

A Final Report on the Training of Effective Business Writers

Anna Yu, Irene Ng, Pionie Foo and Lilian Law

Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

Abstract

This report draws on four teacher-researchers' year long collaboration in planning, teaching and researching a business letter writing programme at the tertiary level. The authors will examine the design of the programme, highlight insights leading to the revamping of the programme and discuss issues related to the integration of teaching and research dimensions. The report focuses on two major themes of the project. After a brief description of the background of the research, we will discuss the purpose and focus of, and rationale behind the writing programme. Two essential aspects of the action research will also be addressed. One aspect is the research process itself, using the essential elements of planning, experimenting, evaluating, reflecting and recycling to improve the writing programme. Outcomes and insights of the research are also discussed. We will reflect on the teaching of writing and discuss what we learned about teacher research and other key issues uncovered by the research.

Introduction

This paper reports on the research of a business letter writing programme in light of action learning. The aim of the action research project is twofold. The writing programme is designed with the aim to help students overcome their writing problems and train them to write effective business letters. At the same time, the design of the programme is examined and its effectiveness is evaluated with the aim to improve the programme and the teaching of writing.

The paper begins with a brief description of the background of the research. It then focuses on the various stages of the research, going through the cyclical process of planning, experimenting, evaluating, reflecting and recycling. The paper concludes with some reflections on the teaching of writing and insights gained from action research.

Background

The writing programme is offered to students at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology as an optional writing course by the consultants of the university's English Writing Centre. It was initiated in response to several common problems observed in students' writing. The majority of letters submitted to the English Writing Centre for consultation reveal that more often than not, the writing purposes are not met, essential information is missing and the tone is inappropriate. There are also typographical and surface errors in the writing. Moreover, students who seek consultation seem to rely heavily on the writing consultants to improve their writing.

Further analysis of these problems shows that these students do not seem to fully understand the writing process. They may think that their writing finishes once the first draft is completed. At best, they believe that editing only involves proofreading for grammatical errors. The heavy de-

pendence on writing consultants also seems to result from little confidence in their own ability or a weak sense of responsibility in improving their writing.

With the above analysis in mind, it is believed that the cognitive skills of analysing the writing process need to be developed and strengthened. The students should also possess strategies to edit their writing in order to meet the needs required by their specific writing situation. Helping students 'to improve the communication with their audience by analysing the writing situation' (Reid, 1995, p. 3) thus becomes an important aspect in the design of the writing programme.

The Writing Programme

Planning

Upon the initial reflection on the students' writing problems, the researchers generated several principles underlying the design of the writing programme. The most important of these is the focus on the conceptual level of communication rather than the linguistic elements used to present the ideas. As it is believed that the use of cognitive skills throughout the entire writing process can help students determine and improve the purpose, content and tone of their writing, the writing programme should provide the training and opportunity for students to enhance their cognitive maturity. With a strong emphasis on the cognitive dimension of writing, the analysis of the writing situation becomes the first and foremost step in all the writing tasks designed for the participants of the writing programme.

Another principle is that the teaching of different types of business letters is not emphasised. Instead, a generic model of situation analysis is introduced and practised throughout the course. The situation analysis model raises students' awareness of the various elements at play in the writing situation. It focuses their attention on an in-depth consideration of these elements and their relationship so that they can better determine their writing purpose and provide the right kind of information to their reader(s) logically and in the correct tone. With such a model, each writing situation is viewed specifically. The same model can therefore be applied to different writing situations regardless of changes in any part of the writing context.

A third principle is the emphasis on the role of the audience in the writing process. A successful communicator needs to fulfil audience expectations in addition to satisfying his/her own purposes. However, 'the writer who generates a text's main ideas is often the least sensitive reader of that text' (Schriver, 1993, p. 151). To gear students' writing towards reader-centredness, the course should provide some sort of audience to whom the writer can show his/her work and get feedback from (Sitko, 1993, pp. 170-171). It is believed that through interacting with a 'live' audience, the students can better anticipate audience's queries and perceive gaps in their writing. This kind of interaction is also considered an intermediate step which a student writer has to go through on his/her way to becoming an independent writer who can communicate effectively with an 'imaginary' audience.

Experimenting

Objectives

Based on the above principles, the writing programme is designed with several objectives in mind. To become effective writers, students should be able to:

- analyse the writing situation, produce writing to achieve their writing purposes and the audience's needs;

- edit their work more effectively and frequently; and
- become independent writers.

Pedagogy

To help students sharpen their cognitive skills so that they can achieve the first two objectives, a detailed situation analysis checklist is designed. The multiple facets of the writing situation are presented, viz., sender's goal and type of message, receiver's goal and queries, conflict and risk inherent in the relationship between the sender and receiver. Moreover, students have to consider the content, organisation and tone of the letter while presenting the ideas generated from the situation analysis (Appendix 1). This situation analysis checklist is used in all three modules of the writing programme: planning, drafting and editing.

