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Business English Documents - A User's Guide

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Abstract

The trend towards increased globalization of the business environment raises a number of questions. Is it possible to present a model business document which is applicable to a wide range of contexts? Is there a "norm" for business documents or does each country/culture have its own established norms? Can a generic model exist?

An investigation into current business English teaching practices in Pacific Rim countries reveals that British and American models are used extensively in the classroom. These models are, logically, also the basis for much of the actual English business communication that takes place in these Pacific Rim countries. However, as the writers themselves are L2 users, the business documents contain errors and non-native usages.

This paper will discuss ways in which instructors can sensitize business English students to model business documents and increase students awareness of different approaches.

INTRODUCTION

Every country, whether developed or developing, has its own conventions for oral and written business communication. Generally such communication will take place in the language of that country. However, as business has become increasingly internationalized, English has become the *de facto* language of international business. Figures show that:

* Over 300 million people use English as their primary language.
* 650 million people use English as a second language.
* English is accepted as the official language in twenty-nine countries.
* About three quarters of the world's mail is written in English.
* English is the language used in 60 percent of the world's radio stations.
* English is the most widely studied language in the countries where it is not native.
* 80 percent of all information stored in computers is stored in English.

* About half of all bysiness deals done in Europe are done in English.

* More than 50 percent of all technical and scientific journals are printed in English. (Dulek & Fielden [1990] and McCrum, et. al., [1986])

Such statistics reveal that English is used extensively in business and technical fields, not only by native speakers (NS) but also by non-native speakers (NNS). At the same time, although British and American English are the dominant forms used, other varieties of English, such as Singapore-Malaysian English and Indian English have developed. These varieties of English have their own distinctive syntactic, lexical and phonetic patterns (Kachru, 1982).

As Varner (1988a) points out, very little work has been done in looking at how business communication works in other cultures. Johnston (1980) describes the business communication situation in Japan and details some of the differences between Japanese and American letters. A comparison has been made of some of the cultural differences between German and American business letters (Varner, 1988a) and American and French business correspondence. Both of these studies examined business letters written in the first languages of the writers, not as NNS writing in English.

Some business communication texts do point out differences between British and American correspondence styles and international correspondence. More and more American business communication texts include a short chapter on international business communication. Bovee and Thill (1989) include not only a section on international business communication, but also a detailed description of some problem areas entitled "Pitfalls of Writing International Business Letters" in *Business Communication Today* (Bovee & Thill, 1989).

This paper will first examine the situation of English business documents in the Pacific Rim countries. This is a region which has seen extremely rapid development and the internationalization of many business fields which range from the petrochemical industry, to the financial and manufacturing sectors. This growth has resulted in an increase in the number of business documents that must be written in English. This is also a region where English is the preferred second language (Japan, Philippines, Hong Kong) and is used as the medium of instruction in some schools (Singapore, parts of India, Hong Kong). It is perceived as a necessary skill for academic and professional success; thus, it holds a very dominant position in business and education in the Pacific Rim countries.

This situation raises a number of questions :

- Do these local varieties of English have any effect on local business documents?
- What conventions of business writing are or are not observed by NNS?
- What are the implications for teachers of business communication/English?
- How can the language professional sensitize students to differing models of business documents?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to turn to an examination of business documents being written in the region and the business communications texts currently used in business and education.

For the purposes of this paper, we have examined texts used in Japan, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore. British and American texts are used almost exclusively; there is very little locally developed material.

In general, North American business communication texts are aimed at university level native English speakers. The focus of many of these texts is on the different forms of business writing: memos, reports, sales letters. Many examples of these are included. The context of these texts is generally confined to the American business environment. Where international business communication is in-

cluded, it is confined to the American viewpoint and is usually dealt with in a few pages or a short chapter. Few examples of actual documents are included and there is little discussion of different writing conventions.

The available British texts are generally written for a NNS audience and fall into two broad categories. There are the advanced texts aimed at adult European learners and an increasing number of lower level texts aimed at adult Japanese learners. Although models of business documents are included, in neither case is much discussion devoted to the format of business documents nor to the writing process.

MODELS

In the Pacific Rim countries, there is a strong demand for books of model business documents : letters, reports, resumes, etc. NNS take comfort in using them, the thinking being that they are excellent examples of what should be written. Students in the region are accustomed to models; this is reflected in the local educational systems where there is considerable pressure from students to teachers to provide model answers in many fields. As rote memorization is the educational rule rather than the exception, students may feel that if they memorize a model they can dispense with the business of learning other styles of business documents.

