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The Language of Business E-Mail: An Opportunity to Bridge Theory and Practice

Abstract

The language of business email has attracted a great deal of attention in the last decade. Research studies on the language, style and register of business email have been published in many journals, books and other publications. However, many of these discussions have been theoretical in nature, failing to make a connection between theory and practice. It is then the task of the ESP teacher to make such a connection. This article argues that business communication lends itself well to bringing theory and practice closer together. To this end, the article first identifies relevant features which have started to emerge from main studies in the language of business email, a vital component in business communication. It then explores different possible pedagogical applications of these findings in the BE class. The article discusses the SAE (Selecting, Applying and Evaluating) model which can be used to design and evaluate classroom activities. The article finally presents four activities which have been created following the main findings emerging from the research reviewed.

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Introduction

In the last ten years the language of business email communication has been researched from several perspectives, providing different views on this new emerging communication genre. Baron (2000, 2002), for example, has discussed stylistic features such as the length of messages, abbreviated and elliptical forms, and informality. These features, Baron suggests, have made the style of email 'reminiscent of telegraphic language' (2002:410). Similarly, Crystal (2001:238) has produced an extensive study of internet language and has asserted that the electronic revolution has brought about a linguistic revolution, resulting in 'Netspeak', 'a genuine new medium'. In addition, Collot and Belmore (1996) have indicated that the nature of the language used in emails is closer to the spontaneous genres like speeches and interviews than it is to the informational genres such as official documents.

Most discussions on email language have been theoretical in nature leaving to the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and Business English (BE) teachers the task of having to make the connection between research findings and classroom practices. If, however, the repeated call for theory and practice to be brought closer together is to be

answered, researchers should also attempt to explore the pedagogical implications of their empirical research findings (Nickerson 2002). The aim of this article is therefore two-fold. It first identifies the most relevant features which emerge from studies in the language of business email communication. It then explores different possible pedagogical applications of these findings in the BE class. To this end, the article discusses the SAE (Selecting, Applying and Evaluating) model which can be used to design and evaluate classroom activities. In so doing the article aims at helping to bridge the gap between theory and practice in BE.

Previous research

The increasing interest in email communication has produced studies which have looked at emails as texts, focusing on their linguistic and rhetorical elements. Many of these studies have embraced the spoken-written dichotomous nature of emails (Baron 2000, 2002; Collot & Belmore, 1996; Crystal 2001; Gains, 1999; Gimenez, 2000), and have provided detailed descriptions of the nature and features of the language of email. This section will review studies which, following this linguistic perspective, have been conducted in a corporate environment and are therefore relevant to the BE context.

In his investigation into the text features of business emails used for internal communication, Gains (1999) focused on generic features such as subjects, closings, openings, as well as linguistic features like compression, abbreviations, omissions and register. Gains discovered a high degree of consistency in the way writers in his samples used most of these categories. He found no evidence of features of conversational discourse being incorporated in the texts he analysed, nor of any compressions or word omissions. Gains concluded that the analysis of his data does not support the existence of a new business genre. However, this lack of evidence may have resulted from the kind of data analysed and the type of analysis made. His data were collected from a "closed system for internal electronic mail" (p. 82) which could have a "permanent legal status" (p. 90) for the company he researched. This may explain the standardisation of the linguistic forms observed. As emailers knew that their messages could become legal records, there is a high chance that they resorted to standard forms to compose their messages.

In a study of external business email communication, Gimenez (2000) also analysed the textual features of business emails. However, his data showed examples that reveal a certain relaxation in the style and register of business emails. The language in his data "contains simple, straightforward syntactic structures, showing a preference for co-ordinated rather than subordinated ideas" (p. 241). In his data, Gimenez also found standard as well as personalised uses of abbreviations, contracted forms and capitalisation and spelling mistakes. He concludes that "efficiency, one of the features of e-mail messages frequently mentioned by e-mail users, seems to equate with informal and flexibility of style" (p. 250). Gimenez's data, however, were composed of messages exchanged between the export manager of a UK-based company and some of his long-established international customers. This may help to explain, for instance, the informal style of the texts analysed and some of the language choices made by the international customers.

