

CHALLENGES IN TEACHING BUSINESS REPORT WRITING TO MULTILINGUAL STUDENTS

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Abstract

The present paper looks into the main challenges language instructors face when teaching report writing to business students who are advanced or proficient in English and puts forward possible solutions for improving the educational approach in order to achieve a more adequate result. In their first academic years, students lack genre awareness, which translates into a persistent reliance upon previously acquired essay-writing conventions. This writing mindset negatively impacts the students' ability to adapt to the factual, concise, purpose-driven style required when writing business reports. The corpus analysed includes 90 documents submitted by first and second-year students; our findings highlight the most common issues encountered: the use of long, convoluted sentences, an overly academic style, information overload, a tendency to slip towards informality or the use of abstract language choices, all of which reveal a weak audience awareness. Therefore, our study argues in favour of a pedagogical shift that includes explicit genre comparison, the use of authentic tasks, resorting to metacognitive strategies and scaffolding. The ultimate purpose of our research is to highlight the fact that mastering genre appropriacy is as crucial as language proficiency in professional communication.

Keywords: genre, genre awareness, appropriacy, flexibility, report writing, challenge.

DOI: 10.24818/SYN/2026/22/1.11

1. Introductory remarks

The present paper has set as its research objective to identify the main challenges language instructors face when teaching business students how to write *reports*. In our experience and based on the corpus analysed, the most important setback stems from the difficulties students encounter when assimilating a new genre, a genre they have been unfamiliar with so far, characterised by very specific rules and a strict discipline of writing.

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It is our firm belief that the main reason students find it so difficult to adapt stems from the previous educational approach they have been exposed to. More specifically, in high-school, when students refine the core writing skills they will abide by for the rest of their lives, they are primarily (if not solely) exposed to *the essay-writing style*, and they subsequently become inadvertently reluctant to shift towards a totally new paradigm. Moreover, due to their intensive exposure to the internet (which characterises chronically online generations), they become inherently accustomed to a speaking and writing style that is primarily informal, and are therefore unable to function within the parameters of a professional setting, at least in the early stages of their turning into professional communicators.

The immediate consequence of the previous educational model alongside predictable lifestyle choices is that, even for business students highly proficient in English, the shift towards the genre of business reports is surprisingly demanding. In their turn, confronted with this reality, the language instructor faces a significant array of challenges, among which the most important appear to be tackling the unexpected coexistence of *language proficiency* and *lack of appropriacy* as well as the difficulties stemming from making students successfully assimilate the rules of what can be considered “good” business writing.

While students have objective realities to tackle when embarking upon the new task of report writing, they are also, to a large extent, subject to previously acquired impressions that clash with the requirements of business writing, out of which we mention the mindset that “more is better”, as well as the commonly encountered misconception that skilfully used language (which, for them, translates into pretentious, convoluted, overly descriptive language) conveys an impression of knowledge and expertise. By contrast, business writing relies heavily on **factuality** (an analysis based on facts rather than emotions or abstract ideas), **conciseness** (conveying only relevant data, with no information overload), **a down-to-earth approach** (objectivity, unpretentiousness, a focus on usefulness rather than theory or complexity, plain and simple language logically structured), as well as **formal** or at least **semi-formal** register use. Moreover, too much is perceived as exactly that: too much, while wordiness comes across as “a lack of respect for the reader’s time” (Jovin, 2019: 147).

In light of the above, the research questions that the present paper aims to answer are the following:

1. What are the main *challenges* advanced and proficient EFL students face when assimilating the genre of business reports?
2. How can business English teaching be adapted so as to improve the students’ genre awareness and to make them fully grasp the implications of *appropriacy* when writing professional reports?

In order to respond, our corpus incorporates 90 reports written by first and second-year FABIZ⁴ students majoring in English, during the first semester of the academic year. The reason we have chosen papers written by both first and second-year students is not random. On the contrary, we have used papers submitted by both cohorts of students so as to identify if sophomores, who have been immersed in the business writing style one year longer than their younger colleagues, have become better at assimilating the new genre. As the present study will aim to show, while there is noticeable progress in the documents submitted by second-year students compared to first-year ones, both cohorts need to work towards improving their genre awareness and writing style, since previously ingrained writing habits are strikingly difficult to upend.

