Bringing reality to the classroom: Exercises in intertextuality

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Abstract

The ability to handle intertextual relations in email is an important component of workplace writing competence that is, for the most part, overlooked in business English classes because of a tendency to treat emails in classroom contexts as independent texts. This study reports on a series of email assignments that required students to read and process a collection of texts before composing emails themselves, with the aim of examining how students dealt with the demands made by the intertextual nature of workplace writing. The findings suggest that the management of multiple texts and their intertextual relations poses considerable challenges for student writers, specifically relating to the amount of information to include, the degree of explicitness needed in referring to other texts, and the management of the dialogue and writer-reader relationship. The study concludes that there is a need to demonstrate to students the centrality of intertextuality and the ways in which it contributes to the coherence of workplace communication. Students need to understand, too, that managing intertextuality is not simply a question of textual manipulation, but of understanding the communicative context and of considering how they want their relationship with the reader to develop.

Key words

1. Introduction

Intertextuality, the notion that texts are linked to other texts, is a pervasive element of workplace writing, and its traces can be seen to a greater or lesser extent in many of the texts produced in workplace settings: the references made to specific documents such as catalogues and regulations, the email chains that evolve from enquiries and negotiations, and the templates produced in organisations that writers use to carry out routine tasks, to name but a few instances. The notion of intertextuality has been variously explained and defined. Bazerman (2004), for example, captures the idea that the construction of texts is both backward and forward looking in its influences and references, while Fairclough (1992) considers the tactical aspects of this phenomenon, and the ways in which text producers

might call upon other texts for their own particular ends. The importance of intertextuality as a feature of workplace writing is largely accepted, and a wealth of research has demonstrated the ways in which texts written in professional settings draw upon other texts, both written and spoken, as writers collaborate, directly or indirectly, to produce workplace genres (Flowerdew & Wan, 2006; Gimenez, 2006; Kankaanranta, 2006; Yates & Orlikowski, 2002). Further recognition of the importance of this feature of workplace writing is evidenced in research that has looked more specifically at intertextuality as a significant factor in the way that writers go about the business of text construction (Cheng & Mok, 2008; Evans, 2012; Ho, 2011; Warren, 2013, 2016). However, there is not much evidence that activities and practices informed by the intertextual nature of workplace writing have found their way into the classroom. Business communication textbooks, for example, take little notice of this phenomenon, and tend to treat texts as standalone, decontextualised entities (Author 1, 2008). Similarly, while the importance of acquainting students with intertextuality as an influence on workplace writing has been acknowledged (e.g. Evans, 2012; Hyland, 2004) there are, to our knowledge, no reports of instructors attempting to take account of intertextuality in their teaching. This study represents one attempt at redressing that situation. Conducted in Hong Kong, it reports on a series of student email assignments designed to address the intertextual nature of workplace writing.

2. Literature review

Research into the role and influence of intertextuality in workplace contexts is predicated on the understanding that texts should not be viewed in isolation; thus, researchers interested in this area see workplace genres as components of larger networks of interrelated activity, describing these variously as "genre sets" (Devitt, 1991, 2004), "systems of genres" (Bazerman, 1994), or "genre repertoires" (Orlikowski & Yates, 1994). Berkenkotter highlights the importance of recognising the interconnected nature of writing in workplace settings, as she explains that "*the professions are organized by genre systems* [emphasis in original]" (2001, p. 327).

One of the earliest attempts at categorising intertextuality comes in the work of Devitt (1991), who identifies three types: referential, functional and generic. Referential intertextuality describes instances when one text refers directly to another; functional intertextuality can be seen when a text in a larger set or system is shaped in some way by the

texts surrounding it; generic intertextuality is the outcome in textual form of writers drawing on previous texts that have been deployed in response to similar recurring situations (cf. Miller, 1984). A useful extension of Devitt's (1991) work can be seen in Bhatia (2004), who builds on her notions of referential and functional intertextuality, providing more detailed categories of these phenomena, namely "texts providing a context" (p. 126), "texts within and around the text", "[t]exts explicitly referred to in the text", "texts implicitly referred to in the text", "texts embedded within the text" and "texts mixed with the text" (p. 127). These categories serve as a helpful lens through which intertextual activity can be viewed, and are revisited in Section 5.

Intertextual contributions to the construction of texts can come from a variety of sources. At a referential level these can include other texts in a chain of correspondence, as might be seen in a negotiated exchange between a buyer and supplier, or texts that are referred to in order to provide more detailed information, such as price lists, import procedures, regulations and so on. Much of the intertextual influence on a text will come from within the organisation. This is because writing processes take place in organisational settings, and as such are socially constructed (Goodwin & Duranti, 1992). Writing is thus context-bound, and texts will be produced with reference to previous documents, the expectations of the professional community, house styles and other factors that are part of a particular workplace setting. The outcome of this is that writers in these settings are often required to write texts in particular ways, either explicitly prescribed in the form of templates or similar, or the result of there being tacitly recognised ways of doing things within an organisation, part of what Berkenkotter describes as the "historically sedimented practices" (2001, p. 338) that might be found there. Moreover, as has been observed by Burnett (2001), as much as 75% to 85% of workplace writing is collaborative in nature; thus, any document will very likely be the outcome of multiple inputs from colleagues. Freedman, Adam and Smart (1994) capture these organisational and collegial influences with their point that "workplace writing is resonant with the discourse of colleagues and the ongoing conversation of the institution" (p. 210).

It is important to remember that intertextuality is not restricted to the relationships among written texts, but that spoken discourse also helps shape the texts produced in professional settings. Gunnarsson (1997), for example, notes the "continuous interplay"

between spoken and written discourse in the workplace. Nickerson's (2000) study of intraorganisational communication finds that writers employed intertextuality in their emails as they included texts taken both from previous emails and meetings; similarly, Evans observes that emails are "tightly interwoven with other texts . . . as well as spoken discourses" (2012, p. 210).

A further key element of writing in professional contexts is that the relationship among texts in systems of genres is dynamic. Workplace writing is an "ongoing, dialogic process" (Author 1, 2008) and this dialogue will have an impact on the ways in which texts are constructed. This dialogic relationship among texts is perhaps most vividly represented in the ways that emails function in workplace contexts, and a number of studies have looked at the role of intertextuality in the production of email (Cheng & Mok, 2008; Evans 2012; Gimenez, 2006; Ho, 2011; Warren, 2013, 2016). These studies demonstrate not only the centrality of intertextual relations in email discourse flows, but also the fact that a "writer or speaker needs to be able to handle intertextuality appropriately" (Warren, 2016, p. 27) to achieve coherent professional discourse. Ho (2011), looking at request emails between academics, provides a specific instance of how the ability to handle intertextuality could be advantageous, saying that "the strategic incorporation of intertextual and interdiscursive elements could affect a higher chance of request compliance" (p. 2545).