More recently, Mallon and Oppenheim (2002) reviewed the textual features that seem to be exclusive to email messages in an attempt to come up with a list of 'e-mailisms'. They define emailisms as those features 'associated with e-mail' which may or may not appear in other forms of communication (2002:9). Mallon and Oppenheim (2002) conclude that the most common emailism in their data was contracted forms, "appearing 142 times in 100 emails" (p. 16), followed by spelling mistakes (57 times per 100 emails). The third most common emailism was quoted text which was used by 30% of (200) writers in their sample.

In a recent study, Gimenez (2005) demonstrates that business emails have become a more complex genre, embedding a series of internal messages. He defines embedded emails as messages "which are made up of an initial message which starts the communication event, a series of internal, subordinated messages which depend on the first message to make sense, and a final message which brings the communication event to an end" (pp. 235-36). Among other features, Gimenez focuses on the length of the messages, concluding that the first ('chain initiator') and last ('chain terminator') messages tend to be longer than the internal messages as they open and close the communication event respectively. The lexical items of embedded emails tend to follow the same pattern of distribution and complexity. Lexical items in the internal messages tend to be less complex than those in the chain terminator and initiator. Another interesting feature observed in relation to embedded emails is their embedded topicality. Gimenez (2005) suggests the macro topic stated in the subject line of an email usually embeds other micro topics as the conversation develops.

Emerging tendencies

The studies reviewed above have managed to isolate some emerging tendencies in the language of business email. The first two studies demonstrate a clear difference between the language of email used for internal communication and that of messages used to communicate with, for example, customers. Thus, we see that whereas Gains (1999) observed a high degree of uniformity in the written formal records of the company he investigated, Gimenez (2000) noted a relaxed style and informal register in the emails for external communication he studied. Although these findings seem to be contrary to what we would expect, an informal register for internal communication and a formal style for external communication, a consideration of the purposes of the messages, the relationship between emailers and the culture of the company can help explain these tensions and apparent contradictions.

Mallon and Oppenheim's (2002) study does not make a distinction between internal and external business emails but identifies essential linguistic features which make up the data they analysed. Contractions, spelling mistakes and embedded texts ranked the highest in the features of their data. Finally, Gimenez's (2005) recent study of internal embedded emails also identifies main features of the language of business emails in terms of its lexis, length and topicality. Table 1 below summarises the main findings in these four studies.

Study	Context	Main Features
Gains (1999)	Closed system for internal communication; permanent legal status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No features of conversational discourse • No compressions • No omissions
Gimenez (2000)	Open system for external communication; long-established customers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simple syntax • Co-ordinated ideas • Abbreviations • Spelling mistakes
Mallon & Oppenheim (2002)	Business correspondence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contracted forms • Spelling mistakes • Quoted texts
Gimenez (2005)	Closed system for internal communication; embedded emails	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiator and terminator longer than embedded messages • Simple lexical items in embedded messages • Embedded topicality

Table 1. Some emerging tendencies in the language of email

Pedagogical applications

One long-standing call in the field of applied linguistics has been the need to bring theory and practice closer together. This call has mostly been understood as a task that only teachers and trainers have to fulfil. Most often than not, with a few notable exceptions (e.g. Nickerson 2000), many researchers in BE have been immersed in theoretical analyses and discussions, leaving the BE teacher or trainer to deal with the practicalities of adapting research findings in teaching or training contexts. However, as Fig. 1 illustrates the research cycle completes itself when results from the practical applications of a theory are fed back into the theoretical stage.

