Quality Business Letters of Higher Education Institution Faculty Members: Content Material Evaluation

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Abstract

This study focuses on quality business letters of the faculty members of a higher education institution in terms of unity, coherence, correctness in terms of grammar and punctuation, completeness, and conciseness. The researcher utilized content analysis research technique that deals with available documentary materials. She also employed purposive sampling technique where respondents were chosen based on these criteria: respondents should be faculty members of an HEI and have written an outgoing business letter. Also, the researcher used quota sampling where she set it to fifty (50) everyday letters and memoranda. Findings revealed one (1) error occurrence in terms of unity where a letter did not relate every sentence in the paragraph. In addition, there were seven (7) errors committed in terms of coherence, specifically in pronoun reference usage (2) and logical order of ideas (5). While in terms of correctness in grammar, there were forty-one (41) errors found, whereas, eighteen (18) errors were discovered in punctuation usage. Further, eight (8) errors were located in terms of completeness while twenty (20) errors occurred in terms of conciseness. Overall, there were ninety-five (95) errors uncovered across all sampled business letters. It was concluded that respondents do not have serious problems in achieving unity, however, there is a need to revise their letters to attain logical order of ideas. They also have difficulty in achieving grammar correctness, have confusion in using appropriate punctuation, and have failed to achieve completeness of the information. Thus, the researcher recommends to conduct training-workshops on technical and/or business letter writing, encourages the faculty to seek help from colleagues for revision, and urges faculty to read reputable references concerning business correspondence used in the Philippine setting.

Keywords: business communication, business letters, content analysis, faculty, higher education, letter writing, technical writing, written communication skills

Introduction

Business communication has been an essential part of those who belong to an organization, in general. Suggestively, business correspondence adapts and submits to tradition. For the past years of teaching in a university, the researcher of this undertaking has seen and observed formal business letters of faculty members and even administrative staff with errors and lapses, veering from achieving the qualities of an effective business communication including business letters. With this, the researcher had the urgency to conduct this study in order to verify the quality of business letters of the said personnel that reflect their credibility.

Notably, Chapman (2006), Oberg and Villemaire (2017), Doctor, Bagaoisan, Bicamong, and Jasul (2006) presented the use of language in writing which is concerned with the use of vocabulary and grammar, processes in writing, and how the language can be seen in writing to be proficient and

competent in the skill. Moreover, Rosales & Espino (2008) specifically defined business letters as those that also use language in writing. Further, Oberg and Villemaire (2017), Juneja (2015), Manalo (2011), Padilla (personal communication, 2015), Brizee (2010), Jackson (2003), and A (2010) proposed and set characteristics of good writing, qualities of an effective business letter, rules and guidelines of written English in terms of grammar, punctuation, and the need of revising the document. Thus, there are some expectations from teachers that Alamis (2010), the Michigan State University (2003), Gill (2012), and Ho (2003) established. First, teachers should give importance to writing especially in teaching the skill. Second, graduate students or professionals are expected to write like experts. Third, teachers are expected to have a mastery of the writing mechanics such as vocabulary and grammar. Lastly, teachers' understanding and application of grammar should contribute to effective use of the English language. Due to these expectations, problems are still evident. Oberg and Villemaire (2017), Strunk (2006), Wijesinha (personal communication, 2011) (as cited in Jayasunadara & Premarathna, 2011), White (1994), Hull (1987), Michigan State University (2003), Darus and Hei Ching (2009), and Cabansag (2013) proved that the common problems committed by writers are incorrect grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and poor writing quality because they are not proficient in the use of writing mechanics. On the other hand, Gepila (2020) found out that company employees are proficient and competent in business letter writing according to the BBC grading system, yet, training and workshops are recommended to improve their writing skills in business operations.

This whole study focused on the quality of business letters of the faculty members of a higher education institution through content material evaluation. Specifically, it sought for the writing performance of the subject-respondents in terms of unity, coherence, correctness in terms of grammar and punctuation, completeness, and conciseness as well as the HEI faculty members' performance among the five (5) qualities of business letter writing.

