

Original Research Article

Pakistani MBA Students' Insights of Business English Writing

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ABSTRACT

Although there has been a steady growth in the education and recruitments of BBA and MBA students in Pakistan, but still there is lack research on what are the demands from the Business English Writing BEW or Business communication course. The present study is the qualitative analysis of Pakistani business student's perception on the BEW course in their degree. Forty-eight students within the course of ten-weeks participated in the study. An interview was conducted with all the students and their answers were recorded in terms of collecting the data. The results show that student's work-related needs differ from their academic course in terms of job-related demands. Students were able to mark their English writing abilities as good or low with distinct expectations from the BEW course. Some of the pedagogical implications were drawn for improving the BEW course in the Pakistani context.

Introduction

In the era of economic unification, English has become a way of communication globally (Evans, 2010; Kassim & Ali, 2010; Trinder & Herles, 2012). In the past few years, Business English Writing (BEW) has become an essential way of communication in Asian countries, like Pakistan, where the regularity of English users has is increasing among the professionals. Despite being English as the first language, Englishmen find BEW, not a natural skill to acquire, as they discussed so many reasons like difficulty in understanding the format of different nature of the company. The disconnection between the regular business writing curriculum in Business schools and the requirement at the workplace and most catastrophic act at workplace is the contradiction between the anticipation of the authorities and the practices of the employee (Crosling & Ward, 2002; Lentz, 2013; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2010). Ever since educational institute has made business English as a part of the curriculum, the main focus has been on the conflict between teaching BEW in classes and real business at the workplace. Louhiala-Salminen (1996) for example, explored how the content of BEW course in formal business contexts might be out of pace with the extensive use of virtual types of business communication in actual enterprise contexts, in particular faxes and emails. In Pakistan, with the advance integration in the financial world, the need for Pakistani MBAs have increased as the requirement is to communicate with the foreign traders in the English Language. Anyhow, there is an insufficient amount of research available on the writing needs of Pakistani MBA students. There are a limited amount of students who come with their perspective of business language, and they consider as assets to the organization. As big industries and various media agencies plan the marketing strategy on the need of the consumer before putting any product or service on launch similarly; students own perception in instructional planner to design the curriculum is encouraged in some of the institutes (Smythe & Nikolai, 2002, p. 164). The present research is to fill the gaps by exploring the perception of a group of Pakistani MBA students on BEW to design the business curriculum in a better way.

Literature Review

The present research, work with the demands of the students' needs regarding specific kind of writing that is demand at work or will be useful after getting the degree. In ESP, including the subject of Business Communication or Business English Writing

(BEW) is a key feature for business students as it matches with practical use of writing at real work. (Sullivan & Girginer, 2002). Most of the researchers are of the view, it is better to develop a curriculum by doing a survey or collecting data from specific students according to their work related demands. (Kassim & Ali, 2010).

In the present study, the process of identifying what the learners required from the target language teaching and what are their expectations from the subject during the course time. The study also focused on the BEW abilities as subject to provide such content to business students that it will help in the future. Self-reflection on their writing ability, will provide the teacher with the idea of how student evaluate their writing ability and teacher can also get the idea about how the student evaluate the study material given by the teacher. The research will also give the idea what sort writing is required at their work place and how well they can perform with the learnt writing abilities. The understanding of self-reflection of students will help the course designers to develop a writing task that will have a practical use rather than just learning some written rules. By doing research on business students, the author can get the direct data from the market or work place regarding the practical usage of English writing which is considered as just an extra course within the degree.

Previous Studies on BEW

BEW research has mainly focused on the need base English writing according to what learners want, real-life business communication analysis. (e.g. Forey, 2004; Sengupta, Forey, & Hamp-Lyons, 1999; Sullivan & Girginer, 2002; Lockwood, 2012), and students' perceive the business English course (e.g. Trinder & Herles, 2012). Most of the researches on business communication deals with the real life Business English analysis to reveal the language features of business communication of the real world. Forey (2004), claims that teachers, designing the business English course may not have experienced the real business world writing. He compared the experience of Business teacher with the business professional in his research work. He took two memo writings, one from the business professional and one from the business English teacher. Results proved that, business professional mainly focuses on the ideational meaning and wanted to convey the message to the reader, however; the business student wrote according to the content by paying more attention to the language rather than the message. The study proved that it is required by the business English teacher to collaborate with the business professionals to design a business English course.

All the previous studies on BEW or Business communication were conducted as English as foreign Language (EFL) in Malaysia, China. There is very few researches available on Pakistani business student's context that deals with their experience of English Business Writing. The study presented by Zhang (2007) on China's BEW in their business program. He proposed that the focus of Business English writing should not be on the basics of English writing only but the Business writing expertise. It must develop the business communication skills at higher level so that students can deal with customers. There are further studies available where students comment on their writing abilities and what sort of change they expect in their business English course.

