Designing email tasks for the Business English classroom: Implications from a study of Hong Kong’s key industries

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Abstract

Email has revolutionised the way in which professionals work and companies operate, and yet has received surprisingly little scholarly attention in English for Specific Purposes and has an unexpectedly muted presence in many Business English textbooks. The dearth of research into email use in globalised business settings may be one of the factors behind the unnecessarily wide gulf that separates the office and the classroom. This article seeks to narrow this gap by making practical suggestions about the design of email tasks for use in Business English courses. These ideas are based on three complementary sets of qualitative data derived from Hong Kong’s service sector: over 30 h of interviews with English-using Chinese professionals, four “week-in-the-life” case studies and 50 email chains comprising 406 separate messages. These data provide pedagogically relevant information about the function of email in internal and external communication, its intimate relationship with spoken communication, the importance of intertextuality in email chains and the length, language and structure of email messages. The study recommends the adoption of a simulation-based approach in which email communication is embedded in a series of interdependent activities that integrate speaking, listening, reading and writing.

1. Introduction

In his influential book The world is flat, Friedman (2006) divides the post-Columbian era of globalisation into three distinct epochs, each distinguished by a different driving force: Globalisation 1.0, which extended from the “discovery” of the Americas in 1492–1800; Globalisation 2.0, which spanned the 19th and 20th centuries; and the current phase of globalisation, which commenced around the year 2000. Whereas the forces that propelled the first two epochs were countries (1.0) and companies (2.0), the motor that drives Globalisation 3.0 is the individual; and whereas the nations and corporations that dominated the second half of the second millennium were mainly European or North American in origin, the individuals who are powering version 3.0 come from “every corner of the flat world” (p. 11). Given that individuals were hardly peripheral players in the ascent of Western countries and corporations, it might reasonably be asked why they occupy centre stage in Globalisation 3.0. Friedman’s response would be that individuals derive their power to collaborate and compete globally from the “flat-world platform”, which is the outcome of the unforeseen coalescence around the turn of the millennium of advances in personal computing, fibre-optic communication and work-flow software. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Friedman neglects to explore the linguistic implications of the tightening and thickening of the human web over the past five centuries, a process that has inevitably stimulated the need for lingua-franca communication, be it in pidgin or Portuguese. Perhaps more surprising, though, is that he largely overlooks (or, more likely, presupposes) the centrality of “the last lingua franca”
The emergence of email as the primary medium of internal and external business communication in the past two decades has revolutionised the way in which individuals work and companies operate (Hewitt, 2006). Together with other space- and time-reducing innovations, such as video-conferencing, instant messaging and smartphones, email has fundamentally altered the dynamic between corporations and their employees and outside parties, such as customers, clients and partners (Argenti, 2006). The prevalence of email in modern business is perhaps one practical manifestation of Friedman’s notion of the individual as the engine of the current phase of globalisation. Whereas in late Globalisation 2.0 internal communication tended to be directed by the upper echelons of the corporate hierarchy via formally worded memoranda, in today’s more democratic and collaborative workplace employees of all ranks are more likely to exchange information and ideas via concise, precise emails shorn of time-honoured indicators of rank and reputation (Angouri & Harwood, 2008; St Amant, 2002). Whereas in pre-internet Globalisation 2.0 external communication tended to be conducted via carefully crafted letters bearing a company’s letterhead, in the more flexible and fluid environment ushered in by Globalisation 3.0 professionals worldwide are transacting business via messages whose length, language and structure often bear little relation to those encountered in Business English textbooks and classrooms (Ehrenreich, 2010; Kankaanranta, 2006).

The adoption of email as the communication channel of choice since the early 1990s has inspired researchers in a range of disciplines to investigate the nature and effects of email use in the business world (Ducheneaut & Watts, 2005). These include fields such as corporate communication, management and information science, in which language matters are often peripheral, as well as disciplines such as intercultural communication, pragmatics and Business Communication (BC), in which language issues are clearly critical and therefore of interest to specialists in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) generally and Business English (BE) particularly.

Research in the former constellation of disciplines has examined some of the problems that flow from the excessive volume and often dubious quality of business-related email communication, such as information overload (O’Kane, Palmer, & Hargie, 2007), work interruption (Jackson, Dawson, & Wilson, 2003) and avoidant decisional styles (Phillips & Reddie, 2007), together with questions that are of relevance to teachers and researchers in BC, BE and ESP, such as the relationship between email and face-to-face communication (O’Kane & Hargie, 2007) and the readability (Sallis & Kassabova, 2000) and style (Mallon & Oppenheim, 2002) of email messages. Indeed, several strands of the BC literature, such as those relating to email overload (Dawley & Anthony, 2003) and online vs. face-to-face communication (Kupritz & Cowell, 2011), parallel work conducted in disciplines not primarily concerned with language matters.

