

Prospects and Perspectives in Teaching Report Writing in English

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By Amituanai Vernetta Heem and Judy-Anne Alexander-Pouono

Introduction

In the global environment of trade and finance, one essential aspect is the writing and maintenance of accurate records. For example, at the local level, all Government Departments and State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) are required to submit annual reports to Parliament. As a result, there is a need for excellent skills in report writing in the work place – even at senior management levels. One local consultant (who wishes to remain anonymous) adds that “good writing skills are important to ensure accurate and complete reporting on events and/or issues. In addition, critical analysis is a significant component to process the facts and opinions in order to reach resolutions and/or make decisions and recommendations.” One course which can assist students to improve their report writing skills is the HEN 100 – Business English course offered by the National University of Samoa.

The course HEN100 BUSINESS ENGLISH is as old as the University – thirty years. It was developed in direct response to a concern and request from the business community through the Samoa Society of Accountants. Its mandate was for the National University of Samoa to

develop an English course that would provide for the needs of working people in the industries, ministries or organisations, both public and private. The proposition was embraced by the Samoa Society of Accountants who implemented the concern within the year and the course was conducted by the English Department of Arts. When the Faculty of Commerce was officially established in 1990, the English Department continued to offer HEN100 which then became a core paper in their many programmes. As the title of the course indicates, it addresses specifically the salient communication needs of the working community in English.

Entry Requirements

The entry requirements for HEN100 Business English is a pass in HEN004 Foundation English, mature entry or a cross credit in the relevant subject from another tertiary institution, for example the University of the South Pacific (USP) (NUS Calendar, 2014).

In order to meet the required standards of the Course as defined by the Department of English & Foreign Languages (EFL) in the Faculty of Arts, students must have the following skills and aptitudes – good listening, reading, communication and interpersonal skills and a clear understanding of business practices and work ethics. Success at university is largely determined by the students' reading and writing skills which clearly has implications for all forms of assessments as well as contributing to better understanding and more effective learning in their studies (EFL, 1985). The ability to read and comprehend is a global problem and UNESCO (2006) reports that "771 million people aged over 15 years live without basic literacy skills". As well, the report details "in absolute numbers, those without literacy skills are mainly in sub-Saharan Africa and West Asia, East Asia and the Pacific" (UNESCO, 2006) which includes Samoa.

Student Composition

At its inception, the cohorts were all part time students ranging from ages 25-50 years and who were at various stages of their careers and lengths of service in the employment sectors. They represented a range of experience and expertise which became evident in discussions and assignments as the course progressed. The prospects of enrolment, initially aimed at people

already in employment, was positively reciprocated and the numbers of students enrolling increased with each subsequent year. In the early years the enrolment numbers were as high as 180 students and involved at least seven lecturers and tutors. One significant aspect is the composition of students in the course over the years (See Table 1 on Enrolments, p. 7). Initially, the course consisted of part time students only, and as part timers progressed in their individual programmes, their numbers gradually dropped. Today, a large percentage of the students are full time and many have never been employed in the work force or other sectors of industry, so they are not familiar with specific or daily work place experiences and expectations. The full time, day students are Foundation Certificate of Commerce students who graduated the year before and who are now pursuing a diploma or degree programme in the Faculty of Business & Entrepreneurship (FOBE). As previously mentioned, they lack the working background or experience in the business world, and so this absence of work place or practical expertise becomes apparent as the course progresses. This is especially so as it impacts on the realistic aspects of the course, such as dealing with customers on a face to face basis, or answering queries on the telephone. It also affects the flow of discussion involving certain topics where experience in real life situations matter, such as writing incident(s) and progress reports, issues in management skills and negotiations in the work place. Thus, this particular group of cohorts have little or no perspective of work ethics or the kinds of communications that are expected and in use in the corporate world. However, prospective employers and interested stakeholders take for granted that graduates would easily fit into the employment sectors and be able to write reports or associated correspondences as easily as expected. In any context, to become familiar with the given working environment and expected outcomes relevant to the specific job description will require time, training, practice, and patience from both management and employee(s).

