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An investigation into the errors in email writing of first-year undergraduates

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Abstract

Email communication has gained vital importance in daily communication in the 21st century, regardless of the field in which it is used. In the context of tertiary-level education, email communication also plays a significant role. Likewise, Error Analysis (EA) is also important in writing skills. Most of the EA research in Sri Lanka has focused more on broader areas like essay writing, grammar, or speaking skills, rather than on genre-specific writing like email. The current study addresses the gap in EA research by investigating the errors in email writing by first-year undergraduates at a Sri Lankan university. Thus, a mixed methods approach was employed, combining pre-and post-tests and questionnaires. Fifty first-year undergraduates of the Department of Commerce and Financial Management, University of Kelaniya, were taken as the sample. The required data were collected through administration, pretest, posttest, and questionnaire. The data were analyzed using the error analytical framework of Corder and Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). The findings indicated that though the learners claimed they were aware of the formal email writing conventions, their emails showed that they were unaware of those conventions. Most students committed spelling errors, verb-related errors and punctuation errors, while, lack of knowledge of the target language elements was the primary reason beyond those errors. Hence, the study indicates that teachers and learners should be aware of the norms and errors in email writing. Providing one-to-one or constructive feedback is crucial for enhancing email writing skills and including the lessons related to the proper email communication required to be included in their syllabus.

Keywords: Email writing, Error analysis, Sri Lankan context, Undergraduates

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Introduction

Language is essential for communication and interaction, directly through face-to-face conversations and indirectly through email and social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Instagram. As a global language, English is widely used and taught in Sri Lanka as a Second Language, playing a significant role in the national curriculum. However, learning English poses challenges due to linguistic differences, which require extra effort to overcome (Mendis & Rambukwella, 2010).

The rise of technology has made email a primary communication tool in education, valued for its speed and efficiency. As email replaces traditional forms like letters and phone calls, teaching email writing skills has become essential in schools and workplaces. Netiquette, or online etiquette, ensures appropriate digital communication, reduces cyberbullying, and improves email perceptions (Shea, 1994; Kozik & Slivova, 2014; Kumazaki, Suzuki, Katsura, Sakamoto & Kashibuchi, 2011). Email writing is considered a distinct genre that requires adherence to context-specific norms, especially in professional and academic settings. Unlike personal emails, which can be more informal, professional and academic emails must follow specific guidelines for politeness and correct grammar to avoid misunderstandings (Ren, 2016). Research by Stephens, Houser and Cowan (2009) and Bartl (2017) emphasizes the importance of adhering to formal conventions in student-teacher interactions to prevent negative perceptions. Consequently, students must recognize that effective email writing involves understanding and applying context-specific norms. Owing to this backdrop, this study investigates the errors in the email written by students in tertiary education in Sri Lanka.

According to Corder (1967, as cited in Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005), errors are systematic and result from gaps in a learner's knowledge of the second language (L2) rules. On the other hand, mistakes are random deviations that occur when learners have not fully mastered a grammatical form. Corder (1981) views errors as incorrect forms reflecting learners' incomplete understanding of language rules. James (1998) notes that mistakes, unlike errors, can occur due to inattention, fatigue, or stress and are often self-corrected once noticed. Brown (2007) agrees, emphasizing that learners typically correct mistakes but not errors, indicating that a linguistic system does not govern mistakes.

Many scholars have defined EA in various ways. Stephen Pit Corder (1974), a pioneer in EA, described it as a set of procedures for identifying, describing, and explaining learners' errors. It involves collecting and analyzing learner language samples to understand errors' nature, causes, and seriousness. In the present study, this model has been utilized as the analytical framework for the emails that the students have completed. Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) view EA as identifying errors and understanding their reasons. Johanson (1975) considers EA the most effective method for explaining language learners' mistakes. Crystal (1999) defines it as examining incorrect forms produced by language learners, emphasizing its role in identifying and interpreting unacceptable learner forms. Additionally, EA involves observing, analyzing, and classifying the differences between learners' language use and standard language (Brown, 2000). Moreover, Corder (1981) identified two functions of EA: pedagogical (theoretical), which explores the language learning process, and practical (diagnostic), which guides remedial actions.

