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Combining Process and Product in a Business Writing Course

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Combining Process and Product in a Business Writing Course

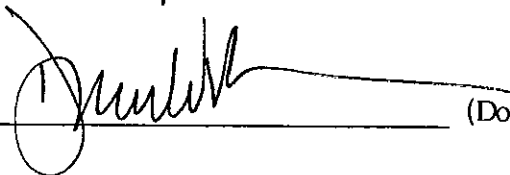
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This project by Stephen Ellis Turner is accepted in its present form.

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Abstract

This thesis documents a business writing course taught in an in-company programme in Japan from September to December 1985. Each student's writing is based upon his own individual working situation and experience. The course emphasizes the importance of having students experience writing as a process and attempts to show how process and product are inter-related.

The core materials used in the course are mostly based upon actual company correspondence. These and the students' own writing assignments provide the input for the class. The course stresses the necessity for materials to which the students can relate and which reflect their own experiences.

There are three main parts to the thesis. Part I presents an outline of the course, with an explanation of the thinking behind it. Part II features an account of how the course went and what I learned from it. In Part III there is a fresh statement of my views on the teaching of writing, made in the light of my experience as recorded in Part II and referring to some current articles on the topic. The thesis concludes with an appendix containing extracts from the materials developed for the course and the rationale behind them.

ERIC Descriptors

BUSINESS COMMUNICATION:Business English
CIJE:294 RIE:147 GC:650 RT

BUSINESS CORRESPONDENCE:Business Letters
CIJE:96 RIE:62 GC:650 UF

WRITING PROCESSES:Series of thoughts and behaviors involved in planning, writing, and/or revising written compositions
CIJE:149 RIE:99 GC:400 SN

Part I: An Outline of the Course and the Rationale behind it

As of September 1985, I have spent almost seven years as an English teacher in Kobe Steel Limited's in-house English language programme in Tokyo. During that time I have taught business writing courses intermittently using a variety of materials, both those available commercially and some I have prepared or adapted myself.

In these courses, I have generally concerned myself with what my students wrote rather than with the phases they went through in order to arrive at their final product. The courses have been closely controlled, relying in large part on the students' repetition or adaptation of model letters, in most cases either fictitious or bearing only a tenuous relationship to my students' working situations. While I have at times created company-related scenarios as the basis for writing assignments or have had the whole class write a letter based on a situation in which one student was involved, I have not until now had students consistently base writing assignments on their own individual professional circumstances.

As a result of my two summers on the Master of Arts in Teaching Program at the School for International Training in Brattleboro, I have come to dwell on a number of ideas concerning teaching and learning which seem to have direct application to business writing courses for EFL/ESL students. These ideas form the philosophical basis of the course which is the subject of this thesis. They have also provided the impetus and direction behind an extensive analysis I conducted of correspondence involving Kobe Steel, from which I have taken the realia for the course.

The time available for the course on this occasion is one trimester, running from September 25 to December 13, 1985. The trimester consists of just under twelve weeks, with three lessons per week for a total of thirty-five lessons. Each class period is one hour and fifteen minutes, amounting to slightly less than forty-four hours of class time altogether. The students will be asked to do one homework assignment per week. Sometimes this will be a letter, which they will generally start in class so that on each occasion the students experience something of the writing process through editing and revision on the basis of consultation with and feedback from colleagues and myself. On other occasions, homework assignments will comprise exercises on more discrete areas of language. Even then, students will critique each other's work and be free to amend what they have written before I see it.

There are thirteen students in the class, though this number is expected to decline during the course due to the attrition caused by students' changing work situations that inevitably occurs in in-company programmes of this type. The students are of approximately intermediate level. They have all been exposed to several years of English during their formal education and the majority of them have taken other English courses, mainly with an oral focus, in the Kobe Steel in-house language programme. They have an oral English proficiency level of 1+ to 2 on the Language Proficiency Interview scale developed by Educational Testing Services of Princeton, New Jersey.

One of the key principles behind my approach is that students learn by making hypotheses about the language, by experimenting with it in contexts meaningful to them and by drawing the appropriate conclusions about their

assumptions in the light of the feedback they receive. While one of the normal facets of business writing is the recycling of formulaic expressions, I feel it is essential that students be given sufficient opportunity to try using new expressions or vocabulary items in ways which will help them to articulate something they actually want to say. By experimenting in this way, students will be able to forge the criteria necessary for them to be able to use the new material appropriately. In practical terms, this means that each lesson should have a reflective period in which students can engage with the material in question without being distracted by further input. While this assumption seems obvious in retrospect, it is something I have often ignored in the past.

A corollary to the above principle is the notion that each student has different needs, strengths and weaknesses. Thus the course makes maximum allowance for students to work on individually relevant items, whether they be sample sentences using certain expressions of interest or complete letters. This facet of the course is particularly important since, while all the students are employees of Kobe Steel, they work in different departments and have differing needs within a general requirement for business writing. When I have students write letters in class or for homework, I do not expect to stipulate the types of letters they must write or their contents. In almost every case, it will be up to the individual student to provide such details from his actual working situation. Should he be unable to produce a real, current, company-related topic from his own work, he will nonetheless be required to obtain one somehow, perhaps from a colleague or by recalling a situation from the past. Thus, though I may at times have small groups of students or the whole class write a letter

concerning a situation provided by one student, in most cases the students will write letters on themes they themselves have supplied.

At the heart of my course is the belief that the students should be invested in what they are writing (Curran, 1976). It is my contention that, while business writing is to a certain extent formulaic and is an area of writing in which students will need to internalize a considerable number of high-frequency expressions, such knowledge will not of itself equip the writer to transmit a clear, accurate message tailored to a specific reader. Business writing is still an activity in which students will perform best when they are encouraged to write something realistic or personally meaningful to them as regularly as possible.

Thus, rather than asking my students to copy model letters in their entirety or with certain prescribed alterations, I will have them attempt to use whichever portions of material they are exposed to in a way that maximizes its relevance to each individual in the class. For this reason, whenever the class is focussing on a letter or letter extract, I will allow sufficient time for the students to pick from the letter whatever vocabulary items or expressions they find useful and make their own sentences using them. The students will then have the opportunity to present what they have written to each other and sometimes to the whole class. The reactions of the students' classmates and myself to what they have written should strengthen their sense of how well they have grasped the new material.

Frequent writing in itself will not make my students competent writers of business correspondence in English. I place equal importance on their willingness both to give and to receive from their classmates constructive

feedback on writing assignments. I see this process as helping students develop the appropriate criteria about the language as well as increase their confidence in their own abilities. By offering feedback, students will be engaging in their own hypothesizing about the language as they try to relate to what their counterparts want to say. On the other hand, the recipients of such feedback will not only benefit from new input but will begin to develop a greater sensitivity to the viewpoint of the reader.

For the above reasons, though I will ensure that my students receive my reactions to what they write, I will make peer critiquing and working with feedback from each other an integral aspect of my course. However, I also see it as serving other purposes. One of these is to promote the goal of having my students become independent learners. As they learn to pool their efforts with other students they should become less reliant on the teacher for correction. I want to nurture a sense of confidence in their own abilities and to undermine the idea that many students have, if on a subconscious level, that they are helpless until the teacher corrects what they have done or gives his or her approval of their efforts. After all, though they will have me to help them for the duration of the course, this will not usually be the case after they finish.

