

UNDERSTANDING OUR AUDIENCE: MESSAGES FROM CONCEPT TO COMPLETION

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Abstract: *The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a business hub for a great number of multinational and international companies that conduct daily communication activities in English, which has made efficient and audience sensitive written communication an essential requirement in today's workplace. With computer-mediated communication (CMC) taking over face-to-face communication, this has created an essential need for students to learn efficient and appropriate communication styles pertinent to communication via emails. This study presents a pragmatic approach for teaching the how of writing appropriate and effective professional email messages. Comparisons of pre-and post-teaching email messages point to significant improvements in the quality of post teaching email messages.*

Keywords: Writing email messages, professional business communication, computer mediated communication, audience awareness

1. Introduction

Dewey (1938:13) rightly argues that “we don't learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience.” Here, Dewey makes a simple but powerful point: experience is not the source of learning, but rather it is reflection on this experience. Dewey's emphasis on reflecting on one's experience is critical in the Experiential Learning Cycle, a model that Kolb (1984) derived from Dewey's concepts. Students, rather than being told to write for someone in a specific context; they write for a genuine reason, because they need to conduct this communication to achieve something. Email messages are also valued because they provide an audit trail and record of the communication. And this is important for keeping a record of students' meeting decisions, calls for meetings, minutes and the role all these play in following up on those who have been assigned work to do/complete.

Crystal (2006) observes that email is formally and functionally unique. In my case, students use email to execute the following functions:

“Engineering graduates' requisite competencies and skills have been of interest to higher education accreditation agencies, academicians, researchers and the industry all over the world” (EL-Sakran & Awad, 2011:105). The past three decades have witnessed an increasing number of engineering job requirements surveys publishing details of employability skills employers seek in their prospective engineering employees. Some such studies (Australian Council for

Educational Research, 2001; Hill & Petty, 1995; Holden & Hamlett, 2007; Levenson, 2000; Patil & Codner, 2007; Prescott et al., 2012; etc.) have noted that employers want their prospective engineers to have the following employability skills:

- 1) Efficient oral and written communication skills
- 2) Interpersonal skills with colleagues and clients
- 3) Leadership skills
- 4) Problem solving skills
- 5) A clear understanding of social responsibility and ethical practices
- 6) Emotional intelligence
- 7) Ability to take initiative
- 8) Time management skills
- 9) Ability to work under pressure
- 10) Teamwork skills and ability to work in multidisciplinary and multicultural teams
- 11) "Global mobility" (Patil and Godner, 2007:649).

As a result and in line with the calls for global engineering graduates and the requirements of the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), engineering colleges have become increasingly aware of the need to provide more than the traditional technical discipline-based education for their students, realizing the fact that sound knowledge of engineering theory and practice alone is no longer sufficient to meet the demands of the marketplace. Consequently, students graduating from engineering programs are expected to have an effective range of communication skills to meet labour market demands.

Writing context and status sensitive email messages have, therefore, become integral components of today's workplace environment. Hewitt (2006) states that email has emerged to be the primary medium used in internal and external business communication in globalised business settings. Yet, from the researcher's vast teaching experience, students in professional communication courses are found to always be reluctant and less susceptible to activities on the teaching and writing of audience sensitive and appropriate email messages. This is mainly due to the assumption that their communication skills, being graduates of American and British based English language medium schools, are far more advanced to the extent that they need not be paid any attention to. Thus, this resistance to more learning has created the need for the present researcher to create and design a teaching context through which those students feel that their email writing skills still need further polishing. This represents the focus of the arguments in the coming sections.

2. Objective of Study

In an attempt to prepare engineering undergraduates to meet the above companies' requirements, this study presents a pragmatic approach for teaching the how of writing appropriate and effective professional email messages. Students needed to contact professors to arrange for meetings with them. Students were also required to send emails to team members on specific occasions to congratulate them on things that they did; for example, awesome poster presentation, weddings, engagements, etc.

