

## **Teaching business correspondence: Lessons from the globalised workplace**

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This article discusses the findings and pedagogical implications of a multifaceted investigation into the role of business correspondence (i.e., email, letters, memos, faxes) in Hong Kong's principal service industries. The findings were derived from four sources: a questionnaire survey of 1,010 service-sector professionals, semi-structured interviews with 31 Cantonese-speaking professionals, analyses of 50 email chains comprising 406 separate messages, and a "week-in-the-life" case study. These findings provide pedagogically relevant information and insights about the role of email vis-à-vis letters, memos and faxes in the globalised workplace, the purposes and characteristics of these text types, and the challenges that Hong Kong professionals experience when writing business correspondence in a second language. The article argues that the traditional foci of business English courses (letters, memos, faxes) are largely irrelevant to the needs of modern-day professionals and that email chains rather than discrete, functionally distinct messages should be the basis for instruction.

**Keywords:** Business correspondence; business English; materials design; syllabus design; Hong Kong

### **Introduction**

The teaching of business correspondence has long been a core component of courses in business English (BE) and business communication for students of English as a second (ESL) or foreign language (EFL). For much of the twentieth century, the focus of such teaching was primarily on the quintessential media of internal and external communication in white-collar workplaces: the letter and the memo. This was reflected in the ready availability of an array of textbooks and manuals for practising and aspiring professionals covering every facet of letter and memo writing, from considering purpose and audience to correcting grammar and style (e.g., Caro & Denton, 1936; Eckersley & Kaufmann, 1964; Educational Services, 1954). The advent of the fax machine in the 1980s added a fresh dimension to external communication in a rapidly globalising world, but no sooner had BE teachers responded pedagogically to this development than they were confronted with another, more radical innovation in business communication, and one that more than any other has stimulated the use of English as a business lingua franca: email.

If published materials are any guide, practitioners' reaction has been to incorporate email communication into syllabi and teaching schedules alongside letters, memos and faxes and to adopt a similar approach to that employed in the teaching of these more established text types; that is, by asking students to analyse the content, language and organisation of specially written models of functionally distinct texts and subsequently

to apply the results of their analysis in a carefully staged process involving pre-writing, drafting and revising. Textbooks in the field of business communication (e.g., Bovée & Thill, 2008; Guffey & Loewy, 2011; Locker & Kaczmarek, 2009) tend to focus on strategies for structuring positive, negative and persuasive messages and for avoiding superfluous lexis and antiquated jargon. These books are designed mainly for native speakers of English in North America, but are nevertheless widely used by ESL/EFL students around the world, including Cantonese-speaking undergraduates in Hong Kong (Bhatia & Candlin, 2001). In contrast, materials specifically designed for second-language (L2) users of English understandably emphasise the linguistic features of business correspondence such as gambits for expressing key functions and the essentials of grammar, style and tone (e.g., Bilbow, 2004; Littlejohn, 2005). Thus, despite acknowledging the novel characteristics of email and its centrality in the current “world flattening” phase of economic globalisation (Friedman, 2006), such materials continue to devote considerable space to memos, faxes and (particularly) letters and to employ essentially the same methodology in the presentation of all four text types. This tendency is especially conspicuous in classic textbooks whose first editions appeared before the widespread adoption of email in workplace communication. Although subsequent editions accord greater prominence to email vis-à-vis other types of business correspondence, the methodological template that inspired the original has generally been refined or at best reformed rather than entirely replaced; this despite Crystal’s (2006) contention that email is formally and functionally unique, and thus not simply another option for professionals to consider when they wish to communicate with colleagues, clients and customers.

One possible reason for this apparent conservatism is the dearth of pedagogically oriented research into the nature and role of business correspondence in contexts where English functions as a business lingua franca. To date, much of the scarcely voluminous research in this area has centred on aspects of business letters, such as generic structure (Flowerdew & Wan, 2006; Santos, 2002), politeness strategies (Chakorn, 2006; Yeung, 1997), intertextuality and interdiscursivity (Bhatia, 2005; Bremner, 2008) and linguistic features (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 1996; Okamura & Shaw, 2000), and (to a lesser extent) memos (Forey, 2004) and faxes (Akar & Louhiala-Salminen, 1999).

Although the past decade has witnessed a significant upsurge of scholarly interest in email communication in the fields of English for specific purposes (e.g., Gimenez, 2005, 2006; Jensen, 2009; van Mulken & van der Meer, 2005), business communication (e.g., Dawley & Anthony, 2003; DeKay, 2010; Kankaanranta, 2006; Kupritz & Cowell, 2011; Zhu & White, 2009), intercultural communication (Murphy & Levy, 2006) and pragmatics (Ho, 2011), these studies often lack specific recommendations for pedagogy or were conducted in Anglophone countries rather than in contexts where English is used as a lingua franca by L2 professionals. Such professionals now constitute a significant segment of the global community of BE users.

Research conducted in disciplines such as corporate communication (Hewitt, 2006) and information management (Jackson, Dawson, & Wilson, 2003) indicates that email has fundamentally altered the way in which professionals and corporations operate in the globalised business world, and yet this revolution has generally not been reflected in BE textbooks, which, as noted above, continue to centre on apparently outmoded forms of business correspondence and to follow the same pedagogical playbook in the presentation of email as that employed in the teaching of letters, memos and faxes. Indeed, major new general-purpose BE textbooks (Baade, Holloway, Scrivener, & Turner, 2011; Trappe & Tullis, 2011) lay surprisingly little emphasis on email communication, preferring instead, like many recent BE publications (Reed, 2011), to

concentrate on proficiency-oriented exercises on grammar and vocabulary. While there are now BE textbooks on the market focusing exclusively on email writing for L2 students (e.g., Emmerson, 2004), the undoubted value of these materials is limited to some extent by their adoption of many aspects of the time-honoured approach to teaching business correspondence. This approach is characterised by the practice of organising model texts and writing tasks along distinctly functional lines (cf. letters of request, complaint, enquiry) and encouraging students to observe the three-stage process and three-part structure (opening, body, closing) that professionals supposedly follow when writing letters, memos and faxes in the real world.