Al-husban (2018) stresses EA's importance in understanding students' learning needs and improving the learning process, including strategies for minimizing the influence of the mother language on second language acquisition.

Email is commonly used to support writing and English for Business Purposes courses, promoting writing skills. Email writing is incorporated into school curricula and higher education English language courses in Sri Lanka. Given this context, a notable opportunity exists to study the EA of emails among university undergraduates using a specific theoretical approach. This study addresses this research gap by analyzing first-year undergraduates' email writing errors. Therefore, the present study was carried out to identify the learners' awareness regarding the norms/conventions of email writing, the most common and least noticeable errors in students' emails and to investigate the factors that cause the students' errors in email writing.

Errors in language learning can be categorized in various ways based on different models. Richards (1971) classifies errors into three main types: interference errors, which occur when learners apply their native language rules to the target language; intralingual errors, which reflect general issues with rule learning, such as overgeneralization and incorrect application of rules; and developmental errors, which arise from learners forming hypotheses about the target language based on limited experience. Furthermore, Corder (1974) offers another classification: pre-systematic errors occur when learners are unaware of language rules, leading to random errors; systematic errors result from incomplete knowledge, producing regular and predictable errors that learners struggle to self-correct; and post-systematic errors are inconsistently produced due to lapses in attention or memory but are often self-corrected by learners. Additionally, Shousha et al. (2020) further differentiate between systematic errors, reflecting a learner's language proficiency, and non-systematic errors, which are performance-related and result from factors like memory lapses or fatigue. The present research focuses on systematic errors, which is crucial for improving language proficiency.

Models of EA

Various Error Analysis (EA) models offer distinct approaches to understanding learner errors. Dulay et al. (1982) focus on surface structures, categorizing errors into omission, addition, misformation, and disordering, and analyzing their frequency and causes, such as first language interference. Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) present a comprehensive model that involves the systematic collection of language samples, error identification and categorization, and analysis of sources like language transfer and developmental stages, which helps in developing effective teaching strategies. Corder's (1981) model, widely used in writing, includes collecting samples, identifying and marking errors, and describing them by type, making it practical for classroom settings and useful for providing targeted feedback. The current research employs Corder's model as the analytical framework for data analysis.

Studies on email writing and EA

Research on email writing errors highlights recurring challenges and proposed solutions across various contexts. Burgess et al. (2005) emphasize that unclear email communication often leads to misunderstandings, advocating for formal training to enhance clarity and effectiveness. Tella

(as cited in Warschauer, 2007) highlights email as a tool for purpose-driven language practice, shifting focus from teacher-led to independent writing. Specific errors, such as plural noun omissions (52%) and malformations (42%), were identified by Lestari and Widiadnya (2021), while Adhikary (2022) noted differences in error patterns between structured and unstructured emails. Suandhari, Putra, and Budasi (2019) underscore grammatical errors stemming from incomplete language knowledge and interference, recommending targeted training.

In academic settings, second-language users often struggle with formality and politeness compared to native speakers (Ewald, 2016). Students' emails to professors frequently fail to meet formal standards, which can negatively impact communication and relationships (Dumbrava & Koronka, 2006). Despite some awareness of email etiquette (Konuk, 2021), student emails often do not reflect these practices, highlighting a need for enhanced guidance and training (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Knight & Masselink, 2008).

These findings underline the importance of improving email writing skills through structured interventions and targeted training. The current study builds on these insights by examining the prevailing habits of the target population related to email communication, aiming to address gaps in the error analysis in the email genre in Sri Lankan context.