Description of the Course

The HEN 100 Business English course is designed to assist students with reading and writing skills that are relevant and appropriate in the trade sector. It is a core paper for the students of the Faculty of Business and Entrepreneurship (FOBE), but it is also open to anyone who is

interested in improving his/her writing skills in the trade industry. The course caters for both full-time and part-time students (NUS Calendar, 2014).

The classes are designed to provide students with the communication skills in English, as required in a business environment. These skills incorporate planning and organising that are necessary to reading, writing, speaking, thinking and listening, and the need for clear communication in the business and professional arena. In addition, the subject matter also allows for a practical approach in acquiring social skills that are relevant to the industry. Furthermore, the objectives also focus on current concerns with communication - oral, aural and/ or in written form and practices in the commercial domain at all levels - local, regional and international.

Course Content and Delivery

The contents of the HEN100 Business Course include all the required skills that are in practice in the employment sector(s) as indicated in the following topics.

- The Communication process - ethics, models and barriers to communication.
- Spoken orders and instructions, group discussions, meetings, agendas and minutes.
- Giving talks – impromptu, prepared/formal, debating, and using the telephone.
- Clear technical writing – memos, written instructions and notices.
- Graphics, dictation, taking notes, making summaries.
- Report Writing - proposals, tender documents, incidents, progress, sales, lab.
- Letter Writing – job applications, CVs, the job interview.
- Listening skills, non-verbal communication, intercultural and international communication.
- Reading and processing information and media – language registers, advertising.
- Negotiations, management skills and problem solving.

The course is offered during Semester 1 of each academic year, on Wednesdays, (lectures and tutorials) during the hours of 5.30 pm to 8.30 pm to cater for students engaged in formal

employment, as well as those who are enrolled on a part time basis. Day time tutorials are available which are mostly attended by non-working, full time students. The course is delivered by a team of lecturers consisting of two hours of lectures on different topics and one tutorial per week over a fourteen week period. Sometimes, guest lecturers who are experts in their fields are invited to present current views and practices in the world of commerce that are relevant to the topics being studied.

It must be noted that students are expected to study for eight hours per week on their own. As a result, each student would have spent a total of one hundred and fifty four (154) hours on this course during the semester. However the ideal is hardly ever the reality. The expectation is that students would have read the relevant chapters before and after lectures, revise their own notes from lectures and tutorials, as well as be prepared for weekly quizzes, in class tasks, and carry out research for their one major assignment. Of particular concern is the large number of students who are without the Reader which is essential to the course. When questioned about this very important requirement, students invariably state the lack of finances as the main reason for their not purchasing the prescribed 'text.'

Course Analysis and Pass Rates

The nature of the course is very utilitarian and this is evident in the content, the teaching methods or approaches and application practices, which are but simulations of the working environment. The classes are also tailored to satisfy academic requirements. Since the students are working members of the community, and could only attend after hours, the course was thus structured in content and context to suit the prevailing needs of the industries and their employees. By their own admission, the candidates who enrolled at the time, felt a personal need to improve themselves as well as for practical socioeconomic rewards such as promotions in positions, and/or salary increments in their places of employment. They were therefore highly motivated and even paid for their fees, which is the ultimate test and evidence of the extent of their commitment.

There are four (4) tables which have been used to demonstrate the issues or concerns of this paper regarding HEN 100 Business English. They are as follows:

- Table 1: Total Enrolment and Pass Rate per year from 2006 – 2014 inclusive.
- Table 2: Total Enrolment and Pass Rate per grade in Semester 1, 2014.
- Table 3: Pass Rates and Average Marks per section in final exam, Semester 1, 2014.
- Table 4: Pass Rates for Course Work, Final Exam only and Total Course.

The first table – Table 1, shows the total number of students enrolling in HEN100 and pass rates for each year from 2006 – 2014 inclusive.

