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ENHANCING BUSINESS WRITING SKILLS IN ENGLISH FOR ECONOMICS UNDERGRADUATES

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Abstract: *Starting from the assumption that writing is an invaluable tool in business communication, the present paper aims at looking into ways of enhancing business writing skills in English for economics undergraduates. The paper is divided into three main parts: the first part introduces the challenges of teaching Business English; the second part focuses on additional challenges brought about by teaching writing in a foreign language, while the last part presents the characteristics of a writing course currently piloted on undergraduate students of the Faculty of Economic Sciences, Transilvania University of Brasov.*

Keywords: *business writing, writing process, teaching methods, practice.*

1. Introduction

Business communication represents today one of the major points of interest for business analysts. Nevertheless, the concept has also constituted the topic of a particularly significant number of articles and books belonging to other fields of study, such as linguistics, socio-linguistics or psychology.

There seems to be an agreement among specialists that business communication is vital to resist in the fast changing world of business nowadays. Within the field of business communication, business writing holds a paramount role. Not only because it is a key part of daily activities in most businesses, but also because some of the texts are legally mandatory, serving as formal records for future reference (Frendo 81). The importance of business writing is also revealed by the place it is given in specialized magazines and journals (The Business English Training Language Key, The Business English Magazine, The Journal of Business Communication), numberless books and textbooks (International Business English, The Complete Book of Contemporary Business Letters, A Handbook of Commercial Correspondence, Business Letters for All, Everyday Business Writing), websites of important universities or centres of business writing within these universities (the London School of Economics and Political Science, the University of Iowa, University of Washington Business School, Purdue University, the Hong Kong University), blogs and other web resources (Internet Resources for Business Writing**,** Business Writing Updated, Online Business Writing Training and Services). They all emphasize the importance of writing, resuming articles from different sources or featuring their own original texts, or just referring readers to other well documented electronic or printed resources regarding this issue. The explicit purpose

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is to offer students, economists, companies or government agencies tips and practice related to general writing skills, business writing skills, as well as to draw their attention to common challenges.

Another element which needs to be added is connected to one particular phenomenon of our times, i.e. globalization, which has enhanced the importance of English in international communication (Rogerson-Revell 1). Especially in the area of business, English has not only become the official language in many multinationals, but, on an increasingly frequent basis, also a requirement comprised in many occupational standards in the economic field at national and international level.

The occupational and personal opportunities brought to the European Union citizens by the proficiency in English, given the border-free Single Market, were also underlined in conferences (The Conference on Linguistic Skills and Competitiveness, Brussels, 21 September 2007) and by members of the European Commission responsible for multilingualism, on a repeated basis.

2. Challenges in Teaching Business Writing

Business writing can be defined as all forms of writing used in organizations to communicate with internal or external audiences. It mainly refers to the exchange of letters in business dealing with enquiries, offers, orders, delivery, acknowledgements, payment, complaints, credit, applications, insurance (known as commercial correspondence) (Frendo 87), but also to other genres of texts which are produced to provide business information or records (reports, proposals, memos, minutes, CVs, contracts, agreements, recommendations, summaries and abstracts) (Tarnopolsky, O. and S. Kozhushko 1).

All these texts have been included in one particular type of writing, i.e. writing for practical purposes or practical writing. According to Tarnopolsky and Kozhushko, authors of several courses for business writing, practical writing skills are those which "students may and mostly will actively use in their future professional and personal life" (Tarnopolsky and Kozhushko 1). Considering that economics undergraduates are expected to be competent writers in their future fields of activity, higher education institutions should adapt to the stakeholders' needs and to the demand of the market by continuously enhancing the writing experience of future economists.

Quite often, in order to erase the boundaries that separate learning and work, to provide economics undergraduates with the appropriate level of preparation, teaching and learning need to be "re-imagined", as stated in the foreword of the volume *Educational Innovation in Economics and Business IX* (Richard, G. et al. XI).

Such a re-imagination should take place also as regards the teaching of business writing. The process is by no means an easy one, first of all due to the challenges brought about by business writing and then, to the peculiarities of the writing process proper.

