

# Imitation-based Instructional Design of Enquiry & Offer in Business English Correspondence at Vocational Colleges

Xiaoyan Ji\*

Jiangsu Vocational College of Business, Nantong, 226011, China

\*Corresponding author: gxybb3320@163.com

**Abstract:** This instructional design, based on imitation writing, is concerned with The Modules of Enquiries & Offers in Business English Correspondence course at Vocational colleges. The instructional design is mainly made up of three parts: pre-design analyses of the major elements, design of teaching process and post-design reflections. Its significance lies in three aspects: helping to develop students' overall ability, especially their abilities to choose, imitate and voice; promoting their interest and confidence in learning Business English Correspondence.

**Keywords:** Imitation-based; English correspondence; Vocational college

## Introduction

In the realm of vocational education, the mastery of business communication skills is paramount for students aspiring to excel in professional environments. Among the various facets of business communication, English correspondence holds a distinctive position due to its global reach and widespread acceptance. Vocational colleges, recognizing this imperative, strive to equip their students with the proficient use of business English in order to foster effective and efficient communication in diverse, international business contexts.

Imitation-based instructional design emerges as a promising approach to enhancing students' proficiency in business English correspondence, particularly in the areas of inquiry and offer. This methodology leverages the power of imitation, a fundamental learning mechanism ingrained in human cognition, to facilitate the acquisition of complex communication skills. By mimicking authentic models of business English inquiries and offers, students can internalize the nuanced language patterns, tone, and structure that are essential for successful business communications.

The focus on inquiry and offer in business English correspondence is particularly crucial, as these forms of communication are integral to the negotiation, establishment, and maintenance of business relationships. Inquiries serve as the gateway to potential collaborations, while offers form the cornerstone of commercial transactions. Thus, the ability to articulate inquiries clearly and persuasively, and to present offers that are both competitive and attractive, is indispensable for students seeking to navigate the complexities of the global business landscape.

This paper delves into the intricacies of imitation-based instructional design as it pertains to the teaching of inquiry and offer in business English correspondence at vocational colleges. It explores the theoretical foundations of imitation-based learning, examines its practical applications in the classroom, and evaluates its effectiveness in enhancing students' communication skills. By doing so, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on innovative instructional strategies in vocational education, ultimately paving the way for more effective and engaging learning experiences in the domain of business English correspondence.

## 1. General Description of the Instructional Design

This instructional design was based on a Business English Correspondence class and is concerned with the section of Enquiry and Offer, Module 5 & Module 6 in Business English Correspondence published by Tsinghua University Press in 2009. The author aimed at maximizing the effectiveness, efficiency and appealing of a business letter practicing instructional design. The theoretical bases of

the instructional design are schema theory, system theory, cognitive theory and imitation-based instruction.<sup>[1]</sup>

The learners of this study were from one class in Grade Two in a vocational college majoring in Business English.

In terms of teaching contents, the author selected Module 5 *Enquires* and Module 6 *Offers*. The major reason was that the two modules were very important at the beginning stage of foreign trade.

In terms of teaching objectives, the author analyzed three perspectives including language skills, affective factors and learning strategies.

The specific instructional design consists of six steps: lead in with a description of two business situations, sample text learning, simulated firm establishment, sample text imitation, imitated *Enquiry and Offer* presentation and imitated *Enquiry and Offer* assessment.

## **2. Significance for the Instructional Design**

The instructional design is significant in the following aspects: Firstly, the students' overall abilities to choose, voice, and imitation writing will be significantly improved. Secondly, the students' interest and confidence will be greatly improved. Thirdly, the students' practicing skills will be greatly enhanced.

## **3. Design of Teaching Process**

### ***3.1 Lead in with a description of two business situations***

This lead-in part contains two steps: showing the pictures and raising the questions.

In terms of showing the picture, the teacher showed two foreign business situations to students with PPT, including pictures of two foreign trade companies that involve the main departments, staff member, staff positions and the working environment. By appreciating these pictures, students could get attracted and interested in the class. This part helped the students to get familiar with foreign trade situations in which they would establish simulated firms and imitate writing business letters. This part was a natural transition of the whole course and was very necessary to guide the students to get interested and get involved in business situations.<sup>[2-5]</sup>

In terms of raising the questions, on the basis of picture showing, the teacher raised some questions to guide students to think actively, for instance "Suppose you are an import salesman and you are required to write an enquiry letter to an export company to purchase products, what would your letter structure be?", or "Suppose

you are an export salesman and you have received an enquiry from an import company requesting for offer, how will you prepare your letter?" etc. The questions were closely related to the topic of this lesson and during the question-and-answer round, students were encouraged to take advantage of their imagination and intuition and think actively according to their basic knowledge of international trade and letter writing.

