Web-Based Writing Materials that Promote Non-Native Business Students' Autonomous Learning

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Abstract

In the 1990s, accounting firms and educators began to voice concerns about the inadequacy of undergraduate accounting students' communication skills. Both factions agreed that accountants entering the workforce must possess adequate communication skills; therefore, they reasoned that accounting degree programs should teach these skills. The fast-increasing international population in U.S. business schools further complicated the job of business educators who were trying to integrate communication skills into their programs. This paper details the collaborative development of a web-based business writing handbook designed to address the specific needs of international business students. The handbook raises students' awareness of common ESL business writing errors and gives them strategies for finding and correcting those errors. Specifically, the paper documents why and how the online handbook was developed and then converted into a book, provides examples of materials included in the handbook, and argues in favor of using such materials in a skills-integrated curriculum.

Introduction

During the past two decades, accounting firms have consistently noted significant deficiencies in the communication skills of undergraduate business students. The firms contend that the students they recruit for entry level accounting positions do not possess the requisite communication skills for success in the workplace (Arthur Anderson & Co. et al., 1989; Nelson, Moncada & Smith, 1996). Such concerns continue to appear in the accounting literature (Blanthorne, Bhamornsiri, & Guinn, 2005). Based on these observations, numerous educators have called for the inclusion of communication skills and writing assignments in the accounting curricula (Mohrweis, 1991; Reinstein & Houston, 2004; Stocks, Stoddard, & Waters, 1992). In fact, many institutions of higher education have responded to the call by implementing innovative writing programs within their academic accounting courses (for reviews of such programs, see Mohrweis, 1991; Riordan, Riordan & Sullivan, 2000). The goal of these practically oriented skills-based writing programs is to integrate communication instruction into regular accounting courses.

Since these writing programs started, most of the research literature has focused on providing guidelines for how to develop and offer these programs (MonPere McIsaac & Sepe, 1996; Riordan et al., 2000). Some scholars have even provided examples of writing assignments (Mohrweis, 1991; MonPere McIsaac & Sepe, 1996), and offered suggestions for grading those assignments (Stocks et al., 1992). A

few other scholarly articles have also produced some empirical evidence to support an integrated skills program and the use of an outside writing expert (Mohrweis, 1991; Reinstein & Houston, 2004; Riordan et al., 2000). All this research seems to indicate that the combined efforts and collaboration between accounting faculty and writing specialists have contributed to improving the quality of accounting students' writing. Yet, despite these demonstrated improvements, comments about the inadequacy of business students' communication skills continue to appear in the literature (see, for example, Blanthorne, Bhamornsiri, & Guinn, 2005). In fact, corporate leaders and educators in most other business disciplines, including U.S. MBA programs, have also raised similar concerns regarding business graduates' poor communication skills (Bacon & Anderson, 2004; Bogert & Butt, 1996; Budig, 2005; Knight, 1999; Pittenger, Miller, & Allison, 2006; Waner, 1995).

According to the Institute of International Education's (IIE's) *Open Doors 2009 Report on International Education Exchange*, the international population at U.S. colleges and universities is fast increasing. This report clearly shows that business programs educate the highest percentage of these students (see Figures 6A and Table 9 of IIE, 2009). Accounting instructors and business communication instructors face major challenges when their classes must meet the needs of both native and non-native English speakers (Penrose, 2007). Perhaps it is the lack of resources to assist the ESL population that contributes to the persistence of the observed deficiency in business students' writing skills. As early as 1981, Johns noted:

> The ESL student, whether he or she is international or bilingual, needs to learn the language particular to business as rapidly as possible. There is a great need for additional research into the nature of this language and for companion works or programs for nonnative speakers. (p. 34)

Yet, not much information is readily available on how accounting writing programs are addressing the special needs of their growing non-native population. It is our contention that despite the steady increase in international student enrollments at business schools, very little specialized help is available to this constituency within the programs themselves. Most business schools refer their international students to ESL programs or Intensive English Institutes (IEIs) within their larger institutions. But these units generally provide short-term help to meet programs' general proficiency requirements rather than the long-term type of communication skills practice the non-native speaker needs.

