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FOCUSED BUSINESS WRITING: THE CASE OF REPLIES TO COMPLAINTS

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Although writing replies to complaints has been a part of our business writing course for long, I was rather disappointed to see students writing similar letters with inadequate structure and making the same mistakes every semester. In this paper I describe a small-scale investigation into the problems faced by students while writing reply letters.

I set out the following objectives for this experiment:

1. To identify common weak points in students' scripts
2. To identify causes of the problems (through student interviews)
3. To consider the role of teacher's comments on student writing
4. To suggest solutions to these problems

After giving a lecture on writing replies to complaints and after a couple of writing tasks, students of first-year engineering did a take-home assignment on writing reply to a complaint letter. (See Appendix for the assignment task.) I wrote detailed comments on each scripts, and, after allowing sufficient time for them to reflect on their writing, interviewed some students. Based on these interviews, I designed instruction in the area, part of which was tried out. In this paper I

wish to discuss the probable reasons why students repeatedly fail to improve their writing in this focused area. I shall also try to describe the role of teacher's comments on students' assignments and provide discussion on related examples from the student scripts.

Description of the lecture

The lecture focused on the structure of a reply to complaint (when the company is at fault). It described and demonstrated the accepted structure of such a letter. (Lahiff & Penrose, 1997)

1. The good news is announced without any fanfare, and the specific actions are enumerated for easy reference.
2. The problem's cause and eventual solution are explained to demonstrate awareness and goodwill.
3. An appreciative, personal, co-operative close confirms the desire to foster a good working relationship.

After presenting this structure with discussion on samples of each component, a model letter and a badly written letter were presented and discussed. I tried to focus my discussion on the image projected by each of these letters. Since this lecture followed a lecture entitled, "Developing Positive Image

through Writing," the major task here was to demonstrate how an overt/repeated apology, use of 'negative' expressions, a hesitant close can project a negative image of the organisation.

In the tutorial exercise, students were asked to rewrite the badly written letter. I also gave them some sentences that could be rewritten in a more positive manner. Students tried to rewrite these sentences incorporating a positive tone and a 'you' attitude.

Analysis of assignment responses

There are two major aspects we need to consider in relation to the students' scripts. First, some common errors recurred despite their mention in the lecture and the tutorial. Second, the structural pattern used by the students deviated significantly from the one recommended. Even this was unexpected considering the narrowly focused nature of instruction. Let us first see the common errors. We will also discuss my findings from the interviews regarding their probable causes, and some suggestions for instruction.

(1). Using words/phrases with less positive connotations

The replies written by students made ample use of words/phrases such as: *Problem, Complaint, Difficulties, Complaint regarding disruptions, Dissatisfaction.*

A probable cause (as emerged from student interviews) is inadequate vocabulary. Since English is their second language, they might have some difficulty in rephrasing these sentences with more positive expressions. This issue is relatively easy to address. An exercise aiming to develop vocabulary in this area can be easily developed. However, students indicated that they did not consider these words negative.

In fact, they thought that using the so-called 'positive' words seems to be hiding information and thus is unethical. They thought that they were being truthful when they chose these words. Thus the issue is more of perception. Students found it difficult to be in the writer's shoes and, at the same time, view the situation from the reader's point of view. In a follow-up activity I would try to provide them with an opportunity to see how the 'look' of a document is important. A document with negative words and phrases creates a negative impression.

(2). Projecting a less than positive image of the organisation

While writing an explanation of the unsatisfactory service, students wrote sentences such as:

"There had been some difficulties to do the connection."

"We had not anticipated the excellent response to this promotional product."

"We assure that there will be minimal disruptions in future."

It is clear that these explanations fail to assure the reader of uninterrupted services in future. They actually portray a negative image of the organisation. Once again, The students interviews showed that students found it to be a valid strategy "to be open and frank" about the issues. They thought that by being "honest" and by "admitting their mistake" they were helping the company establish its credibility.

