

Common Problems in Business Email Writing Among Chinese EFL Learners: A Pedagogical Analysis

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Abstract:

Business email writing is an essential yet challenging skill in Business English and ESP instruction. For Chinese EFL learners, the difficulty often lies not only in grammatical accuracy but also in producing emails that are pragmatically appropriate and professionally effective. This paper reviews recent studies on business email discourse, ESP writing, genre pedagogy, pragmatics, metadiscourse, and AI-assisted writing to examine the major problems Chinese learners encounter in business email writing. Based on a qualitative literature review, the analysis identifies five recurring problem areas: weak organization, inappropriate tone and register, insufficient pragmatic competence, language inaccuracy and weak cohesion, and limited reader awareness. These difficulties are closely associated with restricted exposure to authentic workplace communication, inadequate genre knowledge, overreliance on translation-based strategies, and classroom instruction that still emphasizes sentence-level correctness over discourse and interpersonal meaning. In response, the paper proposes several pedagogical strategies, including genre-based instruction, data-driven learning, explicit teaching of pragmatics, collaborative writing, and the critical use of AI tools. The study argues that business email writing should be taught as a professional communicative genre with clear rhetorical and interpersonal purposes rather than as a simplified language exercise. Such an approach may better prepare Chinese EFL learners for workplace communication in international business contexts.

Keywords:

Business Email Writing, Chinese EFL learners, ESP Writing, Genre Pedagogy, Pragmatics

1. Introduction

Email remains one of the most widely used forms of written communication in professional and business settings. It serves a range of communicative purposes, such as requesting information, confirming arrangements, handling complaints, following up on tasks, and maintaining professional relationships [3,8]. For this reason, business email writing has become an increasingly important component of Business English and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction [1,4].

Compared with general English writing, business email writing requires more than grammatical accuracy. It demands genre awareness, tone control, pragmatic

sensitivity, and a clear orientation toward the reader [5,6]. A successful business email should be concise, purposeful, polite, and appropriate to the communicative context. However, many Chinese EFL learners find it difficult to meet these expectations. Even when their grammar is acceptable, their emails may sound overly direct, excessively formal, vague, or interactionally inappropriate [5,10].

Previous studies have shown that business emails are shaped by conventional patterns of organization, politeness strategies, and reader-oriented discourse choices [8,9]. Professional writers tend to manage interpersonal meaning carefully through mitigation, appropriate register, and sensitivity to audience expectations [5,9]. In contrast, student writers often rely on textbook formulas, literal translation, or habits developed in general English writing. This gap is especially noticeable in EFL contexts, where learners often have limited access to authentic workplace communication [3,6].

Against this background, the present paper aims to examine the common problems Chinese EFL learners face in business email writing and to discuss possible pedagogical responses. Rather than reporting new empirical data, this study synthesizes recent research in ESP writing, business discourse, pragmatics, genre pedagogy, metadiscourse, and technology-assisted writing [1,4,7,9]. By doing so, it seeks to provide a focused pedagogical analysis that can help teachers better support learners in developing effective business email writing skills.

2. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative literature review approach to examine common problems in business email writing among Chinese EFL learners and to discuss their pedagogical implications. Rather than collecting primary empirical data, the paper synthesizes recent studies related to business email discourse, business correspondence, ESP writing, genre pedagogy, pragmatics, metadiscourse, collaborative writing, and AI-assisted writing [1,2,5,6,7,9].

The reviewed literature was selected according to its relevance to three main concerns:

- (1) the linguistic and rhetorical features of business email writing,
- (2) common difficulties encountered by EFL or ESP learners, especially Chinese learners, and
- (3) teaching approaches that may improve learners' professional writing competence. Priority was given to recent peer-reviewed studies that provide insights into workplace communication, genre conventions, pragmatic performance, and instructional practice. [3,4,5,6]

The analysis was organized around five dimensions that frequently appear in previous research as central to effective business email communication: email structure and organization, tone and register, politeness and pragmatic competence, lexical and grammatical accuracy with cohesion, and reader awareness with interactional metadiscourse [5,8,9,10]. These dimensions served as the analytical framework for identifying recurring learner difficulties and deriving pedagogical recommendations.

Because the study is interpretive in nature, its purpose is not to measure statistical relationships but to synthesize key issues and propose practical teaching directions for Business English and ESP classrooms [1,4,6].

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Structural Problems

One of the most noticeable weaknesses in learner business emails is poor organization. A conventional business email normally includes a subject line, greeting, opening move, clearly stated purpose, supporting message, closing move, and signature [3,8]. However, many learner emails do not follow these conventions consistently. Some begin too abruptly without sufficient framing, while others fail to state the purpose clearly or end without an appropriate closing.

This problem suggests that many learners have not yet developed a stable understanding of business email as a professional genre. Their prior experience in general English composition does not automatically transfer to workplace communication, where efficiency, clarity, and rhetorical structure are highly valued [4,6]. Therefore, genre knowledge should be taught explicitly, with attention to the typical stages and communicative purposes of business emails.

3.2. Tone and Register

Another major difficulty concerns tone and register. Business emails should sound professional without being excessively rigid or unnatural. They should also reflect the relationship between writer and reader, the degree of formality required, and the purpose of the message. Many Chinese EFL learners struggle to achieve this balance. Some use language that is overly formal and distant, whereas others write in an informal or overly direct style influenced by everyday online communication.

This problem is often linked to limited exposure to authentic business discourse. Without sufficient input, learners may rely on memorized textbook expressions or inappropriate informal language. Yet in professional settings, register plays an important role in shaping the reader's impression of competence, courtesy, and credibility. An unsuitable tone may reduce the effectiveness of the message, even if the basic content is understandable.

3.3. Pragmatic Problems

Pragmatic competence is central to business email writing, especially in speech acts such as requests, reminders, refusals, and complaints. These communicative acts require more than correct grammar; they require sensitivity to interpersonal meaning and situational appropriateness. The literature reviewed indicates that student writers often produce emails that are too direct, insufficiently mitigated, or pragmatically awkward.

In many cases, the problem lies not in vocabulary knowledge but in the inability to choose forms that are socially and professionally appropriate. For example, a request may be grammatically correct but still sound impolite if it lacks softening devices or supportive framing. This issue becomes even more significant in cross-cultural business communication, where relatively small differences in wording can influence how the entire message is interpreted. As a result, explicit teaching of politeness strategies and pragmatic variation is necessary in ESP writing instruction.

3.4. Language Accuracy and Cohesion

Learners also experience problems in vocabulary use, grammar, and textual cohesion. Some use awkward collocations or expressions translated literally from Chinese. Others make grammatical errors or rely on a narrow range of sentence patterns. In addition, links between ideas are not always clearly signaled, which can make the email difficult to follow and reduce its readability.

Although these issues may appear to be purely linguistic, they directly affect the professionalism of business communication. Business emails are usually concise, but conciseness should not come at the cost of clarity or correctness. Accurate wording, appropriate collocation, and smooth cohesion all contribute to the effectiveness of the message [3,10]. Therefore, language accuracy remains a necessary component of instruction, but it should be integrated with genre and discourse awareness rather than taught in isolation.

3.5. Reader Awareness

A further problem is limited reader awareness. Professional email writers usually anticipate the reader's needs, time constraints, possible interpretations, and likely responses. In contrast, learner emails often focus primarily on what the writer wants to say, rather than on how the message will be received. As a result, some emails may sound self-centered, unclear, or insufficiently considerate.

Interactional metadiscourse can help explain this issue. Professional writers often use hedges, engagement markers, attitude markers, and polite framing devices to guide interpretation and build rapport with the reader. Student writers, however, tend to use these resources less effectively. Consequently, their emails may be less persuasive, less tactful, and less relationally effective. Teaching should therefore include reader-oriented strategies and examples of how interpersonal meaning is constructed in authentic workplace emails [9].

3.6. Pedagogical Causes

The difficulties discussed above are closely related to several instructional factors. First, business email writing is sometimes taught without sufficient explanation of genre conventions and communicative purpose. Second, learners often have limited access to authentic business email examples, which restricts their understanding of real-world usage. Third, classroom teaching may still prioritize sentence-level correctness over discourse organization, pragmatics, and interpersonal effectiveness. Finally, many students depend heavily on translation-based writing strategies, which can lead to unnatural phrasing and pragmatic mismatch [5,10].

Taken together, these factors suggest that the problems in learner business emails are not simply the result of insufficient grammar knowledge. Rather, they reflect a broader gap between classroom writing practices and actual professional communication.

4. Conclusions

Business email writing is a practical but demanding skill for Chinese EFL learners. The major difficulties identified in this study include weak structure, inappropriate tone, limited pragmatic control, language inaccuracy, and insufficient reader awareness. These problems are closely associated with limited genre knowledge,

inadequate exposure to authentic communication, and instructional practices that do not fully address discourse and interpersonal meaning [4,6,9].

This paper argues that business email writing should be taught as a professional communicative genre rather than as a simplified writing exercise. To improve learner performance, ESP classrooms should integrate genre-based instruction, explicit pragmatics teaching, guided analysis of authentic texts, collaborative practice, and critical use of AI tools [1,2,4,6,7]. Such an approach can better prepare learners for the communicative demands of international business environments.

Future research may further investigate learner-produced business emails in specific Chinese educational contexts and evaluate the effectiveness of classroom interventions designed to improve professional email writing.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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