Article Title
Sino-Finnish E-Mail Project
A Teaching Tool for Tertiary Business Communication Course

Authors
Meiling Wang

Sirkku Aaltonen

Bio Data

*Name: Meiling Wang

*Address: School of Economics, Shandong University, 27 Shanda Nanlu, Jinan, Shandong Province, P.R. China, 250100.

*Brief history of professional expertise: Associate professor of Business English at School of Economics, Shandong University. The author has taught College English, Business Communication, International Economics, International Business Negotiations. She received her M.A. degree in English-Chinese Translation Theory and practice program in 1992. Currently, she is writing her Ph. D. dissertation on Business communication teaching in China, in the English Department, Vaasa University, Finland.

Qualifications: M.A. and Associate Professor

*Name: Sirkku Aaltonen

*Address: University of Vaasa, PO Box 700, 65101 Vaasa, Finland

Brief history of professional expertise: Professor of English at the University of Vaasa, Finland. The author has taught business English text analysis and business communication for many years, and more recently teaching translation theory and culture-related subjects. She completed her doctoral thesis on drama translation in 1996. Sirkku Aaltonen is the author of; Acculturation of the Other: Irish Milieux in Finnish Drama Translation, Time-Sharing on Stage, Drama Translation in Theatre and Society, and K 滗 nnetyt illuusiot, a collection of articles by Finnish theatre translators. She has written several articles and conference papers on translation.

*Qualifications: Ph.D. Professor of English at the University of Vaasa, Docent (Reader) in English Translation Studies

Abstract

Intercultural communication in contemporary business world relies increasingly on e-mail, the language of which is predominantly English. This should also be reflected in the contents of Business Communication courses. The present paper discusses a Sino-Finnish international e-mail pilot project conducted between university students. The project was made possible by a researcher/teacher exchange scheme, and it aimed to reform and improve Business Communication teaching. The paper first introduces the background to the international e-mail project, and this is followed by a progress report on the project implementation. In conclusion, the paper argues for the significance of project such as this, for teaching Business Communication in English and suggests improvements both for the implementation and follow up of the project. Its limited focus on the Chinese experience will be complemented in the future by an account of the Finnish experience.

Introduction

English Business Communication has traditionally been a staple course of tertiary EFL business curriculum. Its primary objective has traditionally been to prepare university students of Business studies to communicate effectively and efficiently with people with different language backgrounds in international business interactions. From the exponential growth and widespread use of e-mail as a medium of communication in the corporate world and also the overall globalization of business follows that present Business Communication courses often need updating to accommodate the changes in the social context. The purpose of the present paper is to introduce a Sino-Finnish e-mail exchange project conducted between Shandong University, China and the University of Vaasa, Finland. The primary aim of the project was to introduce a teaching

tool for tertiary Business Communication courses. In what follows, I will first introduce the background to the e-mail project and follow this with a progress report on the project implementation. In conclusion, the paper argues for the significance of such projects for teaching Business Communication and suggests improvements both for the implementation and follow up of the project. The present paper focuses on the Chinese experience and is to be complemented in future by an account of the Finnish experience.

Business Communication Textbooks

Despite the abundance of material for the teaching of Business English in the 1990s (cf. St John 1996, p. 3), there are very few Business English textbooks for tertiary education, which would meet the needs of the new skills required by the corporate workplace. In their aim to cover the widest possible market, they aim at wide applicability by presenting standard solutions to standard problems. In this, they usually rely on narrowly defined cultural competence, whose model comes from the Western, and more typically North American praxis.

Mainstream textbooks in the 1980s typically rely on sample letters and sample phrases to be used in 'standard' situations (Jenkins & Hinds 1987, p. 328). Business communication is taught as a mechanical skill that can be learned through specimen letters and 'fossilized' phrases. The trend runs into the 1990s, and business communication is still too often treated as a store of phrases and idioms separate from the actual business world and professional skills (Louhiala-Salminen, 1996, p. 50).

Writing guidelines given in Business Communication textbooks have not changed much either. In the 1980s, Business Communication textbooks, which at that time were often called business correspondence textbooks (e.g. Kansi & Malmiranta, 1983), used to point out the three C's of courtesy, clarity and conciseness as the golden rules for business writing. Moreover, the C's, which can be extended up to seven in number (clearness, conciseness, courtesy, consideration, completeness, concreteness, correctness) , are still highlighted either explicitly or implicitly in

more recent western textbooks (e.g., *New International Business English*, Jones & Alexander, 1992; Ober, 1998; Kankaanranta & Nordlund, 1998). This is the case also in most textbooks used in the Chinese tertiary curriculum (Wang, 1995; Yin & Guo, 1998). In some recent books in the West, however, the C's have been replaced by acronyms, such as KISS (keep it short and simple), and CBS (clear, brief, sincere) (cf. e.g. Moon, 1999 and Louhiala-Salminen, 1999).