EA Studies in Sri Lankan Context

Few studies have focused on Error Analysis (EA) in Sri Lanka. Jayasundara and Premarathna (2011) examined writing and speaking errors among first-year undergraduates at Uva Wellassa University, identifying grammatical errors as the most frequent across seven error categories. Abewickrama (2010) analyzed essays by Sinhala-speaking undergraduates from several universities, aiming to determine if errors in English writing were primarily due to negative first language (L1) transfer. The study concluded that L1 transfer was not the main cause of these errors. Dissanayake & Dissanayake (2019) studied syntactic errors in the English writing of Sinhala-speaking undergraduates in an academic English program at the Open University of Sri Lanka. They found that many errors, particularly in word order, were due to L1 interference, with learners mistakenly assuming that grammar rules were similar between Sinhala and English, leading to errors when transferring these rules from L1 to L2. Thus, it is evident that most of the EA research in Sri Lanka has focused more on broader areas like essay writing, grammar, or speaking skills, rather than on genre-specific writing like email. The present study addresses the gap in EA research in writing skills related to the email genre at the tertiary level in Sri Lanka.

Methodology

Research Design

The present study utilized a mixed-method research design, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches. This methodology involves collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and reporting both types of data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. (Creswell, 2015). Therefore, as the study attempts to identify the errors in students' email writing using tests and their awareness using questionnaires, this research design would be the most appropriate.

Study Setting

The study was conducted over a month, with sessions lasting two hours each week for four consecutive weeks. On the first day, students completed a questionnaire via Google Forms to gather their general practices and perceptions regarding email writing. Students then wrote an email addressing a given situation, which served as a pre-test to identify common errors in their initial email writing. Students were taught effective email writing techniques on the second and third days, and they composed two sample emails through step-by-step instruction, model analysis, collaborative practice and feedback sessions. Finally, on the fourth day, students completed a post-test email writing task to assess improvements.

Population and sample

In the present study, the population consists of 150 first-year undergraduates from the Department of Commerce and Financial Management at the University of Kelaniya, enrolled in the Certificate Course in English Language during their second semester. The sample refers to a subset of this population, and in this study, it was purposefully selected 50 first-year undergraduates from the population based on their proficiency level. The study employed purposive sampling to select participants who represented the target population because these participants were directly engaged in email writing, making them the most relevant for studying common errors and their improvements.

Data collection

To enhance the study's validity, methodological triangulation was employed. Data were collected using pre-tests, post-tests, and questionnaires. Integrating qualitative content analysis of errors with descriptive statistical analysis of questionnaire responses provided multiple perspectives to confirm the findings. Here, as the pre-test and post-test, the students were given a scenario to write an email using 100-150 words and send it using their student Gmail accounts. For the analysis, the contents of the emails were considered, and therefore, no mark allocation was given to either the pre-test or the post-test. The questionnaire consisted of both Likert-scale and open-ended questions. Furthermore, the pre-test and post-test were tested as a pilot test with a small group of students from the population to confirm that they were relevant and appropriate.

The researcher obtained informed consent from the undergraduates by emailing e-consent forms before starting the study. All participants were treated with respect and were fully informed about the study's aims and methods. Consent forms and any additional information collected were securely kept by the researcher. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, no personal information that could harm the participants was included in any reports resulting from the study.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the pre-test and post-test were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, following the steps outlined in Corder's (1981) model. The process involved collecting

samples, identifying errors, and describing them. Descriptive statistical analysis and frequency analysis were performed using SPSS to tabulate the findings and analyze data from the questionnaire.

Results

The study's data analysis was carried out following the above-mentioned data analysis methods to find answers to the proposed research questions.

Awareness of the learners' email writing norms

Before conducting Error Analysis (EA) on emails collected through pre-tests and post-tests, the data from questionnaires were analyzed using SPSS. The questionnaire had three main sections: demographic information, email writing habits, and awareness of common errors in email writing. For the current analysis, demographic information was excluded, and the focus was on analyzing students' email writing habits and awareness.

Students were asked if they had been taught email writing before entering university. 44 students said 'yes,' while only six said 'no,' indicating that most had learned email writing beforehand. Despite this, it was found that most students rarely communicate via email, with only eight students claiming they write emails weekly, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Students' frequency of email writing

Testing Time	Percentage	Frequency
Weekly	8	16.0
Monthly	9	18.0
Rarely	33	66.0
Total	50	100.0

Further, students were asked whom they communicate with via email in the university context. The majority, 35 students, said they email lecturers, nine communicate with classmates, and six with the university administration. When asked about their response time to emails, 18 students replied within 24 hours, ten within two days, and nine immediately or within 2-5 hours. Two students said they take more than two days or do not reply. Regarding the use of spell check, 37 out of 50 students said they use it, while the rest do not. Finally, when asked about proofreading emails before sending those, 29 students said they always do, nine often, eight sometimes, and two rarely or never.

