

English Business Email Writing Problems of 4th Year Logistics and Supply
Chain Management Students of the Faculty of Business Administration
at Huachiew Chalermprakiet University

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Abstract

Email writing is one of the basic routine activities in business organization as writing business correspondent is a process that every department and function in the organization must undertake. The purposes of this study were to find out the point of view of students of Logistics and Supply Chain Management at Huachiew Chalermprakiet University as well as their perceived difficulty concerning email writing in English at their workplaces during their internship. The sample was 67 fourth-year students with all the students taking; EG 5243 English Reading Writing for Professional Purposes, a compulsory course for Business Administration students. The research instruments used for data collection were a five-point Likert scale questionnaire divided into four categories: (1) ability in email writing; (2) ordering ideas; (3) vocabulary and grammatical usage; and (4) capital letter and punctuation usage. Major research findings indicated that the most common significant problems students encountered in email writing were choosing appropriate technical words, followed by being unable to use correct grammar in business English emails. The study also suggested that vocabulary and grammatical usage were the most difficult for them in writing English emails. Based on these major findings, students should be prepared with sufficient writing skills before they enter the workplace and engage in Business writing. In addition, teachers may reinforce vocabulary, especially technical words, and grammar drills for students to prepare them to be able to work efficiently.

Keyword: Business email writing, problems in email writing, difficulty in business writing skill

Introduction

The current digital age's communication has been changed to accommodate various business context, especially nonverbal communication. The increase of international companies as a result of globalization means communication is now of the utmost importance, because people from different backgrounds must be able to convey meanings in order to achieve a common goal. As a result, English language, as a tool of intercultural communication, is one of the most important communication skills at present (Petterson, 2015).

English language is essential for communication worldwide. For the workplace, English writing is one of the most important skills for communicating among companies. Undeniably, worldwide communication is becoming more digitalized and sending emails becomes preferred method of communication. Prapawuttikul (2004) mentioned that written communication is time-consuming and estimated that comprises 30% of work. It is necessary to develop the skill of writing, not only because of the time involved in writing, but also because success may depend upon it.

Guffey and Du-Babcock (2016, p.100) mentioned that email has been the alternative communication channel lately. Communication by email is "a process and continuous activity", which means both sender and receiver cannot revoke the information or messages delivered. Email correspondence is considered as the pioneer of current social network interaction and, in the past 20 years, it has developed into the most widespread and frequent means of business written communication (Danet, 2001). Since Email is considered as the essential tool for many business organizations, it is very important to monitor how difficult students find email writing and help them improve their business email writing skill to be ready for workplace.

In Thailand, there are many English programs that prepare students for their future careers, and one of the primary things that students have to be aware of is business email writing. Many courses that related to business email writing are provided and included in the curriculum of higher education institutions.

The researchers survey students in the faculty of Business Administration in Logistics and Supply Chain at Huachiew Chalermprakiet University (HCU) and found that students have to use business email writing in their jobs. The students in this field rarely studied English in their first and second year, and they also have difficulties writing emails at workplace.

For these reasons, this study focused on investigating the obstacles and the significant problems of fourth year Logistics and Supply Chain students in writing business email in English during their internship period. The purpose of this investigation was to seek the ways to help students gain the necessary skills for their future career.

Literature Review

Studying business communication is essential in term of preparing students for the workplace. In this regard, Al-Musalli (2019) stated that ability to communicate effectively in business is not general practice which can be obtained from home environment. Business skills need learning and practicing in various business contexts to help students gain effective business communication to work efficiently in workplaces. Mastering business skills can help students in their professional lives. In the field of Teaching English as a Second Language (TEFL), the teaching of business writing has been a key part of courses in business English and business communication for students of English as a second language (ESL) or foreign language (EFL) (Evans, 2014). To illustrate, Gale (2014) argued that business writing is one type of business communication that is used in all workplaces every day. There are many types of business writing, such as emails, letters, reports, memos, faxes, and marketing campaigns, which usually have common writing patterns and styles. Since effective writing skills are indispensable to workplace success, it is becoming more significant to business organization in an increasingly globalized world. Companies depend on information to have an advantage over their competitors for long term success in business.

