Computers in ESP: business letter writing

GEORGE S. YPSILANDIS

University of Macedonia, Greece

ABSTRACT

It is generally accepted that learning how to write involves more than speech transcription. In particular, Martin (1985:53) argues that “learning to write involves learning to write different genres and new ways of using grammar as well”. In business letter writing (BLW) the primary questions that frequently need to be answered by learners and professionals alike are how, what and why. While it is not demanding for teachers to teach and students to learn how (in terms of letter layout: structure and presentation) and why (in terms of purpose for writing), considerable difficulties arise in the teaching and learning of what (in terms of content). That is because apart from writing in different genres and using appropriate grammar, learners usually encounter problems with abbreviations (often used in business letter writing), forms of politeness, internationally acceptable strategies of negotiation, orders and payment, complaints and order adjustments, transportation and shipping, insurance, and so on. Computer programs such as the Oxford Business Letter Writer (BLW) could be used as reference tools to assist: (a) learners to improve their business letter writing skills (if integrated properly), and (b) professionals to find rapid and suitable samples of different letter types of business correspondence and avoid pragmatic pitfalls.

1. INTRODUCTION

Today most language teachers would generally agree that the teaching of writing skills involves more than speech transcription. Indeed, writing has been found by many researchers to be a complex process and “competent writing is frequently accepted as being the last language skill to be acquired for native speakers of the language as well as for foreign/second language learners” (Hamp-Lyons and Hensley 1987:2). In particular Tribble (1996:74) distinguishes four sets of knowledge a writer needs to identify when undertaking a writing task:
content knowledge required by the writing task,
context knowledge and knowledge of target context,
knowledge of the language system relevant to the writing task, and
"knowledge of appropriate writing processes, for example planning and reviewing"

In this study, for the purposes of clarity, content knowledge will be identified as what, context knowledge will be seen as why, knowledge of the writing system and the appropriate writing processes will be seen as how. In EFL why and how are traditionally dictated by the teacher or a higher authority (the Ministry of Education in Greece) while in ESP it is the situation (context) that imposes the above.

Writing for business and professional settings, a sub-genre of writing, is often more difficult as it has to follow particular patterns (both in layout and style), it is language specific (market lingo oriented, incorporating persuasiveness), and has to be done in a pragmatically acceptable and successful manner by the world business community. Tribble (1996:75) recognizes two types of learners who wish to develop foreign language writing skills: (a) learners "preparing to enter the business world (pre-experience)," and (b) learners already working in business environments (job-experience). Although the consensus offered by Tribble (ibid.) that both groups have similar learning needs might be valid, it would be necessary to distinguish that:

(a) while pre-experience learners have the time to learn through didactically graded material (focusing on what, how and why) and learn from the feedback and monitoring provided by their teachers,
(b) job-experience learners would perhaps need material that is largely ready-made, in terms of what and how (why is imposed by the situation), for immediate application due to inadequacy of time and lack of teacher to provide feedback and monitor the text (final draft of content). It should also be noted that job-experience learners feel the added stress of trying to achieve the best results as a business deal or indeed their very own position could be jeopardized by the final result.

1.1. This study
In this study we attempt to provide information on how to run a dedicated software for business letter writing (Business Letter Writer, BLW by Oxford University Press). Mainly however we will also make an effort to evaluate how this program may contribute to the understanding and learning of this writing genre and become useful both to pre-experience as well as to job-experience learners. In addition the way BLW can be integrated into an ESP syllabus will be examined.
2. THE WRITING PROCESS

In recent years the teaching of writing has shifted from product (Britton 1972) to process and more communicative models. Britton’s model, based on traditional oral rhetoric, seems to distinguish three major areas of writing: conception, incubation, and production.

The pattern that seems to be adapted in this model concentrates on a three-stage approach: (a) originating ideas, (b) generating ideas in language, and (c) composing these ideas into a written structure. This model, however, does not seem to include an important phase of the writing process, that of editing and rewriting as it is generally agreed that:

“Few people write spontaneously, (even fewer get it right the first time) and few feel comfortable with a formal writing task intended for the eyes of someone else. When the “someone else” is a teacher (or a client) whose eye may be critical, and who indeed may assign a formal assessment to the written product, most people feel uncomfortable” (Hamp-Lyons and Heasley 1987:2). (Text in brackets mine).

A more elaborated communicative model of process writing offered by Hays and Flower (1983) and White and Arndt (1991), presented by Schofffield (1998), distinguishes three major stages of writing. The first stage is understood as Input, where the writer attempts to identify the rhetorical problem, i.e. the topic, identify the target reader and also the purpose of the writing task.

The second stage is where all the writing processes take place and is further sub-divided into:

(a) Planning, where the writer carefully organises his/her writing plans and goals based on his/her long-term memory, that is his/her knowledge of topic, audience, language, syntax, vocabulary,

(b) Translating, where s/he translates their ideas into words taking into consideration all the above, and

(c) Reviewing where the writer (or a third party; i.e. a teacher) evaluates and revises his/her first draft.

