ASSESSING STUDENTS' WRITING SKILLS: A CASE OF ROMANIAN STUDENTS OF BUSINESS ENGLISH

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Abstract: This article analyses the writing skills of Romanian students of Business English, with the aim of identifying the problems encountered and of determining the extent to which these problems coincide with those described in the English literature on the topic. The study is based on a corpus of business emails written by first-year students at Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, its focus being exclusively on stylistic aspects of communication such as concision, clarity, simplicity, and tone. The selected emails are analysed both quantitatively, with respect to the tendency they show towards wordiness, vagueness and complexity, and qualitatively, with respect to the effect this tendency has on communication and the way in which it could be eliminated. The results of the analysis show that some problematic aspects of business documents such as wordiness and vagueness are much more common with Romanian students writing in English than other problems discussed in the literature, for example the employment of unusual or abstract words and the use of the passive voice.

Keywords: Business Writing, Email, Concision, Clarity, Tone

JEL classification: Z13

1. Introduction

In the last decades, several factors such as the appearance of the internet, of the email, and of various electronic devices, as well as a change in companies' management styles, have led to an unprecedented increase in written communication (Crainer and Dearlove, 2004). As writing expert William Zinsser points out, "Today everybody in the world is writing to everybody else, making instant contact across every border and across every time zone" (2006: xii). In this context, writing has become a key element of success, both for employees and for companies, the business email, letter or report being not only important communication media, but also ways in which we present ourselves to colleagues, superiors, customers and partners (Garner, 2012: vx). For example, Mary Munter (2003: ix) notes that people who communicate well "are more successful at advancing in their careers, other factors being equal," and that organizations that communicate clearly and effectively with "customers, employees, shareholders, creditors, and the community" are seen as more honest and trustworthy than those which communicate poorly.

However, the ease and speed with which written communication is taking place nowadays have also contributed to a proliferation of bad prose by eliminating revision from the writing process (Zinsser, 2006; Garner, 2012); some of "the new computer writers" seem to have forgotten that "the essence of writing is rewriting," Zinsser tells us (2006: xii). In fact, various studies conducted in recent years have shown that people who spend a lot of time reading and writing for work complain that business writing is often "too long, poorly organized, unclear, filled with jargon, and imprecise" (Bernoff, 2016), a situation which can lead to significant losses of time, energy, and money. In this context, good writing skills have become an invaluable asset for all categories of employees, some authors even suggesting that business people should regard themselves as professional writers, belonging to "the same club as journalists, ad agencies, and book authors" (Garner, 2012: xvii).

Various textbooks and writing guides published in recent years offer advice on how to achieve a persuasive and clear business style by emphasizing key aspects of effective communication such as

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concision, clarity, simplicity, and tone (Garner, 2012; Blake and Bly, 1991; Munter, 2003; Zinsser, 2006; Dumaine, 2007; Williams and Bizup, 2015). The main problems these authors identify and discuss in relation to business documents are wordiness, imprecision, the employment of unusual or abstract words, the use of the passive voice and of complicated sentences, as well as tone-related mistakes such as sarcasm, superiority, excessive informality, and hedging.

The purpose of this article is to determine the extent to which these problematic aspects of business writing are present in texts produced by Romanian university students using English as a foreign language.

2. Methodology of research

This article analyses 138 emails written by 23 Romanian students of Business and Economics at Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu as part of their homework for the Business English class. The emails were selected from a much larger corpus according to the grammatical correctness of the language used, and they were based on role cards describing the general situation discussed (misplaced or incomplete orders from a supplier to two customers) and providing specific details such as company names, addresses, order numbers, products ordered, delivery dates, etc.[2] All messages were analysed in terms of their concision, clarity, precision, and tone. The results of the analysis are presented below.

3. Discussion of results

The most common problem identified in the corpus of emails was lack of concision, followed by vague, imprecise language. In detail, almost 60 percent of the analysed messages were characterized by some form of wordiness, and a similar percentage lacked clear, concrete details regarding the topic discussed. On the other hand, the tendency to use fancy words and abstract nouns is much less common than expected, occurring in under 5 percent of all emails, while tone-related problems were found in about 10 percent of the cases. In general, two or several stylistic mistakes are present in the same emails.