My emphasis on the role of feedback in my classes ties in with my belief that students should experience writing as a process. While I feel that business writing differs from literary activities such as the writing of essays or novels in that the author of the former genre has a relatively clear idea at the outset of what he or she wishes to say whereas in the latter case the writer's ideas develop as the work progresses, I consider that students of business correspondence will benefit from the chance to

revise and edit their work. As they receive feedback from their classmates and myself on one piece of writing at different stages, they will have the opportunity to explore a number of different possibilities while benefiting from the fact that, since they were the originators of the ideas in the letters, they have the factual background necessary to ensure that attempts at revision and editing stay meaningful for them.

In line with the principles outlined above, the students will in large part create their own materials. However, as mentioned earlier, I have also prepared a large volume of materials from actual correspondence involving Kobe Steel, examples of which are given in Appendix A. I have used outgoing correspondence written by Japanese employees of the company as well as the work of non-Japanese, though not always native speakers, in communications received by the company. In general, I have taken steps to ensure the anonymity of the writers of material which originated from Kobe Steel so that nobody need feel threatened by my using what they have written.

Some of the materials I have compiled consist of whole letters and others of extracts. Some have been prepared for the students to critique in general terms, while in other cases I will have students focus on a particular aspect, such as verb tense or article usage, which is especially well illustrated in the letter in question. I have emphasized areas of language which my analysis of Kobe Steel correspondence and my professional experience have shown to be troublesome for Japanese students of English. However, the language featured in the materials is naturally limited by the contents of the Kobe Steel correspondence which formed the basis of my analysis. Thus, although the materials feature a wide range of linguistic

items of clear relevance to my students, other issues which my analysis did not lead me to anticipate will almost certainly manifest themselves.

One of my assumptions in preparing this course has been, in fact, that things I did not predict will materialize. Nonetheless, I do not regard this as an unhealthy prospect, as unpredictability is a normal facet of the study and use of a living language. Such a consideration, though, does mean that, in comparison with a course based on an established curriculum, it is relatively difficult to give an accurate assessment of how many hours of class time the course will or should consume. While I will seek to ensure that my students are exposed to as rich a sample of the facets of language covered in the course as possible, my main endeavour will be to achieve a balance between an optimal level of input from actual business correspondence and the opportunity for the students to work with the language in a context meaningful to each individual.

In the short time available for the course, I do not expect my students to eradicate all of their engrained errors of English usage or to equip themselves to write word-perfect letters in English. I do, however, anticipate that they will improve their grammatical accuracy, vocabulary and knowledge of gambits and formulae appropriate to business communications. I expect the emphasis that the course places on each individual's experimentation with the language within contexts supplied from his own experience to play a key role in this regard.

I also believe that, through peer critiquing and the practice of revising and editing their work on the basis of constructive suggestions from others, my students will develop greater confidence in their abilities to convey their ideas effectively. At the same time they will become

increasingly sensitive to their readers' points of view. Finally, if my students succeed in internalizing some of the necessary linguistic criteria of English and if their belief in their own competence is indeed enhanced, I hope that they will regard the use of English to assist them with their professional duties with more enthusiasm and pleasure than some of them have done previously.

Part II: The Course in Retrospect

In this section I will make some broad observations on the most notable features of the course and expand upon the issues which had the greatest influence on my own ideas concerning business writing or which will shape how I approach teaching the subject in the future. This account will not take the form of a chronological record of each class, though I include a few remarks on the rationale for the order in which I introduced various materials below. Chronology takes second place to the significance of certain lessons or phases of them in the context of the aim of the course itself and what I learned from teaching it.

As the title of this thesis would suggest, the issues discussed in the following pages involve the degree to which my students were able to experience writing as a process as well as the progress they made towards improving the quality of what they wrote. I will show how I integrated the presentation of new input with student writing sessions. My account will feature the types of writing activities my students engaged in, the differing forms of feedback they received from their classmates and myself and the effects these responses had on their subsequent writing. I will seek to be as realistic and honest as possible in recounting which of my ideas, exercises and activities achieved their purposes and those that did not.

Though the materials I had prepared for the course were not strictly graded in terms of difficulty, I tried to follow a logical progression wherever possible. Thus the class went over the layout and mechanics of a business letter before proceeding to grammatical issues. I introduced

materials concentrating on article usage before those where the emphasis was on verb forms. As far as there was any logic behind the order in which I presented different linguistic elements, it was based upon my instinct to progress from what I considered to be simpler to more difficult material.

I found, though, that since I was using pieces of real business correspondence as my course material, there was always much to interest the students beyond what I had intended to be the focus. For example, an extract containing some classic cases of incorrect article usage also engaged the students' interest from other points of view, leading to discussion on equally useful, though unanticipated, topics. While I tried to maintain the class's attention on the original focus of the lesson, I did not stifle later examination of other points of interest. Whatever the focus of the class, I always tried to elicit the students' reactions to and interest in the material being displayed rather than evaluating it for them. The emphasis was constantly on the students' development of their own linguistic criteria as opposed to their memorization of mine.

I kept a meticulous record of each lesson plan, how the lesson went and what reflections and insights occurred to me as a result. It took only a few lessons for me to gain a sense of what the main issues would be for both my students and myself. These were largely factors which I had anticipated, though they did not necessarily manifest themselves in ways that I had expected. Chief among these was the question of feedback, both mine to the students and that which the students received from each other during critiquing sessions. The subject of feedback, whether it was positive or negative, precise or vague, was closely intertwined with my approach to correction and with what occurred during the students' peer

critiquing sessions. It was one which constantly engaged my attention and seemed closely related to much else that happened in the lessons.

Before discussing the subject of feedback at greater length, I will briefly mention some of the other issues which my records and recollections show to have been of significance. One of them was the importance of balancing the amount of input students received with the opportunity for language production. Another factor was the degree to which the course was based on each student's individual situation, coupled with the need for the teacher to remain aware of the differing strengths and weaknesses of the students. The effect of time restrictions on the amount of editing and revision students were able to perform on each piece of work also turned out to be significant. Furthermore, the students' varying rates of progress and their tendency to work on improving certain aspects of the language while seeming unconcerned about or unaware of their weaknesses in other areas led me to a greater understanding of how much progress it was reasonable to expect in the limited time available. A final factor was the distinction between having students concentrate on sentence-level language and focussing their attention on longer pieces of discourse.

It was clear early on that my students appreciated the balance between exposure to new material and the scope for experimentation with which I was trying to provide them. They took to the format and rationale of the classes, though they were initially confused at the idea of working together as closely as the regular peer critiquing sessions necessitated. They enjoyed the opportunity which they were given in each class to practise incorporating new material into their own writing. They also gained satisfaction from being able to learn new vocabulary and expressions

from real correspondence involving their own company and sometimes concerning themselves or individuals familiar to them.

This enthusiasm manifested itself in the way the students frequently recycled material they had first encountered in a previous lesson, thus proving that at least some learning had taken place. Furthermore, this feature of the lessons was not restricted to isolated vocabulary items, but involved appropriate usage of verb forms, such as the present perfect tense, which Japanese commonly experience difficulty in using. As the students became accustomed to the degree to which their progress was tied to their own input and the extent to which each participant could, and was encouraged to, relate whatever he wrote to his own personal situation, the enthusiasm and rising confidence of most of the students was easily discernible.