In fact, because the recent economic downturn has caused job seeking to become an even more competitive process, numerous articles now posit that candidates who possess nontechnical, or "soft," skills actually have a competitive advantage in the current downsized job market. The researchers contend that business communication skills are now part of the "ticket" to securing professional jobs (The College Board, 2004; Di Meglio, 2009). To prepare students for successful business careers, accounting and other business program educators should attend to the diverse communication needs of both native and non-native students. Otherwise, non-native speakers will find themselves at an unfair disadvantage.

This paper details our collaborative efforts to address the specialized needs of non-native speaking students enrolled in the College of Business at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). Based on findings from instructional approaches developed for second language acquisition, and especially on those claimed by the language learning strategy field (Cohen & Macaro, 2007), and our experiences teaching non-native English speakers at academic institutions, we concluded that a website that promotes autonomous learning could address the specialized needs of ESL students.

To fulfill this goal, we developed a web-based ESL-oriented business writing handbook that would later form the basis of a book (Sardegna & Slutsky, 2009). The handbook, which was derived from students' actual writing samples, raises students' awareness of the most common errors made in business writing and gives them strategies for finding and correcting those errors in their own work. To date, few scholars (e.g., Quible, 2006) have discussed possible ways of correcting writing deficiencies. This paper's purpose is three-fold: (a) to document why and how we developed this online handbook, and then converted it into a book; (b) to provide some examples of the exercises and business writing strategies included in the handbook; and (c) to argue in favor of using such materials in a skills-integrated curriculum.

Background

In 1989, the nation's largest accounting firms emphasized the need to improve business students' general skills, including communication, intellectual, and interpersonal skills, and recommended that writing should become a significant part of the undergraduate accounting curricula (Arthur Anderson & Co. et al, 1989). The Accounting Education Change Commission (AECC) was subsequently established to help educators achieve these goals. In September, 1990, the AECC listed communication as a necessary skill in its Objectives of Education for Accountants--"To become successful professionals, accounting graduates must possess communication skills, intellectual skills, and interpersonal skills" (AECC, 1990, p. 2). Beginning in May, 1994, the Uniform CPA Examination of the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) started assessing writing skills, including coherent organization, conciseness, clarity, use of standard English, responsiveness to the requirements of the question, and appropriateness for the reader (MonPere McIsaac & Sepe, 1996; Person, 1994).

Project Discovery Curriculum

As part of the imperative to improve business students' non-technical skills, in 1996, the AECC funded the University of Illinois Accountancy Department's transition to the Project Discovery (PD) curriculum. The PD program replaced the traditional accounting curriculum effective with the 1997-1998 academic year. The central theme of this curriculum is learning by discovery—hence its name. Project Discovery requires students to apply accounting principles to real-world problems through discovery learning, role-playing, case studies, and other problem-solving exercises. One of its main features is the PD communications component that focuses on improving students' oral and written communication skills. [For a more complete description of the PD curriculum, see the Accountancy Department's webpage: http://www.business.uiuc.edu/accountancy/about/project_discovery/students.html.]

> Project Discovery addressed shortcomings in the traditional accounting curriculum through the following features: development of critical thinking skills through active learning methods, integration of accounting courses with general education requirements, improvement of students' interpersonal and communication skills, creation of a common conceptual framework for accounting courses, and marriage of real-world business experiences with academic studies. (Brown, 2002, p. 23)

A Communications Specialist (a position formerly held by the first author of this paper) coordinates the activities related to the PD communications component, and trains and supervises the members of the Communications Team (Communications Teaching Assistants). Members of the Communications Team counsel students during office hours, and evaluate the students' communication skills through written work and oral presentations assigned by the PD accounting instructors. In fact, student papers and

presentations are evaluated for both communication skills (by Communications Teaching Assistants) and accounting content (by Accounting Teaching Assistants or instructors).

When the PD program started, it had a fairly small number of international students. Therefore, the communications program did not have to cope with the diverse and more complicated language learning needs of the non-native English speakers (Curry, 1996; Johns, 1981; Penrose, 2007). Over the past 13 years, however, the enrollment numbers for international students at UIUC and other colleges and universities have increased dramatically. These changes in the composition of college enrollments have also been noted in the recent education literature and the local press (Council of Graduate Schools Press Release, 2007; IIE, 2009; McCormack, 2006; Penrose, 2007; The News-Gazette, September 12, 2009; Van Der Werf, 2006).

