Students' English Business Writing Skills Development through Intercultural Emails

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Abstract

This paper examines the development of Thai EFL students' English business writing proficiency through the use of intercultural email tasks adopted the idea of Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) and collaborative learning for future business staff. The purposes of this quasi-experimental research are to 1) compare the effectiveness of student's intercultural email writing between pre-test and post-test, and 2) examine the students' vocabulary use in writing business emails compared between pre-test and post-test. The samples include 33 students enrolled in English for Business Communication 1 at the University of Phayao in 2019 academic year. The instruments were intercultural email tasks, pre-test, and post-test scores. The data was then analyzed using descriptive statistics, mean, standard deviation, and paired t-test for quantitative data.

The results of this study revealed that there was a significant difference of student's intercultural email writing ability compared between pre-test and post-test at 0.01 significant levels. Furthermore, the students used more polite words in email writing for the post-test. The body of knowledge gained from the present study indicates that students can learn and practice intercultural email writing through TBLT.

Keywords: Intercultural Emails; Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT); Writing Tasks; Formal and Informal Word; Business Writing

Introduction

Currently, there have been an increasing number of foreign business companies in Thailand where graduates students can apply for jobs. To be successful in obtaining the jobs from these international companies, applicants must have good knowledge of English language skills and ability to write business email is also required. Writing email is one of the important parts in business courses in order to train university students to prepare for their future career in Thailand. However, writing emails is challenging for many Thai students. As Malathong (2016) stated, there are three types of problems in English business emails writing for non-native speaking employees in an international real estate service company namely; business writing skills, problems in using email, and written emails in international company for non-native speaking employees. The cause of the problems which occurred may be because of the problems in the lack of using English language and in English business email writing for non-native English speakers (Malathong, 2016). In business setting, the failure of communication may occur because the students were inadequately prepared to write emails in business communication. Due to the fact, business correspondence, intercultural communication is a key to cope with the problem of misunderstanding and failure in overseas contact. Intercultural communication is the first used by anthropologist Edward T. Hall in 1959. He defines intercultural communication as a form of communication between people from different cultures (Chaney & Martin, 2004). According to Hall (1976), the most probably useful concept to understand the culture differences in business communication is the distinction of low and high context cultures (Hooker, 2012). Some of countries use high context language such as Japan, China, and Thailand. Low-context countries, however,

include United States, German, and England. Therefore, it is necessary to enhance EFL students email writing ability using high and low context in order to contact foreigners successfully.

According to the study of Japanese cultural thought patterns (Paramita & Ngadiman, 2014), the guideline for the students in the present study is obtained from basic of Japanese writing email which combines in four parts: 1) Ki section refers to writing salutation which prepares towards topic, 2) Shou refers to writing topic, 3) Ten refers to writing additional information, and 4) Ketsu refers to writing main idea and leave taking. Furthermore, guideline for effective response to an English inquiry email is also to be a guide for student's writing the email (ejoy, 2018). There are three parts of English email: opening, body, and closing.

To extend the effectiveness of Thai EFL students' email writing, Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) is one method to enhance their intercultural email. For TBLT, Willis (1996) said that TBLT is an activity which most of the emphasis is on learners doing things, often in pairs or groups, using language to achieve the task outcomes and guided by the teacher. In the present study, the researcher applied email writing through Task-based Language Teaching in order to provide opportunities for students to be able to bring their idea into their email writing. The task framework in this study was adapted from Greenfield (2003) and Willis (1996) and task repetition framework of Bygate (1996) and the framework contains four stages: 1) pre-email writing consisting of pre-writing and planning skill, 2) while email writing involving writing skill and revising, 3) post email writing dealing with of presenting, evaluation, and analyzing, and finally, and 4) task repetition, students rewriting their email and corrected by peers and teacher.

The present study aims to examine the effectiveness of Thai EFL students' intercultural business writing and investigate students' vocabulary use through task-based language teaching in the classroom.

Objectives of Research

This study aims 1) to examine the effectiveness of intercultural email tasks on students' business email writing ability as compared between pre-test and post-test, and 2) to examine the students' vocabulary use in business writing comparing between pre-test and post-test.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This quasi-experimental study adopted a one group pre-test and post-test design. The students email writing through task-based language teaching was investigated in a four-month period.

The Scope of the Participants

The participants were thirty-three of second year students majoring in the Economics and Occupational Health and Safety programs derived from purposive selection method. The samples enrolled in English for Business Communication 1 (146371) at the University of Phayao.

Instruments

There were two instruments in this study, namely pre-test and post-test, and the checklist of formal and informal word use.

