

# Unavoidable Practices for Effective Business Correspondence Teaching

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## Abstract

As a teacher of English as a Foreign Language in general and (the teacher) of English business correspondence in particular in Mbuji-Mayi, I noticed fifth and six-year pupils' weakness in business letter writing. Looking for weakness causes and how to achieve success, I have written this paper in order to make suggestions. Questionnaire and classroom observation have helped me to collect the data. The analytical and comparative methods have been used to find out whether what teachers do in class aligns with what is advocated by experts in the field. The study has revealed that 60% of the teachers said that the textbooks they use does not match with the criteria of contents and teaching approach while 40 % said the textbooks do. 80% of the teachers use samples of letters for reading activities while 20% said they do not. 80% of the teachers said pupils usually write letters at home but sometimes in class while 20% said their pupils usually write letters at home but sometimes at home. 100% of the teachers teach business correspondence as a theory course, not like a practical writing class. 100% of the teachers said pupils have vocabulary problems. In terms of suggestions to remedy this situation, the following unavoidable practices can help to achieve learner success in this field: (1) Learners' Needs Analysis, Material Adaptation and Simulation, (2) Learner-centeredness in English Commercial Correspondence Teaching, (3) Vocabulary and Reading prior to Letter Writing, (4) Repetitive Pupils' Work under the Teacher's Supervision.

**Key Words :** Business Correspondence, English for Specific Purposes, Simulation, Learner Centredness

## 1. Introduction

Teachers of English as a foreign language have a tremendous challenge, that of enabling their pupils to use English in real communicative situations. Particularly the job of the teacher of English business correspondence is even harder. This means that besides making the pupils able to use English in general, s/he has to make their pupils good writers of business letters. The national curriculum of English says clearly that:

*En 5e et 6e années Commerciales et Administratives, Cycle Long, on attribuera une plus grande importance aux sujets ayant trait au monde des affaires, et ce, tout en s'inspirant du programme général. En correspondance commerciale, les lettres deviendront de plus en plus complètes et fouillées (EDIDEPS, 2007 :29).*

In fifth and sixth forms of the commercial section, long cycle, topics dealing with business should be given more space. In business correspondence, letters should get more and more complete and thorough (translation my own).

We usually see how advanced and how thorough letters are at the state exam of the commercial section, although the pupils are not expected to write letters but to answer multiple-choice questions as it is the evaluation model at the final exam in the educational system of the Democratic Republic of the Congo nowadays. In principle, the pupils are expected to write business letters as recommended in the national curriculum.

As a teacher of English and a researcher, I have noted two striking facts: (1) Assessment of pupils in this field does not yield satisfactory results. That is, too many pupils cannot write complete business letters. (2) Many teachers do not show a teaching methodology that is likely to achieve the teaching goal of English business correspondence.

Therefore, this paper looks at the methodology of English commercial correspondence in fifth and sixth forms and aims at presenting teaching procedures that can help the teacher to make his/her pupils effective writers of business letters. In other words, this paper will turn around the following questions:

- What is the essence of English business correspondence?
- How do teachers of English commercial correspondence teach it in fifth and sixth forms?
- What are the unavoidable procedures for the achievement of teaching goals in English commercial correspondence?

## **2. On English Business Correspondence**

### **2.1. What is English Business Correspondence?**

The pupils of the commercial section at secondary school learn general English and the English for Specific Purposes. They are thus initiated to business composition. Business composition involves the mastery of the English jargon related to business and the mastery of English composition norms. This is what is meant by Business correspondence or English commercial correspondence (henceforth ECC). ECC is a course for learners in the commercial section mostly stressing the writing skill, although the reading skill is indispensable. Pupils cannot write effective business letters if they have never read any. Consequently, the main skills the teacher is expected to develop in the pupils are reading and writing. The reading skill must be developed because acknowledging receipt of a letter, for example, is done after the addressee has understood what the letter is about. It means, after s/he has read that letter. Or one cannot respond to a letter which they cannot read. This is generally expressed in the persuasive saying which goes as no reading, no writing. The writing skill must also be developed because the addressee in turn, may be obliged to react by writing a letter and becoming by that fact a letter sender. Thanks to ECC teaching, the pupil will be able to perform (in his/her future life and career) specific tasks such as applying for a job or reading job ads, ordering goods or receiving orders, complaining for wrong goods or services of bad quality or reading complaint letters, and so on. It now appears clearly that English commercial correspondence teaches the type of English known as English for Specific Purposes (henceforth ESP).