The first problem any teacher is likely to face is that of the students' reluctance towards writing courses. This attitude seems to be triggered mainly by students' regarding writing not only as "a chore to be got through for a grade", but also a boring activity (Tarnopolsky and Kozhushko 3). This general perspective on business writing brought about an outstanding movement towards the end of the 20th century, which was to be known as the "WAC movement" (writing across the curriculum). The purpose was that of developing writing skills within the

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context of disciplinary courses (Lee Hansen 213). As Goma argues, the action quickly gained prominence in many fields, including economics, and academic institutions, due to its demonstrated advantages: writing was no longer only a way of evaluating students' understanding of a topic, but also a learning tool (Goma 1). Thus, WAC was considered a means of assisting students in synthesizing knowledge and in enhancing their cognitive and intellectual development. From our perspective, these benefits could also function as a motivator for students regarding business writing courses in English.

The students' uncertainty regarding the way they are actually to use their business writing skills in English may also deter them from becoming good learners. As Goma states, tertiary education aims at providing students with knowledge and experiences which should prepare them "to react intelligently and creatively to life's challenges" (Goma 2). However, given the wide range of fields in which economics students could work after graduation, during their academic studies, very few have a clear idea of the way they will eventually use the skills acquired, including BE skills (Alexander 1). This may be a cause of misgivings, of doubts regarding the way in which demands during English courses in the university really mirror the needs of future economists.

Another challenge could be that of the students' self-delusion that there is always someone else to do the writing, faster and better. It is true that some companies have special compartments dealing with correspondence, but more often, this happens only in big multinationals. At present, it is a fact that the majority of businesses do not rely only on these compartments in business writing, but on almost all their employees.

In addition, there are students who minimize the complexity of business writing starting from two other assumptions. The first is that this type of writing is based on strict patterns and recurrent standard phrases, which could be easily learned or, even more conveniently, taken from the Internet. Thus, they fail to understand that business writing means more than that, that there should always be an appropriate selection of words, phrases, register, ways of addressing, depending on the audience. And, above all, that, in business, the tone, an "ineffable" feature, is the key.

These elements are very much connected to the genre approach to teaching business writing, which stresses the pattern lying behind certain types of texts: letters, reports, minutes etc. Therefore, every text can be written starting from templates or sample texts, by means of imitating defining features. Frendo underlines that in ordinary life, even with native speakers, it is common practice not to start from scratch (Frendo 81). The approach is undoubtedly useful, but it proves even more beneficial if combined with other methods when teaching writing.

The second assumption we referred to is connected to the practical character of business writing. Being given that writing is indeed instrumental, many students consider that, as long as writing documents reach their aim, as long as business is concluded and profit made, texts do not necessarily have to be perfectly accurate. This aspect is relevantly commented on by Frendo (Frendo 84-85), who agrees that there are companies whose policy is more focused on efficiency, on speed, than on linguistic accuracy, but he does not forget to emphasize another significant detail: business writings may sometimes be the first thing the others can see, and consequently have a great power in making an impression.

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3. Other Challenges

Apart from the aforementioned difficulties, students might also face problems related to writing tasks, in general. According to outstanding authors (Frendo, Vizental, Tarnopolsky and Kozhushko, Goma), these would be the following:

a. Differences between speaking and writing

As researchers of the topic underline (Frendo 81; Vizental 240), there are significant differences between spoken and written language, from various perspectives: the type of interaction they suppose, the time to process information and language, the complexity of sentences, vocabulary, register, paralinguistic devices available, the type of response it requires, the structure and organization of the message. Thus, whereas speech lies at the basis of daily, natural interactions, quite frequently infringing a thorough organization, writing is more contrived, the most conscious and deliberate of all communication skills (Tarnopolsky and Kozhushko 2), a skill that needs to be learned. Thus, writing cannot be regarded "as a natural consequence of language learning; nor is it simply spoken language transcribed on paper" (Vizental 241).

b. The organization of the text

With writing, elements of structure are paramount. Thus, apart from elements connected to metalingual markers such as spelling or punctuation, writing supposes good knowledge of the introduction-body-ending structure and of paragraphing, organizational skills, the importance of cohesive devices. And, given that with writing there is generally time to plan ahead, to organize and reorganize ideas, and, consequently, to improve the text, the final output is expected to be almost flawless.

c. Knowledge of writing stages

Insufficient knowledge about all the sequences involved in the writing process can also result in problems. The importance of these elements brought about a particular approach regarding the teaching of writing, known as the "process approach", developed in the 1970s. This approach presupposes the introduction of stages for writing (pre-writing, composing/ drafting, revising and editing). Consequently, the process involves brainstorming, selecting ideas, drafting and redrafting, getting feedback from peers or the teacher. Most of the stages can be performed either individually or in small groups in the classroom, but the final stage is generally assigned for individual work, most of the times as extra-school work. As Tarnopolsky points out, this approach allows focus both on the final result, and on the process (Tarnopolsky and Kozhushko 2).