1. The first instruments were pre-test and post-test which assess students' email writing using email rubric adapted from formal email rubric (Rcampus, 2020) and email etiquette (RUBISTAR, 2013) and business email rubric (Wei, 2017). The rubric contains seven categories: subject line, salutation and closing, grammar and spelling, capitalization and punctuation, ideas, format, and politeness. These emails were assessed by three experts in order to compare the achievement of the instructional email writing.

2. Another instrument was the checklist of business vocabulary in order to see the students' frequency words which analyzed using percentage between pre-test and post-test adapted from Parisuthiman

(2013) and engVid (n.d.). The checklist analyzed the students' frequency of formal and informal words use in email format which contained six categories: subject line, greeting, introduction, body, closing, and sign-off, assessing by the researcher.

Data Collection

In assessing students' email writing, the raters (teachers/ researchers) adapted email rubric from Formal Email Rubric (Rcampus, 2020) and Email Etiquette (RUBISTAR, 2013) which contains seven categories: subject line, salutation and closing, grammar and spelling, capitalization and punctuation, ideas, format, and politeness. These emails were assessed by three raters.

According to the data collection procedures, there were divided into three stages: pre-test, treatment, and post-test. For pre-test, it was used before the project implementation, the participants were asked to take pre-test which involves a writing test made by the researcher. For treatment, it is divided in to two categories: 1) business email writing lesson using Business Communication Essentials textbook (Bovée, et al., 2006) to introduce email writing, 2) TBLT technique in which the researcher had an introduction of TBLT activity to the students. Then, students need to reply to email tasks in five different situations: request email, claim email, ordering email, reminder email, and appointment email respectively. In addition, the students were divided in to ten groups which consisted of three people in each group using specific random. Finally, post-test was used at the end of the project implementation in order to find out the achievement of the study.

Data Analysis

The data analysis consists of mean, standard deviation, and paired t-test in order to analyze students' email writing. Three experts evaluated pre and post-test in order to compare the achievement of the instructional email writing by using formal email rubric. Then the data were analyzed using mean scores, standard deviation, and t-test. For the

vocabulary use analysis of formal and informal words use, the researcher analyzed the students' 132 pre-test and post-test email tasks focusing on the frequency of formal and informal words used in writing emails. After that, the word frequency was analyzed using percentage.

Results

This section demonstrates the results of the study which examine the effectiveness of intercultural email tasks on the students' writing ability and the students' vocabulary use in business email writing.

1) The Effectiveness of Intercultural Email Tasks

This section presents the students' email writing ability to reply English and Japanese email tasks in pre-test and post-test. For the pre-test, the students were asked to write an enquiry email. After the research implementation, the students were also asked to write the post email writing test. The findings of both tests are illustrated in the following table.

Test (n=33)	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	T	Sig. (2 Tailed)
Pre-test	9.90	11.33	-8.24	0.000
Post-test	16.41	24.12		

Table 1: Comparison for Pair Sample T-test for Difference in the Mean Scores of the Students' Pre-test and Post-test in Replying to Western Culture-based Email Tasks (Significance Level of 0.01)

Table 1 shows that the students' post-test scores of intercultural business email were significantly higher than that of the pre-test at the significant level of 0.01 after the students practice to enhance their email writing ability. The mean scores of pre-test and post-test were 9.90 and 16.41 respectively and S.D. of the two tests was 11.33 and 24.12. The scores

are likely to show that the students had a significant improvement of intercultural business email writing through TBLT.

Test (n=33)	$\bar{X}$	S.D.	T	Sig. (2 tailed)
Pre-test	8.53	9.62	-5.26	0.000
Post-test	11.93	14.02		

Table 2: Comparison for Pair Sample T-test for Difference in the Mean Scores of the Students' Pre-test and Post-test in Replying to Japanese Culture-based Email Tasks (Significance level of 0.01)

Table 2 shows that the students' post-test scores of intercultural business email were significantly higher than that of the pre-test at the significant level of 0.01 after the students practice to enhance their email writing ability. The mean scores of pre-test and post-test were 8.53 and 11.93 respectively and S.D. of the two tests were 9.62 and 14.02 respectively. The scores are likely to show that the students had improved in intercultural business email writing through TBLT.

2) The Students' Vocabulary Use in Business Writing

The results of vocabulary using analysis of the emails were written by non-major students comparing between pre-test and post-test. It is to examine the students' vocabulary use in business writing which aimed to seek the effectiveness of students' formal and informal frequency words use in order to investigate to what extent students' writing ability after treatment. In this section, there are two results of the study: the result of the students' formal and informal word use, and the sample of the students' sentences structures.

2.1 The Result of Students' Formal and Informal Word Use

The result shows frequency of the formal and informal frequency word use in order to compare the result between students' pre-test and post-test.