2. Initial approach to report teaching

2.1. Generalities

Our initial approach to teaching reports begins with laying out a theoretical overview thereof. Thus, students are taught that reports represent business documents written in a formal or at least a semi-formal register (levels of formality having been explained and discussed extensively in previous seminars). Based on our vast experience with teaching and business writing, as well as with the necessary research to constantly improve and update our own knowledge, we have been able to identify a marked shift, in recent years, towards the semi-formal register being used instead of the formal one, mainly due to the extensive presence of the internet in all professional communication. "The language used in our writing today should be simple, courteous, relaxed and straightforward, quite conversational" (Taylor, 2012:30). Hence, unlike traditional business writing textbooks, more recent ones clearly recommend that business documents be written in a semi-formal register and some go so far as to warn against the use of highly formal language structures, such as the passive voice, which are seen as excessively stiff and likely to build up a wall between the interlocutors; these have been described as "yesterday's language" (Taylor, 2012:32). Thus, "today's business writing should use active voice, which is more alive, more focused, more personalised and much more interesting and clear" (Taylor, 2012:31). However, despite recent recommendations to that effect, it is emphasised that reports are characterised by a very specific structure, thus standing out due to their clearly organised sections and subsections, to their use of headings and subheadings, of bullets and numbers to enhance readability and to their exclusive focus on factual information leading to recommendations and conclusions, information deprived of unnecessary words and ideas to the point of austerity.

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Students are also taught that reports convey *objective facts* that happened in the past, unlike proposals, which are often described as future-oriented (though we find this particular aspect arguable – since most reports include recommendations, which point to the future, we find the description of reports as past-oriented at least incompletely nuanced). Reports include data, analyses and findings related to specific business activities, projects or operations; depending on the complexity of the topic, they can be shorter or longer (ranging from one page to tens of pages); they usually contain detailed explanations of the relevant facts, may signal unresolved matters or raise issues that require action from the company.

From our perspective, there are several things students should bear in mind before embarking on the task of report-writing. Firstly, they need to clearly understand and define, for the recipient, the *purpose* the document serves. Secondly, the document has to be built starting from the evidence gathered or analysed, while the information conveyed has to be structured logically, according to its key points.

Knowing the *audience* lies at the basis of the language and style that will be used. Who will be reading the report translates into a wide range of issues, covering, among others, cultural and formality-related aspects. Therefore, the language, register, tone, and level of detail have to be tailored pursuant to the reader's background and relationship with the writer, to their knowledge and expectations.

Information has to be collected and triaged carefully. All the relevant data, facts and figures have to be gathered, while at the same time avoiding the temptation of information overload (this also depends on what the audience already knows). Only credible sources must be used, so the information is accurate; equally importantly, it should be organised logically and coherently.

Since reports are fact-based documents relying on conciseness and accuracy, they require specific studies and research and may include surveys, questionnaires, investigations, polls, market studies, statistics, tables and graphs, etc. Given the wide variety of reasons reports are written for, they can be informative or persuasive or a combination of the two. Informative reports “organise and analyse particular information” (Condruz-Băcescu et al, 2013: 116), whereas persuasive (analytical) ones, in addition to analysing information, also make recommendations (Condruz-Băcescu et al, 2013: 116). Broadly speaking, common examples of informative reports would include employee evaluations, sales reports, progress reports and minutes of meetings, while persuasive reports usually fall into two categories: problem- / solution-based and feasibility studies (Enache, 2023: 134). To conclude this section, it would be safe to say that the primary purpose of a report is to provide the foundations and convey the information necessary for subsequent decisions to be made and for action to be taken.

Aside from language and content, there exist further aspects to consider when writing a report, aspects that pertain to the business relationship per se. Firstly, one has to weigh how much background information one needs to provide the reader with, given that the document is drafted with a specific audience in mind. This takes into account the recipient's position in the company, their attitude towards the subject and their experience with it. In most cases, a writer knows in advance whether the recipient is likely to agree or disagree with their position; it goes without saying that the more tense the situation, the more careful the approach needs to be. Secondly, one has to consider carefully how much the reader needs to know about the topic, so as to best provide that knowledge in a way that covers the essentials without falling into the trap of information overload. Thirdly, one must take into account one's credibility with that particular audience, whether it is something already established so the recipient trusts the reader and will wholeheartedly accept their perspective and/or recommendations, or whether it has to be built gradually, in which case the document needs to be crafted more tactfully.

