

Email as a mode of communication among Tunisian postgraduate students

Imen Aribi*, Faculty of Letters and Humanities of Sfax, University of Sfax, Road of the airport 4.5 km - BP Number. 553 - 3023 Sfax, Tunisia.

Suggested Citation

Aribi, I. (2017). Email as a mode of communication among Tunisian postgraduate students. *International Journal of Learning and Teaching*. 9(3), 388-409.

Received February 17, 2017; revised April 19, 2017; accepted July 18, 2017.

Selection and peer review under responsibility of Prof. Dr. Hafize Keser, Ankara University, Ankara, Turkey.

©2017 SciencePark Research, Organization & Counseling. All rights reserved.

Abstract

Emails have great potential in facilitating academic communication. However, writing effective academic emails depends on many factors including students' knowledge, experiences and perceptions about emails. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), people use certain politeness strategies to enhance face between themselves and their interlocutors. Yet, the underlying processes of email communication may be poorly understood, especially as far as politeness is concerned. This study seeks to examine the perceptions, practices and attitudes of 38 postgraduate Tunisian students towards email communication through a questionnaire. The aim is to reveal whether the sociolinguistic and pragmatic dynamics of writing emails in English are adequately understood by Tunisian postgraduate students. The questionnaire comprises four parts which include email use, participants' attitudes towards emails, email practices and social factors. Each section includes closed and open-ended questions. The findings show that the informants have a positive attitude towards the use of emails in their academic life. However, their perceptions concerning politeness and their comment on the effect of social factors show a relative variability. A possible avenue for pedagogical intervention with regard to the instruction of pragmatics in general and politeness routines in particular in email communication is presented.

Keywords: Emails, politeness, pragmatic competence, social factors.

*ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Imen Aribi Ben Amor**, Faculty of Letters and Humanities of Sfax, University of Sfax, Road of the airport 4.5 km - BP Number. 553 - 3023 Sfax, Tunisia
E-mail address: imen_aribi@yahoo.tr / Tel.: +00-216-22 888 529

1. Introduction

The opportunities offered by the Web to people to interact all over the world have greatly increased and people have become able to communicate with each other in whatever place they can be in. Among many types of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), one form of communication that has become the most prevalent is email communication (Eslami, 2011; Waldvogel, 2005) due to its various advantages such as rapidity and efficiency. Email has become an efficient and accepted substitute means of interaction (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011).

However, some studies suggest that there is an altering or reduction in the normal conventions of politeness in email discourse compared with more established written forms of communication (Bunz & Cambell, 2002; Ma, 1996; Simmons, 1994). Many factors may lead users to reduce or omit certain politeness cues in their email discourse. The absence of social context cues in emails "mask[s] ... status differences between participants" (Baron, 1984). Email writers' ambivalence and uncertainty about how to encode communicative intent in this text-only medium tend to surface especially in hierarchical relationships, such as between students and faculty, and in situations involving impositions on the addressee (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007). While students can write to their peers in any manner, they feel uneasy to write emails to superiors (Baron, 1998; 2000; Murray, 1988; 1995 as cited in Chen, 2006). Students may be temporarily "unaware" of whom they are addressing in emails which results in language that lacks status congruence (Herring, 2002; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; 1991). It might also be the result of being simply uncertain about email etiquette because students lack experience and because they are not explicitly taught how to write it (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007). Politeness conventions in email, with little guidance in the academic institutional hierarchy, appear to be a work in progress, and native speakers demonstrate greater resources in creating e-polite messages than non-native speakers (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007)

Accordingly, this study seeks to examine the perceptions and attitudes of Tunisian postgraduate students towards email communication and its use.

2. Method

The questionnaire designed for the current research is used to gather data about Tunisian postgraduate students' perceptions, practices and attitudes towards email communication. In particular, the study seeks to obtain insights from Tunisian students into how the concepts of face and politeness were embedded within email language. Consequently, all the items in the questionnaire are linked as much as possible to the overall objective of the study. Originally, the design of the questionnaire followed themes that were identified to be major in the study such as the expression of politeness in emails.

The questionnaire incorporated four broad sections

- 1- Email use
- 2- Email practice
- 3- Attitudes
- 4- Effects of social factors

Each section elicits both quantitative and qualitative data, including examples of forced-choice questions (Likert scale, Frequency scale, Multiple choice, yes/No answers) as well as open-ended questions. The creation of the current version of the questionnaire was made via a survey tool named "esurvey creator" (cf: <https://www.esurveycreator.com>) and all participants received a link to the electronic questionnaire. The type of sampling used for the present questionnaire was that of convenience. The total number of the target students is 82, however only 38 completed the questionnaire and returned it with a return rate of 46.34%. The participants are native speakers of Arabic speaking English as a foreign language. Their mean age is 30.5. They are 7 males and 31 females who are postgraduate students belonging to different institutes in Tunisia. The respondents are relatively homogeneous in terms of their cultural background and academic experiences.

3. Results

3.1. Email use

The first part is devoted to unveil findings about the use of emails by the participants. The intention behind asking the first question is to deduce approximately the period when the participants started using the email as a medium of communication. The available answers are as follows: before the year 2000, between 2000 and 2005, between 2005 and 2010 or after the year 2010. As it is shown from the figure below, more than half of the sample population agreed upon the choice of the second period (between 2000 and 2005). On the other hand, 31.57% affirm that they started using this medium between 2005 and 2010 and 10.52% said they started emailing before 2000. As a whole, the extent to which the participants have been exposed to emails could be considered relatively important as it exceeds ten years.

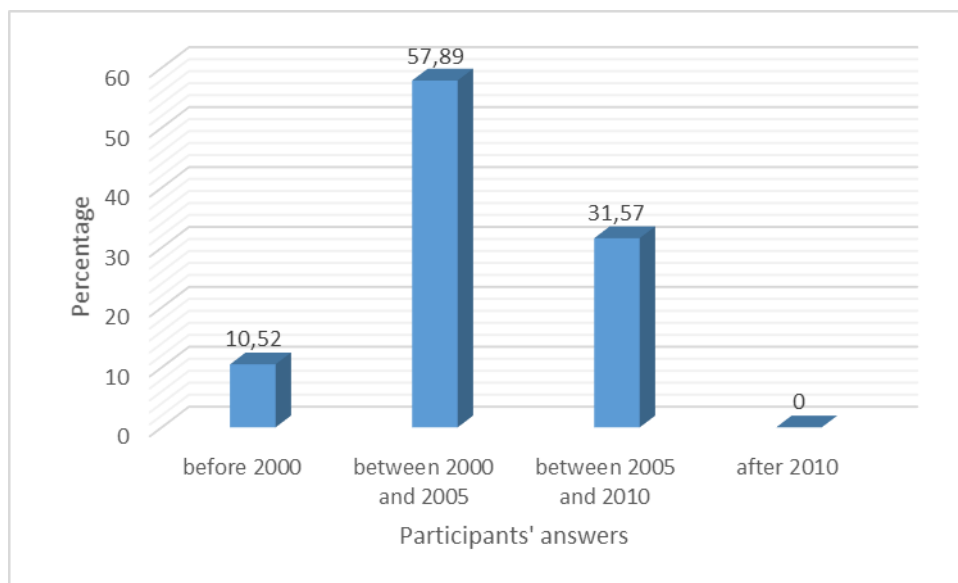


Figure 1. Frequency distribution of participants' answers to when they started using emails

The second question seeks to unveil the frequency of checking email inboxes by the participants per week. Results reveal that while 36.84% of them say several times, 31.57% say frequently. It is found that 15.78% of them are logged into their email accounts almost continuously during the day and they consult their inboxes whenever a new message comes up and therefore, spend a relatively considerable time on email communication.

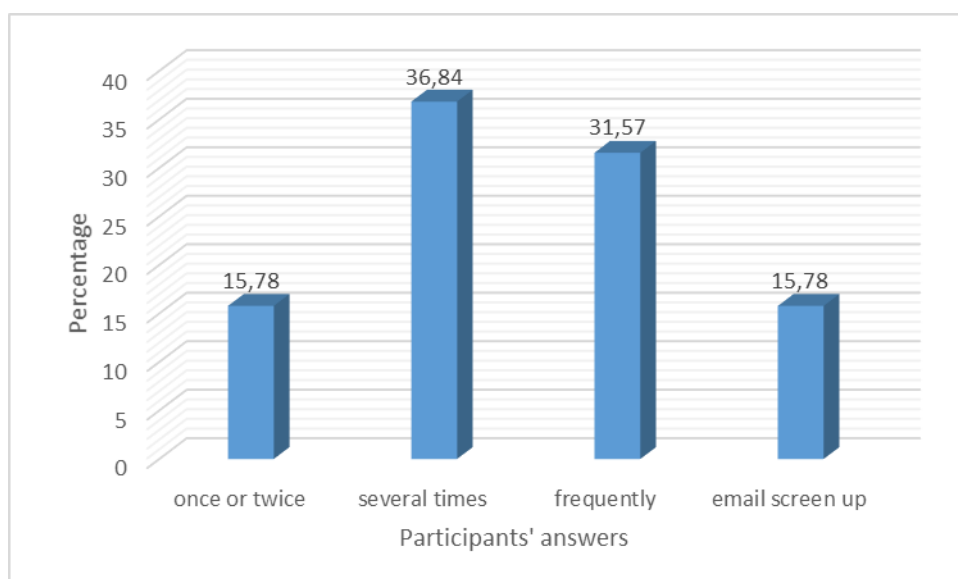


Figure 2. Frequency distribution of participants' answers to the average time spent at checking their emails per week

The third question aims at determining approximately the amount of time that the participants spend on interacting via emails ranging from zero to thirty minutes to more than two hours. As it is clear from the figure below, up to 70% of the participants state that they spend from zero to 30 minutes on email communication, while 21.05% of them affirm that they spend from thirty minutes to one hour. This result suggests that the participants spend a considerable span of time on email communication, which entails the importance of email communication to them.