Format	Pre-test (Word Frequency)				Post-test (Word Frequency)			
	Formal (Polite)	Percent	Informal	Percent	Formal (Polite)	Percent	Informal	Percent
Subject Line	8	19.51	3	6.98	33	15.79	4	6.56
Greeting	9	21.95	6	13.95	50	23.92	1	1.64
Introduction	4	9.76	3	6.98	14	6.70	10	16.39
Body	9	21.95	14	32.56	41	19.62	26	42.62
Closing	3	7.32	8	18.60	26	12.44	10	16.39
Sign-off	8	19.51	9	20.93	45	21.53	10	16.39
Total	41	100	43	100	209	100	61	100

Table 3: The Frequency of Students' Formal and Informal Word Use

The table 3 illustrates the result of students' formal and informal word use comparing pre-test and post-test. It was found that the students used informal word than formal word in the pre-test. In contrast, the students used formal word than informal word in the post-test. However, informal word, the highest frequency of the students' word use was in body part (42.62%) in the post-test, followed by body part (32.56%) in the pre-test and the lowest found in greeting part (1.64%) in the post-test. For formal words, the highest frequency of the students' word use was in greeting part (23.92%) in the post-test, followed by sign-off part (21.53%) in the post-test and the lowest found in closing part (7.32%) in the pre-test. To compare formal students' word use, it was found that the students used formal word in the post-test (209 Words) than the pre-test (41 Words). In summary, the highest frequency students' formal and informal word use was informal word in body part (42.62%) of the post-test, followed by informal word in body part (32.56%) of the pre-test and the lowest was informal word in greeting part (1.64%) of the post-test.

2.2 The Sample of the Students' Vocabulary Use

This result shows the sample of the students' formal and informal words used taken from the students' all parts of the email such as subject line, greeting, introduction, body, closing, and sign-off.

(1) The Subject Line

In this part, it is important for senders should write subject line relate and cover to the message. However, some students were difficulty to write and use in proper formal words to receiver as can be seen in the sample structure in the pre-test below.

Pre-test: <u>Respond</u> email inquiry form customer.

Post-test: <u>Reply</u> your inquiry for catalogue.

To compare between the pre and post-test, the student used the word "respond" in the pre-test. However, he/she used the word "reply" to make the word use sound more politely and more formally to the receiver in the post-test.

(2) Greeting

In this part, some students made the greeting more formal, which may not be accepted for business email in the pre-test as shown below.

Pre-test: <u>To</u> Rohit Sharma.

Post-test: <u>Dear</u>, Rohit Sharma.

For the exemplified greetings above, the student used the spoken expressions instead of standard register for business communication in the pre-test. However, he/ she used more formal greeting in the post-test, using the word "Dear...."

(3) Introduction

In this part, it is important to get receiver's impression to an email. However, there has been informal word which student wrote in the pre-test.

Pre-test: I <u>got</u> your inquire email asking for a computer.

Post-test: I <u>received</u> your email.

For the pre-test, the student used the word "got" which more informal to the receiver. However, he/she used the word "received" which he/she understood using appropriate words in business communication.

(4) Body

In this section, it is the main message that the sender tells the receiver what the sender wants the receiver to do something. However, there have been several informal words that the student wrote in the email as the example shown below.

Pre-test: If you <u>want to</u> buy this computer.

Post-test: If you <u>would like</u> to buy or any questions.

In comparing between pre-test and post-test, the student used the word "want" in the pre-test. However, he/she used the word "would like" in the post-test. It revealed that the vocabulary use was politer and more formal after treatment.

(5) Closing

In this part, it can make the receiver would like to keep in touch with the sender. Therefore, the closing should include polite expression to the receiver. The example below shows how the students used the formal and informal words in the both pre-test and post-test.

Pre-test: If you are interested contact us as soon as possible.

Post-test: We look forward to hear from you.

In the pre-test, the structure showed that the student expresses their idea using if-clause to persuade the receiver to make a contact with the students. However, the students used the standard business closing expression in the post-test.

(6) Sign-off

In this section, it is beneficial to the receiver in order to respect to the receiver. However, some students used informal words in the email as shown below.

Pre-test: Best Regards,

Post-test: Yours Sincerely,

In the pre-test, the student used " Best Regards," which can be informal to friends. However, he/ she used " Yours Sincerely" instead of " Best Regards" in the post-test. Furthermore, it seems that the students can use more formal words in business communication.

