

TIPS TO ADVANCE BUSINESS WRITING SKILLS AT EFL CLASSES (THROUGH THE EXAMPLE OF “LETTER OF COMPLAINT”)

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Abstract

Writing is a creative communicative skill to express thoughts. It is cognitively complex, requires much practice and is best learned through experience. Writing is one of the most challenging, time-consuming tasks in acquiring a foreign language. To improve students' writing skills and accuracy, a teacher should encourage writing-thinking, provide instructions and examples of good writing in the target language, and give feedback focusing both on error correction (cohesion) and organization of writing (clarity, idea development, coherence). This paper explores difficulties of the development of business writing skills and gives recommendations on writing a letter of complaint at English as a foreign language classes.

Keywords: business letter; cognitive activity; foreign language skills; foreign language teaching; higher education; letter of complaint; writing skills.

Introduction

Modern universities pursue to prepare graduates who have professional competence and good knowledge of a foreign language to promote their competitiveness in the increasingly international labor market. Being able to write personal and official letters, fill out questionnaires, forms, documents, etc. is important for professional communication. Thus, students should be taught to communicate thoughts clearly, build logically and clearly written statements in a foreign language. The paper considers some issues of writing an effective letter of complaint.

Background literature

Writing is a demanding, creative process which requires skills to structure thoughts and ideas and organize them in the format which is appropriate to the subject matter. Teaching writing is inextricably linked with the training of other kinds of speech activity. Writing is a reliable tool for thinking; it stimulates speaking, listening and reading in a foreign language. In turn, researchers note that the development of writing skills is furthered by:

- use of authentic materials in an EFL classroom [1–6];
- social networking websites and wikis where students write blogs and post comments [7–11];
- computer-based learning [12–15];
- e-learning courses [16, 17];
- “digital writing”, taking notes on mobiles [18, 19];
- extensive reading [20–22];
- reading and writing of scientific articles and participation in research projects [23–25];
- creative writing projects [26].

Findings and Discussion

Technical universities introduce professionally-oriented syllabi which are aimed at the practical use of a foreign language in professional activities, as business communication skills (both oral and written) are essential for a specialist of any field. Accordingly, students should have developed skills necessary for the implementation of various communicative intentions such as information, motivation, consent, avoiding decision, denial, complaint, etc. In business communication, students encounter a number of hardships:

- lack of skills to work with business letters both in mother and foreign languages (ignorance of business letter structure, planning, emphasis of the basic idea, etc.);
- inability to formulate the communicative intention and draw a plan;
- ignorance of clichés, stereotyped expressions and word combinations typical of business communication.

A business letter is intended to clearly convey the author's ideas to business associates. It is an integral part of working with international partners as it solves a wide range of tasks in a professional and work-related activity. Logic and pragmatic and rational presentation of the information and lack of emotional components are typical for business writing.

Business style is characterized by the highest level of formality. It means that students should be taught to wisely choose words (clichés), pay attention to grammar, syntax and tone of the letter. To create a persuasive effect on the reader, the tone should be friendly, confident, courteous and sincere as it may be the deciding factor on whether the complaint is satisfied. Furthermore, formal written language is often specified by impersonal style and absence of abbreviation and contractions. Business writing in English is realized through a number of language means:

a) lexical:

- functional vocabulary (e.g. to approve, to assist, to consider, to inform, to obtain, to purchase, to reply, etc.);
- terms and word-combinations (e.g. I would appreciate you keeping in mind ..., We highly appreciate..., You are kindly requested to ..., We are ready to assist you in ..., In connection with your inquiry ..., etc.);
- set expressions and clichés (e.g. I am writing in reference/regard to ..., I'm writing to inquire about ..., Should you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact us, I look forward to hearing from you, Yours faithfully/sincerely, etc.);
- verbal nouns (e.g. arrival, building, development, decision, requirement, etc.).

b) grammar:

- modal verbs (e.g. shall/should, can/could, may/might, etc);
- impersonal constructions (the passive voice, the third person rather than the first person, things/situations rather than people as subjects of sentences);
- subjunctive mood (e.g. It is crucial (that)..., It is essential (that) ..., It is advisable that ..., It's unlikely that ..., If it were not for the ..., He said he would have helped us if ..., etc.);
- indirect speech (e.g. I was told that ..., He promised the goods would be there on Monday..., Your representative said the discount opportunities were not part of a..., Mr. Davis advised me to choose that option because ..., Your distributor recommended me to purchase/order ..., etc.).

In addition, there are a number of standard requirements which business letters should meet. They are:

- accuracy of the presentation of information;

- standardization and unification of language and text tools;
- formality and restraint of language;
- brevity and sufficiency of informative content;
- consistency, objectivity and structure of narration.

Writing a letter of complaint, one should be authoritative, concise, factual and friendly. To achieve the maximum effect, the letter should not be long, but contain dry arguments and reasons, and set specific requirements. It should further cooperation and constructive problem-solving, rather than confrontation.

Effective academic and business writing is impossible without proper organization of the document, correct phrases and good grammar. Business letters should be structured with paragraphs and express the thoughts and ideas precisely and convincingly. Much attention should be devoted to the choice of words and clear use of language. To develop writing skills, students should:

- study examples of business writing;
- be aware of the text organization and follow a specific format of a business letter;
- focus on the content and style;
- be provided with feedback regarding their errors in writing.

On the whole, writing a letter of complaint, students should adopt the following letter layout:

Name and address

Date

Dear Sir or Madam (or name),

- *reasons for writing:*

e.g. I am writing to complaint about/on account of ...;

I am writing to express my dissatisfaction/frustration/disappointment with...;

I wish to express my concern regarding ...;

I am writing to draw your attention to ...;

On (*date*) I contracted/asked you to ...;

I am afraid to say I have numbers of complaints about ...;

I was appalled at ...

- *problem (cause and effect):*

e.g. In a letter dated (e.g. November 10), you state that ...;

Firstly, I had difficulty in ... Secondly, and much worse, I encountered ... In addition, there was/were ...;

Unfortunately, the service was inadequate/misperformed;

I think you should be aware of ...;

Since then, I found out that ...;

This situation has caused me ...;

I am therefore returning the invoice to ...

- *solution:*

e.g. I would like to meet with you and discuss ...;

To resolve the problem, I would appreciate ...;

I would be grateful if you review the case / send my order immediately ...;

I trust the situation will improve if you ...;

I assume/hope you will replace the ...;

I demand a full refund immediately;

I would like to hear your explanation for the above problems.

- *closing remarks:*

e.g. I look forward to hearing from you in the near future;

I look forward to receiving your explanation;

I look forward to your prompt action/a swift resolution to this matter;

I hope this matter will be dealt with/resolved as soon as possible;

Please see the enclosed/attached copy of my invoice / order / receipt / a copy of my original claim;

I would appreciate your immediate attention to this matter;

I hope to hear back from you about ... Please contact me as soon as possible at/Please contact at your earliest convenience at (e-mail) or via (phone number).

Yours faithfully (if not sent to a named person) or *sincerely* (if sent to a named person),
Your signature.

Conclusion

In summary, teaching of written speech in a foreign language in a university must be clearly communicative, meaningful and professionally oriented. Writing skills require motivation, conscious efforts and benefit from practice. Thus, teachers should further and develop students' writing habits giving them opportunities to practise. Writing a letter of complaint, students should be taught to state the reason for a complaint, provide aspects of the complaint and support it with a justification. Effective letters of complaint are written in a formal style, using appropriate grammar, vocabulary and spelling, and demonstrate a courteous and complementary tone.

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