This study is anchored on the 7 C's of Effective Communication also known as 7 principles of communication from a book chapter published by Murphy, et al. (2000). These are a helpful way to ensure effective business communication. The 7 Cs of Communication provide a useful check list as a result of which both written and verbal communication is carried out in a clear, simple, targeted, group-oriented and well-structured manner. Throughout the years, there have been two more variations of these which are often neglected namely, creativity and credibility. First C refers to completeness where message should be guided to the world view of the receiver; further information and/or clarification are needed for complex messages; and a successful division of subjects should explain the message. Second C is concreteness where a simple message is also about practical business contact hence, the word and phrase structure used should be universally represented. Third C is courtesy which is also important to treat the audience respectfully and courteously, in addition to respecting the feelings and views of the target groups. Fourth C is correctness where there is a preference for appropriate use of the language in business communication, thus, grammar errors must be avoided and stylistic lapses or inappropriate usage of verbs are not necessary. Fifth C is clarity where simple or plain language is distinguished by precision, concise sentences, and descriptive phrases, therefore, fuzzy terminology is strictly forbidden, as are formal language and cliché words. Sixth C is consideration where it is necessary to relate to the target group and to be active in order to interact effectively. The message can be tailored to them by taking the audience into account. Last C refers to conciseness where message is clear; the plot is coherent; and it does not contain any contradictions. Accordingly, it is crucial that there should be accurate, positive, and essential details. Consequently, brevity of the message should not sacrifice the complete meaning of the letter. All of these Cs create an understanding of a powerful communication tool.

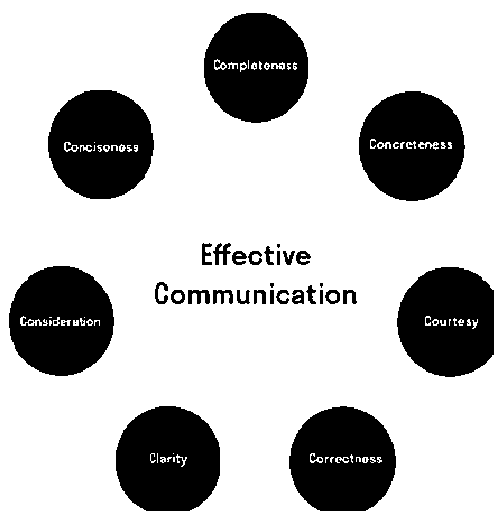7 C's of Communication   toolshero

Figure 1. 7 Cs of Communication

Significantly, this study becomes inimitable compared to previous studies because it focuses on the quality of teachers' business letters rather than the students' outputs. Also, very minimal researches have provided analyses on the respondents' writing performance and training program recommendations for faculty members and staff that are specifically designed in the Philippine context.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed quantitative research design in error-analysing the business letters of the subject-respondents. Also, a content material evaluation was utilized since this study dealt with documentary materials that were already existing and available.

Population, Sample, and Sampling Technique

The researcher used purposive and quota sampling techniques that only included people/subject of interest then set her quota to fifty (50) everyday letters and memoranda. The population was not determined because there were various outgoing business letters from the office of the campus.

Instrumentation

A researcher-made checklist was used to gather data that consists of seven columns. The first column refers to the subject or number of a business letter. Second through sixth column identified whether the materials achieved the criteria set by the researcher for effective business communication. Consequently, the last column was designed for the total number of errors committed by each teacher. Descriptions of each criterion were adapted from Business Communication and Report Writing book (Manalo, 2011).

Data Collection

Data-gathering was conducted through the assistance of the academic head of the campus that permitted the researcher to collect official communications that served as subjects of the study.

He then provided the researcher fifty (50) outgoing business letters. This study was conducted only in the selected higher education institution. The researcher limited her study to the subjects' official communications such as business letters and memoranda whether they achieve the qualities of an effective business communication namely unity, coherence, correctness, completeness, and conciseness. The gathered data from the respondents were checked, classified, and tabulated.

