

Business Writing : A Model Academic Course

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Business Writing: A Model Academic Course

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to report on a practical, academic level English business writing program. The meaning of the term *academic* in this discussion is *using native, college-level course materials*. The program described here was developed by a leading university in the Tokyo area, utilizing a professional level British business correspondence manual as its textbook along with many original scaffolding materials.

This report will begin with a brief description of Content-Based Instruction (CBI), the theoretical basis for the course. The second section will review the features of the course contributing to its success and relate them to CBI theory. The third part of the paper will mention the factors which compromised the complete success of the program, and the concluding discussion will suggest one type of CBI activity which could be added to the course to improve the attitude and performance of the students who enroll. It is hoped that this account will provide a solid framework for other instructors wishing to teach English business writing on the academic level.

Background and Underlying Theory

The course described here was the creation of Professor Asuka Yamagishi-Yoneyama of Aoyama Gakuin's School of Social Informatics, a sub-division of the Science Department. Informatics prepares graduates to assist researchers in compiling and analyzing scientific data. The work is largely clerical, and coordination with researchers

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from abroad is becoming more important. Learning the etiquette and conventions of modern business English writing is therefore advisable.

For the most part, the business writing course introduced here follows the principles of classic CBI. The assumption underlying the use of CBI is that “people learn a second language more successfully when they use the language as a means of acquiring information” (Richards & Rodgers, p. 207). Stryker and Leaver (1997) list the three factors most characteristic of CBI. (1) Educators teach content as opposed to simply language. (2) They use textbooks and materials produced for native speakers. (3) Lessons are suited to the needs of the students.

To explain in greater detail, CBI is a type of linguistic immersion. Learners study one subject area in depth throughout a course. They are exposed to a great amount of native material with little or no translation. Instructors use various kinds of scaffolding or teacher-written exercises to acquaint students with essential vocabulary and other expressions necessary to understand course content and to perform activities. Beyond that, the usefulness of the information and the stimulating content are expected to spur on students to work hard with challenging, native-level materials and learn language through context, much like first language learners do.

Students work with each other and with the teacher (interactive learning). They co-construct or negotiate meaning in order to understand materials and to apply what they have learned. Particularly in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), a form of CBI, courses often culminate with students working in groups to share their personal insights on program content through presentations and essays.

Research Findings: Support for the Use of CBI

Research on instructional strategies and on cognitive psychology, as well as statistics on program outcomes, supports the use of CBI in college classrooms. On the instructional level, CBI makes regular use of cooperative learning and a variety of learning strategies and thinking skills. Studies have shown that such activities result in improved learning

(Slavin, 1995; Crandall, 1993) and richer language development (Curtain, 1994; Met, 1991).

Cognitive psychologists have found that CBI or thematically organized material takes less effort to remember and results in better learning (Singer, 1990). CBI also develops a larger number of discourse skills than traditional EFL/ESL courses because of the higher level of thinking required by learners (Byrnes, 2000).

Additionally, the performance level of students in immersion classes has been shown to consistently exceed that of students in ordinary language classes (Genesee, 1987). Many other studies support these conclusions. With careful planning, preparation and choice of materials, instructors have many reasons to expect good outcomes for CBI courses.

Course Strengths

Next, we will consider the strengths of the business writing course under discussion and when possible will relate them to CBI methodology.

(1) Appealing to Students' Needs

As mentioned above, the School of Social Informatics aims to prepare students for their future clerical roles, including giving them the skills to write and respond to international correspondence. This is not only a need of Informatics students, but of Japanese university students in general as it is likely that many will work in offices one day. A yearly survey of occupations in Japan showed that in 2017 approximately 13 million people or about 20% of the workforce was employed as clerical workers, and the percentage had grown quite steadily from 2010 and 2017 (Japan. Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2018; STATISTICA, n.d.).

Also, as Japan has been increasing its business with other countries and as the need for English correspondence has been rising, its future workforce is failing to meet national standards for writing in English. A 2015 report published by the Ministry of Education,

Culture, Sport, Science and Technology (MEXT), entitled *Plans on the Promotion of Improvement of Students' English Abilities*, details MEXT's mid-2014 study of 7,000 third-year Japanese public high school students nationwide which examined students' performance on the four skills in English. This 2015 publication reported that 82.1% of students were found to be at the EIKEN 3 to 5 level in terms of correspondence. This means that at best they were only able to write short messages (e.g., Bob called at 9 a.m.) (EIKEN, 2008).