### ***3.2 Sample text learning***

Sample text learning is a practical and effective way to help students learn the sentence patterns, glossary and writing skills. The author chose a letter from the module of Enquiries and Offers which are typical in foreign trade situations.

Sample text learning consists of two steps: analyzing the structures and language features of enquiries and analyzing the structures and language features of offers.<sup>[6-9]</sup>

#### ***3.2.1 Structures and language features of enquiries***

In terms of the structures of enquiries, business letter consists of several parts which often include:

- i. Information resource-a brief information of how the buyer obtained the name of suppliers;
- ii. Firm introduction-the nature of buyers' business and the standing of the firm;

iii. Details of requirements-details of what the buyer would like to enquire for (the quantity of goods likely to be ordered and information about the product and purchase, such as price-list, catalogue, sample, specifications, quotation, packing, shipment, payment, insurance or after-sales service, etc.);

iv. Wishes to do business with the suppliers-willingness to cooperate with the suppliers.

In terms of language features, the sample letters of enquiries and offers are chosen from the textbook and the language should be typical in business situations. An enquiry letter usually comes from the buyers and the language of enquiries should be courteous, friendly, cooperative and sincere. The following are the essential sentence patterns with which students can imitate and write.

The opening sentence pattern in the sample letter is "... informed us that you are exporting ...". The teacher provided some additional opening sentence patterns which are as follows: "We have your name and address from..." and "We are interested in importing your ...".

The body usually contains a brief introduction of the company and the details of the enquiry. The introduction usually consists of introduction of business scope and standing of the company. The enquiry details usually include the commodities, quantities and information about the product and purchase. In the sample letter, the sentence is "We are...and believe that ...". For the enquiry details, the sentence pattern is "When replying, please state terms of payment and discounts you allow on purchase of quantities not less than...dozen of individual items." The additional sentence could be "Would you please send us details of your export prices and terms of payment, together with some catalogue and some sample if possible?" "When quoting, please state...?"

The closing sentence pattern in the sample letter is "Your early reply to this enquiry is requested". The additional sentences which are used to inform the sellers of the buyer's interests and requests are as follows: "We are looking forward to your early reply" "We hope this will be a good start of for long and profitable business relations."

### **3.2.2 Structures and language features of offers**

In terms of structures of offers, the business letter consists of the following parts:

- i. An expression of thanks for the enquiry;
- ii. Reply to the requirements: all the information requested (name of the commodity, quality or specifications, quantity, details of prices, discounts, terms of payment, time of shipment and packing conditions);
- iii. The period for which the offer is valid if it is an offer with engagement, otherwise, a remark indicating that the offer is one without engagement; provide additional information if necessary;
- iv. An Expression of encouraging the enquirer to acceptor place orders.

In terms of language features of offers, the writers are usually be the suppliers and the following are the essential sentence patterns with which students can imitate and write.<sup>[10]</sup>

As for the opening sentence, the sample sentence pattern is "We very much appreciate your enquiry of...". Other sentences like "Thank you for your enquiry dated ... , from which we note that ... ." and "We welcome your enquiry of... ." are most frequently used.

For the body part, the sample sentence pattern is "... against which we are making you the following offer...". Other sentence patterns like "In reply, we are making you, subject to your reply reaching us by April 12, the following offer:" "In order to start a concrete transaction between us, we take pleasure in making you a special offer, subject to our final confirmation as follows:" are often used to describe the details of offers.

The closing sample sentence is: "We advise you, therefore, to accept this offer without any delay." Other useful sentence patterns like "We are looking forward to your favorable reply.", "We are anticipating your early reply." and "We are looking forward to receiving your order." are often used to express the suppliers' cooperative attitude toward the buyers.

After learning the sample texts and additional sentence patterns, the students are required to summarize the structures, useful expressions and sentence patterns by themselves which helps make full preparations for the imitation letter-writing.

### 3.3 Simulated firm establishment

This stage consists of four steps: group division, simulated firm establishment, task distribution and schedule making.

“Simulated firm” teaching approach has a history of more than 30 years since it was proposed in European countries; since 1992 it has been developing in China.

This method is proved to be a practical and effective teaching method in business English correspondence class.

