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Improving business writing skills

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Abstract

Having effective communication skills are needed in all parts of our careers such as in business, in workplace, and in our personal lives. Writing is one of the most essential skills that help us to communicate our messages clearly and professionally so that our audience will be able to act on them accordingly. For improving business writing skills effectively, the writers should consider some features such as accuracy, clarity and conciseness that are discussed in details in this research paper. Meanwhile, business communicators need to know the purpose of their writing, the audience, data, context, and formality to be able to convey their messages successfully.

Keywords: business, writing skills, literature

Introduction

Nowadays, business communication is one of the most important skills that a writer should have. According to Parsons and Hughes (1975) ^[7], communication in business can be both inside and outside the organization. External communication is concerned with conveying information to customers, shareholders, suppliers, trade associations and the press. Internal communication has purposes which take many forms such as conveying rules and orders, forming decisions in and outside meetings, changing attitudes of members to work, or to the organization itself and spreading information about the firm, what is happening in it and why it is happening. The results of poor communication particularly at the lower level can be extremely costly. That poor communication often leads to low morale in the management. When men do not understand the reason for policies or actions, they often respond with fear, suspicion, anxiety and aggression. This can result in confusion and failure in communication (p. 2).

Some Background about Research Topic

As a language learner, we need to learn four main skills which are reading and listening (receptive skills) and speaking and writing (productive skills) in order to communicate well. For each of these skills, there are certain rules and ways to learn it effectively. For example, there are mainly two types of writing in English language: academic writing and business writing. To learn these types of writing, we can follow the steps or the processes, apply the format and practice the sentence structure. Paragraph and essay writing are part of academic writing which have their own formats and purposes. Paragraphs and essays are written in academic environments such as schools, universities, and other educational training programs. Another type of writing is business writings which are used in the work place to communicate with colleagues, clients, stakeholders, heads, etc.

Statement of the Problem

I have been teaching writing subject for a long time and I have noticed some reasons that cause Afghan students not to be able to convey their messages effectively in business writing. The problems are explained below.

1. Problems in School

Students learn Dari language in all grades (1-12) in school. They start learning from letters, words, sentences, different types of sentences, poems, meanings, etc. However, they don't have any practice in learning business writing. In my opinion, during the school time, students have to be taught some rules for the business writing. For example, students should know how to write formal letters such as request letters, apology letters, thank you letters, condolence letters, complaint letters, and application letters.

It is because in some situation, it is required to know how to write these letters. For instance, sometimes a student may not be able to attend a class due to some reasons. So they must write a request letter to the teacher or school principal allowing them know about their request. In fact, the problem is that students write such formal letters during their school time and even after graduation from school, but they don't consider the correct format, style, tone, and formality of the business writing. The purpose of their letters or any other business writings is stated in different ways that we cannot find them in the same format. Another biggest problem that causes school students not to be able to compose a well-written business document is lack of qualified teachers. In most Afghanistan schools, especially in provinces, teachers are not professional in the subject they are teaching. For example, a teacher with bachelor degree in science or psychology is selected to teach Dari. Therefore, if we have Dari teachers with bachelor degree in Dari Literature, they are able to teach students some rules and regulations for writing technical documents. Frenzo (2005) writes that learners have little or no experiences in technical communication. Because of their lack of experience, they will often need the teacher to provide some lessons about rules and formats in technical writing.

2. Problem in Technology

In the past decade, technology has made its own bad effects on writing, particularly in technical writing in Afghanistan situation. Most of the young generation have access to internet on their PCs or cell phones and when they are asked to write a formal letter or other technical documents, they quickly search it in Google, find a sample of it and use it with bringing some slight changes or they may ask their friends or colleagues to share a copy of a technical document they need for any task they are assigned. In fact, they try the easiest way to do the writing task without considering the rules of writing a technical document.

3. Reading Culture

One of the main points that make a technical document more effective is the word choice. For example, a formal letter should be worded carefully which means that suitable words and phrases should be used in the letter in order to build a positive relationship with the reader/s. Unfortunately, lack of reading culture is a big problem in Afghanistan. It is not very common to have daily reading practice. If we read newspapers, magazines, short stories, poems, books, articles as a routine, we can become familiar with different works, phrases, and sentence structures in Dari as well as we can improve our knowledge about different issues. According to a well-known saying, a good writer is a good reader.

