

Analyzing Thai Students' Email Literacy at Tertiary Level, Thailand

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— *Review of* —
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ABSTRACT

The present study was designed to figure out the specific information about Thai students' Email literacy employing a set of writing rubric used to evaluate students' business writing skills. A group of 111 intermediate-level Thai students who enrolled business communication course conducted in a business administration program in Bangkok, Thailand were requested to revise a poorly written Email pertaining to job application. The findings showed that Thai students' Email literacy was much below the satisfaction level in almost every aspect, that is, Content, Organization, Format, Business Writing Styles, as well as Language Proficiency in General, especially in Content, Organization, and Email Format. It is, therefore, suggested that teachers who are responsible for teaching business communication course should help students improve their Email writing proficiency through three levels: Content and Organization, Business Writing Style, as well as Email Format.

Keywords: business communication, Email literacy, and evaluation, writing skills

1. INTRODUCTION

The fact that Email has great importance in modern business communication is undeniable. Every day, millions of Emails are sent from companies to customers and suppliers, from employees to their managers and from one co-worker to another. As DeKay (2010) argued, Email has emerged as the most commonly used form of written communication in the corporate workplace. He also made a comparison pertaining to Email's rapid widespread acceptance within the past 20 years. A 1997 study revealed that a majority of American executives favored face-to-face meetings

to any other form of communication; only 34% preferred Email (Oh, 2007) whereas in 2005, the survey, sponsored by the Economist Intelligence Unit, pointed out that two thirds of corporate executives prefer Email as a means of business communication compared to the next most popular options—desktop telephones and mobile phones. (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2005). When it came to 2008, the study performed by the Pew Internet & American Life Project revealed that 72% of all full-time employees have an Email account that they use for work, and 37% of those workers “check them constantly” (Madden & Jones, 2008).

Advances in information and communication technology along with the widespread of the Internet has rapidly promote Email as the most frequently adopted medium for communicating purposes. Given the wide spread of Email communication as well as its significant role in the workplace, it is expected that students should acquire professional writing knowledge regarding Email communication in order to provide more value to their potential employers and project a more professional image as qualified business graduates.

Therefore, this study aimed to find out the specific information pertaining to Thai students’ business Email literacy in order to provide corresponding assistance to help them become more proficient and professional communicators in business setting.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Email is one form of business messages and has its unique format. As summarized by Chen (2015), according to Kankaanranta (2006), the Email format was defined as the framing move that contributes to the physical layout of the message. It consists of *Subject*, *Opening*, and *Closing*. Crystal (2001) defined that the *Subject* writing should be clear, brief, relevant, and concrete in order to be decided whether the message will be opened or deleted by faculty members. *Opening*, is realized by greetings and self-identifications (Bou-Franch, 2006, 2011; Chejnova, 2014; Felix-Brasdefer, 2012, cited in Chen, 2015). Greetings (e.g. Dear Dr. White) are the most and salient feature in an asynchronous Email communication. Closing indicates “the transition from a state of communication to one of non-communication” and it often varies from leaving taking (e.g. “See you soon”), apologies (e.g. “Sorry for the delay”), good wishes (e.g. Happy New Year”) complimentary closes (e.g. “Sincerely”), appeals for actions (e.g. “Looking

forward to hearing from you”), and signatures (e.g. Mary Wang) (Bou-Franch, 2006, 2011; Chen 2001; Herring, 1996; Waldvogel, 2007, cited in Chen, 2015). However, in business Emails, a standard, consistent, and clean e-mail signature will present a more professional appearance for the organization. Contact information, “the most prevalent item” included in business Email signatures, should include “basics on how the recipient can contact you in the future, your title/ role in the organization, and your website URL” (Jenkins, 2009:120).

Writing evaluation criteria in recent literature, as summarized by Huot (1990b, cited in Fraser, Harich, Norby, Brzovic, Rizkallah, & Loewy, 2005), focus on content, organization, and mechanics (p. 206). Levinson (2000) argued that “the quality of business writing can be judged with three broad categories: (1) content and purpose, (2) organization, and (3) style.” (p.2) The criteria for good writing were summarized as follows:

2.1 Content and Purpose

The piece as a whole:

- includes information and ideas that are interesting, clearly presented, well developed, and convincing,
- says something worth saying,
- builds its arguments on valid and sufficient evidence,
- sticks to the point and avoids irrelevant and unnecessary material,
- accomplishes its purpose.

