



Tips for Teachers

A Holiday Quiz.

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In Japan, our intermediate EFL university students expect us to prepare something special related to the holidays and festivals celebrated by their foreign teachers. To please them, we have developed a template for a lesson that combines English study with cultural content. This template is flexible and may be adapted for other holidays, festivals, and celebrations appropriate to the culture and context in which other ESL or EFL teachers live and work.

The lesson consists of five stages: building interest, building background knowledge, linking vocabulary and content, completing a task, and closing. Each stage can be accomplished in a number of ways, and experienced teachers will have little difficulty thinking of ways to adapt the lesson for their circumstances. What follows is a description of a 90-minute lesson that we typically use at Christmas time.

Building Interest in the Holiday

Our students are familiar with the commercial aspects of Christmas. It is important to us that they understand that there is more to the holiday than buying lavish gifts. We begin our Christmas lesson by playing a video of "Feed the World," a rock song whose proceeds go toward hunger relief in Africa. It is a good example of the tradition of giving to the needy at Christmas and helps us introduce the notion of Christmas spirit.

Building Background Information

Then, we read a simple, but not childish, account of the Christmas story to give students some background knowledge about the significance of the holiday for Christians. Depending upon the level of our students, we might give a brief Japanese summary at the end of each page.

Linking Vocabulary and Content

Christmas is as much about fun as it is about religion, and the rest of the lesson reflects this. First, students match pictures of holiday symbols with English labels. In doing so, they learn that present-day Christmas customs and symbols come from several sources. For example, some practices and symbols that we associate with Christmas today actually come from ancient winter festivals that predate Christianity. These include use of the evergreen tree, mistletoe, wreath, and holly. Others relate to the Christmas story itself, such as angel, star, and caroling. Still others, such as chimney and reindeer, are more recent additions. Then, in pairs, students match sentence strips to pictures of Christmas activities, such as wrapping presents, baking cookies, and sending cards. We provide self-correction answer keys for both of these picture activities, so pairs can work at their own pace and check when they are ready. Other forms of realia besides pictures could be used for this stage in the lesson.

Completing a Task: The Christmas Quiz

This activity is a quiz in name only. In fact, it is a trivia guessing game that engages students in English and provides information about Christmas history and traditions. We used an encyclopedia as a source of information for building the quiz. Today, the Internet would provide ample information as well. Students work in groups of three to answer about 20 questions that are formatted to look like a multiple-choice quiz. They must agree on a group answer (or guess) for each question. Some questions are relatively easy and can be answered by using a dictionary. This means that every group can get some answers right. Other questions are quite difficult, forcing students to simply take a chance and guess. We announce that the group with the most right answers will win a prize. The promise of prizes and the familiar quiz format help engage everyone in the activity. Afterward, we "correct" the answers by calling randomly on groups to give their answers, but we provide corrections where necessary. In the end, everyone wins a prize, but the group with the most right answers wins two. More important, everyone has used English to complete a problem-solving task. The quiz is always the most popular part of the lesson. (Some sample quiz questions are listed below.)

Bringing the Lesson to a Close

We try to be prepared with two possibilities for closing the lesson. If there is still some time, we give pairs of students a set of discussion questions to ask and answer about their favorite holiday. These questions can be reused with other holiday lessons to help students review and recycle vocabulary and information. If time is running short, we may end class by singing a simple Christmas song, such as "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" or John Lennon's "Happy Xmas (War Is Over)"

Sample Questions from a Christmas Quiz

In groups, answer these questions about Christmas. Answer every question. Guess if necessary. The group with the most correct answers will win a prize.

1. What group of people first began the tradition of giving gifts in December?
a. Christians b. Romans c. much older cultures
2. The word Christmas is sometimes written Xmas for short. X is the first letter of Christ's name in ____.
a. Greek b. Italian c. Hebrew
3. When was Jesus born?
a. on Dec. 25 b. during the winter c. We really don't know.
4. A display of the stable scene of Jesus' birth is sometimes called a ____.
a. crèche b. manger c. piñata
5. Many present-day Christmas traditions came from ____.
a. Germany b. Israel c. Ireland
6. Where were the first Christmas cards printed?
a. in the U.S. b. in England c. in Germany
7. What two colors are often associated with Christmas?
a. silver and gold b. red and green c. black and white
8. In a popular story, Santa Claus enters your house by coming through ____.
a. the door b. a window c. the chimney
9. The name Santa Claus comes from which language?
a. Dutch b. Italian c. Spanish
10. Which of these is not another name for Santa Claus?
a. Kris Kringle b. St. Nicholas c. Santa Ana
11. Who helps Santa make toys for children?
a. elves b. angels c. snowmen
12. The present-day image of Santa Claus comes mostly from ____.
a. Charles Dickens' story "A Christmas Carol"
b. Clement Moore's poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas"
c. the popular song "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town"