3.1. Wordiness

The use of unnecessary words is one of the most common problems encountered in business documents, some writing experts estimating that the majority of first drafts can be reduced by as much as 50 percent without any real loss of meaning (Zinsser, 2006: 16). Wordiness is detrimental to business writing because it wastes important resources of time and energy, making comprehension more difficult and forcing the reader to work harder in order to make sense of the message (Pinker, 2014: 104). In addition to this, it is generally agreed that reading on electronic devices such as mobile phones reduces concentration and attention span, a situation which makes verbosity even more problematic for business communication (Bernhoff, 2016). Finally, Swift (1973) believes that lengthy, unfocused documents often reflect unfocused thinking, a verbose style stemming from a lack of proper planning and consideration regarding the purpose and content of the message. Thus, he shows that revising a text by eliminating redundancies and unnecessary information can be illuminating with respect to the ideas the writer wishes to convey.

As various writing guides show (Blake and Bly, 1991; Garner, 2012; Williams and Bizup, 2015; Fisher Chan, 2008), wordiness can result from a variety of sources, which include the employment of near-synonyms and pleonasms (e.g. *defects and shortcomings, foreign exports*), of phrases and clauses instead of single words (*despite the fact that* vs. *although*, *in order to* vs. *to*, *that produces the desired effects* vs. *effective*), of unnecessary adjectives and adverbs (*extremely* sorry, *absolutely* necessary, *tremendous* work), or of metalinguistic phrases (*I am writing this letter to inform you*).

The most common form of wordiness in my corpus of emails is the presence of verbs such as *write, inform, announce,* and *ask,* used to describe the act of writing as such or to announce the writer's intentions in writing the message. In detail, more than half of all wordy emails contain an expression

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[2] The source of this activity was the course *Company to Company: A task-based approach to business emails, letters and faxes*, by Andrew Littlejohn, 2005, Cambridge University Press.

such as *I am writing (this email) (to you) to inform you that, I want to inform you that, We inform you that, I would like to inform you that, I kindly ask you to, We ask you to, We need to tell you that, We request that our order be sent.* Moreover, redundant noun phrases like *this email, this letter,* and *to you* often accompany the verb *write,* thus "burying" the main idea and making reading more difficult. Note the employment of this language in the examples below, and the way in which its elimination tightens the sentence without affecting its overall meaning:

Original version	Revised version
We are writing this email to inform you that we have only received half of our order of tea.	We have received only half of our tea order.
We want to inform you that we have a large supply of orange juice.	We have a large supply of orange juice.
We ask you to deliver the orange juice as soon as possible.	Please deliver the orange juice as soon as possible.
We would like to mention that in our 25 years of activity we have never received a complaint before.	In our 25 years of activity, we have never received a complaint before.
As this is an urgent matter, *we request* the rest of the order be delivered as soon as possible.	As this is an urgent matter, please deliver the rest of the order as soon as possible.

Williams and Bizup call these expressions "redundant metadiscourse" and believe that, although they can be useful sometimes (in our case, the verb *write* can appear at the beginning of emails to introduce the subject), reducing or omitting them will generally benefit the reader by helping him "catch the topic more easily" (2015: 129).

Redundancy in the studied emails also comes from the presence of words and phrases that readers can infer, either from context or from their experience and general knowledge of the world. In this category we include words that are implied by each other, called "general implications" by Williams and Bizup (2015: 124). Consider these examples:

We recently *finished and sent* a part of order 260 *directly* to you.	We recently sent a part of order 260 to you.
Please *reach out and tell us* how many bottles you need.	Please tell us how many bottles you need.

Here, *send* implies *finish,* because an order cannot be sent before it is completed, and *tell* implies *reach out*, as communication cannot take place in the absence of contact between the two parties involved in it. The same type of general implication resulting from the reader's familiarity with economic practices is present in the following example: since orders are usually dispatched from warehouses, the explicit mentioning of this detail is redundant, making the sentence longer than necessary:

We are writing in connection with our order for 1,000 bottles of orange juice *from one of your warehouses.*	We are writing in connection with our order for 1,000 bottles of orange juice.