2.2 Organization

- Main points are clearly stated and easy to find.
- Structure is logical, consistent, appropriate, and balanced.
- Important ideas are emphasized, less important ideas re subordinated, and it is clear which is which.
- Transitions between ideas, sentences, and paragraphs are smooth.
- Paragraphs are introduced by a topic sentence, generally cover one idea, and are internally logical and coherent.

2.3 Style (Language Proficiency)

- Vocabulary is accurate, precise, and concrete.
- Sentences are the right length and varied in length and rhythm.
- Tone is suitable and consistent.
- Voice is active and lively enough to hold reader's interest.
- No extra words get in the way.
- All spelling and grammar are correct.

In addition to Email format, its content, organization, and language proficiency also need to conform to business writing styles. Boros (1996) argued that the principle of business writing is that the business writer must “ensure that the recipient of the written communication comprehends the message that is intended by the writer. The cornerstone of this is that the writer clearly conveys the message that he/she intends.” And therefore, the business writer “should not merely try to demonstrate his/her brilliant literary style—business writing is not writing for writing's sake.” (p.17). He also emphasized that business writing style should be “concise (edited), focused, streamlined, correct,” “unslanted,” “professional,” as well as writing for “recipient's benefit.” (p.17)

Campanizzi (2005) also pointed out that effective business writing should fulfil the features of 1) achieving the “you-attitude” by communicating respect for the reader and empathy for the reader's viewpoint as well as focusing on reader's interests, desires, and preferences; 2) maintaining a positive and unbiased tone through the use of positive language and being free of bias regarding culture, gender, race or ethnicity, age, and disability; 3) using active voice for emphasizing action and being shorter and more direct, rather than writing in passive voice (only accounts for 10-15 percent); 4) being clear, direct, and concise to improve the readability of your written product for your audience, the reader; 5) avoiding slang and jargon 6) maintaining goodwill to keep a business or professional relationship with the reader; 8) considering international readers with the awareness of cultural differences.

Combining the general criteria used for checking written assignments with the unique Email format, together with the special concerns and writing styles in business settings, a special assessment rubric for Email consisting of format, content, organization, language proficiency and business writing style has been developed to

evaluate the effectiveness and quality of students' business Email literacy (see Appendix A).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

One hundred and eleven Thai EFL students participated in this study. All of them majored in BA and passed English IV Course before they could study the Business Communication Course. All of them had never received any training regarding Email communication in either personal or profession lives.

3.2 Procedures

Step 1: The teacher adopted objective-oriented evaluation approach (Tyler, 1942, cited in Shim, Lee, Oh, Im, 2015). The teacher first determined the measurable objectives and then created a specific rubric to evaluate to what degree the student can achieve these objectives (see Appendix A).

Step 2: The students were required to respond to a poorly written Email (see Appendix B). They had to revise it totally based upon their understanding towards professional business Emails.

Step 3: The teacher graded students' revised Email scripts according to the rubric using three ability levels: 1) Unsatisfactory, 2) Satisfactory, 3) Good.

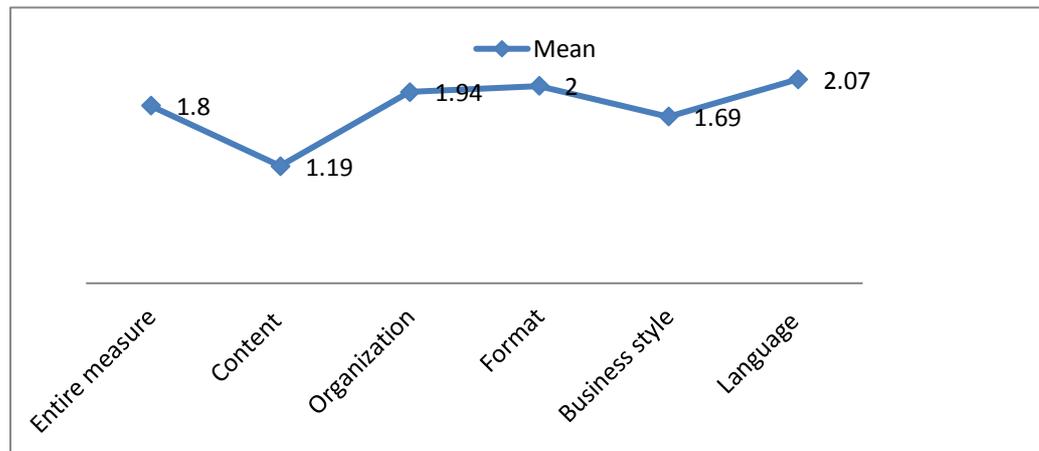
The analysis was regarded as reliable and valid because all Email scripts were graded by the same teacher who not only conducted all the teaching, but has sound teaching background in both English language as well as field of Business Communication.

