

Bridging Cultures and Formats: Insights from Learning Business Communication and Correspondence and Applications for Teaching Chinese Business Documents

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Abstract: This paper reflects on the learning journey of mastering English Import/Export correspondence, focusing on three core pillars: stylistic formatting, document structure, and the practical application of Incoterms. Drawing from personal experience as a learner, the paper identifies key challenges in transitioning from general English to specialized business communication. Furthermore, adopting the perspective of a teacher of Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL), this paper analyzes the fundamental differences between English business letters and Chinese official documents (Gongwen), contrasting them in terms of layout, salutations, politeness strategies, and logical flow (inductive vs. deductive). Finally, it proposes pedagogical strategies to improve teaching efficiency, including contrastive error analysis, genre-based scaffolding, and the use of realia and simulated Incoterms scenarios. The conclusion asserts that understanding these linguistic and cultural nuances is crucial not only for trade professionals but also for language educators aiming to prepare students for the global marketplace.

Key words: Business Correspondence, Cross-cultural differences, Incoterms

Introduction

In the era of globalization, Business Communication and Correspondence is the lifeblood of international trade. A single ambiguous phrase can lead to financial loss or legal disputes. My learning journey in this course moved beyond vocabulary acquisition to understanding a specific logic—one prioritizing clarity, legal safety, and cultural awareness. This paper first reflects on my learning outcomes regarding stylistic formats, structural organization, and Incoterms. It then shifts to a pedagogical perspective, analyzing differences between English business letters and Chinese ‘Gong wen’ (公文), and proposing methods to teach Chinese business writing efficiently.

1. Reflections on Learning English Import/Export Correspondence

1.1 Stylistic Format: The Block Format and the 7Cs

General English rewards creativity, while business English punishes it. The ‘7Cs’ principles are: Clear, Concise, Concrete, Correct, Courteous, Considerate, and Complete.

The near-universal adoption of the ‘Block Format’ (all lines left-justified, no indentation) was initially unappealing but proved pragmatically valuable. This format, combined with double spacing between paragraphs, allows busy managers to scan for key data (price, quantity, date) within seconds. The ‘Subject Line’ functions as a file name, serving both etiquette and legal archiving.

1.2 Article Structure: Inductive vs. Deductive Models

A profound cognitive shift was understanding persuasive structures. Western business culture values efficiency: routine messages use a ‘Deductive structure’ (main point first), while bad news uses an ‘Inductive structure’ (buffer – reasons – bad news – polite close).

For ‘collection letters’, I learned the four-tier system: Reminder → Strong Reminder → Ultimatum → Final Notice. This logical, emotionally neutral structure protects relationships while asserting rights—contrasting with my instinct to be vague to ‘save face,’ common in high-context cultures.

1.3 Incoterms 2020: From Memorization to Risk Transfer

Incoterms define risk and cost transfer. In a CIF contract, the seller files insurance claims; in FOB, the buyer does—even if the seller arranged the ship. Understanding this prevented me from writing accusations to the wrong party. Learning Incoterms taught me that a business letter reflects a legally binding contract, not mere communication.

2. Comparative Analysis: English Business Letters vs. Chinese ‘Gong wen’

From the perspective of a future CFL teacher, the differences between English Import/Export letters and Chinese official documents (Gong wen) are substantial and must be explicitly addressed in instruction.

2.1 Format and Layout

The most visible difference lies in visual layout. English business correspondence almost exclusively adopts the block format, where all text is left-justified with generous white space between paragraphs to facilitate rapid scanning. In contrast, Chinese Gong wen often employs the distinctive Red-Headed format, where the document title appears in large red characters at the top, followed by a more compressed layout governed by strict font hierarchies. For Western learners, this red header can appear intimidating, but teachers should explain that the red color historically signifies governmental authority rather than urgency or danger.

2.2 Salutations and Closings

Differences in salutations and closings are equally striking. An English letter opens with a direct but courteous address such as ‘Dear Mr. Smith,’ uses the second-person pronoun ‘you’ freely, and closes with a simple ‘Sincerely’ or ‘Best regards.’ Chinese business correspondence, however, relies on highly formulaic expressions rooted in classical tradition. A typical closing like ‘shun song shang qi’ (顺颂商祺), which roughly means ‘may business go well with you,’ has no direct English equivalent and must be memorized as a fixed unit rather than translated creatively.

