An Investigation of Students' Intercultural Email Writing Tasks through Task-based Language Teaching

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Abstract

This study aimed 1) to investigate students' satisfaction with learning intercultural email writing tasks, 2) to explore students' opinions towards the use of intercultural email writing tasks. Thirty-three students of the University of Phayao were the participants of this study drawn from a cluster random sampling. There were two sections that investigated students' satisfaction and explored students' opinions toward the use of intercultural email writing tasks. For students' satisfaction, a questionnaire was analyzed students' satisfaction using mean, and standard deviation. Regarding students' opinions towards intercultural email writing tasks, the semi-structure interview was analyzed using content analysis. To investigate students' satisfaction, the highest mean scores found that they could get the knowledge to develop their email writing in the future ($\overline{\mathbf{X}}$ = 4.28 and S.D. = 0.70). In contrast, the lowest point found that the students neither agreed nor disagreed which they clearly understood an email's writing criteria ($\overline{\mathbf{X}}$ = 3.17 and S.D. = 0.80). To explore the semi-structure interview, it also found that a number of the students were positive learning intercultural email writing tasks. In conclusion, it shown that the students were satisfied and positive learning through intercultural email writing tasks.

Keywords: Intercultural Email Writing Tasks, Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT), Intercultural Communication, English as Foreign Language (EFL)

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Introduction

Currently, learning business communication is important for students to achieve their future career. Writing an email is one of the tools that students need to prepare to enhance their business communication skills which they may use to contact other people in the future. In the business field, email is a crucial medium for a business transaction that can run a business successfully in business correspondence. However, some businessmen may get into trouble while contacting other people, such as writing mistakes and cultural differences. In business communication nowadays, concerning culture difference is increasing in business correspondence while people communicate via email. That is because business people have to make contact with other people around the world. They can be a failure to communicate with other people without studying another culture before sending an email. Bovée, Thill, & Schatzman (2006) state that knowing a receiver's culture is something the senders may affect the receivers. Therefore, learning other cultures is vital to EFL students who need to be trained and practiced to reduce conflict with other people in business correspondence.

In business writing class, learning intercultural communication is necessary for students to prepare for their future work in order to cope with problems when dealing with people from different cultures. Teachers also have to draw attention to students to aware of other cultures when they write an email. There are many communication styles that Thai students may encounter, particularly in high and low context communication. Hall (1976) referred to high context (HC), relating to the indirect manner which having implicit meaning in the context. On the other hand, in low-context (LC), cultures rely on explicit information to interpret the message's meaning (Holtbrügge, Weldon, & Rogers, 2013). There are some countries of communicators' use low-context, such as

North America, Scandinavia, and Germany. In contrast, some of the high-context communicators' use includes Japan, China, and Arab countries (Saputri & Saraswati, 2017). Thus, knowing the difference of high-low context communication is beneficial for students as they are able to contact other people from different cultures properly.

Concerning to present project, it is important to improve EFL students email writing ability using high and low context to communicate with foreigners successfully. Thus, the concept of high and low communication features has been adopted for the design of intercultural email tasks which are useful for learners to develop the awareness of communication with people from different cultures. Moreover, to increase students' intercultural email writing, Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is one of the benefits teaching methods that can challenge students to accomplish their email tasks. The TBLT is collaborative learning in which students can work with their friends and teachers. TBLT allows learners to cooperate in groups to complete tasks while the teacher performs the same as the language guide (Hyde, 2013). In this study, the task framework is adapted from Greenfield (2003) and Willis (1996) and task repetition framework of Bygate (1996), which consists of four stages; pre-email writing, while email writing, post email writing, and task repetition stages.

In conclusion, Thai students have a shortage of using email communication in their daily lives, so; the researcher will give students an email as an input to have an opportunity to practice in the class. Therefore, this study aims to investigate students' attitudes toward learning intercultural email writing through TBLT in order to improve or adapt for further instructional procedure and curriculum.