Another substantial strand in the BC literature, that relating to the use of Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Saminen, 2010), is of special relevance to ESP and BE practitioners as it has important (and perhaps awkward) implications for the design of BE courses and materials. A significant segment of BELF-related research has been conducted in continental Europe (Ehrenreich, 2010), with corporate contexts in Finland being especially fertile sites for such investigations (Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010; Virkkula-Räisänen, 2010). Although only a small proportion of this research has focused on email communication (Kankaanranta, 2006), these studies have nevertheless highlighted the centrality of email in the globalised workplace and the considerable chasm that separates the “ideal” world portrayed in textbooks and the “real” world experienced by practitioners. Studies reported in the ESP literature, notably Louhiala-Salminen’s (2002) ground-breaking “fly-on-the-wall” investigation, have also emphasised the extent to which email has become embedded in organisational communication (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, & Kankaanranta, 2005; Nickerson, 1999).

The ESP literature itself is not especially overflowing with studies of email communication in business settings. The emergence of email during the 1990s stirred a modest degree of scholarly interest in a novel and evolving communication channel such as Gains’ (1999) analysis of textual features and Gimenez’s (2000) study of register; but, with several notable exceptions (Gimenez, 2005, 2006; Jensen, 2009; van Mulken & van der Meer, 2005), surprisingly few studies have appeared since the advent of Globalisation 3.0. Although research into workplace emails has appeared in other language-focused fields, such as intercultural communication (Murphy & Levy, 2006), pragmatics (Ho, 2011) and discourse analysis (Kong, 2006), these studies were not motivated by pedagogical considerations and are thus of only general interest to ESP and BE practitioners. To date, much of the ESP-related literature on business correspondence has focused on facets of letters, faxes and memoranda (Akar & Louhiala-Salminen, 1999; Flowerdew & Wan, 2006; Santos, 2002). However, these studies of business correspondence, like those relating to email communication, tend to lack specific recommendations for the teaching and learning of BE, even though they were often inspired by pedagogical concerns.

From a practical perspective, the work of Bremner (2008, 2010) is particularly illuminating as it highlights the limitations of certain widely used BC textbooks, particularly their apparent neglect of two key characteristics of the process and product of business writing, namely, collaboration (Bremner, 2010) and (of relevance here) intertextuality (Bremner, 2008). The essence of intertextuality is nicely captured by Bazerman (2004, pp. 83–84): “We create our texts out of the sea of former texts that surround us, the sea of language we live in.” Its significance in workplace writing was established two decades ago by Devitt (1991), who proposed three types of intertextuality: generic (i.e., when a text draws on previous texts written in response to similar situations); referential (i.e., when a text refers directly to another text); and functional (i.e., when a text is part of a larger “macrotext”). The importance of intertextuality in workplace communication has been highlighted in a number of empirical studies in the past decade (Cheng & Mok, 2008; Flowerdew & Wan, 2006; Louhiala-Salminen, 2002). However, as Bremner (2008) discovered, BC textbooks generally overlook the notion of intertextuality in their explanations,
models and tasks, and thus fail to make explicit to students “the key point that writing is an ongoing, dialogic process, and that this dialogue will have an impact on the way they construct texts” (p. 310).

The BC textbooks analysed by Bremner are mainly intended for native speakers of English in the United States, where English is the dominant language of business and society. Although these materials are also used by non-native speakers in various contexts worldwide, the needs of such students are also purportedly met by an ever-expanding array of textbooks and study guides designed specifically for learners of BE as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL). The demand for such materials has inevitably intensified with the advent of Globalisation 3.0. This indeed is illustrated by Reed’s (2011) comprehensive review of recent BE publications, which runs the gamut from multilevel, integrated-skills courses to specialised, single-volume works. Despite their myriad objectives and foci, these publications apparently have much in common. According to Reed (2011, p. 326), “most” of the materials are “packed” with exercises, such as gap-fills and match-the-phrases. In Reed’s (2011, p. 326) view, such exercises “represent a large part of the ELT materials industry, in Business English as elsewhere”.

Another characteristic that these materials presumably share (to a greater or lesser extent) is their publishers’ belief that they prepare students for communication in the “real world”. For example, the authors of an award-winning, advanced-level textbook, Intelligent Business, echo Friedman (2006) by noting that “Globalisation and the spectacular rise of the Internet have swept away the comfortable business models of the past and brought us all into a new, faster-paced business environment where reactivity and flexibility are the hallmarks of success” (Trappe & Tullis, 2011, p. 6). Thereby, they have found the need for BC materials to “accurately reflect the complexities of a global, wired world” (p. 6). However, even a cursory glance at the students’ book reveals the familiar Headway-inspired EFL textbook template focusing – like many other BE books (e.g., Baade, Holloway, Scrivener, & Turner, 2011) – on “passages” (rather than genres) and discrete, sentence-level “exercises” (rather than tasks). Rather surprisingly given the Friedman-style introductory fanfare, the book provides few examples of emails, either for analysis or as input to writing or speaking activities. The occasional email writing exercise arises from “scripted context” (Bremner, 2008, p. 314), that is, from background outlined by the authors rather than from the study of previous messages and other relevant workplace texts.