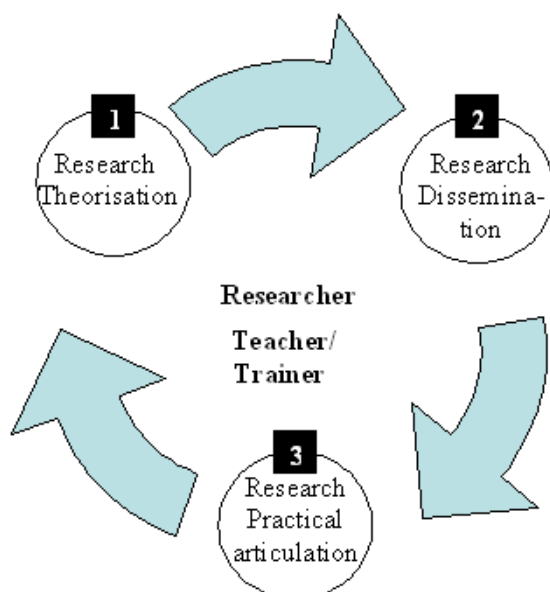


Figure 1. The research cycle: Researchers and teachers/trainers

On the other hand, teachers and trainers could be instructed to apply empirical findings in their teaching or training situations. One framework which facilitates the transfer from

theory to practice is what I call the 'SAE Model'. SAE stands for Selecting, Applying and Evaluating. This model follows principles similar to those for selecting teaching materials and textbooks (Gimenez & Sapg 2002) and, to a certain extent, parallels the research cycle represented in Fig. 1. The SAE model allows teachers and trainers to apply simple and practical criteria to research findings in order to determine which are most relevant to their context. Figure 2 below exemplifies the SAE model.

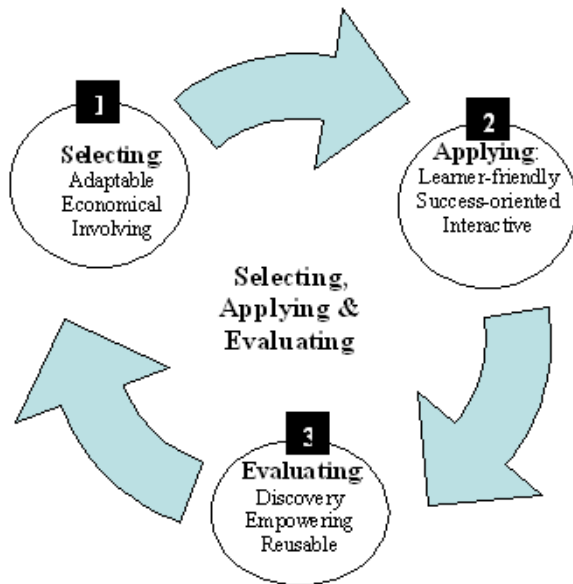


Figure 2. The SAE model

As illustrated in Fig. 2 above, the SAE model suggests features that research findings should bear to be easily adaptable to both the teaching/training context and the target situation in which learners may be involved in the future. Apart from being adaptable, findings should demand minimum adaptation time and effort and should represent an interesting activity for the learners. The application stage of the model focuses on practical, motivational and cognitive aspects. Learners should find the activities based on the findings easy to use, leading to a sense of success and satisfaction and to a variety of interaction patterns: individual, pairs, small groups and plenary. The last stage in the model is the most critical. The evaluation of the research finding and its associated activity is based on the results of its application in class. It focuses on whether it has led the learners to discover new things and have empowered them by the new knowledge they have acquired. A final consideration at this stage is whether the activity has potential for being used again with a similar group of learners.

Sample activities

This last section of the article aims at presenting four activities which have been developed based on the findings discussed above and summarised in Table 1. These activities were prepared for a group of intermediate students doing a BE course at a UK University. The activities were designed, applied and evaluated following the SAE model described in the previous section. Based on Gains' (1999) and Gimenez's (2000) studies, the first activity aims at raising learners' awareness of the differences in

language and style in internal and external email communication. The second activity is based on the main findings of the study by Mallon and Oppenheim (2002) and leads learners to identify and examine common structures and features of email communication. The third activity is based on Gimenez (2005) and shows how the process of embeddedness works in corporate emails. The fourth and last activity resulted from a combination of the research findings reviewed above and aims at exploring and expanding the learners' knowledge of the language of emails by using collocations and concordances.

