to the degree of familiarity with them. The results of this study support [Wotruba, Chonko, and Loe's \(2001\)](#) study on the positive relation that existed between perceived usefulness of ethics codes and the degree of familiarity with such codes. The results are also in line with the studies done on e-politeness and online intercultural communication. [Biesenbach-Lucas \(2007\)](#), who has examined e-politeness among native and non-native speakers, argued that native speakers create more polite messages towards their instructors than non-native speakers do. Studies on non-native students' writing request e-mails to their professors also showed lack of sufficient pragmatic knowledge to write appropriate emails ([Chen, 2006](#)).

4. Conclusions

This study is primarily concerned with the international communicative norms of behaviour in online communication, also known as netiquette rules. The results revealed that there exists a significant dearth of knowledge of such norms on the non-native English participants' part. Furthermore, it was also revealed that non-native speakers' perceived usefulness of such rules were also quite low. Thus, to compensate for the dearth of knowledge in this area, netiquette should be included and taught explicitly in classroom lessons ([Shetzer & Warschauer, 2000](#)). According to [Wotruba et al. \(2001\)](#), "when familiarity occurs, the code will begin to play a role in shaping the ethical climate and familiarity will allow the recognition of its usefulness as a guide to their behaviour" (p. 3). Therefore, the usefulness of netiquette rules as a tool in guiding online behaviour and the application of such codes of online behaviour will be strengthened as internet users become more familiar with the content and intentions of those codes.

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