



Digital Correspondence in Business English: An Analysis of Students' Email Writing in the AI Era

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Abstrak

History Artikel:

Diterima 1 Mei 2026

Direvisi 25 Mei 2026

Diterima 10 Juni 2026

Tersedia online 19 Juni 2026.

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) has had a significant impact on how students approach academic writing, particularly business correspondence. The purpose of this study is to examine students' ability to write business emails in English, as well as the role of AI tools like ChatGPT in shaping their writing practices. This study used a qualitative descriptive approach and included 20 English Education Department students. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and document analysis of students' email assignments. According to the findings, while most students can follow the basic structure of business emails, they struggle with grammar accuracy, vocabulary use, clarity, and maintaining an appropriate level of formality. Artificial intelligence tools have been shown to improve writing quality, specifically grammar and sentence structure. However, the study discovered that students rely too heavily on AI, which may reduce their critical thinking and originality. Furthermore, students show varying levels of awareness regarding politeness and professional tone in email correspondence. This study emphasizes the importance of using AI as a supportive tool while also encouraging Student to develop Title (Digital Correspondence in Business English: An Analysis of Students' Email Writing in the AI Era)

Keywords: digital correspondence, business email writing, artificial intelligence, EFL students, writing skills

Introduction

Communication has changed dramatically in the digital era, moving away from traditional written formats and toward electronic forms, particularly email. Business correspondence, which was previously dominated by printed letters, is now primarily

conducted via digital platforms due to their efficiency, speed, and convenience. As a result, email has become an essential tool for professional communication, particularly in academic and workplace settings.

The ability to write effective business emails in English is an essential skill for students studying English education. It is important not only for academic reasons, but also for future professional careers. However, many students, particularly those who speak English as a second language, find it difficult to write business emails in English. Common issues include grammatical errors, a limited vocabulary, a lack of clarity, and an inappropriate tone or level of formality.

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools, such as ChatGPT, have recently been introduced, adding a new dimension to the learning process. These tools are capable of instantly producing text, correcting grammatical errors, and improving sentence structure. As a result, many students rely on artificial intelligence (AI) to assist them with writing tasks such as composing business emails. While AI has significant benefits in terms of improving writing quality, it also raises concerns about students' dependence, originality, and critical thinking.

Previous research has shown that AI can help students improve their writing performance, particularly in terms of grammar accuracy and vocabulary development. However, there is still a lack of research that specifically examines how students use AI in the context of business email writing and how it affects their writing competence and learning process. This suggests a need for further investigation, particularly in the context of English correspondence courses.

As a result, the purpose of this study is to evaluate students' ability to write business emails in English and to investigate the role of artificial intelligence in shaping their writing practices. The study also aims to identify student challenges, such as over-reliance on AI tools and awareness of formality and politeness in professional communication. By addressing these issues, this research is expected to help develop more effective teaching strategies that incorporate technology while preserving students' critical and independent learning skills.

Research Method

1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to investigate students' ability in writing business emails in English within the context of the AI era. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aims to explore not only the linguistic features of students' writing but also their experiences, perceptions, and practices in using artificial intelligence tools such as ChatGPT. This design allows the researcher to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon in its natural context.

2. Participants

The participants of this study consisted of 20 undergraduate students from the English Education Department who had completed the English for Correspondence course. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, as they met specific criteria relevant to the research objectives, namely having experience in writing business emails and having used AI tools, particularly ChatGPT, to support their writing process. The selection of participants aimed to ensure that the data obtained were rich and relevant to the focus of the study.

3. Data Collection

Data were collected through document analysis and semi-structured interviews. In the document analysis, students' business email assignments were collected and examined to identify patterns related to grammatical accuracy, email structure, vocabulary use, tone, and

level of formality. A total of 20 email texts were analyzed to reflect students' actual writing performance in an academic context. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore students' experiences, strategies, and perceptions regarding the use of AI tools in writing business emails. Each interview lasted approximately 10–15 minutes and was conducted in a semi-formal setting to allow participants to express their responses freely while maintaining focus on the research objectives. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and meanings across the collected data. The analysis began with data familiarization, in which the researcher read and re-read the students' email texts and interview transcripts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data. This process enabled the researcher to become fully immersed in the data and identify initial insights. After that, initial coding was conducted by identifying and labelling relevant segments of the data based on key analytical aspects such as grammar accuracy, sentence structure, tone and politeness, clarity of message, and the use of AI tools. These codes were then grouped into broader themes that represent the main findings of the study, including students' ability in writing business emails, the role of AI in improving writing quality, over-reliance on AI tools, and students' awareness of formality and politeness in professional communication. Finally, the identified themes were interpreted to explain the relationship between students' writing performance and their use of AI tools, particularly in terms of how linguistic competence and technological assistance interact in shaping students' email writing practices.

5. Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, this study employed data triangulation by combining document analysis and interview data. The researcher compared the results from both data sources to identify consistent patterns and strengthen the validity of the interpretations. In addition, careful data handling procedures were applied, including accurate transcription of interview data and systematic coding, to ensure the reliability of the analysis.

Results and Discussion

Students' Ability in Writing Business Emails

The analysis of students' email assignments shows that most participants were able to follow the general structure of business emails, including opening, body, and closing. However, several recurring issues were identified in terms of grammar accuracy, vocabulary choice, tone, and clarity.

