

TEACHING BUSINESS ENGLISH CORRESPONDENCE – THEN AND NOW

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Abstract: *Are letters still important? Are business letters as the classic means of communication needed and important to be taught during language classes these days? Or should the new and modern means of communication prevail over the classic written pieces of paper? This article discusses the findings and implications of an investigation meant to answer these questions about the role of business correspondence in English (i.e. email, letters, memos, faxes) and this is done as a case study addressed to the local door market. The results are based on four sources: 1. a questionnaire that had two versions: an online survey sent by email to 150 alumni of The Faculty of Economics, University of Oradea and to 8 companies and professional associations, and a paper-based version distributed to 80 professionals, who included students undertaking undergraduate and postgraduate programmes; 2. semi-structured interviews with 8 professionals, 3. analyses of 25 email chains comprising 190 separate messages, and a “week-in-the-life” case study. All these cover half a year span of investigation. This research comes with relevant information about the role of email versus letters, memos and faxes in the globalised workplace, the purposes and characteristics of these text types, and the challenges that Romanian professionals experience when writing business correspondence in a second language. The article argues that the irrelevance of the traditional approach of business English courses (letters, memos, faxes) when it comes to the needs of modern-day professionals and need for email and netiquette focus as the core of updated instruction.*

Keywords: business correspondence; Business English; syllabus; letters, email

1. Introduction

The teaching of business correspondence has been an important part of courses in Business English and business communication for students of English as a second language (ESL) in most Romanian higher education institutions- The Faculty of Economic, University of Oradea, included. The accent was primarily on learning the history of letters and correspondence, on discussing the main parts of a letter/business letter, its layout, on writing fictional letters from companies to the business world and memos from one department to another, within the imagined company. For that there were plenty of courses, manuals and textbooks meant to prepare future professionals for approaching any type of business letter, focusing especially on correct grammar and stylish manner. The 1980s brought an important communication invention: the fax machine which added value, speed and freshness to communication, but, as Stephen Evans (2014) notices “no sooner

had Business English teachers responded pedagogically to this development than they were confronted with another, more radical innovation in business communication, and one that more than any other has stimulated the use of English as a business lingua franca: email.” (2014:104)

1.1. Literature study

According to the audience addressed to, materials on teaching business correspondence fall into two categories: those dedicated to native speakers (Bovéé& Thill, 2008; Guffey & Loewy, 2011; Locker & Kaczmarek, 2009) underlining especially strategies for constructing the message and the adequate vocabulary, and those meant for second language users of English which insist more on grammar and style. Naturally, our study will focus on the second one, the studied market being Romanian where English is a second language used mainly at the workplace.

As stated above, we currently live in a completely different world, an age of fast-paced, frequent communication. Texting, e-mail and instant messaging often assault us from every side. Even so, the classic means of communicating, business letters, personal letters, etc. are still an important part of the syllabus for Romanian students to learn while completing their studies at the Faculty of Economics, University of Oradea. As I. Horea rightly stated (2007), Business Correspondence is “taught intensively to students of economics” in Oradea, and she goes on arguing the importance of correspondence, namely letters, as a means of practicing “information on how to use an already assimilated – and not exaggeratedly extended – business lexical material, in a tactful and official manner, in accurate writing of complete, effective and correct formal letters, skilfully selecting the most appropriate phrases and ways of addressing”. Thus, following this logic it is perfectly understandable that the syllabus includes the topic. Nevertheless those who have undertaken teaching business correspondence, stressing mainly on the classic business letters know how difficult it is to arouse and maintain a vivid interest. Consequently, while performing what was to be done, and also witnessing the updated and more used means of communications that people greatly rely on (emails, instant messaging) we have frequently asked ourselves about the usefulness of teaching and focusing on business letters.

It is definitely relevant for any future economist to know the parts of a letter, the courtesy and correct procedure to follow when initiating continuing and maintaining communication with a foreign partner. Nevertheless, nowadays students have never written letters in their entire lives, not even personal ones, and do not feel the need to do it, and so is the case with business letters. On the other hand, we, the instructors insist on the importance of the written word in business, and on politeness and manners. Their questions keep on appearing: then why not emails? Students also argue that they may find the needed information on writing any type of business letter at a press of a button. In spite of acknowledging the new and completely different characteristics of email as well as its essential place in our present “world flattening” phase of economic globalisation (Friedman, 2006), the learning materials on business correspondence continue to devote considerable space mainly to letters, to memos and faxes and which is even more dramatic, to employ more or less the same obsolete methodology in their presentation to students. More recent materials follow Crystal’s (2006) recommendation that email is formally and functionally unique but the methodological approach looks reformed