Ministry standards specified that by graduation high school students should have an EIKEN level of pre-2 or 2. That is, they should be able to write letters and emails of at least moderate length. Clearly, the Ministry recognizes the need for better English writing skills among its graduates and the shortcomings of the public school system in meeting its standards. It falls to forward-looking universities, such as Aoyama Gakuin, to close the gap.

The textbook for the Aoyama Gakuin course was also chosen with the needs of the students in mind. *Model Business Letters, Emails and Other Documents*, 7th edition, written by Shirley Taylor, renowned author and corporate staff trainer, is recognized in the UK and abroad as a leading reference book on the most modern form of business writing, the fully blocked, open punctuation style, which has developed recently alongside the use of computers. Professor Yamagishi-Yoneyama selected this as the text for her program, believing that it was the most comprehensive, cutting edge reference manual available and that it likely would not go out of date during the students' careers. She wanted to give students the security of knowing that after the course ended, they still had a way of answering their correspondence related questions. The scaffolding materials were written with the aim of training students to use the manual to find the answers to typical questions that international business correspondents might have.

(2) Clearly Expressed Requirements Supporting Higher Learning

The first day of class students were given a clear breakdown of the system for earning

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points and a weekly calendar of classes and textbook chapters they would be responsible for. The breakdown was as follows:

Preparation	10%
Participation	10%
Tasks	15%
Weekly quizzes	35%
Final test	30%

Students needed to achieve a 60% final average and be absent no more than 4 times.

To receive preparation points, students needed to read the assigned chapter for the week and make reading notes. Teachers checked each student's text for these notations every week. They were also required to bring their textbook, a dictionary and weekly vocabulary flash cards used to prepare for tests. Students without textbooks were marked absent.

Participation points required students to participate in all classroom activities and to be respectful and cooperative.

For each of the three tasks, students were given one or more model letters. They were asked to make substitutions in the content and to produce the new letters in both handwritten and typed form.

The 12 quizzes, 15 points each, consisted of 7 to 8 vocabulary questions and 8 or 7 questions respectively on business practices described in the previous week's reading and in scaffolding materials. Both tasks and quizzes were returned to students with feedback the week after their submission. No late tests were given and no late homework was accepted without official excuse.

The final test was a selection of the vocabulary and word problems appearing in the weekly tests. Cheating on quizzes or the final test resulted in immediate failure of the course.

(3) Team Effort

During most years the business writing course was taught fall term by three part-time

teachers to approximately 30 students apiece, each group meeting in a separate classroom. The office administrators, however, regarded the three classes as one large class. As such, the rules and materials for the classes had to be as similar as possible, and that required regular consultation among team members and with supervisors.

The three teachers shared responsibility for writing the quizzes, tasks and final examination. Supervisors were quick to intervene in cases of unruly or cheating students. This support gave classroom teachers a sense of security and authority in their classes and kept problems to a minimum. Teachers were able to give their full attention to assisting students in learning rather than disciplining.

(4) Scaffolding

The students taking this course were neither English nor business majors. Their English levels varied widely. Yet, they all were asked to read and learn the principles in a manual written for professional office workers in the UK. The students needed help to bridge the gap between their existing levels and the textbook. During the first year of the program, one of the team members wrote scaffolding materials to introduce vocabulary, simplify new concepts and get students to use the manual to arrive at the answers to content questions which would be tested the following week. The types of exercises used in class depended on the type of information contained in the week's chapter. The source of the scaffolding content was always the chapter. Whenever possible, students used the manual as the source for finding answers.

The types of scaffolding utilized on a regular basis in these classes are listed below.

a) Vocabulary

Key vocabulary found in the readings and weekly lessons was introduced in simple contexts, usually in teacher-written dialogs. Students read the dialogs silently and circled the answer to a question each time to select the meaning of the target word. After checking their answers with an answer key, students read the dialogs together in pairs for further vocabulary reinforcement.

b) Dictations

At the beginning of each chapter Shirley Taylor sets the tone for the reading. She stresses the underlying etiquette to be followed in producing the particular types of letters. She also introduces concepts and communication situations she will discuss in the chapter.