It seems clear, then, that not only is intertextuality a pervasive feature of workplace writing, but it also plays a valuable role in creating effective professional discourse, as explained above, suggesting that the ability to manage this aspect of the writing process is a necessary component of a writer's competence. The pedagogical implication of this is the need to help students understand the ways in which intertextual links affect the writing process and the shape of the texts that emerge, and to help them develop the skills required to manage texts accordingly. However, as noted, while there is some acknowledgement of the value of acquainting students with intertextuality (Devitt, 2004; Holmes, 2004; Hyland 2004), there have been no reported attempts to design workplace-oriented tasks and activities in classroom settings that might expose students to the challenges and demands posed by the realities of intertextuality. Author 1 (2008) has noted that business communication textbooks have taken little notice of intertextuality: the term itself is not mentioned, but more importantly the discussions of workplace writing and the tasks accompanying these tend to

treat texts as isolated, decontextualised events, rather than components in larger genre systems. He calls for the provision of "a richer discursive environment, and one which would give students the opportunity to make more authentic rhetorical responses to different situations" (2008, p. 307), a call echoed by Ho (2011) and Evans (2012).

The writing of email, "the primary medium of internal and external business communication" (Evans, 2012, p. 203), makes considerable intertextual demands on the writer, and could provide an arena in which to situate tasks that would require students to draw on multiple texts as they compose. However, studies of student email writing have for the most part drawn on students' emails to their instructors, looking at how they frame requests and manage register in respect of power relationships (e.g. Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007; Chen, 2006; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). Furthermore, as with the tasks described by Author 1 (2008) in his analysis of business communication textbooks, these studies deal with texts as standalone entities rather than components in discourse flows. Author 1 argues for "the provision of more complex sets of intertextually linked texts" (2008, p. 307) in order to help students experience demands involved in handling intertextuality. Evans is more specific, as he stresses the "desirability of embedding email messages in activities which involve the processing and use of spoken and written input" (2012, p. 206).

The discussion of intertextuality as it relates to workplace writing has now reached a stage where there is recognition of its prevalence, its importance, and also of the need to teach students how to manage it. Yet, there has thus far been no documented attempt to address this need in a classroom setting. This study presents the first stage of an attempt to rise to that challenge, reporting on the experiences of a group of students given a set of email writing tasks designed specifically to address issues relating to the management of intertextuality. As Author 1 explains, students "should not be writing in a vacuum, but producing texts as responses to previous and current situations" (2008, p. 310); thus, the assignments reported in this paper required students to read and process a collection of texts before composing emails themselves. In assigning tasks of this nature, the intention was to move away from the kinds of task typically found in business communication textbooks; these often provide a detailed, scripted context, and explain what kind of response is required. Such a scenario neither allows for nor necessitates much thinking on the part of the writer (Author 1, 2008). The overall aim of the study was to look at how students managed the

challenges posed by the intertextual nature of the tasks, which represented relatively unfamiliar territory in terms of the task type and concomitant demands.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research context

This research is focused on email writing tasks that formed part of the assessment of a 13-week compulsory undergraduate module on the uses of English in corporate and professional contexts, which ran at a Hong Kong university in 2014-15. The students on this module were English majors in their second year, enrolled on a degree programme where the focus was on the uses of English in professional communication rather than on literature. The assessments for the module were predominantly writing tasks and were designed to mirror, as much as possible, some of the different types of writing one might expect to find in and around workplace contexts such as CV and cover letter writing, email communication and report writing. For each of the assessments the students were graded on whether they achieved the overall aims of the tasks, as well as on the appropriateness of the content, organisation and language used.

The classes made use of a lecture and seminar format, in which a weekly one-hour lecture presented students with different theoretical approaches to, and perspectives on, communication, while the weekly two-hour seminar provided opportunities to practically engage with and apply the principles and theories presented in the lectures. 105 students were enrolled on this module at the time this research was carried out. All students were expected to attend the weekly lecture and this large group was then divided into four seminar groups of around 25 students. All of the lectures were delivered by the module leader, who also taught one of the seminar groups. The three other seminar groups were all taught by one other tutor.

There was no textbook for the course; instead we used materials that have been developed over some years. Many of the students, however, had used business communication textbooks, at one time or another, on associate degree courses prior to joining this programme. The books they had used tended to be among the more popular of the standard business communication textbooks (e.g., Bovee & Thill, 2012; Guffey & Du-

Babcock, 2008), which, as shown in Author 1's 2008 study, do not take specific account of intertextuality, and for the most part treat texts, whether for illustrative or practice purposes, as stand-alone entities, underlining the likelihood that the approach taken in the course described here would be unfamiliar to the students. Intertextuality as a feature of workplace writing was raised in the lectures, but was not addressed directly from a pedagogical perspective. It should be stressed that the purpose of this study was very much exploratory in nature, aimed at identifying what sort of challenges intertextually-linked tasks presented, rather than to offer pedagogical solutions.

3. 2 Motivation for research study
The main aims of this module were to develop students' knowledge and understanding of corporate and professional communication, and to improve their ability to communicate effectively in a range of different contexts. Previous iterations of the module approached email communication from a perspective, referred to briefly above, that treated emails as standalone texts and that relied predominantly on scripted context as a stimulus for writing. In their assessments, students would typically be given a detailed prompt describing a particular scenario, and would be required to compose an email that might offer a solution to a problem and/or respond to a request using the content of the prompt to frame and inform their email. The instructions to the students frequently encouraged them to embellish their emails with additional information to make their responses "more realistic", and were often advised to work within a 250 - 300 word limit.

These types of scripted tasks do not really require the students to engage in any intertextual work, as the texts produced are not part of an ongoing interaction. One concern for us was that these tasks were to a considerable extent testing language proficiency, while overlooking some of the skills that might be expected to be applied in email exchanges. For this reason, we instituted a number of changes to the assessments with the intention of creating a more realistic context for writing and of moving away from scripted standalone writing tasks, as described above. In doing this, one of our goals was to find out what happens when students are given intertextually linked tasks. Specifically, we asked: What challenges or difficulties do these types of tasks present, and what types of writing are produced as a result?