For instance, one student wrote: "Hi Sir, I want to ask about the assignment because I don't understand it clearly."

This sentence reflects an informal tone, particularly in the use of "Hi" and the direct phrasing of the request. In formal business correspondence, more appropriate expressions such as "Dear Sir/Madam" and "I would like to inquire about..." are expected.

Another example shows grammatical inaccuracy: "I am very confuse about the task you give yesterday."

The incorrect use of "confuse" instead of "confused" indicates limited control of adjective forms. Similarly, another student wrote: "Please give me explanation about this task."

This sentence lacks appropriate article usage and sounds less polite compared to "Could you please provide an explanation...".

These findings are consistent with previous studies which indicate that EFL students often face difficulties in grammar accuracy and formal writing conventions (Losi et al., 2024). This suggests that students still need support in developing both linguistic accuracy and formal writing competence.

The Role of AI in Improving Writing Quality

The findings indicate that artificial intelligence tools, particularly ChatGPT, play a significant role in assisting students' writing. Most participants reported that they used AI to check grammar, generate sentences, and improve the overall structure of their emails.

One participant stated:

"I usually use ChatGPT to correct my grammar and make my sentences more formal."

Another student explained:

"ChatGPT helps me find better words and makes my email more professional."

These responses indicate that AI functions as a supportive tool that enhances students' writing quality, especially in grammar and vocabulary. This finding aligns with previous research showing that AI can significantly improve EFL students' writing performance (Syarifah & Fakhrudin, 2024).

However, the improvement is often limited to surface-level aspects. Students tend to focus on correcting language errors rather than developing deeper writing skills, such as organizing ideas and adjusting tone appropriately.

Over-Reliance on AI Tools

Despite its benefits, the study found that some students rely excessively on AI tools. Instead of using AI as a learning aid, they tend to copy and paste generated responses directly into their assignments.

As one student admitted:

"Sometimes I just copy the email from ChatGPT because it is already good."

Another participant stated:

"I don't always understand the sentences from AI, but I still use them."

This behaviour raises concerns regarding originality and critical thinking. When students depend heavily on AI, they may not actively engage in the writing process. As a result, their ability to construct sentences independently may decrease.

This finding supports previous studies which highlight the risk of over-reliance on AI in language learning, particularly in reducing students' critical engagement with writing tasks (Marhaban et al., 2025).

3.4 Awareness of Formality and Politeness

Another important finding relates to students' awareness of formality and politeness in business communication. The data show that students demonstrate varying levels of understanding in this area.

Some students successfully used polite expressions such as:

"I would appreciate it if you could provide further explanation regarding the assignment."

However, others mixed formal and informal language within the same email, as shown in the example:

"Dear Sir, can you explain again? I am still confused haha."

The use of informal expressions such as "haha" indicates a lack of awareness of professional communication norms. This issue is closely related to pragmatic competence, particularly in the use of politeness strategies.

According to pragmatic theory, effective communication requires not only grammatical accuracy but also the ability to adjust language based on context and social

norms. In this case, students still need to develop their understanding of appropriate tone and politeness in formal writing contexts.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that students' ability in writing business emails is influenced by both linguistic competence and technological support. While students are generally familiar with the structure of email writing, they still face challenges in grammar accuracy, vocabulary usage, and maintaining an appropriate level of formality.

The use of AI tools such as ChatGPT has significantly improved the quality of students' writing, particularly in terms of grammar and sentence structure. This supports previous findings that AI can enhance EFL students' writing performance (Syarifah & Fakhrudin, 2024). However, the findings also reveal that over-reliance on AI may hinder the development of critical thinking and independent writing skills (Marhaban et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the issue of formality and politeness reflects students' limited pragmatic competence. Writing a business email requires not only grammatical accuracy but also the ability to adjust language according to context and audience. Therefore, teaching strategies should focus not only on linguistic aspects but also on communicative and pragmatic competence.

Overall, this study suggests that AI has great potential as a learning tool in writing instruction. However, its use must be balanced with proper pedagogical guidance to ensure that students remain active participants in the learning process.

Conclusion

This study has examined students' ability in writing business emails in English and explored the role of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in supporting their writing practices. The findings indicate that although most students are able to follow the general structure of business emails, they still encounter difficulties related to grammar accuracy, vocabulary use, clarity, and maintaining an appropriate level of formality and politeness. These challenges reflect the need for further development of both linguistic and pragmatic competence in professional communication.

The study also reveals that AI tools, such as ChatGPT, play a significant role in improving students' writing quality, particularly in terms of grammar and sentence structure. However, the findings highlight a critical issue of over-reliance on AI, where some students tend to depend on generated texts without fully understanding the content. This may limit the development of critical thinking and independent writing skills.

Therefore, it is important for educators to integrate AI tools into the teaching process in a balanced and guided manner. AI should be used as a supportive learning tool rather than a substitute for students' own efforts. In addition, teaching practices should emphasize not only language accuracy but also awareness of formality, politeness, and audience in business communication.

In conclusion, while AI offers valuable opportunities in enhancing students' writing performance, its effective use depends on proper pedagogical guidance. This study contributes to the development of more adaptive and responsible approaches in teaching business email writing in the digital era.

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