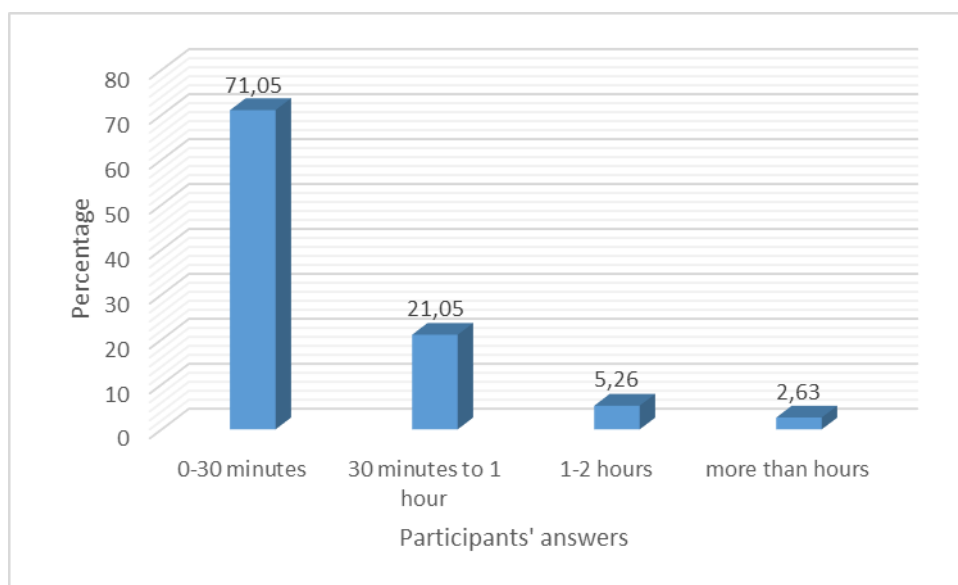


Figure 3. Frequency distribution of participants' answers concerning the amount of time spent on email communication

The fourth question sheds light on the main purposes for using emails. The suggested answers are for personal, academic (relating to institutionalized education) professional (relating to a profession), or other purposes. As it is clear from the findings, the most preferred options were academic and professional accounting for 42.1% and 36.84% respectively. This finding shows that the informants have a strong inclination towards the use of email medium in their academic and professional life. Thus, most of the participants have been using email as an integral part of their academic and professional lives.

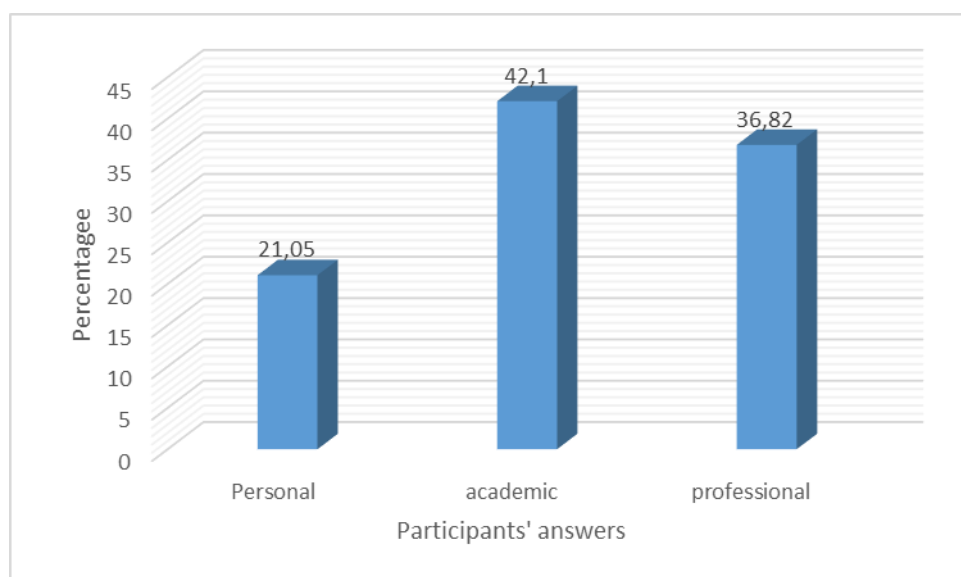


Figure 4. Frequency distribution of participants' answers to the purposes for using emails

The fifth question deals with how often the respondents use emails for academic purposes and the answers range from never to always. The aim behind asking this question is to determine the frequency of their use. The most chosen options are sometimes and always accounting for 44.73% and 26.31% respectively. As it is seen from the results, there is a great tendency to use emails for academic purposes on the part of Tunisian postgraduate students.

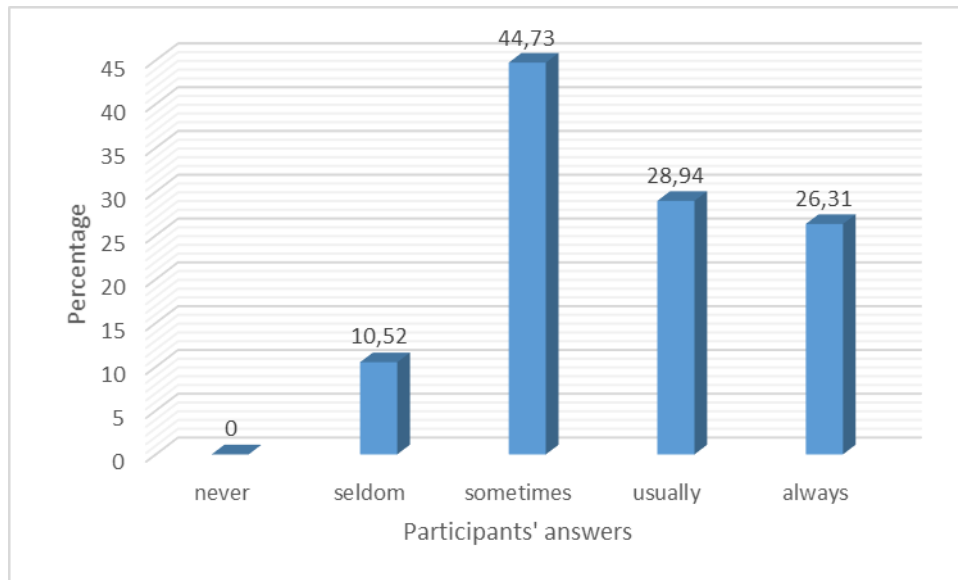


Figure 5. Frequency distribution of participants' answers across the rating scale concerning how often they use emails for academic purposes

The sixth question is about the types of academic purposes for which the participants use email. The options are thanking, requesting something, apologizing, exchanging information and other(s). The participants seemed to opt for requesting something and exchanging information. These two choices account for 39.47% each of the overall answers. This result attests that the participants not only exchange information but also request information or actions via emails. The participants are to some extent, used to writing requests via email. This stresses the role of emails in the academic life of Tunisian students.

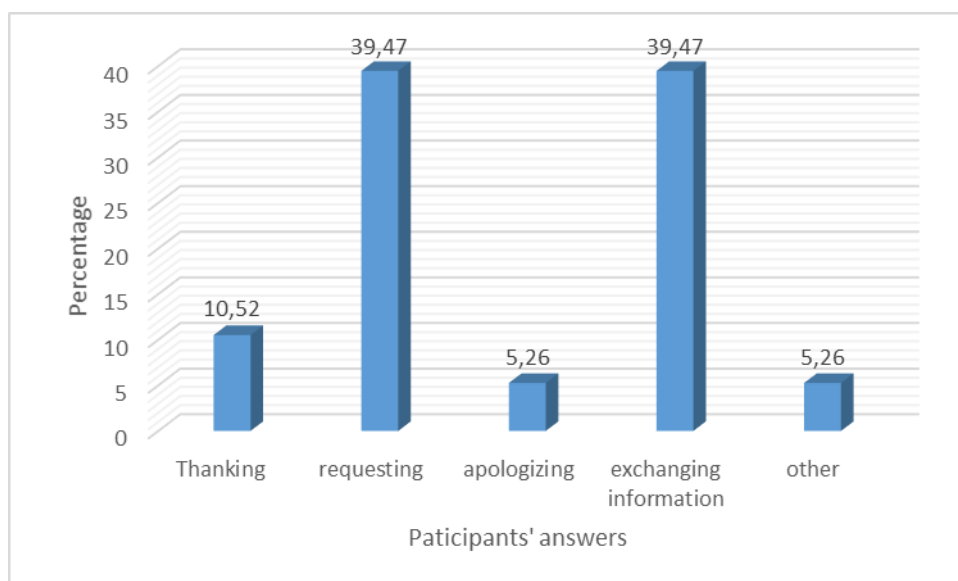


Figure 6. Frequency distribution of participants' answers to the types of academic purposes for which the participants use email

In the seventh question, the participants are required to rank the two or three academic purposes for which they use emails in order of importance. Results reveal that up to 80% of the respondents consider requesting and exchanging information as the two most important purposes followed by thanking. As it is attested from the previous question, the answers to this question also emphasize that the participants are used to email requests.

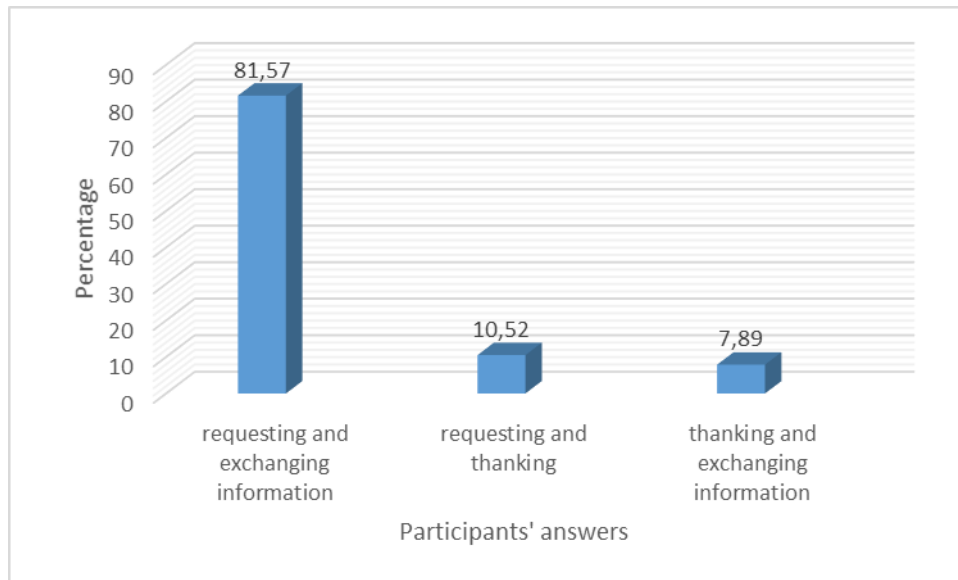


Figure 7. Frequency distribution of participants' ranking of the academic purposes for which they use emails in order of importance

3.2. Attitudes to emails

The second part of questions is devoted to examine the participants' attitudes towards emails. This part includes seven questions. Question one of this part seeks to determine to what extent the participants enjoy using emails. As it is clear from the results, half of the participants say they enjoy using email as means of communication, while 19.44% of the participants have neutral response and 15.78% of them disagreed. The answers to this question suggest that there is a relatively tendency of the participant to enjoy using emails. This stresses their willingness to use emails as means of communication.