Context of the Study and Research Questions

The MBA program for the present research, is at Air University which is famous for its business education which features English as medium of teaching (EMT) technique used for course delivery. It is part of the instruction for the teacher to teach the writing course through the use of English. The course lasted for sixteen weeks, forty teaching hours in which teaching allocated hours are three each week. Business English Writing (BEW) course covers the memos, business letters and business reports which makes the business writing the main focus of teaching BEW. All the course content was conveyed by using English to the students as mean of instruction. This research focuses on three research questions:

- 1) What are the requirements of students related to BEW?
- 2) How students assess their English writing skills?
- 3) What students demand from BEW course?

Methods

Contributors

Forty- Eight participants attend this course are part-time workers in different companies. These students work in day time and are enrolled in MBA evening program by the University. The students from marketing, digital media, logistics participated in the study. Some of the students are part of domestic companies and few are part of foreign industries. These students cover the area of banking, media, education, etc. in which they use business English. The ratio between local and foreign business is 3:1.

Data Collection

An open-ended questionnaire was designed consisting of five questions for the students at end of the course. The questions were designed in such a way that it provoke the students' idea of their BEW course, their writing abilities, what their work demand regarding BEW and what they want in BEW. (see appendix for the open-ended questions). Furthermore, an interview session centering some questions related to their writing requirements and opinions about the course. The researcher explained the reason behind the present research to all the participants. Students participated in the interview session with the researcher and discussed the issues with the researcher. This interaction provide more analytical data to the researcher as the participants were more involved in the self- evaluation of their abilities

Data Analysis

For analysis, the grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 2015) as an inductive methodology in order to analyze the qualitative data. The study was conducted with the reference of three research questions, with the theme of coding to form the analysis. The analysis of the collected data has been done by the two researchers using the coding scheme. The main author holds a degree of MS Linguistics and co-author hold the degree of MBA. The disagreement over the analysis was resolved over discussion.

Results and Discussion

RQ1. What are the requirements of students related to BEW?

According to the present study, need of students changes with respect to the field they want to join. Generally if we look at the percentage of the answers that we get form the students explained much about their need to BEW, only 38% were interested in making English as part of their normal routine because they are part of foreign firms and they had more work related needs in English than those who are part of some domestic organization or own business. The two forms of data collections, one is the self-report questioners and other is the interview session with the students shows us the differences of work related demand of English and different type of organization

For instance, my father owns a business of pipes and I am the one who deal with all the internal and external official documents of his firm and they all are in Urdu, the only English words that I read or wrote in these documents are rupees numbers. (Student 23)

I'm a Logistics officer in United Nation Pakistan which is an international corporation. I have to Ensure effective use of internal Standard Operating Procedures in procurement, control of the workflows, continuous business processes monitoring and elaboration of improvements in the systems and processes. I have to establish Long Term Agreement (LTA) for commonly required services and prepare and conduct Request for Quotations (RFQs), Purchase Requisition (PR) and Bid Analysis Statement (BASs), receipt of quotations, bids or proposals, their evaluation that all are in English as we are dealing with foreign delicate. Therefore, I need to use English writing almost everywhere, like documents and emails with colleagues in and outside the company.

It can be seen from the first extract that Student 23, who works at a domestic company (For his father in his pipes firm), is mostly required to write in Urdu in his daily work. Differently, the second extract that the student working in an international company (United Nation) is required to use English often in his routine work. However, as explained by both respondents above, the type of job they have perform explains the use of English differently. This can be further illustrated by the following extract: *the kind of part time job I am doing these days does not have many requirements for BEW. This is because I Am working in a call center right now and it doesn't involve any sort of business writing. But right adter I completed my graduation in business, I joined a private firm as a full time general secretary and that time my job required me to communicate with British delicate through email writing. So, the difference in job requirements really matter in work-related BEW.* Such students differentiated the requirements of BEW in their job positions. Some of the students didn't specify the kind of work, they are interested in or what sort of work they do but they have shown high demands in terms of improving their English writing skills, particularly learning how to compose reports, high proficiency email writing not just the basic ones. For instance, I am working as a brand promotion manager in a private company where my job is to advertise the product which our company launches. Although my job has nothing to do with writing in English or verbal use of it until and unless I have some foreign customer, only then I have to use English. I want to improve my English skills because it will help my Business study and I can have better future and better job opportunity after the completion of my degree.

