

Evaluating the training of effective writers through a business letter writing course

Anna Yu Wai-yin, Pionie Foo Kim-ling and Irene Ng Wai-ye
Language Centre
The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

Lilian Law Lai-yi
Language Centre
Lingnan College

BACKGROUND

A business letter writing course was designed and implemented by a team of four researchers in the English Writing Centre of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. As consultants of the Centre, we have to read and advise tertiary students on their writing, among which letters are a major category. The students face several types of problem. The most serious one is that they do not fully understand the writing situation. As a result, essential information is missing, the ideas included often cannot completely meet the writing purposes, and the tone is inappropriate. Students also tend to use set phrases and expressions in their letters that are inappropriate to the writing context. The second problem is that students are not keen on editing their own work. Most believe the writing process ends once the first draft is finished. They have little confidence in their ability, and/or a weak sense of responsibility for editing their work. Even when they edit, they try only to spot the grammatical mistakes and give minimal effort to improving the content, organisation and tone.

These problems demonstrated in our students' writing are universal among less competent writers. We believe that the cause of these problems is that these students have not used their cognitive skills effectively in writing, and some may even lack such skills. Evans & Supnick (1989) found similar problems amongst their students, who demonstrated 'a pronounced lack of cognitive skill in areas as simple as outline logic' (op. cit.:18). Such weak, or a lack of, cognitive and conceptualising abilities inevitably affected the quality of writing. 'Many students are not able to view their audience from a reader's perspective; nor can they conceptualize the changes that will improve their writing' (Reid 1995a). Thus, training the students to develop and consolidate the related cognitive skills is necessary so that when they write, they can understand the writing situation from the reader's perspective, to provide the right kind and amount of information logically, and in the right tone. To Reid, such skills also play an important role after drafting: teachers must 'assist [students in] learning about the cognitive aspects of revising: knowing how to improve the communication with their audience by analysing the written situation' (Reid 1995a; cf, Reid 1995b). We think most teachers of writing would agree that there is a need to emphasise critical thinking skills in the writing process. Helping students 'to improve the communication with their audience by analysing the writing situation' becomes an important teacher responsibility (Reid 1995a).

THE STUDY

Purpose

With this analysis in mind, we designed a course to raise students' awareness of the use of cognitive skills in the writing process. Such skills would help them strengthen the content, organisation and tone of their writing. Our study is targeted at finding out whether the course is effective in strengthening students' cognitive skills, measured in terms of the change in their attitude and performance before and after the course. Three aspects are considered: situation analysis, editing and letter writing.

This paper reports the first phase of an Action Learning Project. It covers the research questions, the design and objectives of the course, the modes of training, the evaluative measures used, the results and implications for improvements. The findings will be used to improve the course (including better measures) to determine its effectiveness in the second phase of this project.

Research questions

The present study focuses specifically on three questions:

- Will the raising of students' cognitive skills improve the content, organisation and tone of their writing?
- Will the teaching of editing increase students' confidence and willingness to edit their work?
- Will the modes of training used in the course help students improve their cognitive skills and/or strengthen their confidence and responsibility in editing?

Course design and objectives

We decided to use business letters as the genre of writing for students because business scenarios are extremely rich in content and the reader-writer relationship is crucial. We agree with Evans & Supnick (1989:18) that 'business and technical communication course content provides an effective domain, or body of knowledge, to serve as the environment necessary for product encouraging specific critical thinking skill processes'. Exploiting/analysing the context on which a writing task is based will help students to develop and sharpen their cognitive skills. Following this rationale, we chose course materials from real-life business scenarios and used authentic letters for editing practice.

A twelve-week business letter writing course was organised for thirteen students at the tertiary level. This comprised eight lessons, each lasting for one hour and forty-five minutes, and one individual consultation. After the course, students were expected to show a positive change in both their writing attitude and performance. Students should be able to:

- analyse the writing situation;
- edit their work more effectively and more frequently; and
- produce writing to achieve their writing purpose and meet the needs of their audience.

Modes of training

As the course makes high demand on students' cognitive skills and/or knowledge of the world, training began with teacher-centred activities. The course then gradually moved towards greater autonomy on the students' part in the form of group and individual tasks, as they gained more practice in using their cognitive skills. Through exchange of ideas in groups, students were expected to stimulate each other and build a more comprehensive picture of the business scenarios. Individual work was assigned to students to strengthen their ability and confidence in tackling the writing tasks.