The foregoing discussion has highlighted the centrality of email communication in the era of Globalisation 3.0 and the dearth of pedagogically oriented research into email use in the field of ESP. The lack of such research, which arguably applies to other business genres as well, is perhaps one of the factors that contributes to the disjunction between many BE textbooks (and presumably therefore many BE classrooms) and the “real world” of business in the globalised workplace. Indeed, the mismatch between BE pedagogy and “real world” practices has been a source of concern in ESP for some years (Williams, 1988), and perhaps reflects the continuing influence of BE’s origins as a “materials-led” rather than a “research-led movement” (St John, 1996, p. 15). This article seeks to narrow the gap that inevitably separates the office and the classroom where reactivity and flexibility are the hallmarks of success” (Trappe & Tullis, 2011, p. 6). They therefore highlight the need for BE materials to “accurately reflect the complexities of a global, wired world” (p. 6). However, even a cursory glance at the students’ book reveals the familiar Headway-inspired EFL textbook template focusing – like many other BE books (e.g., Baade, Holloway, Scrivener, & Turner, 2011) – on “passages” (rather than genres) and discrete, sentence-level “exercises” (rather than tasks). Rather surprisingly given the Friedman-style introductory fanfare, the book provides few examples of emails, either for analysis or as input to writing or speaking activities. The occasional email writing exercise arises from “scripted context” (Bremner, 2008, p. 314), that is, from background outlined by the authors rather than from the study of previous messages and other relevant workplace texts.

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This analysis involved, in the first stage, a process of “open coding”, that is, repeatedly reading and annotating the 31 texts (comprising 224,073 words) with keywords, observations and ideas, and, in the second stage, a process of “axial coding”, that is, identifying primary and secondary themes in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This “manual” analysis was complemented by the data coding and analysis software NVivo (version 9), which facilitated the quantification and cross-referencing of the participants’ responses in each category/subcategory. It quickly became apparent in the first phase of the analysis that English-mediated email communication played a crucial role in the participants’ professional lives, far outweighing in importance the other text types and speaking situations itemised in the questionnaire. This is illustrated by the fact that there were 395 comments on aspects of email communication, the next most significant themes (as indicated by the number of comments) being meetings (131) and reports (127). Given its centrality in workplace communication, “email” was understandably one of the major categories that emerged from the data-coding process. The subcategories of email communication that were subsequently identified include purposes, audiences, language issues and rhetorical structure. The results of the coding process harmonised with the findings of the survey, which indicated that reading and writing internal and external emails were the most frequent English-using activities performed by service sector professionals in the SAR (Evans, 2010).

Most of the 31 interviewees (16 males, 15 females) possessed Bachelor’s (17) or Master’s degrees (10) and were fairly experienced in that they occupied senior (12) or middle-ranking (14) positions in their organisations. The sample included professionals in their 20s (10), 30s (9) and 40s (11). The oldest participant, a bank manager, was in his early 50s. The sample included representatives of Hong Kong-owned (14), foreign-owned (12) and China-owned (2) companies, together with several public sector employees working in relevant disciplines within the broad area of business and professional services. Five of the participants employed by foreign-owned companies worked for American corporations, while the remainder were employed by Japanese (2), Singaporean (2), Australian (1), British (1) or German (1) concerns. The interviewees signed a consent form explaining the purpose of the investigation and assuring them of confidentiality if their experiences were reported in subsequent publications. For this reason, they are given pseudonyms in Section 3, as are the participants in the case studies.

2.3. Case studies

The discussion of the interview findings in Section 3 is informed by data derived from case studies involving professionals engaged in each of the SAR’s “key” service industries: the compliance manager of a Chinese bank (Don) (i.e., financial services), the regional account manager of a logistics company (Cathy) (i.e., trading and logistics), an operation officer of a travel agency (Belinda) (i.e., tourism) and the group chief accountant of a hotel group (Alan) (i.e., professional and business services). The case studies were designed to paint intimate portraits of professionals at work. To this end, the participants completed a specially designed professional discourse checklist to record the pattern and flow of their activities in half-hourly segments on each day of a “typical” working week. The checklist, which was based on the instrument used by Cheng and Mok (2008) in their analysis of discourse processes and products in land surveying, provided data about the nature, medium and duration of their internal and external communication activities, the flows of these activities (i.e., the links between the various kinds of spoken and written texts), and the interplay and interdependence of the three main spoken codes (English, Cantonese, Putonghua) and two main written codes (English, Chinese) used in SAR workplaces (Supplementary data 2). Prior to the week in question, the research team briefed the participant on the purpose of the investigation and provided guidelines on the completion of the checklist. After the data had been collected, the participant was interviewed about the entries in the checklist to facilitate the analysis and interpretation of the data. In one case, a member of the research team was able to “shadow” a participant (Belinda) and took field notes about all her communication activities during an entire working day. Data from the case studies, which were conducted in the second half of 2009, confirm the impression that subsequently emerged in the interviews, namely, that reading and writing emails occupy a significant proportion of professionals’ working hours. This indeed was revealed by a detailed analysis of Don’s checklist, which is presented in Section 3.3.