In summary, the student's requirements are not only attached with their writing abilities but to master some of the major areas of business writing through this course. The present study gives the idea, what students need and what they expect in

order to have an advancement in their career through BEW. They have not only mentioned the immediate context of their work but future significance in career development. In the country like Pakistan, where local markets don't have any work in English in their firm but they hire people on their proficiency of English. So it becomes compulsory to look for all the aspects while studying and prepare yourself for the future (Wozniak, 2010; Kassim & Ali, 2010)

RQ2. How students assess their English writing skills?

According to the results, student's self-evaluation of their ability to write in English was assessed as: Good; 2. Average' 3. Hard to asses. All the students were of the view that it is necessary to them to attend these kind of courses that can help in improving their writing skills. Out of 48 participants, thirty-eight participants (79% of all the participants) reported to have "Average" work related English writing. They are of the view that, the kind of course involved is helping them in building the business kind of knowledge not providing enough opportunities to practice their writing. They also reported that the kind of business writing, students are learning are just part the traditional textbook course as the trend of business writing has changed a lot. For example, *during discussion in classroom, we are asked to discuss the questions in the textbook in English due to which my communication has become better but it has also effected the way I handle my writing. It is more like, I am speaking which is not an appropriate way to deal in Business writing but according to me at least I am providing enough information to my readers. I think my performance through verbal communication is good, I can convince my clients but I really need to work on my writing skills as it can turned into embarrassment at higher level documentation or my research. The modification in this course can be helpful to for my future career (student 41).*

I am of the view that there is a difference between the way we learn business English writing in our course and the way we actually use it. As I wish to work in Pakistan and the local companies here though deal in foreign markets but the common language used in the offices is Urdu. I can deal with foreign clients in terms of communicating with them face to face but when it is about to write an email or any document, I usually follow the translation method of making a sentence in my native language and then turning it into a proper English sentence due to which the concept behind the description lack the connection. I felt that the native speakers of English can recognize the gap between the thoughts of policy which not good for any company repute. So in my view point, I need to focus on my writing course.

It is good to know that some of the students are accurate in their self-evaluation especially if it is related to their writing abilities: while some of them have slight idea about their own writing. They mark their writing excellent, good, or above average. It is fascinating that how these students are known fairly about their writing abilities but they have higher demands from BEW course whether it is related to accuracy, clarity in Business writing. After the analysis the researcher has evaluated that 41% of the students mark them as below average in English writing as they are not using English in their daily work life. *For instance, I work in a local company where most of the documentation process is in Urdu, there are very times where I am using English for business. Business English is only useful when my company is dealing with an international client, at that point I felt I have no sense of writing due to which I find myself the need of learning Business writing.* There were a lot of students who marked themselves as good in English writing but they described their strengths and weaknesses of their work related writing performance. *For example, most of my job related writing task involves are standard emails or short reports which I can do it pretty well but when it comes to write high proficiency reports or projects, I am not a confident writer.* The researcher also find out that students are able to understand the difference between the writing for academic purpose and writing for actual business. *For instance, the work currently in which I am involved in requires me to communicate with my foreign clients which due to which I considered that if I am good communicating with them than it will easy for me to write as well but when it comes to write for business perspective I cannot mark myself even above average. While writing in the exams where we are given proper notes for everything, proper guidelines about how to solve the paper it become easy on some level to get marks especially if you rules but in practical job world grammar doesn't count, your idea matters a lot and if you are able to convey it properly only then you are good at communicating.*

In a nutshell, students are divided when it comes to self-analysis of their writing and communicating in English. Most of them considered that if they are doing well in their academics, they will also perform well at their jobs but they find it difficult to handle their routine task at job as the academic syllabus is outdated and business world is updated on daily basis. They want to improve their writing abilities not just to get good marks but to do well at their job while composing emails or reports. Students seems like having different expectation with this course and they want the institute to work on the curriculum with the updated version of business writings.

RQ 3. What students demand from BEW course?

The three ideas that emerged from the business student's course of BEW analysis: 1. Students views about the practicality of the course in improving their skills; 2. The kind of gap between the course writing and the work related writing; 3. What students demand from the course of BEW. According to the first idea, students are of the view that they are learning a lot about business communication through this course but due to shortage of time, they are able to grasp the key points about the BEW. There are 79% of students who are confused and it is difficult for them to get all the ideas and then applying them on the work site. They are of the view that, course given to them in their degree is related to the foreign market, and business scenarios which is totally different form the Pakistani style of market and business environment. They are of the view that, it is difficult for them to find the balance between learning two kinds of business languages. However, few of the respondents cited that learning of business reports, formal business techniques has affected the daily drafting of business reports at workplace.

