ENHANCING ABILITY OF BUSINESS ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS IN WRITING BUSINESS REPORTS

NÂNG CAO KHẢ NĂNG VIẾT BÁO CÁO KINH DOANH CỦA SINH VIÊN NGÀNH TIẾNG ANH THƯƠNG MẠI

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ABSTRACT

Writing business reports is one of the requirements for writing skill development in Business English (BE) course for Business English major students at University of Foreign Language Studies, The University of Danang. According to the BE syllabus based on the course book "Market Leader" (Intermediate) assigned for BE major second-year students, several skills such as reading, writing, listening, speaking should be mastered within the time budget of 45 hours together with the ability to improve the business English vocabulary. Therefore, the mastery of business report writing within the limited time has been a real pressure not only for students but also for teachers. This article aims at proposing some useful strategies in enhancing students' business report writing, and measuring their improvement in business report writing by employing a test for an experimental group and a control group. In addition, the surveys on students' responses on writing strategies and mistake correction methods offered insightful implications for innovating teaching and learning process.

Key words: business report; business English; writing skill; strategies; students' responses

TÓM TẮT

Viết báo cáo kinh doanh là một trong những kỹ năng viết được yêu cầu giảng dạy trong môn Tiếng Anh Thương mại (BE) của sinh viên BE thuộc Trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ, Đại học Đà Nẵng. Theo chương trình học BE thiết kế dựa trên giáo trình Market Leader (Intermediate) dành cho sinh viên BE năm thứ hai, sinh viên phải rèn luyện nhiều kỹ năng như đọc, viết, nghe, và nói, cũng như làm giàu vốn từ vựng thương mại trong thời lượng 45 giờ. Do đó, việc thông thạo viết báo cáo kinh doanh trong một thời gian hạn chế thực sự là một áp lực cho cả sinh viên lẫn giáo viên. Bài viết này nhằm nêu lên một số chiến lược hữu ích trong việc nâng cao khả năng viết báo cáo kinh doanh cho sinh viên, và nghiên cứu sự tiến bộ của sinh viên thông qua bài kiểm tra dành cho nhóm thử nghiệm và nhóm kiểm soát. Ngoài ra, phần khảo sát về phản ứng của sinh viên đối với các chiến lược viết và cách thức sửa lỗi là những gợi ý quan trọng cho việc nâng cao hiệu quả dạy và học.

Từ khóa: báo cáo kinh doanh; tiếng Anh thương mại; kỹ năng viết; chiến lược; phản ứng của sinh viên

1. Introduction

Business reports (BR) are a type of assignment in which the writer analyzes a situation and applies business theories to produce a range of suggestions for improvement [7]. According to McCarthy (1979), they are an essential part of doing business and one's ability to be proficient in this area is critical to the ability to pursue commercial success.

As a part of English for Specific Purposes, this fundamental skill has been taught widely in Western and Asian countries for business students. Interestingly, the prestigious Wall Street Journal has suggested that 75 per cent of jobs created between 1982 and 2010 require, or will require, report writing skills [10]. However, in Vietnam, the mastery of BR writing is still a challenge for students and teachers as most of BE teachers do not have a sufficient business background.

Generally, after graduation, BE major students at Danang University of Foreign Language Studies (UFL) are supposed to work in some areas relating to business. Thus, it is necessary for them to be proficient in this skill. Due to the strict BE syllabus, the schedule for studying BR writing spans 4 weeks, with two

hours per week. Therefore, most of the class time was used for introducing the writing process, strategies or paper correction. Most of students' writing practice has been done at home. The author, therefore, carried out an empirical study in the hope of finding out the effectiveness of Graham's strategy application (2008) in BR writing and exploring students' responses on these writing strategies and mistake correction methods.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Business Report

A business report is a medium which might present the actual solution to solve a business problem or record past business information that is used toward future business planning (Thomson, 2005). Business reports are typically assigned to enable enterprises to examine available and potential solutions to a problem or situation; apply business and management theory to a practical situation; demonstrate the writer's analytical and evaluation skills in identifying possible solutions and outcomes; reach conclusions about a problem and provide recommendations for future action [8].

Kinds of reports are often divided according to purposes. Bovee, Thill, and Barbara (2003) give an example of two main kinds of reports: informational reports which present information about the subject and analytical reports which require the writer to do a research on the subject of the report. Meanwhile, Locker (1997) has recommended other types of reports such as business reports in everyday use such as sales reports; quarterly reports as examples of information reports; annual reports, audit reports as examples of analytical reports; and feasibility reports, problem-solving reports as examples of recommendation reports.