rather than rethought and replaced; One possible reason for rejecting the new might be explained by Evans (2014) who notices that much of the scarcely voluminous research in this area has centred on aspects of business letters, such as generic structure (Flowerdew & Wan, 2006; Santos, 2002), politeness strategies (Chakorn, 2006; Yeung, 1997), intertextuality and interdiscursivity (Bhatia, 2005; Bremner, 2008) and linguistic features (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 1996) and (to a lesser extent) memos (Forey, 2004) and faxes (Akar & Louhiala-Salminen, 1999). And Evans continues by admitting that there is a significant change that has been obvious for the past decade, a real interest in email communication in the fields of English for specific purposes expressed in researches: Gimenez, 2005, 2006; Jensen, 2009; on business communication (e.g. Dawley & Anthony, 2003). The problem is that these studies often seem to lack pedagogical recommendations addressed to professionals who use English as a second language who now cover a significant segment in the global market. Namely, recent materials lay little emphasis on email communication, focusing more on proficiency-oriented exercises on grammar and vocabulary and less on effective communication. Further on, these textbooks guide learners along writing texts on different topics such as complaint letters, enquiries or encourage them to be careful with the structure (opening, body, and closing) of emails that professionals supposedly follow when writing them just like in the case of letters, memos and faxes in the real world.

Being crystal clear that emails are by far more used in the day-to-day business communication (O’Kane, Palmer & Hargie, 2007) the article will try to come up with pertinent answers regarding the role of emails in everyday business context as compared to letters, as well as the challenges that professionals face when writing business correspondence in English. The answers are sought in the area of services in Oradea, an uprising town of Romania and using data from an investigation on to the use of English in the everyday business context. The findings may become recommendations for the future design of the university curricula for students in Economics.

1.2 Differences between letters and emails

As letters are considered obsolete, letter writing is seen as an art, much used in the past, a too detailed and time-consuming process nowadays. Email is used daily, checked regularly, sometimes even obsessively, on computers, smartphones, being presently one of the main ways people communicate with each other on daily, personal basis.

As the term *email* suggests, the name comes from *electronic mail*, which hints to its origin- the handwritten letter format. At the very beginning just like in the case of letters, there was a set of rules for writing appropriate emails deriving from the good practice of letter writing. However, as they are the product of technological innovation, they have also been subject to innovation and thus, in time, the electronic culture started making its own rules evolving divergently from the original format. Today we have essential differences between email and letter writing.

The first and most essential difference is that emails are *less formal* and this is a direct consequence of the development of faster forms of communication- phone, social media, which have relinquished formalities and courtesy formulas. When sending “letters” to hundreds of people at a time and only pressing a button, the rules of starting each and every of them with “Dear Sir/Madam,” seems rather

archaic. Nevertheless, there are situations when the procedure is followed, writing a complaint letter to a bank for instance, when, even in a hurry, formality is recommended. Formulas like "To whom it may concern:" and "Dear Ms Davies," are still recognised as formal salutations, yet, even business English has started relaxing its rules and the more informal "Hi," and "Good day," are becoming increasingly more popular.

Another defining difference between the two ways of communication is *the presence of the subject line*: unlike letters which do not necessarily impose it, sometimes its role being expressed in the first line of the first paragraph: "I am writing in regard to...", emails etiquette suggests a short and to the point subject line arguing that a well-conceived line could save an email from being put off and become part of the priority list.

Differences are also in *the style of writing* and it all depends on the audience. Even if emails are synonymous to informality, it is a fact that most of the emails sent daily are meant for business. Business emails are still more formal and subjected to a certain stylistic standard. Nevertheless, multinationals and new hip internet and communication companies have created a more casual work culture trying to release pressure from employees and to connect work life with life outside the company and the result of this approach is sensed at the level of formality that is expected from a business email. There are domains where the change is not substantial: education, banking, where emails are still rather formal and polite, beginning with "Dear Sir," and ending in "Sincerely yours," and here the formal tone and the level of formality is determined by the recipient.