By 2002, the number of international students pursuing a UIUC Accountancy degree was substantial enough for the Communications Specialist to add an ESL Teaching Assistant to the Communications Team. This ESL Teaching Assistant (a position previously held by the second author of this paper) holds regular office hours for non-native accounting students who need more specialized help with their writing. Students with significant ESL-oriented communication skills problems are referred to the ESL TA. This TA's educational training is geared more specifically to evaluating the non-native students' writing with the aim of devising strategies to help these students improve their skills over the longer term; that is, on an ongoing basis during the course of their studies.

In 2004, we (formerly the PD Communications Specialist and the ESL Specialist for the Accountancy Department at the UIUC College of Business) decided that the PD Communications Handbook the Project Discovery Team had devised for the native English speaking Accountancy students was insufficient to meet the needs of the non-native speakers enrolled in the program. This handbook provided some rules that helped students (a) improve the overall organization of their papers, and (b) identify and correct agreement errors, ambiguous phrases, and wordiness in their writing. It did not, however, provide practice exercises or different sample sentences illustrating how faulty sentences or paragraphs could be improved. Neither did it cover other common errors of non-native writing, such as ungrammatical sentences; spelling and punctuation errors; improper tone and register; and poor sentence constructions. We envisioned that perhaps the ESL students would be able to revise some of these more grammatical and stylistic errors on their own if they had useful reference materials and practice exercises that specifically addressed their writing needs. If our beliefs were right, the ESL TA would not need to spend as much time advising students how to correct those errors and, as a result, would have more time to help them develop higher-order writing skills. In fact, this practice would be more attuned with the kind of guidance other members of the Communications Team were offering native speakers in individual writing conferences. It would, therefore, put the native speakers and the non-native speakers on the same playing field.

Hence, in response to this increasing demand for specialized help, and the observed limitations of the PD Communications Handbook, we sought alternative materials for our international students. Specifically, our attempts to obtain business writing instructional books with practice materials for self-study geared to the ESL/EFL business audience proved unsuccessful. Although some style manuals addressed general ESL writing errors, they lacked the discipline-specific business terminology and style the ESL students needed to write well on the job, and thus seemed inadequate for the students in the PD program.

Development of the Handbook

A research of the literature concerning English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in both ESL and EFL contexts documents differences in the way non-native students perform writing tasks when compared to native speakers (Silva, 1993). Several researchers (e.g., Bacha & Bahous, 2008; Leki & Carson, 1994; Raymond & Des Brisay, 2000; Raymond & Parks, 2002) have consistently stressed the need to offer courses and practice that reflect the types of reading and writing tasks—the academic genres—typical of these students' fields. They argue that such practice socializes (or enculturates) students into the ways of communicating in their particular disciplines. Or as Bacha and Bahous (2008) put it, academic programs play "an important role in helping to initiate students into the academic community in acquiring not only the language proficiency necessary but the specific genres pertaining to these communities" (p. 75). Guided by this research, we were determined to offer such genre-specific resources to our international student population. When our search failed to yield any suitable instructional self-study practice materials for business students, the possibility of constructing a specialized website came to mind. This site would function as an on-line workbook to help the department's non-native speakers practice and refine their business writing skills. Several researchers had already demonstrated that writing websites are effective as teaching instruments (Barrios, 2004; Cleaveland & Larkins, 2004). A recent article reporting on a study for the Department of Education concluded that "[o]n average, students in online learning conditions perfor[m] better than those receiving face-to-face instruction" (Lohr, 2009).

While considering whether to pursue this project, we realized some of the website's basic design and content could be modeled on the PD Communications Handbook that had been developed for the native speaking Accountancy students. We realized, however, that some significant problems were inherent in using this model as the framework for the new website. The PD Communications Handbook had not been written with the non-native speaker in mind. Therefore, it needed to be substantially revised so that the website would address the particular needs of the non-native population.

With these types of limitations in mind, we reviewed the Table of Contents in the PD Communications Handbook to determine any necessary additions, deletions, or significant adaptations for the specialized ESL-oriented website. We realized that, in general, it would be necessary to expand the scope of the Handbook's explanations and present the material in a way similar to other ESL texts. For example, the Handbook would include many examples, definitions, and guidelines that would help readers identify and correct the errors. We also planned to create practice exercises and add a list of complementary websites for further practice.