There are a number of other general observations to make on the overall course. One is that there was not enough time. It was quite impossible to cover all the material I had prepared for the course. On the other hand, I derived satisfaction from the fact that the students invariably found interesting linguistic items they wanted to experiment with even in exercises focussing on discrete points such as article usage. This is because the material consisted of genuine business correspondence and thus contained idioms and turns of expression which would probably have been absent or edited out if it had been deliberately prepared for EFL/ESL students. On such occasions I felt it appropriate and worthwhile to give the students the opportunity to write original sentences incorporating the point of interest even though that meant we would be unable to proceed to what I had originally planned for the class. In any case, the students

soon became used to the fact that each lesson contained a period when they would be able to write anything they wished. Thus they knew they would be given time to practise new items of interest.

As I had anticipated, the course increased my awareness of each student as an individual with his own strengths and weaknesses. An essential aspect of the course was its emphasis on the participants as individuals: whatever students wrote was inspired by their particular working situations and they were in large measure free to decide for themselves what they wanted to work on both in and out of class. I kept a copy of each piece of writing the students produced other than individual sentences written as they practised using new items in class, my written feedback and subsequent changes the students made on the basis of comments from their peers and me. In this way I developed a clear idea about the varying degrees of progress and the idiosyncracies of each member of the class.

However, the stress the course placed on the individual also made me aware of the dangers of forming an overly generalized impression of a student's prowess on the basis of previous knowledge of him and his early performance in the course. By focussing closely on what each participant wrote and how he reacted to feedback, I was able to note weaknesses in students whom I would have generally categorized as good, and redeeming factors in the performances of less satisfactory members of the class. This was particularly instructive on one occasion towards the end of the course when only two students came to class. I had them work together on an exercise contrasting restrictive and non-restrictive relative clauses and was surprised to note the grasp of the subject displayed by the student

I had expected to struggle and the extent to which the supposedly better student found the activity challenging. Therefore the experience of teaching the course demonstrated the importance of viewing the students in a neutral way and trying to avoid the expectation that certain members of the class are going to excel while others are almost sure to perform the task at hand inadequately.

One of my aims in developing the course had been to assist the students in gaining a feel for writing as a process. This goal necessitated that the students accept the appropriateness of revising and editing what they have written and the idea that it is no disgrace if they do not produce a perfect piece of work at the first attempt. They soon realized that, in order to receive useful input to help them improve their first attempts, they needed to open themselves up to comments on their writing from others and to try to let go of the critical self-image that many of them seemed to have at the beginning. I feel that this aspect of the rationale behind the course was soon apparent to the students.

As the course progressed, though, I realized that, due to the constraints of time and my wish to have the students work on as many pieces of writing as possible, there was usually only time for students to revise and edit what they had written once or twice. While the letters they were working on were often sufficiently brief or clear-cut for this limited reworking to be effective, there was a clear contrast between this situation and the repeated revision sessions described by teachers of composition classes, whose published ideas on the writing process had done much to mould my expectations for my writing course. However, I am satisfied that, given that my students knew in fairly specific terms what

they wanted to write beforehand, the experience of the writing process which they gained in this course was worthwhile.

An obvious aim of the course was to enhance the grammatical accuracy and the appropriateness of expression and register of the students' work. While wanting them to be less self-conscious and self-critical in their writing, I still hoped that the end result would be satisfactory in terms of product as well as process. In general, I feel the students did improve the precision of much of what they wrote. However, they persisted in making errors, many of a fundamental nature involving such elements as the usage of articles and the singular/plural distinction.

Though I had not expected forty-four hours of classroom work to entirely eradicate such problems, the experience of teaching the course brought home to me the limitations of what I could reasonably expect to achieve. It also suggested that there is a limit to what a student can concentrate on at any particular time or at any given stage of development. Most members of the class did make progress in distinguishing between, for example, the suitability of the past and present perfect tense. I suspect this is because focussing on their own incorrect application made them aware of the semantic implications of using the wrong verb form. Alternatively, they may have felt that using the correct form was essential for the sentence to appear as genuine English. Article usage and the difference between singular and plural nouns, on the other hand, may have been considered tiresome elements of English which would not greatly influence the transmission of the writers' intended message. Thus the students manifested clear improvement in some linguistic areas and only moderate progress, if any, in others.

Since the course was based upon pieces of actual business correspondence, the material presented to the students was determined by what I noticed in the samples. For this reason the course lacked any obvious conclusion. Moreover, the students and I soon became used to viewing the materials I presented them with as points of focus from which many tangents would take the attention of the class elsewhere rather than as self-contained elements of a rigid syllabus. I realized from an early stage that I would have to deal with issues I had not specifically anticipated and I consider I performed acceptably in this regard.

One problem area I noticed with a number of students was the distinction between verbs of action and stative verbs. One student in particular tended to write such things as "we knew....." instead of "we know....." or "we have come to know....." when referring to matters of which the company was currently aware. Since I had noticed that problem with previous students, and although I had not been consciously looking for examples of it when analyzing the company correspondence prior to the course, I did some spontaneous research on this area of the language and compiled a worksheet which later became the stimulus for a class discussion of the issue. I will certainly include treatment of the stative/action verb distinction in any future course of this type. Furthermore, I will be even more conscious than previously of the fact that I can safely anticipate that the unexpected will occur.

The somewhat haphazard nature of the course and the absence of a clear syllabus did not initially strike me as a problem. However, when I asked for some mid-course feedback from the students on their reactions to what we were doing, a couple of students said they would have preferred me to

present specific types of business communication, such as letters responding to claims or messages of appreciation for hospitality received during business trips, rather than having the students work with whatever they produced. This is an approach adopted by many textbooks of business correspondence, but in planning my course I had felt it unnecessary to follow it myself since I imagined that whatever types of letters students needed to work on would automatically be apparent from what they wrote.

At present I am not yet sure how far I will go to incorporate the categorization approach in my future courses. I feel inclined to avoid it as such since, with my imperfect knowledge of the students' working situations, I do not feel justified in dictating to the course participants what letter categories they will focus on. However, I will periodically ask the students if there are any particular types of letters they wish to practise. In this way I will be aware of the degree to which one student's preference is shared by the rest of the class and will be able to avoid spending time on letter categories which I thought would be useful but which in fact nobody in that particular group of students feels a need to practise writing.

Another matter which I did not perhaps address sufficiently in my course was the question of whether to work with the language on the sentence level or to focus on larger segments of discourse. I actually tended to concentrate on the sentence level. I think this is because most of the samples of writing I had analyzed in order to prepare the course as well as the letters my students themselves produced were of limited length and fairly clear of purpose. However, as problems arose concerning, for example, linking devices, I addressed them and produced materials which I

will incorporate into my courses in the future. In general terms, I have the sense that my course could be enriched if it included a systematic set of exercises and activities designed to encourage students to view business writing from a rhetorical perspective. Nonetheless, it is still true that my students made noticeable progress in their ability to write comprehensible English through a course where the emphasis tended to be on a sentence-level treatment of the language.