Students were provided with a copy of the first page of the week's chapter with blanks to complete as the teacher read. Afterward, the students opened their books and checked their writing for completeness and spelling. This often reinforced vocabulary.

c) Information Gap Activities (two-sided paper: one side for Partner A; the other side for Partner B)

These sometimes took the form of question/answer-dictation exercises. Partner A asked questions 1, 3, 5, etc. and completed the blanks on his copy of the paper as B read the complete answer from his paper. Partner B asked questions 2, 4, 6, etc. and completed the blanks as Partner A read the complete answer from his side of the paper. This activity was very helpful when the chapter did not provide enough of an introduction to the target correspondence or when the concepts discussed, such as tender offers or leveraged buyouts, were totally outside of the students' frame of reference. It was a way of explaining vocabulary which was too complicated to be conveyed in short dialogs.

d) Information Search Activities

Students working in pairs were given a list of statements related to the content of the week's chapter. They needed to check the textbook to determine if each statement was true or false and note the page where the information appeared. Students did not have much trouble locating the information, but many times partners interpreted it differently. After students completed their answers individually, they needed to be sure that their answers and their partner's were the same. In situations where they did not agree, students needed to negotiate the meaning of the words in the text to arrive at the correct answers. First language use was allowed for these linguistically complex discussions.

e) Physical Matching Activities

Student pairs were provided with a sheet of terms and an envelope containing slips, each defining one of those terms. With books closed, students matched definitions to terms and used the manual to confirm their answers at the end. The same activity was used to match small photocopies of letters found in the book with a big sheet listing terms for various types of correspondence. Again, the manual was used as the answer key. This is a vocabulary exercise which is more game-like in nature and which can involve negotiated meaning.

f) Reading Comprehension

Students tended to skip over examples of correspondence as they read the chapters for homework. So that students would be prepared to understand the English correspondence that they might one day receive, they were directed to samples of letters appearing in the week's chapter and asked to answer comprehension questions. Upon completion, they needed to check their answers with a partner. Again, this was an opportunity for students to negotiate meaning in cases where answers did not agree. Correspondence appearing in TOEIC reading practice books might be another source of such material, but spacing and punctuation would need to be altered to match the fully blocked, open punctuation style of the class manual.

g) In-Class Writing

Using open punctuation, block style writing and appropriate spacing does not come naturally to students who have only learned to write personal letters or perhaps traditional business correspondence. Regular, in-class writing practice was given to allow students to make mistakes without serious consequences and to learn from being reminded of correct form.

Teachers needed to be vigilant and to circulate around the classroom repeatedly to catch errors. This type of practice is particularly advisable before assigning the tasks. Moreover, some kind of proofreading exercise, for example, finding errors on a poorly executed task paper, was also used. Such exercises require the learner to use a different

set of thinking skills than for just writing. This is a typical feature of CBI courses.

Using program-specific scaffolding gave students their best chance at understanding the vocabulary and skills presented each week. Having a large file of scaffolding activities to draw upon for every class significantly lightened the burden of preparation for teachers and allowed them to invest their efforts in helping students achieve.

Areas Needing Improvement

The course described here has been successful in many respects. It is popular with students and despite the high level of the material, most people pass. Teachers are usually pleased with the ease of preparation and the stimulating content of the course. Nevertheless, there are aspects which could be altered or improved to help the program function even better. These are listed below.

(1) A Larger Language Component

The scaffolding exercises mainly deal with vocabulary and professional business terms. Traditional CBI assumes that learners will be able to understand higher level grammar and less common constructions from context. However, there were regular incidences in my classroom when students found the location of an answer in the manual to a true-false question but could not decide if the answer was true or false for lack of higher level processing skills.

It would be wise for instructors to examine the language of the answers appearing in the text and to provide an exercise on deciphering any difficult constructions that appear in those answers. Students aren't really learning language if they just memorize answers found in an answer key. Students need to know why statements are true or false, that is, what the words in the text actually mean.