3. Previous Studies

Evans' (2012) study titled 'designing email tasks for the business English classrooms: Implications from a study of Hong Kong's key industries', focused on the analysis of employees' email messages to build email writing tasks for Hong Kong's business students. Although the study presents some excellent conclusions concerning employees' online communication, the study may be considered highly rigid and prescriptive in nature since it tends to mould the students into the practices of some companies' employees, who may be operating under certain fixed communication contexts. It seems that whatever universities do, there will always be a gap between graduates' level of competences and practices in the work place. Research (e.g., Amare & Brammer, 2005) indicates that there is a difference in practice between what universities do as far as communication skills are concerned and what really happens in the labour market. This calls for greater co-operation between academy and industry to close any existing gaps between what is taught in universities and what is practiced in the work environment. This brings into attention the fact that universities should carefully examine on site labour market communication practices and try to use authentic materials from labour markets in teaching engineering students. Such a practice will guarantee that graduates have first-hand knowledge and experience of target discourse community communicative events. Colleges of engineering in non-English speaking countries such as the UAE should recognize the fact that English fluency is a necessary condition for success in a global economy (Kaewpet, 2011). Therefore, a strong emphasis should be placed on developing excellence in communication skills, both written and oral. We have seen how the UAE surveyed employers stress graduates' ability to write and produce sound and formal email messages, a point that international research in English speaking countries did not concern itself with.

Consequently, students should be presented with different purpose-driven and context-based writing scenarios, with certain required and sometimes optional steps/moves that the context of writing the message imposes on them. This way, instructors delegate the decision making process concerning the elements of the communication process to the students, which fosters students' autonomy and lifelong learning. In other words, it is the purpose of writing the message and the writing context that determine the structure and contents of the message as delineated below. Therefore, learners should be exposed to key issues pertinent to writing email message, and be left to make the necessary communication decisions.

Hence, writing instructors need to inculcate and foster this strategic writing skill in students to raise their awareness to essential factors that they need to consider when engaged or about to engage in a writing task. Some of those essential concepts are Halliday's key notions of *field*, *tenor* and *mode* (Halliday, 1985:12) which collectively constitute the register of a text, and offer a linguistic framework for guiding the writing of appropriate, effective and professional email messages. Context of situation consists of three aspects: field, tenor and mode. Field refers to what is happening, to the nature of social action that is taking place. It answers such questions as what it is that the participant is engaged in. Tenor refers to who is taking part, to the nature of the participants, their status and roles: what kind of

role relationship obtains among the participants. Mode refers to what part the language is playing, what it is that the participants are expecting the language to do for them in that situation: the symbolic organization of the text, the status that it has, and its function in the context, including the channel and also the rhetorical mode, what is being achieved by the text in terms of such categories as persuasive, expository, didactic and the like. Context of situation is closely related to various texts. Certain situational context asks for certain text and in return, certain text creates certain context. *Field* is defined as what is happening, as the nature of the social interaction taking place. *Tenor* relates to those taking part, to the participants, their social/professional roles, their relationships and their status. *Mode* refers to the organization of text, to rhetorical modes such as persuasion, exposition, didacticism, description, narration and so forth; to the channel of communication whether spoken or written, monologic or dialogic, whether with visual contact or via computer-mediated communication or telephone and so forth.

Of great and close relevance here is also Grice's (1975:166) four maxims. They delineate the essential rules that one should consider when engaging in communication with others. Grice's theory is a general principle which states: "Make your contribution such as required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged". Cooperative is indispensable in communication. Interlocutors engage several strategies to accomplish this goal. Grice labels these strategies "maxims of conversation".

These are:

Quantity: Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purpose of the exchange: Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Quality : Do not say what you believe to be false; Do not say that for which you lack evidence.

Relation : Be relevant !

Manner : Avoid obscurity of expression.

Avoid ambiguity.

Be brief.

Be orderly.

4. Methodology

To train students in the writing of appropriate audience sensitive messages, they were presented with different writing contexts.