Whilst we did not begin this process with a fixed set of expectations, it is important to recognise that we did set out with certain intentions and assumptions (Smagorinsky, 2008). We wanted to see how the nature of the email writing tasks that we had designed impacted on the students' writing, how the students responded to the tasks and how this reflected their understanding of email communication. The primary motivation for this study was to inform pedagogy and classroom practice, and to address a gap that research has indicated exists between traditional approaches to the teaching and writing of email communication and the types of email writing seen in practice in professional contexts. We assumed that changing the nature of the writing tasks would pose a new set of challenges for the student writers and that it would require them to act in ways different from what they may have previously been taught about writing emails. It was assumed, too, that in addition to the input from the lectures and seminars, students would draw on their own existing knowledge and experiences of email writing to make decisions about how to respond to the tasks, and whilst we expected that the email tasks we set them would be challenging, we did not have any specific or concrete assumptions about how they would perform in these tasks.

3.3 Data analysis

The data discussed here are derived from the email assignments produced by one seminar group, comprised of 29 students , all of whom were in the group taught by the lecturer. The students gave permission for their work to be used for the purposes of this research and all student writing that appears in this article is quoted verbatim.

The approach that we took for data analysis can perhaps best be understood as being one of constant comparison (Glaser, 1965). In order to address our research questions, we began with text-based analyses in which we manually annotated the students' emails. We individually read through the emails looking at the ways in which the writers had addressed the task and noted what we felt to be important features of the text such as common strategies and styles that had been used, or anything that stood out as being particularly effective or confusing . We then came together to discuss our ideas, noting common themes and topics identified. In this sense the process was an iterative one in which we moved backwards and forwards between the texts and our readings and codes, refining each time what we felt were important features and identifying themes and patterns across the different tasks. In many ways our approach mirrors what Heath and Street (2008) describe as

the recursive process (see Figure 1 below), in which the researcher is engaged in "backwards and forwards movement between hunches, the literature and the data" (p. 34).
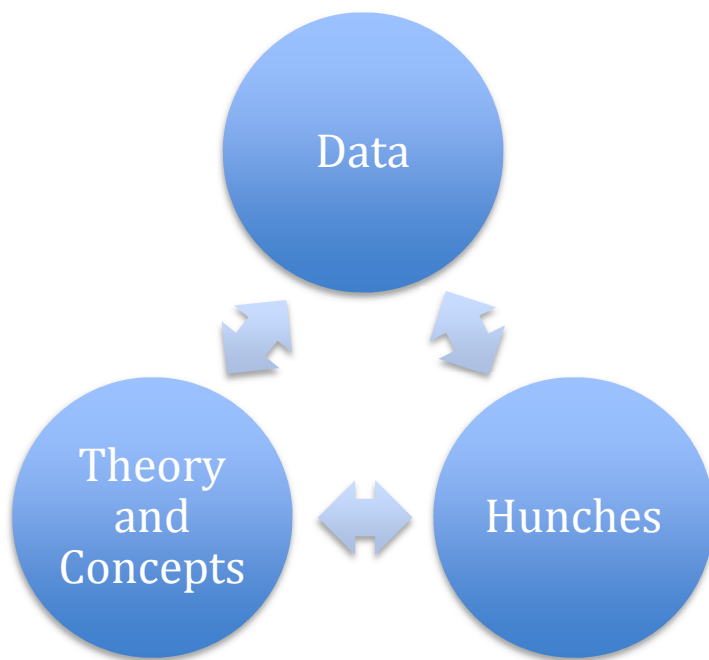

Figure 1: The recursive process, adapted from Heath & Street (2008)

3. 4 Description of tasks

The students were asked to complete three email tasks which were set over a five-week period. The tasks were presented in the lecture and discussed in more detail in the follow-up seminars. Tasks 1 and 2 were designed as pair work tasks that the students had time to work on outside the class, and Task 3 was an individual task that was done in class under timed conditions. The reasoning behind these different task types and interactions was the desire to create different writing contexts, and also to provide a developmental element for this section of the course whereby the students worked together on tasks that were, to a considerable degree, formative in nature before moving on to a more summative individual assessment. In addition to producing the written emails, the students were, in the case of Tasks 1 and 2, asked to submit a short rationale explaining some of the rhetorical and linguistic choices they had made in writing the emails. In these rationales, the students wrote about various issues, such as how they had sequenced the information, the style they had tried to adopt, and the type of language they had used. The rationales were not assessed and no specific guidance was given beyond the explanation that this writing was an opportunity to account for their decisions and aims in making them. The students engaged in this in a variety of different

ways, but because the data from these have thus far not added any significant insights into the writing process, they have not been included in the discussion here.

All three tasks required the students to engage in the types of communicative activities that might be required of them in workplace contexts, in this case responding to information, making a request and delivering bad news. Although the tasks were different in terms of communicative function and focus, they made use of the same context and writer identity and were therefore part of ongoing and interconnected communications. To avoid any ethical issues in using actual email communication, the emails and tasks were specially created for use in this module; however, they were based on actual email communications and workplace tasks that third year students who had completed internships had reported being asked to do.

In Task 1 (see Appendix 1), the students were asked to write an email requesting information from a client with whom their manager had previously been in contact. To do this they had to process a chain of emails between their manager and a client regarding an order for T-shirts, and to listen to a voicemail message related to this order. In Task 2 (see Appendix 2), the students had to write a response to a company supplier to clarify and confirm information regarding an order. This time the students were given an email their manager had received from the supplier; the email had annotations from the manager that included the points of action that needed addressing. In each of these tasks the students were asked to take over the communications' i.e., to take up a dialogue that had been initiated earlier. As a result, a key component of the tasks was that the writing pairs had to make decisions about how they took over the conversations and what information they felt needed to be prioritised.

During the weekly seminars the students were given time to work with their partner on drafting their emails, and to share their draft emails in class for peer review and feedback from the tutor. These sessions were designed to be an opportunity for the students to experiment with different patterns and styles of communication and to develop a better awareness of their own communicative styles through working with their partner.

Task 3 (see Appendix 3) asked the students to draft a 'bad news' email on behalf of their

manager explaining to a client that their order had been affected by a warehouse fire. The email was to be written as part of the scenario that had been established and developed through Tasks 1 and 2. In this task, the students received a message from their manager which highlighted the key points that the email needed to address. The students were told in advance that they would be required to write some sort of bad news email and that this would be done as an individual writing task under timed conditions in class. When they received the task prompt the students were given ten minutes to think about and discuss the task with their classmates and they were then given 20 minutes to compose their email responses quietly by themselves. As with Tasks 1 and 2, the space for peer interaction and discussion of the email responses was important, as there is often a great deal of talk that goes on around writing in workplace contexts (Debs, 1991; Evans, 2012; Gunnarsson, 1997), and it is not uncommon for people to seek input or advice; this was the kind of practice the classes sought to encourage. The task was handwritten and each of the students' emails was collected for assessment.