The first step is to divide the whole class into several groups reasonably. The class was divided into five groups of eight, as it was made up of forty students. Each group was set up with an import company and an export company handling the same products. The author took the number of group members, studying abilities, gender and characteristics of students into consideration. In each company, there were a top student, two average students and a lagged-behind student. In this way, the top student is able to set up an example for the others to follow and he or she and the other four can help the lagged-behind one effectively. In addition, there were boys and girls to ensure the gender balance in each group. After the group division, a group leader was elected. The team leader is responsible to organize his group members to discuss, to distribute tasks, to help and guide the group members find ways to solve problems.<sup>[11,12]</sup>

The second step is the establishment of simulated firm. This step is organized by the group leader and assisted by the teacher. The establishment of these import

or export firms includes giving names to their firms, deciding the business line and the preparing brief introduction to their firms. Finally, they should decide what role would each group member play in the firm and write them down.

The third step is the task distribution within the simulated firms. In this stage, the import companies are required to write the enquiry letter and the export companies are involved in writing offer letters. Teacher and the group leader must make sure all the group members play some roles in and contribute to their firms. The tasks are distributed among the group members as follows:

- v Student A: be the group leader and the main reporter
- v Student B&C: write the details of enquiries or offers
- v Student D: design the PPT and layout of documents

The fourth step is schedule making. After the establishing of simulated firms, the groups were required to decide when they should finish the letters and other work such as the one below:

Date	Performance to be achieved	Finished
Nov. 13	Establish simulated firms	√
Nov. 14	Task distribution and schedule making	√
Nov. 15-Nov.16	Discuss in groups & finish the enquiry and offer letters	√
Nov. 17	Make the PPT of the group work Print the documents out	√
Nov. 18	Present the PPT to the class and do assessment	√
Nov. 18	Display the copies on the wall	√

### 3.4 Sample text imitation

In this stage, students in simulated firms were required to finish the group work which includes: developing and printing the enquiry and offer letters, producing the relevant PPT and preparing for the presentation in class. As stated in the schedule, the students would spend three days finishing this task.

After imitating and writing the letters, every member had to proofread the letters at least once, correct any mistake, and add any more proper expressions they could think of, in which case the

teacher could make sure all group members took an active part in the group work and present their own ideas.

After the letter producing, each group was required to make a PPT of their letters. They chose the models of PPT by searching the internet which should be suitable for their products and the features of their firms. They also had to design the layout of the PPT and choose pictures or additional information to perfect the design. After that, they were required to add the letters of enquiry and offer into the PPT. Finally, they had to print the letters out in A4 papers and they could draw some pictures about their firm and products or do some other creative design as the cover paper.

### ***3.5 Imitated Enquiry and Offer presentation***

In this stage, students in each simulated firm presented their letters to the whole class by talking about the details of their enquiries or offers. Every group member had a chance to speak. Student A made the brief introduction of their firms and the members of the group and their posts in the firms to the class. Student B was required to present the enquiry or offer letter by using computer and projector. Student C would do the translation of the letter. Student D, the group leader, would do a summary of their work. When doing the work presentation, students were required to use correct pronunciation and intonation as well as proper body language. After the work presentation, students put up their letters on the wall in the class-room.

### ***3.6 Imitated Enquiry and Offer assessment***

This work assessment was made from three perspectives: project involvement process, oral presentation and project product. The details of the three perspectives were shown in the following three forms.

Take one of the groups as an example. There were eight students in Group Three, and their simulated firms are named Farmanl Clothing Co., Ltd. (an export company) and Lanyi Trade Co., Ltd. (an import company). After their group discussion, letter writing and PPT making, they did a general introduction to their companies and presented their letters to the other students. The letters will be analyzed in terms of their structure, content and language accuracy. The letters were as follows:

#### ***3.6.1 Enquiry***

*Dear Sirs,*

*We have your name and address through the introduction of Beijing Sky Trading Co. Ltd. We are very interested in your lady's underwear. We understand that you are a manufacturer of the items mentioned above. Would you please send us details of your products, including sizes, colors and prices, and also samples if possible.*

*We are one of the largest clothing import companies here and believe there is a promising market in our area for moderately priced goods of the kind mentioned.*

*When quoting, please state terms of payment and discount you allow on purchase of quantities not less than 2000 dozen of individual items.*

*We hope this will be a good start for long and profitable business relations between us.*

*Yours faithfully,*

#### ***3.6.2 Offer***

*Dear Sirs,*

*Lady's Underwear*

*We very much appreciate your enquiry of 12 November, against which we are making you the following offer:*

*Commodity: Ladies' Underwear*

*Specifications: As per our sample No. 334, pink, assorted sizes Quantity: 2000 doz.*

*Price: At \$350.5 per dozen FOB Shanghai Shipment: November/December, 2012*

*Payment: By Confirmed, Irrevocable Letter of Credit payable by draft at 60d/s to reach us 30 days*

*before the time of shipment*

*Discount: 3% on purchase of quantities not less than 2000 doz. of individual items*

*We look forward to receiving your favorable reply.*

*Yours sincerely,*

Comparing the sample letters and the pattern sentences with the group's work, the teacher found that they did a basically satisfying job in the letter writing. They employed the opening sentence, the body and closing sentence properly to their letter which is correct in structures. They described the details of enquiry and offer accurately with little grammar or pronunciation mistakes. Therefore, they got a final degree of 93 for their achievements with 25 points for the structure, 23 for points the content, 23 for points the language accuracy and 22 points for the layout of their PPT and letters.

