EFL Business Writing with Task-based Learning Approach: A Case Study of Student Strategies to Overcome Difficulties

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Abstract

This study reports on implementing task-based learning (TBL) approach into an elective course, “English Writing for Business,” offered to junior students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in the first twelve weeks of the semester course, for two hours per week. Students were asked to complete three correspondence tasks rooted in real-life business contexts: enquiry, negotiation and complaint. Students’ performance was evaluated from a variety of pre- and post-writing measured by three types of online evaluation. Two questionnaires about writing strategies and writing difficulties were administered at the end of the instruction. The results indicated that students made significant improvement in most linguistic and content-based parameters and the analysis results by the three types of online evaluation were significantly correlated. An independent sample t-test revealed that there was a significant difference in individual type of strategy use among students with different post-writing ability. In addition, students with weaker writing proficiency showed greater overall writing difficulties and were concerned more with surface errors. But, proficient students were more aware of content knowledge, expressed more words of higher levels and had fewer possibilities to borrow words from the model texts in the post-writing.

Keywords: business writing, writing strategy, writing difficulty, task-based learning, English for specific purposes, English as a Foreign Language
1. Introduction

Given the new trend of globalization and internationalization of the workforce, English is dominant in today’s world and regarded as an important communicative tool to compete in the business community. Business English, one of English for specific purposes (ESP) courses, is provided in most of the programs of English as a foreign language (EFL) in higher technical universities in Taiwan to enhance students’ related content knowledge and English skills in the context of professional content, rather than as a traditional language major with strong emphasis on literary texts.

Business writing, such as e-mail, letters, meeting minutes and reports, requires proficiency in written communication (Bacha & Bahous, 2008; Campbell, 2002). Writing is a difficult, complex task for EFL students because it requires students’ conscious mental effort to think of and organize their ideas, the rhetorical component of invention, and then transform them into meaningful texts in English. In addition, limited class time and few opportunities to practice writing have been responsible for the writing difficulties of EFL students in Taiwan. Most instruction in Business English has been affected by conventional General English instructions in Chinese communities, which typically focuses on grammatical analysis and read-to-translate teaching (Min, 2009; You, 2004). Thus, how to design a curriculum to effectively enhance Business English writing by EFL students has been a major concern for teachers in Taiwan and elsewhere who have the responsibility to help students prepare at school so that they will be more confident and competent to deal with various real and practical writing tasks in the future business world.

Task-based learning (TBL), a learner-centered approach, includes three principal phases: Pre-task, During-task, and Post-task (Ellis, 2006). The features of TBL salient to this study are that language is used for a specific task rooted in authentic contexts in which target language skills are used for more real-life communication. Studies in the literature about TBL on language practice indicated that students grew more favorable to the approach (Hood, Elwood, & Falout, 2009) and showed greater preference for it over the traditional teaching methods (Suzuki & Collins, 2007). In addition, students’ content knowledge and English skills can be promoted through the courseware-implemented instruction with TBL approach in the contexts of English presentation and preparation for international trade fairs.

With innovative advances in information and communication technologies, a variety of computational tools have been developed for written text analysis such as online computerized propositional idea density rater (Brown, Snodgrass, Kemper, Hermen, & Covington, 2008), Lexical Complexity Analyzer (Lu, 2011), corpus-based vocabulary
profiler (Cobb & Horst, 2011; Heatley, Nation, & Coxhead, 2002), and Automated Writing Evaluation like Criterion or My Access. Linguistic data analyzed by these computational tools not only provide an accessible and theoretically sound approach for the quantitative evaluation of writing texts, but reduce human fallibility and subjective nature of intuitive judgments (Crossley and McNamara, 2009). Thus, they have been increasingly applied to the evaluation and assessment of English writing performance in EFL environments (Chen & Cheng, 2008; Wang, Shang, & Briody, 2013).

A major focus of this study is to examine strategies for beginning the task of mastering business writing in English by EFL students. Strategy use is considered as a significant factor in the language learning process. In general, strategies facilitate language learning; accordingly, it is important to help EFL students to build a repertoire of learning strategies (Chen & Cheng, 2009). Although the importance of strategy use has been strongly emphasized, writing strategies for EFL students have received little attention in the literature, with little focus on strategy use on EFL business writing.

