

3 Ways to Improve Business English Writing Instruction

by [Christopher DeSandro](#)

In the world of business, it's often the little things that define people. Punctuality, politeness, motivation, accountability—these characteristics and many more contribute to an image of professionalism. However, simply possessing these traits is not enough.

If an employee lacks the ability to communicate in a clear and concise manner, he or she may be judged as incompetent or, worse, find him- or herself out of a job. Having a solid grasp of the conventions of business English (BE) is therefore a vital skill for students who wish to enter the highly competitive world of business. Unfortunately, in many ESL classes, lessons are focused on a traditional view of business writing that is becoming outdated in rapid fashion. Here are three suggestions that can improve the quality of BE writing instruction, including activities that can be undertaken both in and out of the classroom.

1. Use Media as a Source for a Business English “Textbook”

Relying upon corpus-based lists alone for vocabulary instruction can be problematic. Lists such as these may not contain words for new and emerging technologies, words that have recently been coined, or those that have been subsumed into BE. The media is a great resource for providing students with actual BE presented in an eye-catching format.

The [Los Angeles Times](#) is a source that is rich in BE that can be used for a variety of activities. It is easily accessed, both online and in print, and can challenge students to think critically about important issues while they complete exercises. Industry-specific publications are great for supplementing general BE instruction. A few great examples are [Plastics News](#), [Aviation Pros](#), and [Sea Technology Magazine](#). These publications are treasure troves of relevant BE and can be obtained free of charge by simply subscribing or accessing content online.

Activity 1: Locate collocations in a newspaper. Students should find an article of their choice and try to locate five examples of collocations used in an article from the business section.

Activity 2: Find synonyms. Instruct students to find five words from the business section. Next, ask that students find a synonym for each that is less formal. Then have them construct sentences using each to illustrate the differences.

Activity 3: Identify metaphors. Task students with locating as many metaphors as they can in an article. Ask students to think about why they think metaphor was used in each instance instead of direct language.

2. Recognize the Importance of Email

While learning how to write a standard business form letter is undoubtedly important, nowadays most internal and external correspondence occurs in the form of email. Email many times

complements phone calls and face-to-face encounters with business associates and colleagues alike, and is a bridge between conversations and written correspondence. The importance of email is that in the real world “email plays a crucial role in binding together flows of internal and external activities that are directed towards the resolution of problems, the formulation of plans or the execution of decisions” (Evans, 2012, p. 210).

A great resource for student email etiquette is available at [Purdue’s Owl website](#). Another resource for outlining the differences in formal and informal BE email is available at [My English Teacher](#), which also provides students with hints and tips for writing short formal email quickly and effectively.

Activity 1: Determine appropriateness. Using an overhead projector, a PowerPoint presentation, or an example from an online resource, show examples of a typical informal email conversation and one that uses a business tone. Ask students to identify what makes one appropriate for business and the other inappropriate, focusing on vocabulary usage, tone, and style.

Activity 2: Write a formal business email. Have students compose a formal business letter to a fictional colleague discussing an important event such as the company’s effort to “go green.” Students can email each other or the teacher.

Activity 3: Complete an email task. Students will begin an email chain with a partner. One partner will occupy the role of a store manager and the other of a product vendor. Students should be encouraged to pick a type of business that they think is interesting, and correspond in an email chain that spans five responses using the changing format of formal-long to formal-short as outlined by My English Teacher, mentioned above.

3. Use an Online Periodical’s Comment Section

Many online periodicals have a comments section linked to articles that are posted. The types of articles that appear in the business section typically attract business-minded readers who are interested in commenting on the author’s point of view or the content of the article. These readers are more often than not very respectful and post their comments using BE. The following activities will require students to post comments online. Note that some websites require posters to register first with only an email address; instruct students to register anonymously and not to provide any information other than their email address. They may find another website if the site they choose requires more information to register.

Activity 1: Locate target vocabulary words in an article. Students can find an article that interests them in an online periodical. Ask students to identify salient BE vocabulary words from the article. Next, ask them to record three statements from the comments section that use BE and three that do not use BE. Ask them to bring the comments and explain the differences to the class. Follow up: Ask students which they prefer and why.

Activity 2: Post a comment. Allow students to find an article in the business section of an online periodical and post a comment in the comments section. Next, have students

respond to at least three posters using the salient BE vocabulary that they identified earlier. Have them bring the results to class for discussion. If students find that their comments were met with confusion or if the responses were not what they expected, a discussion group is one way of addressing some potential missteps.

Conclusion

It is my experience that when a nonnative English speaker cannot communicate effectively in business, the misunderstandings that ensue create consequences that can range from merely increasing operational time and effort to generating huge financial burdens. It is my hope that by using the suggestions and activities listed in this article, you can help your BE students discover a voice that will drive them to succeed in whatever endeavor they choose to take on.

Reference

Evans, S. (2012). Designing email tasks for the business English classroom: Implications from a study of Hong Kong's key industries. *English for Specific Purposes*, 31(3), 202–212.

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