4. FINDINGS

Table 4. 1 Total Evaluation Results

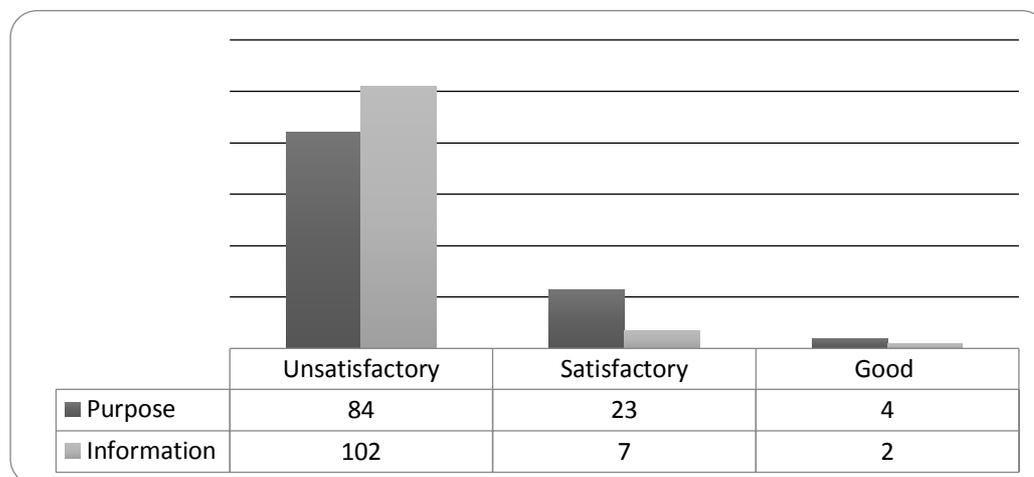
| Evaluation Criteria | Mean | Ability level |
|--|-------------|---------------------------|
| Entire Measure | 1.80 | Below Satisfactory |
| Content | 1.19 | Below Satisfactory |
| Organization | 1.94 | Below Satisfactory |
| Email Format | 2.00 | Satisfactory |
| Business Style | 1.69 | Below Satisfactory |
| Language Proficiency in General | 2.07 | Above Satisfactory |

Figure 4.1 Total Evaluation



As shown in Table 4.1 and Figure 4.1, the students’ general ability score pertaining to business Email writing was 1.8, which is below Satisfactory level. More specifically, apart from Email Format (2.00) and Language Proficiency in General (2.07) reaching satisfactory level, the other performance, including Content, Organization, and Business Writing Style were not satisfying, the scores stood at 1.19, 1.94 and 1.69 respectively.