The proposed email messages writing contexts are:

-Complaint to professor about a course's final grade

-Complaint to a service provider (car dealer, restaurant/hotel management, etc.)

-Writing to a professor to ask for a make-up midterm exam

-Sending an apology to a professor for a class to be missed

-Sending a message to a research article writer to inquire about something in the article or request a copy of article

-Informing team members/co-workers about the death of a dear friend and asking them to attend the funeral

-Congratulating a friend on his/her wedding that you could not attend

Students were asked, in teams of 3 or 4, to respond by choosing to write on one of the topics given to them, and were required to use their personal mobile phones (Chwo, Marek and Wu (2016)) to email their writing outcome to the professors' email. Once the message arrived to the professor's inbox, he created a Microsoft Word Document, copied the message, pasted it in the WD, and projected it to all the class, after removing all students' identification details, to avoid causing any face-threats, or embarrassments to the writers. Then, the whole class engaged in an active discussion to judge the message. Then, at the end of the writing activity, only one piece of writing was projected at a time, and a whole class discussion feedback was ensued. This was meant to make students sense and understand their need for email writing skills polishing, and open their eyes to essential missing information needed for full understanding of the message. Students' written responses (see results below) exhibited several deficiencies represented in the lack of a clear identification of the writer, and not providing the intended audience with enough contextual details that would enable him/her to fully understand the message.

4.1. Procedures

To overcome those deficiencies, this study uses a methodology which creates a need for communication, requires students' involvement in checking the accuracy of the subject matter; a move that allows students to practice whole class editing of the presented subject matter, review information presented, and internalize the way of writing and apply to future natural writing contexts. Creating the need was executed through requiring the students to write in response to the different writing scenarios they were provided with. The class collective discussion of the written samples granted all students, with little support from the course instructor, the opportunity to judge the accuracy of the information, and know what was missing from the written piece. This was handled through supplying the class with a sequence of moves to be applied in each writing context. Some of these moves were common among all the different writing assignments, whereas others were specific to particular writing situations as detailed below.

4.2. Qualitative and Quantitative Analyses of Messages

Improvements in quality and quantity of written messages were measured by counting the number of moves used in the message, its elaborateness and clarity, relevancy to the writing purpose, recipient's informational needs, and the total number of words per message.

5. Writing Moves

A quick look at the email messages writing contexts given above, demonstrates that students were required to write to persons they know and others they did not know before the writing assignment. This necessitated several decision-making processes on the part of the students. In other words, they needed to decide whether the persons they were writing to would be able to clearly identify the writer or not. That is, based on the students' analysis, they should be able to make a decision if they needed to introduce themselves in the writing or not. Although professors may know specific students by name, it should be made clear to

students that those professors may be teaching several sections with students carrying the same name (i.e., John, John). Such situations trigger a need for a student's full introduction/identification for the professor to fully identify who the writer is. Some may argue that professors need to check students' ID numbers for this purpose. The automatic response to this is: Why should professors bother? I believe it is the writer's sole responsibility to be as cooperative as possible by giving as much information as is needed to enable the reader to understand the Who?, the What?

Below some writing contexts are described:

Context 1:

1.1. Writing a complaint email to professor about a course's final grade

For this scenario, students need to follow the writing moves shown below:

1.1.1.

- *Introduce/identify* who you are unless you are 100% sure that the professors know who you are.
- Give credit (i.e., say something positive about the professor, his/her teaching, or the course that you finished with him/her).

This is an essentially required step in the case of writing such face-threatening email messages.

- *Supply accurate description* of course name and number, section number and section time, if multiple sections of the same course are covered by same professor.
- *Be logical and reasonable*

This move requires careful planning, since it demands that the complainant should have a record of his/her performance in the course. That is, marks obtained in exams, quizzes, etc. Having such a record will make the information more factual, give merit to the case, and help students stay away from subjective expressions such as, I was expecting X grade in this course; for grades are based on performance not expectations.