2.4. Analyses of messages in email chains

The interviews, case studies and survey yielded a substantial and varied set of mainly self-reported data. To complement this material, and to provide evidence of actual language use, the investigation also incorporated the collection and analysis of authentic workplace discourses, including 50 email chains, often with several variations (Gimenez, 2006). Half of these chains were provided by a merchantiser (Katie) working for a company that manufactures handbags in China. Katie’s chains contain a total of 135 separate messages. The other 25 chains were collected by an IT manager (Anthony) with a multinational bank. Anthony’s chains contain 271 messages. These messages have been studied using the approach to genre analysis pioneered by Bhatia (1993) in the area of professional communication. Since this article is not primarily concerned with the organisational or linguistic features of emails, the results of this move-based analysis are not reported in detail. Instead, extracts from the email chains are presented at relevant points in the discussion to exemplify, substantiate or provide a counterpoint to findings from the interviews or case studies. The analysis of the chains also yielded information about the purpose, structure and length of messages at different points in the sequence and the prevalence of intertextuality.
3. Findings and discussion

This section examines six key findings that emerged from the data sources described above. The implications of these findings for teaching and research are discussed in Section 4.

3.1. The relationship between email and spoken communication

Studies of email communication often highlight the relationship between email and speech, noting that email messages, especially informal ones, are a hybrid of speaking and writing (Baron, 2000). There is also a perception that emails have assumed some of the functions previously performed by telephone communication (Sallis & Kassabova, 2000), as evidenced by Penny's (banker) claim that “today emailing is like telephoning”. While these findings and perceptions have some merit, they tend to overlook the interdependence of emailing and telephoning and other forms of spoken communication in modern business. Steve, an operational manager in the trading and logistics industry, reported that emails are often preceded by several rounds of telephone negotiations: “We first reach an agreement over the phone and then follow up with emails to confirm the details.” Steve’s experience was echoed by Ken (engineer): “When we write emails, both sides know about the issue. Usually much of the content has already been discussed over the phone. Emails are just a summary of these conversations.” In some cases, telephone calls in Cantonese or Putonghua follow the transmission of English emails in order to clarify their content. This applies particularly in communication between Hong Kong offices and Chinese factories. For example, Freda (regional store development buyer) reported that she usually phones her mainland partners “to ensure that they really understand the specifications in the email”.

Emailing in English not only precedes and follows telephone communication, but may also be synchronised with calls in Cantonese. For example, Belinda, whose working day was divided between speaking/listening in Cantonese (mainly on the phone) and reading/writing in English (mainly via email), was observed at one point to engage in a Cantonese call with a fellow travel agent while simultaneously composing an English email to her interlocutor containing the requested information. The relationship between email and discussions over the phone or in meetings is also evident in the email chains, as these extracts reveal:

...let’s discuss how we can manage the data gap between Feb and...
As discussed with F... please provide the full lists of the...
I have talked to A... today and there is no concrete answer as to how...
As we spoke, for data conversion run of...

The interplay of email with other forms of business communication, both spoken and written, has important implications for task design as it highlights the desirability of embedding email messages in activities which involve the processing and use of written and spoken input. As Bremner (2008, p. 310) observed, students “should not be writing in a vacuum, but producing texts as responses to previous and current situations”.

On the evidence of the interviews, Hong Kong professionals have little difficulty shifting between Cantonese and written English at work. Having in most cases attended schools and universities in which English was the de jure language of textbooks and assessment and Cantonese the de facto medium of much classroom instruction and interaction (Evans & Morrison, 2011), they are generally not disconcerted by frequent switches in the media of spoken and written communication. Although several interviewees acknowledged that it would be more effective to write in Chinese when all the participants in an email chain are conversant with the language, they were generally reluctant to abandon their long-standing practice of writing in English. One reason for their preference for English is that “many people don’t know how to type Chinese”, and even if they do, “it takes too much time” (Chris, assistant manager of a hotel).