**Table 1. HEN100 BUSINESS ENGLISH TOTAL ENROLMENT
AND PASS RATE PER YEAR FROM 2006-2014**

Year	Total Enrolment	Pass Rate (%)
2006	71	95%
2007	58	100%
2008	59	90%
2009	22	100%
2010	83	92%
2011	88	95%
2012	70	95%
2013	53	94%
2014	87	86%

As can be seen from Table 1, the variations in enrolment numbers from year to year is apparent and on further analysis, these fluctuations turned out to be reflections of internal, individual course changes in the timetabling and scheduling in the various Departments of the FOBE. These alterations created clashes for many of the students who had enrolled in

HEN100 Business English which resulted in their subsequent dropping of the course. However, in 2010, HEN100 Business English was passed in Senate to become a compulsory, core course for the FOBE, hence the consistent number of students enrolling since then. The percentage pass rates remained consistently high throughout the years, but the lowest result is recorded for Semester 1, 2014, where most of the students were full time and who had little or no real life expertise in the workplace.

The recent years have seen a dramatic difference in the type of students who are enrolling in HEN100 Business English. The course is now largely comprised of first year degree students, fresh from the previous year's Foundation Certificate programme. These students are disadvantaged by their lack of experience in the employment sector, as they have little or no work ethics. They are not as competent with work place language and specific register and there is little general knowledge and appropriate vocabulary for the various kinds of writing that are required in business correspondences and communications. This change in student composition has highlighted the need for the EFL Department to change their approach by emphasising in its teaching the more relevant and current content of the course in all its aspects.

The second Table – Table 2, highlights the total enrolment and pass rate per grade in Semester 1, 2014.

Table 2: HEN100 BUSINESS ENGLISH TOTAL ENROLMENT AND PASS RATE

PER GRADE IN SEMESTER 1, 2014

Total	GRADES					
Enrolled	A	B	C	D	E	DNC
87	2	18	53	0	12	2
Pass Rate: 86%	Mean: 55.6		Median: 58.0			

As can be seen in Table 2, most of the students achieved Grade C with one student up-graded from a 47-49 raw score.

The third table -Table 3, given below shows a further analysis of the exam results under the various sections with their total marks indicated. The marks show the areas of strengths and weaknesses by students in the course, especially in the Enumeration Section which had a 27% pass rate. In effect, the number of students passing the Course Work only totaled 64 students or 73.56%, whereas 68 students or 82% passed the Final Exam only. The conclusion thus incontrovertibly indicates that internal assessments or Course Work are just as necessary as the Final Exams for all students if they are to pass in their course, as one without the other is an unacceptable disadvantage for either requirement.

**Table 3. PASS RATES AND AVERAGE MARKS PER SECTION IN HEN100 BUSINESS
ENGLISH SEMESTER 1, 2014 FINAL EXAM**

TOTALS	SECTION A	SECTION B	SECTION C	SECTION D	
	M/C, T/F	Enumeration	Matching	Technical	
	Acronyms			Writing	
	Word usage				
	(30 Marks)	(20 Marks)	(10 Marks)	(40 Marks)	
No. students					
Passed		69	23	57	58
% passed		82%	27%	68%	69%
Average mark		22	8	6	22

As can be seen, Table 3, also shows the number of students achieving passes in particular sections of the final examination which is a good indicator of areas of concern that inform

teaching and benefits students as recipients. The selective nature of the pass rates by students is an indication of the difference between top-down, inside-out approach and the bottom-up, outside-in strategy as demonstrated in reading and responding to the exam paper (Smith, 1994). In other words, students do well in memory and knowledge type items as well as the written tasks where expression and vocabulary are greatly under their control. The low marks are in areas where isolated, vocabulary items for comprehension and inferences are expected and largely out of their control in context and content. This is a conflict for many second language students anywhere in the globe, who still have yet to master these skills which will resolve or improve with time and continuous exposure and experience.

The fourth and final table, Table 4, explains the pass rates for course work and final examination only as well as for the total course.