Objectives of Research

This study aimed 1) to investigate students' satisfaction with learning intercultural email writing tasks, 2) to explore students' opinions towards the use of intercultural email writing tasks.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The research design investigated students' satisfaction with learning intercultural email writing tasks and explored students' opinions towards the use of intercultural email writing tasks. The data of this study adopted the quantitative approach. The quantitative data was collected from students' satisfaction with learning intercultural email writing responding to a questionnaire. The questionnaire was conducted with 29 participants after the project implementation. Mean and standard deviation were used to analyze the satisfaction questionnaire. Regarding qualitative approach, the interview was conducted with 10 interviewees out of 33 students after the project implementation. An in-depth interview was used to collect students' opinions towards the use of intercultural email writing tasks. The result of the interview was shown based on students' content analysis.

Participants

The participants include 33 second-year students enrolled in English for Business Communication 1 (146371) at the University of Phayao. The participants were Economics, and Occupational Health and Safety programs selected by the purposive selection method.

Instruments

The research instruments are divided into two categories; 1) students' satisfaction of intercultural email writing tasks responding to a questionnaire and 2) students' attitude toward the use of intercultural email writing tasks using a semi-structured interview. The instruments as shown below:

1. The students' satisfaction of intercultural email writing tasks, collected by using questionnaire was analyzed using mean and standard deviation to get the students' satisfaction of learning intercultural email.

2. The semi-structure interview of the students was selected to interview in order to determine the students' attitude toward the use of intercultural email writing tasks.

Data collection procedures

Firstly, the students were asked to do a pre-test to see their intercultural email writing. Before an intercultural email writing task activity, the teacher introduced the concept and the importance of email writing through high-low context communication. During the classes, the teacher assigned English and Japanese email tasks that the students need to work on each week. The email tasks consist of five types of email; request, answering, ordering, reminder, appointment emails, and then, the students cooperated working in a group to reply these emails respectively. After that, a post-test was used to assess the students' intercultural email writing after the project implementation. Finally, the students were asked to respond to students' satisfaction with learning intercultural email through a questionnaire. The student's attitude toward the TBLT method was derived from a semi-structure interview.

Data Analysis

The data analyses were separated into two categories;

1. The data analysis of students' satisfaction with learning intercultural email writing tasks through a questionnaire consists of mean and standard deviation.

2. The qualitative data of semi-structure interview, content analysis was used from the teacher interviewing one by one to students in order to explore the students' opinions on using intercultural email writing tasks through TBLT.

Results of Research

The results of the study were displayed in two major parts. The first part revealed students' satisfaction with learning intercultural email writing tasks. The second part presented students' opinions toward the use of intercultural email writing tasks toward TBLT.

1. Results from a questionnaire

The questionnaire was conducted with 29 students. The overall statements included 13 items which the student had to respond in each statement. The five-point-scale was used to analyze in the students' satisfaction with learning intercultural email writing tasks. The interpretation for the range of five-point Likert scales items used for students' perception questionnaire are as follow: 1.00-1.80=Strongly Disagree, 1.81-2.60=Disagree, 2.61-3.40=Neutral, 3.41- 4.20=Agree and 4.21-5.00=Strongly Agree. Means and standard deviation (S.D.) were used to analyze the students' satisfaction with learning intercultural email writing tasks. The details of each section are shown in the table below:

Table 1 Students' satisfaction with learning intercultural email writing tasks in the TBLT classroom

No.	Statements to be rated	$\bar{\text{X}}$	(S.D.)	Meaning
Contents				
1	I thought I could take the knowledge of learning email writing skills to develop my email writing in the future.	4.28	0.70	Strongly Agree
2	The email's contents were appropriate to the level of students.	4.07	0.70	Agree
3	The task instructions were appropriate for students to write emails.	3.72	0.65	Agree
4	The whole of the teaching contents was absolutely complete.	3.48	0.91	Agree

