

ESP: A Business Text Analysis

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ESP : ビジネステキストの分析

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Abstract

This brief paper will analyze a writing skills text which was moderately popular in the British business classroom of the early 1990's. Section 1 explores the syllabus and teaching methodology employed. Section 2 compares this approach with contemporary methodologies, not only for ESP but also non ESP materials. Finally, in section 3 the effectiveness of the text will be examined. The conclusion drawn is that the text was somewhat antiquated, not only in content but also (quite crucially), in the author's approach to the teaching of writing.

Section 1

The Syllabus & Methodology Employed

In *Writing for Business* (C. Wilkinson 1989), the author attempted to employ a principled blend of 'content', 'skills' and 'method' syllabuses (White 1988) (1). However deeper examination reveals a text which is top-heavy on content ('product'). The underlying organizing principle for the content syllabus is *situational* (see Appendix A). Generally, each of the twenty units in the text focused on the most common situations which the author felt the students would encounter in business correspondence. For example: *Dealing with Orders* (Unit 5), *Requesting Payment* (Unit 10) or *Replying to Complaints* (Unit 15). In the final units of the text, the business / commercial focus gradually tapered off, to be replaced by a number of units which were slightly marginalized from the business domain or just personally beneficial to the student, i.e. *Applying for a Job* (Unit 18) or *Hotel Reservations* (Unit19).

Each situation in the text is supported by one, or occasionally a number of functions. For example Unit 5 focuses on both '*acknowledging*' and '*advising*', whereas in Unit 15, '*apologizing*' and '*requesting*' are the target functions. Recycling was also a feature of the syllabus, with four units devoted to *revision* evenly divided throughout the text. Finally, for the self study student, the text concludes with an *Answer Key*, *Functional Index* (complete with sentence patterns) and a *Glossary*. Obviously, for the skills element of the syllabus, the emphasis was on writing. Naturally, to support the writing component, reading skills were also given (albeit scant) attention. This was particularly the case in the '*The Letters*' section of each unit, where the presentation of a specimen letter also entailed the learner answering a brief and somewhat very simple comprehension.

Before turning attention to the methodology employed, it is first necessary to give a brief breakdown of an individual unit. Generally, (as is custom), each unit in *Writing for Business*, followed an identical format with a distinct opening stage giving a *Presentation* of the 'product', followed by interwoven *Practice* and *Production* stages (see Appendix B). The *Presentation* stage is divided into 3 sections, beginning with an outline of the '*Aims*' of the unit. This is followed by two specimen letters; '*Letter A*' being a query and '*Letter B*', the response. These specimen letters are rather formalized and in respect to lay-out, style, referencing and salutations, followed what were, very traditional business conventions. The inclusion of the company's letterhead is the author's only attempt at bringing an element of authenticity to the text. The *Presentation* stage concludes with a *Language Focus* section which is loaded with sterile constructions, i.e. '*We are pleased to acknowledge / advise / enclose...*' (Unit 5). Or '*We are unfortunately unable to...*' (Unit 13). In support of these constructions, a number of the units present specific grammatical structures as in Unit 6; 'Note *If* + present tense (negative): *will* + verb' (Appendix B).

In the sections which follow, the learner is eventually given the opportunity to practice writing a business letter. The activities are graded from the sentence level (*Practice Exercise*), through to a cloze exercise, and finally the production of complete letters (*Letter Writing Practice*). What is immediately apparent from these 'tasks' is the focus on accuracy; the writing is very controlled and seems to offer little room for unpredictability. Additionally, and of equal significance, is the dearth of communicative purpose in the tasks. Writing business correspondence invariably involves some form of interchange between people. However with the exception of a final pair-work exercise, the students are repeatedly writing letters to which no-one will reply!

Turning briefly to the role of the teacher; from the above examination, it can be asserted that a teacher-fronted approach dominated each lesson. This was particularly the case in

the *Presentation* stage, where the instructor would presumably use elicitation to present the aims of the unit. In the *Practice* and *Production* stages, the students should ostensibly have more opportunity for autonomy. However, from the lack of tasks which encourage collaboration (i.e. peer reviews / editing), it must be assumed that even these stages were predominantly controlled by the teacher.

Section 2

Contrasts with Non-ESP Approaches

From the preceding analysis of the syllabus and methodology, it is fairly evident that the author followed a '*traditional*' approach to the teaching of business writing. The reliance on specimen letters and the '*Language Focus*' section, with its fixed expressions, both concentrate on the 'product'. The author has assumed that by simply providing examples of model letters and structures for the student to imitate, they should be capable of duplicating the finished 'product'. Such replication is obviously what the author has in mind in the final section of each unit ('*Letter Writing Practice*'), where the learner is provided with a number of situations in which to produce a letter. The finished product would then be corrected by the teacher who would; '*... use rivers of red ink to tell the students only if they got it 'right' or 'wrong'.*' (Susser: 1994; 34).

