Korean EFL Learners' Curious Usage of Double Salutations in English Letter Writing

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I. Introduction

Dear,
Lovely teacher
Hi teacher,
(S14)

How often have you opened a message from a student, read the first line, instantly thought “How sweet!” and immediately after “Where did they learn that?!” This might be the reaction of a native speaking teacher to the letter salutation featured above.

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, especially, face a number of challenges when it comes to written communication. Some are essentially linguistic (vocabulary choice or grammar) while others may be linked to sociocultural aspects,
like textual organization, format, or style.

Difficulties relating specifically to usage may be classified as chiefly pragmalinguistic or sociopragmatic (Thomas, 1983). The former type is said to occur when an utterance is systematically used in an unusual way as a result either of first language (L1) influence or inappropriate assignment of pragmatic force. Sociopragmatic failure, at the other end of the continuum, refers to different perceptions of the sociocultural appropriateness of linguistic behaviour and, as such, assumes a greater degree of control on the part of the learner. According to Thomas, pragmalinguistic failure is easier to overcome as it involves acquiring conventionalized linguistic knowledge rather than changes in belief systems.

The distinction between the two types of pragmatic failure seems relevant to an examination of written correspondence by Korean EFL learners. The particular object of focus here is salutations and, more specifically, the observation that low-level learners overuse them in English letters, employing more than one together.

In an attempt to initiate a discussion of this apparently un researched point, this paper aims to reflect on possible reasons for their curious use. After conducting a small study consisting of short, focused interviews related to writing samples, the researcher arrives at the conclusion that both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic factors contribute to learners’ usage of double salutations. From the participants’ comments, it can be assumed that transfer from the L1 (Lado, 1957) is likely the main cause. However, some students also reveal incomplete understanding of salutations when discussing their inappropriate usage. Related to the sociopragmatic end of things, intentional moves resulting from a concern with relational considerations are reported. Although the findings here are tentative because the number of participants and the amount of data in this study are limited, some pedagogical implications are included at the end of this paper. These mainly underscore the importance of teaching students to develop sociocultural and linguistic awareness, encouraging them to take ownership of the target language, and