The prevalence of email in modern business communication, as evidenced by the now substantial literature on email overload (e.g., O’Kane, Palmer, & Hargie, 2007), together with its formal and functional distinctiveness raise a number of pedagogically pertinent questions for BE teachers, and not least the four research questions which the present article seeks to address, namely: (1) What is the role of email vis-à-vis letters, memos and faxes in the contemporary business world? (2) What are the primary purposes of business correspondence? (3) What are the key characteristics of email messages in terms of style, structure and length? (4) What challenges do L2 professionals experience when writing business correspondence in English? These questions are explored in the context of Hong Kong, a pulsating global centre of trade, finance and business, using data from a multi-method investigation into the use of English in the city’s vibrant services sector.

## **Research methods**

### ***Questionnaire survey***

The survey was designed to provide baseline data on the English-language needs of Cantonese-speaking professionals in Hong Kong’s key service industries as discussed by Sung (2008), viz. financial services, tourism, trading and logistics, professional and business services. The questionnaire elicited information about the participants’ perceived strengths and weaknesses when using English for a range of professional purposes, including writing reports, giving presentations and participating in meetings. The section on business correspondence, which encompassed emails, letters, memos and faxes, asked the respondents to indicate the principal purposes of writing such texts and the degree of difficulty they encountered in their composition. Two versions of the questionnaire were developed: an online version, which was sent by email to 46,094 alumni of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and around 150 companies and professional associations, and a paper-based version, which was distributed to 1,155 professionals, who included students undertaking part-time undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. A total of 1,010 correctly completed questionnaires were returned. The results of Cronbach’s Alpha tests ranged from 0.780 to 0.895, which indicates a good degree of reliability.

Notwithstanding the (unsurprisingly) low response rate, the sample is sufficiently large to capture the experiences of a broadly representative segment of Hong Kong’s service-sector workforce. A sizeable proportion of the respondents were employed in disciplines in the professional and business services industry (49.1%), while the remainder worked in trading and logistics (12.8%), financial services (11.1%), tourism (10.4%), and other service-related sectors (16.6%). Most of the respondents were early-career professionals, with just over half (51.7%) having up to ten years of experience. The survey was, however, able to reflect the experiences of many seasoned

professionals, with just over a quarter of the sample (28.3%) having 11-20 years of experience and 20% having more than 20 years. Just under half of the participants (47.6%) were in middle-management positions, while the remainder occupied junior (30.4%) or senior (22%) positions in their organisations.

### ***Semi-structured interviews***

The survey findings provided the basis for the interview phase of the investigation, which involved 31 professionals (16 males, 15 females), who were selected on the basis of a purposeful sampling strategy (Patton, 2002). The interviewees were generally quite experienced in that they occupied senior (12) or middle-ranking (14) positions in their organisations, which included Hong Kong-owned (14), foreign-owned (12) and China-owned (2) companies as well as government departments (3). The participants signed a consent form explaining the purpose of the investigation and assuring them of confidentiality (through the use of pseudonyms) if their views were subsequently reported.

The interviews were based on an interview guide (Appendix) that outlined the nature and order of the topics to be discussed, but within this pre-determined structure the interviewer was able to ask open or probing questions to explore interesting issues as they arose and to clarify the participants' opinions or perceptions (Gillham, 2005). The topics directly related to business correspondence included the purposes of emails, letters, memos and faxes, reader-writer relationships, message structures, style and tone, and communication strategies. Given the centrality of email in modern business (see below), it is perhaps not surprising that issues related to this crucial communication channel were also discussed in those parts of the interviews devoted to communication tasks and challenges.

The interviews, each lasting 60-80 minutes, were conducted in Cantonese and subsequently translated into English for detailed analysis. The participants were given a choice of being interviewed in either Cantonese or English (an option that was incorporated into the consent form). Their preference for Cantonese perhaps reflected their belief that they could express themselves with greater precision and profundity in their mother tongue than in English. It should be emphasised, however, that they were all highly proficient users of English (as were the case-study participants): the vast majority of the interviewees possessed Bachelor's (17) or Master's degrees (10) from English-medium universities in Hong Kong or overseas and, as they detailed in the interviews, they all needed to use English for a range of purposes at work.

The analysis of the interview translations entailed a close, repetitive reading of the texts to identify and classify key themes and sub-themes. The initial or open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) stage of this process involved reading and annotating the 31 translations with comments and observations. These open codes were subsequently grouped into various categories and sub-categories which captured recurring patterns in the data. The manual analysis of the translation corpus, which comprised 224,073 words, was complemented by the data coding and analysis software NVivo (version 9), which enabled the researchers to quantify and cross-reference the interviewees' responses in each category/sub-category. An example of a major category that emerged from this process was *email communication*. The five most important sub-categories of *email communication* (as indicated by the number of comments) were issues related to *the importance of concision and precision* (73 comments), *email as a communication channel* (55), *style and tone in email communication* (50 comments), *volume and*

*importance of emails and the organisation of ideas* (23). The results of this analysis are discussed further in the first part of the findings and discussion section.

### ***Analysis of email chains***

The survey and interview findings are illuminated by an analysis of 50 email chains, 25 of which (containing 135 messages) were provided by a merchandiser (Katie) working for a Hong Kong-owned handbag manufacturer, while the remainder (containing 271 messages) were collected by an IT manager (Anthony) employed by a multinational bank. This analysis yielded pedagogically valuable information about the average lengths of chain initiators and terminators (Gimenez, 2005, 2006) together with the intermediate messages (i.e., the first and final messages in a chain of email messages as well as the messages that form the body of the chain). This information is used to substantiate the interviewees' claims about the volume and velocity of email communication in Hong Kong's frenetic business world, which in turn helps to explain the major challenge they experience when composing such messages: the need to be precise and concise. This analysis also provides a counterpoint to the survey findings concerning the purposes of business correspondence and evidence of the "moves" (Bhatia, 1993) professionals make when structuring their messages.

