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WRITING EMAILS IN ENGLISH: A KEY SKILL FOR BUSINESS STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT:

TEACHING ENGLISH FOR SPECIAL PURPOSES IS AN ADAPTIVE PROCESS, AS IT REQUIRES THE INSTRUCTOR TO ADJUST PERMANENTLY TO THE STUDENTS' SPECIFIC NEEDS WITH A VIEW TO PREPARING THEM FOR A CAREER IN THEIR CHOSEN FIELD OR HELPING THEM NAVIGATE THEIR WORK TASKS IF THEY ARE ALREADY JOB-EXPERIENCED. WRITING E-MAILS HAS BECOME AN ESSENTIAL LIFE SKILL NOWADAYS, BUT FOR BUSINESS STUDENTS IT IS PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT TO GET IT RIGHT, AS THEIR JOB AND/OR THE FUTURE OF THE COMPANY ARE OFTEN AT STAKE, ESPECIALLY NOW THAT A GLOBAL PANDEMIC HAS FORCED US TO REDUCE DIRECT INTERACTION SIGNIFICANTLY. THIS PAPER STARTS FROM ILLUSTRATING THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING BUSINESS WRITING TO STUDENTS BASED ON AVAILABLE RESEARCH ON BUSINESS ENGLISH TEACHING AND THEN FOCUSES ON PRACTICAL EXAMPLES OF HOW TEACHERS CAN IMPROVE BUSINESS STUDENTS' EMAIL WRITING SKILLS AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL. IT WILL SHOW THAT MASTERING THIS SKILL LIES AT THE BASIS OF SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS INTERACTION AND COMMUNICATION, WHICH IS ONE OF THE MAIN GOALS OF BUSINESS ENGLISH TEACHING.

KEY WORDS: BUSINESS WRITING, E-MAILS, KEY SKILL, BUSINESS ENGLISH

INTRODUCTION

Writing emails has been an important part of doing business for a while, but it may never have been as crucial as in the last couple of years, since the global pandemic which debuted in early 2020 has forced us to communicate remotely on such a large scale.

Students seem to struggle with the concept of sending emails (even in their native language), but even more so with composing them in English. However, teaching writing is not usually at the forefront of Business English classes at undergraduate level, since it is largely assumed that, by the time they access higher education, students have already acquired the necessary skills allowing them to write business letters/e-mails and also satisfactorily decode such messages coming from administrative or teaching staff. Personal experience as a teacher of English at university level has, nevertheless, confirmed the contrary, a conclusion supported by various studies conducted around the world, attempting to showcase the reasons for such occurrences and also trying to identify the elements that make many students' e-mails inappropriate in a business/work context. Reiterating the fact

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that email is a tool very frequently used in the academia, while also acknowledging that emails written by second-language users are different than emails written by native speakers in that they are more informal, even impolite,² Sümeyye Konuk devised a study examining electronic correspondence between staff and students at Turkish universities in their native language, since most of the problems identified are not specific to L2 users. This goes to show that, beyond foreign language acquisition, students are generally unsure about the writing style and tone they should adopt in a formal email, they don't proofread their messages or organise the content effectively, are not familiar with the salutation and closing formulas, the language used is too informal and/or includes emoticons etc. Another interesting study, focusing specifically on emoticons used in student-professor email communication, revealed that "when emoticons are used, students' written language is generally very direct and casual and does not meet the standards of professional email communication."³ Olga Blinova identified similar challenges when teaching writing (an email of complaint) to intermediate L1 Turkish speakers: genre awareness, poor proofreading and self-editing skills, lack of system and process knowledge. She proposes several types of activities to address these issues, which involve identifying common phrases based on a sample letter of complaint and students reading their own sample out loud or asking for help from peers to help with proofreading.⁴