The third section of the questionnaire aimed to assess students' awareness of common errors in email writing. The students were asked to identify frequent errors they make when writing email subjects. Interestingly, most participants (26) indicated that they do not frequently make errors in subject lines. However, 11 students admitted to making errors with incorrect capitalization, and 10 cited writing vague subject lines.

Table 2: Students' common email writing habits

Criteria	Always		Often		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
	Frequency	Valid Percentage	Frequency	Valid Percentage	Frequency	Valid Percentage	Frequency	Valid Percentage	Frequency	Valid Percentage
Do you use a formal greeting in your emails?	28	56%	11	22%	6	12%	3	6%	2	4%
Do you use a formal closing in your emails?	27	54%	15	30%	6	12%	-	-	2	4%
How often do you use contractions (e.g., don't, can't) in formal emails?	3	6%	4	8%	22	44%	4	8%	17	34%
Do you often use abbreviations and acronyms (e.g., UOK, OK, PFA, TIA, etc.) in your emails?	4	8%	7	14%	16	32%	7	14%	16	32%
How often do you have Issues with proper punctuation in your emails?	3	6%	14	28%	20	40%	12	24%	1	2%
Do you often make spelling errors in your emails?	1	2%	4	8%	23	46%	14	28%	8	16%
How often do you write emails concisely and clearly?	10	20%	25	50%	12	24%	2	4%	1	2%
Do you often use informal language or slang in formal emails?	-	-	10	20%	11	22%	9	18%	20	40%
How often do you need help using a formal tone in emails written in a university context?	10	20%	13	26%	19	38%	6	12%	2	4%
Do you often check for grammatical errors before sending your emails?	27	54%	11	22%	9	18%	3	6%	-	-
How frequently do you remember to include necessary email attachments?	17	34%	17	34%	12	24%	3	6%	1	2%

Table 2 offers a detailed analysis of common email writing errors among respondents, categorized by frequency of certain practices. The data reveals that most respondents adhere to

formality, with 56% always using a formal greeting and 54% always using a formal closing. However, formal closings are less consistently used, with some respondents often or sometimes neglecting this aspect. Language usage shows more variation; only 6% always avoid contractions in formal emails, while 44% sometimes use them, indicating the prevalence of informal language. The use of abbreviations and acronyms is split, with 32% never using them and 32% using them sometimes, suggesting that their use may vary by context or preference.

Technical accuracy in email writing shows varied practices among respondents. Table 2 highlights that punctuation issues are common, with 40% of respondents sometimes facing problems and 28% often encountering them. Spelling errors are also frequent, with 46% sometimes making mistakes, though 16% never do. Despite these issues, 54% of respondents always check for grammatical mistakes before sending emails. Clarity and conciseness are prioritized, with 20% always writing clearly and 50% often doing so, though 24% only sometimes achieve clarity. Informal language or slang is rarely used in formal emails, with 40% never using it, although 20% often do. Maintaining a formal tone can be challenging, with 20% always needing help and 38% sometimes requiring assistance. Attention to detail, particularly with including necessary attachments, is relatively high; 34% always remember to include them, and another 34% often do. Overall, the data reveals a strong inclination towards formality and correctness in email writing, though there is room for improvement in reducing informal language and technical errors.

Additionally, when asked about their preferred closing in formal emails, most students chose "best regards," while "sincerely" was the least used. Regarding email body organization, 58% of respondents prefer a structured approach, writing the body in two paragraphs, indicating a preference for detailed communication. Meanwhile, 22% opt for conciseness, organizing the body in just a few sentences, and 20% write it in a single paragraph. These variations suggest that while many students value elaboration, many prefer brevity in their email communication.