### ***Case studies***

This paper draws on data from one of the four "week-in-the-life" case studies which constituted one strand of the investigation. The participants in the case studies were asked to record their business-related activities on each day of a typical working week. They logged these activities at half-hourly intervals on a specially designed professional discourse checklist, which required them to specify the nature, language, duration and direction (i.e. internal or external) of their communication activities together with the number and background of the participants involved. The data in the completed checklists, supplemented by information from interviews conducted before and after the data-collection week, were subsequently used to track the flows of written and spoken discourses and the interplay between the English and Chinese languages.

## **Findings and discussion**

### ***The roles of emails, letters, memos and faxes in the business world***

The most striking impression formed during the analysis of the interview data was the centrality of English-language email communication in the interviewees' professional lives. This analysis revealed that email communication played a pivotal role in the participants' lives, far outweighing in importance the other items (letters, memos, faxes) in the business correspondence section of the questionnaire. The centrality of email is illustrated by the fact that there were 395 comments of varying lengths on email-related issues in the translations, the next most significant themes (as indicated by the number of comments) being meetings (131) and reports (127).

Paul (IT specialist), for example, claimed that "99% of our writing is in the form of email", while Eva (government officer) observed that "emails account for about 90% of our writing load". Penny (banker) encapsulated a major theme of the interviews: "Basically email is the main communication channel in today's business world." These experiences harmonise with the findings of a recent survey, which indicate that reading and writing internal and external emails are the most frequent English-using activities

performed by Hong Kong professionals (Evans, 2010), and also with the perceptions of leading textbook writers (Guffey & Loewy, 2011).

The centrality of email in modern business communication was also indicated by the findings of the case studies. As illustrated in Figure 1, reading and writing emails occupied the greatest proportion of the banker's working week (35.72%), the next most time-consuming activity being telephoning (20.56%) (all but 10 minutes of which was conducted in Cantonese). Unlike the three other case-study participants, and indeed the 31 interviewees, the banker was sometimes required to write emails in Chinese. A close analysis of his checklist revealed that he wrote 17 emails in Chinese during the week. These texts occupied 47 minutes of his time, and perhaps significantly, were all internal messages (as were the 89 Chinese-language emails he reported reading). When questioned about this seemingly atypical use of Chinese in email communication, he pointed out that it stemmed from his bank's mainland Chinese ownership. His email writing in English was fairly evenly balanced between internal and external communication (29 and 23 messages respectively). These messages took an average of 3½ minutes (internal) and 4 minutes (external) to compose, which thus confirms one of the dominant themes to emerge from the interview phase of the study: the need for haste and brevity in Hong Kong's hectic business world (see also Figure 2).

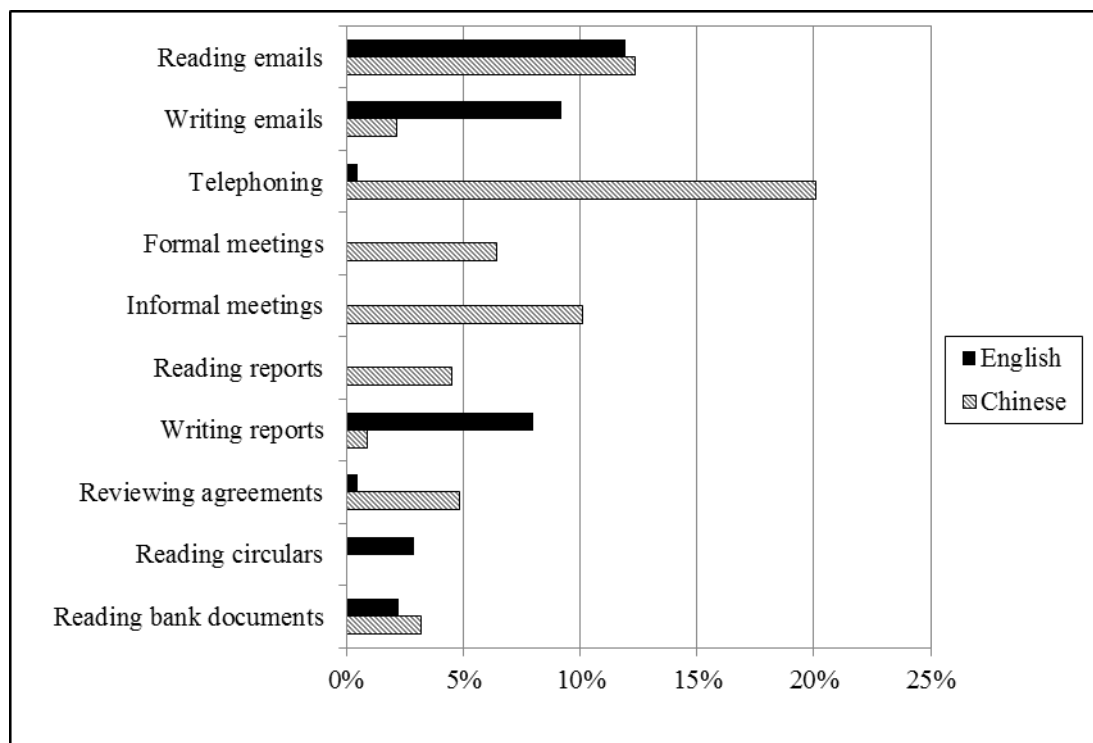


Figure 1: Proportion of time occupied by reading, writing and speaking activities in a banker's working week

Evidence from the interviews suggests that emails have now largely supplanted letters, memos and faxes in the contemporary business world. This indeed is corroborated by the findings shown in Figure 1, which indicate that these traditional text types played no role in the banker's working week. Participants who commenced their careers during the 1980s were especially well placed to appreciate the changes in office life engendered by the advent of email. "Today email has replaced the function of faxes

and letters,” asserted Lara, a veteran of the trading and logistics industry. Lara added, however, that letters are still used for “important matters” and “play a formal role,” which accords with the views of Guffey and Loewy (2011). One such role is to confirm agreements and decisions, which, as Ian (engineer) noted, are often reached through prior email exchanges: “The hard form of a letter is used to finalise the content of the emails.”