3.2. Internal and external email communication

Another design issue that BE professionals need to consider is the difference between internal and external emails. This is crucial because consideration of audience has implications for the length, content, structure and language of the messages that students are assigned to read and write. The distinction between internal and external communication was noted by many of the interviewees. The evidence suggests that internal emails predominate in terms of volume if not importance. Steve, for example, claimed that “over 70% of the emails I write are internal”. Steve’s testimony coheres with data from Don’s discourse checklist, which indicate that internal emails occupied more time than external messages during the week in question (3.3).

What then are the purposes of internal emails and how do they differ from external messages? Lara highlighted their essentially practical nature: “Internal emails are simple and straightforward. They are used for giving instructions to colleagues or informing them of something. They are in point form and direct.” Lara’s testimony is corroborated by an analysis of Katie’s email chains: of the 16 different functions identified in the “action move” of the messages, “informing” is the most frequent, with 69 instances out of a total of 187 instances of the various functions (suggesting, reminding, explaining, etc.). This is illustrated in the following message:
Just spoke to A, she said she has made a proposal to S, and waiting for her decision, she sounds positive and mentioned about willing to make a “win-win” situation.

Let’s see …

S

When considering the role of such messages, several informants noted the degree to which they are interwoven in the day-to-day work of a corporation, thereby underlining the earlier point about the interplay of email with other text types (typically written in English) and speech events (often mediated in Cantonese). For example, internal emails in Ursula’s (financial analyst) department are largely concerned with preparation for meetings: “We have to report to our supervisor and team members about upcoming meetings with clients. We exchange ideas about the points we wish to discuss in the meetings so we can prepare the necessary material.”

Although the style and tone of internal emails vary according to well-known contextual factors (e.g., status, social distance), such messages are generally less formal than external emails. In some cases, as Tanya (buyer) noted, the style employed in internal messages is not necessarily calibrated according to rank (cf. St Amant, 2002): “I send emails to my superiors and subordinates. The style doesn’t have to be formal. There’s no need for greetings and ‘thank you’ at the end. The style is very casual. But emails to clients and factories need to be more formal.” The following message substantiates Tanya’s point about the informality of some subordinate-to-superior communication:

Do u remember the X form for updating? I hv update our information as per instruction by W. As u r the director, I put your info inside for their record. Nothing to do with this anymore. Thanks.

Clara (quality analyst) agreed that “we write more formally when we communicate externally”. One reason for this, as Steve noted, is that in external emails “you are representing the whole company” and therefore have to be “very careful”, whereas in internal messages “you are representing yourself”. Although there will be times when professionals need to attend closely to language and organisation to convey an impression of competence and diligence, when perceptions of professionalism are not a paramount concern, such as in routine communication with long-standing associates, they may not be especially troubled by lapses in grammar, spelling or punctuation. In any case, such is the volume and velocity of email communication in Hong Kong’s frenetic business world that professionals have little time to attend to the finer points of English usage.

3.3. The volume and length of email messages

The sheer volume of messages they receive every day – 400–500 (Owen, group costing manager), 300–400 (Henry, merchandiser) – prompted several participants to observe that an ostensibly “efficient” form of communication in fact frustrates rather than facilitates the conduct of business. “Colleagues just keep sending emails,” sighed Ian, “including ones that are completely irrelevant. I would say there is an over-use of written communication.” The case studies and email chains provide evidence of the number and length of the emails that professionals in the SAR typically read and write each day together with the amount of time they devote to such messages.

As noted above, Don’s self-reported checklist indicates that he spent more time on internal than external emails, although, as Fig. 1 illustrates, a significant proportion of his time involved reading Chinese messages (89 in all). This (atypical) practice stems in part from his bank’s Chinese ownership, but the fact that he wrote only 17 internal emails in Chinese during the week suggests that many of the messages appearing in his inbox were routine “noticeboard” (Kankaanranta, 2006) texts requiring no response. This contrasts with English-mediated internal communication, where the difference between incoming (55) and outgoing emails (29) is much less pronounced. It is significant that all external communication was conducted in English. Don’s meticulous time-keeping records indicate that he spent an average of around 4 min writing

![Fig. 1. Time devoted to internal and external email communication by bank executive during 5-day working week.](image-url)
external emails in English, the longest taking 10 min, the shortest 5 s. The corresponding figures for writing internal messages are 3½ min, 30 min, 5 s. An analysis of the 135 messages in Katie’s 25 email chains reveals that the average number of words in each message is 39. This figure excludes the salutation and closing phrase.

