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ABSTRACT

Issues related to changing modes of business communication, particularly those that are computer-mediated, are discussed as they relate to the teaching of business English. Information about current practices in computer-mediated communication (CMC) drawn from the business press and research journals is summarized, focusing on that which can help a business English teacher teach realistic, up-to-date business electronic mail (e-mail) usage. Discourse features of both synchronous and asynchronous CMC are described, including register, tendency toward simplification, and the phenomenon of "flaming." Technical features of e-mail are also noted, including message format and reply capabilities. A discussion of the business norms reflected in e-mail looks at headers, informal language, abbreviation, volume of information conveyed, reply conventions, and specific notations to express emotions. Some issues in teaching e-mail communication are also noted, including the role of error correction and use of authentic e-mail as instructional material. Contains 22 references. (MSE)

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E-Mail in the Business World: Issues for Teachers of ESP

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Introduction

The nature of written business communication is changing rapidly. The shift from paper to electronic text that began with the widespread adaptation of the fax in the 1980s continues today as communication shifts to e-mail and other forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC). Technology is changing so fast that keeping up with current practices is difficult for a teacher of Business English, and commercial material is of little help. The units on business letters in most texts have hardly changed in the last 20 years. Faxes and telexes are just now appearing, even as their importance declines.

The future will see e-mail take over as the medium of choice in those companies where it hasn't already done so. Usage is exploding. One business consultant reports that 15% of the American population uses e-mail today, and 50% will use it within five years (Fleundy, 1997). Hewlett-Packard's internal network carries 1.5 million messages a day (O'Brian, 1996). It's not hard to imagine a user of business English who never writes formal business letters. One who doesn't use English in e-mail at present probably will do so before long.

This article brings together information about current business CMC practices from the business press and research journals. The focus will be on information that can help a teacher teach realistic, up-to-date business e-mail usage.

Discourse Features of Computer-Mediated Communication

There are two main forms of CMC: synchronic and asynchronous. Both are largely text-based and require typing and reading on a screen. Synchronic CMC requires that users be simultaneously logged onto computers and involves "chatting" by typing messages that appear on the screens. Asynchronous CMC involves messages that are composed and sent, to be read later by the recipient. E-mail is asynchronous, and that form will be examined here, though certain discourse features are shared by both forms.

CMC has been the subject of numerous studies. A general consensus has formed that the discourse of CMC uses a register that uniquely combines aspects of spoken and written English (Murray nd, 1988; Danet, 1995; Liaw 1996; Hawisher, 1993; McElhearn, 1996). Danet lists slang, expressions such as "well," tolerance for misspelling, and the use of sentence fragments as oral features that are also typical of CMC.

Murray (nd, 1988) calls CMC a "simplified register," and compares it to other simplified registers. One of these is the language used to address someone perceived as incompetent in the language, such as a child or a foreigner. Another type of simplification comes from limitations in time and space, such as newspaper headlines and note-taking. She concludes that CMC is clearly a register that employs some of the simplification strategies of other simplified registers, but uses them in a particular way in response to the unique features of CMC.

Murray identifies five strategies as typical of CMC: abbreviations, symbolization, lexical simplification, syntactic simplification, and disregard of surface errors. These strategies are used for several reasons including the desire to save time, reduce keystrokes, and make the communication seem less formal. Since the goal is to communicate, errors are often left uncorrected unless they will cause confusion. Nevertheless, misunderstanding does occur, particularly when communication is between experienced and inexperienced users of CMC.

Far beyond simple misunderstanding is the phenomenon known as “flaming,” identified as early as 1984 by Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire. Danet describes flaming as a “sudden flare-up of anger and insult,” and offers several possible reasons for its occurrence in e-mail exchanges. One is the lack of important clues to the intention behind a message that would be supplied by intonation, facial expression and body language in face-to-face communication. Yet even without this paralinguistic channel, users of CMC tend to communicate conversationally and informally. The ease and speed of CMC may contribute to a message being sent with little consideration of its effect on the recipient. In some contexts the anonymity of the exchanges may serve to disinhibit users. Significantly, Murray (1988) found no instances of flaming in her study of CMC in a business context.

Technical Features of Computer-Mediated Communication

Certain unique features of e-mail spring directly from the technology used. Each message is accompanied by a header that gives the date, a subject, and the sender’s name. In addition, most e-mail programs allow a user to insert a “signature file” at the end of each message. This file can simply be the sender’s name, or can contain the sender’s position and contact information, functioning as a digital business card. Signature files often include personal touches, such as quotes, proverbs and pictures.

Another unique characteristic of e-mail is the ability to quote from a message when replying. This feature has no counterpart in other forms of communication, and usage patterns are still evolving (Sherwood, 1995).

Business Norms

Some features are imposed on e-mail by the nature of the medium (for example, headers); other features have been identified as characteristic of the medium (for example, informal language, abbreviation). But, to be useful to teachers of Business English, we must look at business e-mail. Surely there will be additional features typical in a business context. Of the studies cited above, only Murray’s work reports research on business CMC, and her data was gathered in 1984. There is real lack of research on current business CMC.

An alternative source of information on business communication norms is the business press. Articles from magazines such as *Forbes* and *Business Week* don’t offer peer-reviewed research or academic-style linguistic analysis. The approach is prescriptive rather than descriptive. But it is useful to know what business people say they want in e-mail communication. In addition, since these articles are aimed at the general business reader, they can be copied and used in class.

Articles in the business press about e-mail universally express the writer’s feelings of being overwhelmed with information. E-mail is a significant contributor to the flood of communication that business people cope with every day. Pleas for brevity and complaints

about unnecessary messages abound.