At the project's outset, it became clear that the task was much larger than we had originally anticipated. We would have to develop a number of additional chapters for the non-native speakers on topics such as proofreading for punctuation and spelling; revising ungrammatical sentences; and correcting organizational and stylistic issues (see Appendix for a comparison of the PD Communications Handbook Table of Contents with the ESL PD Communications Handbook Table of Contents).

Also, given the research evidence supporting the use of genre-specific texts in academic contexts, we decided to base the exercises for our website on actual writing samples from undergraduate business students. To this end, over the course of two semesters we collected a wide range of native and ESL student papers from accounting courses offered in the PD curriculum. This systematic data collection procedure allowed us to accumulate not only a large sample of sentences and paragraphs that contained frequent ESL errors, but also a sufficient number of error-free and genre-specific phrases written by native speakers of English. We wanted to include some of the latter in the exercises too, so

that our ESL students would also be exposed to common and well-written business writing expressions while completing the exercises. We then sorted the erroneous samples by error type, and determined which error types were the most common in non-native writing so as to address all these types in our ESL handbook. After determining the most common ESL error types, we categorized them according to the overall writing problem they caused. Now, our design for each section of the website represented one category of errors. (The Appendix shows the error types or subsections identified for each category or section.) Section labels adhere to the following guidelines:

1. Proofread for punctuation, spelling and grammatical mistakes;
2. Choose your words wisely;
3. Avoid ambiguous writing;
4. Be concise;
5. Write clear, simple sentences;
6. Organize your ideas so that readers will find them easy to follow.

Therefore, the collection of sample sentences served as the basis for the examples and the sentence-level exercises in each subsection of the website. In fact, this process of basing practice exercises on student samples turned out to be far more complicated than we initially anticipated. While reviewing the samples, we expected to find sentences that clearly demonstrated a particular type of error. Instead, each sentence contained a variety of grammatical and/or stylistic errors. Although our aim was to train students to identify all errors in their texts, it seemed neither useful nor practical to ask our students to focus on more than one error type at a time in the practice exercises. Therefore, we revised sentences so that they only reflected the specified error type under review. These revisions served a double function: (a) to offer students practice identifying and correcting a specific error type, and (b) to expose students to genre-specific and well-written phrases surrounding the targeted error (see examples of these sentences under Business Writing Strategies).

The Communications Team had developed codes for the error types included in the PD Communications Handbook. For example, *AGR* denoted an Agreement Error, *REF* denoted Unclear Pronoun Reference, and so on. The team was used to coding errors in student papers. The students were responsible for revising those errors and then submitting a revised copy of their work for communication skills grading. It was also the student's responsibility to seek help from the Communications Team as needed. Given that our students were used to this coding system and that the system had proven to be effective with most of our native-speaker student population, we developed codes for the other common errors included in our ESL website. With more guidance and practice, our international students would certainly be able to correct most of their own errors before they had to submit their first draft to the Communications Team. After the students received coded feedback on their work, they should be able to correct some more errors on their own by just following the website's guidelines for the marked error(s). Following this reasoning, the Handbook includes codes for all error types (the Appendix identifies Codes in parentheses next to the labels for each error type).

Moreover, the interactive nature of the website allowed us to include information that helps students (a) quickly get to the subsection needed by a click of a button, and (b) easily navigate through the different sections and subsections of the handbook. For example, a common dilemma for our students has been to determine whether they have used a *be* verb correctly. An error could result from an overuse of a *be* verb or an unnecessary passive voice construction. To address this problem, the website offers the following guidance, which helps students not only decipher the type of error, but also identify the subsection with the information to fix that error:

A good strategy is to circle all *be* verbs in your document and then consider the use of the *be* verb carefully.

- If the *be* verb forms an XBE construction (i.e., a construction that uses the *be* verb unnecessarily), go to section on <u>XBE</u> for suggestions on how to improve your writing.
- If the *be* verb forms a passive construction (i.e., a past participle follows the *be* verb), proceed to <u>Step 2</u> below.
- If the *be* verb neither forms a passive construction nor makes the sentence wordy, you do not need to alter the phrase or sentence. (Source: UIUC In-house Website)

The underlined words denote website links; Step 2 directs the user to a step-wise procedure that helps correct unnecessary passive voice constructions through editing strategies. In this same subsection, users are offered guidelines on what constitutes an unnecessary passive voice construction. In the XBE subsection, users are offered guidelines on what constitutes an unnecessary *be* verb.