2.2. Structure

As we have said before, reports stand out due to their specific, strictly organised structure aiming to facilitate comprehension by the recipient (Dima, Hurduzeu and Militaru, 2015: 105; Marinescu, Nicolae and Șerban-Oprescu, 2019: 237); in other words, its main purpose is to enhance readability and to convey information in a way that is recipient-friendly and helps with remembering relevant facts clearly and logically.

To begin with, reports generally include an introductory section titled "*Introduction*" and a final section titled "*Conclusions*"; a significant number of reports also include a section titled "*Recommendations*"; while recommendations and conclusions may coexist, they can also be used interchangeably, and the choice depends on the overall purpose and degree of complexity of the document. The "*Introduction*" section is present in all reports, as it aims to introduce the purpose and scope of the document so as to help the reader understand what will be covered in the body thereof (Jovin, 2019: 98); while this is the most commonly encountered heading for the introductory section, there also exist alternative headings such as "*Introductory remarks*", "*Preliminaries*", "*Opening insights*", or "*Preamble*".

In between the "Introduction" and the "Conclusions" sections lies the main body of the document covering the issue discussed. The text is further split into sections and sub-sections with customised headings and sub-headings reflecting the topic tackled. Their organisation is rigorous; the headings and subheadings are chosen depending on the topic of each section; these headings should be descriptive, referring to what comes next and helping to make a smooth transition from one subject to another. In terms of the content covered, the main body of the document includes the analysis, findings and discussions that may ensue. Moreover, for the sake of increased clarity

and precision, numbers and bullet points may be used to break down content into bits of information easy to process and remember.

It is important to point out that the number of sections and subsections depends directly on the complexity of the document; longer reports also contain an initial section titled “*Executive summary*” which renders the main ideas to follow, smoothening the transition towards their detailed discussion. In today’s extremely busy, fast-paced business arena, this section may be the only part some pressed-for-time recipients actually read when presented with a document amounting to tens of pages, which makes this section particularly important. If, however, the report is short, this section becomes unnecessary, and the “*Introduction*” section suffices to cover the basics. Longer reports also typically include a table of contents.

As far as choosing between using “*Recommendations*” or “*Conclusions*” or both goes, “*Recommendations*” put forward practical suggestions on how to tackle or/and solve the problem discussed, along with ideas relevant for the success of future activities, while the “*Conclusions*” section appears in most reports and summarises the main points and key findings, giving the writer’s perspective on the facts looked into. To put it bluntly, conclusions are past-oriented while recommendations are future-oriented; based on the overall purpose, the writer can decide which tack to take.

Each subsection includes several paragraphs, and it is recommended they be brief and to the point; if bullet points or numbers are used, the elements in the enumeration are usually separated by a semi-colon, and it is strongly recommended that the sentences in a list be full, not elliptical; should they be elliptical, though, it is recommended they have the same grammatical structure. The sections should be separated from one another; the language should be “clear and concise (...) to facilitate the reading of the report” (Dima, Hurduzeu and Militaru, 2015: 107); the tone should be open and friendly, yet professional (a combination more difficult to accomplish than it may seem at first sight).

Regarding the language used, jargon and technical terms that may be unfamiliar to the reader should either be explained or avoided altogether. “If you are a specialist writing for a lay audience, you should minimise specialised jargon, define essential terms, and explain concepts so that a non-specialist can understand them” (Jovin, 2019:148). If jargon has to be approached with caution, slang or colloquial expressions, on the other hand, should never be used. Ideas should be phrased with a certain complexity, while at the same time striking the right balance between complex and convoluted – the reader should not be overwhelmed with “long, tangled sentences” (Jovin, 2019:126). If the text becomes too difficult to process and the reader spends more time deciphering meaning than focusing on content, readability is impaired, and real communication may be hindered; hence, it is better to keep the language plain and simple so as to ensure easy comprehension. To the same end,

lengthy, obscure sentences, wordiness, and overuse of difficult grammatical structures should be eliminated, as should words or phrases that have no informative value and hence bring no contribution to the message. In business communication, less is more; the only challenge lies in finding what to short-list.