- *Request Action*

The conclusion of an email message is determined by the message's content. That is, if the message is seeking the verification/checking of someone's grade, then the conclusion should read:

Awaiting your kind response/reply or

Looking forward to hearing from you.

Then, the writer signs off by using any of the following:

Best regards/wishes

Yours sincerely/faithfully,

followed by the writer's name.

Context 2:

2. 1. Write a complaint to a service provider (car dealer, restaurant/hotel management)

For this scenario, students need to follow the writing moves shown below:

2.1.1.

- *Introduce/identify* who you are unless you are 100% sure that the intended reader knows who you are.

- *Give credit* (i.e., say something positive about the service provider. For example, I am a regular customer of your restaurant and have always enjoyed dining with you, or I have been staying at your beautiful resort for the past 10 years and have always enjoyed my stay and the services that you provided).

This is an essentially required step in the case of writing such face-threatening email messages.

- *Supply accurate description* of the incident that triggered the writing of this message. You will also need to include the names of the persons involved in the situation, date of incident and location. This is extremely important in the cases of a chain of restaurants/hotels with the same names.
- *Request Action*

The conclusion of an email message is usually dependent on the message's communicative purpose. That is, if the message is seeking an apology, or punishment for someone, then the conclusion should read:

Kindly verify the issues, and let me know of the outcome.

- Then, the *writer signs off* by using any of the following:

Best regards/wishes

Yours sincerely/faithfully,

followed by the writer's name, and cell phone number for easy contact, if needed.

Context 3:

3. 1. Send a message to a research article writer to request a copy of an unpublished paper referred to somewhere, or inquire about the details of some mentioned technique.

For this scenario, students need to follow the writing moves shown below:

3.1.1.

- *Introduce/identify* say who you are, what you are doing, which university you are studying at, and where.

This is an essentially required step in the case of writing email messages to someone who does not know you.

- *Supply accurate description* of the incident that triggered the writing of this message. That is, what made you write this message.
- *Request Action*

The conclusion of an email message is usually dependent on the message's communicative purpose. That is, if the message is seeking academic support, then the conclusion should read:

Awaiting your kind response/reply.

Or,

Thanking you in advance for your support and cooperation.

- Then, the *writer signs off* by using any of the following:

Best regards/wishes

Yours sincerely/faithfully,

followed by the writer's name, and cell phone number for easy contact, if needed.

Context 4:

- 4.1. Write an email to inform your team members/co-workers about the death of a dear friend and ask them to attend the funeral

For this scenario, students need to follow the writing moves shown below:

4.1.1.

- *Supply accurate description* of the incident that triggered the writing of this message. You will also need to include the names of the persons involved in the situation, date of incident and location. This is extremely important for the recipients to act upon the information given.
- *Request Action*

The conclusion of an email message is usually dependent on the message's communicative purpose. That is, if the message is seeking participation in an event, then the conclusion should read:

See you all at the funeral.

Here, the writer may attach a map or a sketch showing the directions to the funeral's location (i.e., venue), or specify an assembly pick up point for those to participate in the funeral.

- Then, the *writer signs off* by using any of the following:

We pray that the deceased soul rests in peace or

Please keep the deceased and his/her family in your prayers,
followed by the writer's name..

6. Results

Comparisons of pre-and post-teaching written email messages point to significant improvements in accuracy, appropriateness, number of words and communicative functions of post teaching written email messages. Here are some examples:

Pre-teaching samples

1. Complaint to professor about a course's final grade

Dear Professor,

I hope you are enjoying the break. I would like to review my final exam paper. I was shocked with getting a B- as a final grade since I have scored a 95 and 88 in my midterms, done well in my quizzes, and submitted all homework. I was expecting a much higher grade to represent the effort I have put into this course.

Regards,

A quick glimpse at the above message shows that the writer assumed that the professor knew who s/he was. Furthermore, no information is provided regarding the course taken with the professor. More importantly, the message lacks any signs of being tactful in addressing a person of a high status.

