Growth of Business English and the Need to Teach Memo-Writing Skills to Indian Tertiary-Level Learners

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ABSTRACT

English has become an inevitable means of communication. Due to globalization and rapid growth in business communication, the need to learn the English language has also gained momentum. Employers are looking for employees who are skilled in the language skills. In India, English has become an important means of communication and learning in the education and professional setup. Though English is being taught in schools and colleges, Indian students miserably fail to produce a good quality lengthy composition. In this respect, this paper aims to focus on the need to teach memo-writing skills to tertiary students. To this end, a group of second year Indian BCA students was taken as samples for the study. The students were given a pre-test on memo writing. They lacked the essential skills in writing a memo. In order to improve their memo writing skills the students had to undergo four tasks. At the end of the tasks, they were able to write a good memo. The corporate world demands accurate business writings and our students have to be trained to meet the demands of the business world. This paper studies the growth of business English, the components of effective business writing and the need to teach business writing to tertiary students, which will enable them to be successful in the business world.

1. Introduction

In this twenty first century, English has become an inevitable mode for international communication. Globalization, liberalization and the internet revolution have made English as an essential channel of correspondence. Globalization has brought the world under one roof. Trade agreements and economic growth have also made English language as an integral part of business. According to Passaris. C, (2006) 'The new global economy of the 21st Century has transformed the economic, social, educational, and political landscape in a profound and indelible manner. Never before in human history has the pace of structural change been more pervasive, rapid, and global in its context. (p. 2)

As business and trade have taken roots internationally, the need for English language has also gained momentum. English language has grown in length and breadth globally. It has taken roots in various professional areas of life and has become the basis for communication in the business world. The universality of the language has imputed a great stress on the importance of learning the language. Today, employers are looking for skilled employees. English has made its way into every business that is globalized. We cannot think about doing business with various countries without the medium of English language**.** And, we hear complaints from employers and managers that poor language skills have become the main problem affecting the growth of the company.

Cheryl Kuch (2013) reported that, 'According to the National Commission on Writing's survey of 120 major American corporations that employ eight million people, business writing skills weigh heavily in decisions to hire or promote salaried /professional staff. Poor writing and communication skills, particularly in the job application process, were key factors in deciding not to hire applicants. And if they were hired, they were denied promotion opportunities due to the same factors. Employers spend billions of dollars every year to correct writing skill deficiencies.' (p.1)

This paper focuses on the growth of English and business English globally and the essential components of business writing. The paper also discusses the problem of poor writing skills in corporate world and the need to teach students to write a good memo. For this purpose, a group of students or learners from the BCA department of Arts and Science College from Chennai, India were selected as samples for the data. The paper discusses the tasks involved in making these students to write a good memo.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Business writing skill

According to Hollis-Turner and Scholtz (2010), 'The provision of correct and accurate information to clients and colleagues is the main focus of workplace writing' (p. 242). They further add, new employees check their business documents for accuracy and perfection. Even experienced employees scrutinize their documents. Their study pointed out that novice employees could not write proper corporate letters. They have further added that **"**Some of the novice employees in this study had not adjusted to the transition from higher education to the workplace and did not know how to put their knowledge into practice" (p.243). Students have to be given practice in writing business messages. According to Hollis-Turner and Scholtz (2010), the first strategy involves 'a pedagogy for teaching business writing and classroom-based interventions to facilitate competent business writing activities' (p.243). It has been observed that employers place immense value to written communication. DeBrine Mascle (2013) pointed out that "all business professions,

even those that many would expect to require little writing, place a high premium on written communication skills' (p.216). Bardine, Bryan Anthony, Fulton, Anthony (2008) have discussed the role of revision memos in the classroom. Revision memos help the students to reflect on their writing. It was reported that the instructors gave their comments which enabled the students to do more revisions and write a better memo. Through this exercise, the students could critically analyse their work and write an effective memo. Welker, Jan, Berardino, Lisa (2009) conducted a test on 96 graduate and undergraduate students to alert them regarding common errors in business writing. The study concluded that 'writing' is a difficult task and the skill has to be learned and practised. The study also discussed that teaching writing skill is not easy and it cannot be improved just by making the students aware of their conventional errors in business writing.