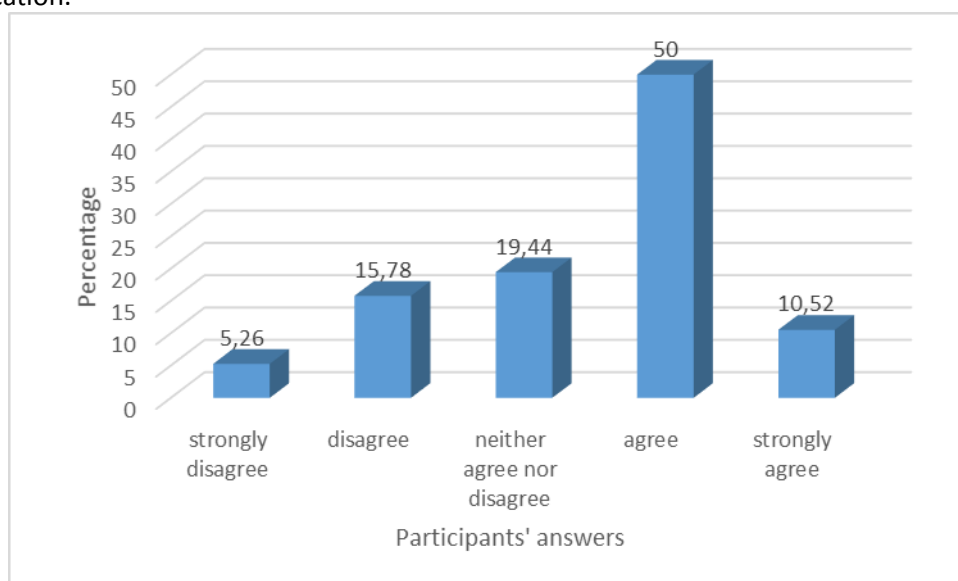


Figure 8. Frequency distribution of participants' attitudes toward enjoying using emails

By answering the second question of this part, the participants express their attitudes concerning to what extent email saves time compared to other modes. It is found that 36.84% answered that they strongly agree with the statement email saves a lot of time compared to other modes while 57.89% agree. It is important to note that the participants do not express any disagreement concerning this question. This entails that emails represent an efficient means of communication to the participants.

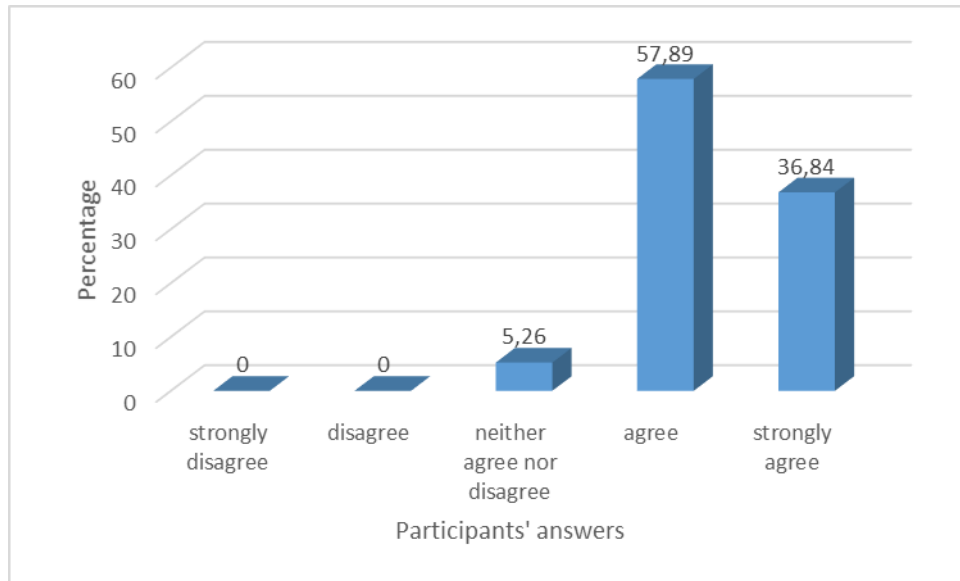


Figure 9. Frequency distribution of participants' attitudes toward saving time via using emails

Question three seeks to determine to what extent the participants think that email has made it easier for them to communicate with people. The findings reveal that 26.31% of the participants strongly agreed with the statement that email has it made easier for them to communicate with people while 39.47% of them agreed. The findings of this question show that email facilitates many tasks to the participants and enhances communication. This emphasizes the advantages of email and its user-friendliness.

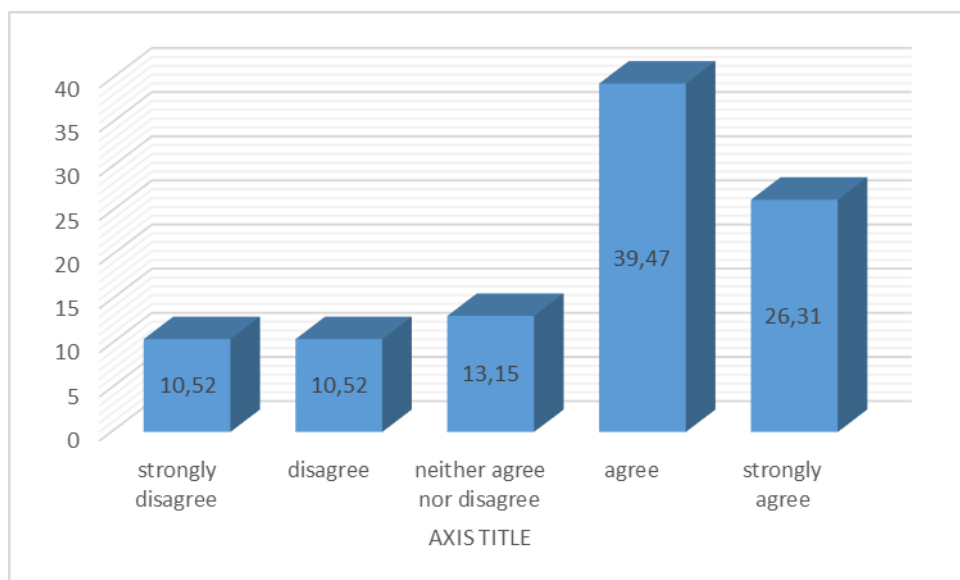


Figure 10. Frequency distribution of participants' attitudes toward the easiness of email communication

The fourth question inquires about the preference of the participants to request something from people via email rather than face-to-face. As it is displayed in the figure below, it is clear that the proportions for the options concerning this question are relatively similar. It is found that the options, strongly disagree, agree and strongly agree are chosen by 8 participants for each. The results of this

question suggest that the participants have different perceptions towards requesting via emails since some of them prefer this way but others prefer face-to-face requesting. The main reason for not preferring the email medium is probably the lack of paralinguistic cues in email communication.

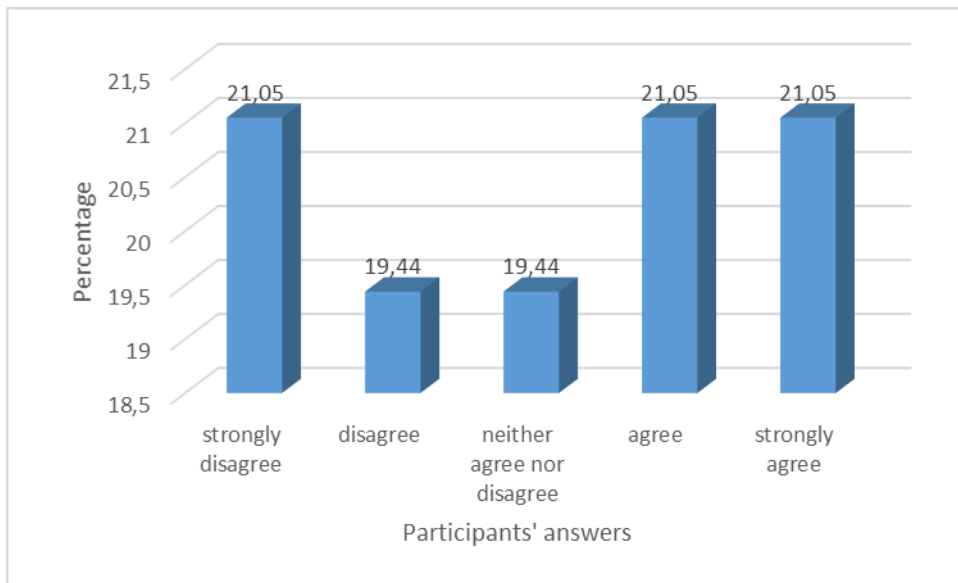


Figure 11. Frequency distribution of participants' attitudes toward requesting via email.

3.3. Email practices

The third part of the questionnaire is about email practices. It comprises nine questions. The first question of this part seeks to determine to what extent the participants think that writing an informative subject line is necessary. The available answers range from very important to unimportant. It is found that the majority of the participants (31) consider that it is important to write informative subject lines in any email.

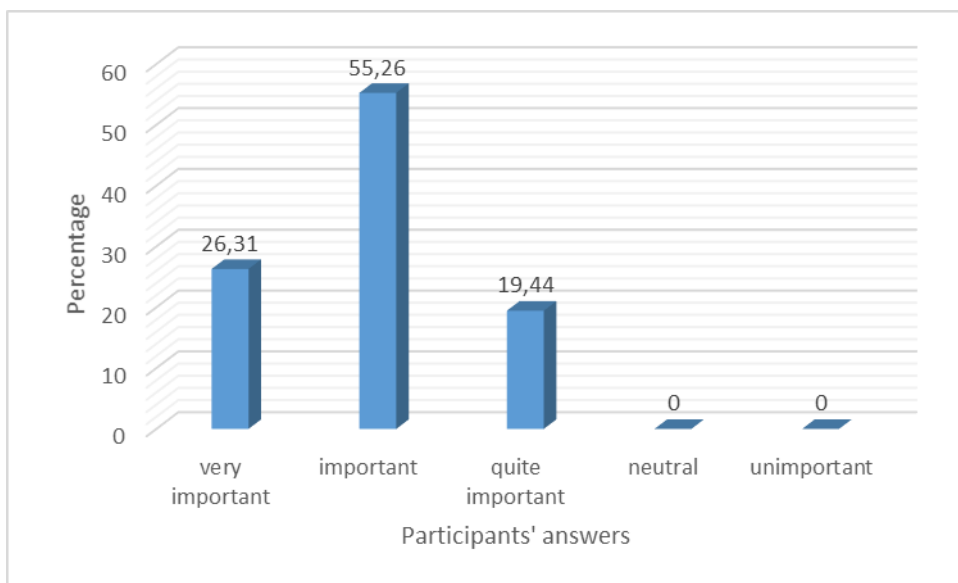


Figure 12. Frequency distribution of participants' answers to the necessity of writing an informative subject line in emails

The second question aims to determine how often the participants write a clear informative subject line in their emails. As it is clear from the results, 39.47% of the participants say that they usually write informative subject lines, the same percentage say that they always do so and 21.05%

choose sometimes. The findings reveal that the majority of the participants assert that they write clear informative subject lines.