The third stage is the outcome of the above procedure, which is the text produced so far. There is a monitoring process at all three phases of the second stage, which is seemingly provided by the teacher. The following diagram (offered by Schofffield 1998) clarifies this schematically:
Hamp-Lyons and Heasly (1987) identify three major phases of the writing process: pre-writing, writing, and rewriting stage which would correspond to planning and generating, translating, and reviewing in the diagram above. The following sections attempt to provide a detailed analysis of running BLW and ideas of how to integrate it in ESP.

2.1. Business Letter Writer (BLW)

The Electronic Business Letter Writer is a program prepared to offer assistance to both job-experience and pre-experience learners (intermediate to advanced) in writing different types of business letters. The program offers over 200 model texts which are classified according to Type (Letter, Fax, Telex, Memorandum), Subject Area (Banking, Insurance, Credit, Agencies, Transportation, Payment, Orders), and Purpose for writing (Advice, Complaints, Enquiries, Forms, Replies, Requests).

The user is offered the option of selecting a Type of document, a Subject Area and Purpose, in any order, and the computer automatically displays a list of documents that match the user's selection. The user can then choose the document s/he feels most closely meets his/her needs and by clicking on the View button at the bottom of the page the user can read the text on screen.

Other options on this opening screen would allow the user to:

1) Open My Folder where users can save up to ten particular documents or parts of documents which they feel will be useful for future reference and thus create a portfolio with their personal collection of their most frequently used documents or texts. Job-experience users could additionally create portfolios of
records of successful or indeed unsuccessful (from experience) business letters (involving persuasion) for a number of different business transactions. Pre-experience learners could, in the same way, create glossaries of business terminology and relevant grammatical points with reference to particular existing letter types. Both groups could finally create letter types for situations not included in the large but not exhaustive list of BLW. In this light My Folder could be used as an assistance tool for the writer's long-memory. One drawback is that My Folder can only save up to ten documents.

2) Open MS Word and edit the selected document (Copy & Edit) in order to make the necessary changes to suit their exact needs both in layout and content. From this point on the user can edit, save and print the selected document like any other Word document. Clearly, using Word facilities (spelling, grammar and thesauri checkers) both pre- and job-experienced users could create folders and files of unlimited different types of documents (anything that cannot be stored in the My Folder section) for consolidation and quick usage. In this manner these users could create a BLW assistant to match their own particular needs with several linguistic, persuasive and cultural points. This process would further increase their linguistic and cultural awareness on the topic and success in business letter writing in general.

3) Open a pop-up that would give him/her More Information about the nature of the selected document. This is intended to help the user to “understand more easily what the writer was trying to achieve in the document” (BLW User’s Guide:S). In addition More Information would give the user more details
as to what the text refers to in terms of previous or future correspondence. This feature would assist both pre- and job-experience learners to better identify the rhetorical problem; i.e. the topic, audience, and purpose for writing.

4) View the selected document. Here the user can initially read the text to see whether it suits his/her purpose and then decide whether to copy it to his/her word-processor. In this manner BLW could be used as a resource for information and opinion on a particular topic (content schemata) and therefore assist writers by providing a better understanding of how to translate their ideas into words (second phase of the writing process). Clearly this would be useful for job-experience learners to employ, but it nevertheless might entail the act of plagiarism for pre-experience learners. In order for the teacher to avoid acts of plagiarism it might be beneficial to ask learners to provide letters on the same topic before accessing BLW. BLW in this case would be used as a reference for learners to compare, evaluate and revise their drafts (third phase of the writing process). In either case, this might also add to the question of conformity of persuasive strategies and style of different cultures to the English which is often the lingua franca for business and other types of correspondence with pragmatically infelicitous results (see also James, Scholfield and Ypsilantis 1994).

In addition, the user can find out more about the function of a particular paragraph (and how to perform the functions given) by pointing at it with the cursor. This gives the user a better understanding of the information structure of the selected paragraph, as it is often pointed out that maintaining a clear structure is important in commercial correspondence. Information of this sort would also help the user to set his/her goals (first phase of the writing process), understand the structure of the program documents and improve his/her writing plans and structure of the documents s/he would produce in the future. Furthermore, the user could learn more about commercial correspondence writing plans (formal schemata, layout and text) of particular types of letters for business correspondence although this might similarly lead to a universal conformity to the English layout and content. Finally the user can also look-up new vocabulary in the Electronic Oxford Wordpower Dictionary (which has been programmed to function with BLW) by double clicking on the particular vocabulary item.