Table 4: Pass Rates for Course Work and Final Exam Only and Total Course

No. of student passing Course Work only:	64 or 73.56%
No. of students passing Final Exam only:	68 or 82%
Total number of students passing HEN100:	74 or 86%

Table 4 illustrates (i) the total number of students passing the Course Work alone, and (ii) the total number of students passing the Final Exam only. However, the final results that are registered for the University's records show a pass rate of 74 students or 86% of the total number of students. This clearly shows the need for students to complete their course assessments and sit their final examination as both definitively determine the pass or fail grade either way, as one is useless without the other. On the other hand, it is possible for a student not to do any course work but score 47% on the final exam paper and still pass because scores 47, 48, 49 can be scaled up to a 50 and vice versa. However, in the thirty years of the

University, there has not been one student who was so enlightened to ever propose such a request.

Also timely and desirable is the need for another analysis of the results in relation to whether there are any differences in performance between part time and full time students. This would entail identifying students and their course selections on enrolment and whether he/she attends on a full time or on a part time basis. Such an analysis will give added vital information and a clearer picture as to directions the course could pursue in the future. However, as student intake varies each year, so will the implementation or teaching of the HEN100 Business English which has stood the test of time in content that is still relevant, current and most apt to the prevailing and changing circumstances of the students and the ever expanding commercial world. The question then should be directed at the students more than ever, who need to internalize and manifest the vision and mission of the University, which is “excellence in English and excellence in Samoan” (NUS Calendar 2014) in all modes of communication – listening, speaking, reading, and writing with the support of the academic staff.

Since the Faculty of Business and Entrepreneurship has designated this course a compulsory core subject in their Certificate, Diploma and Degree programmes, it effectively guarantees its prospects for continuity. There will always be a need for skilled writing, speaking, reading and presenting in English in the working arena, and there will always be students enrolling in the many courses offered by the FOBE. Ever since the University was established, HEN100 Business English has consistently maintained its numbers and the Faculty of Arts and specifically the Department of English & Foreign Languages (EFL) will continue to provide this essential service to full time and part time students, as well as to the overall community. It must be noted that the recent incorporation of several courses in law and banking offered in the FOBE within the last decade, has made their programmes even more attractive and popular to the community and to incoming students, whether full time or part time, and thus all the more need for confidence and proficiency in English in its many modes of delivery.

Community Concerns

As a result of continuous collaborations and consultations over the years between the University and its numerous stakeholders, many NUS graduates are employed in multi-level industries, ministries and corporations, including several banking institutions. In spite of this, and just recently, members of a few institutions have raised their concerns about the quality of graduates whom they have employed in their corporations. The following is a summary of the concerns that were voiced with the NUS Administration Office and relayed to the relevant departments and faculties for their consideration in delivering these courses:

1. The lack of English language competency in
 - writing reports
 - making evaluations
 - articulating these processes on paper
 - very poor grammar
 - poor sentence structures and lacking in coherence
 - inadequate vocabulary

In response to the concerns that were raised, the EFL Department held discussions with its lecturers assigned to these courses to urgently address this issue without having to effect major changes to the courses that would require Senate approval and further delays. In the case of HEN100 Business English, the lecturers felt that the most immediate and least disruptive approach that it would undertake was the implementation of more inclusive strategized pedagogic methodologies. Another strategy to assist also is to include more exercises and practices, in addition to emphasis being placed on the importance of the topic itself to the student for the trade sectors.

Quality language expressions and format, as in substance and style are necessary skills that students are required to have, as well as a good sense of valid general knowledge, and awareness of ethics and protocols in the work place. This is of particular importance in regards to the use of emails in local and international business correspondences. Personal and face to

face communication with a local Senior Officer who particularly asked not to be named (as well as the institution), confirms the poor quality of spoken and written communications complained about. In addition to the specific items mentioned above, the concerns also included employee attitude and performance on the job. Special mention was made regarding the styles and approaches in communications both orally and in writing which were “too casual, over use of slang language, texting, spelling on formal correspondences, ignorance of the Corporation’s status and the poor impression created, lack of professionalism all round, as well as the general attitudes of overfamiliarity and lack of respect and attention to internal protocols in relation to international collaborations” (Apia, 2014).

