Original Article

UTAS' Students Performance in Writing Formal Emails at Post-Foundation Level: A Comparison between Structured and Unstructured Teaching Method

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: The study aimed at finding out the levels of efficacy of two ways of teaching formal email writing: structured and unstructured methods. The study analyzed email responses of two groups of fifteen students each, studying at University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Al-Musannah Campus. These students were taught email writing via two different ways: structured and unstructured email writing. The students' responses to prompt emails in their midterm exams were considered as the data for the study.

Methodology: The content of the collected data was qualitatively analyzed for themes like task completion, content, tone and sentiment, language and formality, and innovation and improvisation.

Findings: The analysis of the data suggests that structured method of teaching email writing is more efficient for the students in the university.

Conclusion: The study concluded that the structured method of email writing is a better option for the students studying at UTAS, Sultanate of Oman, compared to the unstructured method, and should be followed by the teachers in similar contexts.

Keywords: Email Writing, Structured Method, Unstructured Method, English Language Teaching.

Introduction

Today's business, especially in the area of technical communication, requires employees to be proficient email writers (Batova & Andersen, 2017). As a result, it is critical that students pursuing degrees in technical communication obtain training in email writing. The current study involved 30 students from the University of Technology and Applied Sciences Al-Musannah (UTAS-A), Sultanate of Oman who were enrolled in Technical Writing -2 (ENTW1200) and Technical Writing (UNEN1203) courses of the Post-Foundation Programme at the English Language Center. Since formal email writing was one of the primary components of these courses, the study primarily targeted email writing abilities.

The study sought to compare the efficacy of two different approaches to teaching email writing. With the help of formal language chunks and an organized reply process, one group of students was instructed via the structured method while the other group was instructed through an unstructured approach towards writing emails. The structured email writing involves training the students with memorized or repeatedly practiced sentences, clauses and phrases along with the format of the email (Amalia et al., 2021; Cheng, 2021; Hu, 2014). The unstructured writing on the other hand focuses more on the independent use of language by the learners (Hodges & S., 2022).

To assess the effectiveness of these two different methods of instruction (i.e., structured and unstructured), the study had the students complete an email writing task in midterm exams (MTE) in two different courses, but with same targeted learning outcomes, across two different semesters. One group of students were taught formal email writing skills in a structured way under Technical Writing-2 (ENTW1200) course in the *summer* semester of the academic year 2021-22. The idea behind the structured reply process was to provide students with a framework to work within, which could make the email writing process more straightforward and less overwhelming.

As per the testing specifications of the midterm exam for that course, the students were asked to write a formal complaint email (175-225 words) responding to a scenario that included various prompts related to university and/or workplace contexts. The writing task was designed with a set of problems/ issues/ concerns that the students supposedly might have encountered in a real-life situation. They had to use these problems/issues/concerns in their emails in polite and formal complaint expressions. To elaborate, they were expected to write formal emails with all structural elements such as, To, Carbon Copy (cc.) or Blind Carbon Copy (bcc.), Subject, Salutation/Greeting, and Final greetings/Name & Address. They were given the required information about these structural elements describing the scenario. They were also expected to write a formal opening sentence, a short background paragraph about the scenario, and to use the given set of problems/issues/concerns in the body/content paragraph of their email using polite and formal complaint expressions. Besides, they were supposed to write a short compensation/request paragraph taking help from the given scenario.

For another group of students, an unstructured method of teaching formal emails under Technical Writing (UNEN1203) course was deployed in the *fall* semester of the academic year 2022-23. The idea behind the unstructured reply process was to provide students with a framework to work within, which could make them rely on their creativity and ingenuity besides keeping politeness and formal decency.