There are two main reasons for the differences in the nature of Task 3. Firstly, much of the assessment for this module required the students to work in pairs or small groups: designing Task 3 as an individual task provided an opportunity to assess the students' email writing individually and for them to receive feedback on their own writing. The second reason is that making it a timed activity also meant that the students could be assessed under more pressurised conditions.

4. Findings
In the task scenarios described above, the writers are being asked to enter a relationship that already exists, in that the writer's manager and the client have previously engaged in communication about the topic at hand. The reader thus possesses a certain amount of relevant knowledge, and it is the task of the writers to make appropriate decisions regarding how to enter the dialogue and how much information to include as they do so. The nature of the tasks clearly has implications for what we considered to constitute a "successful" email. Obviously, there is no absolute standard way of rendering these texts, but in the light of the situations that we presented the students, we were looking for a message which took up the ongoing dialogue in a natural way, acknowledging – implicitly or otherwise – that a level of shared knowledge and understanding was already in place. To be deemed successful, the

message should be clear and readable, and should not include unnecessary information (i.e. things already known by the reader), but make appropriate levels of reference to shared knowledge in order to convey the new information.

On the basis of the criteria above, the successful student emails identified in our analysis were those which managed to take over and enter into the ongoing dialogue naturally. These texts demonstrated an understanding of the shared knowledge that had already been established and tailored their information accordingly; they also tended to be shorter and more precise and were able to convey the message without providing too much extraneous information. Appendix 4 contains examples of emails that were submitted by the students, one for each task type.

From our analysis of the student texts, three interrelated themes emerged as potential issues and challenges for the writers:
1) The amount of information included
2) The degree of explicitness in referring to other texts
3) The management of the dialogue/relationship

Given that the analysis of the texts, as explained in section 3.3, was, in effect, a process of identifying and grouping common themes, we have taken these themes listed above to be the organising principle for the Findings section. These themes are important, as they reflect one of the primary research goals underpinning this research, which is to better understand the different problems posed to students by intertextuality. The discussion that follows reflects this intention through focusing on the observations we made regarding textual features that characterised both effective and less effective emails.

4.1. Amount of information included

In each of the three tasks the word lengths of the emails produced by the students varied considerably. In Task 1 the shortest email was 141 words, whereas the longest was 317 words (average 211); for Task 2 the shortest email was 105 words and the longest 239 words (average 174), and for Task 3, the shortest was 124 words, and the longest 309 (average 185). It became evident from the analysis that the management of information – in terms of what was deemed to be necessary for the reader—was a challenge, and that the students made quite different choices as to how much detail to include. Whilst some of the pairs kept their

emails very brief and direct, others included much more detail in their responses (see Appendix 4). The longer emails tended to repeat information that would already have been known to the reader, or they included information or "filler" that did not necessarily contribute to the clarity of the message, and in some cases impeded it. This was particularly evident in the Task 3 emails, which required the writers to convey bad news. In the longer Task 3 emails the students seemed to spend more time seeking to mitigate the bad news, rather than considering the impact on the reader and on the message itself. The extract below, which is the opening paragraph from one student's response to Task 3, is an example of the kind of additional information that was seen in the less successful emails:

Since the establishment of our company in 2009, we have placed all of our finished products in several reliable warehouses near our office for storage and early inspection. We are sorry to inform you that there was a fire at one of our warehouses last night. It is fortunate that no one was injured and only part of the orders were damaged, including a box of 25 t-shirts of your order

As can be seen here, the opening line seeks to deflect the reader's attention from what is happening, with information that is largely irrelevant, and it would not be a natural insertion into an ongoing correspondence about a garment order. The tendency to include more information than was needed to convey the main message is an indicator of the students' uncertainty about how much information was needed to achieve their communicative goals. This practice can perhaps be attributed to their adopting a textbook approach to giving negative messages by attempting to buffer and/or deflect attention from the bad news. It is also possible that the students approached the tasks as assessment items, in the belief that "longer equals better", resulting in texts that were considerably longer than those typically seen in workplace writing studies, such as that reported by Warren (2016). A further possibility is that this inclusion of additional information is a result of prior training or advice on email writing that may have set a particular word length, as explained in Section 3.2. These explanations notwithstanding, there is nevertheless evidence that there was some difficulty when it came to introducing this development (i.e. the fire) into the dialogue that had built up between the buyer and seller.

4.2 Degree of explicitness in referring to other texts

As noted above, the problematic areas encountered by student writers are interconnected, and the issue dealt with here—the degree of explicitness found in the emails—is to an extent related to the management of information and the resulting length of the text. Working out the appropriate amount of information needed and referring to it in a manner that made sense in terms of what the reader already knew proved a considerable challenge. The most successful writers in this regard were able to make brief, succinct references to shared knowledge, as seen in this example:

It would be great if we can receive your reply by the 21st, so that we'll have enough time to process the order and deliver the T-shirts by the 29th.

The deployment of references here is skillfully managed: "your reply" implies a message to respond to, and a continuing dialogue; "the order" and :the T-shirts" refer to the broader subject of the entire exchange of emails that this is part of, without going into details that will already be familiar to both parties.

In emails that we classified as being less successful, we noted not only students' uncertainty about how much information to repeat, but also observed their difficulties in handling the information from a linguistic perspective. The example below, which comes from Task 1, is successful in that it conveys the necessary information with its references to shared knowledge (i.e. the order), but in overloading the opening of the email with references to the order, the text contains more unnecessary repetitions, when compared to the example above:

*I am writing on behalf of Mr Smith to confirm the details of your **order** of T-shirts for the charity football match. Regarding your **order**, we would like to confirm the details as the following:*
1. *Size: There is not any price difference for different sizes in your **order**.*
(Emphasis added.)

A related linguistic problem observed in the handling of shared knowledge can be seen in the use of nominalised forms intended to refer to information known to the reader, while avoiding repetition of specific details – words such as *matter, situation, issue, question,*

information and so on. The examples below give an idea of students' attempts to use these forms:

I am writing on behalf of Bob to reconfirm the information that you have given us in the previous emails in order to finalize everything.

I am writing on behalf of my boss Bob to acknowledge our understanding on the situation but we have noticed that there are several points on the matter that have yet to be clarified.

These proforms are tools for achieving cohesion, but the degree of precision in terms of what they are referring to is important, and in the cases seen above, the resulting sentences are somewhat vague.