As a result of this information, it has prompted the EFL Department to add another hour to the course so that it will enable second language students to spend more time and more attention on these specific topics that are of current relevance and importance to the industries. These will include the highly technical and precise vocabulary required in specific communications and correspondences which are the natural concomitants of particular industries such as banking institutions. The Department will enforce even more the provision of on-the-spot assessments in class on the day to minimize that greatest of academic sins – plagiarism, which over the years has come to also include ‘others’ such as friends or relatives who do the assignments instead of the student. Plagiarism is considered a common problem of second language students everywhere, and is more prevalent with undergraduates than graduates (Norris, 2007). The lecturers also looked at some of the subjects in the course and the possibility of dispensing or minimizing some topics that are no longer as important or serving its original purpose, especially in view of the kinds of students now enrolling in the course without work experience. As a matter of fact, topics such as management, negotiations and meetings are now being offered as complete and viable courses of their own by the FOBE.

The particular concerns itemized in the section above are still evident in the writings and speeches of students today, but fortunately they are insufficient and negligible as to prevent a student from passing. If assessments had been based entirely on English grammar, students

would be unduly penalized and the numbers passing would be severely reduced. In spite of this, with time and experience in the working world where these skills are relevant and immediate in their impact, these problems will resolve themselves. Indeed, there are still errors that involve all the eight parts of speech, as well as the sporadic occurrence of run-on and fragmented sentences, unsolicited bilingual expressions, spelling and punctuation problems with capitalizations and end stops in the wrong places. Even formatting or styling as in formal reports, memo forms and letters are carelessly effected or disregarded altogether. Such errors may be considered by second language students as inconsequential, but as the complaint will verify, they have serious implications in the work place, as even the humble period could make all the difference between a ten and a thousand dollars.

Discussion

Students manifest attitudinal problems and degrees of motivation or dispositions that are all too often negative by implication, hence the poor results, which are the very elements that are under the students' control. The differences between a native speaker and a second language learner (the one and same person) is 'dependent on motivation, frequency of opportunities for substantial repetition and elaboration and practices so as not to forget things once learned', according to linguists Peter Culicover and Elizabeth Hume(2010) in their international survey of language issues.

For many students, English is their second language, and everyday communication is conducted in Samoan, their first language. To spend eight or more hours a day at University after thirteen (13) years of formal schooling, (6 hours a day) the expectation is that these students will have acquired a reasonable level of competency in English for tertiary studies. Needless to say, this has not been the case which, according to Lameta (2006) is why English assumed "importance as the language of academic advancement and economic progress" in a population that is "increasingly and highly bilingual". The conflict between the language percentage ratio, when and what to teach in English or in Samoan as a subject or as the language of instruction, in educational institutions (Lameta, 1998) spills over to the world of employment where outcomes matter. The consequence of limited English proficient students in

a systemic dual learning environment has temporal implications on the world at large. One of these is the blatant, corrupt use of Samoan and English simultaneously in expressions that is called 'bilingualism' in contradiction to Samoa's national objective of producing " bilingual individuals fully literate in both Samoan and English" (1995, p.7). This transitional bilingual arrangement is taking far too long a time to feel its effects and the working community is especially sensitive and inclined to this proposition. Since 1995 when the policy came into effect haphazardly, a generation has emerged that is ' just passing' in their reading and writing which impacts on their total academic endeavours and employment prospects.

The attitude of 'just passing' the course is unacceptable but all too common in any university and usually amongst depressed socioeconomic groups whether monolingual or multilingual (Pitt & MacPherson, 1994). With reference to Table 2 on p. 8, it is apparent that the pass rate is heavily weighted in the middle range which effectively gives rise to the more common assumption 'it is expected of second language students' (Norris, 2007). Too many students demonstrate self-defeating behaviors that are certainly not conducive to academic success. Such self-defeating behaviours are both attitudinal and circumstantial such as the non-attendance and non-submission of assessments and assignments, which effectively determine the resultant grades in the course.