### **2.2. ESP Teacher**

The teacher of ESP is different from the teacher of English for general purposes. Bensachi (1013:13) shares this view when he writes that:

*“Since the emergence of ESP in the 1960s, English language teaching, in general, and the status of English teachers, in particular witnessed a radical change. This change created controversies among researchers on the relationship between ESP teacher and the one of EGP.*

Still on the profile of an ESP teacher and that of an EGP teacher, Strevens 1988 cited in Esteban and Martos (2002) puts that:

*ESP practitioners are only EGP teachers being involved in special training courses to teach English for specific purposes to specific groups of learners.*

An ESP teacher will need to look for content specialists for help in designing appropriate lessons. This implies that s/he is obliged to collaborate with teachers of other disciplines specific to the pupils' field of study. Similarly, the teacher of ECC must absolutely rely on contents which are relevant for the commercial section in order to really deal with what the pupils are expected to do in their future career as far as correspondence is concerned.

### **2.3. Teaching Approaches Relevant to Business Correspondence Teaching**

Approaches applied to teach writing are various. In this section, I will discuss the main ones and show the ones that are relevant to the teaching of business correspondence.

#### **2.3.1. The Controlled-to-Free Approach**

This is an approach in which the students are first given grammar exercises that focus on single sentences, and only after practicing this level, they copy, manipulate or change paragraphs (Hymes, cited by Baghdadi 2022). This approach, though older, can be applied in the teaching of business correspondence to make the students know the typical grammar used in a variety of letters or to express a specific attitude or thought. This can be exemplified with the conditional "would" in instances like "I would like to ask for the price list" or "I would really appreciate your quickness in shipping the goods".

#### **2.3.2. The Free-Writing Approach**

This writing approach introduced by Raimes (1983) gives the chance to the students to write freely on given topics without worrying about correct forms as their teachers do not correct the structural aspect of their productions but rather comment only on the content (Baghdadi 2022). When applied, this approach will have the students learn how the content differs from one letter type to another.

#### **2.3.3. The Grammar-Syntax-Organisation Approach**

When teachers use this approach, they emphasize the need to work simultaneously on more than one feature of the composition skills such as grammar, mechanics, organization, content, audience, purpose, word choice all at once (Raimes, cited by Baghdadi 2022). This approach makes it possible for the teacher to teach more than one thing at the same time. For instance, the teacher can teach the letter parts and where they should be written on the letter sheet and teach the content like the subject of a given letter type.

#### **2.3.4. The Paragraph-pattern Approach**

With this approach, students copy, analyze, or imitate model paragraphs. Exercises in the framework of this approach tend to include re-organizing and re-arranging scrambled sentences in the right order, identifying general and specific information, inventing a suitable topic sentence for a paragraph, and the like (Baghdadi 2022). This approach is relevant in the teaching of business correspondence as the teacher can assign a task requiring the students to go from scrambled sentences that they should put on their right order to get a fully written paragraph.

#### **2.3.5. The Communicative Approach or the Functional Approach**

Based on the claim that "writers do their best when writing is truly a communicative act, with a writer writing for a real reader", the Communicative Approach makes it possible for students writers to act as writers in real life by considering the purpose behind their writing and the audience they are writing to

(Baghdadi 2022). In business correspondence teaching, students will have their interlocutors extended to other students or other interlocutors outside the classroom.

### 2.3.6. The Product Approach

This approach is based on the reproduction of writing models (Nunan, cited by Baghdadi 2022). The focus on this approach will have students write an essay imitating given pattern. When applied in the business correspondence classroom, this approach allows students to write a given letter type imitating a sample which was first given to them for reading activities.

### 2.3.7. The Process Writing Approach

Tribble cited by Baghdadi 2022 writes that the process approach is an approach to the teaching of writing which stresses the creativity of the individual writer, and which pays attention to the development of good writing practices rather than the imitation of models. In advanced grades this approach puts the students in a context where they are expected to write a given letter type or parts without imitating a model given to them.