Activity 1: Uses and Differences

1.1 Read the following two examples of email business communication. How do they compare? How do they differ? Consider their:

- Language
- Style
- Register

Sample 1

From: Jake _____@_____
 Sent: 19 April 1996 11:01
 To: Oscar _____@_____
 Subject: Our list of prices for [machine model]

Dear Mr.,

Thank you for your recent email requesting our list of prices for the [machine models]. Please find enclosed the list with our most competitive prices. Prices do not include shipping costs, as requested.

Do not hesitate to contact us if you need further information.

Sincerely,
 Jake [name + surname]
 [Company details]

Sample 2

From: Johnny _____@_____
 Sent: 13 January 2003 11:48
 To: Claudia _____@_____
 Cc: Peter _____@_____; Alice _____@_____
 Subject: Regional [trade mark] certification

Claudia,

I'd be grateful if you could speak with someone in the regulatory team (Emma, Anne?) to find out:

- whether we have copies of the docs above, if not where to get them
- whether they would apply to Regional [trade mark] certification

TX

Johnny

1.2 Make a list of your findings under each of the headings suggested (language, style and register) and compare your list with that of another student.

Activity 2: Commonalities

2.1 Read the following emails. Sample 1 is an example of internal communication and Sample 2 of external communication. After you have read and analysed them, mark the features that they share.

Sample 1

From: Frank
Sent: 13 April 2004 13:23
To: Tony
Subject: RE: System Install

Tony,
what's your view on this. Since we agreed to the terms back then, I believe they'r still entitled to have this IP for the agreed price.
I should have the approval on the discount somewhere. Let me check on that?
kind regards
Frank

Sample 2

Hi Paul,
Unfortunately I cannot make Thursday. In order to ensure that we can cover all the aspects that you need, I've stood Paul down and arranged for Oscar Brown to attend the whole day instead. Oscar is one of our Senior consultants and has extensive experience of P8 Project Management. Oscar is also fully conversed with our delivery methodology.
My apologies for changing the attendees at short notice. I've asked Oscar to contact Tony and Steve directly.
Best Regards
John

2.2 Make a list with the features you marked and be prepared to discuss your choices in a plenary.

Activity 3: Embedded Messages

3.1 Read this chain of email messages and answer the questions below.

3.1.1 Was the first message you read written first or last? How about the last message you read?

From: Franc@...uk
 Sent: 26 April 2003 12:56 AM
 To: James@...au
 Cc: Alice@...uk
 Subject: RE: Interception Issues

Hi James,
 Due to travel arrangements, I have to ask you if we could bring forward our conference call to Wednesday April 30, at the suggested London time of 9.30 am. This also means I will send you the new version of the ICP by cob Monday April 28.
 Please let me know.
 Kind regards,
 Franc

-----Original Message-----
 From: Alice@...uk
 Sent: 16 April 2003 14:59
 To: James@...au
 Cc: Franc@...uk
 Subject: RE: Interception Issues

9.30 is fine

-----Original Message-----
 From: James@...au
 Sent: 15 April 2003 08:43
 To: Alice@...uk
 Cc: Franc@...uk
 Subject: RE: Interception Issues

Yes, 2nd May is probably better as it gives us a bit more time to finalise the amended plan. What is a good time for you? I can do from 9.30 am through to midday (your time).
 James.

-----Original Message-----
 From: Alice@...uk
 Sent: 16 April 2003 02:50 AM
 To: James@...au
 Cc: Franc@...uk
 Subject: RE: Interception Issues

Could you do 2nd of May?

-----Original Message-----
 From: James@...au
 Sent: 15 April 2003 08:43
 To: Alice@...uk
 Cc: Franc@...uk
 Subject: RE: Interception Issues

Alice,
 A conference call on 6th May would be fine. Shall we say 11am your time? I will speak to S again tomorrow about the amended plan and the letter.
 James.