No.	Statements to be rated	$\bar{\text{x}}$	(S.D.)	Meaning
5	The teacher taught each lesson clearly.	3.21	0.82	Neutral
6	The students could take the teacher's lesson contents to apply to write an email.	3.93	1.00	Agree
7	The teacher organized the contents so that the students could understand step by step-contents clearly.	3.28	0.88	Neutral
Procedures				
8	The TBLT's activities were appropriate to Thai students.	3.41	0.87	Agree
9	The students' group activities were useful for students.	3.86	0.79	Agree
10	I could practice to write emails and be good at working in group.	4.03	0.82	Agree
11	In the pre-task stage, the teacher could make me ready to write an email.	3.41	0.82	Agree
12	In the task cycle stage, the teacher could help me to improve my email writing competency.	3.52	0.95	Agree
13	In the post task stage, it could make me summarize, learn the pattern of language, and grammatical structures for email writing.	3.41	0.78	Agree
14	Learners could bring the knowledge of group work activities to develop their own email writing properly.	3.66	0.81	Agree
15	The time management for each lesson was proper for doing each activity.	3.55	0.57	Agree
16	The teacher's instructional media was suitable for contents and the learners.	3.31	0.85	Neutral
17	The learning environment was proper to the students.	3.55	0.91	Agree
Self-assessment				
18	I liked to learn writing intercultural emails though TBLT every week.	3.62	0.78	Agree
19	In the presentation stage, I preferred to have feedback.	3.55	0.78	Agree
20	I wanted to have a teacher's correction on my email writing and feedback after class.	3.52	0.87	Agree
21	My email writing was improved regularly after learning in each email through TBLT phases.	3.93	0.92	Agree

No.	Statements to be rated	$\overline{\mathbf{X}}$	(S.D.)	Meaning
22	A pattern and procedure of email etiquette (High-Low context) improved my email writing skills.	3.76	0.95	Agree
23	I understood clearly in an email's writing criteria.	3.17	0.80	Neutral
24	I understood and improved my intercultural business email writing.	3.62	0.78	Agree

Regarding the questionnaire above, the data can be separated into three parts; contents, procedures, and self-assessment in order to show the result of students' satisfaction with learning intercultural email writing tasks through TBLT. Thus, the data could be presented separately according to their categories of statements.

According to the students' perspective towards the content, in statement 1, most students believed that they could develop their email writing in the future ($\overline{\mathbf{X}}$ = 4.28 and S.D. = 0.70). This was followed by statement 2 ($\overline{\mathbf{X}}$ = 4.07 and S.D. = 0.70) as the students agreed that the email's content was suitable to their ability. However, the lowest point for the contents found is statement 5 ($\overline{\mathbf{X}}$ = 3.21 and S.D. = 0.82) as the students neither agreed nor disagreed that the teacher taught each lesson clearly.

Regarding the procedure, the major finding of the students' attitude was statement 10 which they had the opportunity to practice writing emails and work in groups ($\overline{\mathbf{X}}$ = 4.03 and S.D. = 0.82), followed by statement 9 ($\overline{\mathbf{X}}$ = 3.86 and S.D. = 0.79) as the students agreed that the group activity was useful for the students. However, the lowest point for the procedure found in statement 16 ($\overline{\mathbf{X}}$ = 3.31 and S.D. = 0.85) as the students neither agreed nor disagreed that the teacher's instructional media was suitable for the learners.

In accordance with self-assessment, the highest mean score and standard deviation was found in statement 21 ($\overline{\mathbf{X}}$ = 3.93 and S.D. = 0.92) as the students strongly agreed that their email writing improved regularly after

learning in each email, followed by statement 22 ($\overline{X}$ = 3.76 and S.D. 0.95) as the students agreed that the pattern and procedure of email etiquette could improve their email writing skills. However, the lowest point of the student self-assessment found in statement 23 ($\overline{X}$ = 3.17 and S.D. = 0.80) as the students neither agreed nor disagreed that they clearly understood an email's writing criteria.

2. Results from Semi-structure interview

The interview was used to obtain students' in-depth opinions and it is supplementary to the results gained from the questionnaire to explore the students' attitudes towards intercultural email task through TBLT activity. The interview was conducted with 10 interviewees out of 33 students after the project implementation. The researcher classified the interviewees into 3 groups; high, moderate, and low English proficiency based on the students' pre-test scores of the study. The high English proficiency consisted of student 1, 3, 4, 8, and 10. The moderate proficiency group included student 5 and 6. The low proficiency group consisted of student 2, 7, and 9. There were 3 main parts obtained from students' responses which are shown below.