## 3. Research Methodology

### 3.1. Data Collection

To undertake this enterprise and complete it, I resorted to interview and observation as data collection techniques. Specifically, I went to five schools: Institut Mulemba, Institut Dibwe dya Bwakane Intitut Nkessa, Eureka 4 and Lycée Musungula where I met the teachers of English business correspondence who responded to the interview questions as I interviewed them. The interview sessions have been recorded by means of a mobile phone for an accurate data analysis. Then I attended some business correspondence lessons in order to really see how the pupils are trained in business letters teaching/learning.

### 3.2. Data Analysis

To analyse the data I collected, I have relied on the analytic method and the comparative method. The first method helped me to analyse the responses provided by the teachers in the interview sessions as well as the facts noticed during the classroom observation. I used the second method to compare the results obtained after my field work with what applied linguists and experts in the domain advocate.

## 4. Field Work And Discussion Of The Findings

### 4.1.1. Teachers' Answers to the Questionnaire

I here present the responses provided by the teachers on the questionnaire. Each time I will be presenting the question and the answers the teacher gave. In the end I make comments on the responses provided if necessary.

Question 1: Do you teach English commercial correspondence?

Question N°	Answers	Frequency	%
1	YES	5	100
	NO	0	00

Question 2: How often do you teach it in a week?

Question N°	Answers	Frequency	%
2	ONCE	4	80
	TWICE	1	20

Question 3: What are the textbooks you use specifically for English commercial correspondence or business correspondence?

Question N°	Answers	Frequency	%
3	Kabamba Muana's English correspondence (a handout)	1	20
	Business Letter Writing ( by Mualaba)	3	60
	Specialized English (third-year lecture notes)	1	20
	La correspondance commerciale anglaise	1	20
	Other teachers' notes (old copybooks)	3	30

Kabamba Muana's English correspondence was used by one school out of five (20%). Business Letter Writing was used by three schools out of five (60%). One school out of five has a teacher who uses the lecture notes provided by his own teacher and does not have a specific book for business correspondence of secondary school (20%). The book 'la correspondance commerciale anglaise' was used by only one school out of five (20%). Finally three schools out of five use previous years copybooks for lack of specific books (30%).

Question 4: Do the textbooks you use for business correspondence match the criteria of contents and approach?

Question N°	Answers	Frequency	%
4	YES	3	60
	NO	2	40

Three teachers out of five say that the books they use for business correspondence have good contents and the contents are presented in an approach that is likely to help them achieve the teaching goal. While two of five say that the books they use do not have appropriate contents and finally the contents are not presented systematically in such a way that the teaching goal may be easily attained.

Question 5: Do you usually use samples of letters as materials for reading lessons?

Question N°	Answers	Frequency	%
5	YES	4	80
	NO	1	20

Four teachers out of five do not give the opportunity to their pupils to read samples of letters during reading lessons. Only one teacher out five do that.

Question 6: Where do your pupils write letters?

Question N°	Answers	Frequency	%
6	At home only	0	00
	In class only	0	00
	Usually at home but sometimes in class	4	80
	Usually in class but sometimes at home	1	20

Four teachers out of five usually ask their pupils to write letters at home. While only one teacher usually organizes lessons during which the pupils write letters in the classroom.

Question 7: How often do your pupils write letters to one another?

Question N°	Answers	Frequency	%
7	Usually	0	00
	Sometimes	1	20
	Never	4	80

Question 8: Mention the types of lessons you prepare in the scope of English commercial correspondence or business correspondence.

Question N°	Answers	Frequency	%
8	We teach business correspondence	5	100

All the teachers said that when they prepare lessons of business correspondence, they do not specify the type of lesson they will teach. So they just teach business correspondence.

Question 9: What sort of problems do your pupils have when it comes to writing letters?

Question	Answers	Frequency	%
9	Letter layout problems	3	60
	vocabulary problems	5	100
	grammar problems	4	80
	spelling problems	2	40

The teachers who responded to the interview questions revealed that their pupils have some problems when they are asked to write letters. Three teachers out of five said that the pupils have problems abiding by the layout requirements. All the teachers (100%) said that the pupils have problems finding appropriate words. Four teachers out of five (80%) said that the pupils also have problems related to grammar rules. Two teachers out of five (40%) said that the pupils have spelling problems.