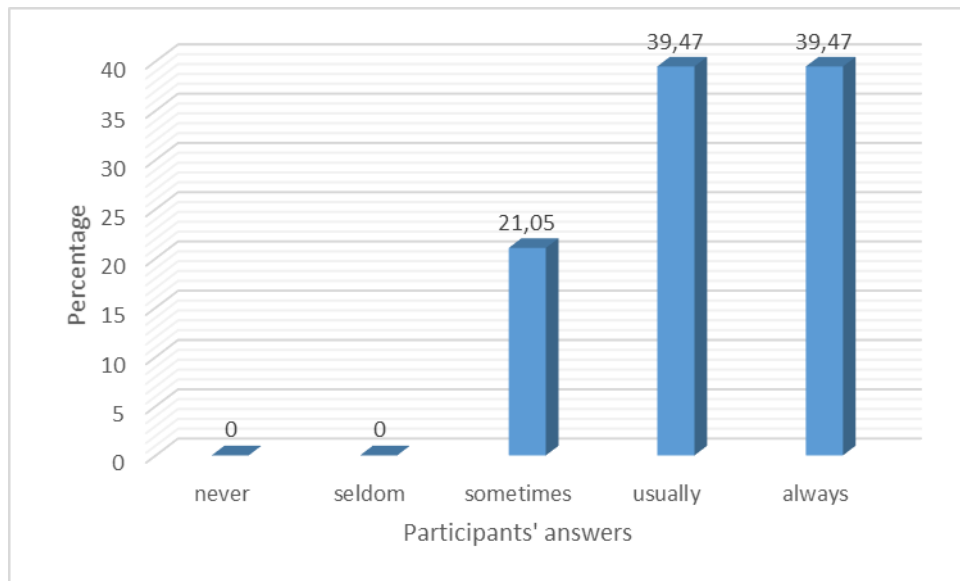


Figure 13. Frequency distribution of participants' answers to writing an informative subject lines in emails

By asking question number three, the researcher intends to know to what extent the participants think that including an opening sentence in emails is important. The informants' answers revealed a tendency to consider opening as important component in emails. It is found that 44.73% strongly agree, 47.36% of the participants agree while only a tiny number disagree (3).

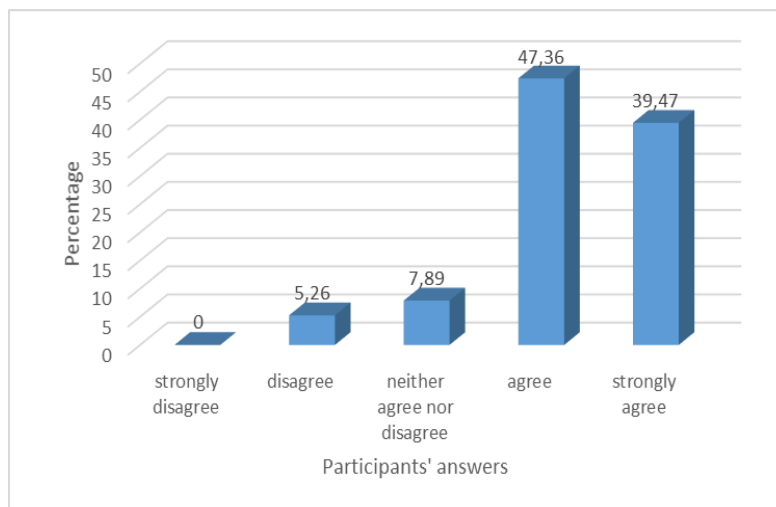


Figure 14. Frequency distribution of participants' answers to the necessity of writing an opening sentence in emails

Question four seeks to determine the frequency of starting email messages with a greeting or salutation by the informants. Results reveal that two groups of the participants (42.10%) say that they usually or always do that while 10.52% of them choose sometimes and 5.26% choose seldom. This suggests that the participants prefer to use openings (opening sentence and salutations) in their emails and consider it as a necessary component.

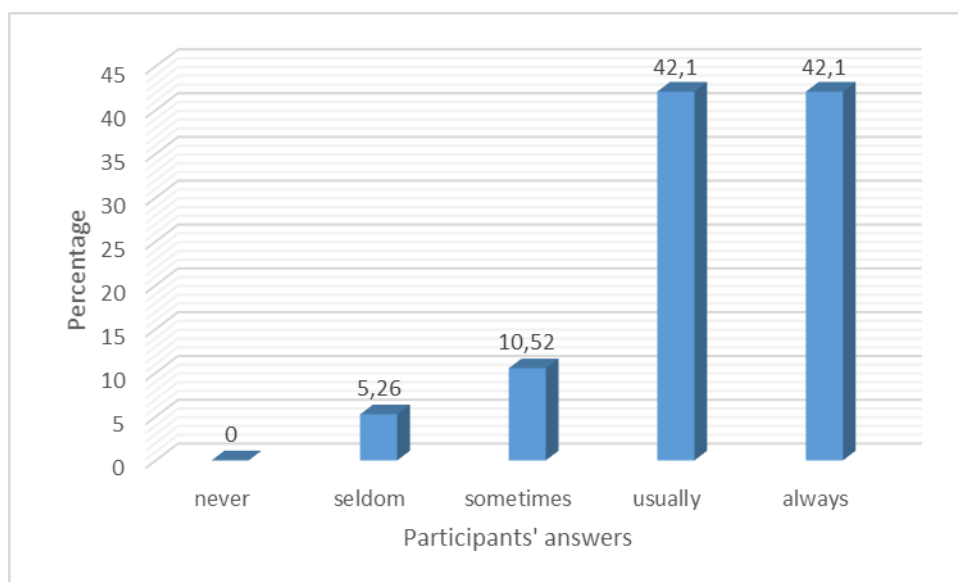


Figure 15. Frequency distribution of participants' answers to writing openings in emails

The fifth question of this part aims to unveil whether the participants ask how their supervisor or professor is doing or feeling when emailing him. This question seeks to determine whether the participants use phatic communication when greeting their supervisor. It is noticed that up to the half of the participants tend to choose the option sometimes with a percentage of 52.63 while 21.05% of them choose usually and 10.52% of them choose always. The rationale behind using such phatic communication is to establish personal rapport with the receiver and show respect and consideration. The use of phatic communication may be considered as an instance of positive politeness strategies. In addition, it could be seen as an instance of the direct transfer of expressions from the Tunisian culture and traditions to English language. However, by using this strategy, the participants may appear to be over polite and may turn to be negative rather than positive.

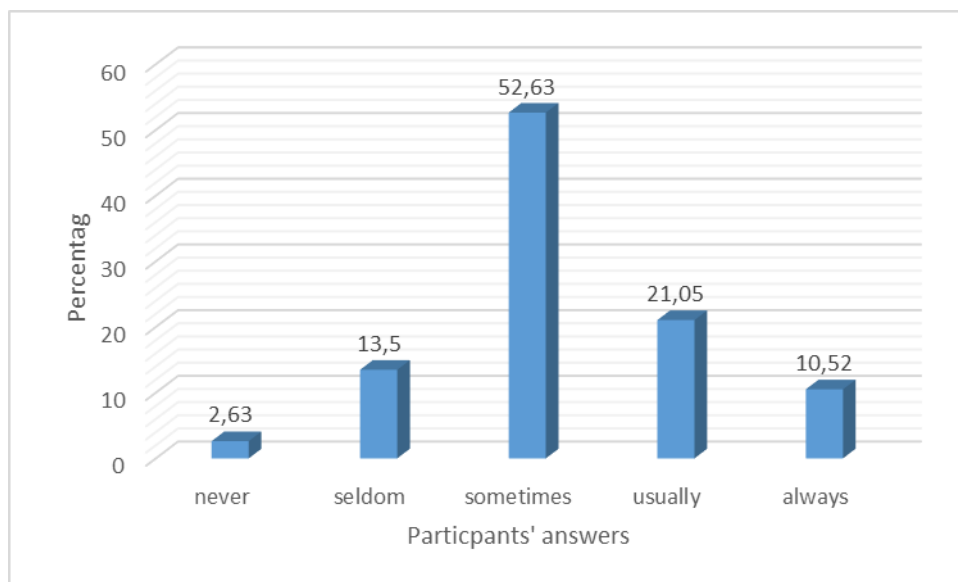


Figure 16. Frequency distribution of participants' answers to using phatic communication

Question six seeks to determine to what extent the subjects think that including a closing in emails is important. As it is displayed from the findings, the majority of postgraduate students agree upon that. 44.73% agree, 42.10% strongly agree while 7.89% disagree. As it is attested from the results, the participants give much importance not only to openings but also to closings.

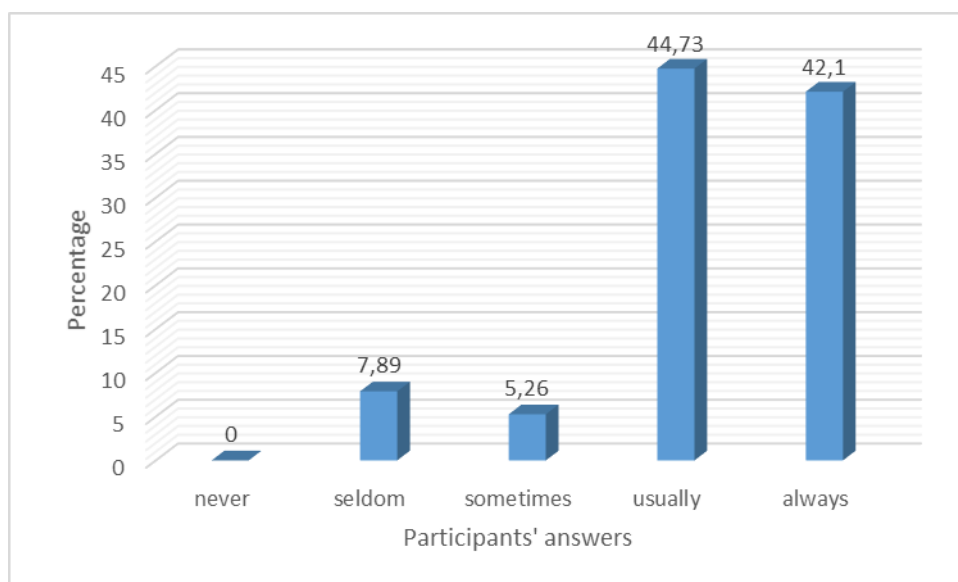


Figure 17. Frequency distribution of participants' answers to the necessity of writing a closing sentence in emails

The seventh question aims to determine how often the participants sign off email messages by using closings. As it is shown from the graph below, 42.1% of the respondents say that they usually do so, 39.47% of them assert that they always do so whereas 10.25% of them choose sometimes and 7.89% choose seldom. The results of this question and the previous one suggest that the participants prefer to use closings in their emails and consider closing as a necessary component.