Since reports are concise, fact-focused documents that present information about the past and, in some situations, recommendations about the future, the content, style and structure need to be tailored to the specific audience and purpose; last but not least, attention to detail and a clear, well-organised presentation of the relevant information are of the essence.

Reports, especially long and complex ones, may also include appendices (providing supplementary information such as raw data, charts, graphs, or additional details), references (where the sources used are cited), visual aids and graphics (since charts, graphs, tables and diagrams can enhance understanding and make complex data more accessible). Data analysis is also a common procedure whereby data is interpreted and meaningful insights are provided – any trends, patterns and relationships within the data must be explained, while charts and graphs help support the analysis.

3. Main genre transfer challenges: genre awareness and genre shift

In the current section of our research, we will look into the main challenges students face when assimilating the new genre (business reports) and when attempting to write a document in line with the basic requirements thereof.

According to Swales (1981, 1985, 1991) as quoted in Bhatia (1993: 13),

Genre is a recognizable communicative event characterised by a set of communicative purpose(s) identified and mutually understood by the members of the professional or academic community in which it regularly occurs. Most often it is highly structured and conventionalised with constraints on allowable contributions in terms of their intent, positioning, form and functional value. These constraints, however, are often exploited by the expert members of the discourse community to achieve private intentions within the framework of socially recognised purpose(s).

Therefore, the concept of *genre* in writing incorporates more than just text; it encompasses **purpose**, **audience**, **structure**, **tone**, and **conventions** (Swales, 1990; Hyland, 2007); genres represent multifaceted occurrences reflecting on the social and communicative practices of particular discourse communities. When drafting a text pertaining to a certain genre, a writer will shape their message keeping in mind the expectations and accepted norms of the targeted readers, making sure that the intended meaning is successfully rendered. Therefore, understanding genre is crucial

to academic and professional literacy, enabling writers to adapt their style and content to specific circumstances, settings and communicative goals.

Moreover, central to students' struggles lies their understanding of the writer's *intention*. As we have said before, their previous academic experience revolved around genres like the argumentative essay, to which they were extensively exposed in the past. The said genre stands out as completely different from the report, as it primarily emphasises critical thinking, abstract reasoning and, above all, personal opinion (which also appears emotion-based in essays, as against fact-based in reports and even proposals). Indeed, as we have repeatedly stated in our research, business reports are **fact-based, action-oriented**, and rely heavily on **clarity, structure, simple language, and conciseness**.

To our surprise, for most students, even for advanced and proficient ones, the sudden shift from essay writing to report writing came with a wide array of adjacent challenges, as we will point out in the remaining sections of our study. Our findings are in line with the concept of *genre shift*, or the application (or misapplication) of established conventions from one genre to another; in many cases, the final result blatantly flouts the inherent rules that should apply. According to Johns (2008), when students learn to write in one dominant academic genre (e.g. the essay), they often internalise that genre's logic and style, which can lead to "negative transfer" - "learning in one context impacts negatively on performance in another" (Perkins & Salomon, 1992: 4) when facing new genres like business reports and tackling them via the rules that corresponded to the former genre but do not correspond to the latter. In other words, students automatically apply the writing conventions they are familiar with to the new business topic given, without being aware of any incompatibility or inconsistency. Thus, raising genre awareness should "assist students in developing the rhetorical flexibility necessary for adapting their socio-cognitive knowledge to ever-evolving contexts" (Johns, 2008: 238).

Finally, the ability to write pursuant to the requirements of a particular genre and to produce content in line with the targeted audience's expectations pertains to the communicative competence of the student, where communicative competence has been defined as "the general ability to use language accurately, appropriately and flexibly" (Yule, 2020: 227). Communicative competence goes beyond grammatical correctness or grammatical competence - "the accurate use of words and structures" (Yule, 2020: 227). It also incorporates sociolinguistic competence, or the ability to use language appropriately in different social contexts, as well as strategic competence - "the ability to organise a message effectively and to compensate, via strategies, for any difficulties" (Yule, 2020: 227). The skilful blending of the three enhances readability and clarity, strengthens the writer's trustworthiness and ensures a smooth alignment of their goals with the recipient's. Mastering communicative competence, selecting tone, style and content that suit the genre and comply with the conventions of a particular discourse community will translate into crafting a

document both linguistically correct and socially appropriate for the intended context, purpose and audience. Thus, the ability to draft a text in a way that is at the same time informative (conveying all the relevant facts) and deferential, reader-oriented (approaching the audience so they can see the writer is not oblivious to their needs and expectations) broadly describes a powerful soft skill that, in today's business arena, no workplace professional can do without (Marinescu, Nicolae and Șerban-Opreșcu, 2019: 220).

