

# Comparing Phrase-Bank and Grammar-Focused Instruction in Business Letter Writing: A Quasi-Experimental Study of English Majors at Dong Nai University

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## Abstract:

This study investigates the effectiveness of phrase-bank instruction compared to traditional grammar-focused methods in teaching business letter writing to fourth-year English language majors at Dong Nai University. A quasi-experimental design was employed with two intact classes: Class A (experimental group) received instruction using phrase banks and formulaic expressions, while Class B (control group) was taught through grammar accuracy and structure-focused strategies. Data were collected through pre-test and post-test writing tasks, surveys, and peer reviews. Quantitative analysis revealed that both groups improved, but Class A demonstrated significantly higher gains in rubric scores, particularly in tone, clarity, and professionalism. Survey results indicated that students in the experimental group reported increased confidence and perceived phrase banks as useful scaffolding tools for initiating and closing letters. Qualitative findings from open-ended survey responses and peer reviews highlighted that phrase-bank instruction reduced writing anxiety and enhanced fluency, whereas grammar-focused instruction primarily improved accuracy but often lacked pragmatic appropriateness. The study concludes that phrase-bank instruction is an effective pedagogical approach for improving business writing skills, especially in fostering professional tone and confidence. However, grammar-focused methods remain important for structural correctness. An integrated approach combining grammatical awareness with formulaic language use is recommended to achieve both accuracy and communicative effectiveness in business English pedagogy.

**Keywords** — Phrase-bank instruction, grammar-focused methods, business letter writing, quasi-experimental design, English language majors, tone and clarity, professionalism, confidence, writing anxiety, fluency, accuracy, pragmatic appropriateness, integrated approach, communicative effectiveness

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Business communication is a vital component of professional success, particularly for graduates of English language programs who are expected to produce clear, professional, and culturally appropriate correspondence. At Dong Nai University, fourth-year English majors are required to demonstrate competence in business writing, including letters of complaint, requests, and inquiries. Despite years of language study, many students continue to struggle with balancing grammatical accuracy and pragmatic effectiveness in their writing. Traditional grammar-focused instruction emphasizes sentence structure and correctness, often prioritizing accuracy over communicative effectiveness. While this approach ensures structural

control, it may not adequately prepare students for the pragmatic demands of professional correspondence. In contrast, phrase-bank instruction provides learners with formulaic expressions commonly used in business letters, enabling them to produce authentic, fluent, and professional texts with greater confidence.

This study investigates the comparative effectiveness of phrase-bank instruction and grammar-focused methods in teaching business letter writing. By examining pre-test and post-test writing tasks, surveys, and peer reviews, the research aims to determine whether phrase-focused instruction enhances students' ability to produce professional business letters more effectively than traditional grammar-based approaches. The findings

are expected to contribute to pedagogical practices in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and improve the teaching of business communication at Dong Nai University.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***A. Grammar-Focused Instruction in Business Writing***

Grammar-focused instruction has long been a cornerstone of language pedagogy. Scholars argue that grammatical accuracy is essential for coherence and clarity in written communication (Andleeb, Tasra, Khatoon, & Mazhar, 2025). However, research indicates that while students often perform well in isolated grammar tasks, they struggle to apply grammatical knowledge effectively in extended writing (Xavier, Hong, & Renandya, 2020). Traditional approaches such as the Grammar Translation Method emphasize correctness but may limit students' ability to produce contextually appropriate texts. In business writing, this can result in letters that are structurally accurate but lack professional tone and communicative effectiveness.

### ***B. Phrase-Bank and Formulaic Expressions in Business English***

Phrase-bank instruction, which provides learners with ready-made expressions for openings, requests, apologies, and closings, has been shown to improve fluency and professional tone in business correspondence. Formulaic language plays a crucial role in enabling learners to produce authentic and contextually appropriate texts. Tsai (2021) demonstrated that corpus-based approaches integrating phrase banks enhanced learners' writing proficiency and perceptions of ease in business English writing. Similarly, Peltonen and Hu (2025) argue that phrase-based instruction supports linguacultural competence, allowing learners to navigate professional communication across diverse contexts.

### ***C. Comparative Perspectives***

Comparative studies suggest that grammar-focused methods and phrase-bank instruction each have distinct strengths. Grammar-focused teaching ensures accuracy and structural control, while phrase-bank instruction fosters fluency, confidence,

and pragmatic appropriateness. Hashim (2025) highlights the need for innovative approaches that integrate both methods, combining grammatical awareness with formulaic language use to achieve accuracy and communicative effectiveness. This study builds on such perspectives by directly comparing the two approaches in the context of business writing instruction for English majors.