Regarding self-introduction and contact information in emails, 70% of participants include these elements, showing an understanding of their importance for context and further communication. However, 30% do not, which may reflect a lack of awareness or a belief that such details are unnecessary. Almost all respondents (98%) use proper email addresses, while only 2% use fancy ones. Most (72%) consider the format and length of their emails before sending them, though 28% do not, which may affect communication effectiveness. The vast majority (96%) avoid using smiley faces or emojis in formal emails, maintaining a traditional professional tone.

Confidence levels in writing formal emails vary, with 4% feeling 'very confident,' 30% 'confident,' 58% neutral, and 8% not very confident, indicating varying degrees of skill and certainty. Online grammar checkers are the most common resource for improving email writing (58%), followed by help from friends or tutors (16%) and English textbooks (12%). A small percentage (6%) use no resources, and 8% use other unspecified methods. Feedback on email errors is infrequent, with 10% receiving it often, 32% sometimes, and 58% rarely or never, suggesting error-free emails or recipients' reluctance to provide feedback.

In summary, these findings offer a comprehensive overview of the participants' email writing practices, confidence levels, and resource usage, reflecting a general adherence to email etiquette with variations in individual approaches.

The most and least common errors in students' email writing

Table 3: Pre-test vs Post-test Frequency of errors

No	Type of error	Pre-test		Post-test	
		Frequency	Percentage %	Frequency	Percentage %
1	Adverbs	9	1.6	8	2.9
2	Capitalization	50	8.6	14	5.1
3	Conjunction	27	4.7	15	5.4
4	Contracted forms	59	10.2	20	7.2
5	Definite/ indefinite articles	16	2.8	19	6.9
6	Errors related to tense	34	5.9	11	4.0
7	Genitive's	10	1.7	4	1.4
8	Missing subject line	19	3.3	9	3.3
9	No introduction or conclusion	27	4.7	12	4.3
10	No sender information	21	3.6	9	3.3
11	Prepositions	14	2.4	7	2.5
12	Punctuation	55	9.5	24	8.7
13	Repetition	12	2.1	5	1.8
14	Singular-plural forms	42	7.2	25	9.1
15	Spelling	102	17.6	56	20.3
16	Subject-verb agreement	23	4.0	10	3.6
17	Verb related errors	45	7.8	21	7.6
18	Word order	15	2.6	7	2.5

The comparison of pretest and post-test error frequencies is shown in Table 03. reveals insights into learners' progress and ongoing challenges. Spelling errors remained the most common, increasing slightly in percentage from 17.6% to 20.3% despite a decrease in frequency. Singular-plural errors decreased in number but increased in percentage, indicating persistence. Punctuation errors also decreased in frequency but only slightly in percentage. Verb-related and contracted form errors showed notable improvement, with frequency and percentage declining. Conversely, errors with definite and indefinite articles increased in frequency and percentage, suggesting this area became more problematic post-instruction. Errors in capitalization and conjunctions saw significant reductions, though conjunction errors slightly increased in percentage. Errors related to tense, subject-verb agreement, and sender information omission improved in frequency and percentage. Less common errors, such as those related to the genitive

case, missing subject lines, and word order, showed frequency reductions but stable percentages, indicating continued challenges in these areas.

Then, the errors were classified and analysed using the qualitative content analysis method using Corder's model. For example,

Email Script 5:

Subject: To arrange a meeting
Dear mam,
My Student no is XXX, I am fourth year student in university of kelaniya, I have to prepare a progress report, so i have many problems about it, so can you please arrange a meeting next week to discuss this with you.

In the email script 5, several errors were identified. The salutation "Dear mam" should be corrected to "Dear madam," a contracted form error. Capitalization errors include "university of kelaniya," which should be "University of Kelaniya," and "i" instead of "I." Punctuation errors are present, as commas were used at the end of sentences instead of periods. Additionally, the article "the" is missing in the phrase "in University of Kelaniya." The email's body also lacks a proper conclusion and signature block, and the student used only a few sentences as one paragraph, which affects the overall structure.

The extract from email script 8, "...so, I would like to get some advice from you to do properly my work..." contains an error in adverb placement. It should be corrected to "...get some advice from you to do my work properly..."

