

Common Mistakes in Business English Writing

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Abstract: With the rapid development of economic globalization and international trade, more and more students go into the international trade industry after they graduate from schools. If they want to sell products to their foreign customers, they need to write a good business letter. But the Chinese students usually make some mistakes related to cultural difference, language and business knowledge. The author tries to find out the common mistakes made by the Chinese students so as to improve the effectiveness of the teaching of Business English Writing. The common mistakes can be categorized into mistakes related to language knowledge, mistakes related to cross-cultural communication and mistakes related to business knowledge.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

With the rapid development of economic globalization and international trade, there are more and more business contacts between the Chinese companies and the foreign companies, which provides a lot of job opportunities for the Chinese graduates. After the students graduate from universities, many of them will enter the companies that specialize in import and export. The number of students who seek a job in international market is also increasing. The writing skills of business English letter is one of the most important skills for employees in the international trade industry^[1]. The students need to know how to write a good business letter to their foreign customers to sell their products or how to write a good resume in English to get a positive answer from their foreign employers. To meet these needs, more and more schools provide the Business English Writing Course for their students who major in Business English. The students need to have the basic knowledge of English, the knowledge of business and cross-cultural communication in this course. The students may make common mistakes in this course because of its high standard. To improve the efficiency of teaching and learning, the author makes a conclusion of the common mistakes made by undergraduate students in this essay.

1.2 Research Question

The research question of this essay is what are the common mistakes made by the undergraduate students in Business English Writing?

1.3 Research Method

By collecting the writings from 240 students and analysing these writings, the author collected the mistakes made by at least 10 students and named these mistakes common mistakes in Business English Writing and categorized them into mistakes related to language knowledge, mistakes related to cross-cultural communication and mistakes related to business knowledge

2 Common Mistakes in Business English Writing of Undergraduate School Students

2.1 Mistakes Related to Language Knowledge

English is a new language to the Chinese students. Despite of more than 10 years learning, some students still cannot master this language well. The Business English majors tend to make language mistakes^[2]. And the grammar of English is different from that of Chinese greatly, which leads to students' making grammar mistakes frequently in their English writing. Here are some examples about mistakes related to language knowledge.

1) We would appreciate it if you can let us know your request for the insurance cover.

In the sentence above, the word “can” should be replaced by the word “could” because in a business letter, the students should establish a friendly and polite tone. Obviously, the word “could” sounds more friendly and polite. Besides the word “could”, the word “would”, “might” have the same function. This knowledge is related to modal verb.

2) We wish to inform you that the goods covering S/C No. 1234 are ready for shipment.

In the sentence above, the word “covering” should be replaced by “covered by” because “goods are covered by S/C”. It's a passive voice so the “-ed” form should be used here. This knowledge is related to active voice and passive voice.

3) We will compensate for you if the goods are found defective.

In the sentence above, the word “for” should be deleted because “compensate” is a transitive verb. The object can follow it without preposition. This knowledge is related to transitive verb and intransitive verb.

4) The supermarket stocks a large number of sugar.

In the sentence above, the word “number” should be replaced by “amount” because “sugar” is an uncountable noun and “a number of” should be followed by the countable noun. This knowledge is related to countable noun and uncountable noun.

5) The price you quoted is too expensive.

In the sentence above, the word “expensive” cannot be used to describe price. In English, we use the word “high”, “low”, “reasonable”, etc. to describe price while “expensive” can be used to describe an object.

6) Please provide the price list to me.

In the sentence above, we should use the word “with” instead of the word “to” because “provide” should be used with the word “with”. This knowledge is related to the fixed collocation.

7) We cannot make the payment now because we face with financial difficulties.

In the sentence above, “face with” should be replaced by “are faced with” because there is no “face with” in English. The students mixed “face something” and “be faced with something”.

8) I think your quotation is unacceptable.

In the sentence above, the students want to say that the price is not acceptable. But the antonym of acceptable is unacceptable not unacceptable. This knowledge is related to word-formation.

9) I am sorry for not make the payment on time.

In the sentence above, “for” is a preposition, the -ing form should be used for the verb after it. It is related to the knowledge of the use of -ing form.

10) I wish I placed an order before the supplier increased the price.

In the sentence above, the wish is different from the fact of past, so the past perfect tense instead of past tense should be used here. This knowledge is related to subjunctive mood.

11) Many a supplier have made a quotation.

In the sentence above, the verb after “many a” should be the singular form though “many a” means “a lot of”. This knowledge is related to subject-verb agreement.

2.2 Mistakes Related to Cross-cultural Communication

The cultural differences have a great influence on English Writing for Chinese students^[3]. The difference of political background, the difference of thinking style, and the difference of society and culture can create difficulties to the Chinese students to write a good business letter. In a letter to foreign customers, cross-cultural communication is necessary. The students should know the customs, traditions of the readers and respect their customs and traditions. But sometimes the students don't follow the rules of the western countries, which causes the cross-cultural communication mistakes. Here are some cases.

- According to the Chinese tradition, we give our family name first followed by the given name in our signature. But in western world, especially in the countries speaking English, the people will give their given name first, the family name comes later when they talk about their names. Many Chinese students don't pay attention to this difference and make cross-cultural communication mistake.

- In China, people can use the family name of someone and his position to make the salutation. But in English speaking countries, the family name and the position cannot be used to make a salutation. We cannot say “manager wang” or “director zhou”. Many Chinese students don't notice this difference and make cross-cultural communication mistake.