An additional problem that arose from students' handling of shared knowledge and the ways in which to refer to it related to the use of articles. In a number of instances the use or omission of the definite article had the potential to result in misunderstanding, as seen below:

*. . . due to **the** fire accident which happened yesterday at our warehouse, 25 white T-shirts are going to be replaced by green and blue T-shirts.*

*Your order was ready to be delivered as we experienced **the** unpleasant incident of **the** fire at one of our warehouses.*

In each of these two examples the writer is in fact referring to an incident that would be unknown to the reader, but the misdeployment of the definite article, while grammatically correct, has the effect of sounding somewhat casual and implying that the reader is already familiar with the situation, when the writer's task is to break the negative news and mitigate it in some way. The non-deployment of the definite article also had the potential to cause problems, as shown here:

Please confirm if you are able to deliver (the) 100 T-shirts to us on 27th September.

The omission of "the" before 100 appears to refer to a new order, when in fact the message should refer to the existing order.

It should, of course, be acknowledged that the management of the article system in English can be a problem for Hong Kong learners because no article system exists in Chinese. (It is also a problem for a number of other groups such as Russian or Arabic speakers.) Thus, the confusion resulting from articles in these examples cannot be attributed directly to the intertextual nature of the task. However, the potential problems caused by inappropriate article usage can be more acute in instances like this, where a considerable degree of precision in referring to shared and new information is needed. For this reason, it is important to pay particular attention to the management of articles when helping students with tasks like those described here.

A final element of email writing related to the issue of referring to shared knowledge was the subject line. Although some students did try for a subject line that captured the message that they were writing themselves, most students in Task 2 retained the subject line from the existing chain of emails, even though the message had changed focus. It is not uncommon in the workplace for subject lines to remain unchanged throughout lengthy exchanges, even if the topic has moved on considerably from the original focus. This point is raised as an observation pertaining to the management of intertextually-linked email chains, rather than as evidence of poor management of information on the students' part.

4.3. Management of dialogue/relationship
The third theme that emerged from the analysis of the data was the difficulty that students encountered in managing the dialogue and relationship, given that they were not the initiators of the interaction and the accompanying chain of emails, but were entering a dialogue that was already in progress. It was interesting to note that in their rationales, mentioned above, none of the students appeared to perceive taking over relationships from the manager as being problematic, but the evidence from their texts indicates that this was not particularly well handled. What we found in these emails was that the choice of opening and closing information played a fundamental role in influencing whether or not the email was successful in achieving its communicative function, i.e. asking for information, clarifying and/or delivering bad news.

This was seen most strongly in Task 3, in which the writers were supposed to communicate news to the client of a warehouse fire that had affected their order. The success or otherwise of this email rested to a considerable extent in how they decided to open the message. From the Task 3 emails, we were only able to identify four openings that we felt were reasonably effective in bringing the issue at hand to the reader's attention. Two of these openings are shown below:

I am writing to update you on your recent order ref.110358 that you placed on the 5th of September for 100 T Shirts. We wanted to take this opportunity to thank you for placing this order with us. We are sorry to tell you that there has been a fire at one of our warehouses due to electricity leakage, we have lost a box of 25 pink T Shirts and there is not enough time to re-print them

Thank you for your recent order of the 100 T-shirts which is supposed to be delivered to you by 30th September. Because of a fire at one of our warehouse, which has caused a loss of some of our stock and disrupted our normal delivery schedule, we are writing to update you about the order

A more common approach, however, was the adoption of what seemed to be a textbook strategy to delivering bad news that included a "buffer" talking up the relationship between their organisation and the client. Typical examples of this approach are shown below:

Thank you for your continuous support for our company; it is our pleasure to work with you.

Thank you for choosing our company. We are always excited to work with ambitious and energetic corporate organizations like your company, one of the best sellers in local market.

As can be seen from these examples, there is no reference to specific elements of the dealings between the organisation and the client (e.g. the order); rather there are attempts to work on the ongoing relationship, but in an almost abstract way. There is also a strong sense of the writer trying to "sugar" the relationship. Such an approach can—ironically—have the effect of flagging an upcoming problem, but it also risks overlooking the fact that the writer and

reader are already in an ongoing conversation. The next example similarly deals in generalities rather than referring to the order straightaway, before going on to the issue at hand:

Thank you for entrusting our company. It has been an enjoyable experience working with you. You have been a very valuable customer to us.
We write this letter as there are a couple of things that require your attention. Firstly, we are delighted to tell you that we have the printed 75 T-shirts at hand and that they will safely delivered on time. Good news is that only these 75 T-shirts will be charged. To complete the order, the box of 25 printed T-shirts, which is lost in a fire at one of our warehouses and could not be reprinted on time, will be replaced by another 25 plain blue or green T-shirts instead.

In attempting to buffer the upcoming bad news, this opening also has the effect of interrupting the ongoing conversation. Not only this, in trying to manage the bad news, the email somewhat obscures the information that needs to be delivered i.e. the fact that the buyers will not be getting all the printed T-shirts. This may have been part of a learnt strategy for burying bad news, but the result is an email that does not fit easily into an existing dialogue and developing customer relationships.

Here is a further example of an attempt to deflect the reader's attention:

For a long time, you have worked closely with our company and there have been numerous business opportunities between us which demonstrated the innovative and creative power of our company. Our latest project, which involved the order of 100 T-shirts for a SPCA football match, was a task of utmost importance to us which we took with the greatest care.

The company was in the final stage of completion for the task. Originally, all 100 T-shirts were finalized in terms of design and size, printed and stored in our warehouse. However, it is with my most sincere apologies to report that there was a fire accident in the warehouse, and our company had lost some of our stock-including 25 T-shirts of the project.

Our crisis management team had tried their best to amend the situation, but I am sorry to say that there will not be enough time to re-print the lost 25 T-shirts before the original due date.

The rest of the 75 T-shirts are stored safely, in good condition and can be delivered on time, which we take very seriously.

Again, it can be seen that the writer is struggling to find to broach the subject of the disruption to the order. This opening also illustrates the point made earlier about the use of "filler" content which does not relate closely to the topic, making the email overly long, and which in turn partly obscures the message that needs to be conveyed.

We also observed that students had difficulty finding appropriate ways of ending the email in Task 3 and of the 29 emails. We identified only six that we felt were relatively successful. Two of these are included below:

If you prefer, as an alternative solution, we can also give you 25 plain T-shirts in blue or green colour for free.

Please get back to us and tell us what will be your decision, or if you want to have further discussion of other alternatives.

These can be considered effective in that they either offer a solution or further discussion; most importantly, they provide the reader with the chance to respond, thereby keeping the dialogue going. As for less successful attempts at ending the email, two examples can be seen here:

Once again, thank you for choosing our company and we are looking forward to working with you in the coming future.

I hope this does not affect your trust in our company. We hope to work with you again in the future. Thank you for your understanding.