(2) Leveling

This course is an elective and attracts students of all levels, beginning, intermediate and advanced, resulting in a significant range of abilities in every classroom. The

assumption in CBI classes is that students are within a certain range of levels. Scaffolding needs to be written at the level of the students to bridge the gap between their natural reading level and the level of the text. If there is no particular level in a classroom, a significant portion of the students will get little benefit from the scaffolding and sit idly in class or simply drop out.

Since there are three teachers teaching the same class at the same time in this program, it would be possible to separate students into levels, such as beginning, intermediate and advanced, according to their freshman English class level. Even if teachers had to teach two levels together to achieve even distribution of student numbers (for instance, beginning and intermediate, or intermediate and advanced), it would be an improvement over the present no-leveling system. Teachers could slow down with lower groups or speed up with higher ones. There would likely be fewer dropouts. This is something that should be considered.

(3) Teacher Turnover

Teacher turnover is high in this program. Every year one or two of the three teachers move on. Most teachers leave for reasons not related to the class, such as pursuit of better career opportunities. This means that the remaining members or member must train and supervise replacements, which can be a time-consuming responsibility. Unfortunately, unless full-time instructors take over the teaching of these classes, this problem is likely to continue.

(4) Cooperative Learning and Personal Expression

In general, content-based courses centering on a certain theme begin with the basics: vocabulary, technical language and fundamental information about the subject. Ideally, a course or unit culminates in more open-ended activities or opportunities for self-expression. Typically, students work cooperatively in groups to make presentations or write essays expressing their views on the subject studied (Shaw, 1997).

In our business writing course, although there are opportunities for collaborative pair

work on short activities, there has been no effort made as yet to use group work that allows for personal expression.

In the world outside the classroom, business writing is done to conduct actual business, to communicate a finite group of real facts and to arrange a limited number of commercial transactions using a very structured format. Business writing courses are essentially skill-based, and correspondence is usually written by one person, not by a committee. Expressing one's personal opinions in standard business letters in some cases might be seen as inappropriate or unprofessional.

Presentations are not usually within the domain of a tightly structured business writing course. In the case of the class under discussion, few of the Informatics majors evidenced the ability to communicate in spoken English beyond simple greetings and requests. Communication with the monolingual teacher was almost always entirely in Japanese.

Recommendations

Nevertheless, it might be possible to inject a little imagination or creativity into the existing course through the tasks. At present the three assigned tasks are a measure of students' ability to manipulate form and observe modern business writing conventions. Students are given a basic business letter and are asked to make substitutions. The objective is for students to make no errors in their final product. More stimulating activities might be used, such as those which follow.

(1) Product Enquiries

While necessary, such mechanical substitution exercises can be boring and often fail to inspire much enthusiasm among the writers. It might be possible to improve on this situation by adding one more step to the task. Students could be given time to do the mechanical substitution exercises in class as a warmup for composing a letter that they might actually want to send. For example, after covering the chapter on enquiries and

writing a sample letter of enquiry in class, students could be asked to find a western product that they liked along with the name and address of the manufacturer, and to write a letter of enquiry about the product. It would not be necessary to actually mail the letters, as such correspondence might attract unwanted marketing, but this assignment would allow students to create a model letter that they might use for enquiries about real products in the future.

(2) Enquiry-Response Activities

A number of the chapters in the class manual present various types of paired enquiry and response letters. These include product enquiries and suppliers' replies; price enquiries and sellers' quotations; customers' orders and delivery notifications; and buyers' requests for special pay arrangements and acceptance or rejection by the seller.

After students do in-class mechanical substitution exercises on particular correspondence pairs, working in groups of two, they could create their own new scenarios and compose a similar letter of enquiry using the manual format but their original details, and this time send it to another student pair. The receiving pair could write a letter of response back to the first pair following appropriate genre style but also using their original details. This would make the activity more immediate and meaningful. The steps of this process are noted below.