Several interviewees reported that hard-copy letters are used only in “formal situations” (Ian) or for “very serious cases” involving legal issues (Ken, engineer). This legally inspired use of letters may, however, be declining as several participants reported that emails and their attachments also have legal implications. Debbie (merchandise), for example, stated that “nowadays we specify that a softcopy contract is an official one even if it doesn’t have a signature”, while Owen (group costing manager) reported that documents such as bills of lading used in freight transport are “legally approved” if they are saved as PDF files.

The evidence suggests that paper-based memos have now been largely replaced by email in internal corporate communication, while fax – the dominant means of communication in the 1990s (Evans, 1999; Green & Evans, 2000; Li & Mead, 2000) – tends to be restricted to hand-written, Chinese-medium communication with manufacturers on the mainland. “We use fax less often now,” observed Tanya (buyer), “but sometimes we use it when communicating with factories.” In most cases, however, communication with production plants in China is conducted via English emails. The use of English in such communication, according to Freda (regional store development buyer), is dictated by legal considerations: “Sometimes if they don’t understand [our emails], we discuss things on the phone in Putonghua. But I mainly use English to reply to emails because every email may be used as a legal document in the future.”

Freda’s observation was just one instance of a theme that pervaded the interviews (and is hinted at in the data shown in Figure 1), namely, the interdependence of email and telephone communication, which in the Hong Kong context is generally conducted in Cantonese. “The purpose of emailing is to remind ourselves of what we have discussed over the phone,” remarked Ken, while Alex (designer) observed that “emails serve as a record of our discussions”. This important role is illustrated in one of the messages in Anthony’s email chains:

R ...

The email records what we have agreed. To make clearer on X, we do not plan to use this function at the moment. Therefore, X can suspend all the works at the moment but please keep the deliverable at the moment. We may need to resume the X if users change their mind, for sure, the delivery time line needs to be agreed again.

Regards

Anthony

The interplay between emails and discussions over the phone (and in other speaking-listening situations such as meetings and briefings) is evident in many of the messages analysed in the present study, which make explicit reference to past and planned speech events (e.g., “As we spoke, for data conversion ...”; “... let’s discuss how we can manage the data gap ...”). The input to and outcomes of these discussions are typically English texts of various kinds such as reports, proposals and contracts. Emails are therefore tightly interwoven with other texts (particularly other messages in an email chain) together with various spoken discourses (cf. Zhu & White, 2009), and thus – to a far greater degree than traditional forms of business correspondence – play an instrumental role in connecting and expediting flows of internal and external

activities in the business world. This is illustrated in the rapid flow of written and spoken activities that the banker engaged in after starting work one morning (Figure 2). As we shall see, this has significant implications for course and materials design.

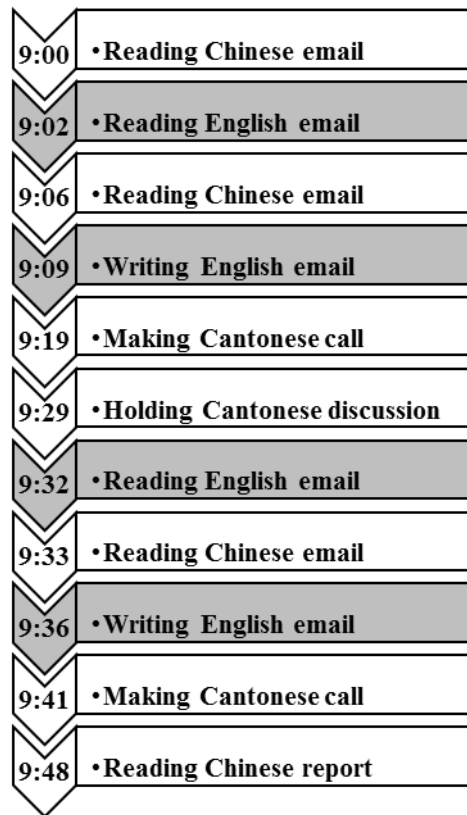


Figure 2: Flow of activities at the beginning of a banker's working day

### ***The purposes of business correspondence***

One section of the questionnaire asked the respondents to indicate the principal purposes of writing business correspondence by ticking up to three of the 12 options provided. As memos and faxes have now been largely superseded by email and letters are evidently reserved for “serious” or “formal” matters, it must be assumed that the participants based their responses on their experiences of email communication. As Figure 3 illustrates, none of the purposes predominates, although *informing* appears to be especially important. This finding accords with a move-and-steps analysis (Bhatia, 1993; Swales, 1990) of Katie's email chains, which revealed that informing is a key function of many of the messages. In the following message, for example, Katie opens by informing her colleague of a development and then proceeds to ask for information and make a request:

hey hey, I hv just received the samples from X this morning. There are 6 wallets and 3 handbags as per enclosed. And they had said something as below e-mail last week. I am not quite sure what they mean in terms of production materials. Also, do you think we will do the wallet samples too? Pls see if you have time to have a look of the samples first. Many thanks.  
Katie



Of the 16 different functions identified in the “action” move of these messages (advising, agreeing, reminding, explaining, etc.), informing is the most frequent, with 69 instances out of a total of 187 instances of the various functions, followed by asking for information (46), instructing (13) and suggesting (9).