These somewhat formulaic lines ("we are looking forward to working with you in the coming future"; "Thank you for your understanding") have the effect of bringing an end to the conversation at hand, i.e. how the impact of the warehouse fire is to be managed, in that the writer has decided to resolve the problem their own way without offering the reader an

obvious way to respond. It is reasonable to conjecture that the use of formulaic endings could be the outcome of cultural influences: certainly this practice has been found elsewhere among Chinese learners (see e.g. Rau & Rau, 2016). The main point here, though, as seen in the discussion of definite article use in 4.2, is that this practice needs to be addressed more closely in this kind of writing because of its impact on the dialogue, i.e. that of effectively bringing it to a close when lines of communication should be kept open.

Below is a further instance of the dialogue in effect being shut down:

To express our apology, we will only charge for the 75 T-shirts at a discount of 10% off. Please find the attached new PO useful. We thank you again for your purchase.

In this case the reader is given no room for manoeuvre, as the writer has decided how they are going to mitigate the problem caused by the warehouse fire, without allowing the reader to provide a response. This, again, may be the outcome of a particular set of strategies the student has learnt for managing bad news, or it may be the consequence of seeing the email as a standalone communication rather than a component in an ongoing dialogue. Either way, it is not necessarily conducive to a good relationship between the buyer and seller. The negative impact of limiting a reader's room for manoeuvre is discussed in Economidou-Kogetsidis (2011).

The examples shown in this section seem to suggest that students were producing examples of writing that met what we might describe as common textbook prescriptions for mediating bad news, but they were not able to adapt these to the demands of an ongoing dialogue.

5. Discussion

This study set out to find out how students managed a set of tasks designed to address the intertextual nature of workplace writing, requiring them to draw on multiple texts, both written and spoken, in order to produce emails. We were specifically interested in the challenges or difficulties these types of tasks presented for student writers, and what types of writing they produced as a result.

The findings from this small scale study indicate that students experienced some difficulties in rendering email texts that were appropriate to the various situations they were intended to deal with. As explained in the previous section, these difficulties related to the amount of information included in their texts, the degree of specific reference to earlier texts and the ways in which these references were handled in linguistic terms, and the management of a pre-existing and ongoing writer-reader dialogue and relationship.

Given that the study is situated in a framework that sees intertextuality as a prevalent feature and influence in the production of workplace texts, it is necessary to consider the extent to which intertextual factors related to the students' performance, in this case looking at the findings through the lens of Devitt's (1991) categories of intertextuality, namely referential, functional and generic, as explained in Section 2.

Referential intertextuality (Devitt, 1991), whereby writers make direct reference to other texts, might seem, on the face of it, to be a simple type to manage, but as was seen, the writers in this study had difficulties. In many cases there appeared to be uncertainty about levels of shared information and how this aspect of the task could be managed, evidenced in one instance by too many references to the order, and in others by somewhat vague references to situations and issues that were too imprecise to establish a shared reference for both writer and reader. Another problem came in Task 3 as some writers sought ways of not referring to the order too directly in their bid to bury the bad news about the warehouse fire.

Beyond references to the order for T-shirts, there was little evidence of writers making direct reference to other shared knowledge or communications (e.g. correspondence between the writer's manager and the client, telephone messages, etc.). It is also worth picking up on the distinction that Bhatia (2004) makes between "[t]exts explicitly referred to in the text" and "texts implicitly referred to in the text" (p. 127). While clarity can often be achieved through directly referencing a particular text, as seen, for example, in Kankaanranta (2006), research also suggests that much common ground and understanding between writer and reader comes through implicit referencing, seen in words and phrases such as "check", "confirm" (Warren, 2016) or "as agreed" (Gimenez, 2006). Further research might reveal which approach is more commonly found, and facilitates reading.

As for functional intertextuality, i.e. the notion that a text will be shaped in different ways by the texts that surround it, this relates most closely to the struggles that students had in effectively placing their text in the stream of interaction and discourse that preceded it. Essentially the writer is entering a dialogue and should be creating texts that make sense within that dialogue. Thus, any text that emerges from these contextual circumstances should be shaped by what has gone before, and by what is already known by the reader. However, the texts seen in this study for the most part do not appear to have taken on board the totality of these issues and influences, and tend towards the overlong. As mentioned earlier, research using authentic email data (e.g. Warren, 2016) suggests that individual emails within a discourse chain can be quite short.

What is also connected to Devitt's (1991) functional category of intertextuality is the need to understand the context and to manage the relationship with the reader. The texts that emerge are not just the outcome of the other texts in the process, but of the endeavours of the people who have written them, and the fact that these texts are part of a dialogue. In addition to this dialogue, there will, in most situations, be an unarticulated context that will be understood by those involved. As Evans has pointed out, "chain initiators", i.e. the initial email message that sets off a chain of messages, do not "fall suddenly from the clear blue sky" (2012, p. 209). They set a dialogue in motion, but there is very often already an established relationship between the writer and reader, in which the background and corporate context are tacitly understood. On the basis of the texts we analysed, our assumption is that students did not appear to be giving enough consideration to the writer-reader relationship in the ways that they opened and structured their messages, perhaps because they were unable to summon up the sense of context that would be available to writers in real workplace settings.

The issue of understanding of context leads is tied to Devitt's (1991) third category, that of generic intertextuality, whereby writers draw on previous texts that have been used to deal with similar situations in the past, as reported, for example, in Flowerdew and Wan's (2006) study of tax accountants. In this task, the students were somewhat disadvantaged in that they did not have generic texts to fall back on, as they were functioning in a classroom environment rather than a professional one, without the organisational resources that would be available to a workplace writer. But this raises the question of how students view texts of this type when called upon to write them. Although the students on the course were

introduced to the whole notion of intertextuality, in which texts are connected to and constructed from other texts, it is not clear how much this affected their thinking when it came to performing these email tasks. Moreover, we were uncertain as to whether the students perceived these emails as freestanding texts in their own right, or as components or stages in a dialogue. It may be that the ways in which they had previously been taught to write certain text types such as letters and emails, and the models that they had encountered in textbooks, might have encouraged their persistence in thinking about these as individual pieces of writing. This perspective contrasts with existing research by Gimenez (2006), Cheng and Mok (2008), and Warren (2016), among others, suggesting that each email is often a short element in a chain of discourse. In other words, "traditional" notions of what certain texts should look like may for these student writers have overridden the textual demands of the situation. Lacking sufficient schema for what they should be doing, they could not meet the generic demands of the situation.

As suggested earlier, the tasks in this study contained implied elements that would only be fully understood or appreciated in a real workplace, such as the tacit understanding of the context that goes with participating in its activities, and the existence of previous texts that can be referred to and drawn on. To that extent the tasks are particularly demanding, and this should be acknowledged in evaluating the students' performance. Nevertheless, there were many ways in which they did not meet the demands of the task, and which they could perhaps have addressed in this situation had they given more consideration to the question of dialogue and relationship, as summarised and discussed above.