While explaining the importance of the written word, Fiona Talbot and Sudakshina Bhattacharjee (2012) observed that **"**harnessing the power of the written word, not just in paper documentation but in electronic communications as well, can turn even relatively junior members of staff in an organization into masters of multitasking'. (p. 30). They have further added that 'Professionalism matters in writing, as in every aspect of your business performance.' (p.206)

## 2.2 The Growth of English Language

The English language has taken dominance over the education in India. English has become a reputed language in almost every field of education. Be it in kindergarten or at a tertiary level, the influence of the English language cannot be denied. Whether it is science, business or technology, English has become the mode of communication. Thus, English has become a link language. English language was brought to India by the British Raj. Since then for four hundred years, the language has taken its prominence in the Indian subcontinent. Now, English has the second-language position in India. According to Saraswathi, V. (2004), 'Our learners are doing extremely well in universities in the USA and UK because of their command of English.'(p. 9) Globalisation and liberalisation of the Indian economy has also made the growth of English in India as an inevitable factor. Thus, the move to teach English in schools and colleges has also gained momentum. The Indian students excel in scoring high in exams, however, they miserably fail to produce a good quality lengthy composition. Thus, the need to teach writing in schools and colleges has also taken priority.

2.3 The Growth of English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

The growing demand for English has led to emergence of ESP (English for Specific Purposes). Today ESP is further divided into different branches of study. The figure below shows the different categories of study under ESP.

Figure 1: ESP classification based on professional area
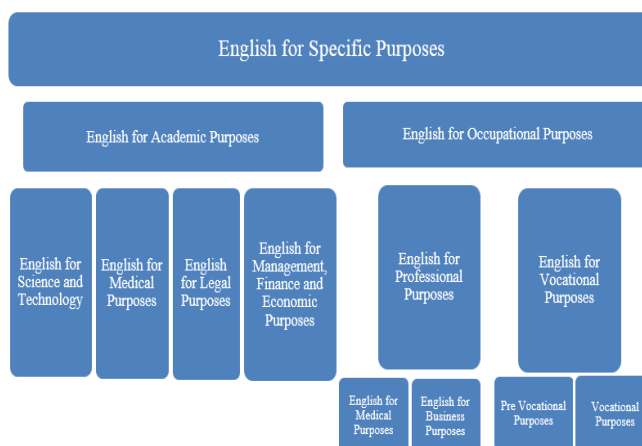
[Adopted from Dudley-Evans, Tony, Maggie Jo St John, (1998), p 6]

As shown in the diagram, ESP is divided into EAP (English for Academic Purpose) and EOP (English for Occupational Purposes). EOP is further divided into EPP (English for Professional Purposes) and EVP (English for Vocational Purpose). English for Medical Purposes and English for Business Purposes are a sub division of EPP. A lot of research has begun in the area of EBP (English for Business Purposes) since 1980s. According to Dudley - Evans Tony and Maggie Jo St John (1998), ESP has absolute characteristics and variable characteristics. These include:

Absolute characteristics

1. ESP is designed to meet the specific needs of the learner.
2. ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the disciplines it serves.
3. ESP is centered on the language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities

Variable Characteristics

1. ESP may be related to or designed for specific disciplines.
2. ESP may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of General English.
3. ESP is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be for learners at secondary school level
4. ESP is generally designed for intermediate or advanced students.
5. Most ESP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language systems. (p. 4-5)

ESP focuses on the need of the learner. Then activities are done based on the need. Thus, the Business English courses should include what kind listening, speaking, reading and writing is done in the business world. Based on the above definition we can understand that ESP teaching should focus on the needs of a profession or discipline. New methodologies should be adopted to bring out a difference in teaching General English and ESP. The teaching methodology involved in ESP allows good rapport between the teacher and learner. The ESP teaching aims to fulfil the specific need of the learner. The interaction level is higher in an ESP class than in a General English class.