The emphasis on conciseness in business communication originates from North America and it takes the North American praxis as a standard (Pan et al., 2002). This praxis, however, is not universally applicable to situations with interactants from other cultural backgrounds. It is a mistake to attempt to standardize professional communication, while in the era of escalating changes, "a really effective and practical approach to professional communication in international settings is ［…］ to learn how to learn *directly from the people with whom we need to interact*" (Pan, et al., 2002, p. 4, their italics). The Sino-Finnish e-mail project aimed to provide the students at Shandong University, China and Finnish university students in the University of Vaasa with the opportunity to do this, to learn from the people with whom they needed to interact.

E-mail in the Corporate World: Some Studies

The teaching of Written Business Communications should respond more flexibly to changes in the choice of the media of corporate communication. The course input needs to be updated so as to better equip the students with skills required by their future jobs. Unfortunately, the textbooks used in teaching Business Communication often lags behind. One of the reasons for this may be the lack of research into corporate e-mail.

A recent survey (Louhiala-Salminen, 1999, p. 96) conducted in Finland has shown that e-mail has increased from only 9% in 1992 to 30% in 1998, while the share of letters and faxes has declined from 27% down to 20%, and from 54% down to 45% respectively. In consequence, the survey also establishes a trend towards increasing informality of the language, which is also

supported by other studies (e.g. Gimenez, 2000). The cline from formal to informal style in written business communication is illustrated by Figure 1. (from Gimenez 2000, p. 250). The cline shows a shift from informal to more formal style as we move from personal e-mails/letters to legal documents. For example, business letters can be very formal as compared with commercial e-mails and business telexes and faxes as well.

Informal ◄──────────────────────────────► Formal

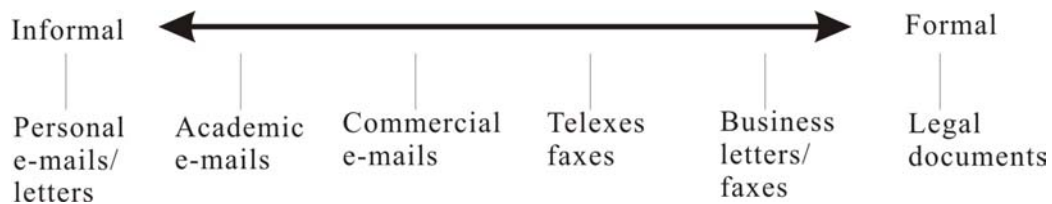| Personal e-mails/ letters | Academic e-mails | Commercial e-mails | Telexes faxes | Business letters/ faxes | Legal documents |

Figure 1. The Style Flexibility Cline in Written Communication

Despite their wide use, corporate fax and e-mail messages have not received much attention among researchers. This is probably due to the fact that companies tend to classify their written business communication as confidential. Although some research has been conducted into faxes (Yli-Jokipii, 1994; Louhiala-Salminen, 1996; Akar & Louhiala-Salminen, 1999), e-mails still remain very much a novelty in research into business communication.

Teachers of Business Communication have to rely largely on the analyses of fax messages for their teaching of how to communicate through e-mail. Some characteristics of fax messages can indeed be assumed to be similar to those of e-mail messages. In her study of requests, Yli-Jokipii (1994, p. 40) describes fax messages as highly sensitive to the situation, the power status of the interactants, and the physical qualities of the messages. Faxes are 'unconstrained', lacking any distinctive form, since diverse materials, such as pictures, graphs, drawings, and also hand-written notes, can be transmitted by fax. Yli-Jokipii further contends that the sensitivity to rhetorical requirements in fax messages is low: they tend not to contain introductory paragraphs preceding the request to the same extent as traditional business letters do. All these features, with the exception of

the transmission of pictures and graphs, apply to e-mail messages as well. A comparison of Turkish and Finnish fax messages suggests that both are characterized by high intertextuality, sentence fragments, technical abbreviations, and well-defined interactants (Akar & Louhiala-Salminen, 1999, p. 220). A new set of conventions is thus being outlined for this medium of communication, many of which we can assume to characterize e-mail as well.