The cognitive skills of students were developed through analyses of the writing contexts. Students were first introduced to the elements in the writing situation (see Appendix 1), which interrelate with each other and affect the content, organisation and tone of the letter. With such knowledge, they then participated in small-group analysis of the writing situation before completing a letter. The letter was reviewed in a simulation in which the writer was paired up with another student who would play the role of the reader, to evaluate how far the writing could meet the reader's expectations. Towards the end of the course, students would draw on their own cognitive skills to produce writing in response to the business scenario independently.

In terms of editing, students were introduced to the systematic process of revising their work. This started with examining how well a piece of writing reflects the situation analysis. Based on the discrepancies, students specified the steps of editing in a pathway. Training in editing skills was provided, focusing mostly on global editing. Such skills (e.g. moving, deleting and adding ideas) ensure that the writing purposes are achieved. The idea of reformulation in editing was demonstrated through the revision of multiple drafts. Students practised editing, first in groups with letters which contained identified problems with organisation, clichés and sentence structure; they were then given a free hand in editing one that called for major revision.

Evaluative measures taken during the course

The major objectives of the study were to help students maximise their use of cognitive skills and develop a more involved and responsible attitude in the writing process to produce effective writing. Different means were used to measure the students' attitudes and performance in analysing the writing situation, editing their work and producing writing.

To tap information about students' attitudes, we developed a questionnaire on students' habits in the planning, drafting and editing stages of writing. The questions all centred on the objectives of the study. Students completed the same questionnaire before and after the course, and we were thus able to track changes in attitude and perception towards writing.

By completing a checklist (Appendix 1), students performed the task of analysing the writing situation. The checklist includes items such as 'sender's goal' and type of message, 'receiver's goal' and 'receiver's queries', the conflict and risk inherent in the relationship between the sender and receiver. Not only did we examine whether students considered each item of the checklist, but we also assessed the quality of their analysis.

Students' performance in editing was measured by two tasks: one to examine their editing process and the other to evaluate the product. Students were asked to design a pathway to edit a given business letter. They evaluated the letter and had to specify the steps they used to revise the letter. They were then asked, in groups, to employ editing strategies learned in the course to improve the letter. In the other revision task, students evaluated a given letter and used editing strategies to revise it individually.

Students' writing performance was measured by comparing the letters they produced before and after the course. The letters were marked on three dimensions: content, organisation and tone. An overall impression mark was also awarded to assess the global effectiveness of the letters, i.e. how thoroughly the readers could understand the writing purposes and how willing they were to take appropriate action. Each dimension carried a maximum of 5 marks. To ensure that markers followed the marking scheme with consensus, they participated in a standardisation meeting.

In addition, an end-of-course interview was conducted to collect introspective data on students' use of the cognitive and editing skills taught in the course.

RESULTS

Situation analysis

In measuring students' attitude change in analysing the writing situation in the planning stage of writing, we examined closely several relevant items from the questionnaire administered before and after the course. The data from one of these items show that students were more aware of the importance of analysing the writing situation before they write, as fewer students reported they would pick up a pen and start writing immediately after receiving a writing task (a 17.3% decrease between pre- and post-course questionnaire). In the post-course questionnaire, 92% of the students reported that they would study the topic and find out about the purpose, situation and audience of the writing task before they wrote, a 22.3% increase over the beginning of the course. Not only did students show an understanding in the importance of analysing the writing situation, they also showed an understanding of how this analysis affects the organisation of ideas in the planning stage. After the course, 92.3% of students said they would plan the organisation of ideas in their mind compared to 50% before the course. These figures show that students are more prone to change their habits of writing if they understand the value of situation analysis to effective writing.

However in completion of the situation analysis checklist, only a few students (16.7%) showed a thorough understanding of the writing situation towards the end of the training of cognitive skills. One third of them (33.3%) expressed difficulty in understanding how the checklist items interrelate with one another. When examining students' answers to the checklist items, we found that students had had difficulty verbalising their understanding of the writing situation. For example, they used generic words such as *polite* to describe the tone of a reply letter to a customer's report of loss of credit card, whereas *helpful* and *understanding* would be better appreciated by the receiver. Students' answers are applicable to a variety of business scenarios, but cannot reflect this specific writing context. From these answers, we find it difficult to differentiate whether the students lack experience and expressions to verbalise their meaning, or whether their analysis of the writing situation is not deep enough.