In addition, Ur (1996:168) denotes that the process of writing can vary individually, which means there is no right system of writing, there should be only guiding strategies so that learners can experiment and develop their own effective personal ways.

2.2. Characteristics of Business Reports

2.2.1. The Process and Format of a Business Report

a) The Process

Thomson (2005) indicated that in generating a BR, the following steps should be considered: determining the purpose of the report; considering the target readers; gathering, organizing and analyzing the supporting information; determining the solution and/or findings; and determining the report format.

b) The Format

Generally, a business report consists of three main parts [10]:

- **Front Matter***: Cover, Title Page, Executive Summary, Table of Contents, List of Figures.

- **Body of the Report***: Introduction, Findings and Discussion, Conclusions, Recommendations.

- **Back Matter***: Appendices, References, Glossary (if required).

Among those items, the two most important parts of a business report should be considered as follows:

+ *An executive summary* or an 'abstract' is very crucial as some readers may only read this part. It should be written last and be sure to include a summary of all parts of the report such as: the purpose; scope of the investigation; methodology; major findings with key statistics; analysis, conclusions and recommendations.

- *Findings and discussion* include the findings supporting the hypotheses, a comparison of results with other relevant theories, factors influencing the results and implications of the results.

2.2.2. The Difference between Business Reports and Essays

An accessible reader - centered style which includes standard formal English is a hallmark of academic writing including in essays or reports. However, there are some key differences between the two genres:

Table 1. *Differences between Essays and Business Reports* (*Source: BR Helpsheet, [10]*)

	Essays	Business Reports
Purpose	Articulate a point of view in relation to a particular proposition	Often recommend action to solve a specific problem
Format & Structure	Have introduction, body and conclusion sections that normally do not use headings	Always have sections clearly divided by numbered headings (and often sub-headings)
	Use cohesive paragraphs to link ideas rather than list dot-points	Use shorter, more concise paragraphs and dot-points where applicable
Abstract	Typically don't normally need an abstract as readers read the text carefully	Always have a executive summary as readers are typically 'time poor'
Graphics	Rarely use graphics as written evidence	Feature graphics for supporting main points
Writer	Are generally the result of individual work	Are often the result of group work
Reader	Are written for the lecturer/ tutor or other academic audiences	Are addressed to a specific audience (i.e. client or manager) established by the topic

2.3. Strategies for Enhancing Business Report Writing

The strategies for writing business reports were adopted from 7-strategies for teaching writing developed by Graham (2008) as follows:

- Strategy 1*: Dedicate time to writing, with writing occurring across the curriculum, and involve students in various forms of writing over time.*

Hazzlitt (1820) states that "the more a man writes, the more he can write." This statement emphasizes the essential principal of frequent practice in writing to make much progress. Also, Graham & Perin (2007) highlight the importance of frequent and sustained writing. A good rule of thumb is that students should spend at least one hour or more each day in the process of writing.

Obviously, it is better for students to practise writing both formal and informal BR, which differ from each other in the format, length, content, personal pronouns and contractions, numbers of headings and visual aids.

- **Strategy 2***: Increase students' knowledge about writing.*

According to Graham & Perin (2007), one way to acquire knowledge about writing is through reading various samples of BR in the coursebooks, business books and internet. Readers are able to learn the ways of using words to evoke specific images and feelings, manipulating sentences, organizing ideas, and setting and changing the mood of text, or using illustrations. In addition, the writer needs to read widely to locate the best resources for writing. To ensure objectivity, if the writer is doing a report on a particular organization, he/she should not just rely on information from them.

- **Strategy 3***: Foster students' interest, enjoyment, and motivation to write.*

Graham & Perin (2007) have made an impressive statement that an important ingredient in fostering students' interest in writing is to make sure their writing assignments serve a real or meaningful purpose. And students are more likely to enjoy writing if the classroom environment is a supportive and pleasant place.

To make sure students analyze and execute the tasks effectively, it is necessary for the teachers to give them comprehensive instructions on the major steps in writing BR and clear explanations on the nature and requirements of each business case.

*- **Strategy 4***: *Help students become strategic writers.*

Most of what goes on during writing is not visible. It occurs inside the writer's head. One thing exceptional writing teachers do is setting up a predictable writing routine where students are expected to plan, draft, revise, edit, and share what they write. In essence, they treat writing as a process and expect students to engage in the same processes as skilled writers. Students should think of their roles in each business case and write reports as they are in the real situations. The source of data collected for writing should be really relevant, credible, current and referenced appropriately to the specific cases.