Any instruction attempting to providing a response to these students' attitudes must provide a discussion on proactive values. We need to show the students that the view taken in this type of writing by them is really a short-term view. They need to base their perceptions in the context of organisational

lifespan. Such 'mistakes' should be taken in their right perspective.

(3). Using words and sentences that have a legal implication

While closing the letter and making a goodwill offer, many students wrote sentences that may have legal repercussions. Some examples are given below:

- *We hope that this will compensate for any inconvenience caused.*
- *You can be rest assured that a mistake like this will not take place in future" (admission of liability).*
- *As compensation, we have enclosed a free gift with this letter.*
- *As a form of apology, our company will be giving you a 25% off for this month's bill*
- *It has been a negligence on our company's part...*
- *We hope that ... the compensation is to your liking.*

As students admitted, one major factor was lack of awareness of legal language. Some of them were quite surprised initially when they were made aware of the implications of a word such as 'compensation.' Another factor that resulted into this kind of writing was the confusion between individual apology and organisational apology. The organisational liability is clearly different from an individual one, and this was a factor ignored by the students. Some students said they used the word 'compensation' *"since it was used in the assignment question."*

As part of the teaching strategy, students need to be reminded that sales letters are considered binding contracts in many countries, and they should avoid even implying offers or promises that cannot be delivered. As part of this instruction, cases to

demonstrate the sensitivity of this aspect need to be discussed. I think that cases should in general demonstrate how even reputed organisations can sometimes ignore the legal aspect. I personally prefer to mention the Microsoft case in which an employment was terminated using e-mail. As a result, the employee had no time to benefit from his stock options. The court ruled that Microsoft should pay A\$ 14 million compensation to the employee.

(4). Failing to make a clear offer at the end to maintain goodwill

Student interviews indicated that they equated maintaining goodwill with an expression of apology. Some responses just indicated that a voucher was attached. Others provided a vague assurance such as:

"Please be assured that First Page will provide its customers with the best service."

Some provided contact information to close the letter:

"In case of any more incident, please feel free to contact me..."

A solution in this case would involve a discussion on why maintaining goodwill must be attempted separately, apart from offering an apology. We also need to address the presupposition that a repeated apology maintains goodwill.

Structural Patterns

Three structural patterns emerged from the analysis of the scripts. All of them deviate from the ones prescribed in lecture and text material. Brackets indicate deviations within the pattern.

Pattern 1

Acknowledgment (/Apology) → Reasons/ Explanations (with apology) → Good News → Co-operative close (/Routine Close)

Pattern 2

Acknowledgment → Reasons/ Explanations → Apology → Good News → Co-operative close (/Routine Close)

Pattern 3

Apologies/ Explanations → Good News → Routine Close → Repeat apology

These deviations are somewhat surprising, since a very clear structural plan was recommended in the lecture and in the textbook. From the interviews, it appeared that many students found it odd to begin with the good news without apologising. Some of them even gave me examples of common everyday situations in which we deal with grievances. According to them, a common ground must be prepared before delivering the good news. Such a common ground can be prepared, according to them, only by apologising in the beginning. In the case of Pattern 3, a repeated apology, according to the student writers, is very much in order. Students said that this strategy of repeated apology was an adequate close for maintaining goodwill. The organisational plans we recommend to the students seem to be very much 'western' and somewhat contradictory to the Asian patterns of communication. However, the situation becomes difficult because in the Singapore situations companies expect western organisational plans of communication. The experience also shows

how difficult it is for the students to change their cultural norms and follow the given patterns of written communication.

Teacher Comments

Many researchers have earlier investigated the impact of teacher and peer comments. I thought that in this case peer feedback would not be very beneficial since nearly all of the students' texts seemed to be suffering from the same problems (detailed in the earlier section). The comments I wrote can be categorised as follows:

Category 1: Providing a model form of revision. These comments actually gave them the word they should have used, the way a phrase should be written, or even a complete sentence that should have been included.