But, as David Camps points out, writing is more than just a skill and "by only taking the skill approach we will not capture everything involved while we write," since "language is always a social interaction."⁵ Moreover, "a type of voice is always projected or constructed when we write,"⁶ which means that teachers need to make sure their students are aware of these two aspects when learning how to write proper emails. Both awareness and reflection on what they write will thus enable students to use the right voice, vocabulary and formalities for each particular situation which requires them to write an email.⁷ Choosing the right register and voice becomes particularly important when cultural differences are involved, as is content organisation, avoiding misunderstanding, the number of details to be included, timescale and/or deadline expectations.⁸ Similarly, Aull and Aull point out that "workplace email communication depends on cognitive abilities, such as selecting appropriate vocabulary and content and producing coherent genre structure, as well as interpersonal abilities, such as making apt rhetorical distinctions in addressing peer colleagues versus superiors."⁹

TEACHING EMAIL WRITING

A common topic of discussion among professors is the need to teach writing a formal email to first year undergraduates, who are suddenly faced with the need to communicate with the academic staff, send assignments electronically and enquire about various

² Sümeyye Konuk, "E-mail Literacy in Higher Education Academic Settings." *International Journal of Education and Literacy Studies* (2021), vol. 9 (3): 29-42, 1.

³ Alenka Baggia, Anja Žnidaršič and Alenka Tratnik, "Emoticons in student-professor email communication." *Communicar* (2022): 119-133, 12.

⁴ Olga A. Blinova, "Teaching Writing to Intermediate Learners of English: Applying the Genre Approach to Emails of Complaint." *Proceedings of EDULEARN21 Conference* (2021), 212-214.

⁵ David Camps, "About teaching email writing for work." *Revista de Clase Internacional* (2022), 7.

⁶ David Camps, "About teaching email writing for work." *Revista de Clase Internacional* (2022), 7.

⁷ David Camps, "About teaching email writing for work." *Revista de Clase Internacional* (2022).

⁸ Nick Brieger, *Collins English for Business: Writing*. (London: HarperCollins, 2011).

⁹ Bethany Aull and Laura Aull, <"Write a Greeting for Your Email Here": Principles for Assessing Interpersonal Workplace Email Communication>. *The Journal of Writing Analytics*, special issue, vol. 5 (2021), 224.

administrative issues as part of the higher education programme. The pandemic has certainly accentuated this issue, since recurrent lockdowns have limited teacher-student interactions to the virtual world and videoconferencing platforms, alongside emails and texts, have taken over. While some students have resorted to social media platforms (due to convenience and familiarity), the need for a more formal channel of communication became evident. The same is true for the business world. While expanding one's professional network on LinkedIn® or Facebook® is a good idea up to a point, these platforms do not replace emails as a means to conduct business, make official arrangements, confirm deals etc. Overall, social media does not hold the same weight as a formal e-(letter)/contract.

So, how does one go about teaching writing business emails? A set of authentic examples of virtual correspondence is a good place to start because it focuses attention on the most common mistakes and also provides a model to follow. However, as previously stated, a one-size-fits-all approach is not going to allow for all the necessary adjustments intended to accommodate the different nuances which are specific to social interactions and that could make or break a business deal.

Let's consider the following email exchanges. They were designed to illustrate the distinction between formal and informal exchanges, but keeping in mind that the topic still requires a certain level formality, even between friendly acquaintances.

To: svetlana.l
From: jennar
Subject: Collaboration proposal

Dear Svetlana,

I hope you are well and rested ahead of the fast-approaching beginning of the new school year.

I am writing with the hopes that you might be interested in a collaboration with the Faculty of Economics at our university. I know you mostly teach general English to secondary-education students, but I was wondering whether you would be interested in branching out and teaching some Business English seminars to our undergraduate students this year.

Please let me know if that might interest you and I will be happy to provide any other details you might require.

Hope to hear from you soon!

All the best,

Jenna

To: jennar
From: svetlana.l
Subject: Re: Collaboration proposal

My dear Jenna,

Thank you so much for your email, it has been a while since we last talked. I hope you, too are well.