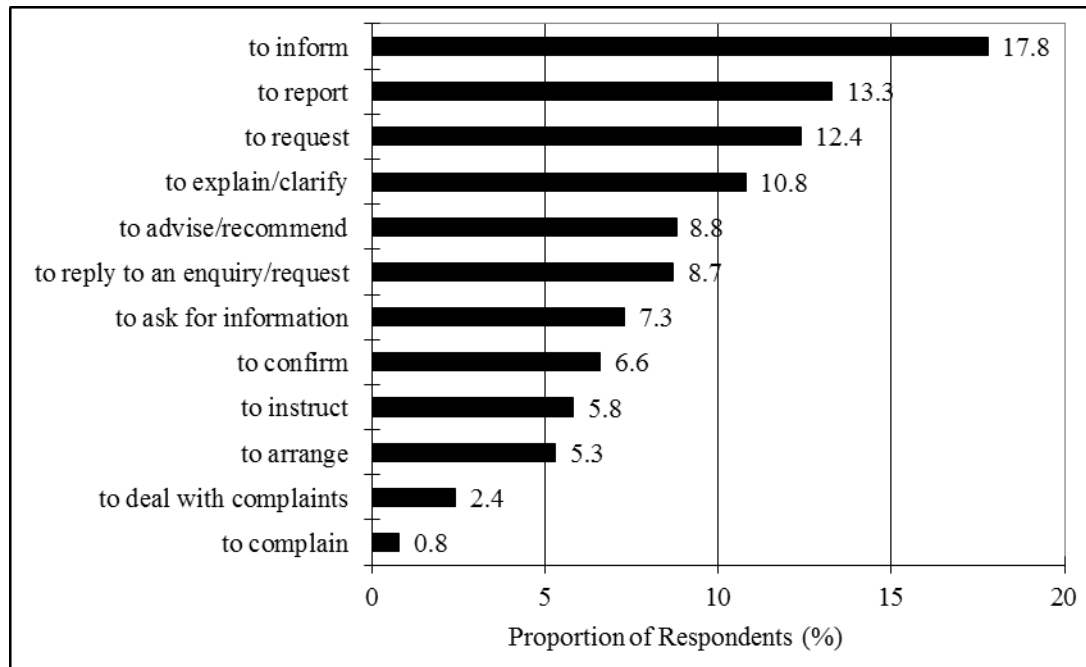


Figure 3: Purposes of writing business correspondence

### *The style, structure and length of business emails*

As noted earlier, one of the limitations of many textbooks and reference books (e.g., Dignen & McMaster, 2011) is their tendency to treat emails as discrete, functionally distinct texts rather than as messages interwoven with other texts in an unfolding chain of messages with manifold purposes. DeKay (2010, p. 110), for example, observes that “textbooks tend to treat email as an electronic memorandum only, rather than as a medium that accommodates innumerable written genres”. Although such books point to the novel characteristics of email vis-à-vis other forms of business correspondence, they rarely discuss the concept of the email chain, still less, provide examples of messages in a chain or practice in writing them.

One consequence of this is that the messages that students study and write in class are often markedly different in style, structure and length from those produced by professionals at work. Textbook tasks and models typically involve an initiatory message and/or a reply rather than messages written at various points in a chain. Katie’s email collection, for example, contains an average of 6.68 messages per chain, and the decisive message is generally the penultimate or final link. This key message, which is present in every chain, is where one of the participants resolves the problem or makes the decision about the subject that has inspired the chain. This suggests that the current pedagogical preoccupation with the first or second message in a chain may be misplaced.

Since the content of initiatory emails in most textbooks is informed by “scripted context” (Bremner, 2008, p. 314) rather than by authentic text and talk, the authors of

such messages are inevitably obliged to provide more background information than is necessary in real world emails, particularly when (as is often the case in contrived texts) the reader-writer relationship is new and the corporate context is unfamiliar. This has two consequences. First, these messages are generally longer than the first and second messages in genuine email chains. An analysis of Katie's email collection, for example, revealed that the average length of the chain initiators (not including the salutation and closing phrase) is 50 words, while that of the second messages, the remaining intermediate messages and the chain terminators is 39, 36 and 38 words respectively. Katie's 68-word message above is therefore a touch verbose, but compared with some of the carefully crafted texts that appear in many textbooks is a model of brevity. These findings are consistent with those of Gimenez (2005), who discovered that the initiator tends to be longer than the terminator, although it is worth noting that this finding was derived from only a single 9-message chain.

Second, since the writers of textbook tasks and exemplars are required to provide more background than is typically present in real world emails, they perhaps inevitably find that the conventional three-part structure for writing business correspondence is best suited to their purposes. A detailed analysis of Katie's email chains, however, revealed that few of the messages have the clearly delineated opening-body-closing structure that is typical of letters and memos, and recommended in business communication textbooks for organising emails. One dimension of this analysis entailed studying the opening moves in three categories of message in each chain, viz. the initiator, the intermediate messages (including the second one) and the terminator. The following types of opening move were identified: orientation, action and politeness.

The first category orientates the reader to the topic of the message, in most cases by referring to an issue or problem. The orientation bears some resemblance to the kind of opening recommended in textbooks, where students are encouraged to state the topic and purpose of the message (be it a letter, memo or email) in the first paragraph before proceeding to elaborate in the body of the text. However, the moves categorised as orientation in the present study are generally extremely concise (a phrase or a simple but not necessarily correctly formed sentence) and are not always demarcated in clearly defined paragraphs. This type of opening move is quickly followed by an action move involving the kinds of functions listed in Figure 3. This is illustrated in the two extracts below:

Attached is my first order, mainly repeat merchandise in other colors and fabrication.  
[orientation] Pls confirm with the X and advise delivery, i expecting delivery X to be End Dec.  
[action]  
Do u remember the X form? [orientation] I hv update our information as per instruction by X.  
[action]

The third category of opening, which is given the umbrella term politeness here, entails the cultivation or maintenance of relationships. This is generally done by expressing thanks, but also in some cases by apologising, expressing appreciation, greeting or making friendly personal remarks:

Hope you have a good trip!!  
THANK YOU!!! YOURE MY SYSTEM!

As illustrated in Figure 4, around two-thirds of the chain initiators commence with a brief orientation move (63.3%) before moving quickly to the action (as in the two

examples above). Most of the remaining initiators (31.6%) get straight to the point with an action move:

Pls advise the estimated delivery time for the enclosed order ...  
 what is the outstanding payment, except I know were not paying lining, deposit ...