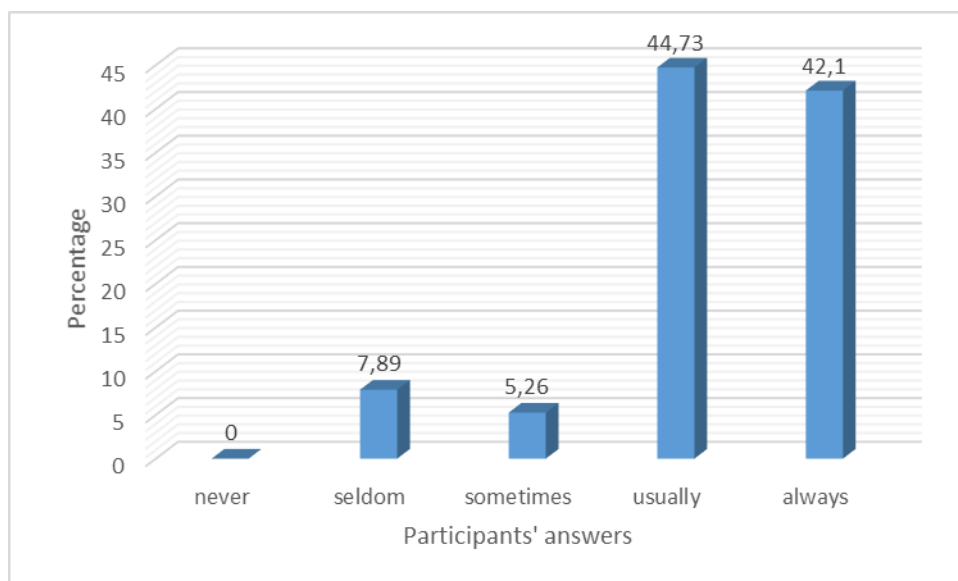


Figure 18. Frequency distribution of participants' answers to writing closings in emails

The aim of question eight is to uncover whether the participants think carefully about how they word their email messages. It is found that 34.21% of them answer that they usually do so, 26.31% opt for always while 31.57% choose sometimes. This proves that writing emails requires cognitive efforts and it is therefore a demanding task. So, it is not easy to produce effective and appropriate emails. It requires a relatively considerable deal of reflection in applying different strategies for writing more influential and persuasive emails.

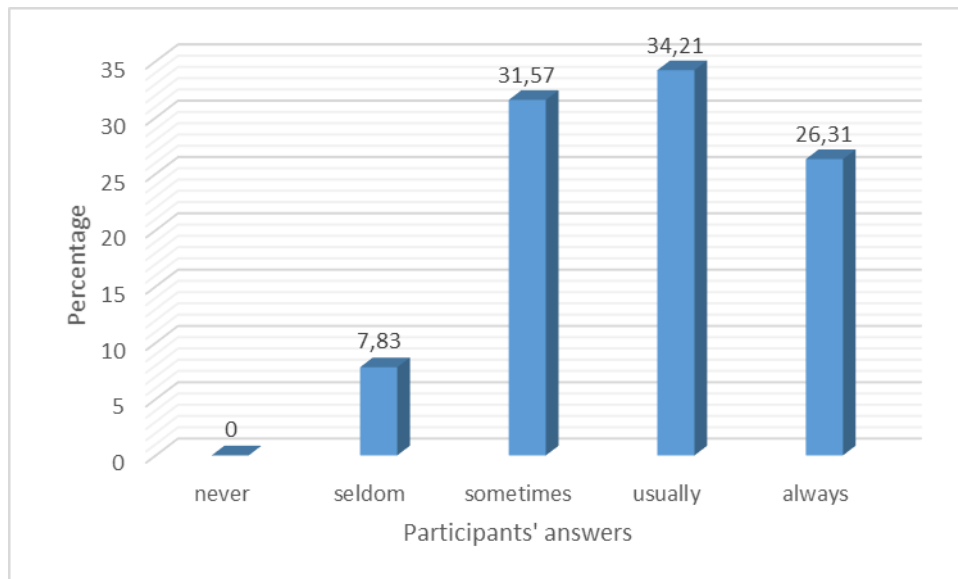


Figure 19. Frequency distribution of participants' answers to thinking carefully about how to word email messages

The ninth question of this part seeks to investigate whether the informants stop and rethink the message before clicking the “send” command. The most favored answers are ‘usually’ with a percentage of 42.1% and ‘sometimes’ (26.31%). This is to prove again that the task of writing emails requires mental efforts on the part of the participants in order to reach a coherent piece of writing. It is worth pointing out that this option is found in the medium of email in contrast to face-to-face communication, thus it offers emails users the opportunity to revise their messages and correct any mistake and change any element.

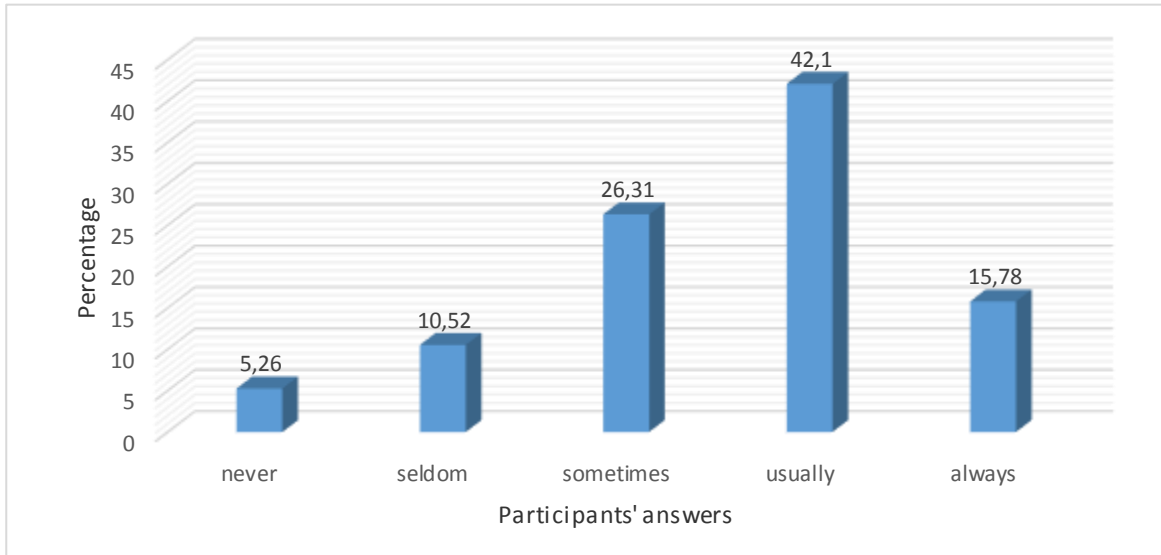


Figure 20. Frequency distribution of participants' answers to rethinking the message before sending it

The next question seeks to determine whether the informants like to write their emails in a formal way. In other words, it aims to investigate whether the participants prefer to follow established rules or email etiquettes when writing their emails. It is found from the findings that the majority prefer to resort to formality, in that 36.84% of them choose sometimes, 31.57% choose usually and 21.05% choose always, whereas only 10.52% choose seldom. This entails that the participants prefer that they follow required or conventional procedures in order to appear polite.

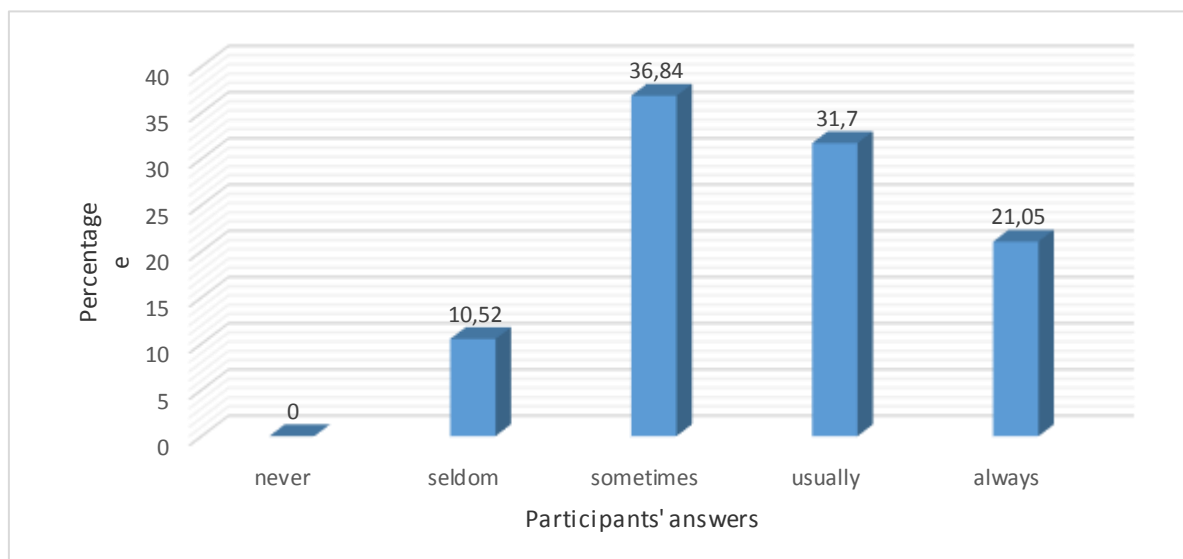


Figure 21. Frequency distribution of participants' preferences to write their emails in a formal way

Then, they are required to specify how they show formality or informality in their emails in general. The ways for showing formality for the participants include addressing full or formal titles, opening and signing off formally, using thanking, showing respect and consideration, using formal language or expressions and using correct language and correct grammar. The most mentioned way to express formality is the use of full titles (12 occurrences), followed by opening and signing off formally (11 times) and using thanking and showing respect and consideration (8 times for each). This shows the diversity of the participants' answers.