5) Click on the Related Documents button which allows the user to see other documents in a sequence which come before or after a particular letter, fax, etc. as “documents in business often form part of a ‘documentary trail’” (BLW User’s Guide:5). In this manner documents give the user a realistic impression and a sense of continuity which is desired in commercial correspondence.
6) Finally, *Info Bank* offers on-line help in two main areas: (a) running the software (how to perform any task in BLW), and (b) providing information about specific topics (such as *Documentary Credit*) and advice on how to produce effective business letters, faxes, etc. Also it provides additional example sentences and paragraphs on more general topics related to business letter writing, such as Structure and Layout, Content and Style, Type of document, Subject Area, Purpose of writing, contributing to the writer’s long term memory. This section could be used as a reference guide for consolidation to provide explanations for different letter types which exist in BLW or as a recommended guide for those letter types that do not exist in BLW. The user can find more information and example sentences on subjects like the following:

- how to refuse an invitation
- what kind of style to use in e-mail
- how to apply for a job
- how to inquire about payment methods
- which telex abbreviations to use
- the insurance policies used in international trade
- etc.

3. INTEGRATING BLW

Integrating BLW into a Business English course could be seen as a straightforward task and comparatively easier than integrating ready-made general English software (Schollfield and Ypsilandis 1994). This is due to the fact that it should not be difficult for a teacher to identify cases relevant to a particular subject area of BLW in almost every Business English course-book (which is topic/situation oriented). However, a number of questions (as were adopted by Hamp-Lyons and Heasley 1987) might arise as to how BLW structure fits into a business English course. These might be related to:

3.1 Sequence or non-sequence?

Although the software, as indicated above, was clearly created to be used in a non-sequence format, which is a realistic way for job-experience learners to exploit it, it might be possible for a teacher to adopt one of two approaches:

1. One of non-sequence. The teacher in this case would have to make explicit reference from the topic/situation of the course-book to BLW, and perhaps ask the students to identify situations relevant to the topic they covered in class. Although this might appear to be easy and straightforward, this is not always the case as students might feel there is no need to reply to a particular type of letter (i.e. acknowledging an order request) or even misunderstand
the implications of a letter. Clearly there would have to be sessions in helping students understand business writing as well as producing it.

2. One of relative sequence. That is, replying to a request, for instance, might have to come after making a request.

3.2. Classwork vs homework

It seems that it would normally not be feasible to cover all the material (200 documents) offered by BLW in class time. Therefore it would seem necessary to make decisions regarding the amount and types of documents that a teacher would decide to cover in class and the remaining documents to be covered at home. This largely depends upon the time available to BL writing and the time dedicated to cover the topics of the course-book; unless an institution decides to offer a course on business letter writing in particular. It also needs to be pointed out here that it seems to be difficult to generalise about homework as there are many (cultural) factors that may be involved. In Greece for example it appears to be difficult to motivate university students to work at home on ESP tasks. Obviously candidates for homework are the longer tasks (documents) which could be offered as a guide/consolidation to similar writing tasks for homework. Clearly another option would be to teach learners how to use BLW autonomously (in a self-access centre) as a reference tool for them to use in future when in employment.

3.3. Monolingual vs multilingual

Apparently the position taken in this software is a monolingual one, i.e. it operates exclusively within one language: English in this case. One however could adopt a contrastive cross-lingual perspective. This is particularly true of the situation in Greece as most students share a common mother tongue. Erasmus student exchange programmes on the other hand offer a wonderful opportunity to employ BLW with a multi cross-cultural approach. This might assist in raising awareness of the understanding of rhetoric not only between English and Greek but also among different cultures using English as a/the medium for communication.

4. CONCLUSION

It appears that BLW is a user-friendly, well-structured program, which offers realistic samples of various types of business documents used in commercial correspondence. It becomes obvious however from its structure, that while BLW could be an invaluable tool for job experience learners, it was not prepared/designed with a clear didactic format and purpose in mind for use in the language classroom. It seems to have been left to the teacher to harmonize and exploit relevant tasks and provide extra feedback or structured off-screen mater-
riales such as dictionaries, notes, and grammar books for learner support. Should this be done, it could prove to offer great potential for the teaching of writing in business environments not only for pre-experience learners, but also for teachers alike.

Job-experience learners could make use of the material provided by the software mainly but not exclusively at a pre-writing and writing stage. At a pre-writing stage BLW could be used principally as a guide to show layout and content of several types of business letters which learners could refer to for advice, in order to prepare a similar letter suited to their own particular needs. At the writing stage BLW could be used straightforwardly by the user to find a document which suits the situation and adapt the content by editing it on a word-processor to make the necessary trivial changes (names, dates, addresses, etc.) for immediate application.

Pre-experience learners could use BLW at all stages of the writing process (offered in 2.0) as these learners could additionally use it for consolidation and comparisons. As indicated above pre-experience learners could compare the letters they themselves prepare with the ones suggested by the software assuming that both letters are at the same level and provided that they are on the same topic and written for the same purpose.

Finally teachers could use BLW as a reference for business letter writing or for contrastive work on commercial correspondence focussing on similarities and differences of persuasive strategies and style between the L1, the L2 and in multilingual classes the L3, and L4. These similarities and differences could be pointed out and discussed in class in order to increase student awareness of the pragmalinguistic element of business correspondence.

REFERENCES


