



## ENABLING INTERMEDIATE LEARNERS TO WRITE FORMAL TRANSACTIONAL LETTERS

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### ANNOTATION

*The article deals with the problem of teaching writing to students of non-linguistic universities. The author analyzed the structural and linguistic features of formal email as a genre. The paper provides examples of the most typical mistakes of students when teaching writing as a type of speech activity in English. The author offers practical guidelines for teaching how to write business emails.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Teaching writing; English for Specific Purposes; email.*

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### ОБУЧЕНИЕ СТУДЕНТОВ ПИСАТЬ ОФИЦИАЛЬНЫЕ ПИСЬМА С ПЕРЕПИСКАМИ

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### Аннотация

*В статье рассматривается проблема обучения письму студентов неязыковых вузов. Автором проведен анализ структурных и языковых особенностей формального электронного письма как жанра. В работе приведены примеры наиболее типичных ошибок студентов при обучении письму как виду речевой деятельности на английском языке. Автором предложены практические методические рекомендации по обучению написанию деловых электронных писем.*

**Ключевые слова:** *обучение письму; английский язык для специальных целей; электронное письмо.*



In this paper the focus is on developing intermediate learners' writing skills through the genre of transactional letters. I have chosen this topic for several reasons:

- My experience shows that intermediate learners are aware of a growing range of language structures, but they can struggle to organise their written work clearly and intelligibly;

- Learners can use this genre in various contexts (information requests, job applications, exam preparation);

- The ability to write basic formal letters/emails requesting information is developed at intermediate level [4]. In the past decades, e-mail has become used for some of the purposes traditionally carried out by letter. Also, many of the request emails features can be applied to other genres of formal transactional writing.

Research supports the idea of analyzing written genres to better teach writing skills [7].

According to Tribble 'genre' is a communicative event which uses texts in a predictable way in order to achieve agreed communicative purpose, e.g. letter of application [10]. This also applies to writing emails. From the genre perspective, email can communicate different transactional messages [5], e.g. requests, responses, or directives, which tend to contain elements that are associated with particular social actions.

As a transactional email sub-genre, request emails are also influenced by subject matter, the relationships between the writer and the receiver and the pattern of organization.

A request email is a solicited electronic letter addressed to a particular individual or company in order to elicit a specific response from its reader(s). This means that from a communication point of view, the most important part of the text is the enquiry itself, and the measure of success is whether the purpose (to receive the answer) is achieved. The efficient way to do it is to follow the established conventions in the organisation of content and use the language appropriate to a formal style.

The structure of the formal request email in English is fixed, and in many respects resembles the structure of traditional letters [3] i.e. introductory, body and concluding paragraphs. However, the limitations imposed by the screen consist in the generally accepted idea that the body of a message should not extend beyond the screen [ibid]. So, paragraph structure should be kept short and clear. This also allows respondents to add reactions which refer directly to the whole of a received message.

A header of an email (the To, From and Subject lines) also distinguishes it from a traditional letter. It can be regarded as a virtual envelope, which determines from and to whom the message will be sent. The subject line is the first thing that the recipient of a request email is likely to notice,

especially from an unknown sender. So it is a critical element in the decision-making process regarding what priority to assign to it. Clear, brief, relevant, and concrete subject descriptions are recommended, with the most important piece of information put at the beginning of the line, e.g. 'Volunteer job request'. Unlike in formal letter writing, it is common for an email to have only one sentence paragraph. New paragraphs are not usually indented but rather double-spaced.

Crystal [3, p.105] points out two important functions of emails closings which are different to traditional letters: firstly, farewell "acts as a boundary marker, indicating that further scrolling down is unnecessary". Secondly, it identifies the sender to the recipient, especially if the e-address is opaque or email is forwarded.

Closely linked to genre is the notion of style. Because of its spontaneity and speed, transactional e-mail offers the option of greater levels of informality than are found elsewhere in traditional writing. Nevertheless, a lot of people expect a certain degree of formality based on status and social distance, especially in educational, business, and other workplace settings, where e-mails are routinely seen as providing a more convenient professionalism rather than just an opportunity for a chat (ibid).

Consequently, transactional email should meet the style requirements of a formal, polite, somewhat distant communication. It is undoubtedly the case that a writer needs to follow the layout rules, use the correct salutation and complimentary closing.

At the same time, due to the high level of the recipient's accessibility and assumed fast responses the style of email seems to be more natural in comparison with the traditional formal letter.

Due to its virtual nature, email discourse represents a hybrid means of communication that shares both oral and written speech characteristics [11].

Transactional email often requires the writer to ask the recipient questions. To mitigate the force of a request, it is more effective to do it indirectly:

*E.g. Could you send me more information about the trip, please?*

*I wonder if you could (possibly) provide me with more details about the company.*

To Klímová, the syntax of the written discourse is less complex [9]. Also, new technologies are conducive to the use of contracted forms or a lack of punctuation: E.g. I'm writing about your advert. Although writing is an activity which many people engage in on a daily basis with few problems in their mother tongue, it is still frequently a cause of problems for foreign learners of English [6].