Unfortunately, many of the model letters included in these model letter books are not authentic examples, but are specifically written for the book. Sometimes the model letters themselves are poorly written. This latter problem becomes compounded when the business communications instructor, without any business experience or experience living in an English-speaking country, does not recognize the model as being less than adequate or authentic and uses it as a model document. It is doubtful whether the following example of a customer service letter would serve as an effective model in any classroom:

Dear Mr

Your electric pyjamas

I am sorry to hear that your pyjamas do not work, and quite understand the annoyance and anxiety this can cause.

Normally this is a very reliable product, and I can only apologise for the difficulties you have had.

Please return the pyjamas for us to check over, as it has been known for the in-line fuse to blow--fortunately for your safety and peace of mind! If this doesn't do the trick we shall be glad to change them or offer you a choice of our other electrical garments.
(Dening, 1986 : 94)

It is not uncommon for companies in Pacific Rim countries to have their own model business letters and for department managers to instruct new employees about English business letter writing. In this case the manager is often using the models he or she was given many years back. When a situation such as this occcurs, there is a lack of awareness about how some business letter writing conventions have changed over years.

In order to determine if Pacific Rim business documents follow the British and American models presented in business communication texts, it is necessary to examine them in terms of format, style and register, and language.

FORMAT

Generally, countries in the Pacific Rim abide by conventional notions of "proper" format, ie. very much like what is presented in business communication textbooks. However, in Singapore, it is not uncommon to receive business letters with numbered paragraphs. It is doubtful whether a model for a letter with numbered paragraphs has ever appeared in a British or American business text. The

rationale for this unique format is that it is "National / Civil Service" style. All Singaporean males spend about two years in the military; evidently the military jargon extends into this written form of text organization. However, it is not only Singaporean men who utilize this format; Singaporean women also follow the "National Service" style.

Letter openings are usually conventional; the recipient is addressed as "Dear". it is common to find business letters with the recipient's full name and title in the inside address and which then begin "Dear Sir". This indicates that although NS conventions are being adopted superficially, the actual conventions are not fully understood. This can be seen in the example below.

Nanyang Technological University
School of Electrical and Electronic Engineering
Nanyang Avenue
Singapore 2263
Attn : Mr. Peter S. Whisson

Dear Sir :

Letter closings too are conventional: "Sincerely," "Yours sincerely", "Yours truly" , "Yours faithfully". There is a far greater tendency to use "Miss" or "Mrs." than would be expected given the multitude of admonitions to use "Ms." as found in the textbooks used in the region. In Asian societies, it is common to use full names in many areas, so when dealing with obviously non- Asian names, the same convention is often observed. This results in salutations which include the middle name.

LANGUAGE

Style and Register

Style and register are two areas where there is vast difference between what business communication texts suggest is acceptable, and what is actually produced. Judgments about tone and the different nuances of words and phrases are problematic even to native speakers; this is further compounded when the writer is an NNS. Even highly proficient NNS have great difficulty in recognizing, let alone producing and controlling different rhetorical styles. It is, therefore, very difficult for such writers to make judgments about the tone of a letter.

Style and register are areas which are discussed at great length in North American business communication texts. Usually, about one quarter to one third of a text is devoted to style and register. The organizational focus is often on different rhetorical styles, and it is common to find chapters devoted to topics such as how to write persuasive letter, how to write letters which convey bad news, etc.

It is doubtful whether the Malaysian author of this letter to a group of American colleagues was aware of the less than helpful tone which comes from his poor choice of words:

> In future, if you are organizing any activity, please decide in future whether you:-
>
> A. do it through the agency directly.
> B. consult me before going to the agency.
>
> If you choose A, then don't bother me at all with respect to anything.
>
> If you choose B, then do so before you do anything. In this case, you may expect me to assist you and perhaps be responsible for any shortcomings.

While the letter is to the point, the author risks offending his readers with the tone employed.

Local Inclusion

Language is always reflective of culture. In Japan, the "san" suffix is considered essential in polite speech and writing. The letter below, from a Japanese to an American, while observing the standard English opening salutation, proceeds to refer to third parties by surname plus san. That this carries over into English demonstrates that a local adaptation

has been made and that conventional nomenclature is not always employed.

Dear Mr. Smith :

Tanaka-san would like to ask Lee-san whether test specifications will be faxed to us soon or not yet. since Lee-san told us that he might be able to prepare all necessary test spec documents to us by 25 November, we are waiting for them. If those documents delay so much, our test planning might have to be postponed. We'd appreciate to have your revised schedule on this.

Please be patient with our straight proposal in this matter.

Best regards,

K. Endo

What is of particular interest is the apology for the direct tone of the letter. Directness is not a typical quality found in Japanese writing. although the letter does not seem overly direct by NS standards, the author feels as if an apology must be made, because such directness would be inappropriate in his culture.

The variety of English used in singapore and Malaysia also contains many local elements including word coinage as seen in this example:

Dear Miss Lincoln

Further to our teleconversation, we are pleased to enclose herewith a set of application forms and information on our club for your kind attention.

