

HELPING LEARNERS WRITE BETTER INFORMAL EMAILS

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Research suggests that the ease of drafting, editing and revising provided by technology motivates learners to develop their writing skills. In this respect, educators have occasionally highlighted the role of electronic mails as a powerful tool for developing language users' writing skills¹.

The present paper focuses on helping non-English speaking learners at lower level write informal emails.

My teaching experience shows that non-native users of English are not so much familiar with the genre of informal emails, as we imagine them to be. This is due to the increasing use of social media. Nowadays it is easier for users to send a Facebook message to their friends than email them. There are situations, however, when just two or three lines common to texting or instant messaging will not suffice, as in communication with colleagues or relatives.

Most language exams² comprise a writing element and include such tasks as writing informal emails or letters to friends and family members. In my home University, learners have to write an informal email as part of their writing exam. The classroom experience shows that often learners do not see the demarcation line between formal and informal messages and tend to be formal even in their informal emails. This stems from the fact that in Armenian, the writing conventions between formal and informal emails are not as disparate as in English. The ability to combine appropriate language with a correct tone is crucial to the construction of certain kinds of text³ and it is essential that teachers help their learners identify the genre-specific conventions inherent in informal email messages.

¹ **Bowen, B.** (1994). *Telecommunications networks: Expanding the contexts for literacy*. In: C.L. Selfe & S. Hilligloss (Eds.). *Literacy and computers: The complications of teaching and learning with technology*. New York, – pp. 113-129. -**Cochran-Smith, M. et al** (1990). *Writing with a felicitous tool*. *Theory into Practice*, 29, 235-245.

² Some Cambridge Main Suite Exams, (e.g. PET) require that candidates complete informal email writing tasks in the writing part of the exam.

³ **Harmer, J.** (2004). *How to Teach Writing*. Essex: Longman, p. 27.

Short for electronic mail, email is defined as the transmission of non-spoken messages between individuals over telecommunications networks to a selected location or locations⁴. Over the recent years, email has become an increasingly popular medium of communication.

Harmer⁵ claims that spoken language features appear when writing seeks to imitate speech. In this respect, a lot of models of electronic writing look much more like conversation than prose. Due to their informal style, informal emails share many similarities with everyday communication. Therefore, the communicative unit inherent in an informal email is the exchange as in everyday communication⁶.

Informal email exchanges have been defined as a type of social interaction in the format of an ongoing dialogue involving collaborative construction of text consisting of messages and replies⁷. They are exchanged between people who know each other fairly well and write to each other to exchange news, respond to news, etc.

Though email messages share some similarities with informal letters, there are certain differences in the layout which should be highlighted.

The email header comprises four core elements: the address to which the message is sent, the address from which the message is sent, a brief description of the message, the date and time at which the message is sent inserted automatically by the software.

The email header can also comprise several optional elements, including a space for the recipients who are to receive the copy of the message (Carbon Copy-CC), a space for addresses receiving the message copy without the prime recipient's knowledge (Blind Carbon Copy-BCC), a space indicating the presence of an attachment to the message, etc.

It is worth mentioning that CC and BCC are more relevant to the language of business communication than to that of formal emails, when the sender wants to advise the office team on any updates.

⁴ Oxford English Dictionary, available at <http://www.oed.com/> 11 September, 2015.

⁵ Harmer, J. (2004). *How to Teach Writing*. Essex: Longman, p. 10.

⁶ Crystal, D. (2006). *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge, p. 112.

⁷ El-Hindi, E. (1998). *Beyond classroom boundaries*. Constructivist teaching with the Internet. *The Reading Teacher*, 51, pp. 694-700. - Reinking, D. (1997). *Me and my hypertext: A multiple digression analysis of technology and literacy*. *The Reading Teacher*, 50, pp. 626-643.