Data Analysis

In analysing and interpreting the results, objectivity was applied. Error occurrences were tallied one by one. Subsequently, frequency results were analysed and interpreted without prejudice. These findings were presented through the use of tables for better visualization and a clear presentation of results. Interpretations and conclusions from the findings relied solely on the frequency counts of the features studied. Moreover, coding was used to analyse the following levels: discourse level, syntactic level, and lexical level. Using the variables in question number 2, they were grouped according to these levels of analysis: discourse-level covers unity and coherence; syntactic level focuses on correctness in terms of grammar, completeness, and adherence to style and format; while, lexical level examines the choice of words in terms of conciseness of texts used, range of vocabulary for business communication, and spelling. The perceptions of the researcher were not influenced by factors other than the outcomes of the variables inquired. The researcher employed directed approach analysis that starts with a theory or relevant research findings as guidance for thematic coding on language features, textual structures, and grammatical features of English Business Letters.

Ethical Considerations

Research subjects were not subjected to harm in any way. The protection of the privacy of research subjects was ensured. None of their personal information found in the business letters was taken, mentioned, and used in the study. There was no conflict of interest to disclose. All communications concerning this study were done with honesty and transparency.

Results

Through the analysis and interpretation of data obtained in the study conducted to illustrate the quality of business letters of the HEI faculty members, the results are cited as follows:

Writing Performance of the Subjects in terms of Discourse, Syntactic, and Lexical Levels:

Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage of the type of error committed in terms of unity. The total number of errors committed by the HEI faculty members in terms of unity was 1 or 100% where the only error was when the writer did not relate every sentence in the paragraph. This proves that they always consider oneness of idea in a body of the letter by consisting one subject and stating the main idea in a single sentence. Evidently, Bander (1985) explains it being exemplified in a paragraph when all of the supporting details are focused on one main idea, meaning to say that if there is one prominent idea that envelopes the entire text, there is unity. Thus, subject-respondents are recommended to be exposed to various samples of business letter. They may file records of their incoming and outgoing letters and review them when writing one.

Table 1. Frequency and Percentage of the Type of Error Committed in terms of Unity

Type of Error Committed (UNITY)	Frequency	Percent (%)
1. not consisting of only one subject/idea	0	0.00
2. not stating the main idea in a single sentence	0	0.00
3. not relating every sentence in the paragraph	1	100.00
Total	**1**	**100.00**

Table 2 presents the frequency and percentage of the type of error committed in terms of coherence. The total number of errors committed was 7 or 100%. 5 or 71.43% errors were because of not following the logical order of ideas in their letters. While 2 or 28.57% errors derived from not using correct pronoun reference. However, no error was committed in terms of not using transitional markers to signal a new sentence/paragraph. In fact, Brizee (2010) supports this quality by mentioning that, in revising a letter, the writer should make sure if paragraphs are logically arranged or if it achieved coherence. Hence, continuous outlining is recommended to stimulate awareness of one's own writing making him develop a mastery of the subject matter, since this technique requires logical organization and parallelism (Frank, 1980).

Table 2. Frequency and Percentage of the Type of Error Committed in terms of Coherence

Type of Error Committed (COHERENCE)	Frequency	Percent (%)
1. not using correct pronoun reference	2	28.57
not using transitional markers to signal the new sentence/paragraph	0	0.00
3. not following the logical order of ideas	5	71.43
Total	**7**	**100.00**

Table 3 displays the frequency and percentage of the type of error committed in terms of correctness in grammar. The total number of errors committed by the faculty members in terms of correctness in grammar was 41 or 100%. The highest number of errors committed was the wrong choice of words. It was followed by 8 or 19.51% errors when they did not capitalize the important proper nouns as well as capitalizing the unimportant common nouns. While 6 or 14.63% errors were committed concerning incorrect usage of prepositions. However, 4 or 9.75% misspelled words were found. Despite these errors, no one committed the error of using passive voice, sentence fragments, and not capitalizing the first letter of the sentence. Suggestively, third of the five (5) guidelines from A (2010) was the code should be selected carefully; the sender should decide what medium to use which refers to the tone of language or choice of words. While in the case of spelling, it is suggested not to depend on spell-checking software applications since it oftentimes missed obvious errors, instead, ask someone to check the spelling from one's composed letter before sending it (Johnson, 2016). Accordingly, Karaan (2013) proposed rules to observe so that writers should not commit errors in grammar which is concerned with the presentation of message that if it is not written correctly, the reader might misread it.

Table 3. Frequency and Percentage of the Type of Error Committed in terms of Correctness in Grammar

Type of Error Committed (GRAMMAR)	Frequency	Percent (%)
1. subject not agreeing with its verb or vice versa	1	2.43
2. not using the active voice instead uses the passive	0	0.00
3. containing misspelled word/s	4	9.75
4. using sentence fragment/s	0	0.00
5. not capitalizing the first letter of each sentence.	0	0.00
6. not capitalizing the important proper nouns (days of the week, months, titles, and venues)	8	19.51
7. capitalizing unimportant common nouns	8	19.51

Type of Error Committed (GRAMMAR)	Frequency	Percent (%)
8. having wrong choice of word/s	14	34.15
9. having incorrect usage of preposition/s	6	14.63
Total	**41**	**100.00**

Table 4 shows the frequency and percentage of the type of error committed in terms of correctness in punctuation. The total number of errors committed in terms of punctuation was 18 or 100%. Two types of errors got the highest number of occurrences which was 6 or 33.33% because of not using comma between items in a series, also, by not using comma when directly addressing someone. The latter error arouses possible confusion or misreading on the part of the recipient. While 3 or 16.66% lapses were located regarding not using colon (:) after the salutation which is a must punctuation and considered formal for business letter (Straus et al., 2014). While three types of errors got the same 1 or 5.55% occurrence due to incorrect usage of colon, not using comma after the complimentary close, and incorrect usage of comma and other punctuation marks. However, it is good news that no one committed the error of using contractions in a business letter as cited in Padilla's (personal communication, 2015) handouts in Modern English Grammar, rule number 1 states that the writer should not use contractions unless he is reporting a dialogue. Generally, Rosales & Espino (2008) mentioned that business letters are formal letters; hence, punctuations used in them must additionally reflect these. So, teachers must review the standard format where a colon is used after the salutation as an alternative than a comma which is often utilized in private or personal letters.

Table 4. Frequency and Percentage of the Type of Error Committed in terms of Correctness in Punctuation.

Type of Error Committed (PUNCTUATION)	Frequency	Percent (%)
1. not using colon (:) after the salutation	3	16.66
2. having incorrect usage of dash, hyphen, or colon	1	5.55
3. using apostrophes for contractions	0	0.00
4. not using a comma between items in a series	6	33.33
5. not using a comma after complimentary close	1	5.55
6. not using comma when directly addressing someone	6	33.33
7. having incorrect usage of comma and other punctuation mark/s	1	5.55
Total	**18**	**100.00**

Table 5 presents the frequency and percentage of the type of error committed in terms of completeness. The total number of errors committed was 8 or 100%. The highest occurrence of errors was 4 or 50.00% when the writer/s did not provide all necessary information such as the reason for the request and venue of their event. Whereas, 3 or 37.50% errors were discovered not providing the title, position, and address of the addressee. While only 1 or 12.50% error concerning not providing all basic parts of a business letter/memorandum such as inside address was found. As has been noted, Manalo (2011) mentioned in her letter writer's creed the need to be informative by giving facts, which refer to all the necessary information that a letter should have. For the same reason, the subject-respondents are recommended to first clearly identify one's goal or reason for communi-

cating; second is to carefully explain what the sender expects from the recipient; lastly, to outline the pros of answering the sender's request in light of a response letter (Rough Notes, 2009).

Table 5. Frequency and Percentage of the Type of Error Committed in terms of Completeness

Type of Error Committed (COMPLETENESS)	Frequency	Percent (%)
1. not providing all the necessary information (5Ws & 1H)	4	50.00
2. not providing title, position, and address of the addressee	3	37.50
3. not providing all basic parts of a business letter/memorandum	1	12.50
Total	**8**	**100.00**

Table 6 shows the frequency and percentage of the type of error committed in terms of conciseness. The total number of errors committed in this category was 20 or 100%. 8 or 40.00% trite, unnecessary/unimportant expressions and obvious ideas were located, 7 or 35.00% repetitive wording, redundant pairs and categories were traced, and 5 or 40.00% unnecessary prepositional phrases, determiners, and modifiers were tracked. Luckily, no one committed the error of not using single-word substitutes of phrases whenever possible by not sacrificing the meaning of the message. Strunk, Jr. (1918) said that a sentence should not have unnecessary words, a paragraph should not have needless sentences, likewise, a drawing should not contain pointless line and a machine with only essential parts implying that conciseness must also be achieved in writing a business letter.

Table 6. Frequency and Percentage of the Type of Error Committed in terms of Conciseness

Type of Error Committed (Conciseness)	Frequency	Percent (%)
1. not using single-word substitutes of phrases whenever possible	0	0.00
2. using trite, unnecessary/unimportant expressions and obvious ideas	8	40.00
3. using unnecessary prepositional phrases, determiners, and modifiers	5	40.00
4. using repetitive wording, redundant pairs and categories	7	35.00
Total	**20**	**100.00**

HEI Faculty Members' Performance Among the Five (5) Qualities of Business-Letter Writing

Table 7 depicts the frequency and percentage of total error occurrences in terms of the qualities of business-letter writing where faculty members performed most and least. Since the frequency and percent refers to the occurrences of their errors committed, the highest number was where they least performed while the lowest number was where they performed most. Among the five qualities of business-letter writing, unity obtained the least number of error occurrence which was 1 or 1.05% proving that HEI faculty members have the least problem when it comes to showing oneness in the body of their letters. While correctness in grammar received the highest number of errors committed which was 41 or 43.16% showing that the faculty members need to focus on some aspects governing grammar that can really affect the meaning of the message of their business letters. This proved the study of Professor Wijesinha (personal communication, 2011) (as cited in Jayasunadara & Premarathna, 2011)that the most common error committed in English is on the grounds that grammar is

not effective and that is the failure to include it into all points of teaching and studying, in precise, with regard to reading and writing capabilities.

Table 7. Frequency and Percentage of the Error Occurrences in terms of the Qualities of Business-Letter Writing

Quality of Business-Letter Writing	Frequency	Percent (%)
1. Unity	1	1.05
2. Coherence	7	7.37
3. Correctness in grammar	41	43.16
4. Correctness in Punctuation	18	18.95
5. Completeness	8	8.42
6. Conciseness	20	21.05
Total	**95**	**100.00**

Conclusions

Based on the results and discussion, the researcher concluded that the subject-respondents do not have serious problems when it comes to achieving unity in writing a business letter. Thus, there is a need of revising the letter to attain logical order of ideas.

Moreover, the subject-respondents have difficulty in achieving correctness in grammar when writing a business letter especially in choosing the correct word appropriate to the context. Further, based on the findings, the faculty members have confusion on when to use comma between items in a series and also in directly addressing someone. However, it is a common error to use comma after the salutation instead of a colon for American style, which is the standard punctuation in the Philippine setting. Furthermore, some of the faculty members failed in providing all necessary information in a letter specifically the reason of making the purpose which is required to receive the appropriate desired action from the recipient, also, to avoid confusion on the part of the reader. This criterion appears in orientation, information, and action parts of the business letter. Lastly, subject-respondents are comforted with trite, unnecessary expressions and obvious ideas which they can omit without sacrificing the meaning of the message. Therefore, their business letters end up lengthy and verbose. This is also common in the Philippine context given that literal translation of varieties of English is an obvious practice rather than semantic translation.

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