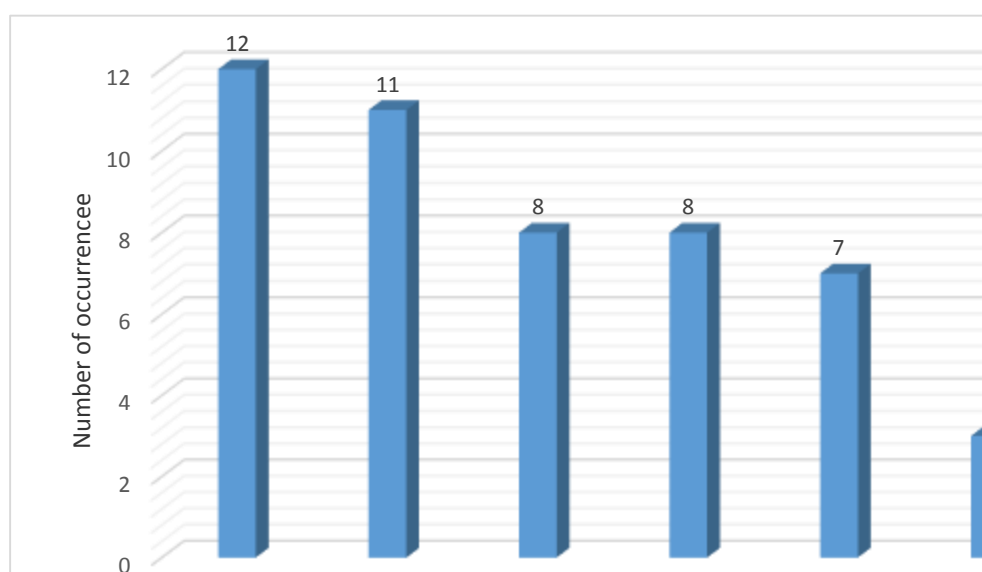


Figure 22. Frequency distribution of participants' answers to how they show formality or informality in their emails

It is also important to note that 12 participants out of 38 said that they use some informal strategies such as using emoticons, abbreviations, using a friendly tone, humor, expressing feelings and sharing thoughts. These procedures are preferred by the participants to show a sense of involvement, reciprocity and solidarity towards their receivers. The use of emoticons is mentioned by the participants 7 times followed by abbreviations mentioned 5 times, then the friendly tone occurring 3 times and after that come, humor and jokes and expressing feelings mentioned 3 times each and finally sharing thoughts mentioned twice.

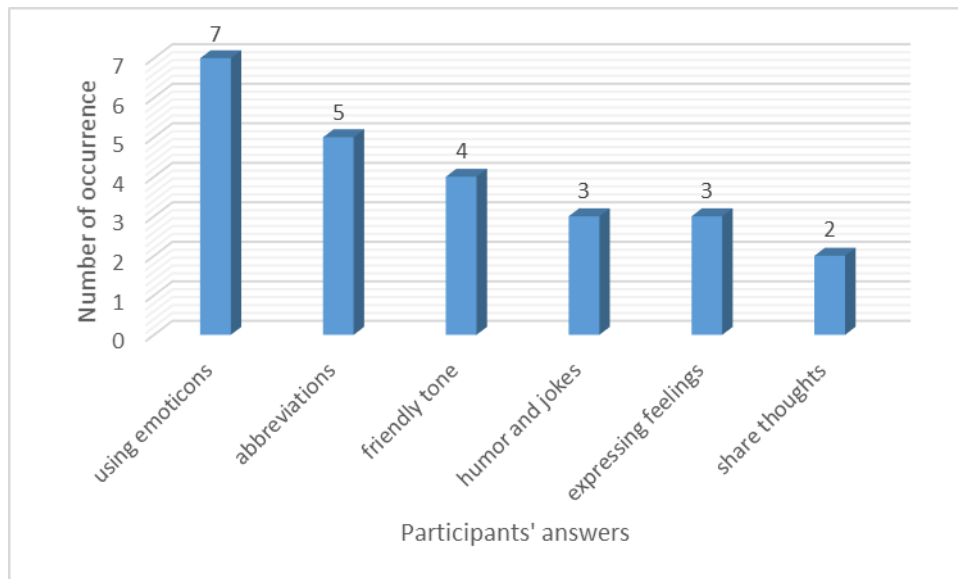


Figure 23. Frequency distribution of participants' ways to express informality in emails

The next question's aim is to detect how important the participants think politeness is in their email writings. The participants' answers show that they consider politeness as an important element. It is found that 36.84% consider it very important, 42.1% consider it as important and 15.78% choose the option quite important. Combining very important, important, quite important percentages lead to the conclusion that they are well-aware of the importance of politeness in email communication.

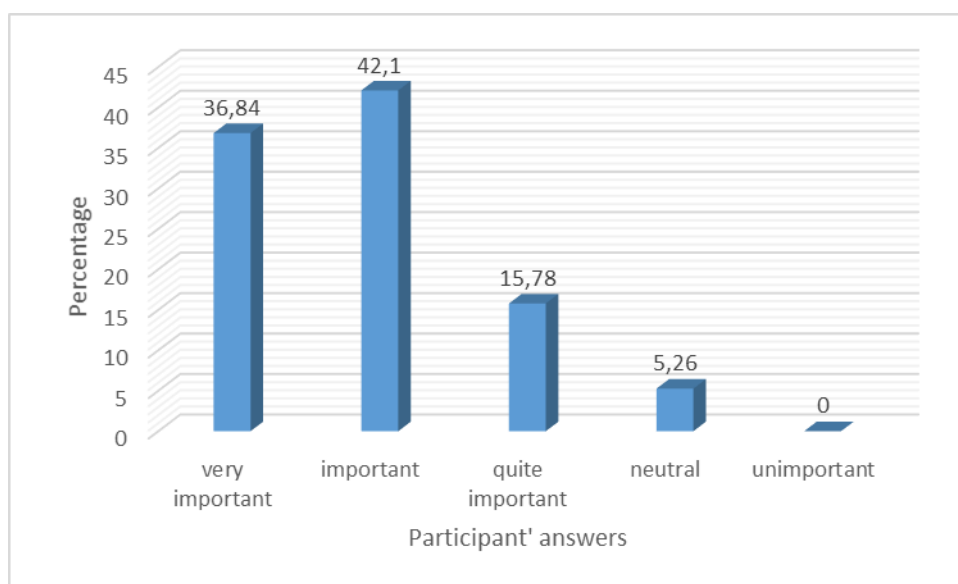


Figure 24. Frequency distribution of participants' attitudes toward the importance of politeness in emails

The participants were required then to mention the reasons behind their preference to show politeness in their email writings. The participants gave many different reasons for wanting to include politeness in email communication. The results of this question indicate that the participants embrace many reasons for wanting to include politeness in their email communication. The theoretical base of Brown and Levinson (1978; 1987), which posits that politeness is used to save the face of both the sender and receiver when there is a potential threat, is the most chosen reason.

Table 1. Reasons for including politeness

Reasons of including politeness	Number of occurrence
To save face and preserve status	16
To achieve personal or communicative goals	13
To avoid conflict	9
To showing respect and consideration	8
To enhancing social relations	7
To showing involvement	5
To following social etiquette	4

The last question belonging to this part concerns how the respondents try to show politeness in their email writings. The overwhelming response to how the participants express politeness was very similar to how they show formality in their email writings. Thus, it is found that the participants use the same ways of being formal such as showing respect and consideration, using formal greetings and goodbyes, full titles, thanking expressions, formal language and expressions, lexical items such as 'please' and 'thank you' and other suitable formulaic expressions. However, using correct vocabulary and correct grammar are not mentioned as ways of expressing politeness.

Table 2. Ways of showing politeness

Ways of showing politeness	Number of occurrence
Using formal greetings and goodbyes	16
Using full titles	13
Using thanking expressions	9
Showing respect and consideration	8
Using formal language and expressions	7
Using lexical items such as 'please' and 'thank you'	5
Using suitable formulaic expressions	4

It is interesting to note that the ways by which the participants express politeness are different. This may highlight the personal and subjective opinion and view point of participants toward linguistic politeness.

3.4. Effects of social factors

The last part of the questionnaire is devoted to grasp some knowledge about the participants' perceptions towards the effects of social power and distance when writing emails. This part is made up of eight questions. In the first question of this part, the participants are required to determine whether the person to whom they are addressing affects their linguistic choices in writing emails. It is found that 39.47% of the participants strongly agree, 47.36% agree, while only 5.26% disagree. This stresses the influence of the factors of social power and distance on the participants in their writing of emails.

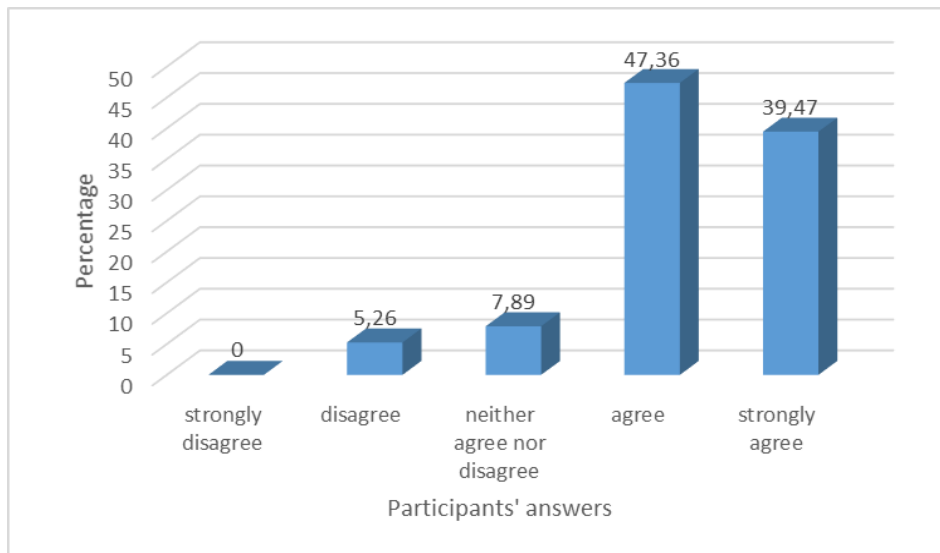


Figure 25. Frequency distribution of participants' perceptions towards the effects of social power and distance when writing emails

In the second question, the respondents determine whether their addressee affects their choice of opening. Results reveal that the participants tend to choose the options strongly agree and agree with a percentage of 39.47% for each option, while it is found that 15.78% are neutral. This stresses the role of the factors of social power and distance in the politeness degree in opening sequences. According to the informants, the opening sequences also vary according to the addressee.

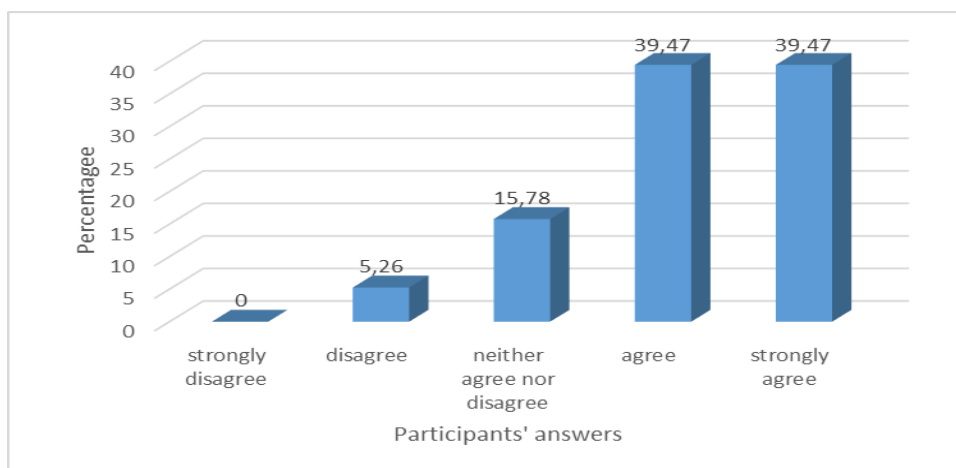


Figure 26. Frequency distribution of participants' attitudes toward the effect of the addressee on the choice of openings

In the third question, the participants are required to specify whether the addressee affects their choice of closings. The most preferred answer is strongly agree with a percentage of 42.1% followed by agree accounting for 36.84%. Similar to the openings, the participants confirm the influence of the factor of social power and distance in closings.