Contents

The content aimed to investigate the effectiveness of the content through students' learning, focusing on what and how students writing ability through TBLT.

Question1: Do you think learning intercultural email (high-low context) can enhance your writing ability and awareness of cultural differences which are proper for Thai students?

Most students agreed that learning email writing in this course could enhance their email writing skill and they were able to be aware of cultural differences which were appropriate to Thai students. Some statements can be shown as followed:

"This course supported and enhanced me in many different types of emails. Thus, I have more knowledge of email writing skill." (Student 3).

"Learning to write emails in culture patterns or practicing the use of vocabulary was also benefit for understanding cultures difference because the students could select which writing style should be written in their email," (Student 4).

Another comment of this email writing course was suitable for Thai students and almost all of the interviewees agreed that Thai students should learn in this course. One of the reason that was suitable for Thai students to learn this course was that it could support their career in the future. One student emphasized that:

"Thai students should learn because we may have an opportunity to work with foreigners in the future." (Student 9).

Procedures

Question2: In your opinion, what are the pros and cons of students' work comparing between the students' group work and individual work?

Some students agreed that working in a group was an advantage to problem-solving. One student expressed that:

"We had to solve the problem while we struggled with a question, we could brainstorm our ideas to analyze and answer the question." (Student 7)

Question3: In your opinion, what are the differences between traditional teaching method and TBLT activities in intercultural email writing course?

To compare traditional and TBLT methods, the students strongly agreed that TBLT is more beneficial than traditional teaching methods, particularly learning by doing. Some students commented that:

"I had many learning techniques in this course because I normally learn basic vocabulary only. However, the processes of TBLT technique helped me learn how to write in many parts of email properly." (Student 4)

"The traditional method was difficult to understand." (Student6)

Question4: What do you think about the process of intercultural email writing through TBLT?

In this question, the teacher obtained the students' opinion on the use of the TBLT process in three sections: pre-task, task cycle, and post-task.

1. Pre-task

Many students were willing to be helped to prepare the task to get ready to write a reply email in the following stage. One student mentioned:

"It was good in order to prepare for group work in the next stage. We should know what we have to do in chronological order." (Student 2)

2. Task cycle

The component in this stage could be classified into 3 sub-stages; task, planning, and report stages in which students were capable of doing the task in their group and were able to express their ideas to the audience. The students also obtained feedback from the teacher and friends.

2.1 Task

This stage was important for students to work in group in which they had to write an email and brainstorm with other members to achieve their task. Working in groups was beneficial for the students and many of them had positive opinions concerning their friends. One student's mentioned:

"Working in group was good because we got help from our members to write an email, to brainstorm, and to exchange our idea to get a better writing," (Student 2).

2.2 Planning

In this stage, planning was one of the stages that students were allowed to prepare their email, reporting to the whole class orally. The students had a chance to revise their email and practice to give a speech in their groups. In the students' point of view, some students commented that the planning stage could help their work. One student mentioned that.

"This stage helped me a lot. My group had reading practice during this stage in order to reduce an excitement, make more reading fluently, and did not get stuck on presenting." (Student 2)

2.3 Report

The majority of the importance in the report stage was beneficial to student expressing their idea to the whole class. The teacher and audiences were allowed to give feedback to a reporter. The student mentioned that:

"Getting a teacher's direct feedbacks was beneficial for me because I would know what the mistakes were in my work." (Student 5)

3. Post task language focus

The students were able to analyze and practice on their email messages to enhance writing abilities. The teacher could give the students exercises and other emails for the students to do on task repetition. In this study, it was not only language use but also intercultural business communication that students analyzed in their emails. There were some benefits of student's working in this stage. One student mentioned that:

"I enhanced the use of social etiquette ability. For instance, if I know the social etiquette I can write email to English and Japanese people properly. Practicing email writing in this course was as well as I could learn other culture difference. Furthermore, I improved grammar, language use, and vocabulary from exercises." (Student 2)

Assessment

In this study, the objective of an assessment was used to investigate the students' attitude toward the use of groups and individual work assessment. There was one interview question as shown below.

Question5: Which individual or group method do you want to assess you, and why?