The midterm exam testing specifications for that course required students to reply/respond to an email that was given in a scenario wherein they received a formal email in which the sender had requested/enquired/complained about a topic/problem with relevant details. In other words, the sender sent different information that would come under 4 to 6 functions such as enquire, request, arrange, complain, schedule, attach etc. about a topic/problem in his/her email expecting the recipient to answer/reply in detail. After reading that email, the students were expected to write a formal email in 175-200 words replying to all the queries/requests/complaints of the sender. They were expected to use a variety of formal expressions in their answers. The scenario and the given email included all the details regarding structural elements and different functions for the students to use while answering. However, unlike the ENTW1200 course task, here they were not guided with a set of information that they could use in their reply to that email. To answer the task, the students were expected to write the following: A. Structural Elements (To, Cc./ Bcc., and Subject. Salutation, Final Greetings and Signature), B. Opening Sentence, C. Details (Using different functions such as enquire, request, arrange, schedule, complain, attach etc. with details in a coherent way) and D. Closing Sentence.

In short, the above tasks of the midterm exams of both the courses intended to assess the achievement of the learning outcomes of the students regarding replying to formal emails. These learning outcomes were to assess whether students could write formal emails responding to scenarios that were related to university and workplace contexts. The present study sought to compare the efficacy of the above

different approaches to teaching emails by doing thematic analysis of the students' answers in the midterm exams of two different courses targeting similar learning across two semesters.

Statement of the Problem

The students studying at UTAS do not have a robust background in the English language. They usually complete their schooling in Arabic medium institutions. That is why, they face many challenges at the university level as the medium of instruction and education abruptly changes to English instead of Arabic. Teachers continuously strive for strategies and approaches that help in bridging the gap between the students' proficiency level and the proficiency level required to successfully complete their studies at the university level. The current study will provide some help in this regard to the students and teachers alike in teaching and learning approaches/methodologies pertaining to the formal and technical writing courses.

Significance of the Study

The study aims at finding out the comparative advantages and disadvantages of the structured and unstructured method of teaching formal email writing. The study will help the students and teachers at the university level in the Sultanate of Oman in finding the right approach towards teaching writing skills in general and formal/technical writing in particular.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims at finding out the best method for teaching formal email writing at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Sultanate of Oman. The medium to low level of English language proficiency among the university students in the sultanate continuously presses the teachers to find out best practices in their fields and relative contexts. The current study compares two teaching methods, the structured and the unstructured method of teaching formal email writing, in order to find out which of the two has more advantages.

Research Hypothesis

It is generally assumed that a sizable proportion of the students studying at the tertiary level in the Arab world do not have the English language proficiency required for completion of their studies (Al-Sobhi & Preece, 2018). Therefore teachers and academicians strive for best practices in the English language teaching and learning. Many studies in the past have concluded that the structured method of teaching formal email writing works best for the Arab students (Ankawi, 2020; Belhiah & Elhami, 2015; Cornbleet & Carter, 2001). The current study takes the fact that the structured method of teaching formal email writing best suits the Arab students' needs as a hypothesis and aims at finding out whether the same is true in the context of Omani students studying at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Al-Musannah' Campus.

Review of the Related Literature

Email communication is an essential part of professional communication, and effective email writing skills are crucial for success in many industries. As such, research has focused on identifying effective strategies for teaching email writing skills to students and professionals alike. One such strategy is the use of structured email writing processes, which provide writers with a set formula or template to follow when composing professional emails.

In a study by Adhikary (2022), 30 high school students were divided into two groups: one group was taught using a structured email writing process, while the other group learned to write emails without any guidance. The results indicated that the structured email writing group produced more effective emails, as measured by both content and language use, than the unstructured group. This suggests that structured email writing processes may be a useful tool for teaching effective email writing skills.

Similarly, another study by Paquot and Plonsky (2017) found that the use of formulaic language in email writing was positively associated with the perceived formality and effectiveness of the email. The study

involved 90 undergraduate students who were asked to rate the perceived formality and effectiveness of emails written using formulaic language versus those written without such language. The results showed that emails with formulaic language were perceived as more formal and effective, suggesting that formulaic language may be a useful component of structured email writing processes.

However, there are also potential drawbacks to structured email writing processes. A study by Hu and Leu (2015) found that students who were taught using a structured email writing process tended to rely on the provided templates and language chunks rather than developing their own writing skills. This suggests that while structured email writing processes may be effective for teaching basic email writing skills, they may limit students' ability to develop their own writing style and adapt to different communication contexts.