2.4 Business English

The twentieth century has witnessed increased need to learn Business English. Thus, to teach the Business English has become important. Appleman E. Jack (2008) pointed out that 'Today business moves at such lightning speed that writers at every level need to deliver information instantly and accurately to a wide array of tough audience' (p. 7). The employee is forced to write accurate business documents. His professional image and career growth largely depends on good writing skills. Instant messages have to be prepared and despatched immediately. Employers demand writing to be clear, concise and correct. Otherwise it would cost a valuable contract or a customer. Studies show that ineffective 'writing skills' in the business world is one of the most annoying parts of communication.

2.5 Business Writing

Poor writing yields poor results (Appleman, 2008). In any company, documentations are done through the written mode only. Written documents are permanent records which could be referred in the future. Good business writing will reveal the principles and notions of an organisation. Bad writing will be characterised by jargons, clichés, informality and structural errors. Whether it is a memo, letter or report the effectiveness of the document should be kept in mind. Thus writing is an essential mode of communication. For effective business documents, words, sentences, paragraphs and the tone should be meticulous. Unlike speaking, writing will not get an immediate

feedback. Since writing is an important source of documentation, it is imperative to write meticulous documents.

Tone is an important aspect of good business writing. The writer must be confident about the usage of the appropriate tone. A friendly and courteous tone would build business relations with customers, clients, colleagues etc. The use of a positive language would emphasize a progressive attitude. This would help in constructing good business communications.

The words used in writing business documents should be concise and clear. This could be achieved when the document does not have redundancy. For example, we can say 'two weeks' instead of 'Two weeks' duration'. Verbosity would irritate the reader. So avoiding redundancy will make communication better and thus would enhance business prospects

'Simplicity' avoids confusion in sentences. Short sentences are preferred to longer ones. Appropriate usage of the active and passive voice will enhance the effectiveness of the sentences. The readers are attracted when parallel structures are used in sentences.

Information from one paragraph to the other must flow systematically. The readers must not have any trouble in shifting the focus from one paragraph to the others. There should be systematic flow of information as well.

2.6 Business Documents - Memo

Letters, memos, reports, circulars, proposals etc. are some of the written forms of communication. All types of business correspondence are done through these medium of communication. While letters serve as a means to send and receive information internally and externally, reports are the presentation of facts and ideas for various business purposes. Memos are vital for inter-office communication.

A memo serves as an important mode of written communication within the organisation. It promotes goodwill and cordial relation in an organisation. Effective memos are concise, to the point, coherent and emphasize on one idea. Brevity is an important feature part of a memo. A good memo might not bring a pay hike, but a bad memo will surely hinder professional growth. While good writers are established in their career, bad writers are pushed behind.

Steps to Write Effective Memos

In order to write effective memos, a good overview or introduction is needed. Only important details should be given in the overview. To avoid monotony short sentences and paragraphs should be used. Headings and using of bullets will help the readers to understand the memo.

There are some important points that should be kept in mind while writing an introduction or the opening of a memo. The writer must be clear about the purpose in writing the memo. The writer should be able to answer the question 'why am I writing this memo?' The central idea or thought that the writer should focus is 'what do I want to inform the reader?' or 'what do I expect the reader to do?' The final question that the writer must try to answer is "what is my point of view regarding this subject?'

The basic characteristics of a good opening paragraph of a memo are clarity, simplicity, brevity, reader's need and expressing 'what' and not 'how'. The qualities and characteristics of an effective memo are explained below. A clear and simple start would enable the reader to get ease with the 'document' at the outset itself. The reader would have a clear idea about the following points or paragraph. Clarity and

simplicity breeds understanding of the passage.

The opening paragraph gives an overview of the memo. The main point is highlighted in the beginning itself.