#### 4.1.2. Classroom Observation

I was much more concerned with how the teacher proceeds so that in the end the pupils can be capable of writing correct business letters. That is why I attended some business correspondence classes in order to see what really happens in the classroom that is likely to make the pupils effective business letter writers. Here are the subject matters of the lessons I observed.

- (1) Essentials of style in 5<sup>th</sup> form
- (2) Letter heading in 6<sup>th</sup> form
- (3) Application letter in 6<sup>th</sup> form
- (4) Letter of order in 6<sup>th</sup> form
- (5) Sales-related inquiries in 6<sup>th</sup> form

Here follows the report of the classroom observation in detail. Each time T stands for teacher and P stands for pupils. The first lesson I observed was conducted in this way:

- (1) Recall
- (2) Introduction: The teacher orally presents the three features of a formal letter style: clarity, concision and courtesy. Then the learners repeat the three features. The teacher explained each of them while the

learners are listening. The teacher insists on the notions and wanted the learners to master them by inviting them to repeat. The learners repeat the notions loudly and collectively.

(3) Practice-Control: The teacher asks questions on what she has just taught and the learners respond.

(4) Copying: The teacher was teaching and was putting the lesson on the board as she was moving ahead. The learners were following the lesson and copying progressively.

The second lesson that I observed was in the 5<sup>th</sup> form and was about letter heading. Here is how it was conducted:

(1) Recall

(2) Introduction:

T: What can you find here? (pointing at a sheet of paper drawn on the board).

P: the heading.

T: What is heading? (Then the teacher explains what the heading is, asks the learners to practice writing the heading on the board).

T: What is reference and where can we find it? (The teacher answers as the pupils cannot).

(3) Practice-Control: The teacher asks questions on what s/he has just taught and the pupils answer.

(4) Copying: The pupils were writing down the lesson while the teacher was teaching.

The third lesson I observed was about application letter and was conducted as follows.

(1) Recall

(2) Introduction:

T: Application letter is the letter you write to request for a job, or sometimes for training or enrolment. In most cases, this request is written as response to an advertisement. The application letter writer should enclose a copy of his/her CV. An application letter body is written as:

paragraph 1: .....

paragraph 2: .....

paragraph 3: .....

P: (are just listening)

(3) Practice-Control: T: What is an application letter?

P: (they answer with much difficulty)

T: In how many paragraphs should the body be organized?

P: (they answer giving different answers)

T: You have a home work. Write an application letter to a firm.

(4) Copying: the pupils write down the lesson.

The fourth lesson I observed was about letter of order. Here comes how it was conducted.

(1) Recall:

(2) Introduction:

T: Order letters are written to ask manufacturers or wholesalers to sell commodities or goods. Placing an order is a proof that the prospective buyer is satisfied with the article he/she has seen and with the business terms given by the supplier...

P: (They are just listening to the teacher).

(3) Practice-Control:

T: What is an order letter?

P: (The pupils answer)

T: the teacher asks some more questions.

P: the pupils answer.

(4) Copying: the pupils copy the lesson.

The fifth lesson I observed was about sales-related inquiries. Here is how the lesson was taught.

(1) Recall

(2) Introduction:

T: Sales-related inquiries are written in regards to a product or service purchased or being considered for purchase. The writer of a sales-related inquiry may ask for:

a) the price of the articles he/she needs

b) the terms of business

c) a catalogue

d) a sample of the article

P: (They are listening to the teacher).

(3) Practice-Control: T: What are sales-related inquiries?

P: (no answer from the pupils)

(4) Copying: the pupils copy the lesson written on the board by the teacher as he was teaching.

All the lessons I observed have revealed that teachers teach theory relating to business correspondence but overlook practice.

## **4.2. Implication for Teaching Business Letters Writing**

First and foremost, the teacher of English should understand that when it comes to teaching business letters, the skill to develop is the writing skill. And teaching writing, is a complex activity as it includes teaching not only lexical and grammatical items but also style, formats, mechanics, and so on. That explains why, for students, achieving good composition is a complex and difficult task for both native speakers and non-native speakers of English (Renandya and Widodo 2016:181). Therefore, considering my investigation into the teaching of English commercial correspondence, I have noticed that there are unavoidable pedagogical procedures which do not occur in business correspondence classes I observed but which can lead to successful results. I will also show how the teacher of business correspondence can practically apply relevant writing teaching approaches.