Once the first link has been established, participants in the chain evidently see little need to open their messages with an orientation move, either because the requisite background has been provided in the initiator or because it is so deeply immersed in a sea of surrounding texts (telephone conversations, meetings, reports, proposals, etc.) that any reference to it is otiose. As can be seen in Figure 4, the majority of the intermediate messages (60.2%) and terminators (78.9%) commence with an action move. These messages do not therefore contain recognisable orientation or politeness moves, or indeed any evidence of the indirectness that supposedly characterises Chinese business correspondence (Ding, 2006). Only a minority of the intermediate messages (29.6%) and terminators (15.8%) begin with a politeness move. As might be expected, most politeness moves occur in replies to initiators (i.e., the first intermediate message), and typically involve thanking the writer for sending the message.

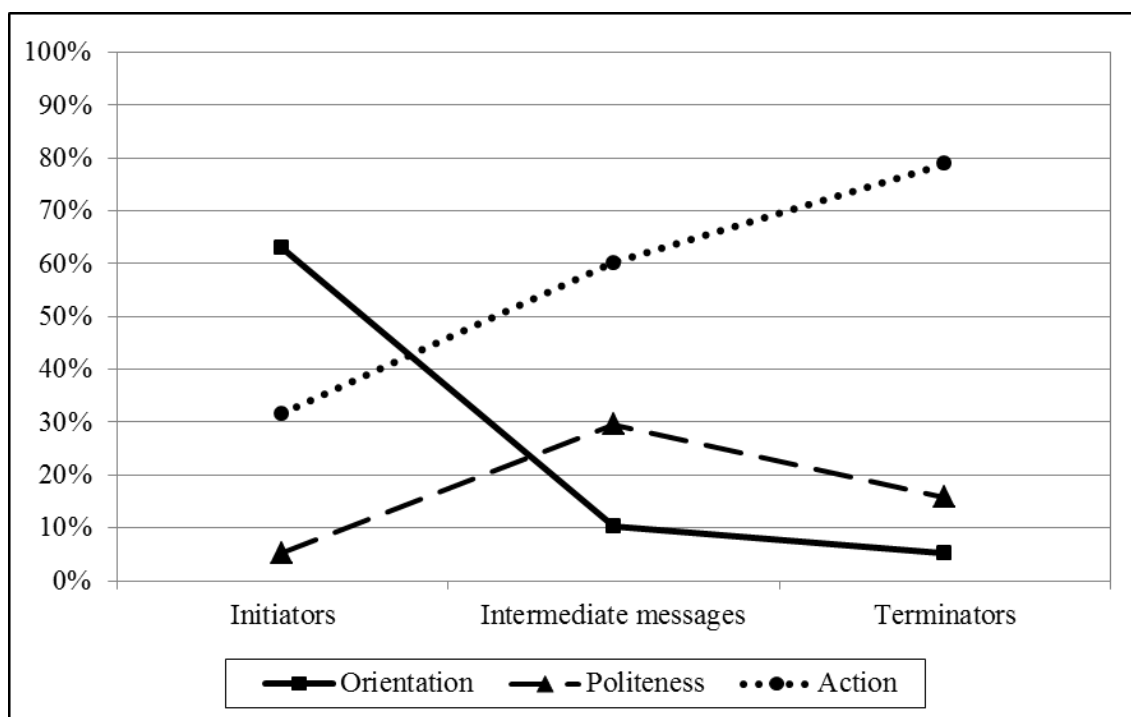


Figure 4: Opening moves of the first, intermediate and final messages in email chains

Evidence from the interviews confirms the impression of email communication that emerged from the analysis of Katie's chains, namely, that busy professionals in "time-is-money" Hong Kong need to write concise, precise messages quickly, simply and directly "to get things done" (Jim, technical support officer) (cf. Zhu & White, 2009). This applies particularly in routine, low-stakes communication:

The most important thing is to be simple. They want it in point form, nothing more. (Harriet, operation clerk)

We use very simple and short sentences. (Chris, assistant hotel manager)

We get to the point. We won't use fancy words. (Clara, quality analyst)

You have to write plainly, avoiding indirectness, and difficult vocabulary. (Elizabeth, assistant corporate communications manager)

The need for haste and brevity in such an environment (cf. Figure 2) means that observing the three-stage writing process recommended in textbooks is neither practicable nor necessary. A neophyte professional who naïvely chose to adopt such a process might not be fired on day one, but would be unlikely to receive a glowing appraisal from impatient superiors.

The evidence also suggests that well-meaning advice (e.g., Munter, Rogers, & Rymer, 2003) about the importance of appropriate style and accurate grammar is often ignored, in some cases for sound strategic reasons. Regarding style, Victor (business consultant) recalled how his conscientious efforts to apply such advice were not appreciated when he started work: “I used a lot of polite words just as I was taught at university, but my boss told me not to do so and to get to the point.” Regarding grammar, Jim claimed that “your English can be seriously wrong, but as long as the purpose of your writing is accomplished, few will care”. It may be the case, therefore, that an initial challenge that confronts greenhorns in Hong Kong is to quickly unlearn some of the principles they have studiously acquired in the classroom.

### *The challenges of writing business correspondence*

The questionnaire asked the respondents to indicate the degree of difficulty they experienced with seven aspects of writing business correspondence by circling the appropriate number on a 4-point scale anchored by the descriptors *very easy* (1) and *very difficult* (4). As can be seen in Figure 5, only a small proportion of the respondents indicated that these aspects presented some degree of difficulty. Indeed, the composite mean for writing business correspondence (1.98) is lower than that generated by the other sections of the questionnaire, namely, report writing (14 aspects; composite mean 2.17), giving presentations (20; 2.25) and participating in meetings (11; 2.31). This suggests that writing emails, letters, memos and faxes in English is the least problematic area of business communication for Hong Kong professionals.