Email Script 25:

Subject: DEAR MADAM
WORKING OUR INTERNSIP SO ASKING ARRANGE MEETING
I AM XXX. MY STUDENT NUMBER IS XXX. I AM STUDING IN KELANIYA UNIVERSITY, 4TH YEAR UNDERGRADUATE WORKING OUR INTERNSHIP DISCUSS MEETING
THANK YOU
YOURS SINCELERY
XXX

Email script 25 contains several notable errors. Firstly, the entire email is written in capital letters, which can be interpreted as expressing anger or dissatisfaction and is generally considered unprofessional. Additionally, there is a mix-up between the subject line and the salutation, with the salutation incorrectly used as the subject line and vice versa. The email also features incorrect or missing prepositions, such as "asking arrange a meeting" (asking to arrange a meeting) and "I am studying in Kelaniya University" (I am studying at Kelaniya University). Spelling errors are present, including "internsip" (internship) and "sincelery" (sincerely). Furthermore, the email suffers from word order issues, resulting in a lack of clarity regarding the writer's intended message.

In addition, Email Script 34 highlights a different problem, with four emails containing the entire message written in the subject line, demonstrating a clear misunderstanding of proper email formatting.

Email script 25 contains several notable errors. Firstly, the entire email is written in capital letters, which can be interpreted as expressing anger or dissatisfaction and is generally considered unprofessional. Additionally, there is a mix-up between the subject line and the salutation, with the salutation incorrectly used as the subject line and vice versa. The email also features incorrect or missing prepositions, such as "asking arrange a meeting" (asking to arrange a meeting) and "I am studying in Kelaniya University" (I am studying at Kelaniya University). Spelling errors are present, including "internsip" (internship) and "sincelery" (sincerely). Furthermore, the email suffers from word order issues, resulting in a lack of clarity regarding the writer's intended message.

In addition, Email Script 34 highlights a different problem, with four emails containing the entire message written in the subject line, demonstrating a clear misunderstanding of proper email formatting.

Email Script 34:

Subject: Dear lecture, I am fourth year undergraduate student. My internship work report has writing progress. I want to know way of writing report. please lecture give me a chance to ask about this thank you.

Email script 34 contains multiple errors, including spelling mistakes, such as "lecture" instead of "lecturer," and capitalization issues, where "please" should be "Please" and "thank you" should be "Thank you." Additionally, the email lacks the necessary article, as in "I am fourth year" instead of "I am a fourth year," and is missing a conclusion and signature block, affecting its overall professionalism. Furthermore, email script 22, while appearing organized and formal, also presents several issues. The writer incorrectly used "but" to combine two ideas where "and" would have been more appropriate. There is a capitalization error with the word "Working," and a tense-related error is noted with "we assigned," which should be "we were assigned." These issues indicate areas for improvement despite the email's generally formal presentation.

Email script 22:

Subject: Involve writing a progress report
Dear Madam,
Madam, I am a fourth year student but my student number is XXX.
This year, I am Working on my internship. So, we assigned to write a report on the internship. But I have some problems with writing a report.
Madam, I kindly request you to give us a time to meet and discuss the writing progress report. Thank you
Regards
XXX

Email script 42 seems more informal as there was no information on who wrote this, and it sounds like addressing a friend rather than a lecturer.

Email Script 42:

Subject: To have a meeting
I want to meet you to discuss my progress report. Can you let me know your free time, please.
Thanks

Factors contributing to the errors in email writing

Furthermore, the reasons for identified errors can be elaborated in Table 4.

Table 4: Common errors and reasons for them

No	Error type	Reasons
1	Adverbs	Lack of knowledge of the target language elements
2	Capitalization	Typing mistakes Negligence Lack of knowledge of the target language elements
3	Conjunction	Lack of knowledge of the target language elements Mother tongue influence
4	Contracted forms	Message typing language influence Less awareness of the email writing conventions
5	Definite/ indefinite articles	Lack of knowledge of the target language elements Mother tongue influence
6	Errors related to tense	Lack of knowledge of the target language grammar rule
7	Genitive's	Typing mistakes Confusion about where to add apostrophe
8	Missing subject line	Lack of awareness of email writing conventions Typing error – when using the phone
9	No introduction or conclusion	Lack of awareness of email writing conventions
10	No sender information	Lack of awareness of email writing conventions
11	Prepositions	Lack of knowledge of the target language elements Mother tongue influence
12	Punctuation	Lack of knowledge of the target language elements
13	Repetition	Mother tongue influence Lack of knowledge of the target language elements
14	Singular-plural forms	Negligence Mother tongue influence Lack of knowledge of the target language elements
15	Spelling	Negligence