Figure 4.2 Content

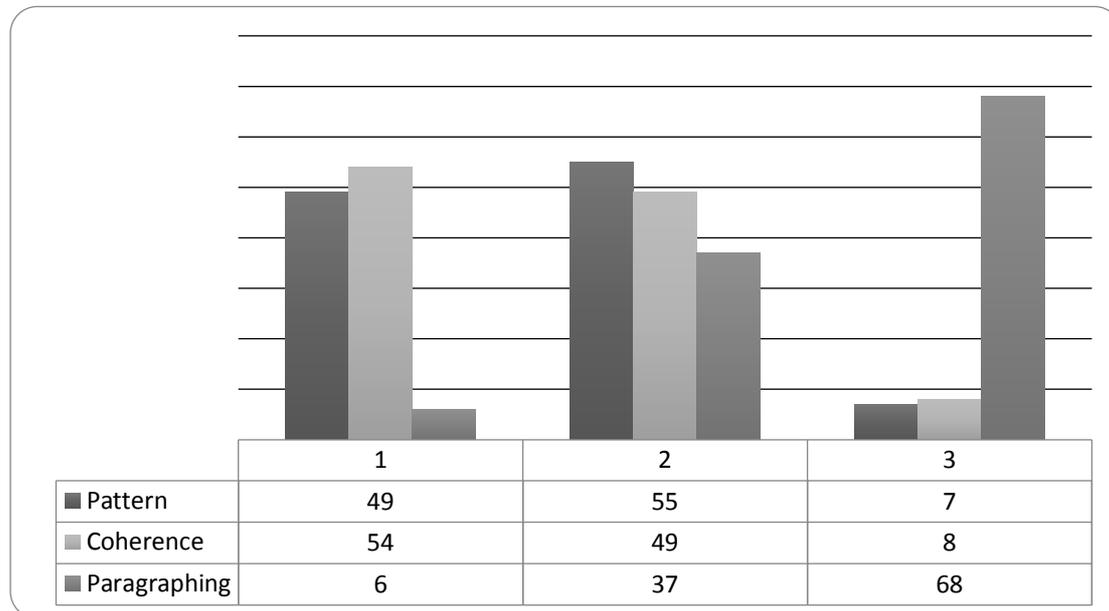


Content, in this study, was evaluated according to writing Purpose (whether the writing scripts provide correct statement of writing purpose for job application) and Information (whether the writing scripts include sufficient information, such as source of job information, job position, work experience, as well as interview request).

Students’ performance in composing Contents was the weakest aspect, as demonstrated in Figure 1. Figure 4.2 shows that 84 students (76%) failed to write clear purpose of applying for the job position and 102 students, nearly 92 %, didn’t provide

sufficient information needed for job application. Only 27 students' writing scripts reached the Satisfactory above in terms of Purpose, and 9 in terms of Information.

Figure 4.3 Organization



Organization includes four aspects: 1) Pattern—Whether students' writing follows the pattern the type of messages, i.e. job application; 2) Coherence/Transition—Whether students' writing provides necessary connection of ideas or continuity from point to point; 3) Paragraphing—Whether students' writing shows sufficient knowledge of paragraphing. As demonstrated in Figure 4.3, students were weak at Pattern and Coherence. 49, nearly half of students (44%) did not know how to write a professional message for job application in a coherent way (54, 49%). However, it seemed that students had good command of paragraphing skills, 95% students (105) achieved Satisfactory level and above.

The awareness of writing profession Email address (Eaddress), writing relevant job application topic with correct format (Subject Heading), addressing the recipient appropriately according to the task given (Opening and Closing Salutations), and providing sufficient personal information (Signature), are used to evaluate students' knowledge towards Email Format. Generally speaking, students' knowledge towards Email format just arrived at 2.00, the Satisfactory level (see Table 4.1). Especially in terms of their knowledge regarding Eaddress, 94 students were aware of using the professional Email address, instead of the very personal Email address, as shown in

Figure 4.4. However, very few students achieved Good level in other criteria like Subject Heading (39), Opening and Closing Salutation (23, 34), and Signature (41).