3.1. Students' cognitive struggles: mental models and schema conflict

As students learn how to write numerous tasks corresponding to the same genre, they gradually become accustomed to cognitive frameworks that make it easier for them to deal with assignments. These mental structures have been referred to as *cognitive scripts* (Schank & Abelson, 1977:60) or *schema*, and they are known to help students recognise certain patterns, anticipate expectations and make choices pertaining to content, language, and style (Perkins & Salomon, 1992). The longer students have been exposed to certain scripts, the more difficult it becomes for them to break free from the deeply embedded constraints and to smoothly transition towards a new genre. These mental models, traditionally built around the essay, include, among others, the following specificities:

- Writing to *demonstrate knowledge* rather than to *contribute to informed decision-making* (as the main purpose of writing essays was to develop language skills, students remain stuck in that paradigm and are unable to internalise the fact that the main purpose of business writing is to create lasting collaborations) since, as has been said, in business communication, language is a means rather than an end in itself;
- Valuing *length and elaboration* (which often cross the border into convolutedness) over *brevity and precision* (also in line with the traditional academic mindset that “more is better”);
- Emphasising a *central (theoretical) viewpoint* backed by arguments rather than presenting objective, factual information leading to informed future decisions.

Therefore, when they are introduced to business report writing, although extensively explained, students experience **cognitive dissonance** as their familiar schema no longer aligns with the expectations of the new genre, which often leads to their overusing narrative or persuasive techniques inappropriate for reports, to their including excessive background information or unnecessary theoretical comments (information overload) or even to general confusion as to the tone and purpose of the document (which tends to slip towards informality).

3.2. Students' rhetorical struggles: audience, purpose, register

The ability to shape a message according to the targeted audience and the communicative context is essential in any kind of writing (Beaufort, 2007).

Therefore, rhetorical flexibility goes hand in hand with and appears as a direct consequence of genre awareness. Students who have been trained to write in a foreign language for an evaluator with the sole purpose of improving their language and argumentation skills often tend to write using an omniscient, impersonal tone and an overly abstract vocabulary. For them, concepts central to business communication (such as readability, usability and reader efficiency) come second, if at all. As a consequence, they find it difficult to organise information logically and hierarchically (using sections and subsections, headings and subheadings, bullet points or appropriate summaries). In other words, as we have already pointed out, their main rhetorical struggles originate in the shift from using language as a goal in itself to using language as a means to an end, a process that needs to be not just theoretically understood, but deeply internalised. Unlike most essays, reports serve **real-world functions**: justifying business decisions, documenting sales, explaining outcomes, etc., all of which play a fundamental role in the smooth running of a business and have concrete financial consequences for the parties involved.

Students unfamiliar with these new contexts inadvertently shift towards essay-like language, style and organisation, which may undermine the report's appropriateness and effectiveness. As stated above, the essay writer's intention and purpose are fundamentally different from the report writer's intention and purpose: while the former produces content having in mind the development of language and argumentation skills as well as critical thinking, the latter revolves around decision-making in the business arena with a view to growing the company. Thus, the essay appears to be primarily writer-centred, whereas the report can be defined as audience-centred (since the audience's response will significantly contribute to further decision-making). In this respect, it may be difficult for students to grasp that, paradoxically, discourses and texts "are like and unlike each other and why" (Eggin & Martin, 1997: 230) and to craft their content accordingly.