*- **Strategy 5***: *Teach basic writing skills to mastery.*

There are many skills that developing writers need to learn to the point where they can be executed with little effort or thought. This includes handwriting, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization skills. While sentence construction skills always require conscious attention and effort, developing writers need to become efficient and flexible in constructing the written vessels that contain their ideas (Graham, 2006).

*- **Strategy 6***: *Take advantage of technological writing tools*

An enormous array of new technological tools for writing such as emails, class or individual blogs, googledrive, grammar checker, online text correction and online business forums, which can be used to support developing writers in general and struggling writers in particular. These tools make the process of writing easier and often provide very specific types of support.

*- **Strategy 7***: *Use assessment to gauge students' progress and needs.*

Assessment is an integral part of writing instruction. It allows teachers to determine if their writing program is working, whether it needs to be adjusted, and if some children need extra help. One way to assess these traits in a sample of student writing is to evaluate each one separately by using a rating scale. Another way is to monitor how students go about the process of composing and their attitudes toward writing. Apart from correcting vocabulary and grammar errors, it is essential for the teachers to analyze whether students' ideas, findings and recommendations are appropriate in each business case and remind them of using as many business vocabulary as possible.

3. Research Method

3.1. Participants

The research was carried out on BE major second-year students at UFL. In order to guarantee the reliability and validity of the experiment, the subjects of this research from two classes were divided into two groups: Experimental Group (EG, 32 participants) and Control Group (CG, 30 ones). The EG received writing strategy instruction adopted from Graham (2008) in 4 weeks. Whereas, CG only received the routine writing instruction - Product Approach - which concentrated on the final product and required the teachers to present a model text and analyze the purpose, the organization, and the style.

3.2. Research Methods and Data Analysis

The research employed Testing and Questionnaire Data. As for the first method, two groups EG and CG were required to take a test after 4-week training on business report writing. The t-test calculation revealed the statistic difference on performance of the two groups and the efficacy of applying Graham writing strategies.

After finishing the test, the questionnaires were allotted to Experimental Group (N=32) to identify students' preference on instructed writing strategies and their attitude towards mistake correction methods. The levels of favorite were counted and averaged based on 5-points Likert-Type Scales by Vagias and Wade (2006) including: extremely like (5 points), like (4 points), neither like nor dislike (3 points), dislike (2 points) and dislike (1 point). The dataset of the survey were analyzed quantitatively to find out means and standard derivations (S.D.) which were the bases for comparison and analysis.

4. Findings

4.1. Test scores

***Table 2.** Descriptive statistics for a business report writing test on EG and CG*

	N	High	Low	Median	Mean	S.D.	df	t-value	P (2-tailed)
Control group (CG)	30	7.0	4.0	5.0	5.40	0.81	60	2.73	0.0083
Experimental group (EG)	32	8.0	5.0	6.0	6.03	0.99			

It is clear from the table that there were significantly higher scores in performance of EG compared with CG. Specifically, EG had the highest mark of 8.0 and the lowest of 5.0, whereas, CG had 7.0 and 4.0 respectively. Similarly, the median also accelerated from 5.0 to 6.0. From these data, t-test analysis was carried out meticulously to investigate the effectiveness of Graham writing instruction. The comparison of t-test statistical data showed that the mean scores of CG (M = 5.40, SD = 0.81) was remarkably different from EG (M = 6.03, SD = 0.99). The value of the P(T<=t) two-tail equals 0.0083 <.05 in the business report writing test indicated the statistically significant difference in the performance of the two groups. It is obvious from the t-test calculation that Graham writing strategies has made remarkable contribution to students' improvement in BR writing.