Additionally, unstructured email writing may offer benefits as well. For example, in a study by Vandepitte, Brunfaut, and Duyck (2016), 58 Belgian university students were asked to write emails to a hypothetical professor in response to a series of prompts. The results indicated that students who were not given any guidance on email writing produced more personalized and effective emails than those who were given a set template to follow. This suggests that unstructured email writing may allow for greater creativity and adaptability in responding to different communication contexts.

Another study by Charalampidou and Konstantinidis (2018) explored the impact of unstructured email writing on students' motivation and engagement in a higher education context. The study involved 162 undergraduate students who were randomly assigned to either an experimental group, where they were given the freedom to write emails in their own style, or a control group, where they were given a structured email writing template. The results indicated that students in the experimental group were more motivated and engaged in the task, and also reported higher levels of satisfaction with their email writing experience compared to the control group.

Overall, the literature suggests that both structured and unstructured email writing processes have their own advantages and disadvantages. Structured email writing processes may be useful for teaching basic email writing skills and ensuring consistency and professionalism in communication but may limit students' ability to develop their own writing style. Unstructured email writing may allow for greater flexibility and creativity in communication but may also result in less consistent and professional emails.

The study by Lee and Choi (2017) aimed to explore the relationship between tertiary-level students' English writing performance and metacognitive awareness, from a group metacognitive support perspective. The researchers found that students' metacognitive awareness and their writing performance were positively correlated, suggesting that students with higher levels of metacognitive awareness tended to perform better in their writing tasks. Additionally, the study revealed that group metacognitive support, such as peer feedback and collaborative learning, played a significant role in promoting students' metacognitive awareness and improving their writing performance.

Another study by Hua and Zhang (2020) investigated the effects of a structured email writing process on the perceived professionalism and persuasiveness of emails. The study involved 90 Chinese college students who were asked to write persuasive emails using either a structured email writing process or their own writing process. The results showed that emails written using the structured email writing process were perceived as more professional and persuasive than those written using the students' own writing process. The authors suggest that structured email writing processes may be useful for improving the effectiveness of persuasive emails.

In a study by Singh, Aggarwal, and Tiwari (2020), the authors examined the effectiveness of a structured email writing workshop for Indian engineering students. The workshop involved providing students with a set of email templates and language chunks to use when writing professional emails. The results showed that the structured email writing workshop was effective in improving students' email writing skills, as measured by language use, email format, and content organization. The authors suggest that structured

email writing workshops may be a useful tool for improving email writing skills in non-native English speakers.

In a study by Kelly and Elton (2020), the authors examined the email writing practices of a group of university students in the UK. The study found that students often relied on their own writing style and experience rather than following a set structure or template when composing emails. The authors suggest that unstructured email writing may be more common and natural for students and may allow for greater creativity and flexibility in communication.

Another study by de Korne, van Waes, and Schellens (2018) investigated the effects of unstructured versus structured email writing on the quality and efficiency of email communication in a professional setting. The study involved 26 participants who were asked to respond to three different email scenarios using either an unstructured or structured email writing process. The results showed that there was no significant difference in the quality or efficiency of email communication between the two groups. However, the authors note that participants in the unstructured group reported feeling more in control of their email writing and were better able to adapt to the specific communication context.

Finally, a study by Li and Li (2019) examined the impact of unstructured email writing on the effectiveness of email communication between Chinese university students and their English-speaking instructors. The study found that students who used more personal and informal language in their emails were more likely to receive a response from their instructors, suggesting that unstructured email writing may be effective in building rapport and establishing a personal connection with the recipient.

Overall, these studies suggest that unstructured email writing may offer benefits in terms of creativity, flexibility, and adaptability in communication. However, the effectiveness of unstructured email writing may depend on the specific context and audience of the email communication. More research is needed to explore the effectiveness of unstructured email writing in different professional contexts and with different populations.

These recent studies tend to support the idea that structured email writing processes may be effective for improving email writing skills and enhancing the professionalism and effectiveness of emails. However, more research is needed to explore the effectiveness of structured email writing processes in different professional contexts and with different populations. Additionally, the potential drawbacks of structured email writing processes, such as limiting creativity and adaptability, should also be considered.