To conclude this part of our research, we can safely state that, for business students, previous writing experience, especially when limited to essays, can inhibit genre flexibility. Research by Devitt (2009) and Tardy (2009) shows that students often carry over genre habits across contexts unconsciously; this phenomenon, which has been called *genre rigidity*, often results in the poor transfer of discourse features (headings, lists, bullets and numbers, data commentary), in the misalignment between content type and overall tone, as well as in facing difficulties when meeting the audience's expectations regarding objectivity and conciseness. Moreover, students may assume that "good writing" is universal, failing to recognise that good writing and effectiveness are genre-dependent (Schlepperegell, 2004).

4. Case study highlights - findings

In the current section of our study, we will support our findings by presenting a selection of extracts from the reports submitted by the first and second-year FABIZ students mentioned at the beginning. For the purpose of the present research, we have decided to only analyse four extracts which we have found particularly striking in terms of lacking genre appropriacy; however, all the documents submitted exhibit a certain degree of inappropriacy and justify the conclusions of our paper.

Thus, the report students were asked to write corresponded to the following task:

Your company used an advertising agency this year to promote products/services. Write a report for your boss:

- *Outline what the advertising campaign consisted of*
- *Indicate strengths and weaknesses*
- *Explain how successful the advertising was*
- *Suggest ideas for future advertising.*

As can be seen, the guidelines were very clear; contentwise, the students were told that they should include in their document all the information required and provide specific data to back their findings. It is also important to point out that most reports submitted had no problem complying with that part of the task; as far as the content was concerned, the main problem stemmed from including too much rather than too little information, which reinforced our pre-existent belief that information overload is a more common issue than information scarcity in student writing. We believe that this tendency to include more than is necessary may be related to a desire to showcase diligence and thoroughness and also to the fear of leaving out details that may turn out to be relevant. Conciseness, as a result, is a goal posing significant challenges for students, and their tendency to write more than the essentials often hinders readability, leaving the recipient with a document that is too long and sometimes sprawling, vague and unclear to the brim of incoherence.

We will therefore provide some sample answers submitted by students, attempting to explain why they were not appropriate, flouting the rules for report writing and also the audience's legitimate expectations.

Sample answer 1

To be honest, the campaign was a bit of a mix. Some of the ideas the agency came up with were super creative, especially the Instagram reels — they had a cool vibe and got lots of attention. But other stuff, like the flyer design, felt kinda boring and not really in line with our usual branding. It's hard to say for sure whether it was all worth it, but overall, it didn't exactly blow our minds.

The extract above, which was taken from the introductory part of a report submitted by a first-year student, violates appropriacy in several striking ways. Firstly, there is extensive use of informal language even in an extract this short – expressions like “to be honest” (belonging to the conversational style), super creative (which is informal bordering on slang, as is the degree modifier “kinda”, the slangy contraction of “kind of”), as well as the idiom “blow our minds” have no place in a business document; besides, the adjective “boring”, reflecting one’s personal opinion or emotional reaction, clashes with the basics of business writing, which should be clear, neutral and fact-based. Since students were taught the rules of formal writing, this leads us to believe that it is difficult for them to internalise and apply concepts they have understood in theory.

Moreover, the tone of the extract above is vague and emotional, lacking objectivity, precision and reliance upon facts. No measurable data is presented and the insights into strengths and weaknesses are not presented in a structured, logical manner, but rather by relying on the writer’s own feelings, emotions, and subjectivity.

Sample answer 2

The campaign reflected a strategic attempt to redefine our brand's positioning through multimodal communication. By employing both digital and print media, the agency aimed to construct a more engaging narrative around our core values. This approach resonates with recent trends in experiential marketing, where emotional appeal and storytelling are prioritised. While this may have elevated our brand identity, the absence of a concrete call to action might have limited its measurable impact on customer acquisition.

The second extract, which was also taken from the introductory part of a report submitted by a first-year student, while not informal at all, also violates appropriacy for other reasons. The tone can be primarily described as too academic, theoretical and vague – thus, expressions like “redefine brand positioning”, “construct a narrative” and “resonates with recent trends” sound posh while not conveying any specific information – to a seasoned businessperson they mean nothing and may even cause irritation, due to the effort expended to process what the writer likely means by them. The extract also lacks hard data (there is no mention of actual campaign results like reach, click-through rate, drop-out rate, conversion rate, sales change etc.), and the conclusion itself is vague, sounding cautious and speculative: “might have limited its measurable impact”. Here, we have also noticed the students’ tendency to rely on modal verbs as a “safe” language choice, expressing trends in an evasive, non-committal way. Generally speaking, the approach in this extract is not reader-oriented at all: it reflects *on* the campaign philosophically rather than *reporting facts and results* directly and clearly.