These findings strongly indicate that the management of multiple texts and their intertextual relations poses certain challenges for student writers. The fact that there are aspects of the workplace that cannot be easily replicated in tasks such as ours may discourage some instructors from assigning tasks of this kind, but in our view this should not be a reason to desist from trying them. Such tasks serve to raise awareness about the complexity of this kind of writing, and a number of issues can in fact be addressed in the classroom.

In a module on business email writing, the first step is to demonstrate the importance and centrality of intertextuality and to show how it contributes to the coherence of workplace

communication. Authentic data for this is fairly thin, but some of the more recent research into email that has been cited in this paper (e.g. Cheng & Mok, 2008; Gimenez, 2006) can help illuminate this aspect of intertextuality. Of particular relevance is Warren's (2016) study, which looks at how writers make use of recurrent words and phrases in order to signal intertextuality in business emails. The organisational influences on the shape of texts can also be explicated in intertextual terms, so that students can see why particular representations of a genre may or may not be allowable in a given context.

Students need to understand, too, that managing intertextuality is not simply a question of textual manipulation, but of understanding the communicative context, namely where the writer and the reader fit into this, and how—in the case of emails—they want their relationship with the reader to develop. They need to work out what the reader already knows and what they need to know, and on the basis of this make a decision as to how much information to include from earlier texts, in what level of detail, and how explicitly or implicitly they should refer to it in order to achieve the clarity required to get the communicative job done.

At the same time, as explained previously, students need to be encouraged to think about the relationship as well as the message, and to consider the question of how to acknowledge the ongoing dialogue and relationship effectively. On a more micro level, this would consist of looking at ways of opening a message that will indicate, either implicitly or explicitly, that the writer is participating in an ongoing dialogue with the reader, and at ways of closing the message that will allow this dialogue to continue. An extra dimension to this is the management of politeness: as the relationship develops, it is quite probable that the register will change. The ability to read signals and adapt to the changing tenor of the interaction is not easily learnt, but students should nevertheless be made aware of this phenomenon.

6. Conclusion

Intertextuality is a pervasive feature of workplace writing, which has been demonstrated in numerous studies. Yet, given the substantial gap between research and pedagogy in this regard, there is a risk of it being seen as little more than a theoretical construct., when it is

anything but. Intertextuality plays a vital, *purposeful* role in giving texts coherence in relation to other associated texts and contexts (e.g. whether a writer is following up an order, requesting information, negotiating their way through a complex business deal or any other workplace transaction). It follows that the ability to handle intertextual relations in texts is an essential part of workplace writing competence (Candlin & Maley, 1997; Ho, 2011; O'Connor, 2002; Warren, 2016), and that as teachers we should look at ways of adding this ability to a student's toolkit.

The study has used email as the platform for its various intertextual tasks. This was not a random choice of medium. As Evans (2012) explains, "email plays a crucial role in binding together flows of internal and external activities that are directed towards the resolution of problems, the formulation of plans or the execution of decisions" (p. 210), and as such, email provides a powerful illustration of the ways in which intertextuality plays out in workplace writing. We would like to challenge the notion that email can be "covered" in a couple of classes or textbook units. Much more time is needed as email has enormous intertextual reach and complexity, a complexity that is for the most part overlooked because of the tendency to treat emails in classroom contexts as independent entities.

The broad goal of focusing on intertextuality in our teaching has been expressed by Author 1 (2008), who explains the need for students to "see the texts they read and produce as part of a wider, ongoing system of intertextually related practice, grounded in a professional context" (p. 319). Evans (2012) moves this goal closer to the classroom when he talks of "the desirability of embedding email messages, both as reading input and written output, in a series of interdependent goal-oriented tasks that integrate speaking, listening, reading and writing" (p. 210). The research reported here has taken tentative steps towards trying to achieve this goal, but it is a small-scale study. While it has identified some of the problems that students might encounter when taking on tasks that involve the management of intertextuality, a great deal more research into the nature of intertextuality, the ways in which it is realised linguistically, and the kinds of challenges it poses for student writers is needed before we can start talking about effective pedagogical interventions.

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Appendix 1

Task 1:

Email Task 1: Requesting Information

Context:

You work for a small, but successful printing company. You make a wide range of products and your company has expanded its line to include T Shirts. You help with the communications. You receive a voice message from your boss Bob Smith.

In order to write the email, you need to listen to the voice message Bob leaves you and follow his instructions. The emails he forwards are below.

Your assignment

In addition to the email, please submit a short (approx. 2 paragraphs) rationale explaining your choice of email style/language/sequence/tone etc. You will be working in pairs for this assignment and will only need to submit one copy of your work.

Emails forwarded to you from your boss

To: bobsmith @tshirttastic.com
Subject: re: Quote for T Shirts
Date: 8th September

Dear Bob,

Thanks for your email. Can you, or your team, suggest colours for me? I am not so good as a designer. In terms of want we need on them, can we get *1st SPCA Football Fundraiser* printed on the front of all of them, kind of across the middle of the chest? I need them by the 29th.

Thanks again,

Sam

To: SCheung1 @ampholdings.com

Subject: re: Quote for T Shirts

Date: 5th September

Dear Sam,

Thanks for sending the numbers through. I have a couple of points to clarify, what colours do you have in mind and do you need a range of sizes do you need, or do you want them all the same size? There are some small differences in the prices of certain colours (see price list attached in previous email) but there are no price differences in terms of sizes. When I have this, I can proceed with the order. One last point, are the T shirts for the helpers included in 25 extras?

Looking forward to completing this order for you,

Best wishes,

Bob

To: bobsmith @tshirttastic.com

Subject: re: Quote for T Shirts

Date: 5th September

Bob

Thanks for the info, that's great. Here are the numbers

Players 45

Organizers 20

Prizes 10

Extras 25

Total 100

BR

Sam

To: SCheung1 @ampholdings.com

Subject: re: Quote for T Shirts

Date: 5th September

Dear Sam,

Thank you for your email. We just started doing T shirts in the Summer so it is a new area for us and I am delighted to be able to help you with this. The football matches sound like good fun and it is for such a good cause.

In terms of the cost, this depends on how many you order, the colour and if you want any design on them (I am attaching our current price list for your reference). There is a discount for orders over 100. Once the details are confirmed, it takes between 5-7 days to complete the order so we should have plenty of time to get them to you before the 29th.