To conclude, despite less formality, there are some business writing rules that apply to emails as well.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 The questionnaire survey

The survey was intended *to underline* the needs for language learning of the Romanian professionals performing in the local business, the door market, also *to discuss* the participants' strengths and weaknesses when using business English correspondence, including writing emails, letters, memos, faxes, reports, giving presentations and participating in meetings and *to find* a possible answer to the question: emails or letters? Thus, a questionnaire was developed: an online survey sent by email to 150 alumni of The Faculty of Economics, University of Oradea and to 8 companies and professional associations, and a paper-based version distributed to 80 professionals, who included students undertaking undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. A total of 84 correctly completed questionnaires were returned. The results indicate a good degree of reliability. In spite of the low response rate, which is of no surprise, the sample is comprehensive enough so as to capture the experiences of a rather representative segment of the local door market workforce.

2.2. Analysis of email chains

There was also an analysis of 25 email chains, out of which 19 (containing 135 messages) were provided by a product manager (Alina) working for a local door

selling company, while the remainder (containing 55 messages) were collected by a marketing manager (Cosmin). This analysis provided useful information on the structure, initiation, continuation and ending of the email communication chain and also supported the participants' assertion about the daily volume and frequency of email communication, and also explained the challenges they are faced to, such as the standard formulas, structure and also the need to be precise and concise in every email.

3. Results of the investigation

A significant ratio of the respondents of the survey were employed in disciplines in the professional and business services industry (49.1%), while the others worked in trading and logistics (12.8%), financial services (11.1%), tourism (10.4%), and other service sectors (16.6%). Most of the participants were career professionals, more than half of them (51.7%) having up to ten years of experience. The survey was the initial stage of the investigation, its findings provided the basis for the interview phase, which involved 8 professionals (4 males, 5 females). The interviewees had experience in their working field as they occupied middle and senior management positions in their organisations.

The interviews were based on predetermined plan, but, as a warmup, the interviewer was able to ask free questions to explore interesting issues to create a proper interview atmosphere. The topics approached dealt with business correspondence focusing on the purposes of emails, letters, memos and faxes, message structures, style and tone. Given the centrality of email in modern business was to come as a no surprise topic as seen below. The interviews were in Romanian, each lasting 30-40 minutes.

3.1. The roles of emails, letters, memos and faxes in the business world plus the key part played by English in international business communication

The surest piece of information provided by the study, as it appears in the chart below, is the major part English language plays in the business communication.

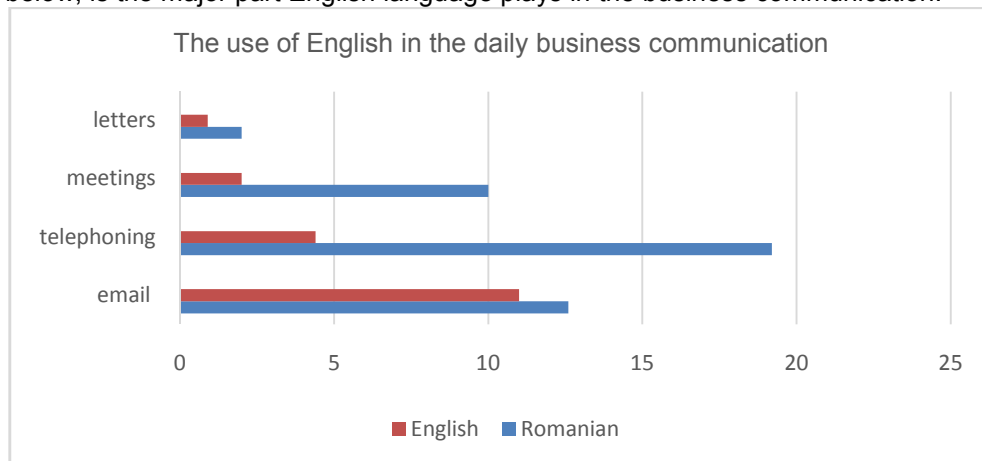


Figure 1 Source: own design

Another key information that resulted underlines the importance of emails in the business communication greatly prevailing that of other means: letters, faxes, memos. As illustrated in Figure 2, reading and writing emails eat up an important part of the employees' time (35.72%), the next most common activity being telephoning (20.56%) (although not conversations were conducted in English). A close analysis of the product manager checklist revealed that she wrote 17 emails in Romanian during the week. These texts occupied 47 minutes of her time, and perhaps significantly, were all internal messages (as were the 49 Romanian-language emails she reported reading). Her email writing in English was fairly balanced between internal and external communication (29 and 23 messages respectively). The task of dealing with messages took about 3½ minutes (internal) and 4 minutes (external) to compose, which thus confirms the need for being quick and brief in the nowadays business world.

Paul (buyer), for example, admitted that "99% of our writing is in the form of email", while Raluca (human resources) observed that "emails equal about 90% of our writing". Cosmin (marketing specialist) pointed the very quintessence of the interviews: "Basically email along with telephones is the main communication channel in our activity."