Other examples of general implications in the corpus include expressions such as *the order you requested/made* (vs. *your order*), *the order that I placed* (vs. *my order*) or *the email sent* (vs. *your email*).

A particular form of wordiness involves the presence in a sentence of words and phrases with the same (or nearly the same) meaning. For instance, the adjective *past* in the first example below is

pleonastic, due to the presence of the past tense verb *sent* nearby. Similarly, *we are sorry to inform you* in the second sentence conveys the same meaning as *unfortunately*:

I am contacting you regarding a *past* e-mail *I sent* …	Further to my email of 3 May …
We are sorry to inform you but *unfortunately*, we could only deliver half of the order.	Unfortunately, we could only deliver half of the order.

Another source of verbosity in the corpus is the employment of lexical groups containing a specific word or phrase (such as a date) and a more general one designating its category (in this case, the noun *date*). Note this situation in the example below. Also note the use of the metalinguistic phrase *We are writing this email to inform you that* in the first part of this sentence:

We are writing this email to inform you that we have only received half of our order of tea that we made on *the date of 21th October of 2021*.	We have only received half of the tea order we made on *21 October 2021*.

William and Bizup (2015: 124) use the term "redundant categories" to refer to the general words in these groups and illustrate them with phrases such as *large in **size**, round in **shape**,* or *honest in **character***. Similar examples in my corpus include *a **number** of 1,000 bottles* (vs. *1,000 bottles*), *a **quantity** of 150 kg of tea* (vs. *150 kg of tea*), and *order with **number** 260* (vs. *order 260*).

The employment of both specific and general expressions that convey the same idea can take the form of whole sentences and is an important source of verbosity in the studied emails. For example, the first sentence below (*It seems that there has been a mistake concerning our order*) is only a more general and vaguer variant of the second one, which describes the mistake made in specific, concrete terms, and can therefore be eliminated without any loss of content. The tendency to say the same thing twice, first in a general form and then in more specific terms, is also evident in the second example, where the clause *We will remedy the issue* is redundant, since the idea it conveys is more explicitly spelled out in the last part of the sentence:

It seems that there has been a mistake concerning our order. We ordered 1000 bottles of orange juice and we received 1000 bottles of shampoo.	We ordered 1,000 bottles of orange juice, and we received 1,000 bottles of shampoo.
We will remedy the issue and we will deliver the rest of the products by the end of the month.	We will deliver the rest of the products by the end of the month.

Sometimes, wordiness results from the employment of adjectives and adverbs meant to add force to another word in the sentence or to emphasize the statement being made, *e.g. essential, principal, very, clearly, certainly, undoubtedly*. However, writing experts believe that such words should be used sparingly, since they often have the effect of casting doubt on the truthfulness of the writer's claims and thus of undermining rather than increasing his credibility (Strunk and White, 2000; Garner, 2012; Williams and Bizup, 2015). Thus, as Strunk and White (2000: 73) point out, "When you overstate, readers will be instantly on guard, and everything that has preceded your overstatement as well as everything that follows it will be suspect in their minds." Note this situation in the examples below:

We would be *extremely* grateful if you could contact us at your earliest convenience.	We would be grateful if you could contact us at your earliest convenience.

Undoubtedly, any taxes or fees will be handled by us.	Any taxes or fees will be handled by us.
Fortunately, here at ABC (Drinks Machines) Ltd., we offer top-notch services at competitive prices.	Here at ABC (Drinks Machines) Ltd., we offer top-notch services at competitive prices.
I am *truly* sorry to hear that you are experiencing issues with the order.	I am sorry to hear that you are experiencing problems with the order.

Other similar examples in the corpus include the following: *express our **sincere** apology**, more than happy** to work with you, we want to **properly** inform you, a **totally** wrong order, our **prestigious** hotel, we **politely** ask you, we are **deeply** sorry, I am writing to **sincerely** apologize, the products you **actually** ordered.*

Another source of wordiness in the studied emails is the use of relative clauses instead of phrases or single words with the same meaning. For example, in the first sentence below, the clause *in which you informed us about* can be replaced with the preposition *regarding* (or *about*), while *you are able to deliver it* in the second example can be rephrased simply as *delivery*:

Thank you for your email of 11 February, *in which you informed us about what your hotel needs.*	Thank you for your email of 11 February *regarding your hotel's needs*.
Please send me the earliest day *you are able to deliver it.*	Please send me your earliest *delivery date*.
Thank you for your email *sent on* November 13.	Thank you for your email *of* November 13.