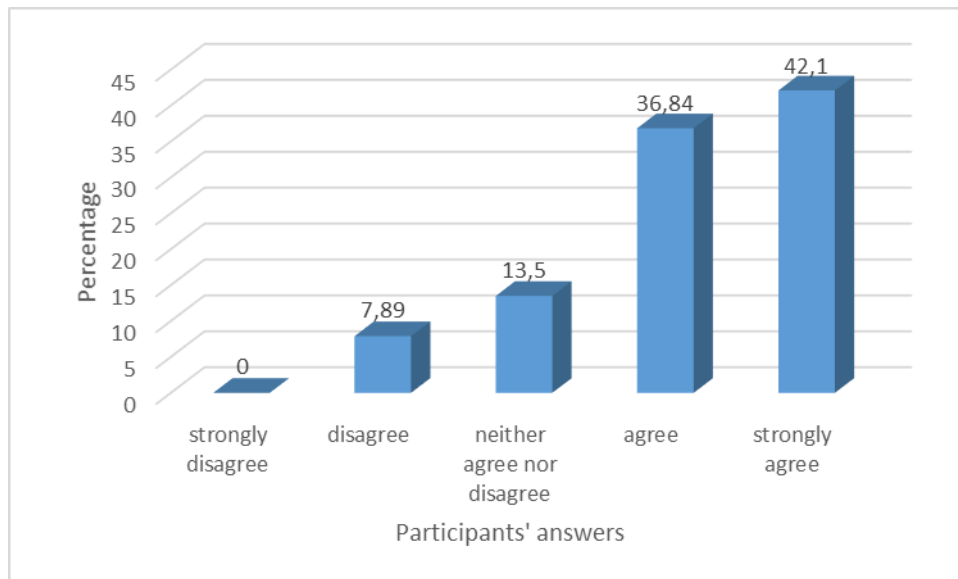


Figure 27. Frequency distribution of participants' attitudes toward the effect of the addressee on the choice of closings

The next question aims to investigate whether the participants think that they express politeness differently in their email communications with unknown or quite familiar receivers compared to their communication with people they know. As the figure below displays results, the majority of the respondents answer yes (92.1%) while only 7.89% of them answer no. Thus, the participants acknowledge the effects of the social factors of power and distance in their email communication.

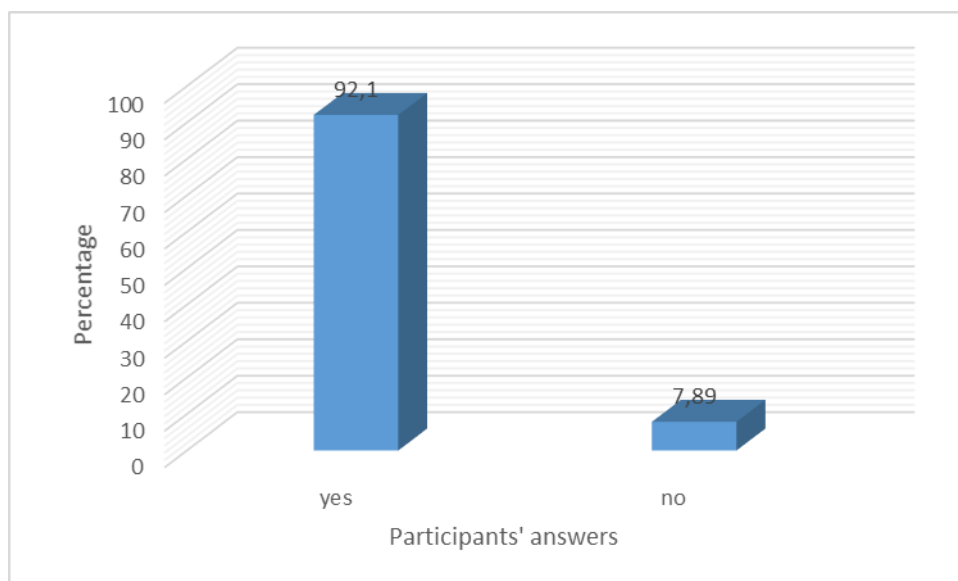


Figure 28. Frequency distribution of participants' answers to the ways they express politeness in emails

In the following question, if the participants' answers are positive, they were required to state how they express politeness differently according to the social distance. The participants consider the issue of social status important. The major way to show politeness to strangers according to them is to express themselves formally rather than informally. According to them, formality of language shows respect for strangers and people with whom there is some extent of social distance.

Question six of this part seeks to determine whether the participants' emails written to their professor or supervisor are different from those sent to their peers (colleagues) and/or their students or pupils. It is worth noting that all the informants (100%) choose yes to confirm that their emails differ according to the social power of their addressee. This confirms the consideration of the effect of the social power in writing emails by the informants.

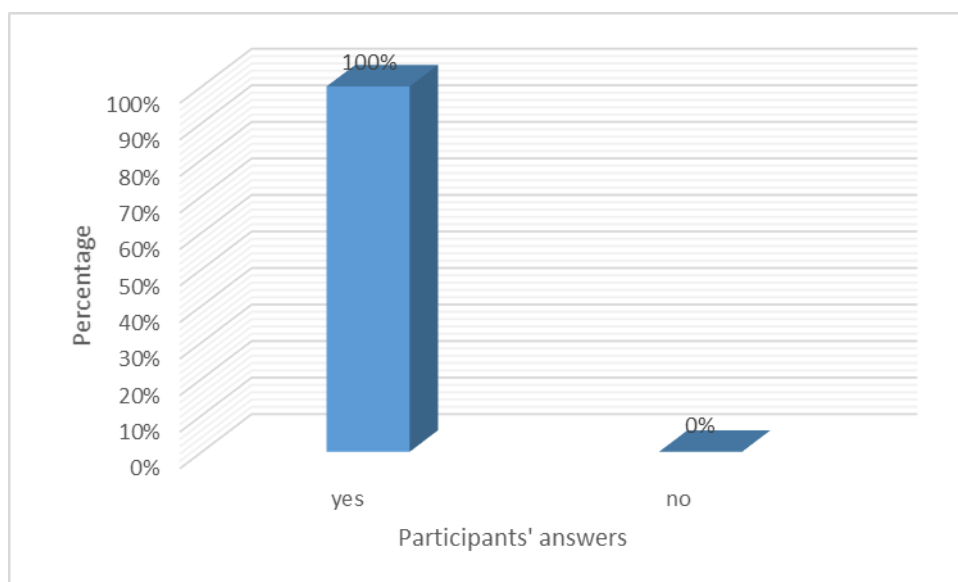


Figure 29. Frequency distribution of participants' attitudes to the difference between emails written to superiors and equals

The seventh question aims to unveil how the informants express politeness differently in their email communication with superiors compared to their email communications with peers or social inferiors. The participants assert that when addressing high-ranking people, the most important feature to show is formality. The ways that the Tunisian participants said that they use to convey formality of writing included addressing, opening and signing off formally. Nevertheless, the inclusion of formulaic expressions of thanking, showing consideration and respect are also emphasized. According to the participants, formality of language shows respect for socially different others. In other words, the participants said that they expressed politeness in their communications to superiors through being more formal. However when answering the questionnaire, the majority of the participants say that they did express politeness differently according to the social factors of power and distance, but they equated politeness with formality.

The last question of the questionnaire aims to evaluate how easy/hard it was for the participants to write emails. As it is clear from the findings, 26.31% find it very easy, 44.73% find it easy while 10.52% find it hard and 13.5% of them find it neither hard nor easy. Indeed the easiness of writing emails depends on the email's writer. The answers to this question emphasize the idiosyncrasy of the participants and their subjective viewpoints towards the degree of difficulty of writing emails.

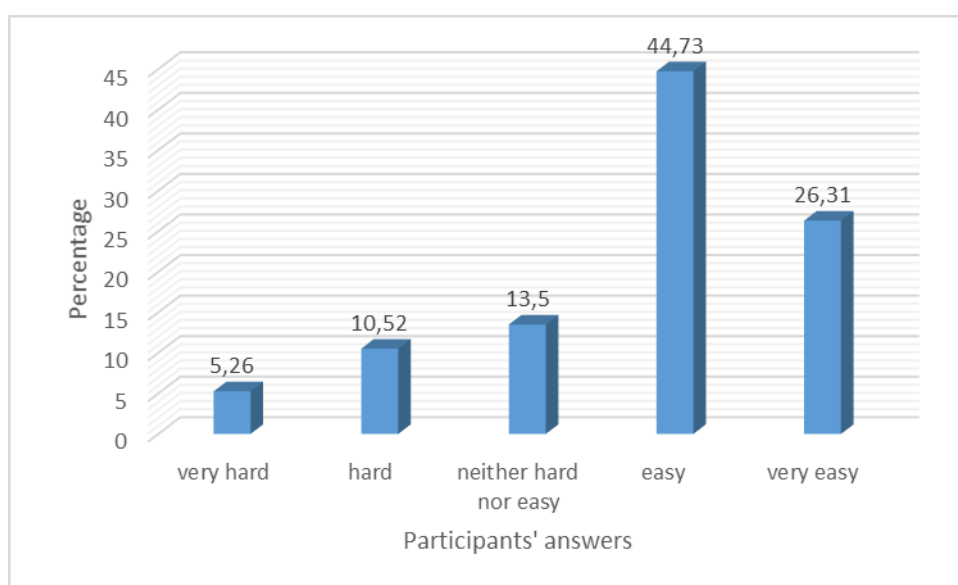


Figure 30: Frequency distribution of participants' attitudes toward the easiness of writing emails

4. Discussion

A close analysis of the questionnaire's results reveals that the informants assert that they spend a relatively considerable span of time on email communication. They have a strong inclination towards the use of the email medium in their academic life especially for requesting. Tunisian postgraduate students stress the fact that they use email as an integral part of their academic and professional life. Indeed, the main advantage of email over other modes of communication is that it enables people to communicate speedily the same information to many others in diverse locations and time zones (Waldvogel, 2007). Furthermore, it could be said that emails could complement face-to-face produces (Murphy, 2006). In line with Barron (1998), emails perform significant interpersonal relationship functions and often remove difficulties associated with verbal communication such as shyness or fear, thus enhancing the freedom of expression.