I will now expand upon my earlier remarks about the significance of feedback in the course. The question of feedback commanded my continuous attention largely because it is a subject to which I had not given sufficient consideration in the past but also, of course, because it was intimately bound up with the fundamental purpose of the course. Since I wanted my students to experience and regard writing as a process as well as to be concerned with their final product, the feedback the students received during the course of a writing assignment was of crucial importance.

In acquainting the students with the philosophy behind my approach, I made it clear that peer critiquing and the exchange of feedback between students would be an integral aspect of the course. However, what I did not fully appreciate was the difference between directed and undirected feedback. When I asked the students what insights they would hope to receive from their partners' feedback, they were at a loss as to what to respond. This was not surprising as the whole idea of peer critiquing was new to them. I noticed that, although they soon developed the habit of giving their partner comments on his efforts, the recipient of the feedback did not usually direct the focus of the comments.

I now see that I missed the chance early on to have the students develop the habit of asking for comments on particular aspects of what they had written. If they had entered into this habit, I feel they would have gained more from the critiquing sessions, at least in the early stages of the course. Nonetheless, as the students became accustomed to the style of the class most of them seemed to enjoy and even look forward to these sessions. Indeed, there were occasions when students wanted to continue this activity even though I was eager to move on to what I had planned for the next phase of the lesson. Thus I do not hesitate to claim that the course participants were soon convinced of the benefit to a writer of having another person make constructive comments on what he has written.

My feedback to individual students usually took the form of written comments attached to their writing assignments. The students were then expected to respond to my comments on an individual basis or with the help of a classmate if necessary. Although my students seemed to appreciate this approach and I will quote several instances where it was effective, I tended to overlook one important aspect of this or any other type of feedback until we were well into the course. This was the idea that feedback should be positive as well as negative. My records show that while I initially intended to include positive feedback in my comments, I quickly lost sight of this aim and came to view my written feedback only as a means, albeit an enlightened one, of correction. I usually focussed on what was inappropriate or unacceptable and omitted to let students know when I found a turn of phrase or use of a certain verb tense particularly effective. Though the general atmosphere of the class was one of cooperation and in keeping with my beliefs about teaching and learning, I

could have done more to bolster such a spirit by writing positive comments or making them orally as I returned students' assignments.

One of my aims in giving feedback which I occasionally lost sight of was to vary the wording used. I wanted to prevent my feedback from becoming too predictable and to ensure that it always made the students think and examine their criteria and assumptions about the language. As the course progressed, I naturally came to see advantages of one form of feedback over another, though it was often the case that an approach that succeeded in eliciting correction from a student on one occasion failed with the same student on another. Conversely, something that worked with one student did not necessarily achieve the same effect with his colleague. Thus I became increasingly aware of the need to diversify the feedback I gave from one assignment to the next as well as the way I approached different students. Some examples of the reactions that specific forms of feedback engendered will illustrate the issues I faced.

From the beginning I made my comments on the basis of each paragraph or sentence, depending on the nature of the message and how the student had organized it. In some cases I made remarks on the assignment as a whole. I used a combination of brief prompts such as article and count or mass? and short sentences or questions. While I felt that the briefest possible hints would be most effective in having the students hypothesize and grapple with the language, this sometimes failed to give them sufficient guidelines upon which to act. In such cases, my fault was in being too vague. The key to giving the students effective feedback which would maximize their learning lay in striking a balance between excessive vagueness or obscurity on the one hand and identifying the problem area too

precisely on the other.

In one student's first writing assignment, the hint preposition succeeded in replacing of with for in the sentence:

Thank you very much for your firm (i.e. confirmed) order of roll core (p.o. no. 63610).

In the same letter, the hints article and noun/verb problem succeeded in having him insert "a" before "drawing" and change "confirm" to "confirmation" in the following sentence:

Enclosed are manufacturing procedure sheets and drawing which need your confirm.

Such hints did not always achieve the desired effect. Some students would be unable to trace the problem even though they had some idea of the type of error involved and others were led to change something incorrect to something else that was equally faulty. There were also students who unnecessarily changed something that had been correct in the first place in their zeal to follow up my feedback. An example of this concerned a student looking for a singular/plural problem who changed "this cooperation" rather than "relation" into the plural in the following phrase:

In view of this cooperation and the long friendly relation between Kobe and Chowgule.....

There were not a few other cases where my feedback was so vague that the students can have had virtually no chance of making acceptable changes. These instances usually comprised sentences which did not sound natural or idiomatic but where it was difficult to isolate discrete errors for the students to work on. In response to such sentences I wrote 3rd para: Try

to rephrase it! or 2nd para: Think again!. I soon realized the futility of making such comments, since it gave the students no useful parameters within which to try to work out the problem for themselves.

It was this type of problem which prompted me to develop a different type of feedback. This consisted of a question, ostensibly seeking confirmation of my understanding but at the same time containing within it an expression or grammatical construction which the student could actually use in rewriting the problem passage. I felt that this approach would give the student an idiomatic way of saying what he wanted and that the process he went through in interpreting it and extracting it from my question would give him a greater chance of internalizing it for future use than if I had just rewritten his original sentence for him.

In one instance, in order to help a student improve upon his unintentionally abrupt refusal to take action on behalf of the company, my question "What are you not in a position to do?" resulted in the following acceptable revision:

I regret that we are not in a position to be of assistance to you in this matter.

Sometimes my feedback consisted of direct questions. At other times, direct feedback took the form of a statement rather than a question. This was the approach I adopted when confronted by the sentence:

Please refer to our technical brochures to make sure that higher welding efficiency can be obtained by using flux cored wire "DW-100".

I commented as follows:

It seems as if you (Kobe Steel) doubt that higher welding efficiency can be obtained by using the flux cored wire "DX-100".

The following revision from the student, while somewhat wordy, showed that

he had understood my point:

Please refer to our technical brochures from which you can understand that higher welding efficiency can be obtained by using the flux cored wire "DW-100".

One effect of the individual feedback each student received was that it increased the students' awareness of their strengths and weaknesses even if it did not eradicate every error. The students were not used to proofreading their own work or having others critique it, as shown by examples of sheer carelessness in some of the early pieces of writing that I saw. The perpetrator of ".....the above shipment will be delay....." and numerous simple spelling mistakes in his first assignment became markedly more careful about what he turned in as his awareness of the reader's viewpoint and of his own ability to write clearly and with reasonable accuracy grew.

Although I am satisfied that the students benefited from the individual feedback they received and from frequent peer critiquing sessions with other members of the class, they also gained from whole group efforts. A few times I chose a topic for a letter suggested by one student which the others found reasonably interesting or applicable to their own situations and had the class as a whole compose the letter. We brainstormed about how to organize the letter and I wrote it on the whiteboard as they dictated. My feedback, which I tried to restrict to brief non-judgemental comments, helped them to revise and edit as they went along.

I deliberately double-spaced on the whiteboard to leave room to add alternative ways of saying things. Though I placed as much of the burden

of composition on the students as possible, this activity was an opportunity for me to give the students idioms and more sophisticated expressions to articulate what they wanted to say. They copied down such expressions with relish and many students made a point of recycling them in their own assignments at the earliest possible opportunity.