Although e-mail messages have entered the workplace in the 1990s, research into the characteristics of this medium has so far elicited little information. Some features have, however, been outlined as characteristic of the language of e-mail. E-mail represents a hybrid combination of spoken and written language (Gimenez, 2000, pp. 237-251). In internal communication, e-mails tend to be stylistically close to a writing-based telephone 'talk'; in external communication, they tend to be similar to faxes and letters. The stylistic pendulum swings from the formality of business letters to the informality of e-mails (cf. Crystal, 2001, p. 64). A well-designed e-mail project can thus make students more sensitive to the characteristics and use of the new medium and stylistically to the relaxed formality of e-mail messages. Ideally it can also increase the students' awareness of the importance of cultural competence in the interaction. In addition, it provides an opportunity for the teacher to complement the Business Communication textbooks with practice one of the most important media of the contemporary business world.

Cultural Competence and the Teaching of Business Communication

English as the lingua franca of international business communication is used more between non-native English speakers than native English speakers (Louhiala-Salminen 1996, p. 44). Moreover, English is often shaped by the context, and the different Englishes, for example, Euro-English (AcArthur, 2003) and China English (Jiang, 2003) are gaining more recognition. Against this background, it is important that Chinese and Finnish university students can be

exposed to different "Englishes". Language is, however, only part of the entire culture and linguistic competence only part of our cultural competence.

Cultural competence is receiving increasing attention in foreign language education and communication studies. Haney (1979, p. 285) contends that misunderstanding in intercultural communication is caused, most importantly, by bypassing, the miscommunication pattern, which occurs when communication fails between the sender (speaker, or writer) and the receiver (listener or reader) because of the absence of general agreement, egocentric interpretation or self-assertive conception.

Cultural competence is an important aspect of both the pedagogy and research of business communication. In addition to introducing a new teaching tool, the Sino-Finnish e-mail project was therefore also designed to provide material for my doctoral research into the role of cultural competence in Sino-Finnish e-mail messages. The inaccessibility of corporate e-mail messages will thus be partly compensated for in the message data by e-mail messages of Finnish and Chinese students of Business Communication.

International E-Mail Project as a Teaching Tool

International e-mail projects have been used increasingly and beneficially in communication and language education (e.g., MacDonald et al., 1995; Warschauer, p. 1995). In addition to these, the Sino-Finnish project was also inspired by studies of e-mail exchange for intercultural perceptions (Meagher & Castanos, 1996; Ma, 1996; Guest & Lovejoy, 1997). The project was designed to combine English language learning and intercultural communication in the context of international business negotiations. The aim was to update the instructional contents and method of the written Business Communication course and the advantages were assumed to include: 1) an opportunity to simulate international business negotiations in English via e-mail and gain "authentic" experience of a situation where English was used between non-native speakers with different cultural backgrounds; 2) to raise the students' consciousness of rhetoric strategies and language needed in

different situations; and 3) to improve their communication and language skills. The assumption was that university students in both cultures were motivated to use their knowledge of English and international business to "perform" assigned tasks in a business situation.

Preparation and Planning

The project aimed to place students in an 'authentic' business situation, where they 'perform' a series of business negotiation tasks with their business partners. Such a case-based approach has been suggested as "the most suitable means for learning about communication in business" (Louhiala-Salminen, 1996, p. 50), and it was thus adopted also in the present project design. Two imaginary companies, one Finnish and the other Chinese were assumed to be in the process of striking a business deal. In order to enhance the feel of "authenticity", the Chinese company Zhi4Mei3 Furniture Accessories Co. Ltd. and the Finnish company Pohjanmaan Kalustetehdas Oy were given detailed contact information, including culturally-loaded names, postal addresses, telephone numbers, fax numbers, e-mail addresses and websites. From the pedagogical point of view, attention was given to careful outlining of the business situation and topics that the students were supposed to be able to handle. The briefing emphasized that the inquiry from the Finnish company presented a rare business opportunity for the Chinese company. In consequence, the Chinese company was supposed to seize this opportunity and aim to maintain the relationship for the future business. The exchange of e-mails constructed a continuous communication chain, from request, reply to request, order, order acknowledgement, to complaints and adjustments. The project participants were expected and encouraged to consider what, and how to communicate in the particular situation.