From previous studies, Wijayanti (2017) posited that teaching English oral and written communications in university are equally significant, sending and replying to emails. According to Dolidze (2016), students writing in a second language usually have trouble with background knowledge related to second language acquisition, so the ability to write well can be obtained through cultural learning. For Business English courses, teachers should provide language samples that can help students understand the nature and the real aspect of workplace. In several more recent studies, Schneider and Andre (2005) pointed out that most of the skills taught in normal business writing course are insufficient for effective workplace writing because the contents are based on topics that are commonly used rather than focusing on the students' writing skills in drawing conclusions, making recommendations, and solving problems in the real-world business situation. Yet as Washington M.C. (2014) found, international students start studying in universities with a minimal basic English language, grammatical, tone, and organizational skills necessary to be an effective business writer. Moreover, one of the main obstacles that teachers have been facing when teaching Business writing is that students are too young to understand real work experience in the business world. Thus, Business English teachers need to prepare their business students both in understanding language patterns and using appropriate language, as suggested by Gimenez (2000).

It is very essential to help students gain the competencies for their professional career by studying significant problems and suggestions, and to improve English Business writing skills of university's students. Zhu (2004) explored factors that determine an important purpose of the

business communication which was to prepare students by providing them with opportunities to enhance and sharpen skills for working in the real business context. Washington M.C. (2014) has drawn attention to the fact that many international students are unable to make clear sentences due to a minimal basic vocabulary. Washington M.C. also assumed that the students who are confronted with this problem continue to write with some errors such as the improper use of prepositions, articles, verb tenses, and idiomatic expressions. The above findings echo similar results by other researchers. For example, Al-Musalli (2019) reported that grammar is the main factor influencing business writing skills for new employees. Decharotchanawirun (2015) conducted a survey to investigate problems in the business English writing skills of 30 employees who worked in different departments at The Classic Chairs Company. The findings revealed that the most common problems in writing business letters were using correct grammar, having limited vocabulary, and using appropriate words. As for the employees' perspectives, all of the respondents felt that they could not write emails clearly and correctly. While 46.67% (f=14 out of 30) felt that they could not use correct grammar in their business English emails, 36.67% (f=11 out of 30) felt that they could not use appropriate words in their business English emails. The results are related to the findings by Malathong (2015) who explored the problems of writing English business emails of 30 non-native speaker employees who worked in the Bangkok head office in every department in the workplace. The findings showed that grammar and vocabulary are the two major problems in business English writing. Furthermore, Tiensawangchai (2014) studied the grammar errors found in business writing assignments produced by Thai EFL students who took an English Correspondence course at the Language Institute, Thammasat University, Thailand. He found that the most-frequently found grammar errors fell into ten categories: (1) subject-verb agreement, (2) sentence fragments, (3) noun plurals, (4) noun singular, (5) tenses, (6) spelling errors, (7) active-passive voice, (8) miss election of the article and comma splices, (9) infinitive and noun morphology errors, and (10) gerunds. He reported further that the type of documents had no effect on the number of grammar errors made by the students.

Research on business writing problems, their results assisting in preparing students for real world business context, have been numerous due to their global popularity. This current research plans to add to that body of knowledge by providing data on the English business email writing problems of the fourth year Logistics and Supply Chain Management students. This study aims to answer the specific research questions as follows:

Research Questions

1. What are the problems in writing business emails in English for the fourth year students

majoring in Logistics and Supply Chain Management?

2. In what category do the students have the most difficulties and the least difficulties?

Methodology

Participants

The participants involving in this study are a convenience sample of 67 fourth-year students majoring in Logistics and Supply Chain Management at HCU. All students are taking the same course, EG 5243 English Reading Writing for Professional Purposes, which is compulsory for Business Administration students. The course emphasizes the components and methods used in writing memos, e-mails, application letters, and filling job application forms. The participants had done internship at various logistic companies, and they were required to use English language, especially to write emails for communicating with other departments, suppliers, and shipping agents.

Procedures

The convenience sample was recruited by an announcement in class. The students were informed of the research and the purpose of the study. They were asked to sign a consent form in order to participate in the research. The questionnaire was written in Thai and distributed to the participants in a paper form. Participants spent about 10 – 15 minutes to finish the survey. Once finished, the questionnaire was collected by the researchers for an analysis.

Measures/Instruments

The questionnaire was used as the instrument in the study to measure the students' problem in writing business emails in English. The questionnaire was validated by HCU English teachers specializing in English language teaching to ensure they effectively capture the research questions.

Questionnaire Form The questionnaire consists of two parts.

Part I: Participants' background information.