Figure 4.4 Format

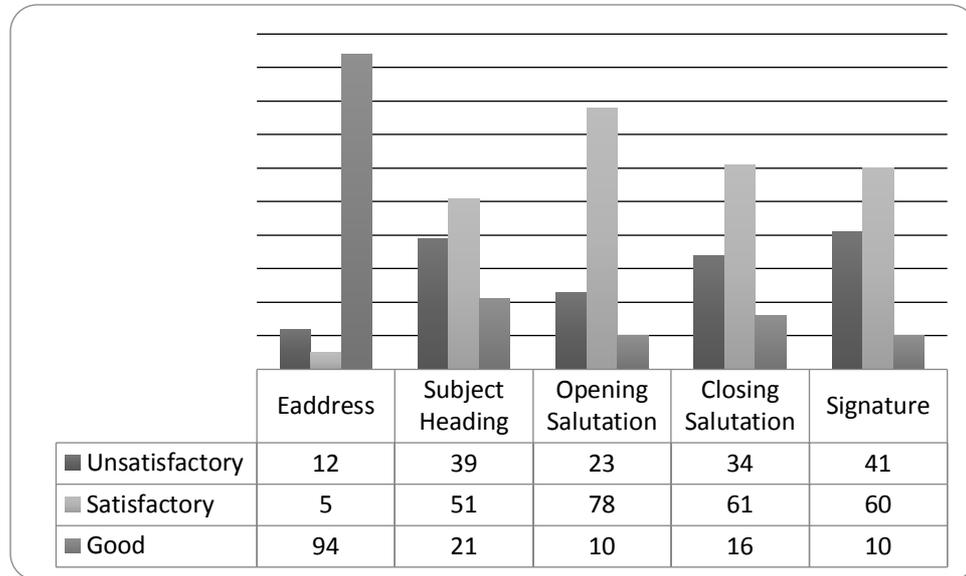
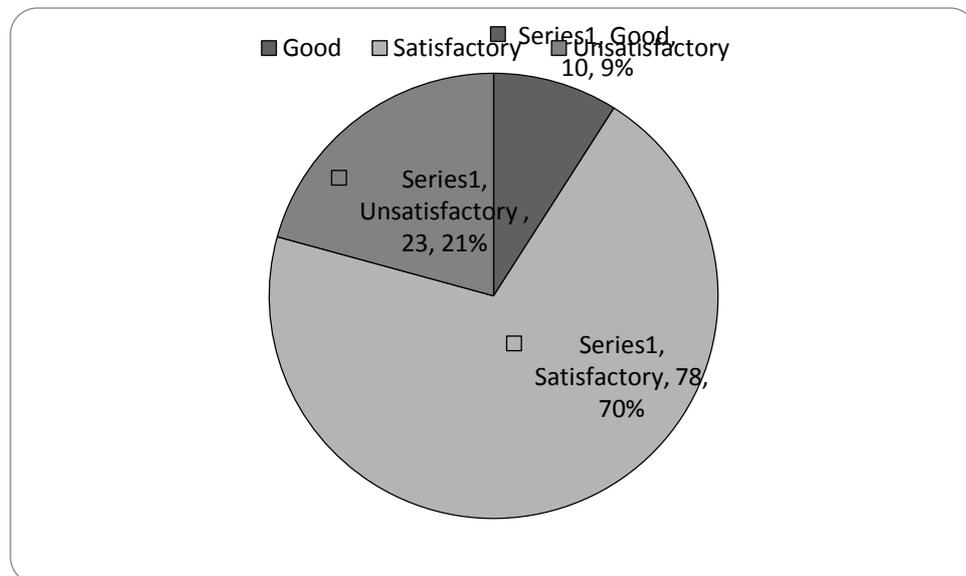


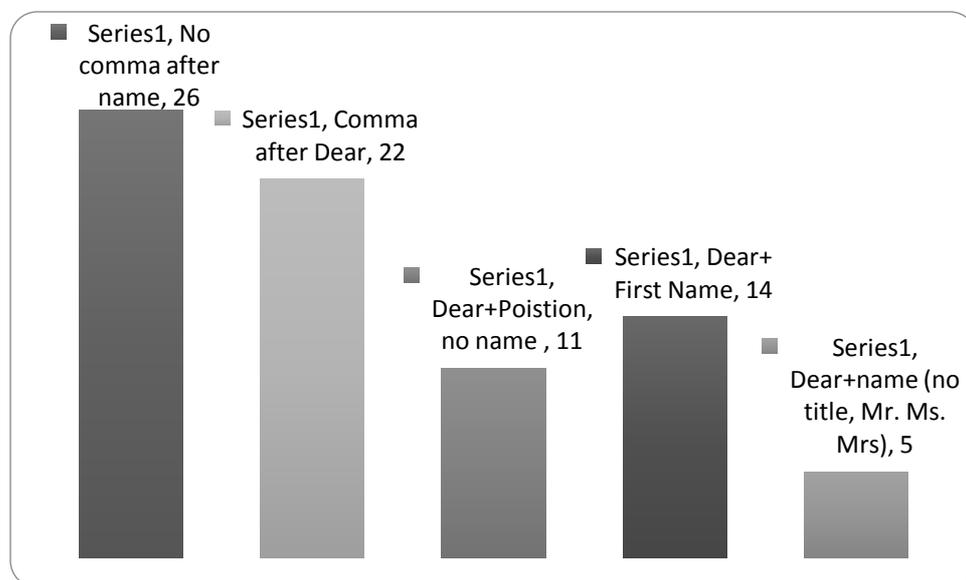
Figure 4.5 Opening Salutation



There are some interesting findings pertaining to Opening Salutation. As demonstrated in Figure 4.5, only 9% of students (10) wrote correct format, Dear Ms./Mr. Surname, according to the given task (See Appendix B). More than one fifth (21%) of students used completely wrong format (To...). Although 78 students (70%) researched

Satisfactory level, the format of their opening salutation was acceptable with various error types, according to Figure 4.6.