In planning, students learn to analyse the writing situation with direction from the checklist. They are then divided into three groups, with each group given a different situation on which to write. They analyse the situation with their group members using the checklist. Each student then follows the group analysis to draft their letters. They also need to record any difficulties encountered in or remarks about the writing process as they draft.

To edit their work more effectively and frequently, students need to be made aware that editing is a step which cannot be omitted in the writing process. They also need to learn that editing starts at the global level with content and organisation.

In the editing module, students are also made aware of the needs and expectations of their readers. The writers are provided with feedback from another group of students who role-play their employers. These 'employers' also analyse the same writing situation using the checklist. They then evaluate the letters based on the checklist and return them to the writers with written comments. Based on these comments, the writers edit their letters using the editing strategies learned from their teachers' instruction.

As further training in global editing, students are shown multiple drafts in the editing process to demonstrate how a letter which lacks considerations from the audience's perspective can be revised to balance the writer's and reader's needs. The drafts are sequenced in such a way that editing moves from global to local levels. After the input, students edit a letter that requires significant revision. A final exercise on editing requires students to record the pathway used in the editing process of a letter.

In the training of independent writers, students have to become resourceful as well as competent. To help students expand their limited internal resources, a variety of external resources and reference materials need to be introduced as well as tasks designed to help students critically judge the usefulness of these materials. The pathway exercise mentioned above has another purpose of training students to become independent. They are required to use external resources at various stages of the editing process. They note down, in groups, the uses and effectiveness of external resources. Other groups provide feedback on the appropriateness of the materials. In another task, students are required to search for examples of different types of letters. They need to write evaluative remarks about the content, organisation and tone of these letters, which are posted on the board for other students to comment on.

The writing programme was first implemented over a period of 12 weeks, with a total of 8 lessons and 1 consultation. Various evaluative instruments were used to measure the students' improvements in their cognitive skills and the writing they produced. The data collected were used to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme so that informed judgement and subsequent revisions could be made about the objectives, pedagogy and evaluation of the programme.

Evaluating Round 1

Evaluation is a crucial element in an action research project because it helps the researchers to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the project and to decide which part of the course should be retained and which part should be revised.

Whether students show improvement in their writing performance is obviously a key indicator of a successful writing programme. But measuring performance alone is insufficient for two reasons. First, the strong emphasis on cognitive training may not be readily reflected in performance due to students' language inadequacy. Second, the short duration of the programme may not help students improve language proficiency, which is a key factor affecting writing performance. In view of these aspects, the evaluation of this action research will cover two dimensions: performance and attitude.

The quality of students' performance was measured by comparing students' pre- and post- writing performance which was sub-categorised into four areas: content, organisation, tone and overall impression. To ensure that the marking was reliable, three raters assessed the scripts individually.

The change in attitude was indicated by whether students used various writing skills in their daily life. They answered a questionnaire on writing habits, both before and after completing the course, to identify any change in their use of writing skills. The above information is further elaborated by qualitative data collected from the course evaluation questionnaire and the one-to-one consultation administered at the end of the course.

Table 1: Students' Performance and Attitude Change in Round 1

Items	Performance		Attitude
	t-value	1-tailed sig	response difference
Writing (Content)	3.81**	0.001	+ 7.50%
(Organisation)	2.20**	0.024	
(Tone)	3.77**	0.002	
(Overall impression)	4.34**	0.001	
Analysing the writing situation	Nil		+18.76%
Editing	Nil		+17.92%

df = 12

$t_{crit} = 1.782$ (*p < .05)

$t_{crit} = 2.681$ (**p < .01)

The results in writing performance were encouraging, showing statistically significant improvement in all four areas as indicated by the t-values in Table 1. Furthermore, a higher percentage of students tended to use the writing skills covered in the course.

Reflecting and Recycling

Despite the improvements students showed in their writing, the researchers identified various aspects of the writing programme which can be enhanced. The changes resulting from the researchers' observations are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Changes in Round 2

	Round 1	Round 2
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> independence in writing: internal & external resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> independence in writing: internal resources
Pedagogy	<p><u>activities</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> interactive & experiential <p><u>situation analysis checklist</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> linear model brief headings <p><u>simulation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> written feedback from students role-playing the boss <p><u>editing</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> edit others' letter editing at global level focus on editing process 	<p><u>activities</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> more input & guidance before interaction <p><u>situation analysis checklist</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> graphical model guiding questions & vocabulary items to facilitate verbalisation <p><u>simulation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> interactive feedback with students role-playing the reader <p><u>editing</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> edit own letter editing for organisation & tone focus on editing performance
Evaluation	<p><u>tapping students' attitude</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 consultation: post-course questionnaires: yes-no responses <p><u>measuring writing performance</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> writing <p><u>marker reliability</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 raters (researchers) 	<p><u>tapping students' attitude</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 consultations: after situation analysis, after editing & post-course guided reflective journals: after situation analysis & after editing questionnaires: 5-point scale <p><u>measuring writing performance</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> writing situation analysis editing <p><u>marker reliability</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 8 raters training provided & inter-rater reliability measured