Discussion

Knowing about intercultural aspects in email is useful for ones using email to contact with people from different cultures. For university students, this kind of knowledge should be taught to enhance their skill in using appropriate language, especially in business writing, to enable them to realize the nuance of language that might either cause or reduce the conflict in communicating with email recipients of different cultures. In this part, when pre-test and post-test scores were compared, the study result can be discussed based on two main study objectives by focusing on the effectiveness of intercultural email tasks on.

1) Students' writing ability to write business emails.

2) Students' ability in using vocabularies relating to business writing.

1. In accordance with the first objective, it was found that students' post-test scores are significantly higher than the pre-test. The higher scores could be explained through the TBLT discussion process where students were given a chance to practice the language on replying emails with five different situations. Using TBLT, the tasks given to students were designed to challenge them to improve their writing and evaluating skills. Firstly, TBLT provided the opportunity for students to plan and brainstorm in their groups while individual work could not do. Secondly, the students had more creative and critical ideas to negotiate with their friends while they were working in their groups. Moreover, when students took turn to discuss in different groups, they had a good chance to immerge themselves in several discussions with friends. Thirdly, students were asked to analyze and rewrite many emails

after class. In addition, feedback from teacher and peers in task repetition may also result in the improvement of their language, especially the ability to use formal words, business vocabularies, and to recognize grammatical errors. Thus, task repetition would enhance their writing skills. This finding is consistent with a previous study (Liao & Fu, 2014) which proved that task repetition improved students' competency in syntactic diversity and lexical complexity. Another reason why the students improved their writing skill was possibly because of the exercise. The exercise might be useful to the students to improve and enhance their writing ability to practice writing sentence with various structures and using polite words. Therefore, the model of using TBLT task framework can enhance students' perception on intercultural aspects in email writing. Some findings are similar to that of González and Pinzón (2019) who supported the use of TBLT in that students taught with TBLT could write more coherently and were able to use the vocabularies they had studied. Another study of Naudhani, M. and Naudhani, S. (2017) stated that learning rules or vocabularies through task-based learning were advantageous to real-life situations. With the studies mentioned and the result of this study, TBLT activity can support students' ability to effectively write email regarding to intercultural differences. However, the students are non-major English students, but this TBLT model can improve students' intercultural email writing.

2. With regard to the second objective, to examine the students' vocabulary use in business writing, it was found that they had improved their ability to use vocabularies in writing intercultural emails. For formal and informal word use, the result showed that the students used formal than informal words in the post-test because the researcher put more emphasis on teaching formal words to students. Regarding to teaching formal words, it is one of the important things for students. They can use formal words correctly in order to respect to recipients in business emails. However, the result of this study showed that students still used

a lot of informal words in their email. However, correct use of formal words is more difficult than informal words as supported by a study of Akhmad and Amiri (2018). It was found that a great number of students thought that formal expressions were more difficult than informal expressions to be learned. Therefore, teaching business email should put more emphasis on teaching formal words. To enhance students' usage of formal and informal words in TBLT, teachers should introduce and give examples of bad email writing using informal words to students to make them aware of the sense of disrespect to email recipients. Furthermore, teachers should give feedback on negative effect from using informal words and show students how to change them into formal words. Furthermore, teachers should assign more exercises such as worksheets, on formal expression to students after class.

New Body of Knowledge

This study shows a new body of knowledge about TBLT which challenged students to use language in writing various types of emails. In addition, choice of words used in writing can enhance students' intercultural email writing ability effectively. This can be further discussed as follows.

1. The TBLT can improve students' ability to write intercultural email when assessed by email rubric. The rubric contains seven categories: subject line, salutation and closing, grammar and spelling, capitalization and punctuation, ideas, format, and politeness.

2. Regarding to students' formal word use, it was found that students used more formal words in the post-test. It shows that the students are aware and respectful to write emails to people in cultural differences. However, there is still many students' informal word use in the post-test.

3. In accordance with TBLT principles, the result revealed that students enjoyed writing emails through TBLT activities because students worked in group. In such circumstance, the learning process allows

students to brainstorm and negotiate their ideas together. Moreover, students can revise and reflect on their idea together in doing group work. In summary, learning intercultural email through TBLT is proper for university students because they can analyze and negotiate their ideas with other students well. Thus, learning intercultural email through TBLT in this study is suitable for students to prepare to work in their future career.

Conclusion

Learning Intercultural email through TBLT is suitable for university students. It is because TBLT is allowed students learning through the process which the students can manage their writing step by step. However, an email task should relate to students' daily life and it should be more authentic in order to improve students' idea to cope with problems in the real situation. Furthermore, the email task should be challenging to students' writing ability and the students should have more opportunity to reply more multiple culture emails. Finally, task repetition should be more difficult than regular task in order to see students' different idea to solve the problems.

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