		Lack of knowledge of the target language elements
16	Subject-verb agreement	Mother tongue influence Lack of knowledge of the target language elements
17	Verb related errors	Mother tongue influence Lack of knowledge of the target language elements
18	Word order	Mother tongue influence Lack of knowledge of the target language elements

Comparison between selected questionnaire data and actual email writing findings

Table 5 compares questionnaire responses and data collected from pre-test and post-test email writing assessments. The table examines various criteria for email communication, including the use of formal greetings and closings, the effectiveness of conciseness and clarity, adherence to a formal tone, inclusion of self-introduction and contact information, accuracy of subject lines, and the structure of body paragraphs. This comparison assesses changes and consistency in email writing practices over time.

Table 5: Frequency comparison between questionnaires and actual email writing gathered data

Criteria	Questionnaire		Pre-test		Post-test	
Use of formal greeting	Always	28	Formal Greeting	29	Formal Greeting	35
	Often	11				
	Sometimes	6	Informal/ without greeting	21	Informal/ without greeting	15
	Total	45				
Use of formal closing	Always	27	Formal closing	27	Formal closing	35
	Often	15				
	Sometimes	6	Informal/ without closing	23	Informal/ without closing	15
	Total	48				
Concise and clear email	Always	10	Concise and clear	25	Concise and clear	35
	Often	25				
	Sometimes	12	Not Concise and clear	25	Not Concise and clear	15
	Total	47				
Formal tone	Always	10	Formal tone	20	Formal tone	35
	Often	13				
	Sometimes	19	Informal tone	30	Informal tone	15
	Total	42				
Self-introduction and contact information	Yes	35	Yes	20	Yes	35
	No	15	No	30	No	15
Subject line	No errors	26	Missing Subject line	4	Missing Subject line	2
	Incorrect capitalization	11	Body in the subject line	3	Body in the subject line	2

	Vague subject line	10	Vague subject line	29	Vague subject line	32
			Correct subject line	14	Correct subject line	14
	Few sentences	11	Few sentences	7	Few sentences	5
Body paragraph	One whole paragraph	10	One whole paragraph	33	One whole paragraph	15
	3 paragraph structure	29	3 paragraph structure	10	3 paragraph structure	30

The analysis of Table 5 reveals significant advancements in email writing practices, highlighting key trends and persistent challenges. Improvements in formality are evident, with a consistent increase in the use of formal greetings and closings, reaching 35 occurrences in the post-test for both categories. This progress reflects stronger adherence to established email conventions. Similarly, clarity and tone saw notable enhancements, as concise and clear emails rose from 25 in the pre-test to 35 in the post-test, accompanied by a substantial increase in the use of a formal tone, which also reached 35 instances. Organizational improvements were also marked, with the adoption of a structured three-paragraph format rising from 10 to 30 occurrences in the post-test, demonstrating a better grasp of professional email formatting.

Despite these advancements, challenges persist. Errors in subject lines, particularly vague ones, remained prevalent, with 32 cases in the post-test compared to 29 in the pre-test. Additionally, while the structure of the email body improved, only 30 emails achieved the ideal format in the post-test, indicating the need for further refinement in this area. Overall, the data underscores significant progress in formality, clarity, and organization, while highlighting areas requiring continued attention to achieve consistently professional email practices.