Editing

In terms of their attitudes towards editing, 53.8% of students reported at the end of the course that they would read their writing after they had finished, compared with 35% at the beginning; 84.6% of the students at the end of the course reported that they would examine the coherence of their writing and make changes, compared with 70% at the beginning. It seems from the results that more students were taking upon themselves the responsibility of examining their own writing. Besides relying on their existing knowledge, students also found external resources to help them edit their writing. For example at the beginning of the course, none of the students would ask friends or language teachers to proofread their writing, but after the course, 38.5% of students said they would ask their friends and 15.4% said they would ask language teachers. Perhaps students have learned from course activities such as the simulation that external sources can enrich their knowledge of the world and improve their perception of the writing situation.

As for students' actual editing skills, their performance in the editing process was not as encouraging as that in the edited letter. In the pathway task, the majority of students reported that they worked on local editing, such as description, checking grammar and spelling, to improve the accuracy of a given piece of work. Only 16.7% of them attempted any global editing, which we believe should be an essential step in any editing process. Although the data from the letter editing task do not reveal the sequence of revisions students made, the finished product contains evidence of more global revision, apart from corrections of local errors.

Attempts at global editing are evident in the better content and organisation of the edited letters (see Appendix 2). While the original letter lacks a statement of purpose, all edited letters begin with a statement of writing purpose. Ideas relevant to the writing situation are added in the edited letters for richer content. These letters are also found to have a sharper focus, probably due to the shift from the general in the original to more context-specific ideas in the edited work. While the original is poor in paragraph arrangement, the edited letters have better balanced ideas and exhibit more logical idea development and smoother transition. Students were asked to edit an authentic letter without any guidance from teachers: the task is not a simple mechanical exercise and should be able to reveal students' ability to evaluate a piece of work critically and edit it effectively.

The difference in students' performance in editing in the two tasks may reflect some learning effect. Pathway presentation was a much earlier task. At that stage, students may still have viewed editing as a correction of local surface errors. As they were exposed to the editing process and various editing strategies, they may have come to realise the importance of global editing and this was reflected in the later task of letter editing.

Writing

The performance of students' writing before and after the course showed a significant improvement in content, organisation, tone and overall impression, as reflected in a gain of more than 0.5 out of 5 in the mean scores. This gain is statistically significant as indicated by the t-values in Table 1. Since the probability for all the dimensions measured is well below the 3 percent level of significance, there is evidence to show that the course was effective.

Table 1: Students' writing performance.

	Pre-test mean	Post-test mean	Mean difference	SD	t-value	p (one-tailed)
Content	2.60	3.50	.90	.85	3.81	0.001

Organisation	2.92	3.50	.58	.95	2.20	0.024
Tone	2.63	3.32	.70	.66	3.77	0.001
Overall impression	2.62	3.40	.78	.65	4.34	0.000

Paired t-test (df = 12).

DISCUSSION

Evaluation of students' changes in attitude towards writing indicates that the course was effective in bringing about a positive attitude towards the use of various strategies throughout the writing process. However performance data from the situation analysis do not match students' self-reports of the importance and their mastery of the cognitive skills required of competent writers. The discrepancy between their perceptions and actual performance could be attributed to the lack of linguistic means to present an intricate situation or verbalise a complicated idea, as observed in their superficial analysis of the writing situation. Another factor causing the discrepancy in the situation analysis seems to relate to the difficulties the students reported in visualising the interrelationship among the checklist items. Other than these, students' limited knowledge of the world is likely to affect the quality of their analysis of the writing situation.

Performance in the letter editing task does not, however, seem to deviate from the students' understanding of editing. The shift from correction of surface errors to revision at both global and local levels, as exemplified in the two editing tasks, seems a particularly good indication of the effectiveness in the training of editing skills.

Students' writing performance also showed a significant improvement after the course. The gain is particularly obvious in the overall impression of the letters. This could be due to the clarity with which the writing purpose is expressed in the post-course letters. They also seem to take into account the readers' concerns as seen in the enriched content and improved tone. Another reason for the encouraging results might be attributed to the students' high motivation and, thereby, their willingness to adopt the writing strategies learned in the course.

