

Teaching Business Correspondence: Using Learners' Response as Feedback for Planning Reteaching

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Introduction

Using learners' responses as feedback for planning remedial teaching is a common practice in language teaching. This article argues that students of business communication mug up the qualities of a good business letter from their prescribed textbooks but fail to write successfully when confronted with a new situation; there is a disconnect between theory and practice. It also describes how teachers can plan remedial teaching on the basis of the learners' feedback to help students understand the qualities of a good correspondence so that they can apply this knowledge to their own practice.

Business Communication

Business Communication in English is one of the papers in business-related courses in almost all schools and colleges in India. The course, like all English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses, deals with theoretical aspects and their practical application in business settings. It prescribes, among others, theoretical topics such as definition of communication, its nature and functions, direction of communication, barriers to communication, elements of effective communication and so on, and expects teachers to build a bridge between this theoretical knowledge and its application.

Theory and Practice

There are many challenges of teaching this course. One of the challenges, the teacher faces

is the 'disconnect' he/she finds between students' theoretical knowledge of certain concepts mugged up from books, and their understanding and practical application in business communication activities. This becomes evident when in the examination students are asked to attempt two related questions—one aimed at testing their theoretical knowledge and the other at testing their skill in the application of this knowledge. For example,

- Q.1. Describe the qualities of an effective business communication.
- Q. 2. You are interested in doing a part-time training course. Write a letter to the Principal of a training institute in your neighbourhood. In your letter:
- Describe the type of training course you want to do and indicate the timings that suit you.
 - Explain why you want to do this training course.
 - Ask questions to seek details of the course.

Write at least 150 words. The students whose answers are less than 150 words will be penalized.

The examiner finds that students score high on theoretical knowledge in Q 1. However, their response to its practical application in Q 2 is not as good. This is apparent from a typical sample answer reproduced as follows:

Respected sir/madam

How are you? My name is Rahul Sharma and I live in the neighbourhood to your training institute. I am interesting in doing a part-time training course from your institute because it is very near my house. Please let me know the timings that suit you.

I have done B.Com (Professional) course from a college here and want to do this training. I am working a junior accountant in a private company for six months now. My office will give me promotion and more salary to doing training. So I want to do this training now.

Please send me details of the course. How can I get admission? What is the tuition fees and admission fees? What is the duration of the training course? Is it a certificate or diploma course? Are reading materials given or I buy it?

Regards and thank you.

Yours' obediently
(Rahul Sharma)

The reason for this wide variation in the performance of the students in these two questions can be attributed to the distinction between rote learning and understanding. According to the books on business communication generally prescribed for our students in India, the qualities of an effective business communication are what they term, the '7Cs'. These '7Cs' stand for seven qualities that these textbooks list as *Completeness*, *Conciseness*, *Coherence*, *Courtesy*, *Clarity*, *Correctness*, and *Consideration*. So, in answer to Q.1, students reproduce what they have mugged up from their books and write a very good answer detailing these seven qualities so thoroughly that they score almost 100 per cent marks on this written assignment. But it soon becomes apparent that although they have

answered this theoretical question very well, they have not understood the significance of these qualities. Hence they fail to apply this knowledge to the practical assignment in Q. 2.

There are many reasons why this theoretical knowledge does not get translated into practice. However, one of the main reasons is that business communication teachers do not spend much time explaining the theoretical concepts and making learners practice application. Moreover, many of these '7Cs' signify abstract qualities that are not easy to understand and apply unless the teacher devotes time and effort to explain them and makes students practice their application.

The task before the teacher then is to explain to the students the concept of the '7 Cs' and demonstrate to them how these can be applied in letters drafted by them or by other writers. They generally do not do this as it is an arduous task. Alternatively, the teacher can give students concrete criteria in place of these abstract ones that are easy to understand and apply. I find this alternative more useful as such criteria do exist and are easier to remember and apply.¹ One of these criteria² is as follows:

1. Task completion
 - a) Format
 - b) Task completion
 - c) Tone and style
2. Coherence and cohesion
 - a) Logical development of ideas
 - b) Inter-linking of sentences
 - c) Paragraphing
 - d) Referencing
3. Language
 - a) Lexical resource
 - b) Grammar and structures
 - c) Punctuation

These criteria can be understood from the following explanations:

1. Task Completion

- a) **Format:** Check that the format is appropriate. Format does not only refer to the layout of the letter. It also includes the text type and all that goes into making and presenting it—the tasks expected, ideas and their relevance, tone and manner of communication, choice of lexis and register used, and the manner in which the ideas are communicated. The format will depend on the type of text one is expected to write, i.e., whether it is a letter, a set of instructions, an office memo, a notice, a report (short or long), a proposal and so on, as each type of text has its own distinct format, use of register, etc., and the writer is expected to follow these.
 - b) **Task completion:** Check that the given task is fully and appropriately completed. Does it give adequate and relevant ideas? Is the purpose of writing clear? Has it covered all the key points the task requires it to cover?
 - c) **Tone and style:** Is the tone of the letter appropriate to the task involved? Is the writer aware of formal and informal styles of writing and has s/he taken care to use the appropriate style of writing? Make sure that the style of writing, particularly while conveying bad news does not cause offence to the reader.
- 2. Coherence and cohesion:** Is there a logical development of ideas in the writing? Has the writer used appropriate cohesive devices to indicate a logical relationship between ideas and linked sentences from the first to the next in the paragraph? Has s/he used paragraphing sufficiently and appropriately? Are backward and forward referencing accurate and appropriate?

3. Language

- a) **Lexical resource:** Are the writer's words and expressions accurate and appropriate? Does the writer show evidence of awareness of word formation, style and collocation in her/his selection and use of words and expressions? Are the spellings accurate? Will the density of errors in word formation and spellings impede communication?
- b) **Grammar and Structure:** Is there a wide range and variety in the sentence structures? Are the sentences grammatically correct? Will the density of grammatical errors make communication difficult? What is the nature of these errors: are they systematic, asystematic, or slips?
- c) Does the writer use important punctuation marks to make the meaning clear?

These are concrete criteria, and can be easily applied by learners for assessing the suitability of a given draft letter, or to even rewrite an appropriate letter of their own with some help and practice by the teacher.

Let us see how the teacher can give students practice in applying these criteria to assess the suitability of the draft letter given earlier.

Exercise 1. Read the answer to Q. 2 and see if it meets the following criteria. Put a tick mark (✓) if it meets the criteria and a cross (X) if it does not. Give reasons for your answer, citing examples from the given letter, if necessary.

1. Task Completion
 - a) Format
 - b) Task fulfilment
 - c) Tone and Style
2. Coherence and cohesion
 - a) Logical development of ideas

- b) Inter-linking of sentences
 - c) Paragraphing
 - d) Referencing
3. Language
- a) Lexical resource
 - b) Grammar and structures
 - c) Punctuation

(Note: Initially the exercise can be done in pairs/groups with a time limit for completion).

When the exercise is over, the teacher has to give feedback to the learners in order to help them improve upon the draft reply or rewrite one, if necessary.

Practice and feedback could be given by showing more sample drafts on the same topic or on another topic, either written specially, or picked from those written by the learners in earlier classes as shown in Q. 3.

Q.3. Your company provides inter-city train services. It has received a complaint from one of its customers regarding late running of a train and on-board catering. The office assistant has drafted the following letter in reply. Read the draft letter and examine if it is a suitable reply to be sent. Give reasons for your answer.

Assess the suitability of the draft letter, and then join your group and discuss your answer/views with them.

(Note: Keep in mind the criteria for effective business communication given earlier while judging the suitability of this draft reply).

(Draft letter – adapted)

Dear Sir/Madam

It is with great regret that we read of your recent unpleasant experience while travelling on our Shatabad train from New Delhi to Amritsar on the morning of 2 December. We offer our sincere apologies and hope that your experience will not be repeated.

On receiving your letter, we investigated into your complaint concerning the late departure of the train. Our investigation reveals that the reason for the delay on the day in question was purely technical. The fault had to be replaced and thoroughly checked before the train could be allowed to depart.

We are sure that you will appreciate that the delay was unavoidable as the safety of our customers is as important as providing good service.

Yours truly

Each practice exercise needs to be followed by the teacher's feedback so that learners understand the positive and negative aspects of each draft letter taken up for consideration.

We have found that this technique of planning reteaching based on learners' response proves very helpful for them. It gives them concrete criteria to judge the suitability of a business correspondence rather than depend on abstract criteria mugged up from their books. Besides, this method is also more effective than providing a 'model' answer and discussing it, since a model focuses only on 'imitation' and 'conformity' and ignores individual creation and variety. Analysing and discussing a model answer postulates only the positive aspects of an answer. Hence this technique fails to anticipate what different individuals may do and thus ignores variation in free writing activity. On the other hand, the method of teaching that involves looking at the pitfalls faced by different

learners helps them to move from 'imitation' and rote-learning of theoretical knowledge to understanding and creation.

References

See, for example, Arthur Hughes (1989), *Testing for language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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