The evidence therefore suggests that Hong Kong professionals receive a large number of short, straightforward emails every day and that, when required, they compose their responses quickly and concisely, usually in less than 5 min and 50 words. The need for speed and brevity has apparently intensified in recent years with the increasing use of smartphones and instant messaging, which means that professionals need to tailor their messages not only to the role and requirements of their addressees, but also to the devices and media their colleagues and clients are using. “Nowadays people like to communicate in short messages,” reported Elizabeth (corporate communications manager). “They check the messages and reply immediately. So, if you know someone is using a Blackberry, you have to keep your message short, ideally one line.” Such an approach is illustrated in the following message, which was written by one of Katie’s colleagues:

amh… trouble here… let’s wait n see what happen in LP, fix LP before I can think of any action in PP. F

A similar “one screen” approach is employed in Debbie’s (merchandiser) import–export firm “to avoid imposing an extra reading load on our clients”. The composition of such messages necessarily entails the application of some of the process-oriented principles advocated in BC and BE textbooks: “We edit them again and again so that the message is concise and to the point, so our clients feel comfortable reading them.” In most cases, however, the three-stage “process” recommended in such books (viz. pre-writing, drafting, revising) is neither practicable nor necessary in Hong Kong’s “time-is-money” business world.

3.4. The structure of business emails

The need for haste and brevity in such an environment raises doubts not only about the applicability of advice about the writing process, but also the relevance of recommendations about structure and language. With regard to the former, textbooks often highlight the three-part structure (opening, body, closing) that apparently characterises business correspondence (Bilbow, 2004; Guffey & Loewy, 2011) together with the different approaches (e.g., direct, indirect) for organising positive, negative and persuasive messages (Bovée & Thill, 2008; Krizan, Merrier, Logan, & Williams, 2011). The issue of directness is also discussed from the perspective of intercultural communication (Guffey & Loewy, 2011; Locker & Kyo Kaczmarek, 2009), with some cultures (e.g., American) supposedly favouring directness and others (e.g., Chinese) preferring indirectness (Ding, 2006). Evidence from the interviews and email chains unsurprisingly indicates a divergence between the principles espoused in the textbooks and the practices adopted in the workplace.

Although there are occasions when Hong Kong professionals need to adopt the three-part structure (incorporating detailed body paragraphs) and a cautious indirect approach (e.g., in delicate negotiations with overseas customers), they generally identify the purpose of their messages immediately and, where possible, present the details in point form rather than paragraphs, thereby enhancing clarity and, conveniently enough, reducing the need to agonise over grammar, style and cohesion. The pithy, practical nature of emails in Hong Kong’s business milieu was noted by every participant. Jim (technical support officer), for example, observed that “the important thing is that we pinpoint the key issues and present them directly”, while Clara remarked that “we have to get to the point. If it’s really complicated, then you have to break it down and describe it in point form”. Elizabeth states the purpose of her messages “at the very beginning”, having encapsulated her intentions in a succinct subject heading. Indeed, the subject heading is the message in several of Katie’s emails (e.g., “Can you email S . . . A . . . phone no to me thx”), the message box being left blank.

Fig. 2. Length of messages in six email chains in the merchandising field.
The interviewees’ testimony about the need for directness was reflected in the email chains. In the following message (with the subject line “please quick assist on quotation”), Anthony admonishes a colleague for failing to provide assistance with the quotation. He provides no background information because communication about the matter has already taken place, which incidentally provides further evidence of the interdependence of emailing and telephoning.

W …
You left me a voicemail in last Friday that this will be done on this Tuesday. However, I have not had any update and this has not been done. Regards, Anthony

This message was written on the Thursday (i.e., two days after the deadline). The next day, having received no response, an increasingly exasperated Anthony sent a curt follow-up, which, like the previous one, was carbon-copied to nine colleagues:

W …
Any update?

The brief and brusque character of email messages is also revealed by an analysis of 52 texts in six chains from Katie’s corpus (Fig. 2). The majority of these messages (32) go straight to the heart of the matter after the (non-obligatory) salutation, usually by informing the recipients of a development (12) (e.g., “hey hey, I hv just received the samples from F…”) or by asking for information (8) (e.g., “Have you got any information about the date of . . .?”). The remaining 20 messages mainly commence with brief relationship-maintaining expressions of politeness or sociability (e.g., “Hope you have a good trip!!”) before getting quickly to the point. The number of contributors to the chains ranged from four to seven, which highlights the collaborative nature of workplace writing.

3.5. Intertextuality in email chains

As well as illustrating the simplicity and directness that characterise business emails, the email chains underscore the critical role that intertextuality plays in real-world email communication (Ho, 2011), a role that is much less conspicuous (and indeed often entirely absent) in email models and tasks in BC and BE textbooks (Guffey & Loewy, 2011; Littlejohn, 2005). The emails presented for analysis or set as writing practice in such works often involve the first link in a chain of messages which the reader perhaps assumes will subsequently accumulate. Since the information that initiates these exchanges, as well as essential contextual background, is either missing or at best somewhat sketchy, the writers of these models or tasks are inevitably required to provide considerably more “scene setting” material than is usually the case in authentic emails, particularly when the emails are sent to potential customers with no knowledge of the senders. In such scenarios, which presumably do occur in the business world, the opening-body-closing structure advocated in textbooks is likely to serve the writer well. Anthony, however, did not even require three words to convey his message as its background and purpose were embedded in a deep and dense hinterland of text and context.