Sample answer 3

The campaign involved online advertising across Facebook, Instagram, Google Ads, and LinkedIn, in addition to print media placements in three national newspapers and four regional outlets. We also partnered with four social media influencers, ran a five-week radio promotion on three regional stations, distributed flyers in six cities, and placed in-store promotional materials in 42 branches. In total, more than 60 advertising assets were created, including video ads, static visuals, banners, and stories. The campaign also included email marketing, targeted at 12 segmented customer lists using Mailchimp. Weekly analytics were compiled for each platform, covering impressions, reach, click-through rates, bounce rates, and conversion funnels. Performance metrics were discussed in weekly meetings and compiled in internal dashboards.

Sample answer 3 was taken from a report submitted by a second-year student and belongs to the main body of the report, more specifically, to a section titled "Campaign description and reach". We can see that, unlike the first two extracts, the writing in this case is not unprofessional – it is neither informal nor overly academic, which legitimately leads us to believe that, at this point, business students have internalised the fact that document writing should be specific and fact-based. However, even in this case, there is room for improvement.

While the text does provide clear details, it falls into the predictable trap of information overload. The reader is drowned in material that appears unfiltered, detailed, randomly amassed and difficult to process. There is no logical structuring and no prioritisation of the key results or the layers of impact of the campaign; the document does not read like a business report; rather, it looks like a raw, first-draft log an employee would be writing for themselves instead of a superior. There is no analysis of the facts, nor are they synthesised; the actions and statistics are indiscriminately laid out for the reader without any summary or interpretation thereof, which makes the text difficult to pin down, although it is specific.

Sample answer 4

The campaign had some positive aspects but also areas that could be improved. On the positive side, it reached many people and created awareness. Customers seemed to engage with the brand more during the campaign, and the company got more visibility overall. However, it is not clear whether all the advertising was cost-effective or targeted enough. Some parts of the campaign worked better than others, and not all feedback from the audience was positive. There were also internal concerns about the timing and messaging of the campaign, which need to be considered for future efforts.

Sample answer 4 was also taken from a report submitted by a second-year student and also belongs to the main body of the report, to a section titled "Strengths and weaknesses of the campaign". We can see that it is less fact-focused and less detailed

than sample answer 3; however, it is neither informal nor overly academic, like the first year students' answers were. Still, the tone is vague. The speaker resorts to indefinite, non-committal quantifiers like "some" and "many", as if wary of giving clear numbers, and the whole context lacks precision (expressions like "*some positive aspects*", "*reached many people*", "*some parts worked better*", while pointing to trends, are not specific). Lack of clarity and reluctance to be firm also stem from using the verb "seem" and the vague negative construction "it is not clear" (in business writing, when some facts are unclear, it is often recommended that they be omitted altogether). The section is not logically structured – the strengths and weaknesses are blended together instead of distinctly separated, and there are no subheadings, bullet points or any other type of logical sequencing to enhance readability and convey information simply and clearly.

While the fact that the tone is neither informal nor too academic is a definite plus (again, showing improvement when compared to the first-year cohort), the extract does sound non-analytical and generic, lacking in both evidence or specificity. No data is given to back the mentioned trends, nor is there any kind of explanation of why some elements worked and others did not, which impairs the overall logic of the extract.

To conclude this section, we can say that, while second-year students have grown somewhat accustomed to the requirements of writing for business and their assignments turned out significantly more appropriate than their younger colleagues', they still need to work on assimilating the main tenets of report writing and on radically breaking away from their deeply ingrained habits, thus successfully becoming fully immersed in the new writing paradigm.