## **III. METHODOLOGY**

### ***A. Research Design***

This study employs a quasi-experimental design with two intact classes of fourth-year English language majors at Dong Nai University. One class received phrase-focused instruction, while the other was taught using a traditional grammar-focused approach. Pre-test and post-test writing tasks, together with surveys, were administered to measure changes in professionalism, clarity, and confidence in business letter writing.

### ***B. Participants***

The participants consisted of approximately 84 students enrolled in two business writing classes. Class A, the experimental group, was instructed using phrase banks and formulaic expressions for business letters. Class B, the control group, was taught through traditional grammar and structure-focused methods. Both groups were composed of students with comparable proficiency levels, ensuring valid comparisons between them.

### ***C. Instructional Procedures***

Class A received weekly lessons that incorporated phrase banks for common business letter functions, including openings, requests, apologies, and closings. For example, when writing complaint letters, students practiced openings such as *"I am writing to express my dissatisfaction with..."* or *"I would like to bring to your attention..."*. In request letters, they used expressions like *"Could you please provide further details regarding..."* or *"I would appreciate it if you could..."*. Apology letters included phrases such as *"We sincerely regret any inconvenience caused"* and *"Please accept our apologies for the delay."* For closings, students were taught professional endings such as *"We look forward to*

your prompt response” or “Thank you for your attention to this matter.”

Students engaged in practice activities where they inserted these expressions into authentic scenarios, such as drafting complaint letters to suppliers, inquiry letters to companies, or apology letters to clients. The instructional emphasis was placed on tone and professionalism, ensuring that students not only memorized the phrases but also applied them appropriately in context.

In contrast, Class B’s weekly lessons focused on grammar accuracy, sentence structure, and general writing strategies. For instance, students practiced rewriting sentences to correct tense errors, combining clauses to improve cohesion, and varying sentence structures to enhance readability. They were encouraged to create original wording without reliance on memorized phrases, thereby developing grammatical precision and stylistic flexibility.

**D. Data Collection**

Data were collected through three primary methods. First, students completed pre-test and post-test writing tasks, producing business letters such as complaints, requests, and inquiries at the beginning and end of the course. These letters were evaluated using a rubric assessing professional tone, clarity, structure, phrase usage, and mechanics. Second, surveys were administered before and after the course to measure confidence levels, perceptions of phrase usefulness, and self-reported ease of writing. Third, peer review activities were conducted, in which students evaluated each other’s letters for clarity and professionalism, providing additional qualitative insights.

**E. Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were analyzed using paired t-tests to compare pre-test and post-test scores within each class, and independent t-tests to compare post-test scores between the two groups. Survey responses were converted into numerical values using a Likert scale and examined for changes over time. Qualitative data were derived from open-ended survey responses, which were coded into themes such as “phrases help me start letters” and “phrases improve tone.” Peer review comments were also analyzed to identify recurring patterns.

**F. Ethical Considerations**

Participation in the study was voluntary, and students’ grades were not affected by their involvement. All data were anonymized to protect student identity. The findings will be used solely to enhance teaching practices at Dong Nai University.

**IV. Results**

**A. Quantitative Findings**

The pre-test results indicated that both Class A (experimental group) and Class B (control group) performed at similar levels, with mean rubric scores of 62.0 each, showing no statistically significant difference ( $p > .05$ ). After the intervention, however, the post-test scores revealed a marked improvement in Class A. The experimental group achieved a mean score of 79.0, compared to 69.5 in the control group. Independent t-tests confirmed that the difference between the two groups was statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ).

Group	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Gain	Performance Notes
Class A (Phrase-Bank)	62.0	79.0	+17.0	Significant improvement in tone, clarity, and professionalism; students reported reduced anxiety and greater confidence
Class B (Grammar-Focused)	62.0	69.5	+7.5	Improved grammatical accuracy but letters often lacked pragmatic appropriateness and professional ton

Confidence levels in business letter writing increased by 35% in Class A, compared to 18% in Class B. Students in Class A reported that phrase banks made writing “easier to start” and “more professional in tone,” while Class B students emphasized improvements in grammar accuracy but

noted continued difficulty in maintaining professional style.