Since students were assumed not to have prior work experience, instructions were given in the form of a checklist for their reference in e-mail composition. Checklists were constructed on the basis of recent genre analysis research into business writing, which aims to explain why writers make certain linguistic and rhetorical choices (dos Santos, 2002) and some textbooks (Berntzen &

O'Gorman, 1990; Ashley, 1992; Ober, 1992).The checklists outlined the moves typical of different types of e-mails, and the rationale was to familiarize the students with the *syntactic and rhetoric patterns* of e-mails (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993) and raise their sensitivity to *the rhetorical structures that tend to recur in genre-specific texts* (See, e.g., Swales, 1990, p. 213). As checklists were seen to be important for the students' understanding of their L2 environments, and they encouraged them to see business communication as a set of moves. The moves were not made obligatory in order to allow for flexibility and innovation needed in emerging business situations, as is also the case in the actual business world. This orientation allows students to take initiative, which is not traditionally emphasized in the teaching of Business Communication.

Practical Arrangements

Preparatory measures were needed to overcome some practical problems. Firstly, different curriculum arrangements in the two universities needed attention. English Business Communications is offered in the autumn term for an average class of 15 students for 10 double-hour sessions at Vaasa University, whereas it is offered in the spring term for a group of 130-plus students for 17 triple-hour sessions at Shandong University. Chinese university administrators made therefore an effort to arrange this program to be given in the multimedia room use and to convert program lectures to regular curriculum lectures. Secondly, to make the Chinese group compatible with their Finnish counterpart group, 15 Chinese students were chosen from a class of fourth-year students from the Department of International Trade to take part in the project. They had completed their Business Communication course and were to participate in the project in their free time for no credit points. These 15 Chinese students were randomly arranged into pairs with the 15 Finnish students.

Project Implementation

The pilot project extended over a time span from October to November 2003. In the implementation stage, some problems emerged.

The first problem concerned the incorrect reading of e-mail addresses. Although the list of e-mail addresses were exchanged at the very beginning, it was difficult for teachers to monitor if the participants had actually managed to establish contact with each other. There were, for example, problems in sending messages to some of the Chinese participants because their e-mail addresses had been read incorrectly. Unlike the Finnish students who all used the university e-mail host, the Chinese students had several e-mail hosts. Also their e-mail addresses were not always read correctly by the teacher because of their individual writing styles in giving their contact information.

The second problem was caused by the timing of the project. The Business Communication e-mail project was an 'intruder' course for the Chinese students, as it took place in the last two months before the Master's Degree entrance examination and some other examinations. The majority of the Chinese university students fail to attend even some obligatory classes, as they need get time for their entrance examination or the English Proficiency test they need to take for overseas studies. The class managed to meet only twice. In the first meeting, only some half of the students was present. In the second meeting, which aimed to discuss the content of the project, again only half of the participants attended the class, as something else had coincided with the meeting.

Overall, project assignments were announced and e-mailed to the Chinese participants at proper intervals to follow the course delivery pace in Vaasa. Reading materials, including effective e-mail writing strategies and two sample e-mails to highlight the cultural impact on intercultural business communication,   were provided by the Chinese teacher.

Post-Project Feedback

As the project was expected to produce pedagogical benefits in providing the students with testing ground for their learning, a small-scale survey was conducted among the Chinese participants to get their feedback. At the end of the project, the Chinese participants were asked to submit their e-mail messages (they had been informed about this request already at the beginning of the project), both incoming and outgoing, and to complete a questionnaire, as well as to write a 200-300-word (English or Chinese) commentary on the project design and their experiences of the project.

Six replies were received from the Chinese group of 15 students. Five of these had interacted successfully with their Finnish partners and one student had not managed to establish a contact with her Finnish counterpart. The low feedback percentage may be due to the problems in establishing the e-mail contacts, and only those who had succeeded submitted their feedback.

A small-scale questionnaire was composed of four multiple choice questions. For the first question, concerning the needed skills, four out of five students listed the skills in the order of importance as 'practical knowledge of the trade', followed by 'terminology or jargon' and 'competence in the English language'. Only one student placed 'terminology or jargon' before ''practical knowledge of trade'. The implications for the classroom activities of this are clear. The focus of traditional textbooks on accuracy, set phrases, useful expressions, and syntactic construction needs to be shifted to business writing as a process where students are encouraged to interpret and analyze 'situations' in order to find solutions. This must be supported by their knowledge of business practices. The second question concerned the relevance of cultural competence for their business interaction. Three out of five answered 'none' and two picked the category of 'a little'. The limited range of tasks in their e-mail exchange was given as a possible reason. None of the students felt that cultural difference played a significant role in their interaction with their Finnish partners. The usefulness of a genre-based checklist, as a guide to their letter composition, monitored by the third question, was confirmed as expected. Four out of five respondents picked the category 'necessary' and one picked 'very necessary'.