An analysis of the 50 email chains indicates that the first message in each chain (i.e., the “chain initiator”) is generally longer than the second message and indeed the “chain terminator” (Gimenez, 2005, 2006). The average length of the chain initiators in the banking corpus is 85 words, while that in the merchandising corpus is 50 words. The average length of the second and final messages is somewhat lower, 42 and 43 words respectively in the case of banking and 39 and 38 words respectively in the case of merchandising. The tendency for the chain initiator – the quintessential textbook task – to be the longest message in the sequence is illustrated in Fig. 2. In only one case (Chain 3) is the second message (26) longer than the first (14). Although message length fluctuates quite sharply in some of the chains, most are well under 50 words.

What is particularly significant, from a task design perspective, is that none of the chain initiators in the two corpora fall suddenly from the clear blue sky. In other words, although the 50 chain initiators set in motion an exchange of “dialogue” (Kankaanranta, 2006) emails about a particular issue, in each case the writer–reader relationship is well established, the background to the “new” topic is familiar and the corporate context is understood. This is evident from the opening moves of some of the initiators:

As S … received the enclosed letter from XXX, we would like to check …

Unfortunately many of the styles they do not keep stocks …

It is also illustrated by the following message, in which the writer and addressee are evidently on such familiar terms that the use of names is otiose:

Hey sorry to keeping you waiting. pls find enclosed the pr for your use. Let me know if you want any change. Tks. I will send the simplified version to u after this.

3.6. Style and grammar in business emails

The emphasis on speed and concision not only influences the structure of business emails, but also their style and grammar. Owen highlighted the importance of previous messages from clients in determining the language (and content) of his responses: “If they write in a very polite manner, I will reply more politely. But if they write only two or three sentences, I
will reply more simply.’’ Owen’s superficially unremarkable observation is significant because it highlights the desirability of incorporating email chains into materials and activities, both as input to the content of student writing and as inspiration for the language they employ. Rather than being told the context and purpose of their emails and instructed on the level of formality they should adopt, it would be more realistic and challenging if students were asked to judge these matters for themselves by studying previous emails (and ideally other forms of input).

If students were to study authentic emails in Hong Kong they would probably conclude that local professionals and their addressees around the world are not fixated with the finer points of style and grammar. For example, Jim pointed out that “we just don’t have the habit of modifying or qualifying our texts to make them look nice”, while Clara noted “we get to the point, we won’t use fancy words”. This particularly applies in internal emails where the emphasis is on expediting business. “I use simple wording in internal emails,” remarked Mike, “and I don’t think very carefully before sending them out.” Although greater care is taken with external emails, there is evidence (as in the following message) that many of these messages (and those received in reply) lack the stylistic finesse and grammatical exactitude generally associated with communication with customers and clients: “Those are the recently delivered items for X. U know we propose that the payment terms is 45 days, that’s why those amount not paid by X yet.”

Even messages written in clear and correct English may be so plain and direct that that their authors appear impolite. When reading such messages, Steve wonders “if the writer is really rude or just doesn’t know how to write”. It must be assumed that in the majority of cases the impression of discourtesy flows from the need for haste and brevity. Like their counterparts in Europe, many Hong Kong professionals regard English as a tool to “get things done” as Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Saminen (2010) point out, “English? – Oh, it’s just work!” Owen, for example, claimed that some local professionals “don’t view English as a real language”. According to Jim, “English just plays a supporting role. You can use simple and direct English to get things done. Your English can be seriously wrong, but as long as the purpose of your writing is accomplished, few will care.” Jim’s observation raises an important question about the teaching and learning of BE: if the fundamental objective of BE courses is to prepare students for communication in the “real world”, should materials designers incorporate authentic texts that are inaccurately and/or inappropriately written?

4. Implications for teaching and research

This article has discussed issues that teachers, course planners and materials writers might wish to consider when designing email-related tasks for use in the BE classroom. These issues have emerged from a multifaceted study of the use of English by professionals in Hong Kong. While some of these issues may arise from the particular sociolinguistic circumstances of the SAR and thus be of questionable value to BE practitioners elsewhere, given the city’s entanglement in Globalisation 3.0 it is likely that many of the study’s pedagogical implications are relevant to other contexts. The most obvious implication, and one that certain publishers might usefully heed, is that email communication should be an integral component of any BE course that genuinely seeks to narrow the gap that inevitably separates the office and the classroom.