Figure 4.6 Various Types of Opening Salutation



As shown in Figure 4.6, the most common error type among the Thai students was that the wrong use of comma: the missing comma after the name, such as *Dear Mr. Nanny* (no comma after Nanny), 26 students made this mistake; Category 2: 22 students put comma after Dear, such as *Dear, Mr. Nanny*. The second type of error was that the students lacked of knowledge how to write the receipt's name correctly: such as *Dear+ First Name* instead of the Given name (14); *Dear + Position*, instead of the receipt's name as the name is known in the given task (11); and *Dear + Given name* without proper Title (Mr./Ms./Mrs.)

The evaluation towards Business Writing Style consists of four aspects: Whether students can apply the most suitable writing tone, as well as “you-attitude” (Tone), whether students can demonstrate good awareness of analyzing the relationship with the audience through using appropriate degree of formality (Awareness of Audience Analysis), and whether students' writing conforms to business writing style, such as using active voice, strong verbs, writing concisely, etc.. According to Figure 4.7, students were significantly weak at applying appropriate tone as well as “you-attitude” as almost 90% of them (96) failed to achieve the Satisfactory level. This performance also affected their understanding towards audience analysis, 32, nearly one third of the

writing scripts fell into Unsatisfactory level. Performance in terms of conciseness and using active voice or strong verbs was significantly satisfying.

Figure 4.7 Business Writing Style

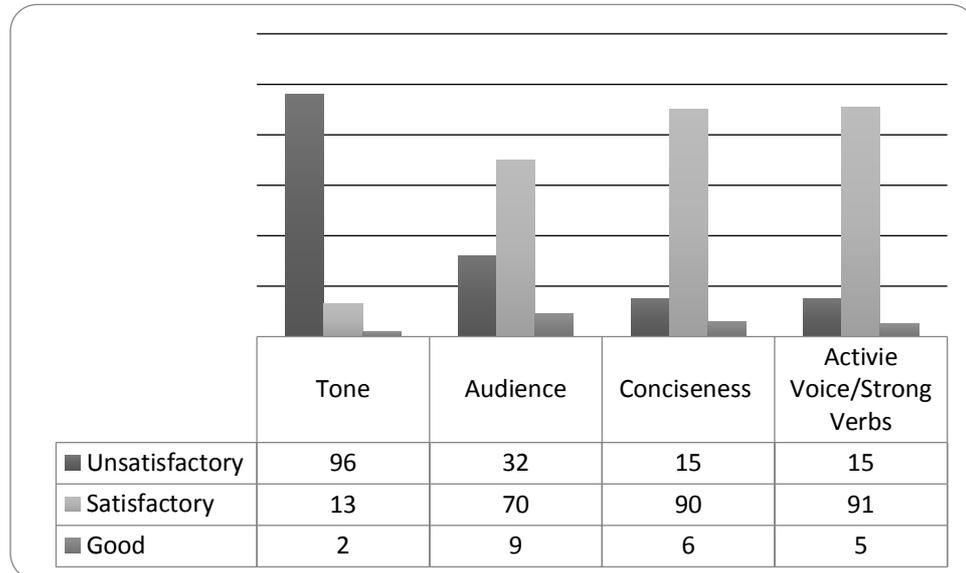
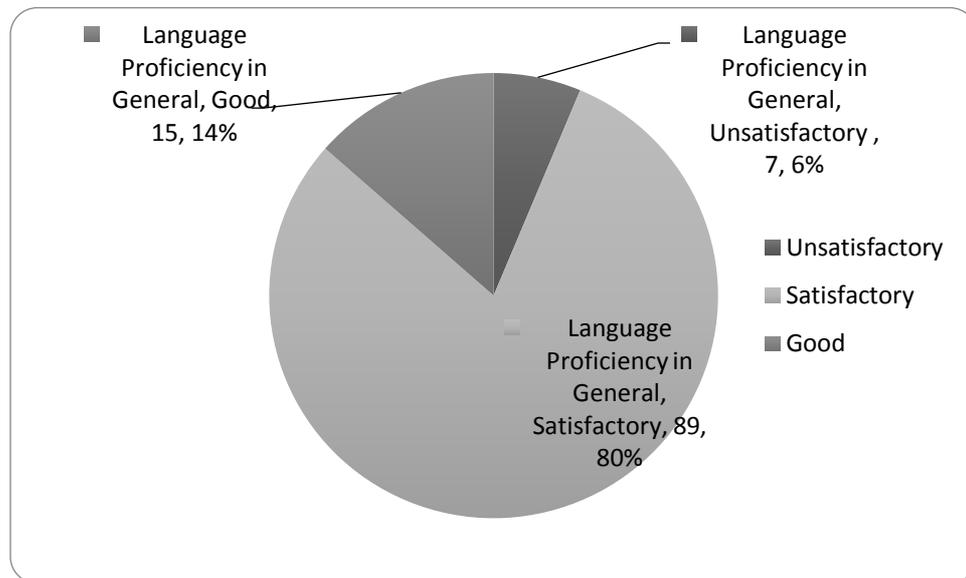