Discussion

Reaching the first objective, the study reveals that although most participants had been taught email writing before university, their pretest results showed a lack of formal email writing skills and frequent errors. Further, it was identified that students were aware of common email writing errors, including greeting, closing, contractions, abbreviations, and punctuation, spelling, formality, and grammar issues. However, the analysis showed discrepancies between students' self-reported email habits and their actual email practices, particularly in formal greetings, closings, clarity, tone, self-introduction, contact information, subject lines, and body paragraphs. The study's findings are consistent with previous research, such as Konuk's (2021) survey on authentic emails by higher education students. Konuk's study highlighted issues like poor style, carelessness, lack of clarity, and errors in spelling and punctuation in student emails. Common problems included the absence of institutional usernames, informal language, inadequate paragraph structure, missing formalities, and poor email etiquette. Students often provided non-descriptive, late, or sloppy responses and struggled with expressing emotions, using punctuation effectively, handling complex topics, and proper email formatting. Despite some awareness of academic email conventions, students' actual emails reflected these deficiencies.

The study's second objective was to investigate the most and least noticeable errors students make in email writing. Analysis of pre-test and post-test data using EA methods and SPSS showed that spelling errors were the most noticeable in both pre-test and post-test results. In the pretest, contracted forms were the second most noticeable error, followed by punctuation, capitalization, verb-related, singular/plural, and tense-related errors. In the post-test, singular-plural errors were the second most noticeable, with other significant errors including prepositions, verb-related issues, contracted forms, articles, and capitalization. These singular-plural errors were mainly because the students were more focused on the email writing format and its norms. The least noticeable error in the pretest was adverbs, while in the post-test, it was the genitive "s." Adhikary's (2022) study supports these findings, noting common formatting and grammatical mistakes and a thematic pattern in email writing, with differences observed between structured and unstructured groups. Overall, these findings provide valuable insights that could inform teaching practices and curriculum design to address persistent errors in students' email writing. Some actionable suggestions include targeted instruction for spelling errors and incorporating common error patterns into curriculum design.

The third objective examines the factors causing students' errors in email writing. The study identified a lack of knowledge of the target language elements and systems as the primary reason for these errors. Additionally, negligence and typing mistakes contributed to the errors in spelling, punctuation and including subject line. Lestari and Widiadnya (2021) found that interlingual transfer and intralingual transfer were major causes of errors, including omission, misformation, and addition.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the study highlights a gap between students' perceived understanding of formal email communication norms and their actual practices, which often reveal deficiencies in spelling, grammar, and formality. These issues arise from limited knowledge, negligence, and typing errors. The findings underscore the importance of prioritizing email communication instruction and raising awareness of email writing standards in Sri Lankan tertiary education. Addressing the study's limitations and exploring further research opportunities could offer valuable insights for future studies. Despite its constraints, the study seeks to promote awareness among teachers and students about the significance of adhering to email writing norms for effective formal communication.

The study has several implications. Firstly, despite students' claims of understanding email writing norms, their emails were error-prone, suggesting a need for better adherence to proper email practices. Secondly, teachers should provide feedback to encourage and motivate students to improve their email writing skills. This type of feedback can be given as model responses, focused feedback or one-on-one sessions. Lastly, students should receive guidance and knowledge-sharing sessions on formal communication during their first semester to better prepare them for effective email communication. These knowledge-sharing sessions can include email basics, common mistakes, cultural norms, and real-life scenarios in terms of interactive workshops, role-playing, and guest speakers.

The study had a few limitations and recommendations. First, the sample was limited to 50 first-year undergraduates from the Department of Commerce and Financial Management though manageable for a focused study, may not capture the full range of email writing practices or challenges faced by the broader student population. This relatively small size might limit the statistical power of the findings and their applicability to larger or more diverse cohorts. At the same time, the disciplinary focus of the present study is commerce and financial management students, these findings may not reflect email practices in other disciplines. Expanding the sample to include students from other departments or faculties could provide more comprehensive results. Second, exploring additional data collection techniques could improve the research methods. The researcher suggests further research to compare EA across different genders in tertiary education as the communication styles, including email writing, can sometimes differ by gender due to sociocultural influences. For instance, studies suggest that women might use more polite or tentative language, while men might be more direct. As the present study indicated, the discrepancies between self-reported habits and actual practices could be explored further by considering factors like overconfidence, limited practice, or misunderstanding of formal email conventions.

Conflict of interest statement:

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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