Informal emails usually start with *Dear* or *Hi* followed by the first name of the recipient and punctuated by a comma. However, people who know each other well can often exchange messages without greetings. This can also happen, when the message recipient considers the message as the second part of two-way interaction, e.g. when giving an immediate response to the question comprised in the first email message, as in this case.

Arriving message: *Lilit-are we meeting for coffee tonight?*

Response: *Yes, in my place.*

However, in case of delay in responding, the answer is likely to comprise a greeting due to the time-lag⁸

The main email message is comprised in the body and usually includes what the sender wants to tell the recipient. The number of paragraphs in the body depends on the number of things the email writer wants to discuss.

When closing an informal email, we can give a reason for ending the message (*I have to get back to work.*), send greetings (*Give my love to Anna.*), refer to the future contact (*Hope to hear from you soon.*), or close the message on a new line using a wide range of farewells (*All the best, Love, etc.*).

In most cases, informal emails comprise a closing formula and identify the sender, e.g. *All the best, Lilit*. Informal emails can also contain initialisms, i.e. the initial letter of the first name.

Linguists define registers as linguistic varieties inherent in particular occupations or topics⁹. In everyday communication, we vary our language respective of the context and the people involved in it. The Internet register, referred to as Netspeak by some linguists¹⁰, underlies the written informal communication on the Internet and is described to share such features with informal emails, as the use of keyboard typography (italics, asterisks, highlighting, etc) to make the message stand out, excessive punctuation used to modify the import of what is written and signal the email writer's mood, e.g. *What?!*, instances of graphological deviance, e.g. *Helloooo*, emoticons, the pictorial representations of facial expressions.

⁸ Crystal, D. (2006). *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge, p. 100.

⁹ Trudgill, P. (2000.). *Sociolinguistics: an Introduction to Language and Society*. London, p. 81.

¹⁰ Crystal, D. (2006). *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge. - Antonijevic, S. (2008). *Expressing Emotions Online: An Analysis of Visual Aspects of Emoticons.*. Retrieved from http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p14175_index.html 12 September, 2015.

The style of informal emails is colloquial, similar to that of a conversation. In terms of their language, informal emails, like formal emails, boast certain *phrases* or *vocabulary* items which we expect to see in informal emails. These are *colloquialisms* (cool), *acronyms* (ASAP), *fixed phrases* we use for opening and ending the email (hi, take care), direct feedback expressions (*Great to hear from you.*)

Grammatically, the language of informal emails is marked with the use of contractions (*I don't know*), elliptical anaphoric devices (*Fine with me*), subject ellipsis (*Will let you know*), and simple sentences (*I got your message.*)

Cohesion and coherence in informal emails can be achieved through the use of linkers, substitution, *anaphoric and exophoric references*. The former refers back to something in the message (*It was nice, had fun there*) and the latter indicates the shared world of the writer and reader. Thornbury¹¹ (2014: 27) refers to *exophoric* references as the insider knowledge, reflecting the close relationship between the sender and the recipient. Lexical sets, for instance *wedding gown, church, best man* and pronoun reference (my wedding) in an informal email sharing the news of the sender's marriage also help build a cohesive message.

Unlike formal emails, poorly written informal emails are not likely to discredit the writer's professional image. As informal emails are exchanged between people who know each other well, the recipients seem to be more tolerant of spelling and/or punctuation inaccuracies, and pay more attention to the message content than the form.

However, it is important to note that informal emails aim at building social interaction between the sender and the recipient and learners will benefit from effective communication once they overcome the following challenges.

Lack of motivation is one of the affective factors that can affect the learners' decision to write. Frequent are classroom situations, when my learners demonstrate their reluctance to write. Harmer claims that the reasons for this kind of behaviour should be sought in the fact that writing is alien to them, as they rarely write in their native language¹².

In the classroom, teachers often use visualisation, a technique that helps learners create images in their mind and write an email in response to them. Visualisation develops the learners' ability to create sensory images and helps them make mental associations between these images and the language they can produce

¹¹ Thornbury, S. (2014). *Beyond the Sentence*. Oxford, p. 27.