Reading can also improve students' spelling. Based on my experience and some of my colleagues' sayings, students' Dari spelling is getting worst day by day. In written assignments or exam papers, teachers can see spelling errors most often. Thus, a technical document with some misspelling words is considered an ineffective and unprofessional document. Also, daily reading can help us to learn the proper usage of punctuation marks; we can apply them correctly when writing a technical document.

4. The Influence of English Language in Dari Business Writing

Nowadays most of the young generation is more interested

in learning English. They can learn this language in different institutes, private courses, or universities. Also, they have access to English textbooks for different skills in the libraries and they can search anything they want to learn in English from internet. The more enthusiasm in learning English and availability to different sources will lead the youth to pay less attention on their native language. For example, when I write a short report or a business letter in Dari in my workplace, I use the English format. As I read different examples of business letters in Dari, I couldn't find them in the same format. Therefore, I don't know what the correct format of a business letter or a report in Dari is. As a second example, students write their curriculum vitae (CV) mostly in English. However, sometimes it is required to write a CV in Dari or Pashto. As they have no ideas about the CV format in Dari or Pashto, they use the English format. The main purpose of this research paper is to describe the main elements to consider in improving business writing skills.

Method of Research

The information in this article is obtained from different library books, articles from reliable internet sites and also from my own teaching experience. The issues related to business writing from these sources were synthesized, summarized and then added in this article with the page numbers. The reference list of all sources used in this research paper is written in the last page.

Literature Review

To convey the information effectively, there are some essential elements to consider in business communication. In business communication, one of the important points to keep in mind is accuracy. Business documents should be written with correct information or direction so that the audience can get the information or follow the instruction correctly. Business communication conveys information that is crucial to the success of real-world task. It has a very specific use to the readers. It results in decisions being made or machinery being constructed. Because of that, business documents must be highly accurate (Martinez *et al.*, 2008, p. 5) ^[6]. Accuracy or correctness in technical communication also means to write the document with correct grammar. Technical writers should be familiar with some grammar rules such as subject-verb agreement, using appropriate pronouns, clauses, models, conjunctions, etc. (Parsons and Hughes, 1975, p. 6) ^[7].

Another element to think through in business writing is clarity. Writing clearly means choosing your words deliberately and constructing your sentences carefully. By writing clearly, you will get straight to your point in a way your audience can easily comprehend. In order to succeed in your communication task, you need to keep your audience's attention. Writing clearly is one way to capture and retain their interest. Rambling on, conversely, may lose your audience's attention (IEEE Professional Communication Society), (p.1).

The third element that is also important to know in business writing is conciseness. According to Martinez *et al.* (2008) ^[6], business writing is characterized by direct language that gets right to the point. It avoids flowery descriptions that can obscure the meaning. Technical writing is goal-oriented; its goal is to convey information. The reader should not have to sift through extraneous material to get

the essential information needed. The various types of technical documents all have a specific format that allows the reader to quickly locate the information that is most important. All technical communication should include everything the reader or listener needs in an organized, no frills fashion. That doesn't mean that technical writing is ugly by any means. Its beauty is in its simplicity, in the clean and usable way that it conveys such sophisticated content (p. 6). When writing business letter, explain your position in as little words as possible. Spell out what you can and what they need to do. Use clear and easy to understand language so that any misunderstanding can be minimized. Think before you write. Ask yourself why you are writing? What is it that you want to achieve? (Cheng, 2010, p. 8) [2]. Technical writings are usually written for different reasons such as to inform, to persuade, to sell, to describe, etc. They are not intended to entertain; they communicate information to an identified person or group. Wandering sentences and extra words reflect badly on the author and often have a negative effect on the readership that you are trying to reach (Engineers' Guide to Technical Writing, 2001, p. 8).

In order to communicate effectively, a writer should know some points. The first point is knowing the purpose of our writing. Gale (2014) [4] has stated that purpose serves as the direction, the reference, and the path of your details. This will set the tone, the style, and structure of your letter. This is your message and your goal. Defining your purpose will set things right at the very beginning. For example, if your purpose is to excite and invite the employees to join the annual talent contest of the company as a team-building effort, you cannot bore them with long paragraphs explaining how the activity will help boost their productivity, write too formal sentences, or use heavy office or work jargon. The author adds that to determine how the document will appear, it is only critical to ask yourself first if your purpose is: to inform, to persuade, to argue, to invite, to confirm information, to make an inquiry, to ask for approval, to reject or approve, to propose or suggest (p. 3).