Clearly such a mechanistic approach to the teaching of writing, where the emphasis is on copying a prescribed model, *Writing for Business* differed sharply with contemporary non ESP approaches. One obvious contrast was the scant attention given to the actual 'processes' involved in learning to write. The *Process Orientated Approach* which was initially proposed in the mid 1980's, is easily identified by a number of tasks:

- ◆ There is a need to write about topics which are meaningful or of interest to the learner.
- ◆ At the start of the writing process little attention is given to linguistic accuracy.
- ◆ Journals and free-writing are encouraged.
- ◆ There is a focus on pre-writing and multiple drafting tasks, with feedback between the tasks.
- ◆ There is a major emphasis on feedback through collaboration. This would take the form of pair / group-work, brainstorming, multiple drafting and teacher intervention.

The final feature merits further consideration. The focus on collaboration, free writing and multiple drafting tasks was echoed in the extensive research of Susser (1994), who asserted that there were two vital components to process writing pedagogy; '*awareness and in-*

tervention.' (Susser: 1994; 35). By 'awareness', the intention is to alert the learners to the fact that writing is a 'process' and that there are as many diverse processes as there are kinds of writing. There is no fixed formula and students need to view writing as a '*voyage of discovery*' (op.cit.), where their ideas are generated and circulated amongst peers and not just transcribed, as is the case in product pedagogy. On the other hand 'intervention', involves both the students and teacher. The aim is to encourage the learners not only to generate ideas but also to assist in the planning and production of initial and subsequent drafts. Such emphasis on intervention can be contrasted with the traditional teacher-fronted approach taken in *Writing for Business*. As White and Arndt (1991) declare;

The teacher, instead of being cast merely in the role of linguistic judge, now becomes a reader, responding to what the students have written; the students, rather than merely providing evidence of mastery of linguistic forms, proffer experiences, ideas, attitudes and feelings to be shared with a reader.' (White & Arndt: 1991; 2)

What is immediately apparent from this broad observation of process pedagogy is the capacity of this approach to incorporate all four major language skills. This integration of the main skills is a chief feature of the approach advanced by Charles (1996), who argued the need to engage students in a number of communicative tasks to enable them to reach three pre-defined goals;

'The long (term) aim... is to improve the students' ability to write both academic work in English by increasing their awareness and understanding of both language and the writing task itself. In the medium term, the aim is to help the students to improve their writing themselves. Finally, the short-term aim is to ensure an adequate public performance in the writing (task) the students are currently engaged upon.' (Charles: 1992; 59)

Unsurprisingly, process pedagogy, quickly crossed over from EAP to the business domain. An early example of the approach in a business context was Howard's (1993) 'experiment' with Indonesian business students. Despite their high level of L2 communication skills, the students were frustrated at their poor writing skills in business correspondence. In an attempt to combat this (Howard; *ibid*) and her colleagues, introduced process methodology which encouraged student collaboration and peer evaluation at every stage of the writing process. Additionally, the students were expected to take the initiative, with the teacher abandoning the traditional role of instructor (the '*source of language*'), to become instead, one of '*facilitator*'.

In summary, this section has outlined a number of contrasts in methodology which exist

between *Writing for Business* and 'process pedagogy'. However, as we turn our attention to the text's effectiveness, another approach to the teaching of writing will also be considered.

Section 3

Text Effectiveness

Bearing in mind that the ultimate goal of *Writing for Business* was to enable students to communicate by writing business correspondence, there is a dearth of communication in the tasks provided. Firstly, not only is there minimal communicative purpose in the tasks themselves but secondly and perhaps more significantly the activities encourage little interaction between the students! At the time, various definitions of what could be regarded as a communicative task had been proposed. For Littlejohn and Hicks (1987), there were five necessary criteria:

- ◆ Extended Discourse Learners need the opportunity to process language above the sentence level.
- ◆ An Information Gap The need for learners 'to share information not previously known by all participants in the task' (op.cit; 103).
- ◆ Uncertainty In any particular situation or task, the students should be able to choose for themselves what to say or write.
- ◆ Goal Orientation Tasks should provide learners with some purpose for communication.
- ◆ Real Time Processing Tasks should give learners the opportunity to deal with the language spontaneously.