This type of writing can result from a difficulty in finding the right word (for example, the preposition *of* to indicate a date in the last example above and the noun *delivery* in the second one) or from a general tendency towards overexplaining and verbosity. Other instances of phrases used instead of words in the corpus include compound prepositions, such as *in order to* instead of *to* and *in regard to* instead of *about,* and verb phrases, such as *let know* instead of *tell* or *are in need of* instead of *need.*

A wordy style can also result from the use of abstract nouns rather than verbs to express actions, (e.g. *recommendation* instead of *recommend, consideration* instead of *consider,* or *application* instead of *apply*), but this situation is very rare in my corpus, which contains only the examples shown below:

I am writing this email *to express our sincere apology* for not sending the coffee requested.	I am writing *to apologise* for not sending the coffee requested./ *We are sorry* for not sending the coffee requested.
We are truly sorry for *our impossibility of providing* the entire order you requested.	We are sorry *we could not send* the entire order.

Another structural choice that can generate wordiness in a text is the employment of the passive voice (e.g. *the order was delivered by us*) where the active would be more suitable (*we delivered the order*). In addition to using fewer words and being structurally simpler, active constructions are also more direct and reader oriented than passive ones, which often sound impersonal and distant (Insley, 2014: 219). Note the difference between the following passive sentences and their active equivalents:

I am writing to you in connection with order 260 *that has been placed* at the beginning of	I am writing in connection with order 260 *that we placed* on 2 November./ I am writing in connection with order 260 of 2 November.

the month. Can you please confirm that *it was received*?	Can you please confirm that *you have received it*?
While part of the order *has been delivered*, the remaining part *is to be delivered* by the end of the month.	*We have delivered* 75 kg of tea and *will send* the remaining part by the end of the month.

However, this situation is not very common in the studied emails, passive constructions occurring in only about five percent of all messages.

Longer than necessary sentences may sometimes result from the presence of irrelevant information, such as the italicized words in the following example:

We are very sorry for the inconvenience *and we don't know how it was possible for it to happen.*	We are very sorry for the inconvenience caused.

Finally, wordiness in many emails usually comes from more than one source. For instance, an intensifier (*more than* before the adjective *happy),* a phrase used instead of a word (*in order to* instead of *to),* a general implication (*the contents of* implied by the noun *order*), and a redundant phrase (*to work with you*) combine in the following sentence, making it longer and more difficult to read than the revised version:

Therefore, we would be *more than* happy to *work with you in order to* send *the contents of* the order back.	Therefore, we would be happy to send the order back to you.

3.2. Vagueness

Another common problem encountered in business documents is their lack of precision (Garner, 2012; Blake and Bly, 1991; Fisher Chan, 2008). As Garner (2012: 50) points out, while writing that uses specific, concrete language can be understood by anyone who reads it and at any time, texts that lack definite details and assume familiarity with the topic discussed are clear only to a few people and only for a limited period. Writing specialists believe that vague, unfocused writing usually results from a lack of proper planning and research for the message and can be detrimental to communication in two ways: first, it is uninformative and thus unhelpful, requiring further clarifications and wasting important resources of time and energy, and second, it undermines the writer's credibility and reputation by suggesting lazy thinking or even the intention to mislead the reader and hide information. Thus, Blake and Bly (1991: 86) note:

Frequently, the ability to write a persuasive letter or memo hinges not on style but on research: the gathering of facts, arguments, and statistics to support your position. One of the biggest shortcomings of business writers is laziness or lack of time. (…). But if you want to persuade your readers, you must support your arguments with facts.