About the Authors

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Teaching Business Email Writing

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Email is fast changing our way of communicating and interacting with people. The advantages are obvious. It is instantaneous, efficient, and easily disseminated. This is as true in the business world as it is in academia. In business communication, email is now widely used especially for internal communication and between business partners who have already established a working relationship with shared mutual benefits.

When compared with formal business letters, business email exhibits several distinctive features. One major distinguishing feature is that although business email depends on the written medium for its representation, it shows linguistic and stylistic features of spoken discourse. For example, it is often informal, straightforward, and context-bound. "Utterances" are often short and fragmentary. Informal abbreviations, non-specific references, repeated lexical and syntactical structures are also common.

Despite its increasingly important role in business communication, email is largely neglected in EFL writing courses. There is little mention of business email writing in textbooks. Instead, the business letter, a more formal but somewhat outdated genre, is still the main focus of course materials on business writing. As a result, when some learners write business email, they refer to principles they have learned for business letter writing. The result is that their emails are essentially business letters transmitted by a new medium, though a little less formal and rigid.

On the other hand, some learners are probably aware of the conversational features of business email, and thus tend to view business email as what might be called "written telephone calls." Their email messages are often composed "on the fly" with little editing or proofreading. Some ignore style and grammar, making their writing impolite and unprofessional. All this can result in serious offenses in communication. As Guffey (2003) rightly points out, unlike forgettable telephone calls, email can create a permanent record and can even be used as evidences in trials.

Clearly, both groups of students need systematic instruction in the principles of writing business email. In order to discover what those principles are, we did some reading and conducted a small-scale study. Our reading showed us that although email is a relatively new and still evolving channel of communication, a number of rules for polite online interaction have emerged. Guffey (2003) states these rules in simple form as:

1. Limit any tendency to send blanket copies.
2. Never send spam.

3. Consider using identifying labels.
4. Use capital letters only for emphasis or for titles.
5. Announce attachments.
6. Don't forward messages without permission.

In our study, we analyzed a corpus of 55 authentic business emails, 22 by native English speakers and 33 by Chinese business professionals. We found there were noticeable differences in the messages composed by native as compared with non-native writers. As a result of this study, we developed a four-part unit of instruction for our students in the Department of International Trade at Zhejiang University. To date, student reaction has been positive. What follows is an outline of our unit.