2.3 Logical Flow: Deductive vs. Cyclical

The final structural difference lies in logical organization. English follows a deductive structure where the main point appears in the first sentence—for example, ‘We need the goods by May 1st.’ Chinese business letters, however, typically employ a cyclical or context-first structure, opening with background information and mutual history before finally presenting the request or decision near the end. A Chinese writer might begin with seasonal conditions or past cooperation, only arriving at the delivery request after establishing shared context. This difference often leads to English speakers perceiving Chinese letters as vague or circuitous, while Chinese speakers may find English letters abrupt or even rude. Bridging this expectation gap is one of the most important tasks for the CFL teacher.

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3. Pedagogical Methods for Teaching Chinese Business Documents

3.1 Contrastive Error Analysis (CEA)

This method involves presenting students with intentionally flawed examples that reflect common interlanguage errors—specifically, Chinese business letters written according to English structural logic. For instance, the teacher might provide a letter where a Chinese trader writes, ‘We reject your price because it is too high,’ following the English deductive pattern of stating the main point first. Students are then asked to identify what feels ‘wrong’ about this letter from a Chinese cultural perspective and rewrite it by adding contextual softening phrases such as Kongpa (恐怕 - ‘I’m afraid’) or moving the rejection to the end after providing background reasons. This exercise makes the abstract concept of ‘face-saving’ tangible. By seeing the consequence of English logic imposed on Chinese text, students internalize why structure matters and avoid the most common pitfall of L1 interference.

3.2 Formulaic Chunking

Chinese Gong wen is highly modular and formulaic, resembling a construction kit more than a blank canvas. Rather than asking students to compose every sentence from scratch, the CFL teacher creates a ‘Chunk Bank’: a categorized collection of pre-fabricated phrases that appear repeatedly in authentic documents. Opening chunks include ‘Jie guigongsi lai han’ (接贵公司来函 – ‘Regarding your company’s letter’) or ‘Xian jiu...wenti hanfu ru xia’ (现就... 问题函复如下 – ‘We now reply regarding the issue of... as follows’). Body chunks include ‘Jing shenhe’ (经审核 – ‘After review’) and ‘Youyu yixia yuanyin’ (由于以下原因 – ‘Due to the following reasons’). Closing chunks include ‘Teci hangu’ (特此函告 – ‘We hereby inform you’) and ‘Shun song shang qi’ (顺颂商祺 – ‘May business go well’). Students practice assembling complete letters by selecting and arranging these chunks, dramatically accelerating accuracy while reducing the cognitive load of grammatical decision-making. Over time, they internalize the chunks as automatic units.

3.3 Simulated Trade Fair (Task-Based Learning)

This immersive activity combines technical knowledge of Incoterms with the practical application of Chinese writing formats. The class is divided into importers and exporters, each receiving different pricing and shipping constraints. In Phase One (English), pairs negotiate terms verbally, deciding whether to use CIF Shanghai or FOB Ningbo based on their respective risk preferences. In Phase Two (Chinese), each student must write a formal Hanyi (函移 - letter of intent or confirmation) using the correct Chinese format, complete with appropriate salutations, cyclical structure, and formulaic closings. The teacher, role-playing as a Chinese customs officer or quality inspector, rejects any letter that follows English block formatting or deductive logic, explaining, ‘This does not meet Chinese documentation standards.’ This authentic consequence, having to revise the letter before proceeding, creates genuine motivation. Students learn not because they are told to, but because the simulation requires correct format to succeed.

3.4 Digital Genres Comparison

Modern business communication does not exist in a single genre, it spans formal emails, official letters, and instant messaging platforms like WeChat. This method asks students to compare how the same business message would be expressed across three registers. First, they write a formal English email using deductive structure and block format. Second, they translate the same content into a formal Chinese letter using cyclical logic, honorifics, and a classical closing. Third, they compose a Chinese WeChat message to the same business partner, shorter and faster, but still requiring appropriate politeness markers like ‘Nin’ (您) and ‘Mafan nin’ (麻烦您 – ‘to trouble you’). By comparing the three versions side by side, students develop register flexibility: they learn when to use the full formal Gong wen format, when a semi-formal email suffices, and how to maintain respect even in abbreviated digital contexts. This comparative approach prevents the common error of treating all business writing as identical regardless of medium.

Conclusion

Learning Business Communication and Correspondence required moving from beautiful prose to clarity and risk mitigation. Incoterms taught that every word carries financial liability. English's deductive structure reflects low-context, efficiency-driven culture. However, Chinese 'Gong wen' operates in a high-context, hierarchical space. The Red Header, cyclical logic, and honorific systems are not 'bad English' but a different system. Efficient teaching requires contrastive analysis, formulaic chunking, and simulated scenarios. Understanding that a business letter is a cultural artifact bridges East and West, ensuring that the deal closed is the deal understood.

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