### **4.2.1. Learners' Needs Analysis, Material Adaptation and Simulation**

The teaching of ESP is made interesting and successful thanks to learners' needs analysis. It is mostly successful thanks to materials adaptation and simulation. In fact, learners' needs are analysed in terms of the profession that they will be in later. Therefore, the syllabus of ECC is designed in such a way that English will be used to achieve some clearly-determined functions, namely reading and writing business letters.

Material adaptation in language teaching implies the notion of register. Register is the language appropriate to particular types of situations. For example, the register of the church, the register of the law court, the register of informal conversations, the register of debates, etc. (Cunningsworth 1984:97). In addition, Richards at al. (1985) define register as (1) style and (2) speech variety used by a particular group of people, usually sharing the same occupation (for example, doctors, lawyers) or the same interests (for example, stamp collectors, baseball fans). Hence, materials that the teacher is supposed to use in ECC should be adapted so that they belong to the business and correspondence world and reveal the professional environment where the pupils will be in their future career as accountants, sales managers, secretaries and the alike. For instance, the following lines from Knecht and Piguet (1973:65) sound typical of accountants:



*“Since we shall shortly close our books for annual audits, we should be very much obliged to you for setting the balance of your account with us according to enclosed statement account made up to and including December 31<sup>st</sup>”.*

Simulation is defined as a situation in which a particular set of conditions is created artificially in order to study or experience something that could exist in reality. It is also the fact of pretending that something is real when it is not (Hornby’s Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary). Furthermore, simulation is viewed by Holden (1977:32) as an ESP teaching practice which is particularly suitable when she writes that:

*“The very nature of simulation makes it particularly suitable for use in the ESP class. First, it is obvious enough that a specific situation, task, or problem with which the learner may later find himself faced, can be simulated in the classroom and thus give him both training and rehearsal in using the language he will later need”.*

In the particular case of ECC, simulation is created in such a way that learners can be trained in letter-writing thanks to some classroom conditions created by the teacher. These conditions are the imitation or the portrait of what happens in the real world of business. As soon as the teacher becomes aware of simulation suitability, s/he will implement it by allowing the pupil to be a letter sender and/or a letter addressee.

#### 3.4.2. Learner-centeredness in ECC Teaching

Success in English language teaching cannot be achieved with passive learners, neither with a teacher-centred approach. Similarly with ECC teaching, the teacher is called upon to really let his/her learners write during letter-writing classes instead of spending most of his/her time telling them what they have to do. The teacher must let the pupils get down to work when they are expected to write letters. Mualaba (1997:5) shares this view when he mentions that:

*“Letter-writing is much more about doing things than knowing them. It is in the first place a skill, less a science. As far as its teaching is concerned, I suggest that the activities be not only teacher-centered as it has appeared to be in most classrooms so far.”*

#### 3.4.3. Vocabulary and Reading prior to Letter Writing

Writing good business letters requires the mastery of certain words and expressions. There are words and expressions which seem to be some sorts of clichés because they appear in most typical business letters. Such words and expressions must be taught to the pupils who are expected to write effective letters because writing acceptable formal letters requires an appropriate register. Reading empowers writing. That is why, the pupils who are expected to write a given kind of letter must absolutely read one of the kind before they are asked to write it. Learning to write letters is successful by trying to write letters and not by just listening to or seeing how letters are written.

For the learners to write letters correctly, they must study the words and expressions necessary for a given kind of letter, they must view a sample letter (especially for the format requirements) and read it so that they may be able to write theirs of the sort. So, the syllabus of ECC must contain vocabulary lessons, reading lessons and writing lessons which are based on different types of business letters.

#### 3.4.4. Repetitive Pupils’ Work under the Teacher’s Supervision

Many teachers tend to show their pupils how to write letters but assign writing work as home work. Without trying to minimize the importance of homework, in-class work always bears its natural advantages: the teacher makes sure that the pupil really works and that the pupil has the teacher as his or her advisor and facilitator in case he or she meets with an obstacle. In-class work will be a good

preparation stage where pupils will be at work producing their respective personally-written letter under the teacher's supervision for control and orientation.