As far as the participants' attitudes towards emails are concerned, results reveal that there is a relative tendency on the part of the participants to enjoy using emails. The reasons behind this positive attitude towards the email medium is undoubtedly its various advantages. Concerning the issue of time, the participants do not express any disagreement regarding saving time when using the email medium compared to other modes. The findings show that the participants consider the medium of email as a facilitator of communication and it enhances online interactions. For example, the email users may express themselves openly and freely in such a way that they are isolated from social rules, from control and also from criticism (Sproull & Kiesler, 1991). Another advantage of email communication is that it is asynchronous and thus receivers can reply to the messages at their own time and space (Eslami, 2011) which may facilitate communication. On the other hand, while some of the participants prefer using emails, others prefer face-to-face interactions. The main reason for not preferring the email medium is probably the lack of paralinguistic cues in email communication. Indeed, the lack of social context cues such as certain body language messages that appear in face-to-face communication, may pose a barrier in email communication (Garton & Wellman, 1994; Holmes, 1995). Thus, the absence of meta-communicative features like facial expressions, posture and tone of voice may be the main reason to prefer face-to-face communication to email.

Concerning the findings of the part of email practices, it is found that the participants consider the subject line, openings and closings as important components of emails but the question posed here is to what extent the informants do so in reality. Moreover the participants assert that they use phatic communication in openings and greetings. This is to establish personal rapport with the receiver and show respect and consideration. The use of phatic communication may be considered as an instance of positive politeness strategies used to show respect and could be seen as an instance of the direct transfer of expressions from Tunisian culture and traditions to English language. This is frequent in Tunisian conversations when the speaker asks the hearer many questions after the greeting about his/her health and well-being and even about his/her family. However, when using this strategy in email communication, the participants may appear to be over polite and hence turned to be negative rather than positive.

Results reveal that there is a tendency to choose the formal way in writing by the participants through using full titles, using formal language or expressions and using correct language and correct grammar. Concerning politeness, results reveal that almost all participants consider politeness as important feature in email communication. The participants express many reasons for wanting to include politeness in email communication. These reasons coincide with those of researchers who speak of politeness as an instrument to:

- save face (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987; Goffman, 1971)
- achieve personal goals (Simmons, 1994)
- avoid conflict (Lackoff, 1989; 1990)
- preserve status (Barddon-Harig and Hartford, 1993; Watts, 2003)
- show respect (Lustig & Koester, 1999; Thomas, 1995)
- display adequate proficiency in the accepted standards of social etiquette (Watts et al., 1992)
- match the context assumed by the society in line with cultural norms (Frazer, 1990; Chiluiwa, 2010).
- show a form of cultural etiquette and the proper behavior expected from the receiver. In that way, politeness adopts the socially and culturally acceptable mode of behavior (Chiluiwa, 2010).

It is worthy to note that formality is considered by the informants as the major indicator of politeness. In other words, the participants said that they expressed politeness in their communications to superiors through being more formal. The formal ways of expressing politeness included using formal greetings and goodbyes and using proper titles. The findings also confirm that politeness can be embedded in certain linguistic structures (Meier, 1995; 1997; Watts, 2003). The use of polite terms or expressions such as “please” and “thank you” are widely emphasized. Other suitable formulaic expressions such as “thank you in advance” or “thanks for your cooperation” are also mentioned. Respectful expressions of salutations and leave taking such as “dear sir” or “best regards” “I look forward to hearing from you” are also emphasized. Appropriate sentential structures containing modal verbs such as “would you accept to...”, “could you ...” “may I ask you to ...”, “I was wondering if you...”, “I would appreciate if you...” or in the choice of function such as complimenting, appreciation, thanking apologizing and so on. This entails that the participants prefer that they follow required or conventional procedures in order to appear polite. It is worthy to note that the ways of expressing politeness by the respondents are diverse which may suggest the variability and subjective orientations of the participants towards politeness in email communication.

Concerning the participants’ perceptions towards the effects of social power and distance when writing emails, they affirm that they adjust their writing according to their addressees. In fact, it is a cultural trait in the Tunisian society to use a certain degree of politeness when addressing certain individuals based on their perceived social status and professional titles. In this context, politeness performs a functional role of constructing individuals’ social roles as well as reinforcing and maintaining the established cultural values (Chiluwa, 2010).

The major way to show politeness to strangers according to them is to express themselves formally rather than informally. According to them, formality of language shows respect for strangers and people with whom there is some extent of social distance. The ways that Tunisian participants said that they convey formality of writing included addressing, opening and signing off formally. Nevertheless, the inclusion of formulaic expressions of thanking, showing consideration and respect are also emphasized.

The last question of the questionnaire seeks to investigate how easy the participants consider writing emails. The answers of the participants display variability since some of them consider it easy while other found it somewhat difficult. Research has shown that people encounter difficulties when writing emails to those perceived as higher in status when initiating communication, suggesting new ideas, making request, and expressing disagreement or criticism (Baron, 1998, 2000; Kling, 1996, Murray, 1988, 1995).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Since the participants of the present study belong to Tunisian cultural background, they have specific perceptions concerning how to write emails and other related issues such as how to be addressed or greeted and how to be polite. This study suggests some useful pedagogical implications and provides some suggestions for EFL instructors. Unless students are exposed to recent books that explicitly address email use in academia (e.g., Swales and Feak, 2000), or unless ESL/EFL teachers incorporate email composition into their syllabi; students are left to their own devices in trying to craft a message that is effective as well as status-congruent and polite (Chen, 2006). NNs have to make sociopragmatic choices when using emails regarding forms of address, degree of formality and directness, closings, amount of mitigation strategies and the types of modification strategies (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011).

Tunisian EFL learners need to be supplemented with explicit instruction regarding the pragmatics of English and specifically teaching pragmatic issues concerning writing emails. This may be achieved through using authentic materials and more classroom awareness-raising activities. Instances of authentic material include authentic academic emails containing various requests. The use of authentic materials in the context of pragmatics instruction is highly recommended as it can highly benefit Tunisian EFL learners to raise their awareness about pragmatic issues such as politeness.

Indeed, explicit pragmatic instruction seems necessary. Academic email writing should be incorporated into EFL curriculum so that Tunisian students can obtain a clear understanding of how to write a polite email that may enhance their academic success. Students could particularly benefit from

an instruction involving a series of activities that promote discovery and raising of meta-pragmatic awareness (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007).

Another practical method is to introduce and teach email writing guidelines and etiquettes so that Tunisian students can readily refer to them when writing emails. Teachers can also help students understand academic email etiquettes by explicitly explaining what they expect in the student email. In line with Bolkan and Holmgren (2012), professors may explain email policies or put the email guidelines in their course syllabi.

References

- Baron, N. S. (1998). "Letters by Phone or Speech by Other Means. The Linguistics of Email". *Language & Communication*, 18, 133–170.
- Baron, N. S. (2000). *Alphabet to Email: How Written English Evolved and where It's Heading*. London, Routledge.
- Biesenbach-Lucas, S. (2007). Students writing emails to faculty: An examination of epoliteness among native and non-native speakers of English. *Language Learning and Technology*, 11, 59-81.
- Bolkan, S., & Holmgren, J. L. (2012). "You are such a great teacher and I hate to bother you but...": Instructors' perceptions of students and their use of email messages with varying politeness strategies. *Communication Education*, 61(3), 253-270.
- Brown, P. and Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: some universals in language use*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1978). Universals of language usage: politeness phenomena. In E. Goody (Eds). *Questions and politeness*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Bunz, U., & Campbell, A. (2002). Accommodating politeness indicators in personal electronic mail messages. *The Association of Internet Researcher's 3rd Annual Conference Maastricht, The Netherlands*. Retrieved from
- Chen, C.F.E. (2006). The development of e-mail literacy: From writing to peers to writing to authority figures. *Language Learning and Technology*, 10, 35-55.
- Chiluwa, I. (2010). The Pragmatics of Hoax Email Business. *Proposals Linguistik online* 43, 3/10 Communication, Case Western Reserve University, USA .Sprouts: *Working Papers on Corney*, 2003).
- Economidou-Kogetsidis, M. (2011). Please answer me as soon as possible: Pragmatic failure in non-native speakers' e-mail requests to faculty. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 43, 3193-3215.
- Eslami, Z.R. (2013). Online communication and students' pragmatic choices in English. *Lodz Papers in Pragmatics*, 9, 71-92.
- Fraser, B. (1990). Perspectives on politeness. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 14, 219-236.
- Garton, L., & Wellman, B. (1995). Social Impacts of Electronic Mail in Organizations. *A Review of the Research Literature*, 18, 434–453.
- Goffman, E. (1971). *Relations in Public. Microstudies of the Public Order*. London, Penguin.
- Herring, S. C. (Ed.). (1996). *Computer-mediated communication: Linguistic, social, and cross-cultural perspectives* (Vol. 39). John Benjamins Publishing.
- Holmes, J. (1995). *Women, Men and Politeness*. London, Longman.
- http://bunz.comm.fsu.edu/AoIR_2002_politeness.pdf
- Kling, R. (1996). Social relationships in electronic forums: Hangouts, salons, workplaces and communities. In R. Kling (Eds.). *Computerization and controversy: Value conflicts and social choices*, 2nd Edition (pp. 426-
- Lustig, M. W., & Koester, J. (1999). *Intercultural Competence. Interpersonal Communication across Cultures*. (3rd Eds.). New York, Longman.
- Meier, A. J. (1997). Teaching the universals of politeness. *ELT Journal*, 51, 21–28.
- Meier, A. J., (1995). Passages of politeness. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 24, 381-392.
- Murphy, M. (2006). *Towards a Practical Approach for Assessing Politeness in Intercultural Email Communication* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation), Griffith University, Australia.
- Murray, D. E. (1988). The context of oral and written language: A framework for mode and medium switching. *Language in society*, 17, 351-373.
- Murray, D. E. (1995). *Knowledge Machines: Language and information in a technological society*. New York, Longman.
- Sarantakos, S. (1998). *Social research*. London, Macmillan.
- Simmons, T. L. (1994). *Politeness theory in computer mediated communication: Face threatening acts in a 'faceless' medium* (Unpublished master's thesis), Aston University, Birmingham, England. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 381 005).

Aribi, I. (2017). Email as a mode of communication among Tunisian postgraduate students. *International Journal of Learning and Teaching*, 9(3), 388-409.

Sproull, L., & Kiesler, S. (1986). Reducing social context clues: Electronic mail in organizational communication. *Management Science*, 32, 1492-1512.

Sproull, L., & Kiesler, S. (1991). *Connections: New ways of working in the networked organization*. Boston, MIT Press.

Thomas, J. (1995). *Meaning in Interaction*. London, Longman.

Waldvogel, J. (2005). *The Role, Status and Style of Workplace Email: A Study of Two New Zealand Workplaces*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation), School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.

Waldvogel, J. (2007). Greetings and closings in workplace email. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12, article 6. Retrieved from; <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol12/>.

Watts, R. J. (2003). *Politeness*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Watts, T. J., & Ehlich, K. (1992). *Politeness in language: Studies in its history, thoughts and practice*. Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter.