

Teaching Advanced Business English Writing Skills in the Digital Environment

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Abstract: Due to the huge increase in written communication over recent decades, improving writing skills in foreign language has become one of the particularly important questions in ELT methodology. This paper elaborates on writing as one of the foremost communication skills in business context and investigates teaching models and techniques which can be efficiently employed in advanced Business English language courses in the digital environment. The aim of this paper is to propose some ideas on how to enhance learning and teaching writing skills particularly focusing on the online platforms which provide a rich variety of tools and resources for all participants in advanced Business English courses.

Keywords: Business English, writing, teaching, digital environment

1. Introduction

In the highly competitive business environment one of the pathways to business success is language learning. Proficient language skills are highly ranked on the scale of the competencies necessary for life and career development in the 21st century. As companies are usually operating internationally, developing language skills for various business purposes is becoming one of the priorities for all the individuals who strive for the excellence in any professional field. Being quite obvious that the mastery in those skills may bring significant advantages to the individuals and companies they work for, this field of business language skills is steadily in the focus of research from various perspectives.

Since the main objective of Business English courses is to prepare students for successful communication in the business domain, the demand for business

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English courses is constantly increasing, while the need for skills in written communication is highly positioned on the list of priorities. That is not surprising, if we notice that most English today is very much about ‘how to win business through English’ (Talbot 2009: 34) and that ‘[b]usiness writing can impact on whole business cycle, it can win business, it can lose business or it can communicate the framework by which the results can be achieved’ (Talbot 2009: 4). Among the other things, it is also noteworthy that Internet and social media are particularly contributing to constant changes in communication, as well as they are changing the way we live and work. Therefore, our aim in this paper is to describe the position and importance of business writing skills in the modern business context and to investigate the ways how to utilize virtual possibilities and efficiently organize practice of those skills in advanced online Business English courses.

2. Theoretical background

In this part of the article we will elaborate on ESP and Business English courses, writing as an essential language skill in the modern business environment and methodological approaches to teaching writing skills in Business English courses in order to define theoretical background for the following section in which we will investigate online tools and sources for teaching writing.

2.1. ESP and Business English

ESP courses emerged out of the need for increased specialization in language learning after the Second World War. The main aim of ESP courses is to get students to the target situation, i.e. to teach them language skills they will need in the specific business tasks, such as understanding business letters, communicating effectively on sales conferences, getting the necessary information from sales catalogues and so on (Hutchinson & Waters 1998: 55). ESP teaching approach is learning-centered which refers to its objective to find the best models of teaching to maximize learning effectiveness (Hutchinson & Waters 1998: 72). Business English courses are the least specialized ESP courses and can be labeled as a kind of natural extension of general English classes tailored for professionals in various specialized fields. Business English presupposes the knowledge of general English and is designed with the aim to develop communication skills in the business domain (Frendo 2005, Elis & Johnson 1994). The field of business communication goes far beyond language area, since it incorporates many other components, such as cultural and psychological knowledge, etiquette, etc. and in accordance with that teaching approaches should be adopted. Besides, it’s notable that Business English courses are suitable for and usually incorporate practicing skills, such as collaboration, creativity, cultural awareness, critical thinking, which helps students build their personalities and shapes them for 21st century challenges (Mavridi & Xerri 2020). Such setting gives teachers a lot of space for the whole variety of chances to plan enjoyable and engaging classes.

The fact that the digital revolution is in progress increases the number of possibilities even more, as teachers are striving to keep up with all the changes and challenges by finding the best models to incorporate in classes rich variety of the available online sources in the most effective way.

2.2. Business writing

Business writing skills are powerful tools for all the professionals in various business domains and the main goal of teaching writing skills in Business English courses is to help students on the way to high quality performance in writing. According to the CEFR descriptors students on an advanced level in written communication are able to express themselves ‘with clarity and precision, relating to the addressee flexibly and effectively in an assured personal style’. ‘[They] can express [themselves] in clear, well-structured text, expressing points of view at some length’. Besides, ‘[They] can write detailed expositions of complex subjects in an essay or a report, underlining what [they] consider to be the salient issues.’ Finally, [they] can write different kinds of texts in a style appropriate to the reader in mind.’ ([https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/table-1-cefr-3.3-common-reference-levels-global-scale.](https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/table-1-cefr-3.3-common-reference-levels-global-scale))

In a highly complex business environment various models of interaction and writing which is constantly ‘in state of flux’ and ‘diverse in style’ (Talbot 2009: 7) call for continual research in the field of language, communication and language teaching methodologies. Clear, concise and captivating written communication has never been as important as it is today. In order to get the attention and achieve some goals, such as to attract the customers by writing an advertisement, get the call for a job interview by writing CV and motivation letter, or writing reports or e-mails which may bring some business advantages or promotions, it is necessary to achieve high proficiency in writing skills. Therefore, the aim of teaching writing skills in a Business English course on an advanced level is to equip students with all the necessary knowledge to produce effective high quality pieces of writing for the whole range of different purposes.

As writing in business on an advanced level is much more than just an activity aimed to produce grammatically correct piece of text which requires the knowledge of basic vocabulary and grammatical rules, it involves many other skills and broad knowledge which have to be incorporated in order to produce an effective text. The analyses of business writing trends show that it ‘is tending to become more informal, especially because of the rise in e-mail and web writing, where material is presented in bite-sized chunks (Talbot 2009: 45). The main aim in the writing process is to identify key messages and ‘present them in a way which will engage readers’ attention (Talbot 2009: 22-24). Besides, it is generally pointed out that ‘[w]riting English for business should not be about ‘over-Englishing the English’ (Talbot 2009: 50) and that the focus should be on readers as our customers, which means writing from their perspective, empathizing with them, favoring positive, proactive words,

avoiding both words that put up barriers, and jargon whenever possible and using words to satisfy and delight (if possible) our customers (Talbot 2009: 44). Consequently, in order to achieve intended goal, some of the essential issues which should be paid attention to and dealt with in Business English courses are: formality of the style, the use of idioms, clichés and nuances, human touch in letters (personalized vs. depersonalized approach). All these elements in writing merit lots of discussion, but since it goes beyond of the scope of this paper at this point we won't go into the further analysis. Besides, correct paragraphing, spelling, punctuation and alike are mandatory components of any written text in business. Here it is worth to mention some available books, which represent extremely valuable resources for all people who are dealing with business writing in some way. For example, there is the three book series on business writing written by Fiona Talbot (2009), which describe three stages of upgrading business writing skills and provide a lot of useful pieces of advice on various types of business writing. In the first book entitled 'How to write effective Business English' the author 'defines building blocks and effective guidelines for business English writing', the second one 'Make an impact with your written English' is on 'written word power to promote and sell your messages, as well as 'brand you'' and the third one 'Executive writing skills for managers' elaborates on 'writing as a key business tool'. Many other publications in this field should be referred to as well: *The Manager's Guide to Business Writing* (1997), *Business Grammar, Style and Usage: The most used desk reference for articulate and polished business writing and speaking by executives worldwide* (2003), *Mastering the Business Writing* (1997), *Effective Business Writing (Creating success)* (2009), *Writing at work: A guide to better writing in administration, Business and Management* (2002), *Web-based Teaching Resources for Business English Classes* (2017), and so on.

2.3. Teaching writing

Writing in English language courses is widely used. It can be an objective itself, a means for engaging with other aspects of language or both means and objective. When it comes to writing as an objective practice can be carried out at 'micro' and 'macro' level. Micro level includes practice, such as handwriting, typing, spelling or punctuation, while at the 'macro' level the emphasis is on content and organization (Ur 1997: 62). The third type of writing in which writing is both means and objective 'combines purposeful and original writing with the learning or practice of some other skill or content' (Ur 1997: 62).

2.3.1. Writing and other skills in business courses

Learning a language is a process based upon practicing both receptive (reading and listening) and productive (speaking and writing) skills, which are interdependent and require a lot of time and practice to master. Teaching approach which includes

practicing various skills simultaneously is usually employed on an advanced level. Such classes are more likely to be engaging, interesting and effective, than the ones focused on one single skill. 'Restriction to one skill may create boredom' and in order to keep learners alert teachers should provide variety in teaching materials and tasks (Hutchison & Waters 1998: 75). That is why teaching writing skills should incorporate practicing all language skills through different interaction patterns in different phases of learning process. What's more, '[u]sing a range of skills greatly increases the range of activities possible in the classroom [...] and makes it easier to achieve a high degree of recycling and reinforcement, while maintaining the learners' interest' (Hutchinson & Waters 1998: 141).

2.3.2. Components of writing

The approach to teaching writing skills is quite a complex one due to the number of writing components which should be addressed in that process. Some features such as, spelling, punctuation, paragraphing, coherence and cohesion, as well as grammar and lexical resources are cornerstones of any successful piece of writing and should be constantly practiced. As each type of writing has different characteristics, such as the level of formality, intended audience, cultural relevance, genre features and so on each deserves different focus and approach in teaching. The presentation of concrete authentic written text models is recommended and widely used in the methodology of teaching writing (Dejica 2012).

2.3.3. Materials design model

One of the most important and challenging tasks for ESP teachers is materials design. Fortunately, nowadays online sources are so rich with materials which can be very helpful in this process. Materials design model which can be applied in the process of teaching writing consists of four elements: input, content focus, language focus and task. 'The aim of this particular model is to provide a coherent framework for the integration of the various aspects of learning, while at the same time allowing enough room for creativity and variety to flourish' (Hutchinson & Waters 1998: 108-109): (1) According to this model input may be any piece of communication data depending on the needs, which will provide 'stimulus materials for activities, new language items, correct models of language use, a topic for communication, opportunities for learners to use their information processing skills' and give learners the opportunities 'to integrate their knowledge of the language and subject matter. (2) Content focus refers to the need to exploit non-linguistic content to generate meaningful communication in the classroom. (3) Language focus refers to the activities in which students have the opportunities to analyze and practice the use of concrete language items. (4) Task is supposed to give the students the opportunity to use the content and language knowledge they've built up previously.

In order to provide best instruction and practice teachers have to know that individuals vary and that it is not possible to recommend one right system of writing. Instead teachers' task is to 'suggest and make available various possible strategies, encouraging individuals to experiment and search for one that is personally effective' (Ur 1997: 168). Besides, being potentially satisfying, absorbing and enjoyable writing is 'worth investing through in the selection of topics and tasks that motivate learners to write; and extremely important to provide an appreciative reader audience, whether teacher or co-learners' and the appropriate feedback (Ur 1997: 169). Furthermore, the only way to improve writing skills is to get students to write a lot and learn from their own writing experience.

When it comes to writing practice, the model of teaching which may ensure more effective use of class time in online environment is flipped classroom [Santos Green, L., Banas, J. R., Perkins, R. A. (2017), Reidsema, C., Kavanagh, L., Hadgraft, R., Smith, N. (2017)]. When classes are organized in that way, writing tasks are done at home, and class time is used for discussions, debates, elaboration on some frequent mistakes and key concepts. In that process students' motivation may be increased if the tasks are collaborative, interactive and creative and if they are set in the realistic context. In the process of teaching writing class time is particularly suitable for collaborative tasks and it should be devoted to discussions of some problematic issues and brainstorming sessions.

3. Analysis of online tools and resources

As already mentioned, the list of issues which should be addressed in Business English courses in the domain of business writing is quite long. The types of writing in this field are very diverse: formal and informal e-mails, reports, CVs, product reviews, action points from meetings, executive summaries, mission statements and so on, and all of them call for different approaches in terms of content, form, accuracy, grammar and vocabulary range. Most Business English courses being carried out as online, hybrid or blended usually rely on some of the Business English course books available in the market, but online resources rich with various materials and tools are normally used as a valuable support in the teaching process.

Platforms which are usually used for online classes – Zoom, Skype, Big Blue Button, Google Meet etc. offer the possibility for audio and video call, sharing materials. All of them are constantly improving and start to offer the whole variety of new sophisticated possibilities which are appropriate for miscellaneous collaborative and interactive activities suitable for online, hybrid and blended classes. Apart from mentioned platforms, there are many other ones which may improve the quality and bring variety in English classes:

WorldWall <https://wordwall.net/>

Edmodo <https://new.edmodo.com/>

Wakelet wakelet.com

Mentimeter <https://www.mentimeter.com/>

Screen-o-Matic screencast-o-matic.com.

Tutorials for each of these platforms are available at <https://www.teachertrainingvideos.com/>.

All of them may be used for various collaborative activities in different stages of the writing process, such as brainstorming sessions, mind mapping, vocabulary or grammar practice, project work, feedback. They are very convenient for flipped classroom.

It is highlighted in the previous sections that the success in language acquisition may be enhanced if the teaching materials and tasks, among other things, are engaging, relevant, personalized. Apart from tasks and materials which can be found in the course books, online sources may significantly contribute to the variety which is also an important element for the success in language teaching and learning. Here are some suggestions for online support related to some components in business writing:

1. Sites for teaching materials:

<https://www.writeexpress.com/>

<https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/skills/writing/advanced-c1>

<https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/business-english/english-for-emails>

<https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/business-writing-skills>

<https://www.template.net/business/letters/business-letter-template/>

<https://www.sampletemplates.com/marketing-templates/marketing-writing-samples.html>

2. Grammar and style check:

Readable - <https://readable.com/>

ProWritingAid - prowritingaid.com

ReversoSpeller - <https://www.reverso.net/spell-checker/english-spelling-grammar/>

3. Dictionaries:

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/>

<https://www.thesaurus.com/browse/dictionary>

Not all of these platforms are free, but most of them offer free trial periods and teachers' task is to make an adequate selection of all these sources and incorporate them efficiently in language learning process.

3. Conclusion

Business English language classes have an important role in preparing students for their future professional life. The main objective of Business English courses is to improve students' communication skills in English and so help them cope successfully in all business situations. Considering that we live in the era of digital communication, modern education highly relies on the Internet and online sources.

The question how to utilize all the online possibilities and how to adopt traditional teaching approaches are constantly in the focus of research of language teaching methodologists. As circumstances change, teachers have to adopt their approaches in order to provide the best possible support for students on their way to advanced command in language skills. Our aim in this paper was to elaborate on writing as an essential communication skill in the modern business environment and to investigate teaching approaches and some online tools and sources for teaching business writing skills. We hope that the insights gained in this article may be useful for all Business English teachers and language teaching methodologists who are interested to investigate further in the field of teaching business skills in the digital environment.

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