## 5. Conclusion

When the pupils of the commercial stream take their state exam, they are asked to answer among other questions, the questions on English business correspondence. One striking fact here is that those questions are related to well-elaborated business letters. This implies that they have to read typical business letters carefully before they are asked to answer the questions related to such letters. According to the national curriculum, these pupils are expected to write correct business letters. The second fact (based on my survey) which is even more striking is that most pupils hardly read typical business letters before they are asked to write them. Even worse, most pupils are scarcely given the chance to really write business letters under the teacher's supervision. Consequently, secondary school leavers of the commercial stream are not able to write acceptable business letters.

This motivated me to undertake an investigation in this area. My aim in this paper was to identify the causes of pupils' weakness in business letters writing and to make suggestions which can lead to success. Accordingly, I have advocated some practices which are absolutely crucial for success: simulation, learner-centeredness, letter-related vocabulary, letter reading prior to letter writing, pupils' work under the teacher's supervision for control and orientation as well as an eclectic approach based on methods and techniques applied in the teaching of writing. The first practice will allow the pupils to experience written commercial transactions and how they are processed. The second practice will give the chance to the pupils to work more than the teacher. The third practice will empower the pupils with the word-stock and the register they need for effective business letter writing. The fourth practice is the practical training in letter writing because one masters and improves letters writing by trying to write them and not only by seeing how they are written. The last practice consists in combining various methods and techniques specific to the teaching of writing.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix I: Teachers' Interview Questions

Let's talk about English commercial correspondence. Please answer the questions I am going to ask you and rely on your class reality.

- (1) Do you teach English commercial correspondence?  
a) yes                      b) no
- (2) How often do you teach it in a week?
- (3) What are the textbooks you use to English in general?
- (4) Have you ever read the national curriculum?  
a) yes                      b) no
- (5) What are the textbooks you use specifically for business English and/or English commercial correspondence?
- (6) Do they match official criteria of contents, methods and teaching context?  
a) yes                      b) no
- (7) Do you usually use samples of letters as materials for reading lessons?  
a) yes                      b) no
- (8) How often do your pupils write letters to one another?  
  
a) usually    b) sometimes    c) never
- (9) Where do your learners write letters?  
a) at home only    b) in class only    c) usually at home but sometimes in class    d) usually in class but sometimes at homes
- (10) Do you often specify the lesson types when you teach English commercial correspondence? If yes, mention the lesson types you prepare in the scope of English commercial correspondence.  
a) yes                      b) no

### Appendix II: Teachers' Answers to the Interview Questions

Questions	Answers	Frequency	%
1	a)yes b) no	9 0	100
2	a) once b) twice	6 3	66.6 33.3
4	a) yes b) no	3 6	33.3 66.6
6	a) yes b) no	4 5	44.4 55.5
7	a) yes	4	44.4

	b) no	5	55.5
8	a) usually b) sometimes c) never	– 4 5	– 44.4 55.5
9	a) at home only b) in class only c) usually at home but sometimes in class  d) usually in class but sometimes at home	1 –  5	11.1 –  55.5
10a	a) yes b) no	6 3	66.6 33.3

For clarity in the analysis of the frequency and percent columns, it has been preferred to present the results of questions 3, 5 and 10b separately from the rest of the questions because questions 3, 5 and 10b have more than one answer from respondent. But questions 1,2,4,6,7,8,9, and 10a have only one answer from each respondent.

Questions	Answers	Frequency	%
3	a) English for Africa b) Practical Guide to the State Exam c) A Direct Way to English Teaching d) An English Course for French Speakers, Book 2	9 1 1 1	100 11.1 11.1 11.1
5	a) Kabamba Muana's English Correspondence (a handout) b) Mualaba's Business Letter Writing c) Specialized English (third year lecture notes) d) Anglais professionnel (an unpublished booklet) e) Other teachers' notes or old copybooks f) A certain dissertation g) A Direct Way to English Teaching 2 h) La correspondance commerciale Anglaise	1 3 4 1 1  1 1	11.1 33.3 44.4 11.1 11.1  11.1 11.1
10b	Writing	6	100