The second point to keep in mind in business writing is to know the audience. Identify the audience by answering the following questions: Who is the intended audience (one or multiple)? What subject knowledge, vocabulary, and biases will the intended audience have? How will the report be used? What information must be conveyed and how much detail will be expected? (Gerrish *et al.*, 2007, p.6) [3]. When writing, it's easy to get carried away with your own perspective and needs, particularly if you have strong personal interests in or deep prior knowledge of the topic. However, in workplace writing, the reader's interests and expectations take priority. This is because the reader will likely take some sort of action in response to your message. Therefore, a key part of planning a workplace document is stepping back and analyzing your reader, trying to understand what the reader has to gain or lose from the message. As you plan your message, try to imagine your reader constantly asking: "What does the writer want or need me to do with this information?" (Goins, 2016, p.3) [5].

The third issue is considering cultural awareness. Whether you're writing for an internal or external audience, effective writers know that cultural considerations are key to building and maintaining strong professional relationships. Such considerations might be related to social demographic areas like gender or ethnicity, or they might be tied to language

proficiencies and cultural preferences. Your job as the writer is to consistently be aware of the relationship between your own writing choices and your audience's expectations and needs (Goins, 2016, p. 4) [5].

The fourth point for a business writer to remember is data. Gerrish *et al.*, (2007) [3] has explained that collect adequate relevant information with sufficient depth for the intended audience before starting to write. Brainstorm by listing relevant ideas. Then group related thoughts together. Organize the key points and supporting details in a logical order. Ensure that each section relates to and supports the message, eliminating irrelevant ideas. Develop an outline of heading and subheadings that convey key points (p.1).

The fifth issue is context. It is important to know the context which means bearing in mind the surrounding of the topic addressed in the document. The context in which the technical communicator is writing or presenting should be considered. Context largely determines how the reader or listener will receive and interpret the message. It helps the writer determine what format is appropriate and how the subject should be approached. Failing to consider context may result in the message being rejected (Martinez *et al.*, 2008, p. 7) [6].

The sixth point about effective business communication is considering formality of writing. According to Martinez *et al.*, (2008) [6], it is important to pay attention to formality in business writing. One thing to consider in formality is the tone of the writing which can directly affects how readers feel about a business relationship and whether or not that relationship will continue in a positive light or become a negative experience. Tone is achieved through a writer's diction. Diction refers to specific words a writer uses. For example,

This letter is meant to deal with your complaint. (Informal tone)

I am writing to address the unsatisfactory service you received. (Formal tone)

The author adds that another point to consider in formality is how a person is addressed in technical writing. In most cases, the two parties will not have a personal relationship outside the boundaries of work; therefore, recipients should be addressed using titles such as Mr., Mrs., Ms., Miss., Dr. or other appropriate titles. If the two parties have known each other for an extended amount of time, then it may be appropriate to address the person on a first-name basis. First names also may be used if the recipient has told the writer to address them that way. With that in mind, care should be taken for international readers and their preferences for being addressed. As a general rule, always make recipients feel at ease by addressing them using either a formal title or the way in which they prefer to be addressed. Letters should begin by using the standard "Dear Dr. Karim:" the use of "Dear" is standard and should not be dismissed (Pp. 33- 34).

Angeli and Brizee (2010) [1] have mentioned that the level of formality you write with should be determined by the expectations of your audience and your purpose. For example, if you are writing a cover letter for a job application or a college academic essay, you would write in a formal style. If you are writing a letter to a friend, writing something personal, or even writing something for a humorous or special interest magazine when informal writing is expected, you would use a more informal style (p.2).

Conclusion

As we all know, communication plays an important role in our daily life. We can communicate verbally and non-verbally to convey our message, discuss about an issue, solve a problem and most importantly build relationship. In written communication, as much as our writing is organized, and well- content, our communication will be more effective and the audience will get our points easily. Regarding communication, Parsons and Hughes (1975) ^[7] mention that to be an effective communicator in written language, it is important to consider formality, tone of the words and sentences for emphasizing the main parts of the message and conciseness for transmitting a long and complex message in a clear way (p. 3).

In this article, it was found out that improving business writing skills play vital role in written communication. The main elements for a writer to know and apply them are considering accuracy, clarity and conciseness. Meanwhile, a business writer should know how to convey the message effectively in order to build a good relationship with the receivers/ readers.

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