The purpose of this study aims at probing the business writing performance of EFL students receiving the instruction with TBL approach. Three main research goals were studied in order (1) to understand whether or not students can apply what they have learnt to complete the assigned tasks while TBL approach was implemented; (2) to identify the impact of three types of online evaluation, including online Criterion automated writing evaluation, online Computerized Propositional Idea Density Rater (CPIDR), and online VocabularyProfiler used to assess students’ business writing performance; and (3) to review questionnaires of writing strategies and writing difficulties that were administered and analyzed in order to get a clearer view of students’ strategy use and overall difficulties in business writing.

2. Methods

The instruction with TBL approach was implemented in an elective course, “English Writing for Business”, for junior EFL students in a technical university in Taiwan in the first twelve weeks of the semester course, for two hours per week. Considering that it was a new experience for students to learn and study under TBL approach where they needed to take much more responsibility in learning, the procedure of the instruction was explained to the students in the beginning of the instruction. All students in the course were assigned individually to computers in order to access subject content and complete assigned tasks through the Intranet of the laboratory.

Task-based learning (TBL) is one increasingly popular approach to communicative
language learning in which the user’s attention is more focused on meaning rather than grammatical form. Meanwhile, TBL provides a student-centered and self-oriented learning for students to seek solutions to real world problems (Barrows, 1997; Lo, 2009; Prince & Felder, 2006). Nunan (1989) noted that communicative tasks involve the learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language. Thus, TBL is mainly directed at cultivating and improving students’ communicative ability to use the target language by providing a purpose for the language activity. This feature corresponds to the requirements of ESP.

In general, the design of a task-based lesson includes three principal phases: Pre-task, During task, Post-task (Ellis, 2006), corresponding to a multistage writing instruction used in guided essay-writing tasks (Hanaoka & Izumi, 2012; Qi & Lapkin, 2001) in which linguistic problems occurring during the original composing stage (Pre-task phase) were compared and noticed in the subsequent comparison stage (During-task phase), and then affected the revisions made in the revision stage (Post-task phase).

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**Course Explanations and TOEIC-like Test**
1. To explain the procedure of the instruction for students’ understanding
2. To understand the English proficiency of the students

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**Pre-Task Phase: 3 tasks, 3 weeks for each task**
3. Pre-writing for 40 minutes
4. Dictation of the model text and its correction

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**During Task Phase**
Students take an active role to study two types of written correction feedback on their own for 90 minutes: their corrected prewriting text from the teacher and a model text given by means of a dictation quiz.

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**Post-Task Phase**
1. Post-writing for 40 minutes
2. Corrected script of the post-writing given back to students

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**End of the instruction**
1. All the students’ written texts are collected, analyzed and measured by three types of on-line evaluation:
   - Computerized Propositional Idea Density Rater (CPIDR)
   - Online Vocabulary Profiler
   - Automated writing evaluation product, Criterion.
2. Questionnaire survey:
   - Writing strategies
   - Writing difficulties

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Fig. 1. Procedure of the instruction with TBL approach for EFL business writing
There were three tasks assigned in this study: (a) correspondence for enquiry to ask more product information, (b) correspondence for negotiation to ask a better term of trade, and (c) correspondence for complaints about wrong specifications and bad quality of the products. In the Pre-task and Post-task phases of the instruction for each task, students were asked to respectively complete a prewriting and post-writing tasks rooted in real-life business contexts within 40 minutes. The procedure of the instruction with TBL approach for EFL business writing in this study is given in Figure 1.

During the TBL process in this study, students took an active role to learn or practice the target content according to the curriculum schedule controlled by the teacher. Students were able to check their pre- and post-writing texts by using the spelling and grammar checking function embedded in Microsoft Word of their computers. The teacher only supervised and observed students’ behaviors and learning, and encouraged their self-learning. Such a role limited the teacher’s intervention to working in order to understand students’ ability to self-study and to apply what they learned to complete the post-tests.