It is worth noting that many studies have focused on undergraduate students, and more research is needed to explore the effectiveness of different email writing processes in different professional contexts. Additionally, research on email writing processes has primarily focused on language use and content, and more research is needed on other factors such as email formatting, subject lines, and email etiquette. Nonetheless, the existing literature provides valuable insights for instructors and professionals looking to improve their email writing skills.

Research Methodology

The study involved 30 students studying at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences Al-Musannah (UTAS-A) in Sultanate of Oman, enrolled in two different courses titled Technical Writing 2 (ENTW1200) and Technical Writing (UNEN1203) in two different semesters. Both these courses, however, targeted similar learning outcomes. Replying to formal emails is one of the common components of these courses. To elaborate, there were two different groups of students who were taught how to reply to emails in two different ways. One of these groups was taught under ENTW1200 course in the *summer* semester of the academic year 2021-22 using structured reply process. This means that these students were given chunks of formal language used in typical email responses. The other group learned to reply to these emails under UNEN1203 in the *fall* semester of the academic year 2022-23 without such facilitation. That is, the second group learned the email replying techniques without any structure or chunks provided to them. The samples taken for the analysis were the students' answers to questions in

their midterm exams. The data selected for this study is taken from two different sections enrolled in these courses in two different semesters.

Sample

The data consisted of 30 (15 for each group) emails responding to two email prompts. One of the prompts asked the respondents to reply to an email complaining about the poor performance of a mobile banking application. The respondents were supposed to imagine themselves as bank representatives while replying to the email. These respondents were supposed to apologize to their imagined bank clients for their awful experience with the malfunctioning bank application and, at the same time, justify its poor performance and assure the client that their problem would be fixed as soon as possible. It is pertinent to mention that the group responding to this email prompt were taught the email replying process via structured method.

The other 15 respondents were asked to reply to an email sent directly to them by the school administration about their careless attitude towards their studies and exams. They were supposed to reply to the email justifying their continuous absence resulting in missing various lectures, assignments, and even exams. Ideally, they were required to justify their absence in a polite manner. They were also supposed to apologize to the administration and thank them for being concerned for their academic loss. This group of respondents was taught to reply to emails via the unstructured method.

These 30 respondents were selected based on their performance in their respective midterm exams. There were other students whose answer scripts were not selected for this study as their performance was not up to the mark. Generally, English writing skills are not the strong areas of students studying at educational institutions across the Sultanate of Oman. That is why the answer scripts of those students who performed relatively well were selected for this study.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed qualitatively. Thematic analysis was carried out on all the emails written by the students. The following themes were identified for data analysis:

Content: The students were supposed to address all the required aspects/points through the prompt email.

Tone and Sentiment: The tone of the reply was to be assessed in terms of being professional/neutral/positive/negative. The sentiments of empathy, sympathy, apology and frustration were to be analyzed in the emails.

Language and Formality: The emails were to be analyzed in terms of level of formality and appropriateness of language.

Relevance and Accuracy: This theme relates to the respondents' overall achievement of what was required of them by the prompt emails. This pertains to both the form and content of the emails.

Innovation and Improvisation: This theme was particularly added for the respondents replying in an unstructured way. It is an established fact that students taught to reply to emails via unstructured method are free to use new ideas and can adjust to a contingent situation.

An application/software called QDA Miner Lite was used for analyzing the data generated by the responding emails. It is a free application/software used to analyze small to medium data sets qualitatively.

Results

The following observations were recorded while analyzing the obtained data:

Content: The students taught via structured method were the ones who addressed almost all points required of them in the prompt emails. Eleven out of the fifteen respondents in this group responded well

to the complaints and grievances shared by the imagined bank client/customer. The remaining four partially completed the task.

The students of the unstructured method, on the other hand, were not as good in responding to all the points in their reply emails. None of them completed the task fully. Four of the fifteen respondents fulfilled the required task, not fully though. Others could only achieve half of the given assignment.