The FOBE has designated HEN100 Business English as the one and only English course for their core and compulsory elective in their programmes. It is taken at the beginning of a 2- or 3- year programme so that by the time their graduates exit the University, the students will have forgotten most of the content and even the format of basic correspondences as in memos, letters, reports and summaries that are commonly utilised in the world of commerce. Although all their commerce courses use English as the language of instruction, (and bilingual in some), it is not sufficient to accommodate the requirements of the industries at large. Since the concern raised by the community is valid, it is perhaps timely that the FOBE now consider including an additional course in English to further reinforce competency and proficiency in English. The EFL Department has a course that addresses academic and formal writing in

tertiary institutions which can be tailored to accommodate a particular area of need in the world of commerce. The HEN107 English for Academic Purposes was implemented in 2007 and has become a core elective for the Faculty of Sciences as well. The course HEN107 English for Academic Purposes focuses on writing and presenting reports and research that are aligned with the student's Faculty of preference and their writing expectations.

Since most of the students are full time and without work experience, it becomes expedient that lectures and tutorials for HEN 100 Business English be increased to four (4) hours per week, which still allows the course to continue its traditional two (2) hours of consecutive lectures followed by two (2) hours of alternating, one (1) hour of tutorials to enable students to apply in class and on the spot many of the required reading, writing and oral presentations that are industry related. Even telephone manners and the taking of messages which often are not relayed, as many senior managers will attest, require urgent attention and improvement.

Recommendations

1. The HEN100 Business English will continue as a core course in Semester 1 for the three (3) year Bachelor of Commerce Degree and other programmes.
2. The HEN107 English for Academic Purposes is recommended as another English course that the FOBE should consider as their other elective in the FOBE diploma and degree programmes for their undergraduates. These will hone their reading, writing and presenting skills even further.
3. The EFL Department in collaboration with the FOBE will design a specialist course in Report Writing at the 200 or 300 level tailored specifically for technical writing in the corporate world.
4. The EFL Department will increase the number of tutorials from one to two hours to enable more practical application of business correspondences on the spot, especially in relation to the many types of reports, summaries, and related writings, inclusive of grammar, coherence and formality.

- 5 The EFL will conduct periodic collaborations and consultations with the various stakeholders, departments, public and private enterprises to ensure that course content and practice are relevant, current, and compatible with the needs of individuals and industries in process and progress.
- 6 The EFL Department to consider group follow up refresher sessions and workshops on site and made available according to the particular needs of the organization or institution, at a cost and time to be negotiated between the two parties (EFL-NUS and other).
- 7 The EFL Department to consider a change to the weighting system of assessments to 40% Course Work and 60% final exam to reflect the importance of passing course work and the final examination. The present system is 50% Course Work and 50% Final Examination.
- 8 Resources will always be a need – workbooks, CDs, DVDs, Library, etc.

Conclusion

The EFL Department will continue to provide and service the course HEN100 Business English for the FOBE and other interested individuals for personal and professional progress and satisfaction. While the content of HEN100 Business English is still relevant and applicable to the employment sectors, the implementation of subject matter and topics will incorporate a variety of teaching pedagogy. This will involve the using of available resources and technology appropriate to the constantly changing technological developments in the modern business world. English will be both the subject matter and the language of instruction in the course, in relation to the current topics and applicable to the world of commerce. There will always be difficulties owing to individual differences and experiences which can be modulated and promoted with the support of local and visiting international professionals in the field. However, with consistent evaluation and feedback from graduates and industries, the course will continue to provide valuable and essential skills suitable to the working world locally, regionally and internationally. Finally, since this is a work in progress, it would still require

continuing research and analysis that would categorically identify any innovations that could have significant impacts and thereby enhance the calibre of the course HEN 100 Business English, and ultimately the profile of graduates and prospective employees.

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Biodata

Amituanai Tuiloma Vernetta N. Heem was born in Samoa, educated in Auckland and graduated with a Bachelor and Master of Arts Degrees from the University of Auckland, New Zealand. She returned to Samoa and taught English at the Church College of Western Samoa. She is currently the Head of Department in the English and Foreign Languages Department in the Faculty of Arts at the National University of Samoa.

Judy-Anne Alexander-Pouono is originally from Trinidad and Tobago, and has been living in Samoa for the last twenty five years. She was educated in Canada, Trinidad and Tobago and New Zealand, and continues to contribute to the field of education. Alexander-Pouono is a lecturer in the EFL Department at the National University of Samoa.