There were two types of feedback given to students after the prewriting for each task: their prewriting text with written correction feedback from the teacher and a model text of writing extracted from a business writing textbook and checked by an American native speaker of English, an experienced university-level EFL lecturer. Based on the feedback from the prewriting, students were expected to better understand what would be expected of them while performing the tasks. In the During-task phase of each task, the students had 90 minutes to study the two feedback texts on their own. At the end of the Post-task phase, based on students’ post-writing performance for each task, the teacher provided written and oral feedback about language forms that students were using, problems that students had with language and organization, and progress that students made in the post-tests. Finally, two questionnaires of writing strategies and writing difficulties were administered. The methodology is explained below:

2.1 Target Audience

There were 41 junior EFL students who took this elective business writing course and completed all the pre- and post-writing for the three tasks and filled out two questionnaires of writing strategy and difficulties. Their English proficiency was determined by an online TOEIC-like test before the Pre-task phase. The TOEIC-like test included seven test units with a total score of 990. The validity of the on-line TOEIC-like test was verified by a Pearson correlation analysis on the scores of a group of 191 students who had completed the on-line TOEIC-like test and an official TOEIC test. A significantly positive correlation was
found between their scores of both TOEIC tests ($r=.795, p=.000$). The students’ mean score of this business-based TOEIC-like test was 624, a medium-high English proficiency.

2.2 Learning context
After having finished prewriting for each task in the Pre-task phase, students received the two feedback texts: their corrected prewriting text from the teacher and a model text given by means of a dictation quiz. The written correction feedback from the teacher involved explicit attempts to draw students’ attention to their problems in grammar, syntax or lexicon, and the model text provided students with professional vocabulary, content knowledge and practical use of language in the target task given in this study such as how to start an enquiry, how to propose business terms of trade for negotiation, or how to make a complaints for annoying problems. In the subsequent During-task phase, students were asked to check their corrected pre-writing script themselves, and as well to notice their mistakes or problems in the dictation by typing the model text. Students were expected to get more ideas of content knowledge or have better written communication skills for the post-writing of the target task.

2.3. Assessment
A variety of pre- and post-writing tests were conducted in the Pre- and Post-task phases for the three business contexts commonly encountered in the workplace: enquiry, negotiation and complaint, to provide students’ writing performance evidence. All the tests were given in Chinese so that English vocabulary or terminology with which students were unfamiliar would not be shown while composing business correspondence. The pre- and post-writings of each task were considered as quizzes whose scores were included in their grade. This technique allowed for a higher instrumental motivation that is generally characterized by the desire to obtain something practical or concrete from the study of a second language (Hudson, 2000). Since the computational assessment can provide an accessible and theoretically sound approach for the quantitative evaluation of writing texts and reduce human fallibility and subjective nature of intuitive judgments (Crossley and McNamara, 2009), all the students’ pre- and post-written texts were collected, analyzed and measured by three types of on-line evaluation for students’ writing performance, including Computerized Propositional Idea Density Rater (CPIDR), online Vocabulary Profiler (Cobb,T. http://www.lextutor.ca/vp/, an adaptation of Heatley, Nation & Coxhead's (2002) Range), and an automated writing evaluation, Criterion.

(1) Criterion: It is an automated writing evaluation which can provide immediate scores with diagnostic feedback and analysis including writing errors in grammar, usage and mechanics, style, and organization and development. A variety of business-based
References


任務型學習應用於以英語為外語學生之商務英文寫作學習策略與困難之個案研究

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摘 要

本研究以任務型學習應用於科技大學應用外語系三年級專業選修之商務英文寫作的課程。在为期 12 周，每週 2 小時的期間，學生必須完成以商務情境為主的三項前後測寫作任務：詢問、討還價與抱怨。學生前後測寫作由三種線上評量工具進行質與量的評估分析，並於本研究結束前實施寫作策略與困難度的問卷調查。研究結果顯示，與前測寫作相比較，學生後測寫作在大部分語言與專業的評量參數上都有明顯的進步，而且分別由三種不同線上寫作評量所分析的數據相互間有顯著的相關。不同後測寫作能力學生在個別的寫作策略上有顯著的差異，寫作能力較差的學生顯現較大的寫作困難，而且比較擔心於寫作時犯錯。寫作能力較佳的學生於寫作過程中則較能注重專業內容、使用較高階的字彙，且較少引用範本中所提供的字彙。

關鍵詞：商業寫作、寫作策略、寫作困難、任務型學習、專業英語、以英語為外語