3.1.2 How do the first and last messages compare with the other messages in between in terms of length?

3.1.3 Which message(s) is more complex in terms of the language used?

3.2 Write an email to a classmate and answer his/her reply by using the 'reply option' to create a chain of emails.

3.3 How does your chain compare with the example in 3.1?

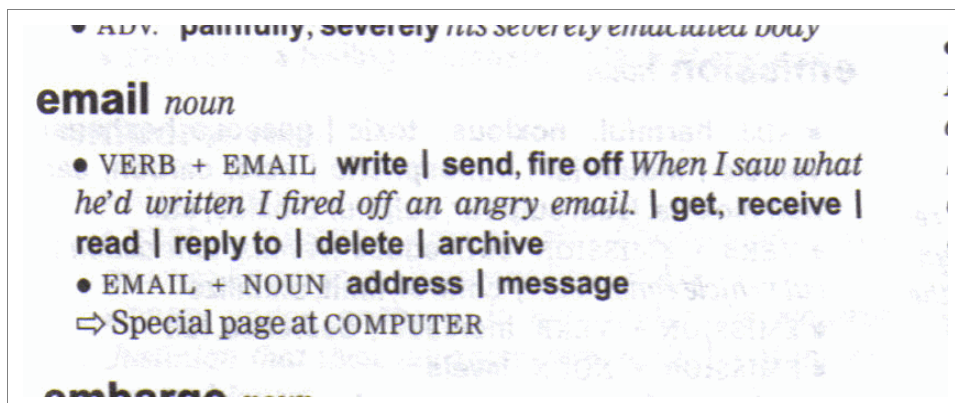
Activity 4: Email English

4.1 Some language curiosities

- The word 'email' can be spelt with a hyphen (e-mail) or without it (email).
- 'Email' is becoming more and more common.
- Email can be either a 'noun' (Send me an email.) or a 'verb' (I'll email it to you).
- The verb 'attach' (I'm attaching a copy of...) has 'attachment' as its noun (can you send me the document as an attachment?).
- The noun 'carbon copy' is normally referred to as 'CC', read as 'see-see'. It can also be used as a verb 'to cc someone'.

4.2. Some words associated with the word 'email'

Look at the entry for the word 'email' in the Oxford Collocations Dictionary (p. 253). Then complete the sentences below the entry.



1. I never _____ (verb) an email even if I am angry at the sender.
2. What's your _____ (noun) address?
3. How many emails do you _____ (verb, many possibilities) a day?
4. You've got a new email _____. (noun)
5. I always _____ (verb) unimportant emails.
6. Does your company _____ (verb) important emails?

4.3 More words associated with 'email'

Look at the concordances (an alphabetical index) for the word 'email' from the Online KWIC Concordancer. Concentrate on the words/phrases before and after the word 'email' and then complete the rules following.

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1 kada of the Personnel Department via e-mail (okada@jpt.com.jp)
2 confirmation of this reservation by e-mail (tyamada@jpt.com.j
3 h if you would send me your reply by e-mail (tyamada@jpt.com.j
4 er extension is 558. Her interoffice e-mail address is Cbarton
5 [BLC2:30:00557] I hope this e-mail finds you well.
6 2:30:00095] I received the following e-mail from you last
7 [BLC2:30:01247] In my previous e-mail I wrote I was
8 [BLC2:30:00801] In reply to your e-mail of April 1, I am
9 BLC2:30:00466] Thank you for your e-mail of April 10.
10 epage (http://www.tbn.com), or send e-mail to admin@tbn.com.
11 2:30:00832] For reservations, send e-mail to
12 ght it was a good idea to send you e-mail to say hello and
13 ppreciate your kind permission via e-mail.
14 ate your permission in your return e-mail.
15 gest an alternative date by return e-mail.
16 I'm already using it to write this e-mail.
17 e know as soon as you receive this e-mail?

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1. You can send/confirm something _____ or _____ email
2. You can get an email _____ someone but you send an email _____ someone.
3. An email you sent before is your _____ email.
4. If you want to mention the date of an email, you say 'my email _____ December 10'.
5. If you have to reply an email, you need to send a _____ email.

Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to demonstrate how the findings of empirical research can be applied in a pedagogical context. I have discussed the emerging tendencies in the language of business email and have used the SAE framework to suggest a generic structure to turn these theoretical considerations into practical classroom activities. I hope this will help raise researchers' and teachers' awareness of the need to bridge the gap between theory and practice in business English and to approach the responsibility of bridging this gap as a shared endeavour.

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