- In China, the number 6 is a lucky number and it delivers a good wish of everything goes well. When the Chinese people make a quotation, they would like to quote at the price with the number 6, and think this quotation is more acceptable. But in western culture, the number 6 symbolizes the monster. The number 4 has a similar pronunciation as “die” in Chinese, so the students tend to avoid using the number 4 in their letters.

- When we invite someone to a party, to an exhibition, etc., we may say “You must come” in China. The word “must” can show our sincerity and our determination. But the word “must” sounds like an order and is impolite in English.

- The word “dear” is a part of salutation and there is no personal emotion in this word in a letter. But in China “dear” will only be used in a letter to the intimate people. Influenced by this custom, the Chinese students are reluctant to use the word “dear” in making a salutation in a business letter.

- The order of the date in China is year, month and day while the order of day, month, year or month, day, year is used in English. Sometimes the students will forget the English order and follow the Chinese order in a letter.

- The Chinese attach much importance to their family, their organizations and their companies, which is known as collectivism. The students tend to represent their company in the letter though it's unnecessary. For example, they will make this sentence “Our company would like to give you a competitive price”. But native speakers of English will say “I would like to give you a competitive price”. The western culture focuses more on individualism.

- The westerners pay much more attention to their privacy than the Chinese. Some topics, such as personal income, marriage status, etc., are ordinary topics for the Chinese while these topics are considered privacy for westerners. Some students don't know this difference and ask for the income information of the reader in the letter, which is considered impolite.

2.3 Mistakes Related to Business Knowledge

Business knowledge is needed when write a business English letter. But when the students are not so familiar with this knowledge, they may make mistakes related to business knowledge. Here are some examples.

1) Please cover the goods against War Risk only.

War Risk is the additional coverage and it cannot be covered against alone. It should be covered against together with the basic coverage, like FPA, WPA or All Risks. This is related to the knowledge of insurance.

2) Since this trade is done under CIF, and you (the buyer) should be responsible for the transportation and insurance.

Under the trade term of CIF, it's the seller that should be responsible for the transportation and insurance. This knowledge is related to trade terms.

3) Please open the L/C as soon as possible, otherwise you (the seller) cannot make the shipment on time.

L/C is issued by the bank of the buyer. But in the sentence above, the buyer asks the seller to issue the L/C. This mistake is related to the knowledge of L/C.

4) I would like to have a voyage charter from January 1st to March 12th.

A voyage charter is based on the voyage instead of a period of time. When the vessel completes the voyage, the shipping company will have fulfilled its obligation. If the writer needs a vessel from January 1st to March 12th, he should ask for a time charter. This knowledge is related to transportation.

5) Please pay the demurrage because you don't make the shipment on time.

Demurrage refers in particular to the amount of money given to the carrier when the shipper cannot load all of the goods before the deadline. The money paid to the buyer for not making the shipment on time cannot be called demurrage. This knowledge is related to transportation.

6) Please endorse the straight B/L to the buyer.

Straight B/L is not negotiable and cannot be transferred through endorsement. This knowledge is related to transportation.

7) Please collect the container (LCL) from my warehouse.

In container transportation, the supplier needs to send the goods to the container freight station and the carrier will collect the goods there in the form of LCL. This knowledge is related to container transportation.

8) The goods are shipped on board now. Please cover the goods against all risks.

The seller or the buyer needs to effect insurance before the goods are shipped on board. Otherwise they may lose the right to effect insurance for the goods. This knowledge is related to insurance.

3. Conclusion and Recommendation

3.1 Conclusion

More and more students go into the international trade industry after they graduate from schools. They need to write business letters to their foreign customers in English to introduce their products, to generate sales and to talk about the important terms in the sales contract. It becomes more and more important for the students to write a good business letter. But the Chinese students usually make some mistakes related to cultural difference, language and business knowledge. The language mistakes are usually related to modal verb, active voice and passive voice, transitive verb and intransitive verb, countable noun and uncountable noun, word-formation, fixed collocation, etc. The

mistakes related to cross-cultural communication are about the habits of making salutation and signature in the letter, the differences in culture, thinking style, etc. The mistakes related to business knowledge are about the knowledge of insurance, transportation, L/C and trade terms.

3.2 Recommendation

The common mistakes made by the students are mistakes related to language knowledge, mistakes related to cross-cultural communication, mistakes related to business knowledge. There are several reasons for making these mistakes. The first one is that the foundation of the English language is not solid enough. The second one is that the students lack business knowledge. The last one is that the students don't know the culture differences between the western countries and China. To help the students improve their writings, here are some suggestions.

1) The schools should open courses to improve the students' language ability, such as grammar course, reading course, etc.

2) The schools should attach more importance to cross-cultural communication. Cross-cultural communication courses should be provided to introduce culture, history, politics, religions of the western countries. Films and reading materials can also be recommended to the students to make them have a better understanding of the western culture. At the same time, schools can provide more exchange programs for the students so that they can have a chance to live and study in the English-speaking countries.

3) Courses which can equip the students with business knowledge are also important. International trade, transportation and insurance are important courses for the students. In business world, practice is very important. The schools should seek cooperation opportunity with the companies and provide internship opportunity for the students.

4) The arrangement of the courses should be reasonable. The course of business English writing should be arranged after language course, cross-cultural communication course and business course because these courses can provide the knowledge which is necessary to write a business letter.

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