2. Writing to a professor to ask for a make-up midterm exam

Dear Professor,

Hope this email finds you well.

I wanted to inform you that I will not be able to attend the midterm that will be held on Thursday, 25th of February 2016 at 6:00 pm, for I have a surgery

scheduled on the same day. Moreover, a medical report will be provided on request. Consecutively I would like to kindly ask you to assign a date in which I can take a make-up exam if possible.

Best Regards,

Similar remarks to those made above can be made on this message. Yet, after class discussions of the these messages, students were able to see the wider picture, that is, realize that they needed to tell the recipient who the writer is, what kind of relationship holds between the sender and the recipient, and add a touch of politeness to the message as illustrated in the below post-teaching messages.

Post-teaching samples

1. Complaint to professor about a course's final grade

Subject: ENG207 final letter grade

Dear Professor X,

Good morning.

My name is X and I took with you an ENG207 course this past semester. It was really fun taking this course with you, and I really benefitted, both personally and professionally.

However, based on my performance throughout the semester in the quizzes and midterms, as well as the final exam which I believe I did well in; I feel that my final letter grade could be higher.

Therefore, I was wondering if you would be kind enough and consider reviewing my final grade for this course. I have attached to this email a record of my exact grades in all the quizzes and midterms for your reference.

Sorry for any inconvenience.

Looking forward to hearing from you soon.

Kind regards,

2. Writing to a professor to ask for a make-up midterm exam

Subject: Request for a make-up midterm

Dear Dr. X,

I hope this email finds you well.

My name is X (@00054222), and I am a student in your ENG 207 class, section 6 (9:30-10:45 am). I am sending you this email regarding the midterm I missed, which was scheduled for Thursday, 25th of February, due to a serious car accident. I am extremely sorry for any inconvenience, but I was wondering if it would be possible for you to give me a make-up exam. Most probably I will be discharged from the hospital by next Monday, 7th March, and I can take the exam at any date

that suits you.

I have attached to this email a copy of my schedule and free times, as well as the hospital's report of the accident.

Looking forward to hearing from you soon.

Best regards,

7. Discussion

Besides utilizing accurate personal forms of address, appropriate tenor, mode, and field of language, correct spelling, providing sufficient general personal identification details, and appropriate layout of written messages (i.e., spacing, paragraphing, etc.), the post-teaching samples exhibited more sense of readers' informational needs, greater clarity represented in the length of the message, and good use of politeness tactics (Kozel, Hawrysz, Vilamová, Hys (2017). In a nutshell, the steps reported in this study have contributed in shifting the focus from teacher-centered practices to students' collaborative learning-centered environments, resulting in improved student autonomy, positive self-perception and responsibility. That is, through careful examinations of deficient messages, students were able, with minimum guidance from the professor, to take full responsibility of their writing and make sound judgements as to their audience's informational needs. Moreover, this practice provided learners with real opportunities to create their own texts, engage in real communication tasks and reflect on the outcomes of their communication processes. This was manifested in email messages written to professors and other recipients for genuine communication purposes. In this regard, Rilling and Dantas-Whitney (2009:2) rightly argue that "[t]he goal of using and creating language for real-world purposes within language instruction is to bring authenticity to the learning experience...." In addition, students have become more knowledgeable about the steps involved in composing appropriate email messages, which has helped in their gaining "transferable skills and knowledge" (Chun 2010:24).

8. Conclusion and Recommendation

To conclude, writing formal email messages (Wang & Aaltonen, 2004) should be given precedence in communication courses and other engineering courses. Students "develop the proficiency that would enable them to communicate effectively and appropriately with target language speakers in various social settings and circumstances" (Liaw and Johnson, 2001). The concept of *interpersonal relationships* was of great importance so that students know where they stand from their addressees. Students, as a result of writing to different people of different social and hierarchical statuses, were able to use varied "discourse ... strategies to negotiate the power differentials" (Liu, 2011:268) and maintain appropriate rapport.

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