Part 1: Raising Awareness

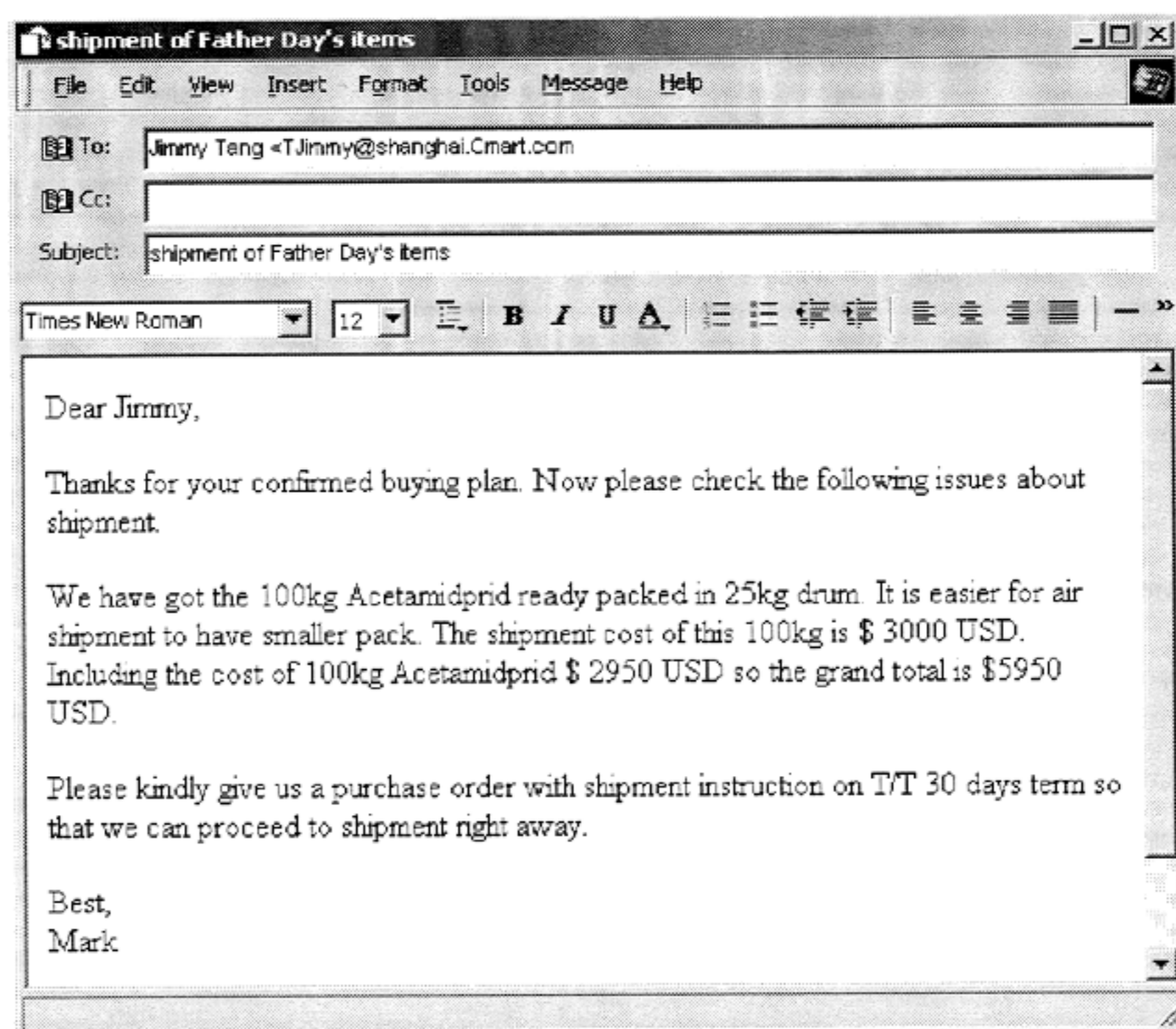
We begin our unit with an informal discussion using questions like the following.

1. Have you ever written an email? In what context?
2. From your experience, when would email be useful in the business world?
3. Have you ever known of an occasion where email has caused problems, or miscommunication? If yes, share your story with a partner.

Part Two: Readings

In this stage, we ask students to study both content and linguistic features of several email messages written by native speakers of English. An example of one message is below followed by discussion questions.