5. Recommendations for language instructors

In view of the discussion above, we believe it is advisable that language instructors specialising in teaching business communication in English as a foreign language should consider changing their approach to teaching reports, so as to consider the difficulties students face when internalising the rules of report-writing as a genre *per se*, a genre completely different from other genres they have focused on so far, particularly essays. Thus, students should set as their ultimate goal to successfully meet the expectations of their new audience, including businesspeople and corporate employees, for whom knowledge on English is not a goal in itself, but a means to an end. It is the language instructor's mission to adjust the course so as to respond to the learner's needs and to focus on the delivery of appropriate practical outcomes (Dima, Hurduzeu and Militaru, 2015: 60).

Therefore, to help students not just understand, but assimilate the new genre and apply its rules effortlessly in their writing, we believe language instructors should incorporate in the teaching process the following strategies:

- they should attempt to raise students' genre awareness, by explicitly comparing essays and reports in terms of language used, structure, audience, tone and purpose, rather than focusing exclusively on reports independently of essays; the comparison should include not just concrete aspects like formality and structure, but also more abstract differences like that between the essay-like, narrative style and the objective, fact-focused report style;
- the teaching process should include authentic tasks; by stimulating workplace communication scenarios, students will gradually become aware of the fact that the purpose of a report is, above all, to help a business progress in concrete ways (the most obvious example being profit); subsequently, it will become easier for them to develop the appropriate writing skills and shift to writing documents with real-life value;
- students should be made aware of their own current writing habits and of how these need to change according to the genre tackled; in other words, students should become accustomed to engaging in *metacognition* - "self-evaluation of current knowledge" (Driscoll et al, 2019 / 2020: 86), the conscious awareness of their habits and of the roots thereof. Students are mostly used to absorbing English as a second language by acquisition rather than learning – in other words, they pick it up subconsciously, and "are not usually aware of the fact that they are acquiring language, but are only aware of the fact that they are using language for communication" (Krashen, 1982: 10); by contrast, learning has been defined as "conscious knowledge of a second language, knowing the rules, being aware of them" (Krashen, 1982: 10). In this particular case, by turning to intentional learning, they will become more adept at transferring genre knowledge successfully from one context to another;
- students ought to be guided via scaffolding, through exposure to a progression of increasingly demanding tasks. As they are shown well-written, preferably real-life reports, the information should be broken down and they should be given small, focused writing tasks before more complex, more difficult ones. While early tasks should focus on isolating specific features (like writing executive summaries or introductory sections, using data-driven language, etc.), in later stages, students should be guided towards drafting complete reports. This approach enables students to internalise the conventions of the genre, while at the same time gaining confidence in their own potential as professional communicators.

6. Conclusions

The case study presented above has attempted to show that, in today's fast-paced academic environment, rapidly shifting towards business writing can represent a challenging task even for advanced and proficient students. Thus, they face a

powerful conflict in their first years, when applying essay-based writing habits to drafting texts pertaining to the more restrictive genre of business reports. Consequently, as students struggle to adjust to the concise, purpose-driven and highly structured nature of report writing, as they need to focus on making adequate language choices and changing their academic mindset alike, an immediate task ensues for instructors as well – they must not only make these genre rules and expectations explicit, they also need to design targeted pedagogical strategies to help students transition smoothly and seamlessly towards professional writing.

We believe the main roots of this conflict can be traced back to their prior training in academic writing, which led to persistent patterns like verbosity, convoluted language, information overload, theoretical framing as well as using a subjective tone and an informal register. We can see that their prior training has left a mark both on their language choices (such as slipping towards informality) and on the selection and organisation of the content conveyed (the most common problem being information overload).

As stated, in their turn, instructors are confronted with a difficult challenge of their own. The students' level of English is excellent, hence there are no issues related to language proficiency; however, the students enter college unaware of the fact that it is the audience, purpose and professional tone that matter the most in business communication and that good writing means more than grammatical correctness. More specifically, good writing is not a universal construct; by contrast, it depends on meeting the specific expectations of each genre. Moreover, the students' legitimate self-confidence in their level of English may itself hinder the learning process, since the first thing they need to acknowledge is that there is something new to learn and it is different from everything they have been taught before.

In light of the above, the main issue language instructors need to tackle is genre appropriacy, which is as important as language proficiency. Genre awareness and rhetorical flexibility need to be taught rather than taken for granted (as some instructors may be tempted to do, misled by the students' very good command of English). They must help students not just to write correctly, but to write appropriately, keeping in mind the purpose, audience and possible impact of the business report.

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