Thanks again for thinking of us and I look forward to hearing from you,

Best wishes,

Bob

To: bobsmith @tshirttastic.com

Subject: Quote for T Shirts

Date: 4th September

Dear Bob,

I hope this email finds you well. I know this is different to my usual orders but I see you do T Shirts and I was wondering if you could give me a quote for some T shirts? Our firm is organizing a day of charity football matches to raise funds for the SPCA and we need T Shirts for the players, the organizers and other helpers as well as some for prizes. The matches are scheduled for the 29th of September, Can you get them done by then?

Best regards,

Sam Cheung

Transcript of the 30 second audio recorded voice message students were given

Hi Bob here,

I've just got off the phone with Mr Cheung…he's a long term customer usually orders er… his company's stationery from us but he also saw that we do T shirts so…um… er… he wants a few of those for a charity football match that his firm are organizing to raise money for… I think it is the SPCA. Anyway…I am forwarding you on his emails to us so far… er I need him to confirm the numbers, sizes, dates before the order can go through… so could you take care of that. Oh… one more thing …the colours as well…. thank you

Appendix 2

Email Task 2: Responding to information

You work for a small, but successful printing company. You make a wide range of products and your company has expanded its line to include T Shirts. You help with the communications. Your boss, Bob Smith, has received an email about an order. He has printed off the email and has given it to you to write the reply. He has made some notes on the email.

(INSERT PDF HERE)

Appendix 3

Email task 3: Bad news email

Students were required to draft an email on the basis of the information provided below. They were told (in both the lecture and the seminars) that the email for Task 3 would be making use of the same writing context as Task 1 and 2.

From: bobsmith@tshirttastic.com
To: you@tshirttastic.com
Date: 27th September

Hi

Horrible news, there has been a fire at one of our warehouses and we have lost some of our stock. I am going to be out of the office most of the day dealing with that. I will need to send a few urgent emails to customers that have been affected, Sam Cheung is one of them. As you know the order, can you draft an email for me. I will look at it, make any changes and then send it on to him this afternoon. The main points are below, sorry for the bullet points but I am in a rush, thanks

Bill

- a box of 25 T Shirts has been lost in the fire and there is not enough time to re-print them
- all the others are okay and will be sent out on time
- we can give him 25 plain blue/green ones instead
- only charge for the 75

Appendix 4

Example emails

Example of a Task 1 email

To: SCheung1 @ampholdings.com
From: m.suen @tshirttastic.com
Subject: Details of the T-shirts order
Date: 9th September

Dear Sam,

I'm Mark Suen, Bob's colleague. I'm writing to ask for further details of the T-shirts you want for the charity football match. In order to assist Bob in preparing what you need, there are a few things that I would like to discuss with you.

First, you have mentioned in the previous letter that you would need T-shirts for helpers; however, are these T-shirts for helpers included in those 25 for the Extras? Would the total number of T-shirts be 100? If it is more than 100, there is a discount for you.

Second, we offer a wide range of T-shirts colours. We suggest not using the T-shirts colours of black and white in summer since black objects absorb heat while white T-shirts are easily stained. In order to clearly distinguish different teams, we consider sharp colours including Red, Yellow, Green and Blue depending on the number of teams. To remind you, the prices of different colours vary. Please refer to the previously-attached price list.

Third, we provide different T-shirts sizes, ranging from extra-small to extra-large. If you want to provide the participants with a wider variety of choices, it is better to have equal amount of T-shirts from small to large, while the remaining ones could be extra-small and extra-large. There is no extra fee for different T-shirts sizes.

Finally, we need to confirm the date of delivery. As we can complete the order in 7 days at most and it takes no more than 2 days for delivery, we need approximately 9 days for both the production and delivery. Once we receive your final confirmation, our company will start preparing the T-shirts. So when do you want to receive the final products?

Please do send us your final confirmation of the numbers, colours, sizes of the T-shirts and date of delivery. It is our honor to complete your order.

Best wishes,
Hong Chow

Example of a Task 2 email

To: Benny.Jacks@quality-printing.org
From: sarahjames22@tshirttastic.com
Date: 21st September
Subject: Feedback on the possible delay of our order ref.7769XP2
Cc: bobsmith@tshirttastic.com

Dear Mr. Jacks,

I am writing on the behalf of the Department of Communications and Relations of our company under the instruction of Bob Smith. We have recently received an email from you regarding an update on our order ref.7769XP2 of the 100 T-shirts, and we would like to give our feedback.

In the email, you had mentioned that due to the increase in orders and the fact that you are still waiting for an additional delivery of green and blue T-shirts- it is possible that our order, which was placed on 17th September, could be delayed.

We sympathize with and understand your situation fully, but I am afraid to say that Mr. Cheung, a highly valued client of our company, made the order. Delaying would cause potential problems in our relations with him, who expects to see the completion of the original order in due time.

We are deeply appreciative of your effort to complete the original order, but having a definite idea of the type and number of T-shirts, which will arrive on 27th September, will benefit us in terms of organization and partnership with our client.

I look forward to your reply with a resolution to the dilemma at hand, and I certainly hope for many more mutual partnerships for years to come.

With kind regards,
Sarah James

Example of a Task 3 email

These emails were originally hand written. For ease of presentation here we have reproduced the example here in typed form.

Dear Sam

This is Bill from T shirt Tastic writing on behalf of Bob. Because we understand that you expect superior quality of our T-shirts, that is why we are writing personally about the T-shirts you recently ordered.

All of our clients are sure that we will handle our T-shirts with the greatest caution and commitment. Therefore we have been using the best-quality T-shirt printers only since our operation in 2005. Recently there has been an increasing number of T-shirt orders for us, with our supreme printers keep working day and night there was, unfortunately, a short-circuit of the printers in our warehouse last night resulting in a minor explosion and a fire. Most of the T-shirts were damaged, but fortunately 75 T-shirts of your order remain untouched in this incident. Because we expect only the finest products, the malfunctioning printers will not be used and given the deadline of your order, we do not have time to re-print the damaged T-shirts.

We are genuinely grateful that 75 T-shirts of your order are in a good condition. In an effort to compensate for your loss, we are pleased to give you 25 plain blue/green T-shirts instead. The 75 undamaged T-shirts will be sent on time and to show our regrets, the 25 damaged T-shirts will not be charged. With regard to this accident, our company will be moving to a new and more secure warehouse two months later. We have already hired a few experienced security guards to prevent similar cases from happening again.

In the meantime, please accept our sincere apologies for any inconvenience caused. Thank you for your trust in us, therefore we are enclosing a coupon which allows 20% off discount

for the next order. We hope that you will continue to enjoy the comfort of our T-shirts for many years to come.

Yours sincerely,

Bill