It took us approximately two years to collect student samples, revise portions of the sentences, design the website, write new sections and expand existing sections, and develop the exercises for practice. At the beginning of the Fall 2006 semester, the first web-based version of the PD ESL Communications Handbook was released to the UIUC Accountancy students and faculty. Many early website users, including some of the non-native faculty, mentioned that they had searched for business writing texts geared to the ESL/EFL audience, but had been unable to find any. Since the website's introduction, both non-native students and faculty have reported that they used the website and found the materials helpful in addressing their individual needs. This website has recently been made available to all the students and faculty in the departments within Illinois' College of Business (website address: http://business.illinois.edu/pdeslcomm/).

Conversion of Web-Based Handbook to a Book

After one year's use of the specialized website and noted improvements in our non-native population's writing skills, we realized this need for specialized communications help was more widespread than we had anticipated; in fact, it appeared to be a significant problem for the non-native speaking students and faculty at business schools nationwide.

Despite the increasing number of international students enrolling in business programs at American colleges and universities, specialized communications help is rarely offered *within* the business curricula. At most colleges and universities, the business schools and the ESL-oriented departments do *not* tend to work together to solve this growing, yet unanswered problem. That is why we decided to devise the original workbook website for these students. It is also why converting the project to a book would serve the same constituents' needs, but on a far broader scale.

Converting the web-based Handbook to book form would allow it to serve a much broader audience—undergraduate and graduate non-native business students, non-native speaking business faculty, instructors who teach business communications to non-native speakers, and international businessmen and women. Because the website's design was tailored to serve the basic writing needs of Accountancy undergraduates, the discipline-based language is not so specialized or advanced as to be too discipline-specific or difficult to understand for students pursuing undergraduate or graduate degrees in other business disciplines or faculty engaged in teaching and research within the various business disciplines.

The feedback from in-house website users helped us determine other elements we could incorporate into the book. Needless to say, these changes and additions could have also been made to the online website. We did not bother to do that, however, because our students had access to both formats (the online handbook and the book). Instead, we strived to offer two complementary materials for our international student population. Because the readers of this paper would likely benefit from knowing about the additions that resulted from our website users' feedback, we include the following abridged list of the elements that were incorporated into the book format.

1. A section on Capitalization and a chapter on proofreading;
2. More explanations on how to identify errors;
3. Expanded practice exercises;
4. Paragraph-based practice exercises at the end of each chapter (which included the different errors discussed in each chapter);
5. An Answer Key with detailed explanations for all the exercises;
6. How-to-Correct (HtC) Editing Strategies for each section;
7. A coding system that identifies the HtC strategies;
8. Use of the coding system in the explanations and in the answer keys in order to guide readers as they work through the self-directed practice exercises.

After adding a section on Capitalization, and making a few changes to the organization of the website's sections and subsections, we expanded the explanations in both the chapters and the subsections of the book and included some more sentence-level practice exercises. These exercises helped focus students' attention on one error type at a time. Repeated practice correcting the same error in different sentences made the correction rules and strategies more memorable. In addition, we drew some more samples from our collected data to develop paragraph-level exercises. These new exercises offered readers practice identifying different errors within paragraphs. After all, that kind of practice more closely resembled the kind of correction our readers would need for their written work (see examples of paragraph-level exercises in Sardegna & Slutsky, 2009).

Another important addition to the book is the development of the HtC Editing Strategies. These guidelines help readers determine the method(s) they should use to complete a particular exercise. For example, in the Spelling subsection, the HtC strategies and codes help the reader discriminate whether a spelling error resulted from: (a) a typographical error (PRF-TYPO); (b) confusion between a one- or two-word spelling (CHG-1/2W); (c) an error in constructing plural form (PRF-PL); (d) confusion of homonyms (CHG-W); or (e) an error in the spelling of a compound noun (PRF-CN). Using this coding system also helped us streamline the text. Including codes that represent the HtC Editing Strategies in the Answer Key reduces the need to reiterate the same reasons over and over in full text. The coding system also serves the needs of those business writing and ESL instructors who might use the HtC Strategies and Codes to develop instructional materials. For example, in their feedback on students' papers, these instructors can simply identify writing errors with the codes so that students can revise their own work by following the book's guidelines.