Only the most deluded materials designer could imagine that BE materials can accurately reflect the complexities of a global, wired world: an hour in the company of a Hong Kong professional or a morning in Belinda’s office would quickly disabuse a textbook writer of such a notion, not least because it would reveal that the globalised workplace is far from being an English-only zone. There are nevertheless a number of practical ways in which aspects of “real world” communication could be incorporated into classroom activities, and one of these is to ensure that email is given due attention in teaching schedules. This is not to suggest, however, that units on email writing be expanded or, still less, that such communication should be the focus of entire books. As Crystal (2006) observes, email is formally and functionally unique, and thus treating it in the same manner as traditional forms of business correspondence (e.g., by asking students to analyse or write discrete, functionally distinct messages) overlooks the way in which it is used in the modern workplace, be it in Hong Kong or Helsinki.

The present study indicates that email plays a crucial role in binding together flows of internal and external activities that are directed towards the resolution of problems, the formulation of plans or the execution of decisions. Email is thus an important means of working towards these goals, enabling professionals to exchange and discuss information and ideas quickly and conveniently with colleagues and clients. Email messages are therefore tightly interwoven with other texts, such as letters, reports and (of course) other messages in the chain, as well as spoken discourses, such as meetings, discussions and (particularly) telephone conversations. This underlines the desirability of embedding email messages, both as reading input and written output, in a series of interdependent goal-oriented tasks that integrate speaking, listening, reading and writing. For example, the ultimate objective of such a task might be a decision of some kind, such as the direction of an advertising campaign or the location of a new regional office. This decision would arise from a series of inter-related activities involving (inter alia) proposals, presentations, meetings, telephone calls and reports. If email messages were to be incorporated into such a sequence and be used in ways that reflect their role in the “real world”, they would be the thread that binds these activities together; for example, by clarifying issues, arranging meetings, attaching documents, reporting progress or summarising decisions. Designing such tasks clearly represents a considerable challenge: it points to the need for a simulation-based approach in which participants occupy clearly defined and differentiated roles in a particular business setting, and a task that stimulates collaboration and conflict, both internally and externally. If such an approach were to reflect in some measure the complexities of the globalised workplace in Hong Kong, it would need to inject key characteristics of the city’s business milieu into task design, including its relentless pace and pressure, thereby prompting students to attend closely to the twin imperatives of precision and concision.
The study also has implications for the design of tasks focusing exclusively on email writing (i.e., not part of an integrated sequence of activities). In light of the findings in Section 3.5, such work might entail writing two or three messages at various points in a chain rather than (as is invariably the case) writing the first or second messages. Students would therefore have to judge for themselves the purpose of their messages as well as the amount of detail they should include and the level of formality they should adopt. In fact, one of the potential limitations of the ostensibly desirable case study approach to BE, as recommended by Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Saminen (2010) and as adopted by (inter alia) Baade et al. (2011), is that the scenario is often wholly “scripted” participants are told what they are, what they think, what they have to do, and so on by the materials designer rather than through the analysis of a database of authentic or simulated-authentic written and spoken input, with introductory “scene-setting” kept to a bare minimum.

This study not only has implications for the design of BE courses, but also offers pointers for research into business-related email communication. An early ESP study in this area found that the messages under investigation generally accorded with “the standard conventions of written business English” (Gains, 1999, p. 86). This contrasts sharply with the present study’s findings: most writers (probably deliberately) flouted these conventions in order to accomplish their objectives. That they generally succeeded was essentially because, like many professionals in Europe (Ehrenreich, 2010; Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010), they had acquired strategic competence in email English through relentless on-the-job practice. The precise means by which professionals develop and deploy such competence is an interesting topic for future research, not least because it would help BE specialists implement Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Saminen’s (2010, p. 208) valuable suggestion about training students to be “flexibly competent”.

This study has unsurprisingly highlighted the intertextual and collaborative nature of business writing, and thus underscores the importance of Bremner’s (2008, 2010) work in these areas. Bremner’s textbook analyses did not, however, centre on email communication, and being desk-based studies, were not informed by evidence from “real world” workplaces. The present study, which draws on insider perspectives from practising professionals and authentic email messages, lends weight to Bremner’s recommendations about incorporating these key characteristics into task design.

The investigation also extends Gimenez’s (2005, 2006) exploratory work on email chains, which exposed the limitations of viewing emails as one-way, self-contained messages and introduced the notions of chain initiator and terminator. The present study accords with Gimenez’s (2005) finding (albeit one based on a single nine-message chain) that the initiator tends to be longer than the terminator, but diverges from Gimenez’s analysis in that the initiators and terminators in Anthony’s and Katie’s chains are significantly shorter than those studied by Gimenez. However, what neither study has explored in full is the function of the intervening messages in the chain. This question should be high on the BE research agenda since it would help to enhance the teaching and learning of what should be a key component of any course that seeks to reflect in some degree the “real world” of business in the era of Globalisation 3.0.

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Supplementary material

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References


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