I prepared a somewhat similar activity, though one based more on my written feedback, for the whole group. For this I used a letter written by one particular student which had been revised on the basis of my feedback but which still required attention and would, in my view, be of interest to all the students. My approach was to have everyone critique it as I displayed it via the overhead projector. On these occasions everyone was able to refer to my comments and volunteer interpretations of them as well as to compare the writer's original efforts with his later modifications.

There were also times when I had the class focus on a letter without any written feedback. In such cases my oral comments replaced those that I would otherwise have written. The discussion was, of course, more wide-ranging than when students were working in pairs and allowed the class to be exposed to differing perspectives. At the same time, my participation ensured that the students would be able to expand their vocabulary by noting suggestions which I made when it seemed appropriate.

Variation in the way I gave feedback was closely intertwined with my belief in the value of varying the classroom dynamic as a means of ensuring the students' active attention and engagement with class activities. Thus, as well as having students write letters individually, getting the entire group to focus on a letter which one student had written and asking the whole class to cooperate in writing a letter together, I found it expedient

at times to have small groups of students compose a letter based on an idea supplied by one member of the group. This approach maximised each individual's input, making it difficult for quiet students to avoid participation in the venture, while enabling the students to test their hypotheses against competing ideas from other people in the groups. At times I would give them a little oral feedback, particularly if the competition of ideas had resulted in deadlock and time was of the essence. Such feedback sometimes led to wholesale revision of what they had written, though the students usually made changes as the need arose, particularly as they realized this was an integral element of the rationale behind the course.

The spirit underlying my approach to the course directed class activities equally when the students were working on their own original letters, when they were critiquing entire letters from my dossier of Kobe Steel correspondence and when they were tackling exercises on discrete points that I had prepared for them. While much of my discussion in this paper has focussed on the students' letter-writing assignments, the points made apply to everything the class was asked to do. For example in an exercise on verb forms compiled from Kobe Steel correspondence, several verbs were changed to the dictionary form for the students to put them into the appropriate tense. I routinely had the students compare what they had written with peers so that they could debate issues of contention first without my interference. Then, when we reviewed the exercises together the students were already tuned to controversial issues and ready to discuss them or perhaps to admit that they were stuck but had thought about the problem and considered the possibilities.

Since the business writing course described here was the first of its type that I had taught, my expectations were somewhat vague and tentative. Nevertheless, I feel that in many respects the course turned out as I had anticipated. What I noted and recall from the classes shows that the students did improve their awareness of what constitutes effective written business communication in English. This improvement manifested itself in areas of obviously crucial importance such as the organization of ideas, the appropriateness of verb tense and article usage and the students' knowledge of suitable business formulae and idioms. The students achieved what they did by taking responsibility for their own learning and by using themselves and each other as resources. Each student was able to work on what was relevant to him to a significant degree and even the weaker students grew in confidence in their abilities to communicate effectively in English.

Teaching the course did much to strengthen my own understanding about how effective language learning takes place. The problems and complications which arose were valuable learning opportunities for me and did not undermine or contradict any of my fundamental assumptions or goals. I feel sufficient confidence in the course to anticipate offering it, with suitable modifications, on a regular basis. Indeed, I taught a similar course shortly after the one on which this thesis is based and have developed a condensed variation of it which I have given in workshop form. I expect to be able to demonstrate on future occasions how process and product can be combined to help students write effective business letters in English.

Part III: The Teaching of Business Writing to EFL/ESL Students:
A Revised Statement of my Approach

In this section of the thesis I will focus on my reflections on an approach to teaching business writing which emphasizes the writing process and its relevance to the types of business writing course in which I have been and am likely to continue being involved. As well as meditating on my own convictions and experiences, I will refer to current articles on the teaching of writing in the hope that what other teachers have experienced might throw light upon my own situation and perhaps, in some cases, lend credence to my own conclusions. Though most of the articles concern the teaching of composition, the ideas I will refer to are clearly applicable to the teaching of business writing as well, despite the greater stress on initial clarity of purpose, conciseness and use of formulaic language that the latter genre entails. What follows, then, is a statement of my current beliefs, acquired both through first-hand experience and consideration of the writings of others.

I will begin with an overview of what I consider to be the ingredients for successful writing and the development of writing skills, then expand upon these points in subsequent paragraphs. My experience has shown that, as Zamel says (1976:74), "the primary emphasis should be upon the expressive and creative process of writing". For writing to be expressive and creative, the writer must be invested in the situation: there must be something that he or she wishes to say. While this may appear to be stating the obvious, I have witnessed how motivating it is for students to

be able to bring into the classroom their own personal, relevant experiences and circumstances and make them the basis of their writing assignments. I can also recall how much less enthused my students were when I taught business writing courses which did not regard the students' working situations as central to the process. Thus I see the students' involvement on a genuinely personal level as a prerequisite for effective and creative writing.

As well as being engaged in the situation, the students need to be given the opportunity to concentrate on developing their thoughts, free from the interference of premature correction by the teacher. Interaction between the writer and the teacher as well as with his or her peers can help the writer gain a sense of how what has been written is perceived by others. Feedback offered during the early stages should emphasize the rhetorical aspect of the writing, or whether or not the desired meaning is being conveyed. Emphasis should be paid to surface-level accuracy only when meaning is no longer a problem. Appropriate feedback will greatly assist the writer in revising and editing, which are natural and essential aspects of the writing process.

I believe that emphasis on letting students concentrate on developing their ideas without immediate correction helps them become more confident of their own abilities to convey their thoughts in English. Throughout the writing process, though, they have to make choices concerning the most appropriate language for the situation. Due to their limited linguistic criteria, they need a regular supply of realistic input to furnish them with the means to convey their message. However, it is the students' task to sift the input and selectively adopt those features which will help them

express their own thoughts rather than trying to reproduce it wholesale as an end in itself.

While writers cannot develop their ideas fully by concentrating on grammar and mechanics before the ideas are properly formed, the language selected is, of course, important. My views on how students internalize language are much as they were when I embarked upon this project. I believe that students learn by hypothesizing and experimenting with the language. Their linguistic assumptions and criteria are confirmed, thrown into doubt or disavowed by the feedback they receive, both from their classmates and from the teacher. It is normal and predictable in the learning process that mistakes occur. When this happens, students are forced to re-examine what they had thought to be true about the language. The criteria which they form on the basis of experiencing what does not work in the language are just as important as any other conclusions they may reach.

I am convinced of the need for students to be exposed to realistic, comprehensible input on a regular basis. Though it is essential for students to test their assumptions about the language by employing it to express their own thoughts, it is equally important for them to receive new input. My experience shows that realistic input will engage the students' attention more readily than contrived material but that it should not be so dauntingly difficult as to dishearten the students. Such input can be provided either by the teacher, by native speakers or their own classmates.

I found in my course that letters presented to students for their analysis and samples of their own or their colleagues' writing used as a basis for discussion, together with my own comments and feedback, furnished

my students with input that was usually realistic and largely comprehensible. It was then up to each individual to attempt to incorporate into his own work whatever he found useful or felt able to handle. In this way, the transmission of the students' original ideas took priority over the use of a particular form of language, rather than the reverse. Or, as Watson (1982:8) mentions in her discussion of the use of models in the ESL writing class, "alien product" informed "original process", leading to "genuine composition". Indeed, the concluding words of the same article reflect the way in which I believe the writing process should be combined with new input:

When models are used within the writing process, students can easily perceive their purpose and utility. In a sense, the student writers control the total process, including recourse to the model, because their own writing has quite clearly become the central concern of the lesson. And that, of course, is exactly what it always ought to be (1982:13).