I am really honoured by your proposal and although my hands are quite full at school, I would like to know more about the specific requirements and, most importantly, the schedule. I would be available six hours per week, so if that is feasible for you as well, I would really like to take you up on the offer.

Looking forward to learning more about this opportunity!

Svetlana

To: learningcenter
From: jennar
Subject: Collaboration proposal

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Jenna Rubens and I am writing on behalf of the English Language Department at the Faculty of Economics.

I am writing with regards to a collaboration proposal for the 2022-2023 academic year. We are looking for two English teachers specialising in Business English who would be interested in teaching a number of seminars to our undergraduate students and we are hoping that you can help us with some recommendations of suitable candidates.

All the information about specific requirements, recruitment procedure and pay can be found in the attached document below. Should you have any other questions, please feel free to contact me at any time.

We would also appreciate it if you could share this message with anyone who might be interested in this opportunity. Thank you!

Yours faithfully,

Professor Jenna Rubens, PhD
Faculty of Economics

From: learningcenter
To: jennar
Subject: Re: Collaboration proposal

Dear Ms. Rubens,

We were delighted to receive your message and hope this is the beginning of a fruitful collaboration between our two institutions.

We have forwarded the information you have provided to three potential candidates whom we recommend highly for the positions advertised, as their qualifications and expertise seem the most suitable for what you are looking for. They will contact you shortly with a view to starting the application process.

Please let us know about the result of the selection process and should you require any other information!

Yours sincerely,

Amanda Sign
General manager
Learning Centre¹⁰

The two exchanges obviously have the same topic, but are on the opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of register. An initial discussion with the students about the general structure of a business email should be followed by a more in-depth analysis of the specific differences in tone and the language cues that contribute to the way the message is conveyed. At university level, the focus is less on grammar and vocabulary as such, but rather on the nuances necessary to express the information clearly, politely, concisely and overall, efficiently.

Doing business internationally also requires a healthy dose of cultural awareness, which actually dictates the way information is structured and expressed in an email. While in some cultures the number of details to be included is very small (since the addressee is expected to infer certain things from the context), others require, for example, that the sender provides a lot more information and/or is expected to follow up meetings with a written agreement, otherwise the deal might fall through. Students also need to be familiar with the different types of emails that are more frequently exchanged in business, depending on the field of activity they are specialising in. Chapman groups them into four loose categories, based on the purpose of the message: enquiries, requesting action, exchanging information and making and confirming arrangements.¹¹

Another example that might be useful to provide students with is making enquiries about their academic work and/or grading. They usually struggle with salutations, do not include enough relevant information (including their full name, year of study, class etc), frequently omit the subject or write the body of the email in the subject line. Younger generations, who have never written a classic letter, are unable to associate emails with formal written correspondence and thus follow the model of text messages that they use to communicate with family or friends. Hence the use of emoticons and colloquial language,

¹⁰ Source: Author's own lesson activity. Disclaimer: All information in the proposed email exchanges is fictitious. Any name similarity and/or reference to an existing institution/organisation are purely coincidental.

¹¹ Rebecca Chapman, *English for Emails*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

even when addressing professors. In terms of grammatical errors, they are often a reflection of mistakes in their native language, so they cannot necessarily be associated with poor foreign language acquisition.

The email exchanges presented above will give them an idea of what enquiry emails look like in a professional setting, which often has higher stakes than a student-professor email exchange.

CONCLUSION

Email writing in English is not a skill that can be fully mastered in a short amount of time. Nevertheless, the basic structure and general communication rules can certainly be discussed and implemented relatively easily, depending on the students' language level and business background. Starting from examples and moving towards more specific information about cultural differences in terms of formality, number of details to be included, the perception of time (which may determine how much time in advance is a meeting to be scheduled, for example), attitudes towards company hierarchy etc. can help them understand that, beyond choosing one's words carefully, they need to consider some other factors when deciding how and when it is appropriate to send a business email. While it does involve some trial and error, email writing is about students' ability to select, organise and express messages in a way that is both effective and context-appropriate.

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