The reader must be informed about 'what' the issue is. The memo could be about a project. The readers could be informed about 'what the project is'. The readers will be in a fix if 'how the project will be implemented' is dealt in the introduction. The reader's need should be explained in the beginning itself.

The body of the memo

The body of the memo is the significant part of the memo. The various points in the memo can be organised with the usage of headings and sub headings. The reader can understand the information better when the sentences are simple. Precise and concise language would make the message clear to the readers.

The conclusion of the memo

The conclusion will reinstate the main purpose of the memo. A friendly, positive and courteous tone would be a good conclusion for a memo. Words like 'feel free' and 'do not hesitate to' will provide a good closure. Since memo is an inevitable part of business writing, knowledge about writing a memo is essential. Teaching students to write effective memos would enable them to compete in the corporate world. This is the focus of the current study and the details on methodology are outlined below.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

A class of 50 second year BCA students from Arts and Science College in Chennai, India was taken as a sample for the study. The level of the students was considered as 'average' through the class tests conducted by the institution. The group consisted of both male and female students within the age group of 18 to 21.

3.2 Procedure

The study was employed on nine groups of students or learners. The learners interacted with themselves and actively participated in the tasks assigned to each group. The first task was a pre-test on memo writing. The second task was an idea generating session wherein the students were given business newspapers. They were asked to find business terms and write a summary of any one business article. After the task, there was a discussion on each group's performance. The third task involved doing a mind map on a memo situation. In the fourth task, the groups were asked to write a memo on the mind map they had done. The fourth task was a post-test. The time given for each task was forty minutes. There was a time gap of one week between each task.

3.3 Instruments of data collection

The four tasks involved in the study aimed at improving the memo-writing skills in tertiary learners. The pre-test analysed the kind of errors learners committed in writing a memo. The second task stimulated the students to identify business terms. It was an idea generating session. These students did not have any knowledge about business writing. Since they belonged to the computer department, they did not have business communication as a part of their syllabus. So, the students had no idea about 'what a memo is' or any information related to memo writing. The second task involved identifying various business terms. This was an eye opener to the learners, wherein they learnt number of business terms. The third task was a mind mapping activity. Vincent van Vliet (2014) found that "By mapping out key words or word pictures (i.e. words that summarize a certain aspect concisely and that serve as a basis for further association) using imagery, drawings and colour we use our full brain power. Mind Mapping is a method that links up perfectly with the functioning of our brains and makes optimal use of our brain

capacity" (p.1). The fourth post-test task was the memo writing session. Compared to the pre-test, the post-test performance of the participants was good.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

The study aimed at investigating whether students would acquire business writing skills when task-based training is given. The four tasks administered to the students, enabled them to write an effective memo.

4.1 Task 1: Background and Analysis

The students were assigned a memo-writing exercise. This was an individual exercise. This was a pre test. This was a brainstorming session. The students were not informed about the pre-test. They were given thirty minutes to plan and write the memo. They took the activity seriously and wrote the memo.

Figure 2: Results of Pre-test on Memo writing
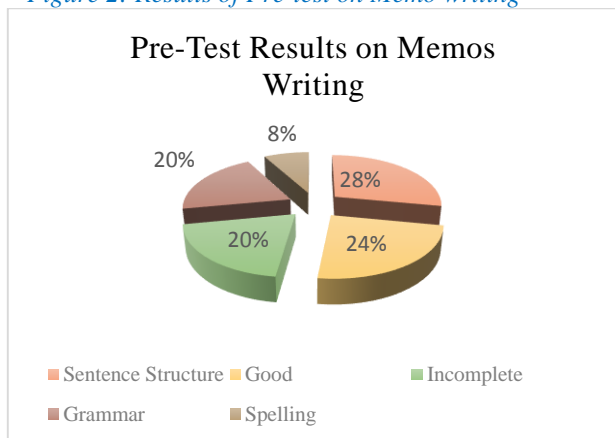
The students did commit errors, errors like sentence structure, spelling, incomplete data and grammar. Sentence structure errors were found in 14 memos (28%).The errors were like '*he can't be able to*' and '*I need brilliant PA for the meeting to attending the speech.*'12 (24%) memos were considered to be good. 10 (20%) students gave incomplete memos. The complete data was not given in the memo. Certain memo did not have the date; place and the important points were not written.