These experiences came as answers to our premises indicating that reading and writing internal and external emails are the most frequent English-using activities; the key role of email in modern business communication was also indicated by the findings of the case studies.

3.2. The purposes of business correspondence

A part of the questionnaire focused on the main purposes of writing business correspondence that the participants were asked to by ticking up to three of the 12 options provided. The participants based their responses on their experiences of email communication. As seen in Figure 2 the purposes are quite different, none of them predominates, although finding information seems particularly significant for all of them.

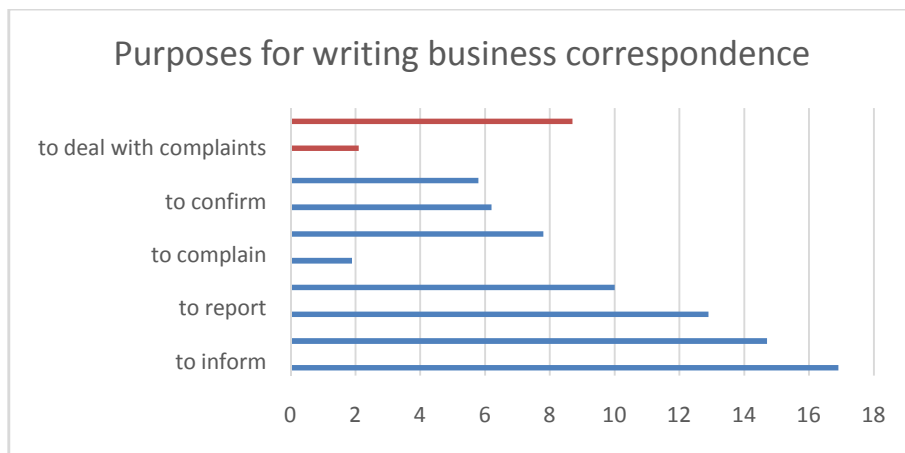


Figure 2 Source: own design

3.3. Analysis of email chains

The survey and interview findings are supported by an analysis of email chains, out of which a majority of 25 email chains (containing 135 messages) was provided by a product manager (Alina) working for Romanian door manufacturer, while the rest of them (containing 121 messages) were collected by an IT manager (Ionut) employed by a multinational company.

This analysis provided useful pedagogical information about the average lengths of chain emails (i.e., who initiates the chain, who finishes it, the first and final messages in a chain of email messages as well as the messages that form the body of the chain). This information is valuable as it proves the interviewees' claims about the volume of email communication and meanwhile explains the major challenge they experience when composing such messages: the need to be precise and brief. And it also testifies the extreme importance of English communication skills.

3.4. Case study

This paper was also based on data collected from a "week-in-the-life" case study. The participants in the case studies were asked to record their business-related activities on each day of a typical working week. They checked on a specially designed paper with their current activities specifying the nature, language, duration and direction (i.e. internal or external) of their communication activities. The data was meant once again to track the flows of written and spoken language be it Romanian or English.

4. Conclusion

The paper was meant to reveal some aspects of our world, personal and professional as recorded by the findings of a questionnaire survey, of interviews, email chains and case studies. The findings are relevant of us, language teachers of English-language business correspondence in Oradea, from at least three points of view:

First, to know whether our teaching should focus on letters, memos and faxes as it currently does. Memos and faxes have now largely been used too much being taken over by emails and letters seem to undergo the same path. the same destiny superseded by email and thus could easily be removed from students' already overloaded syllabi. The existence of extremely numerous predefined templates and models explains the lack in interest of students, the only practical purpose of teaching them should be to help students develop aspects of their written English, such as grammar, style and cohesion.

Second, the data acquired suggests that email plays a key role in workplace communication and consequently it should become the core component of any course that seriously seeks to prepare students for professional employment. It is crucial for students to understand that emails contain embedded messages and thus they integrate all the four skills.

Third, as derived from the present investigation, the focus should be on following the email chain rather than the isolated one-way message and this might become the basis for useful real email instruction. One important change in the teaching seems to be the lengths of the emails drilled in the class: the emails students compose in the classroom tend to be long and very detailed whereas the emails

written daily by professionals hardly go over 50 words. This is because they are linked to previous ones or are the result of documents and discussions that have been produced or participated before; consequently students should be given the chance to write messages at different points in a chain, to adapt the content, length and language of their messages to the new reality which goes beyond the guidelines provided by their textbooks.

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