Tone and Sentiment: The structured method students were the high achievers in this area as well. They sounded more professional and the language in their responses was either neutral or positive. This might be because they were provided with the chunks of language usually used in such professional replies to email prompts. Another reason could be that they had to reply as bank representatives and there was nothing that could be termed personal in the exchange of emails. As far as the sentiments in the responses were concerned, the majority of the respondents in this group showed empathy or sympathy to the individual complaining in the prompt email.

The unstructured method students were less professional and more personal in their responses. It might well be due to the personal nature of the email response they were supposed to write. They sounded subjective and apologetic in their responses. The tone of their language was either positive or neutral, which corresponds to that of the other group.

Language and Formality: This is another area where the structured method group seemed to be the high achievers. Most of the students in this group used highly formal language which was appropriate to the situation. The sentences and vocabulary used in their responses were apt and appropriate for most of the respondents. Perhaps this happened due to the ready-made chunks of the language provided to them during their learning process.

Only five of the fifteen participants in the unstructured group sounded formal in their language. Others used quite a few informal chunks in their emails. This group also seemed to be falling short of the appropriate vocabulary in order to describe the imagined situations they had to use to justify their long absence from school.

Relevance and Accuracy: In terms of relevance and accuracy, both in the form and the content of the emails, the structured group seemed to be quite ahead of the unstructured group. They followed all the formal traditions of a typical email response. They also addressed the questions/situations demanded by the prompt email.

The unstructured group had seven respondents who failed to meet the formal structural demands of the traditional email replies. Most of them seemed quite irrelevant in their responses at times.

Innovation and Improvisation: This theme/code was specially included to see whether the unstructured method students show any innovation or improvisation in their emails. The structured group, being very formal and matter-of-fact in their structured replies, were not expected to show ingenuity in their responses. Neither did they show any such characteristics.

The unstructured method group also did not show any remarkable innovation in their emails. Four of the students in this group were, however, an exception as they came up with really innovative situations in order to justify their absence from school. Apart from these two, there seemed to be nothing new and innovative in emails across the board.

Discussion

The thematic analysis recorded above suggests that both the structured and the unstructured methods of teaching email writing have their merits and demerits. The structured method has the benefit of making it easy for the learners to remain formal and check all the checkboxes required in formal email responses. In the context of the Omani students, it also sounds beneficial as it makes it easier for the students to learn. They quickly pick up the format and content and easily remember the chunks of formal language to be

used in their emails. The unstructured method of teaching formal emails has its own positives. It gives the students a wee bit of independence to deal with the context and situations. The students who learn via this method can improvise according to the changing contexts more effectively compared to the people who learn via the structured method. Both the methods have their disadvantages too. The structured method does not allow any innovation and improvisation to the students. It makes them bound to the form and content taught to them in the structured way and limits their cognitive activities inside its boundaries. The unstructured method, although very liberating, compared to the unstructured method, is not easy to teach, especially in the context of the Omani students.

Conclusion

The students who learned via the structured method displayed greater control over most of the elements required to complete the given task. They used formal language written in a professional tone and were up to the mark in providing what was required of them. Most of the students in the unstructured group, on the other hand, failed to address all the required points. They sounded more personal and subjective and some of them flouted the formal traditions of email writing as well. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that the structured method is better than the unstructured method when it comes to teaching formal email writing. However, since this study was conducted in the context of students studying at University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Sultanate of Oman, with their unique requirements and use of English language, the findings may not be generally applicable to all the students studying emails.

Based on the findings of the study, here are some possible further research areas that could be explored. As a matter of fact, the study was conducted with university-level students in Oman. It would be interesting to see whether structured email writing is effective for younger or older learners, or for learners with different language backgrounds. In addition, the study used a specific approach to teaching structured email writing. It would be useful to investigate whether other structured email writing approaches (e.g., using models, providing sentence starters) are equally effective or more effective. Moreover, the study did not investigate the long-term impact of structured email writing on students' writing skills. Future research could explore whether the benefits of structured email writing are sustained over time and whether structured email writing leads to better writing skills in other contexts beyond email.

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