In order to get their opinion and attitude towards the project, the fourth question concerned reasons for a possible dropout from the project, that is, had they considered dropping out, what would have been the reason. Four out of five picked the option of 'their Finnish partner's inadequate enthusiasm' and one 'no regular access to internet'. None of the students suggested the lack of interest in the project as a possible reason for dropping out.

The Chinese respondents described the e-mail project as a 'rare' or 'precious' opportunity. The advantages included: 1) applying their English language and business learning; 2) communicating with a non-native English speaker with a different cultural background; 3) improving their e-mail writing skills; 4) developing the feel of an international business community; 5) learning about their partner's culture.

The time frame was regarded as the biggest problem. Three of the five respondents were busy preparing for their entrance examination and the other two were busy with their application for overseas studies. To improve the project, they suggested having the time frame rescheduled before October to overlap their course of EFL business communication. One participant also suggested a credit system to boost and maintain the participants' enthusiasm. One participant complained about the limited number of writing tasks. In sum, all students appreciated this opportunity and agreed it should be made a part of the studies of international trade.

Students' E-Mail Messages

The small e-mail corpus reveals that the participants had a clear idea of the difference between formality of business e-mails and informality of personal e-mails. Also, the corpus suggests that students take initiative as the project gave rise to new unexpected topics. For example, efforts were made to sort out a misunderstanding of a date either as the shipment date or delivery date. Another example could be the suggestion made by one Finnish student to have the Finnish text and the Finnish logo attached to the Chinese labels.

Problems and Solutions

The main problems in the pilot project lay in the implementation stage, in particular, the exchange of e-mail addresses and the weak functional role of the teachers as monitors and facilitators. Posting and carrying out the project on a WebCT environment could solve most of these problems. A WebCT course setting would enable teachers to post lectures online and have students' activities under full control.

With reference to the feedback from the Chinese students, more writing tasks would be needed. The time frame of the course should be rescheduled, for example, a month earlier or it could be fitted into the course homework of Business Communication for the 3rd year students. The construction of the dyads may need more careful consideration; for examples, same-sex or different-sex pairs or dyads with similar hobbies may enhance the intensity of correspondence. Last but not least, feedback from both sides needs to be obtained and studied to improve the e-mail project.

Concluding Remarks

As emphasized at the beginning, the international e-mail project was designed as an innovation to improve EFL Business Communication teaching and learning. Administrators at both ends were needed in its successful implementation ; without them, the project would not have developed so far. The enthusiasm of the participants was another guarantee of the success of the project. Student participation was self-monitored and thus depended on their motivation and willingness to take responsibility. The post-project feedback gives strong evidence of the potential pedagogical benefits of the e-mail project.

The benefits of the student-centered teaching, situation-centered learning and process writing have for long been acknowledged, and promoted as elements of business communication teaching. The participants of the international e-mail project assumed professional roles to 'negotiate' and get things done. In doing so, written communication was no longer perceived by students as a skill

that can be learned through sample letters, translation work and set phrases. This has been the traditional approach to the learners of business communication and still is so, for example, in the new Chinese textbook of English Business Communication (Hu, forthcoming). Instead, students were focusing on messages and adjusting their behaviors accordingly.

The present paper argues for international cooperation as a way to improve English Business Communication teaching. On the basis of the participants' contribution and feedback, the potential pedagogical value of an international e-mail exchange course is undeniable. In conclusion, the international e-mail exchange project provides an effective way to bridge the gap between classroom activities and the dynamic fast-changing business environment.

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APPENDIX 1.

cline from informal to formal.pdf

APPENDIX 2.

Questionnaire

Directions: The small questionnaire is composed of four closed multiple choice questions. Please read carefully and put your numbered answers in the spaces provided:

1. From the interaction experience, I have realized that I need to improve my weak areas in order of priority (   ) .

    1) practical knowledge of trade   2) terminology or jargon 3) competence in the English language

2. To what extent have you felt the impact of cultural factors on effective communication from your email exchange? (   )

    1) none 2) a little   3) a lot

3. Purposes determine the main covering contents in business letters. Do you find the genre-based checklists for guiding your letter composing? (   )

    1) not necessary   2) necessary   3) very necessary

4. If you had considered dropping out, what would be the reason? (   )

   1) no regular access to internet   2) Finnish partner's lack of enthusiasm   3) own fading interest