Edwards (1993) blames a tendency to overuse e-mail on the ease with which a message can be written and sent. He claims that inter-office e-mail, for all its high-tech sheen, "is nothing more than that unglamorous standby, the memorandum." But unlike a paper memo, which gets thicker as it lengthens, e-mail simply scrolls away into invisibility as it is written. There's no tangible indication of length. Edwards recommends a one-screen-per-message rule.

Rothschild (1994) expresses concern about the volume of messages rather than their length. He describes an executive who spends 3 hours of each 12 hour day handling about 150 e-mail messages. This executive claims that 80% of the messages are a total waste of time, and that e-mail has become devalued as a means of communication. Programs that can filter and prioritize incoming messages are available, but can only work crudely, for example, by deleting all messages from preselected senders.

Rothschild blames this communication flood on the seeming lack of cost for e-mail communication. There is no price mechanism to limit message production; the cost is born by the receiver of the message, in the form of the time spent to deal with it. Rothschild advocates the introduction of a charge to the sender of inter-office e-mail.

Seglin (1996) wrote about six e-mail problems and asked, "Wouldn't the world (at least my E-mail world) be a much better and, dare I say, more productive place if we could eradicate those six affronts to E-mail integrity?" Two of the problems are technical (problems with servers and airport telephones) but the other four are related to message content. This is a good article to give to students, and has the additional advantage of being available on the Internet. Here are his four pet peeves with some advice for students based on them.

"People who reply to multiple questions with a one-word response." In other words, be careful; ensure that your response is truly responsive. E-mail is so fast and that send button is so easy to click that it's tempting to just type it, send it, and forget it. It's a good idea to spend the extra few minutes to re-read it.

"E-mail responses that reiterate your entire message." The ability to quote messages in responses is great, but mustn't be used thoughtlessly. Quote the relevant passages only. (See Sherwood, 1995)

"Geographical notations. I don't care where you're E-mailing me from." E-mail is less formal than other forms of written communication, but don't go too far. Keep personal and chatty content to a minimum.

"Emoticons." These can be fun to use, but don't assume that they are appropriate. See if other people use them before putting them in your messages. In a wider sense, use the e-mail you receive as a guide. Different companies have different norms.

Students should also be alerted the dangers of e-mail. E-mail may seem intangible, but it can be more permanent than paper messages, and it's very easy to copy and distribute (Edwards, 1995). Anything inflammatory or embarrassing may be seen by many people. In the United States, employees have no right to privacy on a company e-mail system (Bianchi, 1996). In addition, U.S. courts have ruled that companies can be held liable for messages written by employees on company computers (Mamis, 1993). Users of e-mail

should be as careful when writing electronically as they are when writing on paper, or more so.

Pearce (1996) has collected advice on company to company e-mail and posted it on the Internet. This site recommends usage of the same level of formality as a business letter, at least for initial contacts. He gives insight on the use of e-mail letterheads, signature files, capitalization, names and titles, with special consideration of international situations.

Teaching Business E-mail

With the lack of widespread standards and the changing technical landscape, teachers may wonder if it's worthwhile, or even possible, to teach "Business E-mail Style." There's no set of rules and formats that can be learned. The schematic "Parts of a Business Letter" diagrams still to be seen in many texts are of little interest to many students, and there's no replacement. Murray (1988) found that users acquired the conventions of CMC through modeling rather than explicit instruction. This finding is hardly counter-intuitive to the many of us who have learned "E-mail as a Second Language." She recommends teaching learning strategies, such as paying attention to language variation in different contexts, and modeling.

Clearly business e-mail is not something that can be taught by a teacher inexperienced in its use. Many students of Business English are already long-term users of e-mail in English, and a teacher must also be a user. The linguistic features of CMC arise from this new medium's unique characteristics. If a computer is the medium of student-teacher communication, these features will develop spontaneously (Liaw, 1996; Conrad & Rautenhaus, 1994; Wang, 1996). Alternatively, a paper simulation of e-mail communication would be hopelessly inauthentic. Students would be practicing English in a context that has no real-world counterpart.

Some language issues will only become apparent when communicating with students using their everyday e-mail system. There may be a misspelled word in a signature file. A student may have a habit of writing subject lines in all capital letters. Neither of these impede communication, but they will make an impression on the receiver, and it's unlikely that a business colleague will comment on this type of "error." Students using non-English e-mail programs may be sending messages with headers that are unreadable to English language e-mail systems. Though the body of the message may be unaffected, the sender's name, subject line and date will appear as random gibberish. Again, receivers may not comment on this and the sender can remain unaware of the problem. Working out these bugs is one of the services a teacher of Business English can provide.

Byrd (1997), in a discussion of grammar teaching, argues that language must be learned in real contexts using authentic materials. "Researchers studying genre and discourse have shown that different types of communication have different grammatical signatures; that is, different types of communication make use of different grammatical structures and can be characterized in terms of those grammar items." By using e-mail with students who use e-mail in their jobs, teachers will greatly increase the likelihood that appropriate structures and vocabulary are practiced, without even needing to know what those structures and vocabulary are. Designing communicative activities that parallel students' real communication in terms of topics and functions will raise the effectiveness further.

The benefits of using e-mail for language teaching have been described in terms of enhancing student-teacher communication and providing teachers with student-produced electronic texts (Bauman, 1998). Creating students-student e-mail interaction, within a class or internationally, is becoming more common (Warschauer, 1995; Warschauer, 1996). Teachers are finding that e-mail is a powerful new tool, even for those students who don't use it outside of class. When e-mail is one of the mediums through which students actually communicate in English, its neglect is a real disservice.

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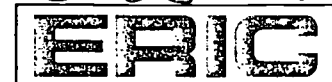
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