One of the major changes in Round 2 was the redefinition of the objective — independence in writing. In Round 1, one aspect of independence is defined as 'knowing how to and willing to use external resources'. However, it was discovered that when students used external resources, they mostly focused on following the content and organisation and copying set phrases from the sources. The researchers felt that only when students have internalised all these external resources can they write letters which are appropriate to their specific writing situations. Therefore, the focus in Round 2 was redirected towards helping students strengthen their self-reliance on their ever-expanding internal resources.

Based on the researchers' observations and students' feedback, the situation analysis model was modified. In Round 1, there was only a list of headings in the checklist to prompt students to analyse the writing situation. Students found it difficult to complete the checklist due to several reasons: lack of experience in analysis, insufficient vocabulary to verbalise their analysis and failure to understand the intricate relationship between the various elements of the writing situation. Therefore, in Round 2, the headings were expanded into guiding questions and vocabulary was provided to facilitate verbalisation. A graphical model (Appendix 2) was also developed to help students visualise the relationship between the elements in the writing situations.

Changes were made in the activities in Round 2. Training at different stages of the writing process began with more teacher guidance since students seemed to lack the cognitive skills and knowledge demanded by the writing programme. They were initially provided with some degree of direction in order to evaluate their own progress with the models and examples provided. Another change occurred in the simulation activity. Instead of obtaining written feedback from students role-playing the boss, in Round 2 students engaged in face to face discussion with their peers role-playing the reader. This activity helped them understand the expectations and needs of their readers more directly. In Round 2, students edited their own instead of other's writing. Moreover, the researchers believed that good performance entails editing at both global and local levels. If students performed well in their writing tasks, it was not necessary to document each step meticulously in the pathway activity.

A more in-depth study requires assessing students' use of sub-skills — analysing the writing situation and editing. With the original evaluative measures, the data cannot indicate how well students mastered the sub-skills and whether revisions in the writing programme resulted in a greater progress in students' overall writing performance. The data from the questionnaire relating to the use of writing skills was also very limited as students were only asked if they used the skills or not. Frequencies were not clearly shown, so the magnitude of change was unclear.

As a remedy, the researchers revised the evaluation design to enhance its comprehensiveness, validity and reliability (Table 2). Apart from measuring students' overall writing performance before and after training, the scope of evaluation expanded to include students' mastery of the two sub-skills. And to ensure that the pre- and post-course writing tasks were at similar levels of difficulty, the researchers designed comparable writing situations using the situation analysis checklist.

In Round 2, guided reflective journals were used to obtain formative evaluation on students' cognitive development in the two sub-skills. To gather reliable cognitive data, the researchers interviewed students immediately after the training and practice of each sub-skill. Such consultations were also useful in clarifying students' misconceptions as well as helping them overcome individual difficulties.

These journals and consultations were also a source of qualitative data on students' attitude change, supplementing the quantitative data collected from the two other evaluative instruments: the questionnaires on writing habits and on course evaluation. The limitations of the questionnaires were also overcome. Instead of a yes-no answer, students were provided with a 5-point scale

to indicate their frequency in using a particular writing skill. Both the qualitative and quantitative data provided a sharper profile of the attitudinal change due to training.

All the changes stated above enhanced the validity of the evaluation. Effort was also made to improve the reliability, as the number of raters increased from 3 to 8, involving language teachers other than the researchers. Training and standardisation meetings were organised to ensure uniformity in understanding and using the marking criteria. Inter-rater reliability was measured, too.

Evaluating Round 2

Students' performance and attitude changes were measured with the revised evaluative instruments. The data are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3: Students' Performance and Attitude Change in Round 2

Items	Performance		Attitude	
	t-value	1-tailed sig	response difference	
Writing (Content)	5.22**	0.000	3.15**	0.005
(Organisation)	2.09**	0.025		
(Tone)	0.77	0.224		
(Overall impression)	2.91**	0.004		
Analysing the writing situation	5.59**	0.000	4.00**	0.001
Editing	2.04*	0.027	4.19**	0.000

df = 22 $t_{crit} = 1.717$ (*p < .05) $t_{crit} = 2.508$ (**p < .01)

Students' performance in writing business letters improved significantly, especially in terms of content (t=5.22**, p=0.000) and organisation (t=2.09**, p=0.049). Such improvement was likely to result from students' significant progress in analysing the writing situation (t=5.59**, p=0.000) and their mastery of the editing skills (t=2.04*, p=0.027).