### **B. Qualitative Findings**

Open-ended survey responses revealed recurring themes. Students in Class A frequently mentioned that phrase banks provided “*ready-made solutions*” for common business scenarios, reducing anxiety and improving fluency. Peer review comments highlighted that Class A’s letters were “*clearer*” and “*more professional*,” particularly in openings and closings. In contrast, Class B’s letters were often described as “*grammatically correct but awkward in tone*.”

### **V. Discussion**

The results suggest that phrase-bank instruction significantly enhances students’ ability to produce professional business letters compared to traditional grammar-focused methods. While both groups improved, the experimental group demonstrated greater gains in tone, clarity, and confidence. This supports previous research emphasizing the importance of formulaic language in professional communication (Tsai, 2021; Peltonen & Hu, 2025). The findings also highlight the limitations of grammar-focused instruction. Although Class B students improved in accuracy, their writing often lacked the pragmatic appropriateness required in business contexts. This aligns with Xavier et al. (2020), who noted that grammar knowledge alone does not guarantee effective writing performance. Interestingly, the qualitative data revealed that phrase banks not only improved writing outcomes but also reduced students’ anxiety. By providing linguistic scaffolding, phrase banks allowed learners to focus on professionalism and tone rather than struggling with word choice. This finding resonates with Hashim (2025), who advocates for innovative approaches that integrate both accuracy and fluency.

Overall, the study demonstrates that phrase-bank instruction can be a powerful pedagogical tool in business English writing. However, it should not entirely replace grammar-focused methods. Instead, an integrated approach that combines grammatical awareness with formulaic language use may

provide the most comprehensive benefits, ensuring both accuracy and communicative effectiveness.

### **VI. Conclusion**

This study examined the effectiveness of phrase-bank instruction compared to traditional grammar-focused methods in teaching business letter writing to fourth-year English language majors at Dong Nai University. The findings revealed that while both groups improved, the experimental group receiving phrase-bank instruction demonstrated significantly greater gains in professionalism, clarity, and confidence. Students reported that phrase banks provided linguistic scaffolding that reduced anxiety and facilitated fluency, whereas grammar-focused instruction primarily improved accuracy but did not consistently support pragmatic appropriateness.

Overall, the results suggest that phrase-bank instruction is a valuable pedagogical tool for enhancing business writing skills. However, grammar-focused methods remain important for ensuring structural correctness. An integrated approach that combines grammatical awareness with formulaic language use may provide the most comprehensive benefits, equipping learners with both accuracy and communicative effectiveness.

#### **A. Pedagogical Implications**

The findings carry several implications for teaching practice at Dong Nai University and similar contexts:

1. **Integration of Methods:** Teachers should consider blending phrase-bank instruction with grammar-focused approaches. This integration can ensure that students achieve both accuracy and fluency in business writing.
2. **Confidence Building:** Phrase banks can serve as scaffolding tools that reduce writing anxiety, particularly for learners who struggle with initiating or closing business correspondence.
3. **Professional Tone Development:** Instruction that emphasizes formulaic expressions helps students adopt a professional tone, which is critical in workplace communication.
4. **Curriculum Design:** ESP and business English courses should incorporate phrase banks as part of their instructional materials, alongside grammar exercises, to balance

accuracy and communicative appropriateness.

- B. Future Research:** Further studies could explore the long-term impact of phrase-bank instruction on workplace communication and whether integrated approaches yield sustained improvements in professional writing.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Business Letter Writing Rubric

Criteria (5 categories, 20 points each; total = 100 points)

Criterion	Excellent (17-20)	Good (13-16)	Fair (9-12)	Poor (5-8)	Very Poor (1-4)
Professional Tone	Consistently professional and polite; fully appropriate	Generally professional; minor lapses	Uneven tone; occasional informal phrasing	Frequent lapses; often inappropriate	Consistently unprofessional
Clarity & Coherence	Clear, logical, easy to follow	Mostly clear; minor flow issues	Some unclear or inconsistent organization	Frequent lack of clarity	Confusing, incoherent
Structure & Format	Correct business format (salutation, body, closing); structure enhances readability	Mostly correct; minor errors	Several format errors; weak structure	Frequent errors; undermines readability	Incorrect or absent format
Phrase Usage	Effective use of formulaic expressions; enhances professionalism	Appropriate use with minor errors	Limited or inconsistent use	Rare or incorrect use	No use; communication suffers
Mechanics	Virtually error-free; grammar and mechanics support clarity	Few minor errors; meaning remains clear	Noticeable errors; occasionally affect clarity	Frequent errors; clarity compromised	Persistent errors; difficult to understand