I regard feedback, both from the teacher and from the students' peers, as among the most important factors to be considered in the teaching of business writing. Indeed, it must inevitably figure prominently in any discussion of the writing process. In the light of my beliefs on how learning takes place, one of my principal aims in giving feedback is to assist students in the process of working things out for themselves. Feedback is thus an important means of leading the students to correct their own errors. However, it need not be restricted to drawing attention to unsatisfactory aspects of students' writing: by responding appropriately to what impresses me I will be bolstering the students' confidence in their abilities to communicate effectively in English, thus helping to nurture a positive attitude towards the study of the language.

The impact of positive feedback should not be underestimated. Cardelle and Corno (1981) found in a study of the effect of various types of written feedback on college students of Spanish that the vast majority of the subjects appreciated feedback that combined both comments drawing attention to errors and those recognizing positive aspects of their writing. On current reflection, I am not surprised that these students expressed such a preference; I am only sorry that the feedback my business writing students received tended to be almost exclusively concerned with errors, though couched as far as possible in non-judgemental terms.

In the future, I will certainly attempt to achieve some balance in this respect. Though my teaching situation will probably be decidedly different from the circumstances experienced by the writers mentioned above, I will try to keep in mind Cardelle and Corno's suggestion to provide "specific written feedback on homework assignments that identifies student errors, guides the student towards a better attempt next time, and provides some positive comment on work particularly well done" (1981:260).

As well as addressing both positive and negative factors, I believe feedback should always be given for a specific purpose and in a manner that can be expected to elicit effective action on the part of the student. Though variety in feedback is desirable to ensure that it induces the student to think and does not become too predictable, the choice of the form of feedback to be employed at any particular time should be purposeful and not haphazard.

The appropriate focussing of feedback requires that the teacher make a genuine effort to understand what the student is trying to say, and not to allow surface errors to distract him or her from the student's broader

message. Feedback related to the individual student and text in question will be far more effective than stock comments or prescriptions, to be recycled whenever a certain familiar error appears. I am by no means alone in having discovered that vague injunctions to "think again" or "rephrase that part" are virtually useless. Zamel (1985:88), in an article on teachers' feedback to student writing, brings into focus the often "arbitrary and idiosyncratic" way that teachers respond to writing. I suspect I have been guilty on occasion of leaving students bewildered by such an approach. In the same article Zamel suggests that teachers keep logs of the type of responses they make so as to review them at a later date, and obtain feedback from students on their comments. I find the following passage especially relevant to my own experience:

We are likely to discover, as a result of such self-exploration, that we need to change our responding behavior so that students can better understand how to revise their writing. We must recognize that students may not be able to use our comments and markings, for our responses may represent very complex reactions which they are incapable of applying to their texts. Therefore, we need to replace vague commentary and references to abstract rules and principles with text-specific strategies, directions, guidelines, and recommendations. Responses of this sort reveal to the writer the confusion that the reader may have experienced and make obvious how to deal with these problems (1985:94).

One of my assumptions when I devised the course was that the feedback students received from their colleagues and myself would help them to improve the quality of what they wrote. However, my understanding of the role of feedback in leading to self-correction has deepened considerably as I have come to see writing as a process rather than the instant creation of a finished product. I realize that I have at times responded to a student's first attempt as if it were a final draft rather than a piece of

writing still in the process of development. I have attended to every error manifested in the script, treating meaning-related problems in the same way as surface-level features of writing. Apart from possibly overloading and discouraging the student with feedback on his deficiencies, I have thus interfered with the student's development of what he wanted to say by premature attention to how to say it. In the future I will try to maintain a distinction between feedback which focusses on content and organization and that applicable to a finished product.

I sensed during the course and have become convinced through subsequent reflection and reading that there is a limit to the categories and number of errors that students can endeavour to correct at any particular time or stage of their development. Some errors and the issues of language that they raise simply have more relevance to students than others. Thus, though the time which my business writing students can spend on each piece of writing before presenting their final draft is limited, I will try to become more discriminating in the future when deciding which errors to focus on when confronted with the first draft. Furthermore, I will attempt to avoid unrealistic expectations of error-free writing as students progress, bearing in mind Tsukamoto's observation that:

A certain error may disappear; but on the other hand, a new one will surface as the learner advances from one developmental stage to another (1983:41).

As my views on the importance of feedback have developed, I have come to believe even more strongly in the efficacy of peer critiquing and editing. This practice enables the writer to have his or her work read on a regular basis, both in the course of its development and on completion,

by someone other than the teacher. This encourages sensitivity to the needs and probable reactions of the reader. Peer critiquing also involves both the critiquer and the recipient in a re-examination of their linguistic assumptions. As Keyes (1984) points out in an article on the advantages of peer editing, the editor experiences learning by applying actively what may have been passive knowledge. The author, of course, gains similar benefit from the new input, plus perhaps the opportunity to pit his or her criteria against those of the editor.

In order to be effective, however, peer critiquing needs to be as focussed as the feedback teachers offer their students. I have already noted my failure to properly introduce my students to the rationale behind critiquing each other's work. While my experience showed that the students soon overcame any initial anxiety they may have felt about such an approach, they would have found the exercise much more useful from the beginning if I had elicited from them or, if necessary, simply dictated to them some suitable questions to ask their partners to ensure that the feedback they received was useful.

In future I will have the recipients of feedback ask focussed questions to elicit such information as what the most impressive aspect of the letter was, where they feel improvements could be made, whether they had difficulty understanding any part of the letter and if they could identify any grammatical or spelling problems. Once the students have become accustomed to this approach, I will encourage them to think of their own questions to ensure that their partners give them feedback on those aspects of their letters which concern them.

Much of the feedback I offered my students and which I encouraged

students to offer each other was on the sentence level. However, I am now more conscious than I was at the outset of this project of the need to take into account the rhetorical factors of writing in English when planning a writing course for EFL/ESL students. Writing involves the crafting of a particular message for a specific audience; writing effectively in a second language presupposes a familiarity not just with the grammar of the language but with its rhetoric and the cultural assumptions underlying it. Field (1980:91) was perplexed when her Japanese university students, though displaying proficiency in "grammar, sentence structure, use of articles and other details which I thought would reveal keys to writing problems", were unable to produce what she considered to be acceptable paragraphs. She later found out that they simply lacked the concept of a paragraph as it exists for native writers of English. Her account rings true. I too, in my years of EFL teaching in Japan, have had numerous opportunities to dwell on rhetorical differences between written Japanese and English.

While I realize that my approach to teaching business writing as manifested in the course documented in Part II tended to dwell on the sentence level, I believe my students improved their grasp of the rhetoric of English anyway. The large amount of input they received from me, from my dossier of Kobe Steel-related correspondence and from each other inevitably touched upon or stimulated discussion of organizational and cultural factors even though I had not consciously adopted a rhetorical approach. I feel the students absorbed and experimented with models which they were exposed to in class and came to their own conclusions.