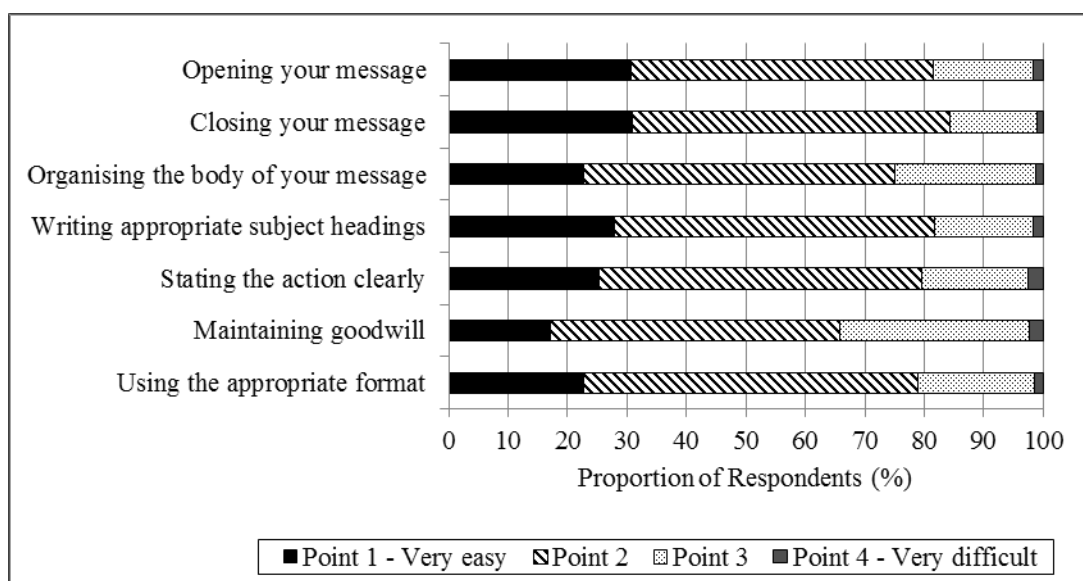


Figure 5: The challenges of writing business correspondence

The qualitative data offer three possible explanations for the survey participants' responses. First, it must be assumed that these responses were based on their experiences of writing letters and (particularly) emails rather than now apparently outmoded memos and faxes. As we have seen, letters are reserved for serious or formal matters and are thus carefully planned and written, particularly when legal issues are involved. Despite this, the interviewees generally experience little difficulty writing such texts because, as illustrated below, they reproduce or slightly adapt the content and wording of relevant examples and templates stored in corporate archives or personal files:

The staff in the legal department provide us with the standard format ... (Ursula, financial analyst)

I can use the format of previous letters ... (Chris)

We draft letter templates for other departments and colleagues within our bank so that they can fill in the contents relevant to their fields ... (Penny, deputy manager of a bank)

In other words, the scope for creativity is somewhat limited (cf. Flowerdew & Wan, 2006) and the demands on their letter-writing skills are accordingly negligible.

Second, given the centrality of email in modern business, it is likely that the survey participants based their responses largely on their experiences of email communication. Since emails are usually written quickly, simply and directly to expedite business, often in the knowledge that lapses in grammar, style, spelling and punctuation will be ignored (or not held against them), it is understandable that many respondents felt that writing such messages was not especially demanding.

Third, the aspects of business correspondence included in the questionnaire were derived from standard works on business communication, which, as noted earlier, continue to highlight the three-part structure associated with letters and memos and tend to overlook the unique characteristics of email communication. The respondents may therefore have found it difficult to respond to items about, for example, the opening and closing paragraphs of a message since, on the evidence of Katie's chains, these are often inconspicuous in the pithy, practical messages they habitually read and write at work.

While the survey results indicate that writing business correspondence is not unduly taxing, the interviews uncovered a number of issues that pose challenges for Hong Kong professionals and thus have implications for pedagogy. These issues unsurprisingly centre on aspects of email communication and highlight the importance of developing students' strategic competence rather than simply their language skills. The most prominent issues are communicating information precisely and concisely, and managing relationships through carefully calibrated style and tone. Of the 395 comments about a multiplicity of email-related issues in the interview translations, a significant proportion focused on these two issues, 73 in the case of precision and concision and 50 in the case of style and tone.

The importance of precision and concision in business correspondence has long been espoused in BE and business communication textbooks; however, the emergence of email has evidently introduced a fresh constellation of challenges for Hong Kong's on-the-go professionals, particularly (one imagines) those schooled in the more leisurely arts of letter and memo writing. These new challenges include the need to distil and convey complex technical information with crystalline clarity. Debbie, for example, outlined the difficulty of explaining an intricate production process for her customers: "The email needs to be concise and precise so that a difficult issue is not made even more complicated due to unnecessary and lengthy elaboration." The prevalence of smartphones has underscored the importance of precision and concision. "If you know

someone is using a BlackBerry,” Elizabeth observed, “you have to keep your message short, ideally one line.” However, as Amy (investor relations manager) noted, emails cannot be so succinct and practical that they overlook the human dimension of business communication: “I have to be precise and concise, but I don’t want to be so brief that I fail to impart a personal touch.”

Amy’s testimony points to the second challenge revealed in the interviews; that of managing relationships with colleagues and clients through strategically structured and stylistically attuned email messages. As Elizabeth observed, this is particularly daunting in internal communication: “I have to be skilled in manoeuvring human relationships to get my job done.” She accomplishes her practical and personal objectives by possessing a sensitive awareness of roles and relationships in her corporation and the ability to tailor the length and language of her messages accordingly. For example, she deliberately avoids “formal and sophisticated English” in emails to departmental colleagues because “I don’t want them to feel obliged to reply in a similar style”. Adopting such a strategy not only saves her colleagues’ time (and sometimes face), but also helps to secure their confidence and cooperation.

### **Pedagogical implications**

The multidimensional study reported above was inspired by the desire to narrow the gulf that inevitably separates the classroom and the office. Although only the most naïve course designer could believe that the complexities of the globalised workplace can be replicated in the classroom, there are nevertheless a number of ways in which BE syllabi, teaching materials and classroom approaches can be adjusted to reflect communication in the real world. The present study sought to uncover aspects of this world, as manifested in a quintessential business city, through a questionnaire survey, semi-structured interviews, analyses of email chains and case studies. How far the findings derived from these methods reflect this world and can be applied to other business contexts is difficult to determine. They do, however, have at least three obvious implications for the teaching of English-language business correspondence in Hong Kong.