d. Insufficient language proficiency

Although from the perspective of the time allotted writing could be considered easier than speaking, from the point of view of the level of language required, it is unanimously regarded as more complex. The structure of sentences is complex, the register required is generally the formal one, a more refined selection of words and grammar structures needs to be made. Therefore, students' command of the language should be significant. Some authors argue that all this challenge entangled by higher demands can lead students to neglect content, as they may fail to put into words exactly the ideas which they want to express (Goma 3).

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e. Insufficient practice and feedback

As Vizental emphasizes, competent writing cannot be expected without enough practice, since developing specialized skills always takes time. Thus, the need arises to determine students to write frequently and regularly and to provide them with meaningful, motivating feedback.

4. A Business Writing Course

The course under consideration was designed for the 3rd year undergraduate students of the Faculty of Economic Sciences, *Transilvania* University of Brasov. Its beginning can be traced back three years ago, when economics students used to be taught writing skills in an integrated manner, within the Business English class, during their 3rd or 4th year of study, depending on the programme of study they attended.

Since the implementation of the Bologna process, foreign languages in the Faculty of Economic Sciences, *Transilvania* University of Brasov, have been restricted to four semesters, with the exception of one specialization, International Business, which has one additional semester. This semester in the 3rd year of study bears the specific name *Commercial Correspondence.* Thus, the need arouse to devise a course entirely focused on writing for the first semester of the 2010-2011 university year.

However, the discussions with students from other specializations and with colleagues from the Department of Languages revealed that Business Writing classes would also prove beneficial for students enrolled for other programmes of study. Therefore, writing materials have been prepared for 2nd year undergraduates in Management, Finance and Banking, and Marketing, attending their last semester of English.

In terms of Frendo's classification (Frendo 1-3), the target population of the course is represented by pre-experienced learners, i.e. students who have little or no experience of the business world. It should be mentioned that there are also a few general business-experienced students, but these are exceptional cases.

As regards students' experience with English, they are generally intermediate to advanced learners, with good command of Business English concepts, having studied two semesters of General Business English so far and one of more specialized thematic vocabulary, focusing on important areas in the business field (Marketing, Accounting, Auditing, Mergers and Takeovers, Funding the Business etc.).

Consequently, the prerequisites for the course in question are represented by good linguistic competence (good command of grammar structure, of general and specialized vocabulary) and good discourse competence. The latter, going beyond the mastery of language, deals with language in use, with performing language in a variety of contexts: socializing, networking, selling and buying, negotiating, communicating in writing, travelling, marketing, meetings and presentations (Frendo 7). For later units within the course, students also need to possess the knowledge presented in the introductory units.

The course outline is given below:

1. The writing process
2. Organizing a written text
3. Abstract. Summary
4. Format of business letters
5. Letter of complaint. Replying to a letter of complaint
6. Letter of enquiry. Replying to a letter of enquiry
7. Orders. Accepting/ declining orders

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8. Letter of application. Accepting/ turning down an application
9. Invitation. Accepting /declining an invitation
10. CV. Personal recommendation.
11. Contracts
12. Report. Memo
13. Proposal. Minutes
14. Fax. E-mail

As it can be seen, the first two units have an introductory character, being concerned with writing at a more general level. Their aim is to draw students' attention to the differences between spoken and written language, the peculiarities of the formal written discourse, the stages of the writing process and ways of organizing the discourse. Consequently, they aim at providing students with the general know-how for business writing.

All subsequent units focus on writing particular types of texts. Most of them belong to commercial correspondence, but, there are also types of texts which we also considered useful for economists: abstract, summary, personal recommendation, contract, report, proposal, minutes.

Apart from the introductory part of the course, units are organized according to the same pattern, featuring the following sections**:** a. *What is a ……?;* b. *Rules to be followed*; c. *Structure and useful vocabulary*; d. *Replying to …*(only for letters); e. *Activities*; f. *Homework*.

The two-fold aim of the course was, from the very beginning, to develop students' general writing skills and to acquaint them with business writing conventions.