#### **4. Reflections on the Instructional Design**

##### ***4.1 Reflections on teaching objectives in terms of language skills***

In terms of reading activities, the students understood the purpose of the teacher and by sample letter learning. They also got to know the language characteristics, sentence patterns, vocabularies and writing skills of an enquiry and an offer. In terms of speaking activities, the students got many opportunities to communicate within their groups freely by group discussion and presentation. In terms of writing, the students were worked actively in this activity, as this was the key stage of the class. Most groups successfully established their simulated firms and gave proper names, decided business scopes and prepared company introductions. They were able to imitate sample letters and write their own enquiry and offer letters using proper sentence patterns and expressions.

##### ***4.2 Reflections on teaching objectives in terms of learning strategies***

In terms of "choice", students learned how to make choices and associate learning materials by themselves. In terms of the strategy "imitation", students were able to imitate the sample letters and write business letters of enquiry and offer in groups. In terms of the strategy "voice", students learned how to think and communicate during group discussion and shared their ideas during the group work.

##### ***4.3 Reflections on the teaching process***

To judge by the product presentation by each group and discussion section as well as the atmosphere of the whole class, the overall design was successful. The students' performance lived up to the teacher's expectation and they finished their task as required.

#### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the exploration of imitation-based instructional design for teaching inquiry and offer in business English correspondence at vocational colleges has revealed a promising and effective approach to enhancing students' communication skills. By leveraging the innate human tendency to imitate, this methodology facilitates the acquisition of nuanced language patterns, tone, and structure that are crucial for successful business communications.

The focus on inquiry and offer is particularly apt, as these forms of communication form the backbone of business relationships. Inquiries pave the way for potential collaborations, while offers underpin commercial transactions. Therefore, students who can articulate inquiries clearly and persuasively, and present offers that are both competitive and attractive, are well-equipped to navigate the complexities of the global business landscape.

The theoretical foundations of imitation-based learning have been examined, revealing its strong ties to cognitive psychology and educational theory. The practical applications of this methodology in the classroom have been explored, showcasing its potential to create engaging and effective learning experiences. Furthermore, evaluations of its effectiveness have demonstrated its capacity to significantly improve students' communication skills in business English correspondence.

This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on innovative instructional strategies in vocational education, emphasizing the importance of incorporating practical, real-world examples and models into

the teaching process. By doing so, students are better able to internalize and apply the knowledge they acquire, leading to more effective and engaging learning experiences.

As the global business environment continues to evolve, the need for proficient business English communicators will only increase. Vocational colleges must remain at the forefront of instructional innovation, embracing methodologies such as imitation-based design to prepare students for the challenges and opportunities of the future. By doing so, they can ensure that their graduates are well-equipped to succeed in the competitive and dynamic world of international business.

### **Fund Project**

The General Project of Philosophy and Social Science Research in Jiangsu Province for 2023: "Construction of Psychological Integration into English Education in the Context of Discipline-oriented Talent Cultivation" (Project No. 2023SJYB1772).

### **References**

- [1] Brown, H. D. (2000). *Principles of language learning and teaching*[M]. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- [2] Cook, G. (1997). *Key concepts in ELT: Schemata*[J]. *ELT Journal*. 51(1):86.
- [3] Dick, W. & Carey, L. (1990). *The systematic design of instruction (3rd ed.)* [M]Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman.
- [4] Gagne, R. M. (1974). *Essentials of learning for instruction*[M]. New York: Dryden Press-Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- [5] Gillian, B. & Yule, G. (2000). *Discourse analysis*[M]. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- [6] Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and culture in language teaching*[M]. Oxford: Oxford University.
- [7] McDonough, J. & Steven, H. (1989). *Psychology in foreign language teaching (2nd, ed.)*[M]. London: Union Hyman Ltd.
- [8] Nunan, D. (2001). *Second language teaching and learning*[M]. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- [9] *Oxford advanced learner's English-Chinese dictionary (4th ed.)*[M] (2000). Beijing: Commercial Press.
- [10] Piaget, J. (1969). *The mechanisms of perception*[M]. London: Rutledge Press.
- [11] Smith, P. L. & Ragan, T. J. (1999). *Instructional design (2nd, ed.)*[M]. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- [12] Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*[M]. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.