Rhetorical Style

As can also be seen from the example above, there is heavy usage of rather antiquated rhetorical devices in Pacific Rim business communication. It is still common to find phrases such as:

"We are pleased to enclose herewith"
"We hope for your kind consideration"
"We thank you for your kind attention"
"We seek your understanding on this matter"
"I refer to your call to our Public Relations office regarding the abovementioned matter."

These frequently occur despite the fact these are the very phrases that business communication texts advise writers to avoid.

Most business communication texts stress the use of the active voice to improve readability and reduce reader confusion, yet in the Pacific Rim area the preferred method for starting a memo is the passive voice. An example of this can be seen in the memo below:

Please be informed that if you have not submitted the above assessment forms, kindly do so without delay as you have way passed the deadline for submission.

PEDAGOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As instructors, it is important to make a realistic assessment of students' linguistic levels. The aims and objectives of the business writing course can then be determined. Generally speaking, students enrolled in business English courses are not beginners, but may be less than fluent speakers/writers.

It is incumbent upon instructors to ascertain the types of real writing tasks which students will face in business. This may prove to be a difficult task for some instructors as they have no business experience themselves. However, instructors do receive business correspondence and can pay particular attention to the correspondence they receive in English. Instructors should acquaint themselves with the different types and styles of business writing but should bear in mind that the vast majority of business writing is routine.

Resources

As can be learned from the "pyjama" letter, it is important to use genuine or as genuine as possible materials in the classroom. Authentic business documents can be obtained in a number of ways. One source is friends in the business world. Often times friends are very happy to pass on non-sensitive documents. Former students may also be able to provide authentic materials; these materials may be used again and again. Instructors can build up a bank of materials which can be used in many different classroom contexts.

One can request public relations materials and annual reports from public companies. These are provided free of charge and are usually an excellent source of up to date business writing. Business magazines such as *Fortune* and *Forbes* offer readers an information service that provides materials on their advertisers.

Regional resources such as RELC in Singapore, the British Council in most large cities, and the AUA in Bangkok--all contain banks of business English material, some of which may be useful.

Instructors can also look at business English texts which contain examples of business letters. When selecting a texbook, the instructor should try and pick texts which provide up to date sample documents. This can be determined by reading the introductions in texts and paying attention to what is said in catalogues from publishers. Look at the date of publications and the credentials of the authors--are they academics, consultants, business people? In the text, where are the sample documents from? If no credit is given, most likely the samples are the author's own.

As mentioned earlier, many business English texts are written for native speakers and thus may contain a large percentage of writing tasks which may be unnecessary or irrelevant for non-native speakers, ie. letters of persuasion, letters of dismissal. These types of correspondence should not normally be the focus of most business writing courses. Do not make the mistake of using the table of contents of a business English text as the syllabus for a course.

Model Letters

With the provisos already mentioned regarding models, it is possible to successfully use model letters in class. Authentic models can be motivating to students, especially if they include local material. Instructors can use models to demonstrate both good and bad qualities inherent in some business letters. Students especially like to see poorly written letters where the authors are native speakers. This serves to remind them that everybody, native speakers included, must learn some elements of effective letter writing.

Before actually using a model document, instructors should try and have the model looked at by people in business to ascertain whether such a document actually occurs in the business environment. If there is a native speaker available, grammatical and style questions regarding model documents can be asked.

Another source for model letters, in addition to textbooks, is the students themselves. If one has a business writing class where the participants are in business, have them bring in typical letters and other business documents they receive. One useful classroom exercise is to make a transparancy of one of the letters and to edit it as a group. Depending upon the level and makeup of the students, longer documents such as reports can also be edited and discussed as group exercises.

Along similar lines, students may write replies to the letters which they have supplied. Generally, it is best to have students bring in either multiple copies so that all may work on the same letter, or collect the letter from the

student and make copies for the following class meeting.

Increasing Student Awareness

How can language professionals make students more aware of the different registers and styles of writing which are found in business writing?

As mentioned previously, it is very important to accurately gauge students language proficiency. If students are at a lower level, an instructor should not attempt to try and explain the nuances of register and style. Basic polite language should be addressed; the softening effects of please, would, and thank you, can be demonstrated.

When students are more proficient, differences in style and register can be addressed more directly. With advanced proficiency, the finer points of language use can be discussed. Instructors can show letters which contain similar substance but differ in levels of politeness and sophistication. Discussion can focus on the writer's intentions, anticipated reader reaction, the use of direct and indirect language. In essence, students with advanced proficiency can "play" with the language to a much larger extent.

The teaching of business communication in the Pacific Rim area requires the instructor to be aware of the linguistic level of the students and also the business culture of the country. When these two factors are taken into consideration, more effective business communication will result.

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