Day 1: Write Initial Letter of Enquiry

1. Seat students in groups of two.
2. Give the students a choice of various kinds of enquiry letters already studied. Supply page numbers of the manual showing samples of the target correspondence for each type of enquiry.
3. Students must follow the manual format for the type of letter they will produce. The particular details in the letter are up to the student pair.
4. Have each group draw an envelope from the teacher's bag. The envelope contains the names of another student pair. (The teacher may need to do some quick adjustments

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if an anticipated pair member is absent and a different pair has formed.) These are the names that the target letter should be addressed to.

5. Allow enough time in class for students to complete their letters in the fully blocked, open punctuation style. Collect the letters at the end of class or ask students to send them to the teacher as attachments to email.

Day 2: Rewrite Letter of Enquiry; Deliver; Write Letter of Response

1. Return the corrected letters to the students with scores.
2. Require the students to copy their letters with all corrections made in order to receive the score.
3. Students hand in the rewritten letters to the teacher who reviews them quickly and passes the letters to their intended recipients.
4. The recipients compose letters of response, using the response format of sample letters in the manual, along with their own details. It is best if the teacher provides a handout of the page numbers where students will find the response models.
5. The teacher collects and corrects these response letters or asks for them to be sent through email.

Day 3: Correct Letter of Response and Deliver

1. The teacher passes back to student pairs the scored and corrected response letters for rewriting.
2. The teacher quickly collects, checks and distributes the rewritten letters to the intended groups.

The above series of activities has the potential of engaging students much more than substitution exercises because each student must interact with another during production of the two letters, knowing that their first letter will be read and responded to by two other students. Students also have some freedom over the details they use in their letters which may spark their imaginations. While this set of activities might take more class time than simply handing out a substitution exercise for homework, it fulfills the

requirements for both task 2 and task 3 and would reinforce in the students' minds the relationship between their particular kind of enquiry letter and the response genre. The activity would also involve a greater number of thinking skills, which is a goal of CBI.

The use of CBI or studying academic content in a second language is nothing new. According to Brinton, Snow, & Wesche (1989), Saint Augustine advocated it as early as 389 A.D. What is new is the endorsement of the CBI method in the past half century by government organizations in leading nations. In Canada, immersion education was established for non-native speaking students in 1965 and soon after became the policy in the U.S. In 1975 a British government report encouraged ESL teachers to teach core subjects in their classes and teachers in all disciplines to concentrate on reading and writing in their classes. The slogan of this report, "Every teacher an English teacher" became the mantra of school teachers in both the U.K. and the U.S. (Brigham Young University, n.d). At about the same time, Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) programs began to appear in the U.K. and somewhat later in America. These programs mainly teach working age adults English for the workplace.

Though not always mentioning CBI by name, a number of recent government position papers have come out in support of highly similar methods. The European Commission, the European Union's policy-making body, in its policy paper *Developing Basic Skills as Key Competencies: A Guide to Good Practice*, puts forth its carefully researched list of the Seven Pillars of Learning or the factors which make for successful learning at all ages. The first four factors, 1) fostering needs of learners, 2) creating the desire to learn, 3) the social dimension or learning by interacting with other learners, and 4) learning to learn, or using many thinking strategies, are all key components of CBI (European Commission, 2004).

The same factors, referred to as the 5Cs (Communication, Culture, Communities, Connections and Comparisons) are likewise endorsed in the American Council on Teaching Foreign Languages' national standards (Martel, 2016).

Finally, the government of Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) released a proposal on March 31, 2018, *Study of Course Guideline for Foreign Languages in Senior High School*, as an addendum to its *Course of Study Guidelines* which will take effect in public high schools at the start of the 2022 academic year (McMurray, 2018). This new position paper concerning the guidelines advocates the use of Active Learning (AL) in all school subjects as a way of motivating high school students to learn. AL requires students to culminate their study of topic units by working in groups, discussing issues related to these topics, and coming up with new perspectives or solutions, which they share with their class through presentations and written reports. These are the very same integrated activities used in CBI and CLIL to help students solidify their learning and express their creativity and personal viewpoints.

In light of research findings and growing government support worldwide, it seems clear that CBI courses like the business writing program described in this paper offer a very good learning outcome for language students and are likely to be a growing trend in EFL/ESL education in the 21st century.

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