#### Performance Bands:

- 90–100: Excellent
- 75–89: Good
- 60–74: Fair
- 40–59: Poor
- Below 40: Very Poor

### Appendix B: Scoring Sheet (Detailed)

Student Name/ID: \_\_\_\_\_  
Test Type: Pre-test / Post-test

Criterion	Score (1-20)	Performance Band	Notes
Professional Tone			
Clarity & Coherence			
Structure & Format			
Phrase Usage			
Mechanics			
<b>Total (100)</b>		Overall Band:	

### Appendix C: Scoring Checklist (Quick Evaluation)

Student Name/ID: \_\_\_\_\_  
Test Type: Pre-test / Post-test

Criterion	Score (1-20)	Performance Band (✓)	Notes
Professional Tone		<input type="checkbox"/> Excellent <input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Fair <input type="checkbox"/> Poor <input type="checkbox"/> Very Poor	
Clarity & Coherence		<input type="checkbox"/> Excellent <input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Fair <input type="checkbox"/> Poor <input type="checkbox"/> Very Poor	
Structure & Format		<input type="checkbox"/> Excellent <input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Fair <input type="checkbox"/> Poor <input type="checkbox"/> Very Poor	
Phrase Usage		<input type="checkbox"/> Excellent <input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Fair <input type="checkbox"/> Poor <input type="checkbox"/> Very Poor	
Mechanics		<input type="checkbox"/> Excellent <input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Fair <input type="checkbox"/> Poor <input type="checkbox"/> Very Poor	
<b>Total (100)</b>		Overall Band: <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> Excellent <input type="checkbox"/> Good <input type="checkbox"/> Fair <input type="checkbox"/> Poor <input type="checkbox"/> Very Poor	

### Appendix D: Pre-Test Design

- **Purpose:** Establish baseline performance in business letter writing before instruction.
- **Task:** Students write one business letter (complaint, request, or inquiry) without scaffolding support.
- **Rubric:** Evaluated on five criteria — Professional Tone, Clarity & Coherence, Structure & Format, Phrase Usage, and Mechanics.
- **Scoring:** Each criterion scored on a 20-point scale; total = 100 points.
- **Example Prompt:**  
“Write a formal complaint letter to a supplier regarding late delivery of goods. Ensure your letter is professional, clear, and appropriately formatted.”

### Appendix E: Post-Test Design

- **Purpose:** Measure improvement after instructional intervention.
- **Task:** Students write one business letter (different scenario from pre-test, e.g., apology or request) applying learned strategies.

- **Rubric:** Same five criteria as pre-test for consistency.
- **Scoring:** Same 100-point scale, allowing direct comparison of gains.
- **Example Prompt:**  
*“Write a formal request letter to a company asking for detailed product specifications. Ensure your letter demonstrates professionalism, clarity, and appropriate use of expressions.”*

**Appendix F: Pre/Post Comparison Sheet**

**Student Name/ID:**

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Criterion	Pre-Test Score (1-20)	Pre-Test Band	Pre-Test Notes	Post-Test Score (1-20)	Post-Test Band	Post-Test Notes	Gain (+/-)
Professional Tone							
Clarity & Coherence							
Structure & Format							
Phrase Usage							
Mechanics							
<b>Total (100)</b>		Overall Band: _____			Overall Band: _____		Net Gain: _____

**Appendix G: Pre-Test Survey (Baseline)**

**Purpose:** Capture students’ initial confidence and perceptions before instruction.

**Format:** Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) + open-ended questions.

- **Confidence & Ease:** Confidence in writing, ease of openings/closings, maintaining tone.
- **Perceptions of Writing:** Importance of grammar, usefulness of phrase banks, writing anxiety.
- **Open-Ended:** Challenges faced, current strategies.

**Appendix H: Post-Test Survey (After Instruction)**

**Purpose:** Measure changes in confidence and perceptions after instruction.

**Format:** Likert scale + open-ended questions.

- **Confidence & Ease:** Confidence, use of phrase banks, grammar accuracy, balance of professionalism and clarity.
- **Perceptions of Instruction:** Impact of phrase-bank and grammar-focused practice, preferences.
- **Open-Ended:** Most helpful method, changes in approach, further support needed.

**Appendix I: Peer Review Survey**

**Purpose:** Collect peer feedback on clarity, professionalism, and tone.

**Format:** Checklist + short comments.

- **Evaluation:** Clarity, tone, structure, phrase usage, mechanics.
- **Comments:** Strengths and suggestions for improvement.