First, whether such teaching should focus on letters, memos and faxes is questionable. Memos and faxes have now largely been superseded by email and thus could easily be removed from already overloaded syllabi without any great loss to students. The same fate could also befall letters, a traditional business communication staple, since their use is now significantly circumscribed, their function highly specialised and their content, language and organisation so highly regularised that there is little scope for originality. The prevalence of industry-specific templates and models renders much general-purpose instruction in letter writing irrelevant in practical terms, although it may of course help students to develop aspects of their written English, such as grammar, style and cohesion, which they may be able to apply to less formulaic business genres. If BE courses were to reflect letter-writing practices in Hong Kong’s service sector, students would be occupied mainly in undemanding copy-and-paste or gap-fill exercises.

Second, the evidence suggests that email plays a central role in workplace communication and should thus constitute a core component of any course that seriously seeks to prepare students for professional employment. This does not mean, however, that syllabus space devoted to the traditional forms of business correspondence should simply be transferred to email or, still less, that the pedagogical playbook typically employed in presenting and practising letters, memos and faxes

should be replicated in the teaching and learning of email communication, that is, by treating emails as discrete, functionally distinct messages. Evidence from the present investigation suggests that email messages are tightly interwoven with spoken discourses as well as other written texts. This highlights the importance of embedding email messages, both as reading input and written output, in tasks that integrate the four skills; for example, by asking students to participate in telephone conversations or negotiations (i.e., speaking, listening) about reports or proposals (i.e., reading), which then set in motion chains of messages involving functions such as informing and requesting as they work towards their goals (e.g., decisions, solutions, plans). With advanced-level students this could involve an elaborate, multi-stage simulation in which, at relevant points, participants would need to engage in real-time email exchanges via laptops, tablets or smartphones. Such a task could be designed to reflect in some degree the pace, pressure and unpredictability of the Hong Kong workplace, thereby compelling students to communicate with speed and spontaneity as well as precision and concision in order to accomplish their objectives.

Third, as reflected in the example above, the email chain rather than the one-off, one-way message should be the basis for email-related instruction. One consequence of treating emails as self-contained texts and of concentrating on the first and/or second messages is that the texts that students analyse or compose in the classroom tend to be more detailed and clearly structured than the messages professionals typically write in the office, particularly when the writer-reader relationship is new and the subject unfamiliar. The messages analysed in the present study, whether initiator, intermediate or terminator, are generally no longer than 50 words. This is because they are not only intertwined with other messages in the chain, but also (as noted above) arise from a multiplicity of documents and discussions that have been produced or participated in prior to their composition. Students should therefore be given the opportunity to write messages at different points in a chain, particularly the decisive message that is typically the penultimate or final link. They would therefore need to base the content, length and language of their messages on their assessment of the earlier links in the chain rather than on the scripted context and other guidelines provided by the textbook writer. A crucial question for BE teachers is whether the messages that students are asked to process and produce should reflect the characteristics of strategically effective real world emails, including the deliberate disregard for the conventions of grammar, spelling and punctuation, and the finer points of style.

### **Acknowledgements**

The work described in this paper was wholly supported by a grant from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (Project No. PolyU 541808). I would like to thank the other members of the project team for their assistance: Professor Winnie Cheng, Dr Gail Forey, Dr Chris Green, Dr Li Lan, Professor David Qian, Professor Martin Warren.

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## **Appendix: Interview Guide**

### ***Preliminaries***

- Briefing about project, its objectives and likely flow of the interview
- Consent form
- Personal information form/background about job nature/organisation

### ***Fundamental objectives***

- To examine the role of English in written and spoken professional communication in interviewee's workplace
- To examine the nature of the communication tasks which the interviewee is required to perform in English at work
- To identify and account for the language/communication problems the interviewee experiences when using English for professional purposes

### ***Language use in the workplace***

- Roles of written/spoken English, Cantonese, written Chinese, Putonghua
  - ❖ Text types
  - ❖ Speaking situations
  - ❖ Interplay of writing/speaking
  - ❖ Changes in HK's linguistic landscape

### ***Communication tasks***

- Types of tasks
  - ❖ Writing
  - ❖ Reading
  - ❖ Speaking/listening
- Characteristics
  - ❖ Purposes
  - ❖ Addressees/audiences/participants
  - ❖ Internal/external communication
  - ❖ In/outside HK
  - ❖ Level of formality
  - ❖ Codes of practice/legal standards
  - ❖ Disciplinary practices
  - ❖ Models/templates

### ***Challenges***

- Nature of/reasons for problems, e.g.
  - ❖ Grammar
  - ❖ Style/tone
  - ❖ Vocabulary
  - ❖ Coherence
  - ❖ Communication strategies
  - ❖ Genres

- ❖ Listening/accents
- Overcoming problems
  - ❖ Strategies
  - ❖ Role of university/previous business English courses
  - ❖ Reference materials

### ***Report writing***

- Types/purposes
- Planning/writing processes
- Sections of reports, e.g.
  - ❖ Introductions
  - ❖ Method
  - ❖ Findings
  - ❖ Conclusion
  - ❖ Recommendations

### ***Business correspondence: email, letters, memos, faxes***

- Purposes
- Roles/relationships
- Structure of messages
- Style/tone
- Communication strategies

### ***Oral presentations***

- Characteristics/purposes
- Audiences/participants
- Planning/structuring
- Delivery, e.g.
  - ❖ Communication strategies
  - ❖ Non-verbal communication
  - ❖ Transitions
  - ❖ Visual aids/support materials
  - ❖ Grammar
  - ❖ Stress, intonation

### ***Meetings, discussions, negotiations***

- Characteristics/purposes
- Participants
- Patterns of interaction
- Communication strategies
- Intercultural communication