Sample Text



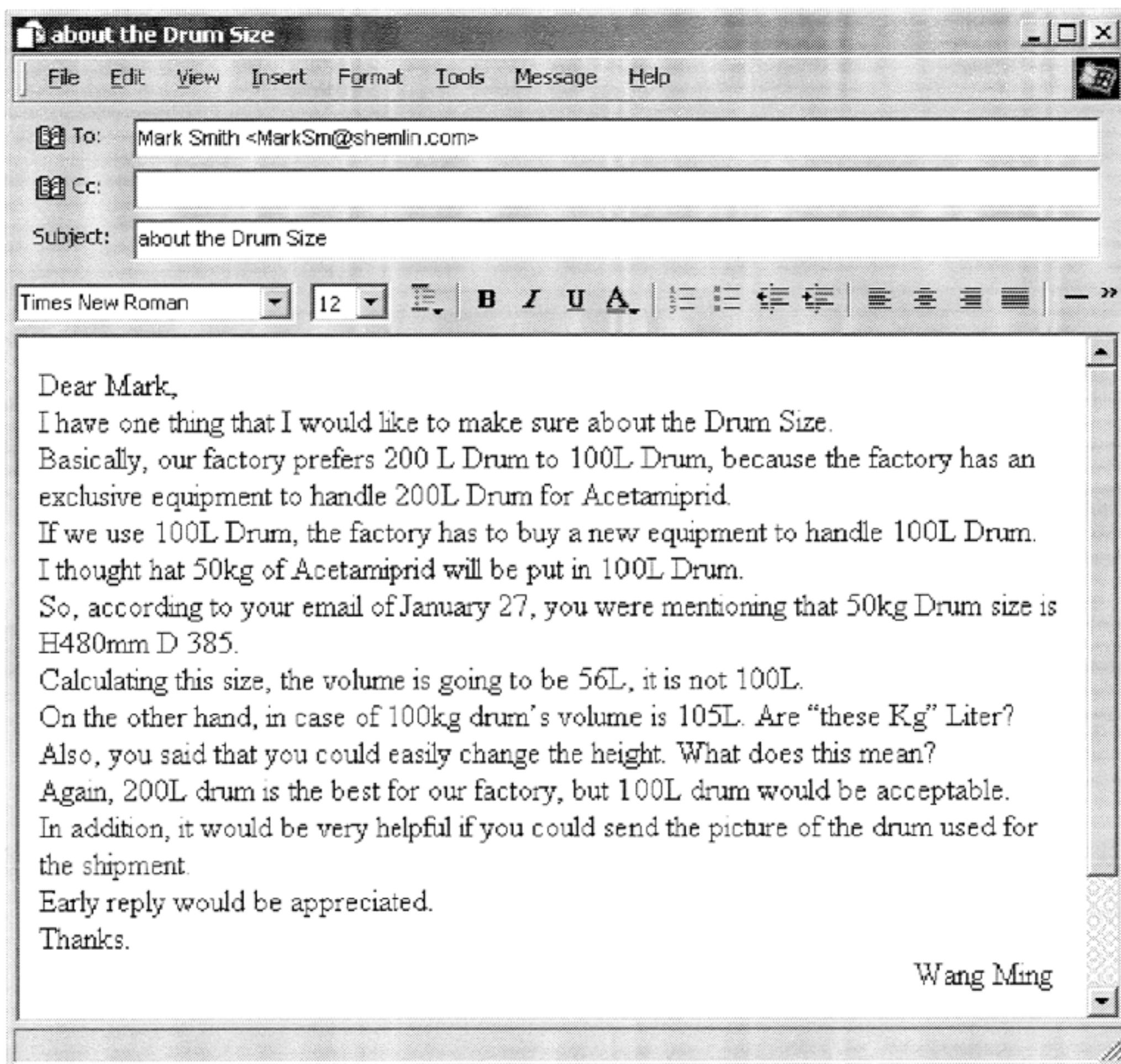
Questions for critical thinking and discussion:

1. Summarize the central idea of each email message.
2. Do you think they are professional and effective emails? Give your reasons.
3. Discuss these linguistic features of the messages: styles of opening and closing, syntactic structures, elliptical forms, and use of contractions.

Part Three: Language Focus

Next, we have students examine a number of email messages written by Chinese business professionals like the one below.

Sample Text



Directions for Students:

1. Compare these texts with those that you read in Part Two. Look again at styles of opening and closing, syntactic structures, elliptical forms, and use of contractions.
2. What problems do you see? Revise or rewrite these messages.

To help answer question 2, we discuss some differences in style, syntax, and degree of conciseness in the email messages of native as compared with non-native speakers of English. These differences surfaced in our study.

Style of Opening and Closing

Native speakers usually start with the recipient's given name, or even without any salutation, and then go directly to the topic. Chinese learners, in contrast, tend to address the recipients with a salutation beginning with "Dear ...," followed by some phatic expressions. Closings also show differences. Native speakers are inclined to finish an email simply, with only, or even no, sender's name, while Chinese writers are more likely to follow the letter closing patterns of formal written correspondence.

Syntactic Structures

Email written by native speakers is like natural speech, which is delivered clause by clause. These clauses are frequently connected with coordinate conjunctions like *and* and *so*. In contrast, email written by Chinese professionals displays more elaborate and roundabout expressions with complex syntactic structures. Some conjunctive expressions like *otherwise*, *on the other hand*, and *generally speaking* are frequently used.

Conciseness

Native speakers usually adopt direct communication strategies. Politeness is mainly achieved by imperative sentences mitigated by words like *please* or *thanks*. Their email messages contain only what is necessary to convey information and be courteous. However, in our corpus of messages written by Chinese professionals, different forms are more popularly used to minimize possible imposition. In making a request, for example, some wordy structures like *It would be very helpful if...* appear often.