Considering the possible challenges and the specialists' contributions in the field, the best practices they identified (William Baker 1-5; Vizental 242-243; Frendo 84-86), the guiding principle for the entire course was that the effectiveness of business writing teaching is influenced by a number of factors.

- students' understanding of the characteristics, significance and usefulness of each type of text. This is exactly what the *What is …?* and *Rules to be followed* sections do, i.e. define clearly each type of text and present its specific features;
- students feel scaffolded provided they have something to start from. To meet this need, we chose to have the distinctive section *Structure and useful vocabulary,* which stresses, on the one hand, the role of each part of the text within the whole (introduction, body, ending, headings, subheadings etc.) and, on the other hand, to facilitate students' access to relevant lexis for that text, under the form of phrases or contextualized sentences. This is the point where sample writings are offered.
- situating language learning in the real world by involving students into kinds of language activity found in real life. In this way, as M.H. Abdullah argues, teachers bridge the gap between "language used in the real world and what Dyson calls the 'fake' world of school" (Abdullah 2).
- shift in the teaching-learning activity from teachers to students. Indeed, it has been proven that students' placement in the middle of the pedagogical act helps them become more autonomous learners, through an intelligent mechanism: students involve actively, they become actors in the teaching-learning process, refusing to be passive recipients of information.
- meaningful and purposeful practice by a progression from controlled to guided and, then, free activities. As Baker (Baker 6) underlines, "The human brain remembers ideas in the form of mental clusters. Each new bit of input is related to one of the mental clusters already established in the brain. The closer the relationship between the new input and the established mental cluster, the easier the mental digestion of the new idea will be". Consequently, all the exercises within the units are based on the principle of

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transition from simple to more demanding tasks: from error correction, text punctuation, choice of the correct option, fill-in exercises, to organizing jumbled paragraphs, formulating coherent responses, matching sentence halves, register transfer, providing supporting sentences for given topic sentences, discussing the function of each paragraph in a text, translating into English (translations are integral part of every unit), generating ideas for preparing a first draft for the homework. Students are also invited to compare several sample examples of the same type of text and choose from the phrases present in the text or are asked to distinguish well written texts from faulty ones, insisting on what makes the former good texts.

- feedback from the teacher. Several outstanding authors (Vizental 243; Frendo 85; Baker 6-8) insist on the beneficial effects that positive feedback has on enhancing students' confidence. Baker stresses that "human beings act in anticipation of a desired goal. If the goal a person seeks is attained, the goal-directed activity is reinforced. If the anticipated goal is not attained, however, the tendency to engage in similar goal-directed activity in the future is lessened" (Baker 7). Thus, the teacher's job is not about red-inking every mistake, but about "what they need to do differently to create successful messages", as Lynn Gaertner-Johnston argued on her blog. Within our course, apart from the feedback students receive during the classes, there is also the possibility for them to receive extensive feedback. In the *Homework* section of each unit, students are set home assignments, which are not mandatory. However, those students who are willing to have further practice and receive feedback are to submit their assignments during the term. The length of each text is about 230 words, with the exception of abstracts, summaries, memos and e-mails, which are generally shorter. All the writings are assessed by the teacher during the term (each text is to be handed over one week after the homework has been set) and comprehensive feedback is given. Provided the portfolio comprises at least ten written texts, the student may receive a bonus of up to 1.5 points to the final grade. Apart from motivating students, the aim of the homework is obviously to offer students an additional opportunity for practicing their writing skills. Moreover, it also gives more proficient students the possibility to use their knowledge in a more refined way.

5. Conclusions

The aforementioned issues regarding the features and challenges comprised in the process of writing, the application it requires from both students and teachers succeeded, we hope, in giving an overview of the difficulties teachers might encounter when attempting to prepare business writing courses.

Having the abiding conviction that good business writing is not easy to learn, but that it is not impossible either, that there is no ideal way as to teaching writing, that the teacher should become a facilitator and students should always be placed in the middle of the teaching process, that materials and methods should always be tailored for meeting students' needs, we opted for a combination of approaches. The aim was to encourage diversity, practice, self improvement, the reinforcement of the ability to organize and express ideas in writing and, above all, to enhance students' confidence to cope with complex written tasks in a variety of business contexts.

The aim of the presentation of the course we designed was that of offering one possible way of teaching business writing, with inherent failings, but one which we

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hope to improve with the assistance and suggestions of specialists, as the ideal would be, as Baker (Baker 5) stated, to reach to create that course and climate in which "students have the least possible chance for failure".

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