Figure 8 Language Proficiency



Language Proficiency was used to evaluate students’ language skills in general, focusing on accuracy regarding grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Bias-free language is supposed to be the part of language proficiency, but it was not considered in the given job application task, and therefore, was not analyzed in the present study. As shown in Figure 8, 94 per cent of students’ writing skills were satisfactory above.

5. CONCLUSION

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the specific information regarding Thai students' Email literacy in business setting.

In general, Thai students' language skills are satisfactory. This might be reasonable and understandable since the targeted students have acquired basic language knowledge through years of English study before enrolling the course. However, apart from the language proficiency, Thai students' Email literacy is much below the Satisfactory level in almost every aspect, especially in Content, Organization, and its Format. This is a frustrating fact since Email communication has become unavoidable in our lives, both personal and professional.

Teachers who are responsible for teaching the business communication course should focus on three levels in order to improve Thai students' business Email literacy, according to the research results.

5.1 Level One: Content and Organization

This level should be applied to any type of business messages. Teachers should begin the course by training students that whenever they start to communicate, they should 1) analyze communication purpose, 2) provide sufficient information according to the purpose, 3) choose the suitable writing approaches, either direct or indirect, and 4) organize the corresponding information coherently, and logically.

5.2 Level Two: Business Writing Style

Even though this study shows that the Thai students' have achieved satisfying results towards writing skills in general, they are still not familiar with the specific business writing styles, especially in understanding various writing tones, applying "you-attitude", determining writing formality according to the audience analysis, as well as how to write with conciseness, active voice and strong verbs, etc. Teachers should teach students to get used to writing business messages in professional business styles and be aware of the differences between the business writing style and academic writing style that students are familiar with.

5.3 Level Three: Email Format

Email is one type of business messages with its specific format features. To write more effective and efficient Emails, students should be able to employ correct Email format consisting of Subject Heading, Opening Salutation, Closing Salutation as well as Signature. Especially, Thai students should be trained how to use comma correctly in both opening and closing salutations. It will be more difficult for Thai students since punctuation is not commonly applied in their mother tone.

Based upon the research findings, the future researcher could focus on evaluating students' progress pertaining to Email literacy after specific and explicit instruction or other teaching methods to help with students' Email literacy in business setting.

APPENDIX BUSINESS EMAIL RUBRIC

Data Entry Rubric: Email Writing--information in brackets are detailed grading criteria for the given task). Adapted according to Clayton State University College of Business: Problem-Solution Persuasive Memo (May, Thompson, & Hebblethwaite, 2012)

| Performance Element | <input type="checkbox"/> Unsatisfactory | <input type="checkbox"/> Satisfactory | <input type="checkbox"/> Good |
|----------------------------|--|--|--|
| Content | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Purpose | <input type="checkbox"/> Does not provide correct statement of purpose (for job application) | <input type="checkbox"/> Provides correct statement of purpose (for job application) | <input type="checkbox"/> Provides correct statement of purpose (for job application) and adds clarifying information |
| Information | <input type="checkbox"/> Include incomplete information for achieving the purpose (including only experience, interview request) | <input type="checkbox"/> Include necessary information for achieving the purpose (including job position, experience, interview request) | <input type="checkbox"/> Include complete information for achieving the purpose (including source of job information, job position, experience, interview request) |

| Organization | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|----------------------|---|--|--|
| Pattern | <input type="checkbox"/> Does not follow the pattern for the type of message (only Work Experience) | <input type="checkbox"/> Generally follows the pattern for the type of message (Work Experience+ Interview request) | <input type="checkbox"/> Follows the pattern for the type of message (Purpose +Work Experience+ Interview request) |
| Coherence/Transition | <input type="checkbox"/> Provides little connection of ideas or continuity from point to point | <input type="checkbox"/> Provides some connection of information (for ideas) within and between paragraphs with appropriate transitional words | <input type="checkbox"/> Provides clear and consistent connection of information within and between paragraphs with appropriate transitional words |
| Paragraphs | <input type="checkbox"/> Shows no knowledge of paragraphing throughout the message | <input type="checkbox"/> Shows certain knowledge of paragraphing | <input type="checkbox"/> Shows sound knowledge of proper paragraphing according to different ideas |