¹² Harmer, J. (2004). *How to Teach Writing*. Essex: Longman, p. 61.

in writing. Visual learners benefit from this activity, as it stirs their imagination and helps them see the content that is not easy to see.

Research defines **writer's block** as "an inability to begin writing for reasons other than a lack of basic skill or commitment"¹³. Some language teachers regard writers' blocks as a myth but my teaching experience shows that learners can sometimes feel motivated but not inspired to write, as they lack ideas. ELT professionals¹⁴ suggest removing writer's block through *freewriting*. This technique encourages the learners to increase their quantity and flow of writing. They concentrate on the content rather than the form and in this way generate more ideas on the paper.

The teaching experience shows that once learners have been introduced to the guidelines of formal email writing, they tend to demonstrate **excessive formality** even in their most informal email messages. Nowadays, business e-communication tends to move away from formal writing to a more personal informal style. In this respect, it is essential that teachers help their learners notice the language inherent in informal emails by asking them to think of situations when they would write a formal email and an informal one and then instructing them to brainstorm over the language and style differences between these two. This kind of activity encourages the learners to identify the patterns occurring in the target language and hypothesise rules from these patterns. Through the inductive approach, learners develop their autonomy and recognize the language inherent in informal emails.

Thornbury¹⁵ argues that 'discovered' rules make learning more memorable than the presented ones. Asking the learners to work collaboratively reduces the possibility of their failure and boosts their confidence, as they are not afraid of making mistakes.

Harmer¹⁶ (2004) postulates that the overemphasis on the study and analysis of different genres can lead learners into the **genre trap** and make them feel that the only way they can write a text is imitate what the teacher has given them. To evade the trap, Harmer suggests giving the learners a number of texts within the same genre, preferably with examples boasting individual differences. The variety of exposure alerts the learners to the descriptive rather than prescriptive nature of

¹³ **Rose, M.** (1984). *Writer's block: The cognitive dimension*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, p.4.

¹⁴ **Harmer, J.** (2004). *How to Teach Writing*. Essex: Longman, - **Hedge, T.** (2005). *Writing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁵ **Thornbury, S.** (2006). *An A-Z of ELT*. Oxford, p. 102.

¹⁶ **Harmer, J.** (2004). *How to Teach Writing*. Essex: Longman, p. 29.

genre analysis and prevents them from sticking to one restricting model of the text when doing their own writing.

To conclude, unlike speaking, which we learn in the early stages of our life and which does not require so much effort, writing is a skill which needs to be acquired and developed.

Teaching research and teachers' classroom experience identify effective writing skills with the knowledge of genre, knowledge of the language systems and that of the process of writing.

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ԲԵՔԱՐՅԱՆ Լ. Ա.

Ամփոփում

Ներկայումս տեղեկատվական տեխնոլոգիաների զարգացման հետ կարևորվում է էլեկտրոնային հաղորդագրություններ գրելու հմտությունների դասավանդումը: Նման հաղորդագրություններ գրելիս անգլերեն ուսումնասիրող շատ ուսանողներ հաճախ բախվում են այնպիսի խնդիրների, ինչպիսիք են ժանրային ծուղակը, շարադրելու արգելքը կամ անհամապատասխան գրելաոճի ընտրությունը

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**СОВЕРШЕНСТВОВАНИЕ НАВЫКОВ НАПИСАНИЯ НЕОФИЦИАЛЬНЫХ
ЭЛЕКТРОННЫХ СООБЩЕНИЙ
У СТУДЕНТОВ**

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Резюме

С развитием информационно-коммуникационных технологий в процессе обучения английскому языку следует постоянно развивать у студентов умение составлять электронные сообщения. Часто при написании подобных сообщений студенты сталкиваются с такими проблемами, как жанровая “ловушка”, препятствия письма и несоответствие стиля.