Grammatical errors were identified in 10 (20%) memos. Grammatical errors were in the usage of preposition, article and tense. For example:

1. *in my holiday trip*
2. *I am going a conference in Delhi on next week*
3. *a assistant*
4. *An temporary*
5. *I need temporary P.A for attend the conference*

4 (8%) memos had spelling errors like '*temparary', 'tempuray'* etc.

Most of the memos had mistakes. The students had difficulty in constructing sentences. This led to structural errors. Spelling errors were comparatively less. The students did make some grammatical errors. These errors were mostly prepositional errors. The students also submitted incomplete memos. The memos did not mention the necessary data and place.

Since the task was a brainstorming session and that the students had little idea about memo writing, they could not write error-free memos. So the students were identified as the sample with which more practice sessions could be done. They could be assigned with activities to enhance their memo-writing skills. For this purpose they were divided into groups. Task 2 was the next activity conducted with the students.

4.2 Task 2: Background and Analysis

It was identified that most students committed errors in the pre-test memo-writing session. Task 2 was an idea-generating session. The students were divided into nine groups. Each group was given a business newspaper. They were asked to select an article and write a summary of the article in hundred words. They were also asked to write at least ten business words from the newspaper.

Session: 1

Summary Writing

All the nine groups actively participated and wrote the summary of an article of their choice. The various topics that the groups covered were:

1. Google India
2. Take Lunch to Office
3. Tablet Bix
4. Mutual fund
5. Time to Sell or Buy Rail Infra Stocks
6. Football Investments
7. Tax-filling Form
8. The Tax Form Seek more Information on Income
9. Black Berry Z3

The groups chose various topics on business. Three groups had divided the summary into points. The other six groups had written the summary as a paragraph. All the summaries covered the essential points from the article.

Business Terms

Each of the nine groups wrote a minimum of ten business terms. For example the terms were:

1. Consumers
2. Capitalization
3. Transaction
4. Asset
5. Enterprise
6. Stocks
7. Revenue
8. Entrepreneurial
9. Equity
10. Recovery

The groups were given forty minutes to accomplish this task. The discussion continued in the next class.

Session: 2

Session 2 continued in the next class. In this session, each group's representative read their article summary and the business terms that they had written. The class was enriched after hearing the various articles. The exposure to a number of business terms was very informative to the students.

The findings of this exercise show that the students understood the importance of the knowledge of the business text and terms. The two sessions were an eye opener for the students to know about the business genre. These two sessions were idea-generating exercises. The students were given an opportunity to glance into the world of business. These students would otherwise not have read a business newspaper. But as a group, they were instigated to read the paper and jot down the main ideas. This gave them ideas about the corporate setup.

*4.3 Task 3: Background and Analysis*

After writing article summary and business terms, the class were able to have a hold over the business genre. In the task 3, they were given a mind mapping task. A memo was given. The students were asked to make a mind map for the memo. Instead of writing without proper planning, the mind mapping technique helped them to organize, plan and then write an effective memo.

The memo given to them was:

> Assume yourself to be the manager of Sunrise Software Systems, Hyderabad. Write a memo for circulation to all employees, announcing a change in the working hours and explaining the reasons for doing so.