This part focuses on general information of the participants. They needed to identify basic information such as their gender, age, and major of study.

Part II: Problem of participants in writing emails in English

This part focuses on the problem of participants in writing emails. There are 12 questions, and they are grouped into four categories. The first category consists of one question concerning the inability of students to write email in English in general. The second category asks about the students' ability to organize their ideas when writing email. The third category's questions concern

with the grammar and vocabulary usage of the participants. Lastly, the fourth category contains problems concerning punctuations. This part uses a five-point Likert scale (1 for Strongly Disagree, 2 for Disagree, 3 for Neutral, 4 for Agree, and 5 for Strongly Agree)

Data Collection and Analysis

The study was conducted at HCU. The questionnaire was distributed to 67 participants in paper form. The data was collected by the researchers at HCU for analysis and analyzed quantitatively for the means and standard deviations for each question. The problems in four categories were analyzed and discussed in more details in the Result section.

Results and Discussion

Problems in English business emails writing for fourth year students majoring in Logistics and Supply Chain management

The results of this research have revealed the problems in English business emails writing of the 4th year Logistics and Supply Chain students of the Faculty of Business Administration at HCU. The results have been divided into four categories: (1) ability in email writing; (2) ordering ideas; (3) vocabulary and grammatical usage; and (4) capital letter and punctuation usage. A five-point Likert scale is used to measure degree of agreement. The results have been presented in the form of frequency distribution, mean and standard deviation (S.D.). In addition, the collected data are also presented in the form of means, which are calculated into ranges using the criteria as follows.

| <u>Degree of Agreement</u> | <u>Mean Range</u> |
|----------------------------|-------------------|
| Strongly Agree | 4.21-5.00 |
| Agree | 3.41-4.20 |
| Neutral | 2.61-3.40 |
| Disagree | 1.81-2.60 |
| Strongly Disagree | 1.00-1.80 |

Table 4.1 Problems in English Business Email Writing

| Description | Rate Scale Ranges | | | | | Mean | S.D. | Degree of Agreement |
|---|-------------------|----|----|----|---|------|------|---------------------|
| | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | | | |
| <u>Category 1: Ability in email writing</u> | | | | | | | | |
| 1.1 I cannot write business English emails. | 9 | 17 | 33 | 6 | 2 | 3.37 | 0.93 | Neutral |
| <u>Category 2: Ordering Ideas</u> | | | | | | | | |
| 2.1. I cannot logically organize my ideas when I write my business English emails. | 5 | 23 | 27 | 9 | 3 | 3.27 | 0.95 | Neutral |
| 2.2 It's difficult to create email subject line. | 5 | 17 | 24 | 16 | 5 | 3.01 | 1.05 | Neutral |
| 2.3 I cannot write my emails with all the information necessary to make the point and clarify whatever action the email requests. | 12 | 22 | 24 | 6 | 3 | 3.51 | 1.04 | Agree |
| <u>Category 3: Vocabulary and Grammatical Usage</u> | | | | | | | | |
| 3.1 I cannot use a correct grammar in my business English emails. | 15 | 22 | 26 | 3 | 1 | 3.70 | 0.92 | Agree |
| 3.2 I cannot spell the words correctly. | 13 | 20 | 16 | 14 | 4 | 3.36 | 1.19 | Neutral |
| 3.3 I cannot use appropriate words in my business formal and informal English emails. | 13 | 21 | 22 | 10 | 1 | 3.52 | 1.02 | Agree |
| 3.4 I cannot use a wide range of vocabulary in my business English emails. | 19 | 18 | 19 | 8 | 3 | 3.63 | 1.15 | Agree |
| 3.5 I cannot use the appropriate technical words in my business English emails. | 22 | 27 | 13 | 4 | 1 | 3.97 | 0.95 | Agree |

| Description | Rate Scale Ranges | | | | | Mean | S.D. | Degree of Agreement |
|---|-------------------|----|----|----|----|------|------|---------------------|
| | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | | | |
| 3.6 I cannot use appropriate phrases in my business English emails. | 15 | 26 | 16 | 7 | 3 | 3.64 | 1.08 | Agree |
| <u>Category 4: Capital Letter and Punctuation Usage</u> | | | | | | | | |
| 4.1 I cannot use the capital letters appropriately. | 4 | 7 | 13 | 29 | 14 | 2.37 | 1.11 | Disagree |
| 4.2 I cannot use the punctuation appropriately. | 4 | 9 | 25 | 18 | 11 | 2.66 | 1.09 | Neutral |