The results in cognitive improvement were very encouraging. Students showed significant improvement in both the sub-skills and overall writing skills. They tended to make use of the skills they learned in the writing programme much more frequently than before. The following excerpts from students' journals show how well they mastered the sub-skills:

Q: Do you have confidence that the checklist will help you in writing?

Ans.: The checklist is actually quite hard to use (as I'm not used to doing so) and it takes me about an hour to finish the table! Nevertheless compared to my past writing habits, this method saves me some time in writing an actual letter as it speeds up my writing. It provides me with a clear concept of what I'm writing and gives me confidence in presentation.

Q: I think editing is :

Ans.: (before lesson 4) to revise grammatical and spelling mistakes.

(after lesson 5) to evaluate and fulfil sender and writer goals through change in organisation and tone and adding some lubricant ideas. Also, it involves change in the local level.

Overall speaking, the course is effective in improving students' business writing, both in attitude and performance. Ninety-five per cent of the students confirmed in the course evaluation questionnaire that they would recommend this course to their friends. One student wrote:

... [the course] can help you to write the letters based on some basic and useful techniques.

Insights into Teaching and Researching

The researchers encountered a lot of difficulties in various stages of the research project. The most important difficulty relates to the validity and reliability of the data. Since a standardised means to evaluate the cognitive aspects of writing could not be found, the researchers resolved to use the situation analysis checklist to measure this dimension. A clearer and more explicit checklist was developed to ensure better verbalisation. Even with the improved checklist and more teacher guidance, some students were still unsure of their ability. The researchers had to provide more learner training and interactive feedback in consultations to help them build their confidence. At the same time, these measures could ensure that students' responses were a more reliable indicator of their cognitive ability.

Another more basic and inherent problem of this study lies in the discrepancy between the 'imaginary' reader and 'real-life' reader. Regardless of how students were trained to think about the needs and expectations of their reader, this 'imaginary' reader and/or the 'simulated' reader role-played by their peers could be very different from the reader they encounter in real life situations. To overcome this obstacle, students could train themselves to become more perceptive to the intricacies involved in communication.

Insights into the Teaching of Writing

Before the commencement of this study, the researchers believed that the problems demonstrated in students' writing were related to students' cognitive development. The results of the study further convinced them that the foremost step in improving students' writing is to improve the quality of students' thinking. This conclusion does not mean that language proficiency has no place in students' writing performance, but rather that cognitive skills development has an even more important role in improving the quality of students' writing.

The situation analysis model developed in the training programme aims to help students develop their cognitive skills. This generic model can be applied to the teaching of other genres of writing, e.g., report writing and essay writing. The researchers believe that cognitive skills are universal and can be transferred to the writings of other languages. As Chinese business communication skills become more and more important in Hong Kong, further studies can be conducted in applying the model to Chinese business writings.

Although improving the quality of students' writing is important, training students to be self-reliant in dealing with writing tasks and helping them build confidence in their writing are equally, if not more, important. Such independence can be achieved through the student-centred activities of the training programme.

Insights into Action Research

The interactive characteristic of action research is best described by Zuber-Skerritt (1992a) in that 'action may influence the object (i.e., the objects of teaching and the teaching context), but the object has also an impact on the action (it may shape, restrict or enhance the action)' (p. 89). The researchers' experience in this action research confirmed the above idea. In helping students improve their writings in the research process, certain beliefs of the researchers concerning students' writing also evolved with the progress of the study. For example, 'independence' in writing was redefined as a result of such changes in the researchers' beliefs.

The researchers believe that action research is a sensible and practical way to bring like-minded teachers together to inquire into meaningful issues of practice that emerged out of actual teaching. In this particular project, they researched alternative approaches to the teaching of writing and means of assessing and reporting on students' learning. Just as Zuber-Skerritt (1992b) describes, the researchers gained 'a deeper understanding of the whole situation — with a greater awareness of how student problems can arise and be solved; with the realisation of the need for continuous evaluation, self-evaluation, self-reflection and change; and, as a result, with professional development' (p. 88). The researchers' experience convinced them that action research is a way to integrate educational research with teaching practice, and a way of professional development for teachers as researchers and reflective practitioners.

Appendix 1

Situation Analysis Checklist

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sender's goal	
message to receiver	
receiver's goal	
receiver's queries	
relationship between sender and receiver	
conflict of interest to be resolved	
risks to be avoided	
important ideas and organisation	
tone	
layout (appearance)	

List of words to describe tone:

warm, friendly, concerned, enthusiastic, engaging, inviting, constructive, supportive, business-like, tactful, apologetic, consoling, respectful, aggressive, polite, challenging, assuring, pacifying, assertive, impartial, warning, understanding, condescending

Appendix 2

Situation Analysis Model

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