4.2. Questionnaires

4.2.1. Responses towards teaching and learning strategies

***Table 3.** Students' responses towards teaching and learning strategies (EG, N=32)*

No	Strategies	Mean	S.D.
1	T. gives directions to students at every step	2.97	1.16
2	T. emphasizes fluency rather than accuracy	2.38	1.28
3	T. highlights cohesion and coherence	3.28	1.09
4	T. emphasizes accuracy of the language	2.68	1.20
5	T. draws attention to the use of linking words	3.14	1.12
6	T. uses pair work to teach writing	3.74	0.89
7	T. uses group work to teach writing	3.21	1.10
8	T. introduces teaching aids to help students to write	3.64	0.92
9	T. identifies the objectives of the writing tasks	2.34	1.30
10	T. focuses on format	2.39	1.27
11	T. probes students to elicit relevant ideas	3.53	1.01
12	T. allocates enough time for students to write	3.60	0.98
13	The writing task is meant for learning and not for testing	2.65	1.21
14	T. creates supportive atmosphere to encourage students to write	3.54	1.02
15	T. presents a model of writing for students to imitate	3.81	0.87
16	T. provides students with ideas and vocabulary needed for writing	3.40	1.04

The survey on students' preference on writing strategies was employed on Experimental Group (Number = 32) based on the questionnaires of 16 strategies generated from Graham (2008) strategies. The variable range of students' preference was based on 5-points Likert-Type Scales (mentioned in 3.1).

As can be seen from the table, students' most favorite strategies (S) were teacher's modeling of writing (S15, M=3.81), using pair work (S6, M=3.74), introducing teaching aids (S8, M=3.64), allocating enough time to write (S12, M=3.60) and creating supportive atmosphere (S14, M=3.54). The statistical data showed that students were fond of active learning environment, using technology and having enough time to practice. Interestingly, the medium interests were on S5 (using linking words, M=3.14), S3 (highlighting cohesion and coherence, M=3.28) and S16 (providing students with ideas and vocabulary, M=3.40). Whereas, their least preferable strategies were S9 (M=2.34, identifying the objectives of the writing tasks), S2 (M=2.38, emphasizing fluency rather than accuracy) and S10 (M=2.39, focusing on format).

4.2.2. Responses to Mistake Correction

Table 4. Students' responses towards mistake correction (EG, N=32)

No	Strategies	Mean	S.D.
1	T. indicates errors but does not correct them	2.40	1.28
2	T. asks students to write in their note books to monitor their progress	3.25	1.12
3	T. involves students in peer correction	3.80	0.87
4	T. corrects all syntactic errors	3.10	1.18
5	T. corrects the content of the subject only	2.54	1.21
6	T. encourages students who did well to read their works aloud in the class	3.90	0.84
7	T. chooses good written works of the students for a wall magazine	4.13	0.79
8	T. comments on the negative aspects of the written work	3.56	1.05
9	T. comments on the positive aspects of the written work only	3.35	1.08
10	T. provides students with feedback on their weaknesses and strengths	3.98	0.82

The survey on students' responses towards mistake correction also used 5-points Likert-Type Scales. The comparison of means and standard derivation from dataset revealed students' most and least favorable correction methods. Specifically, the highest scores of mean were on choosing good written works of students for a wall magazine (S7, M=4.13) and receiving feedback on students' weakness and strengths (S10, M=3.98) or reading the best works aloud in the class (S6, M=3.90). It was fascinating to realize that students highly appreciated the compliments and encouragement of the teacher. Furthermore, peer correction was also the great favorite of students (S3, M=3.80), certainly, collaborative correction was an effective way to improve students' writing ability. Besides, monitoring students' progress by writing in notebooks was also the desirable method of students (S2, M=3.25) as frequent practice was the most essential factor for mastering writing skill. On the other hand, the lowest scores of preference were on some correction methods such as indicating errors without correction (S1, M=2.40), and only correcting the content of the subject (S5, M=2.54).

5. Implication

Apart from the criteria and strategies required for writing BR mentioned above, students should consider the following issues:

- Using specific, concise and clear language and consistent and accurate verb tenses.

- Avoidance of emotional language and jargon.

- Utilizing the active voice with short sentences, clear actors and actions as well as specific verbs and adverbs as in *"Company X considered the plan carefully"*.

- Avoidance of too many sentences starting with the words like "considering" and "having", instead briefly subordinating already known information as in *"Since X Corporation began operating in this region, some issues have arisen that have impacted on profits."*

To help students improve their BR writing, it is recommended for the teachers to deal with errors in student writing properly and encourage them in the writing process by focusing on the content of student writing and leaving an insistence on correctness as writing is an exploratory process for students.

6. Conclusion

The study's quantitative and qualitative data analysis indicated the efficacy of applying Graham (2008) strategies in teaching business report writing. Besides, the results of the investigation on students' preference on writing strategies and mistake correction are the valuable implications for teachers to innovate their methodology. Apart from students' great effort in practice, it is essential for English teachers to have a self-improving plan to catch up with requirements of business English teaching which consist of several professional terms and notions.

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