| Format | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
|------------------------|---|---|---|
| Sender's Email address | <input type="checkbox"/> Unacceptable and unprofessional Email address (same as the original one given in the task) | <input type="checkbox"/> Less professional Email address (personal but acceptable) | <input type="checkbox"/> Professional Email address (name.surname@) |
| Subject | <input type="checkbox"/> Irrelevant to the topic (job application) | <input type="checkbox"/> Relevant to the topic (job application) but with wrong format | <input type="checkbox"/> Relevant to the topic (job application) with correct format |
| Opening | <input type="checkbox"/> Wrong opening for Emails (To...) | <input type="checkbox"/> Acceptable opening salutation with minor mistakes (1. Dear + job position 2. No comma 3. Comma after Dear 4. Dear + first name 5. Dear + name without title) | <input type="checkbox"/> Correct opening salutation according to the task given (Dear Mr. Surname,) |
| Closing | <input type="checkbox"/> Wrong closing format | <input type="checkbox"/> Acceptable closing salutation (same as the original one given in the task) | <input type="checkbox"/> Correct closing salutation according to the task given (Sincerely, Faithfully, etc.) |
| Signature | <input type="checkbox"/> Wrong Email signature format (same as the original one given in the task) | <input type="checkbox"/> Acceptable Email signature with minor mistakes (such as, no capitalization, no full spelling of the words, etc.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Correct Email signature (Full Name, Job Position, Contact Information, etc.) |

| | | | |
|---|--|--|--|
| Business Writing Styles | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Tone | <input type="checkbox"/> Conveys condescending or rude tone (“I” centered throughout the entire message) | <input type="checkbox"/> Conveys a generally professional tone (focus on company’s benefits, but lack of contact information) | <input type="checkbox"/> Conveys a polite and sincere tone, and “You-attitude” (focus on company’s benefits, providing contact information for the audience) |
| Awareness of Audience Analysis | <input type="checkbox"/> Demonstrates no awareness of analyzing the relationship with the audience in terms of degree of formality | <input type="checkbox"/> Demonstrates certain awareness of analyzing the relationship with the audience through using acceptable degree of formality | <input type="checkbox"/> Demonstrates good awareness of analyzing the relationship with the audience through using appropriate degree of formality |
| Conciseness | <input type="checkbox"/> Uses many unnecessary words | <input type="checkbox"/> Uses an occasional unnecessary words | <input type="checkbox"/> Avoid unnecessary words |
| Active voice/strong verbs | <input type="checkbox"/> Uses passive voice and weak linking verbs | <input type="checkbox"/> Uses active voice and strong verbs most of the time | <input type="checkbox"/> Uses active voice and strong verbs throughout |
| Language Proficiency | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Language in general | <input type="checkbox"/> Contains numerous grammatical, punctuation, and spelling errors. - | <input type="checkbox"/> Contains few grammatical, punctuation and spelling errors. | <input type="checkbox"/> Contains no grammatical, punctuation and spelling errors. |
| Bias-free language <i>** (not applied in the given Email task)</i> | <input type="checkbox"/> Uses biased language: sexist, racist, agist | <input type="checkbox"/> Avoids biased language: sexist, racist, agist | <input type="checkbox"/> Avoids biased language: sexist, racist, agist, and builds goodwill |

APPENDIX B EMAIL WRITING TASK

Please highlight the mistakes in the following business Email and revise it appropriately.

From: sexyme@gmail.com **To:** Gary.Nanny@sales.com

Subject: URGENT BUSINESS MATTER!!!

Good afternoon, Sir

I am writing to you today to introduce myself. I am an ad specialty sales rep in your area. I have worked with other businesses in the community and feel I can be of service to you as well.

I have been in the business for 25 years, so I have rich experience. I am very interested in your company, and I think that I will be the best candidate for the position.

Please contact me to schedule an interview. If I can be of any help, don't forget to contact or Email me. Thank you for your kindness.

Regards,

John Jones, account exec

ABC Sales

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