I was not always happy, however, with my students' paragraph organization and it is true that I tended to deal with problems such as the

use of suitable linking devices on an ad hoc rather than a planned and methodical basis. In the future, I will try to incorporate into my courses an element that encourages more conscious attention to English rhetoric. For example, at the beginning of the course I will try to elicit from the students what they think a paragraph is, and I may have them do exercises such as rearranging into paragraphs scrambled sentences taken from actual business correspondence.

Much of what I have come to regard as my approach to the teaching of business writing is featured in an article by Pica (1986) on what she calls her "interactional approach". This method incorporates opportunities for students to test their hypotheses about the language and regards errors as an inevitable concomitant of the process. It stresses the provision of an adequate amount of comprehensible input and emphasizes the important role of feedback in the target language. As Pica herself describes her approach, it seeks to combine elements which my own experience has shown to be crucial:

An interactional approach....is based not only on the needs of language students as perceived by their teachers and textbook writers, but also on insights from second-language acquisition theory and research. Thus, its key components include provision of extensive written input and feedback to students' writing and the use of students' own work to serve as imperfect models for stimulating hypotheses about target-language rhetorical and grammatical structures (1986:8).

I found Pica's views on written feedback most thought-provoking. She feels that the teacher's written input should be in a similar form to the writing desired from the student. Thus, to respond to a student's effort with single words or phrase-level comments while expecting the student to produce "fully formed sentences, with cohesive paragraphs, with a variety

of lexical items, with tensed verbs and numbered nouns" (1986:8) is to severely limit the value of the input the student receives. In a study she conducted comparing "interactional" feedback with the "fragmented" type,

'interactional' feedback had a higher correlation with increased length of students' sentences and paragraphs and a decrease in the number of grammar-usage errors they made. Students who received more traditional, 'fragmented' feedback also improved, but not as much as the 'interactional' group (1986:8).

Most of the feedback chronicled in Part II of this paper was of the fragmented type. While my rationale was to use minimal hints so as to induce students to tackle problems by drawing upon their own resources, I am inclined to feel that the input they would receive from the interactional approach would be of greater benefit to them. Indeed, as I reported, my own feeling that some of my feedback was becoming too predictable led me to experiment with different forms, including questions or statements from which students could extract key elements to use in their own writing. I believe such an approach reflects the interactional spirit, and will seek to apply it in the future. However, I am not yet sure whether I will completely discard feedback of the fragmented variety.

Underlying the ideas I have offered in this thesis are certain assumptions about the relationship between teacher and students in the business writing class and in the EFL/ESL class in general. I would like to say something about what I think this relationship should be, while admitting uncertainty as to how near I have come to achieving such a relationship myself. My approach to teaching and learning puts the primary emphasis on the involvement of the student. The student should be intellectually and affectively invested in the learning enterprise (Curran,

1976) and it is the teacher's responsibility to do everything in his or her power to see that the classroom atmosphere is conducive to such a situation. In a writing class, while the teacher has experience and expertise of undoubted value to the student, it should be offered in a sincere, non-judgemental way, so that a partnership emerges between teacher and student. This ensures that the written expression of the student's experiences is not overshadowed by what the teacher decides the student wants to say.

Most contemporary articles on the writing process suggest that their authors hold similar views to mine. Zamel has written extensively on this topic, and I would like to quote from her views on responding to student writing:

To respond by participating in the making of meaning means that we no longer present ourselves as authorities but act instead as consultants, assistants, and facilitators. Thus,..... we need to establish a collaborative relationship with our students, drawing attention to problems, offering alternatives, and suggesting possibilities.

....What all of this means, then, is that we should respond not so much to student writing but to student writers (1985:96).

My current approach to teaching business writing is centered on the ideas expressed in the preceding pages of this section. To sum up, the students' progress is intimately bound up with their personal involvement in the writing enterprise and their genuine interest in ensuring that the product accurately reflects their thoughts. By being free to develop their thoughts fully before attending to error correction and by drawing upon feedback from the teacher and their peers both when forming their original ideas and during the editing stage, students experience writing as a

process. The process gives students confidence in their ability to achieve effective communication. Moreover, the interaction with teacher and colleagues that this entails enables the writers to re-examine and refine their assumptions about the language.

At the heart of this interaction is the role of feedback, both from teacher to students and among the various members of the class. I believe the teacher should respond to student writing in a supportive and non-critical manner. The teacher's comments ought to be crafted so that the students are led to reflect on their linguistic criteria and in such a way that they have the opportunity to take effective action. Feedback should have a specific purpose and be tailored to the type of response required, rather than being vague and prescriptive. At the same time it should be varied enough to ensure that it always engages the students in reflecting or hypothesizing about the language. Feedback also needs to address both positive and negative elements of the students' writing so as not to discourage the writers. Lastly, it ought to nurture in the students an awareness of English rhetoric through such means as having them look at language on the paragraph as well as the sentence level.

The ideas outlined above represent the essence of what I learned from teaching the business writing course described in this thesis. As I apply the principles underlying my present approach in future courses, issues which I had not previously considered will probably command my attention. The relative weight that I attach to various elements of my course may well change. However, I anticipate that having students experience the writing process as a means of creating a polished product will remain my central goal.

Appendix A:

Some Extracts from Materials Used in the Course

Virtually all the materials prepared for the course were based on actual samples of Kobe Steel correspondence, both incoming and outgoing. I only used other materials when I felt something I had prepared for a different course would be particularly suitable for my business writing students or when it was necessary to create an exercise to meet a specific need at short notice. Such occasions did not occur frequently.

Some of the incoming letters used in the course were written by native speakers of English and some not. Almost all the letters from Kobe Steel employees were, of course, written by Japanese. The writing of native speakers provided input which was usually, though not always, positive. That of non-native speakers contained imperfections which the students could focus on in class. In this regard, I felt it was valuable to present students with writing by non-native speakers who were not Japanese so as to help dispel any feelings they had that Japanese people are intrinsically poor at English. Furthermore, I usually removed the names of letters and letter extracts written by Japanese employees other than the students in the class to prevent embarrassment. I retained the name in a few cases where the sample in question was clearly being used as a good model and the writer was well-known throughout the company.

I prepared four categories of materials. The first involves complete letters used as models of both appropriate and inappropriate usage. Second, there are letter extracts, compiled because they contain conspicuous examples of specific areas of language usage such as the

application or omission of articles. The third type consists of exercises made up by modifying actual letters or letter fragments, such as by removing all articles so as to have students supply them where they feel they are needed. Fourth, there are exercises specially written to elicit practice on certain linguistic points.

It is important to note that, although most of the materials I prepared involved a particular area of language, they often led to discussion of other issues as well. Conversely, I often used a combination of these different types of exercises to address the same linguistic issue. I have decided to categorize the materials in this section according to their linguistic focus.

Exercises on Article Usage

I used the following extract from a letter written by a Korean customer to have the students identify problems concerning article usage:

I appreciate very much for your sending me R&D-Kobe Steel Engineering Report. This helps me understanding new technology and new products by the Kobe Steel.

.....As learned from R&D, the Kobe Steel seems to be one of most advanced company in Japan in technology as well as experience.

I shall appreciate if you introduce me a right person to contact for LNG cryogenic power project by telex hopefully.