A number of the students preferred to have the group assessment method which they could help in their own group to achieve a better score. One student mentioned that:

"I preferred to have group assessment because everyone was good at different sides, so the score should be average to all members." (Student 2)

In short, these findings supported that learning intercultural email through TBLT was a positive way to develop students' intercultural email writing skill and language proficiency. Furthermore, TBLT method could promote students' positive learning through group working.

Conclusion and Discussion

In this section, the results were found regarding to the objectives as shown below:

According to the first objective, to investigate students' satisfaction with learning intercultural email writing tasks, the result from the questionnaire revealed that most students believed that they could get the knowledge to develop their email writing in the future. On the other hand, several students neither agreed nor disagreed that they clearly understood an email's writing criteria.

With respect to the second objective, to explore students' opinions the use of intercultural email writing tasks toward TBLT, the results showed that the students were satisfied and enjoy learning intercultural email writing through TBLT.

Discussion:

In global business, communications between organizations occur every day. To prepare EFL students to deal with people from different cultures, mainly an email correspondence is vital for business contact. In this study, the results can be discussed based on two main study objectives by focusing on the perception of the students' learning intercultural email writing task.

1) Students' satisfaction with learning intercultural email writing tasks

2) Students' opinions towards the use of intercultural email writing tasks.

1. With regard to the first objective, the majority of the questionnaire respondents found in the students' opinion toward to content which the students strongly agree that they could obtain knowledge to develop their email writing in the future. This was supported by students' interviews that they could bring their knowledge from this learning course to use for their future work as some students mentioned that "Thai students should learn business email writing because we may have an opportunity to work with foreigners." On the other hand, the lowest was found in the student self-assessment as the students neither agreed nor disagreed that they clearly understood the email's criteria. There were some problems found in the email's criteria. Firstly, the teacher did not point out directly what the student should write and give an example as to which one was a good or bad message in order to get the point from the raters. Secondly, the students were second year non-English major students who had first experience of writing and assessed in an English email. To solve this problem, the teacher should have more explanations and give students some advice regarding to understand the email's criteria.

2. In accordance with the second objective, the results showed that the students were satisfied and enjoy learning intercultural email writing through TBLT. This result corresponds to Chooma's (2013); Tachom's (2014) studies which found that using the TBLT technique was satisfied and motivated students to learn English. Furthermore, the majority of the students preferred working in groups and found that they could benefit greatly from it. They commented that it benefits to work with friends in order to have a better idea and collaboration to achieve their email task. This result is in line with Nassaji and Fotos, 2011 (as cited in Hyde, 2013) in which they summarized the impact on language learning by Vygotsky stated that when students co-operate with their peers. A supportive context was created which helped the students obtain a higher cognitive level than working alone.

New body of knowledge

This study displays a twofold body of knowledge of students' intercultural email writing tasks using the TBLT method in the intercultural email project:

1. The present study demonstrated the use of TBLT for constructing to intercultural email writing tasks by adapting the work of Greenfield (2003), Willis (1996), Bygate (1996) for the purpose of an EFL business writing class using pre, during, and post email writing activities. The proposed task was implemented and studied in order to improve EFL students' writing as well as to plug the gap in the existing body of knowledge in intercultural email writing task.

2. Regarding students' opinions towards intercultural email writing tasks, the students enjoyed studying intercultural email writing through TBLT because this approach provide students with the opportunity for effective collaboration with their friends. Therefore, undergraduate students' engagement in intercultural email writing through TBLT can benefit and further students' overall learning outcomes. Thus, the TBLT approach is on that is appropriate for Thai EFL students in business writing classes.

In brief, learning in this intercultural email writing project can improve students' email writing ability.

Suggestions

With respect to this study, it shows that learning intercultural email writing through TBLT is useful for EFL students. However, here are some advice for further research that can develop to EFL business classrooms.

1. An email task should be challenging for students' future careers, and the tasks should cover all types of emails, including tasks that might have an unfavorable reply. For students practicing to write emails for an unfavorable reply, it can examine students' vocabulary and language use in order to see their writing ability when they reply to an unfavorable email.

2. Learning business email should allow more time for students to practice and extend the knowledge of business email writing clearly.

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