Though for the position, I am working on requires mainly the auditing and drafting to reports that requires a rigid format, which thanks to BEW, I am learning in this course and it is really helping me in understanding the structure of different section of report making and auditing at certain levels. Just like different kind of workloads functions for different sections.

The second idea discussed the theme of student's confusion regarding the practicality of course content included in their business module. Only 31% of the students are of the view that course is well designed for the kind of job or business they want to avail but 69% of the participant's reported that the course content is only focused on the one type of traditional way of email or report writing though the each business deal with different style and they demand the companies to work according to their needs which is not been fulfilled in this course. For instance, *I think there should be more importance given to the course content and it needs to provide us with practical work-related writing in the market and there should also be something about the kind of research work we need to deal in our final projects because as BEW is the only kind of subject that will help us in such type of writing in the end.*

It can be observed from the data that participants were more interested in learning basic business writing skills which they can use in business world for which they are getting training in. According to the collected data it can be perceive that:

1. The learning of business language especially for the local markets;
2. The students may lack the confidence in their English writing proficiency.

The third idea that is part of the discussion is related to the second theme, which is student's recommendations are very important for improving the content in BEW course. According to the response from the participants 79% of the respondents stated the compulsion of enhancing and update the course content of BEW.

For instance, I think writing skills at business level is very important and I would also prefer to make this course as major subject throughout the Business teaching as it is one of the major aspect in dealing with business requirement other than the major subjects of business. In addition to business communication, most of the students at this practical stage are not good with sentence structure and appropriate vocabulary. So I think it would be good if our university could take this issue serious because they are more concerned on working on our higher skills and we are lacking the base work without knowing.

I would recommend that teaching of English should be delivered throughout the entire degree. It will benefits both daily work routine and thesis writing as well.

From the above two statements, it can be seen that all the students know the importance of English in their daily work and more concerned not just about the degree only but what content they are learning as well. Students are apprehensive about the proficiency of English which is a universal language and they know whether at local market or in foreign firms, employees are required to use English, regardless of writing or verbal communication. Secondly, almost majority of the students are of view that there has to be some sort up gradation in the course content which will reflect the demands of workplace setting. For instance, *I think we are only taught that is part of textbook, it would be helpful to teach students how to deal with different business scenarios which didn't include just the formal business writing but the kind of dealings which comes with different job description. For example, how to write invitation letters, how to handle customer complain etc. Students at this stage can easily compare the practical needs and the academics work load, so it is important to give them something relevant and useful for their daily work. Though it totally depends upon the kind of teacher we are dealing with, if they are interested in teaching us something outside the book that is more relevant to the practical world then it is enjoyable and learn full experience as well.*

According to the collected data most of the students have very genuine facts about the course content which are really need to consider. They want the teachers to analyze the latest language features, content that are used in top companies of their country and of the companies of the world. Students are of the view that authentic samples direct of the companies will be beneficial after the degree completion as well. In addition to this, majority of the students advised that writing should not be limited to the lectures only, there should be in class writing activities so that teachers can give feedback right that moment and students can clear their points. For example, *as a part time worker, I only have that much time to study or practice something which is in the class so it would be better to do more class writing activities rather than teachers hoping that we will do it on our own.* To sum up, students want BEW course content to be revised according to the modern day use and application.

Conclusion

The present research discovers the perception of Pakistani MBA students about BEW, which is an unexplored field in ESP and MBA curriculum. After the analysis of the data collected by the Pakistani MBA students, it is concluded that there are various job related needs of BEW course. When these students will start working in such firms where English is the only requirement and their routine writing tasks require more writing proficiency than just serving in exams for marks. With the changing situation of employment in Pakistan, the need of business English writing with proficiency in communication becomes the most relatable requirement in the business world. During the data collection, students told the researcher about the less confidence on their own English writing abilities and their fear of losing any job opportunity due to this weakness.

The study contributes in the pedagogical importance of business writing and communication in the field of business study. After analyzing and discussion with the students, it is essential to find the balance between the need and expectations of students in their routine work related task. On the other hand the curriculum needs to be revised as most of the working students didn't find the academic rules and formats in the working fields. So it is necessary to design the course after the discussion with the business officials of recognized company. It is also important to work on the language proficiency through writing as most of them are fluent in English but they have general skills in writing. So, it is important to embed the training of Basic English writing skills, like sentence structure, word usage and grammar as a extra course in their degree program.

However, the study is conducted in Private institute due to which the sample size is small. Moreover, due to the limited time only few aspects of writing has been covered.

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Appendix

1. What do you think about the Business communication or Business English Writing (BEW) course?
2. How well do you think BEW course meets or will the requirement of writing at workplace?
3. Any suggestions you want to make in Business English writing curriculum of the Business program?