According to Table 4.1, the researchers found that there were six important obstacles for the participants in their business English emails. The first one was that they could not use the appropriate technical words in their business English emails with Mean of 3.97, followed by the problem that they could not use correct grammar in business English emails as the second. (Mean = 3.70) The third issue was that they could not use appropriate phrases in business English emails (Mean = 3.64), whereas the fourth one was that they could not use a wide range of vocabulary in their business English emails. (Mean = 3.63) The fifth problem was that they could not use appropriate words in their business formal and informal English emails (Mean = 3.52) and they could not write their emails with all the information necessary to convey their issues and clarify whatever action the email requests (Mean = 3.51) came as the sixth respectively.

Categories the students have the most difficulties and the least difficulties

As shown in Table 4.1, it is revealed that the category which is the most difficult for the participants is category 3 which relates to vocabulary and grammatical usage. There are many differences between Thai and English grammar, thus using correct English grammar in writing business English emails is also difficult for participants since writing skill is the most difficult skill in language learning for non-native speakers. Moreover, writing business English emails is used in business setting as a tool for communication and each type of emails has its characteristics and features. According to Gale (2014) who claimed that business writing is one type of business communication that is used in all workplaces every day. In addition, there are various types of business writing, such as email, letters, reports, memos, faxes, and marketing campaigns, which always have common patterns and

styles in writing. Furthermore, the second rank which is also difficult for our students are category 2 which relates to ordering ideas. The point that made this category difficult for them is that they cannot gather all necessary information to convey their issues and clarify whatever action the email requests.

However, these findings also revealed that there are three categories that are the least difficult for the participants. The first rank is category 1, email writing ability. The participants felt neutral with the statement “I cannot write business English emails.” (Mean = 3.37) This point is also in accordance with Decharotchanawirun (2015)’s research which revealed that their participants felt neutral with the same statement. (Mean = 2.87). It may be assumed that writing business English emails is not too difficult for them. In addition, the category which followed as the second rank is category 2. This category relates to ordering ideas. The participants also felt neutral with two statements in this category: 1) “I cannot logically organize my ideas when I write my business English emails”. (Mean = 3.27), 2) “It’s difficult to create email subject line”. (Mean = 3.01) The last category which comes as the third rank is category 4 which is capital letter and punctuation usage. The participants felt neutral with the statement “I cannot use the punctuation appropriately”. (Mean = 2.66). Meanwhile, they disagreed with the statement “I cannot use the capital letter appropriately”. (Mean = 2.37) It may be assumed that the appropriate use of capital letters was not the problem for the participants in their writing.

Conclusion

The goal of this research is to find out problems and the most and the least difficult categories that the participants faced in their English business emails writing.

1. This study revealed that the problems in writing business emails in English for the fourth year students majoring in Logistics and Supply Chain Management are using appropriate technical words and correct grammar.

2. This study showed that the category 3 is the most significant problem. Moreover, it also revealed that the participants had some difficulty in category 2 which relates to ordering ideas with the point that they cannot gather all necessary information to convey their issues and clarify whatever action the email requests. However, the category 1: ability in email writing and category 4: capital letter and punctuation usage were the least difficult for them.

Discussion

Regarding the result above, we found that our participants faced the same problems as those in the findings of Decharotchanawirun (2015) which also employed a survey to investigate

problems in business English writing skills of 30 employees at the Classic Chairs Company. It revealed that the difficulties in writing business English emails include the word usage and using correct grammar. In addition, our findings are in accordance with the findings of Malathong (2015), with data collection through a questionnaire in order to explore the problems of writing English business emails of 30 non-native speaker employees. The findings showed that grammar and vocabulary are the two major problems in business English writing. In conclusion, from the pedagogical side, this research is beneficial for teachers since it has revealed the difficulties of students in English business emails writing. Regarding their difficulties, teachers may reinforce vocabulary, especially technical words and grammar drills for students. Nevertheless, there were some limitations. The sample in this research was intended to represent the students majoring in Logistics and Supply Chain Management at Huachiew Chalermprakiet University. They studied EG 5243 English Reading - Writing for Professional Purposes which is compulsory for Business Administration students. However, the sample did not cover all students from various majors within the Faculty of Business Administration. The students in other majors may have different point of view. Thus, future research could be undertaken with broader sample to increase the validity of the finding.

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