In general, the students achieved better performance in editing and writing than in situation analysis. We speculate that the editing task is not as cognitively demanding as analysing the writing situation. In the editing task, students were involved in the evaluation of ideas and their presentation rather than production of ideas in the situation analysis. Another reason for better editing performance could be that students were given another person's work to edit. As they were really editing from a reader's perspective, it could be much easier for them to be critical and overcome the affective concern for pulling one's own work apart. Similarly, students did not perform as well in the situation analysis as in their letter writing because such an analytical task was fairly new to them.

IMPLICATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

If the students' actual performance in analysing the writing situation is really affected by the difficulty in verbalising their ideas, they should be provided with a list of linguistic expressions so that a more accurate measurement of their mastery of the skills can be made. They should also be encouraged to use their native language, in this case Chinese, to express their thoughts and understanding of the cases.

The quality of students' analyses can be improved by providing them with clearer indications of what a good analysis entails. Teachers' participation in the group discussion and simulation could lead students towards more in-depth analysis of the writing situation. Students can also draw on teachers' knowledge of the world as well as from each other's.

The results of the study also have implications for the design of the situation analysis checklist. It seems essential to make a major revision in the linear representation of the checklist items. A more graphical presentation of the items may be a good visual aid to help indicate the interrelationship among the various factors. Based on this graphical presentation, a better tool can be made available for the evaluation of the students' ability to analyse the writing situation.

A real picture of the students' ability to review their own writing from a reader's perspective, and hence a better reflection of their mastery of the editing strategies can best be provided through the editing of their own writing. Peer evaluation of students' writing and revision of others' letters can be used for practice, whereas the effect of the training will be assessed by asking the students to edit their own work.

The positive change in students' attitude and performance towards writing are encouraging initial improvements. We have to be cautious, though, in interpreting these results as the number of students is small in this classroom-based research project. The current research on training effective business letter writers indicates future directions for a more comprehensive and in-depth study in the second phase of this action learning project. Improvements in various aspects, for example, syllabus design, pedagogy and evaluative measures, should yield conclusive results in the training of an effective business writer.

Appendix 1

Situation Analysis Checklist

© 1995 Ng, Foo, Yu and Law.

Sender's goal	
Message to receiver	
Receiver's goal	
Receiver's queries	
Relationship between sender and receiver	
Conflict of interest to be resolved	
Risks to be avoided	
Important ideas and organisation	
Tone	
Layout (appearance)	

Words to describe tone:

<i>warm</i>	<i>friendly</i>	<i>concerned</i>	<i>enthusiastic</i>	<i>engaging</i>	<i>inviting</i>
<i>constructive</i>	<i>supportive</i>	<i>businesslike</i>	<i>tactful</i>	<i>apologetic</i>	<i>consoling</i>
<i>respectful</i>	<i>aggressive</i>	<i>polite</i>	<i>challenging</i>	<i>assuring</i>	<i>pacifying</i>
<i>assertive</i>	<i>impartial</i>	<i>warning</i>	<i>understanding</i>	<i>condescending</i>	

Appendix 2

Students' revision of content and organisation in editing task

Original ideas in letter

- A. Value of Humanities and Social Science studies
- B. Personal plan in the coming three years
- C. Reason(s) for choosing HKUST

Ideas added by students to letter

- D. Reason(s) for writing this statement 100%
- E. Personal reason(s) for applying to the MA programme 50%
- F. Personal reason(s) for applying to the HSS programme 75%
- G. Areas of personal interest in HSS 75%
- H. Personal plan after the MA programme 50%

	Paragraph 1	Paragraph 2	Paragraph 3	Paragraph 4
Original	A B	C		
Student 1	D E	F	G A	B
Student 2	D F	G	B H	
Student 3	D F	B A	E	
Student 4	D	A G	H	

Evaluating the training of effective writers through a business letter writing course

Anna Yu Wai-yin, Pionie Foo Kim-ling and Irene Ng Wai-yee

Lilian Law Lai-yi

Reference

- Evans, E. B., & Supnick, R. 1989. Evaluating evidence of critical thinking skills. *Business Education Forum*, 43(6), 16–18.
- Reid, J. M. 1995a. Teaching revision: The etc approach. Part 1: The problems. *TESOL Matters*, 5(2), 3.
- Reid, J. M. 1995b. Teaching revision: The etc approach. Part 2: Some solutions. *TESOL Matters*, 5(3), 3.