Writing a request email, following its genre features, poses a challenge for learners of English [2]. This may result in failure in communication.



The most obvious potential reason is that genre might be unfamiliar. It can be assumed that some learners have not written a transactional email in their L1.

Generic conventions can also be problematic for adult learners. Even those who frequently exchange formal emails in their L1 fail to recognize transactional email communicative purpose, structure and linguistic rules due to L1 interference.

For example, in Russian formal writing it is common to omit the salutation and opening sentence, and use the pronoun 'we' instead of 'I'.

Also, if intermediate learners have relatively good language proficiency but lack genre awareness, they tend to write as much as they know about the subject in long, poorly structured paragraphs.

Though some L2 learners manage to recognise and differentiate between some distinctive genres, e.g. a business letter and an email written to a friend, they sometimes fail to apply the appropriate level of formality in practice. For example, the most demanding stylistic aspects for some intermediate ESP students are the use of politeness strategies and indirect questions:

*E.g. ? I want to get more information. ?*

Waiting for your answer.

Another student problem with style is the inclusion of colloquial expressions, such as? I also wanna visit a castle. This might be due to the fact that students generally view email as an informal means of communication. This is also the case when students employ phrasal verbs in their formal writing, e.g. look into that option.

Moreover, this could be a result of them having been encouraged to use phrasal verbs in the spoken mode and informal written registers, and they have equated phrasal-verb use with 'good English' across all contexts of use.

We have found that some students lack control of formulaic expressions due to overgeneralisation, e.g. ? with concern to your email (instead of with reference to/with regard to).

At intermediate level, a focus on appropriacy as well as accuracy is still in development and discourse markers/linking words are still being learnt. However, it can sometimes be difficult to focus student attention on cohesion, not just the language system control.

Many of the issues identified above can be addressed by a genre-based pedagogical approach to writing. In this approach, students are offered explicit and systematic explanations of the ways language functions in social contexts which determine the nature of content and organisation of the text [7, 1].

In terms of writing development, Dudley-Evans [cited in 1] identifies three stages in genre-based teaching. First, a model of a particular genre is introduced and analysed with the teacher's guidance to identify the text's communicative purpose and

potential readership. Learners then carry out exercises which manipulate genre dependent structure and relevant language forms. Finally, learners are able to independently produce a target text (in our case transactional email requiring information).

Although most of the learner problems identified with formal request email writing can be addressed by an awareness-raising genre-based approach, areas, which might need further explicit training, are organisation and style.

The examination of model text is often prominent in the genre approach to writing, and helps raise learners' awareness of the conventions of typical request emails in English. Students read the letter and label the paragraphs with the names of the moves.

This activity allows students to realize how authors organise their writing. To further identify the structure of request email, learners are given the cut up strips of such an email and asked to group them into a formal letter. This is followed by examining the whole text. Learners underline the key words/phrases and identify the aim of different paragraphs (e.g. reason for writing, relevant experience, requesting details, etc). Then students complete the paragraph plan. This activity is effective because students generally appreciate the examples showing specifically what they have to produce. This raises their awareness of the features of the genre and gives them some language chunks that they can use in their own writing.

To enable students to use the appropriate style in their writing, I give them the inappropriately written request email and ask a few simple comprehension questions, e.g. Have they been in contact before?

Then I ask what is wrong with the text, e.g. too informal, doesn't follow request email-writing conventions. I then elicit examples from the students of what they will need to change to make it more formal (vocabulary, sentence structure, layout, paragraphing, greeting and close). In pairs, students re-write the message to make it more appropriate as a formal email.

At this stage I also draw attention to the conventional greetings and endings for formal emails. It may also be worth highlighting the punctuation used here, e.g. a comma after the greeting, as this can vary between languages. Other issues which are problematic for my learners, such as paragraphing, discourse markers/linking words, over-long sentences, etc., can also be dealt with here. In this activity students master their writing skills through understanding the type of language that is used in a formal email by contrasting it with informal communications. This enables the students to use the style appropriate to the purpose.



Recently, using games has become a popular technique applied by many educators in the classrooms and recommended by methodologists in the world. Many sources list the advantages of the use of games in foreign language classrooms.[11]

Taking a genre-based approach to teaching writing skills ensures that necessary language is treated in context by explicitly drawing attention to both purpose and audience. By so doing, it can address most of the problems intermediate students face with organisation, style and appropriate language patterns. The suggested teaching solutions demonstrate how a genre-based approach might be realised with regards to writing a formal request emails. Going forward, I will encourage students to exploit authentic discourse structures, so they comprehend writing as a tool that they can utilize outside the classroom.

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