Category 2: Pointing out the necessity for revision at a particular point in the script. These comments also provided brief explanation for this necessity.

Category 3: Asking students to refer to a specific portion of lecture notes or study material.

Providing a model for revision

Example:

| Student response | Teacher's comment |
|---|--|
| <i>Our company will make another promotion sale.. and you can change our gift there..</i> | <i>You should say "redeem your voucher."</i> |

It was clear from the student interviews that they seem to prefer this most. They perceive this to be the most helpful part of teacher's comments. However, when they were asked to revise a particular segment, it was also evident that such comments only help them for that particular revision. As Sommers (1978) points out, the assessor might impose his/her own view on the student's writing. More problematically, the students might accept this as a normal part of teaching—learning process. The next category therefore seems more conducive to teaching—learning, although it is not as comfortable for the students.

Pointing out the necessity and grounds for revision.

In these kinds of comments, the teacher draws the students' attention to a particular portion of their writing, and suggests that a revision may be necessary. The comments also point out why a revision is appropriate.

Here are some examples from my comments on the scripts:

- *Avoid this term ("compensate") since it has legal implications.*
- *The subject line is too general and does not mention the subject of the letter. Use a more concrete subject line.* (The student had used "Reply to complaint letter" as a subject-line.)

Students sometimes find this useful.

Referring to text material/ lecture notes

This is the least popular among students. I think that this also seems to be the least effective in terms of revision. As we

saw in our discussion on the deviant patterns of the letter structure, students seem to have obvious difficulties in merely following the recommendations given in the study material. This is especially true of the notions in the study material that directly contradict with their cultural learning. It is therefore necessary to provide them instruction that is more deeply-rooted in the value system.

Conclusion

It is common in the research works in this area to follow the dichotomy related to meaning-level and surface-level changes (see Paulus, 1999). Different kinds of results have been obtained with reference to the revisions made by the students in response to teacher and peer feedback. Paulus' (1999) and Lam's (1991) studies indicate a high percentage of surface changes. Belcher's (1989) work found more meaning than surface changes. The present work indicates that it may be very difficult to draw a boundary line between surface and meaning level changes.

The experiment helped me realise (once again) the value of comments on the scripts. Teacher comments seem to be performing a vital role (partly due to its semiotics). They seem to leave a more lasting impression on students. Active learning seems to be a result of teacher's comments. However, some types of comments seem to be more useful and effective than others.

The teaching of business writing must be firmly grounded in the discussion of business ethics. A major problem seems to be that the students are unable to make decisions based on values.

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Appendix

The Assignment Question

You have just joined **First Page (P1)**, the newest paging service provider, as the Customer Service Manager. Your responsibilities include dealing with customer complaints. Recently, your company offered its latest promotional product, a pager service for a mere \$5 a month. The response was overwhelming, and the company received more applications than it could handle. As a result, there were some connection delays, and you received several complaints. The following is an example of such complaints:

My name is Jason Lee. I bought a pager from you in response to your very attractive offer, and signed a contract for two years with your company. I thought my pager phone number was up and running for two weeks until I began to suspect something amiss because I was not receiving calls from my friends and clients. To my horror, several of my friends and business clients said they repeatedly received a busy signal when dialing my page number. I am very disappointed with your service, and your negligence has cost me to miss several important business calls. Although my pager is up and running now after my complaint, I would like to be assured that I would not be billed for the first two weeks when it was not working. I spoke with your service clerk yesterday, but she claimed she was not sure of company policy on that. She suggested that I should write directly to you to lodge my complaint formally.

Write a letter **in reply** to the complaint. Apologise for the unsatisfactory service, offer an explanation, assure your customer that he will not be billed for the two weeks, and compensate with a free gift and further assurance of future service. Provide appropriate details and use the full-block format.