Finally, the Answer Keys include detailed explanations to indicate the steps we took to correct each error. That is, apart from providing a corrected version of the sentence, we explained how to identify the error and the HtC strategy the readers should use to fix it.

Business Writing Strategies

Our aim in providing students with self-editing and self-teaching strategies was to empower them to correct their own writing errors. Recent research in the area of language learning strategies has focused on "encouraging learner investment and participation" (Belcher, 2006, p. 136). Instructors' efforts to increase students' engagement and sense of responsibility for their own learning has led to an emphasis on the teaching and practice of learning strategies in ESP contexts. Learning strategies help students become more independent and self-directed learners, which maximizes their opportunities to become better writers (Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary & Robbins, 1999; Cohen, 1996, 1998; Cohen & Macaro, 2007; Oxford, 1990, 1996). In fact, the research evidence to date indicates that instruction positively affects how students approach writing tasks and how autonomous they become (Manchon, Roca de Larios, Murphy, 2007).

In addition, the learners' interaction with network technology is also "ideally suited for autonomous learning" (Hemard, 2006, p. 25). Not only can learners repeat the practice as many times as they want and at their own pace, but they can also complete the practice exercises according to their needs, and in whichever order they prefer. The numerous links embedded in the website also save students' valuable time they would have otherwise spent trying to find the right resource. In an effort to maintain these valuable features in the book, we (a) designed the book chapters so that learners could also complete them in whichever order they wanted, and (b) included signposts in the various subsections to direct readers to other subsections in the book.

The explanations and editing strategies provided throughout the website and, even more so, throughout the book constitute other valuable features of the handbook. For example, the subsection on colloquial language states the following strategies:

1. Change simple nouns into polysyllabic nouns whenever possible.
2. Change two-word, weak verbs into one-word, strong verbs.
3. Balance your use of adjectives and adverbs. Also, avoid using vague adjectives and adverbs such as *good, bad, well, nice, pretty, very.*
4. Spell out contractions in their full forms. For example, change *won't* into *will not*, *it's* into *it is*, *let's* into *let us*.
5. Only use idiomatic language in informal situations where such usage seems appropriate.

A few sample erroneous sentences from the exercises that focus on colloquial errors follow:

1. Let's just make the production process easier by hiring new employees to manufacture steel rings.
2. Cocktail, Inc. ran into some financial problems last year and had to borrow a lot of money from banks.
3. The firm has cut down its employees' working hours a little bit.
4. This new method will make our sales better.
5. Sales Manager John Smith did a good job during the press release.

The suggested corrections for the sentences listed above are the following:

1. I suggest we facilitate the production process by hiring new employees to manufacture steel rings.

2. Cocktail, Inc. encountered some financial problems last year and had to borrow a substantial amount of money from banks.
3. The firm has minimally reduced its employees' working hours.
4. This new method will enhance our sales.
5. Sales Manager John Smith spoke effectively during the press release.

Due to space limitations, further examples of these strategies are not provided here. For more information, including additional examples, see the final versions of our HtC strategies included in *The Practiced Business Writer* (Sardegna & Slutsky, 2009).

The detailed nature of the explanations and correction strategies also make the book a useful resource for native speakers whose writing suffers from persistent problems with certain grammatical or stylistic concerns, such as passive voice (UPV) or agreement (AGR). For example, when native speaking students indicate that they just cannot understand how to revise passive voice constructions, the Communication TAs at Illinois often refer the students to the Handbook's more detailed explanation of UPV.

Rationale for Using the Handbook

Perhaps the most important contribution of this handbook is its strategy-based approach, whereby non-native speakers use the website or the book to self-direct their own learning activities. Apart from developing students' autonomy and writing skills, this approach also has several time and cost-saving implications for the book's various stakeholders (the readers themselves, their institutions—colleges/universities, and businesses). Without access to this type of self-directed language learning approach, most non-native business students and faculty would end up either paying tutors, or enrolling in costly language acquisition courses offered at their home institutions, on-line, or at private language schools. Except for the on-line courses, the time commitments required of enrollees—attending sessions and completing required assignments—could become very overwhelming for undergraduate students.