Vague, unfocused writing is a common problem in my corpus of emails, occurring in more than half of the 138 messages analysed. In general, vagueness results from the absence of objective details such as dates, names, numbers, or quantities, and from the use of general-purpose words like *recently, soon, as soon as possible, shortly, this, some, etc*. Consider this example:

We're sorry for the inconvenience. The rest of your order of tea will arrive shortly.	This morning we sent part of order 260 to you. Unfortunately, we could only send half

	of the tea that you ordered. We hope to send the rest of the order by the end of the week.

Here, the first version requires familiarity with the situation discussed in order to be understood (what inconvenience is the writer referring to?), whereas the second one, through the meaningful and concrete details it provides, is clear and can be easily understood by anybody who reads it.

Other examples of vague writing in the corpus include expressions such as *the **right** order, the **wrong** order, the **unfulfilled** order, **some** problems, **this** error, the mistake **you've made**, we would like **something** to be done*, used in the absence of more specific details to explain or clarify them. For example, in the first sentence below the adjective *missing* should be replaced with an order number, the phrase *what happened* should be detailed with facts, while *we are working towards* should be replaced with a description of the intended course of action. Finally, instead of *It won't take long* the writer should provide a date or specific period of time:

We have received your email regarding *the missing order*. We are sorry *for what happened* and *are working towards* providing you with the ordered orange juice. *It won't take long.*	Thank you for your email of 4 May regarding order 122. We are sorry for sending you 1,000 bottles of shampoo instead of 1,000 bottles of orange juice. We will deliver the orange juice at the beginning of next month and collect the shampoo at the same time.

3.3. Unusual words

Business writing textbooks urge readers to use simple, everyday English words instead of unusual or complicated ones. Fancy words of Latin origin (*utilize, terminate, prioritize, duplicate, finalize*, *etc.*) and abstract nouns (*consideration, recommendation, provision, etc.*) are less likely to be understood by a large audience and can thus hinder comprehension and communication. However, such words are very rare in my corpus, the vocabulary employed in the studied emails being in general plain and accessible. This situation may be due to the fact that the writing task on which the emails are based is formulated in simple and clear terms, but also to the fact that non-native speakers of English are less likely than native ones to have unusual words in their vocabulary. Examples of Latinate lexical items used by some students in their messages include *disseminate, veracious,* and *finalize,* as in:

We are writing in connection with a piece of information that has been *disseminated* by Mr. Wilson at Western Trading Co. Should the information be *veracious*, you *are in need of* a large quantity of orange juice at once.	We are writing in connection with a piece of information that has been *given* to us by Mr. Wilson at Western Trading Co. Should the information be *true*, you *need* a large quantity of orange juice at once.
We would like our order *to be finalized soon.*	We would like our order to be completed soon./Please send our order *before 1 December*.

3.4. Tone

Tone is the attitude we convey through our writing, and as such it can contribute to the success or failure of a message almost as much as content (Garner, 2012; Fielden, 1982). Thus, it is generally agreed that business writing should always be polite and friendly, avoiding sarcasm and arrogance, as well as excessive informality and indecision (Blake and Bly, 1991).

The analysed emails contain relatively few problems related to tone. Sometimes, students use negative words, for example the noun *mess* in the first sentence below, or hedging devices (i.e. evasive, noncommittal words and statements), for example the adverb *maybe* as in the second sentence:

Please try to fix this *mess* as soon as possible.	Please deliver our order as soon as possible. You can also collect the shampoo you sent by mistake at the same time.
If you are interested, don't avoid to contact us and *maybe* we can also make a discount.	We can offer you a discount of 10 percent on orders exceeding $1,000.

4. Conclusion

The analysis conducted in this article has shown that the most common stylistic mistakes made by Romanian students of business English writing are wordiness and lack of precision. Wordiness often results from the employment of metalinguistic expressions that describe the act of writing and its purpose, but also from the practice of saying the same thing twice, both in general and in specific terms, from the use of pleonastic words, and from the employment of whole clauses or phrases where single words would do. The emails analysed sometimes combine verbosity and imprecision, definite details being omitted in favour of general, vague statements. However, other problems frequently discussed in the literature on the topic are only marginally present in the studied corpus. In detail, very few students resort to unusual words and abstract language in their writing, and a relatively small number use the passive voice.

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