Thus, email written by Chinese professionals is more like formal business letters than email written by native speakers. Email by native speakers was not without problems, however. For example, we found multiple topics were quite common in one message in our corpus. This is considered improper and unprofessional according to Guffey (2003). Without proper models and instruction, examples like this one may mislead EFL learners.

Part Four: Writing Tasks

In this stage, students compose several of their own business email messages.

Sample Task

FIRSTLITE is a lighting manufacturing company in China. Its main products include Down/Spot/Halogen lights that enjoy a good reputation for their extraordinary reliability. Suppose you are an assistant to Louis Zhang who is the sales manager in charge of the

European market. Louis wants you to write an email message to one of your old customers who wants to place an order for table lights. Detailed information about the product is available at the company's new website <http://www.ramie.com.cn/jxzm/jxzmE.htm>.

In your message, include a brief introduction to the new product, the price, and possible discount. Tell your customer about the company's website, too.

Conclusion

Although email is a new and still developing channel of communication, students in international business courses benefit from systematic instruction that builds awareness of its characteristics and gives them an opportunity to practice writing their own messages. Our unit has proven useful for our students, and we hope that this outline may be of value to other ESL and EFL business English instructors.

Reference

Guffey, M. E. (2003). *Essentials of Business Communication*, 6th ed. Mason, OH: South-Western College Press.

About the Authors

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Recitation Recitation

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There is an old Chinese saying that goes like this: One can make himself a poet by reciting fluently 300 poems of the Tang Dynasty. The Tang was a prosperous era with a rich tradition of poetry. Recitation of poetry and all manner of other texts was once a common teaching technique in China. Students were asked to recite passages whether they understood them or not. Later, people criticized recitation as boring and ineffective. Students are now taught to think and solve academic problems scientifically and analytically.

In foreign language classes, memorization and recitation have also been discarded in favor of more communicative techniques. However, students, particularly at the beginning level, frequently express frustration at not being able to recall English words or to say anything in a natural, fluent way. By transforming the traditional form of recitation into something fresh, I have been able to help my students overcome some of these initial feelings of frustration.

The three techniques described below have enabled me to use recitation to help my students develop confidence and fluency in their use of English.

Encourage students to recite with tapes.

In the beginning, I encourage my students to listen to and imitate tape recordings. Special English broadcasts from Voice of America are particularly useful. Some students prefer to imitate the voice of BBC broadcasts. My experience is that students enjoy listening to and imitating both accents. Developing familiarity with different accents also facilitates communicating with English speakers from different parts of the world. It is not long before students are ready to try imitating live broadcasts. Other suitable sources of recordings are books on tape and collections of famous speeches. These kinds of recordings have the advantage of being authentic material with appealing content, making them far more attractive models for imitation than the typical language textbook recordings.

Encourage students to choose their own materials.

After the initial stage, students are ready to choose material that matches their individual interests, background, or goals. My students have selected material as varied as poetry, film scripts, short stories, and even Francis Bacon essays. They can also be encouraged to work together to recite lines of actors in a favorite movie or

characters from a book that they have read. Of course, the possibilities for imitation and recitation with music are endless.

Encourage students to recite in front of their peers.

Just as the publishing stage is important in the writing process, going public is also important in oral fluency. Knowing that they will recite in front of their peers gives students the incentive to attend to pronunciation, intonation, body language, and stage manner. A presentation may be for the class, school, or wider public. Public speaking competitions have a long tradition in many parts of the world. This format can be adapted for a foreign language speech event. Whether it becomes a competition, a performance, and simply a special event in class might depend on the goals and setting of the school. My experience is that students enjoy the opportunity to display their growing fluency and that such an event helps create a target language speaking community where it might be difficult to find one otherwise.

After using recitation for a while now, I have made some informal observations about its benefits. Recitation of authentic material helps my students internalize many of the features of spoken English. They achieve a level of automaticity that is often lacking at the beginning level. This gives them a sense of autonomy and empowerment. They practice more freely and engage more naturally in the use of the target language. Vocabulary grows and the carry over is apparent even in their writing.

About the Author

Ms. Ding Jiali teaches English in the Foreign Languages Department of Jiangnan University, Wuxi, the People's Republic of China. She was a visiting scholar in Australia in 2000.