As the analysis in section 2 reveals, with the exception of the 'practice letters' (which provided extended discourse), the tasks in *Writing for Business* do little to fulfill the above criteria. Another salient point which deserves attention is the lack of 'authenticity' in the text. The author would perhaps argue otherwise, with the presentation of the semi-authentic 'specimen letters'. However, considering the advances made with authentic business English materials, the text appears hopelessly outdated – even by the standards of the day! Contemporary approaches to the teaching of writing in business contexts generally entailed both teacher and students building up extensive corpora of authentic materials to analyze. Such materials would have included internal memos, faxes and business letters, to be joined as the 1990's progressed, with emails and text messages.

The identification of specific 'text types', obviously entails incorporating the *'genre ap-*

proach' to the teaching of writing and although a detailed examination of genre theory in ESP (2) is beyond the scope of this paper, the pedagogical justifications for such an approach merits consideration. With genre theory, the focus is very much on the rhetorical structure of individual genre. In a business context, examples of genre could be; an email to arrange a conference, in house memos giving instructions, a text message requesting clarification or confirming a meeting, even the taking of a phone message. Students would examine both good and bad example of the genre from the micro-level (i.e. through concordances of a number of texts to see how particular genres exploit certain linguistic forms), to the macro-level, which could involve, (for example) studying how sample genres are organized.

Cheung's (1993) analysis of fifty direct-mail sales letters can be regarded as a classic example of the genre approach. All the letters he examined;

'... were found to exhibit very similar or nearly identical discourse structure, which can be analyzed in terms of distinct sequence moves...' (Cheung 1993; 273)

For Cheung (ibid), such methodology had a number of pedagogical implications. Most importantly (perhaps), was the ability of such an analysis to give students insight into what functions and forms to exploit, based on the profiles and needs of their respective companies. As successful as Cheung's approach may have been in exploiting authentic resources (in genre terms), it clearly lacked communication. Ironically, the earlier research of Littlejohn & Hicks (1987) addressed this conundrum with more success. They asserted that their task-centered writing activities, which integrated the use of both semi-authentic materials and student collaboration created 'simulations' where; *'writing as a means of communication would appear naturally..'* (1987; 108). Hyland and Hyland (1992) went one step further and exploited fully authentic written genres in their 'process-orientated task based approach'. (Although one must consider that the initial focus of their syllabus was not one isolated skill). Finally, the success of Sawyer 1989; Valdeviesco 1992; Charles 1996 (and others) in exploiting 'case studies', has proved that communication and authentic materials could be integrated in the business English classroom.

Finally, when compared with contemporary texts, it really is quite remarkable how dated *Writing for Business* actually was! For example, despite undergoing five re-prints since its initial publication, there was still a unit devoted to telexes and cables! Clearly, there had been no or little 'Target Analysis'. By the mid 1990's, it was obvious that the conventional business letter was being replaced by more advanced methods of transmission, whether it be the fax which had already established itself in the business environment or

the increasingly invaluable email. The impact of this revolution in communication clearly had significant consequences for the teaching of Business English. As Badger declared;

'The increasing use of fax machines and electronic media such as email is placing increasing demands on writing skills....' (Badger; 1994; 8)

One of the most dramatic results of these '*demands*' was the manner in which written business English was altered. As the research of Louhiala-Salminen (1996; 1999) proved;

- ◆ Emails and faxes began to 'blend' features of written and spoken English, resulting in less formalized business writing.
- ◆ A considerable amount of business correspondence was often characterized with 'free writing'. What had become most important was the '*exchange of messages*' (op.cit). As such less attention was being paid to the traditional conventions of letter writing such lay out, style, grammatical accuracy and salutations. (The rapid increase in internal emails certainly encouraged this trend.)
- ◆ With modern transmittal methods, focus was now being placed on the 'interdependence' of writing and speaking. For example, an email may prompt a phone call, which in turn could lead to another email or a text message, and so on.

Conclusion

The preceding brief analysis has clearly exposed a number of weaknesses in the syllabus, methodology and approach to the teaching of business writing. What lies at the heart of these flaws is the author's failure to consider not only the rapid changes which were taking place in the business environment but also his inability to apply contemporary writing pedagogies to his text. However, as critical as this paper has been, one must bear in mind that the text also targeted the self study student and this clearly influenced the author's overall approach. Additionally, despite all the accolades for 'process' pedagogy' and as imperfect as the 'product approach' may appear, there is still room for '*a mechanical element in business communication*' (Louhiala-Salminen 1996; 50).