The following portion of a letter received from the U.S. required the students to go a little further in testing their hypotheses, by filling in the blank with an article or leaving the space empty, as they considered appropriate. I prepared the exercise by removing all articles and introducing blanks before certain nouns where there was originally no

article. Though the extract below was written by a native speaker, with similar samples written by non-native speakers I decided to correct errors unrelated to the linguistic focus so as not to distract students from the purpose of the exercise.

We would be glad to meet with you during _____ week of November 7th to exchange views on _____ research and development of techniques for treatment and storage of radioactive waste.

The only experimental facilities which we have at present are _____ scale model of _____ radioactive waste storage tank and analytical laboratories. Most of the laboratory and pilot plant testing for _____ West Valley Demonstration Project is currently conducted by _____ Battelle Pacific Northwest Laboratories located in _____ Richland, Washington.

Exercises on Punctuation and Capitalization

Punctuation and capitalization were topics of discussion in the early stages of the course. The following passages are faulty in this regard. The first two were written by Kobe Steel employees, while the third was in fact the work of a native speaker.

(1) Reference is made to the matter on the captioned, pleased be advised that we have carefully studied the content of your letter at our concerned department and comment you hereunder as our recommendation.

(2) However, due to some delay on our side for the preparation of necessary documents to be presented to the symposiums, we propose to hold the symposiums one month later respectively, that is.

(followed by list of dates and related details)

(3) Here is the information you asked for on our new product trends, sorry it took so long.

Exercises on Count/Mass and Singular/Plural Noun Distinction

Japanese students do not find the distinction between count and mass nouns and singular and plural forms easy. The following extracts, the

first three of which were penned by Kobe Steel people and the fourth by a Middle Eastern agent, illustrate this point:

- (1) If it would be permissible for him, he would like to visit your institute and to exchange his experience with your staffs.
- (2)mainly consisting of spare parts and furnitures,.....
- (3) Among the refinery plant equipments, our major interest is focused on heavy walled, high pressure equipments, for example, we can pick up the following items.
- (4) Regarding telescopic boom crane, you can feel that since 1975 till 1981 P&H cranes used to be among the most appreciated cranes for cranes users in the world.

In order to have the students further test their instincts concerning count/mass and singular/plural discrimination, I took a few company-related letters and introduced an element of choice, as the following two paragraphs from a letter written by an American demonstrate:

I sincerely appreciated the opportunities to meet with you
and your people and want to thank you for the hospitality
extended to Messrs. Tanaka, Danielsen and me.

They are my understandings that we reached a consensus
during our discussions about an expanded GE-Kobe Steel
relationship in the turbines, forgings and castings areas. In
particular, the Bintulu project will be excellent opportunities
for expanding our cooperations for mutual benefit.

Exercises on Verb Forms

Problems in the use of appropriate verb forms were evident in the company correspondence from which these materials were taken. I prepared various worksheets featuring relevant extracts from letters. The following

are examples:

(1) We have completed our negotiations with your representatives in New York City on February 8, 1984..... (English speaker)

(2) I am very pleased to have had the opportunity to meet and discuss with you again on December 4, 1984 and would like to say thank you again for the excellent dinner which you had kindly given to us. (Japanese speaker)

(3) In the meantime, I always feel grateful for your continuous patronage to us in the fields of our aluminum and other material-type products by KSL. (Japanese speaker)

(4) We like to point out that we are consulting engineers and we need your literature for the completing of our files and for our general information. (German speaker)

Exercises on Restrictive/Non-restrictive Relative Clause Distinction

The topic of relative clauses and the distinction between the restrictive and non-restrictive variety came up in the course. Since I already had a worksheet stemming from previous research, I used this as a basis for our discussion. It consisted of a series of sentences, each containing a blank. The students were required to put an appropriate word in each space and add any punctuation they considered necessary. They were also asked to note any cases where they thought more than one sentence was possible, with meanings differing according to the punctuation employed.

Sample sentences are:

(1) The production manager _____ has only been in this position for a few months will be visiting the U.S.A. next month.

(2) We are going to send the engineer _____ knowledge of English is excellent to an international conference next month.

Exercises on Stative/Action Verb Distinction

The distinction between stative verbs and verbs of action was clearly problematic for some students. Since I had not prepared a specific course component on this issue I put together a worksheet comprising pairs of sentences. The students had to complete the first sentence by filling in the blank with a designated verb in the appropriate form, then write a second sentence with essentially the same meaning but using a different, predetermined verb in the correct tense. I also provided hints such as time expressions to assist students in selecting the appropriate verb tense. Each pair of sentences was designed to contrast stative and action verbs. The purpose was to enable students to gain a grasp of the differences in usage between the two types of verbs, even when they were superficially similar. An extract from the exercise follows:

- (a) (to get to know)
I _____ Mr. Smith when I was stationed at the New York office.
- (b) (to know/since)
-

Exercises on Linking Devices

Towards the end of the course, my concern that I had concentrated overly on language at the sentence level and had not given much consideration to the wider rhetorical features of business writing in English led me to prepare a few worksheets from which I erased linking devices so as to have students supply those they considered appropriate. In some cases I asked students to supply a suitable expression even when the original had not contained one. For this type of exercise I used passages from both native and non-native writers of English. The main

criterion was to find a message of sufficient substance or complexity to require linking expressions. Below are a few paragraphs from a telex written by a Kobe Steel employee. I decided to leave everything else in it intact, feeling that I could exploit its questionable aspects to stimulate useful discussion.

BOTH OF MR YAMAMOTO AND MYSELF WOULD WELCOME YOUR PROPOSED VISIT TO JAPAN FOR DISTRIBUTION AGREEMENT.

WE ANTICIPATE THAT FROM MIDDLE OF JAN UPTO MIDDLE OF FEB, 1986 BOTH OF THE TWO WILL PROBABLY BE OUT OF JAPAN, MAINLY BECAUSE OF OUR ENGAGEMENT IN DISTRIBUTION ARRANGEMENT IN USA AT THE OPPORTUNITY OF CON/AGG SHOW AT LAS VEGAS.

YOUR VISIT WOULD BE SUGGESTED TO EFFECT AT LATTER HALF OF FEB, OR WE WOULD ARRANGE MR YAMAMOTO'S VISIT TO YOU ON WAY BACK TO JAPAN FROM USA AROUND THAT TIME, IF IT IS PREFERABLE TO YOU.

SO AS TO EFFECT THE SIGNING OF THE AGREEMENT AT OUR ABOVE SUGGESTED TIMING IN FEB, WE ARE GLADLY PREPARED FOR START OF TLX EXCHANGE WITH YOU FOR PRELIMINARY AND FUNDAMENTAL NEGOTIATION OF THE TERMS.

Exercises on Register and Tone

Finally, real letters and letter extracts were useful in generating discussion about register and tone. Most of the students started the course with the general notion that English was direct and Japanese was vague, but some of them were not very sensitive to the borderline between directness and rudeness. The following opening paragraph from a letter of complaint written by a German company provided the students with an amusing introduction to the question of tone and led to discussion on how to express such sentiments as dissatisfaction within a civil and courteous mode of expression:

Dear Sirs,

Much to our disappointment, we have neither received the requested brochures nor any reply from you up to this day. Why could you not comply with our request?

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