The students found it very comfortable to make a mind map and then write the memo. The memo was divided into various points. Be it the salutation, subject, content etc., all the points were covered in the mind map. The mind map looked like this:

Figure 3: Example for Mind Map
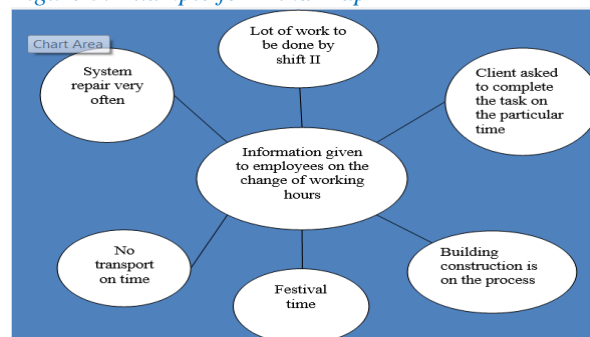
The other groups also wrote more reasons like power shortage, O T time can be valued, cab problem etc. Overall, the nine group's performance was good. The students seemed to be interested in writing after doing the mind mapping activity. The members in each group actively participated in the group activity. Each of them contributed at least one point. The session was over in forty minutes. After which each group read their points. Thus was an idea-sharing experience for the class.

4.4 Task 4: Background and Analysis

The mind mapping session enriched the students on memo writing. They learnt how to plan, organise and write a memo. In task 4 (post-test), the student groups were asked to convert the ideas of the mind map into a memo format. Being the final session, they were also briefed on the format and the nuances of memo writing. After gaining adequate knowledge on memo writing, the groups were asked to write a memo from the mind map they had already done.

The memos written by the nine groups had less errors compared to the ones written in Task 1. This was a post-test in memo writing. The memos in task 4 were planned, organised and well written. The students wrote the memos in the correct format. The points in the content were clear and accurate. The task 4 was a successful memo writing session. After going through the process of idea generation and mind mapping, writing a memo seemed to be easier. Memo writing was no more a challenging task for the students.

4.5 Discussion

This paper aimed to discuss the growth Business English and the essential elements of effective business writing. The paper also highlighted the poor writing skills in the corporate world and the process involved in improving memo-writing skills at tertiary level in India. The findings of the study show similarities with the findings reported by Welker, Jan, Berardino, Lisa (2009).

As pointed out in literature review section, students have to be given practice in writing business messages. The findings of the study confirm this hypothesis. While doing so, as Hollis-Turner and Scholtz (2010), have noted, the first strategy involves 'a pedagogy for teaching business writing and classroom-based interventions to facilitate competent business writing activities' (p.243). Bardine, Bryan Anthony, Fulton, Anthony (2008) have discussed the role of revision memos in the classroom. Revision memos help the students to reflect on their writing. The findings of the study are in line with this.

As pointed out by Welker, Jan, Berardino, Lisa (2009), 'writing' is a difficult task and the skill has to be learned and practised. Similar are the suggestions of the current study as practice helped the students master memo writing skill. After the fourth task, (post-test) the students were able to write a good memo. Thus, it is very important that the learners are taught the nuances of business writing. So, the study shows that a systematic teaching pedagogy would enable the learners to improve their business writing skills. When task-based teaching is done, learners can write effective memos. The same process could be applied to teach students to write a business letter or report.

5. Conclusion

Today the corporate world demands that the employees have to be excellent in writing business documents. The success and growth in one's career is determined not only by speaking skills but also by their writing skills. When they falter in writing accurate business documents, it would result in the failure of their professional life. To use Garner. A Bryan's (2012) words, 'those who write poor create barriers between themselves and their

readers; those who write well connect with readers, open their minds, and achieve goals' (p. xv). Success in professional life would largely depend on impressive writing and the kind of attention it draws from the audience. The result of this is seen in a lot of research being done in the field of 'communication skills'. Thus, the need to teach business writing to tertiary level students is of utmost importance. Proficiency in writing letters, memos, reports etc should be taught in the colleges itself. Their knowledge in writing compelling business documents would enable them to progress in their career.

Since the participants of the study were BCA students, the students had little knowledge about writing business documents. Though memo writing was an arduous for them in Task 1, they were comfortable to write a memo in Task 4. Working in a group enabled them to actively participate in the sessions. Their confidence level in writing business documents rose high after participating in the four tasks. Thus, it can be concluded that a structural approach to business writing can lead to improvement in writing skill of the learners.

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