Notes

1. By the late 1980's (the time *Writing for Business* was originally published), a number of classifications had been proposed for syllabus types; Widdowson (1983); Breen (1987); Nunan (1988) and White (1988), which led unsurprisingly 'to a certain amount of confusion' (Hyland & Hyland 1992; 70). For this paper the classifications advanced by White, were followed.
2. The consideration given to both the process and genre approaches to the teaching of writing, draws attention to what was originally regarded as a contentious issue in EFL. In the late 1980's many researchers saw both approaches as inflexible methodologies and in opposition to each other. Horowitz (1986) was particularly vocal. However as the later studies of White & Arndt (1991) argued, it is best to regard process not as one but as many approaches, thus emphasizing the complementary, overlapping nature of both process and genre pedagogy.

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Appendix A

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Appendix B

Unit 6

AIM: Writing Reminders

<p style="text-align: center;">Michael Artois Limited 13, Rue Jean, Paris, France</p> <p><i>The Sales Manager Longford Mills Leeds England LE2 6ND</i></p> <p><i>Your ref: Our ref: MW/CC</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>3rd August 1989</i></p> <p><i>Dear Sir / Madam,</i></p> <p><i>On 19th July, I wrote you a letter requesting details of your special trade discounts but I have not yet received your reply. The details are <u>required urgently</u> and I should be grateful if you could send them <u>without further delay</u>.</i></p> <p><i>Yours faithfully, M. Knight M. Knight Manager</i></p>	<p>Polite first reminder</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Has Mr. Knight's first letter been answered? 2. What does 'them' (line 3) refer to? 3. How do we know Mr. Knight wants the details quickly?
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<p style="text-align: center;">Michael Artois Limited 13, Rue Jean, Paris, France</p> <p><i>The Sales Manager Longford Mills Leeds England LE2 6ND</i></p> <p><i>Your ref: Our ref: MW/CC</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>21st August 1989</i></p> <p><i>Dear Sir / Madam,</i></p> <p><i>On the 19th of July I wrote to you and requested details of your trade discounts. On the 3rd of August I wrote again but have still not received a reply. If I do not receive your reply <u>by return</u>, I will be <u>forced*</u> to <u>approach</u> an <u>alternative supplier</u>.</i></p> <p><i>Yours faithfully, M. Knight M. Knight Manager</i></p>	<p>Much stronger second reminder</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How many times has Mr. Knight written to Longford Mills? 2. What does 'by return' mean? 3. What will Mr. Knight do, if he doesn't receive a reply?
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Language Focus

1. Expressing urgency

(the details).....*are required urgently*
*send them without further delay*
*send them by return (of post)*

2. Requesting action (formal)

I should be grateful, if you could..... (send ...)

3. Threatening (Consequences of inaction)

If I do not.....(receive your reply by return), I will.....be forced to approach an.....
If you do not.....(send your reply by return), I will.....be forced to

Practice Exercises

Write sentences as directed

1. Request that the following actions be completed urgently:
 - a) sending latest catalogue
 - b) replying to your last letter
 - c) sending latest price list
 - d) answering your enquiry of March 21st
 - e) sending samples you requested two months ago

2. Make threats if actions are not carried out.

	Action	Threat
a)	reply to our enquiry	cancel our last order
b)	send discount details	approach another supplier
c)	settle last month's account	stop supplying you
d)	replace broken items	cancel our last order
e)	send latest price-list	approach another supplier

Letter Writing Practice

1. Complete the following letter. A customer is writing to his supplier complaining that he has not received the price-list which he asked for three weeks ago.

James Hill PLC	
22, Derbyshire Lane Weybridge, Surrey KT6 2LM	
Jose Alva 27, La Plata St. Madrid Spain	Our ref: Our ref: (1) / LD 20 th October 1990
Dear Sir.	
On the 30 th August I wrote (2) ***** asking for (3) ***** but I have (4) ***** price list (5) ***** and I would (6) *****	
Yours (7) *****	
J. Hill J. Hill Import Manager	

2. Write a letter from James Hill PLC to Jose Alva. Complain that you have had no reply to your last two letters asking for a price list. Threaten to place your next order with an alternative supplier.
3. Write a letter from your own company to Global Metals (Unit 65, Oak Trading Estate, Birmingham, U.K.), complaining that you have not received their spring catalogue that you requested three weeks prior.
4. Write a letter from your company (Michael Artois Limited) complaining that you have not received a reply to either of your last two letters in which you requested replacements to a number of broken items (order No. MA/765). Threaten to cancel all current orders if you do not receive an immediate reply.

Pair-work

1. Write a letter complaining that you have not received a reply to a request for prices and detailed specifications of a new range of furniture (invent items of furniture & companies names and addresses).
2. Take your partner's letter and write a follow-up letter complaining that you have not received a reply to either of your previous letters. Threaten suitable action.