The handbook's approach also saves instructors both preparation and teaching time. Because of the previously mentioned imperative to teach communication skills within the curriculum, such a resource permits faculty members who teach in the various business disciplines, in business communications courses, or in ESL/Business English courses to recommend the handbook as a resource for those students who need specialized help. These instructors would otherwise have to prepare their own materials to cater to their non-native students' language needs as well as to devote class and/or office hours time to disseminating this information. As reported by Epstein (1999), when asked through a survey, instructors attempting to integrate business communications instruction into their field-specific course content expressed their frustration with (a) their lack of class time to teach both their areas of expertise and effective writing skills, and (b) their heavy faculty workload that discouraged them from using writing assignments. In fact, their responses to the survey questions clearly indicated that they felt they had no time to teach or grade writing assignments. Unfortunately, because most instructors do not want or have the time to do either of these things, ESL students do not generally receive the kind of practice and feedback that would eventually help them improve their writing skills. As a result, these students often struggle with academic writing assignments and business documents. The handbook offers a solution to this widespread problem in academia.

In contrast to the academic model mentioned above, corporations tend to hire private language consultants to teach their international employees basic business writing skills. This type of training proves *both* costly and time-consuming for the companies. It requires them to set aside training time for

their non-native employees' language acquisition needs. Therefore, the need for this specialized type of employee training impacts corporations' overall staffing costs. These costs could be greatly reduced if company employees engaged in autonomous and self-directed learning. The handbook was designed with these types of consideration in mind.

Conclusion

We designed the original project website to serve the specialized language acquisition needs of the Accountancy Department's students at the College of Business, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). Business schools should only recruit international students if they are willing to offer this constituency some reasonable level of help to improve any perceived deficiencies in their communication skills. Otherwise, these students may face serious consequences when they graduate and compete for and/or secure jobs in the marketplace. As new employees, they may be (a) restricted to working in positions that do not require competency in communications; (b) assumed unfit for promotions that require good communication skills; (c) placed on probation due to inadequate communication skills; or even (d) terminated due to deficiencies in their communication skills. These types of long-term concerns about the future careers of non-native speaking business students convinced us to convert the project to book form. With the publication of *The Practiced Business Writer: An ESL/EFL Handbook,* a wider audience now has access to our self-directed language learning strategies.

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Appendix

Table of Contents (TOC) PD ESL Communications Handbook	Table of Contents (TOC) PD Communications Handbook
Introduction	Introduction
List of Correction Symbols	List of Correction Symbols (as part of TOC)
Proofread for Punctuation, Spelling, and Grammatical Mistakes	
Punctuation Error (P)	n/a
Spelling Error (SP)	n/a
Faulty Grammar (GR)	n/a
Wrong Verb Tense (T)	n/a
Agreement Error (AGR)	Agreement Error (AGR)
Missing Article(s)/Wrong Use of Article(s) (ART)	n/a
Choose Your Words Carefully	
Word Choice (WC)	Word Choice Error (WC)
Colloquial Language (COLL)	n/a
Improper Tone (TONE)	n/a
Avoid Ambiguous Writing	
Unnecessary Use of Passive Voice (UPV)	Unnecessary Use of Passive Voice (UPV)
Dangling Modifier (DGL)	Dangling Modifier (DGL)
Misplaced Modifier (MPL)	Misplaced Modifier (MPL)
Faulty Pronoun Reference/Unclear Reference (REF)	Unclear Pronoun Reference (REF)
Be Concise	
Wordy Construction (WDY)	Wordy Construction (WDY)
Excessive Use of Be Verbs (XBE)	Excessive Use of Be Verbs (XBE)
Excessive Use of Prepositional Phrases (XPREP)	n/a
Write Clear, Simple Sentences	
What Do You Mean? (?)	n/a
Indicated Passage Lacks Coherence (COH)	n/a
Run-on Sentence (RO)	n/a
Weak/Awkward Construction (AWK)	Awkward Construction (AWK)
Organize Your Ideas So That Readers Will Find Them Easy to Follow	
Faulty Parallel Construction (II)	Faulty Parallel Construction (II)
No Transition/Wrong Transition (TR)	No Transition/Wrong Transition (TR)
Poor Sentence Structure (S)	n/a
Sentence Fragment (FRAG)	n/a