Business Communication Assessment and its curriculum implications

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The Business Communication Assessment (BCA) was developed collaboratively by staff in the Centre for Applied English Studies (CAES) and the Faculty of Business and Economics (FBE) to measure the extent to which Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) students in the University of Hong Kong (HKU) are achieving improvement in written business communication skills during their 3-year degree. The BCA requires students to exercise their applied grammar and vocabulary knowledge to correct typical Hong Kong learners' common errors in business contexts; and then to read critically, analyse and finally, respond to a short business case of local relevance. This paper will outline the nature of the BCA, the design principles that underpin it, the results from 340 first-year students in 2008-2009 and the implications that the BCA has on the design of programme-specific courses for BBA students in 2009-2010. At the present time, first-year BBA students are required to take two basic Business Communication half courses (each of 3 credits)). This is followed by the "Advanced Business Communication" (full course: 6 credits) which is required for 2nd and 3rd year Accounting and Finance students, and offered as an elective course for other BBA students. "Business Communication for Technical Professionals" (half course: 3 credits), on the other hand, is taken by Information Systems students in their 2nd year. While the first year courses are taught by staff in the CAES, the second and third year courses are taught by staff in FBE.

Keywords: Business communication assessment, BBA programme

Introduction

Driven by the need to create an assessment which measures the level of knowledge and application of written business communication skills among students, which is one of the Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) programme outcomes at the University of Hong Kong (HKU) and an important concern for American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) professional accreditation; staff in both the Centre for Applied English Studies (CAES) and Business Communication of the Faculty of Business and Economics (FBE) began the development of a Business Communication Assessment (BCA) in April 2008. The BCA does not intend to reflect any specific syllabus of study; instead, it aims at capturing the progress made by BBA students in their English proficiency and business communication skills between the entry and exit of their three years of study at HKU. The

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applied grammar items, business vocabulary and case study used in the assessment are all within the nature and scope of the BBA programmes (Vice & Carnes, 2001; Wardrope, 2002).

Test Development and Test Design

Part I of the BCA is Applied Grammar and Vocabulary, which is worth 30%, while Part II is a response to a business case, which is worth 70%. A bank of typical grammar and vocabulary error types in the local business context was identified after consulting references developed based on Hong Kong data (e.g. Bunton, 1989; Potter, 1992). In the assessment, students are asked to first identify the errors and then correct them in a continuous text extracted and modified from a business-oriented publication. Instead of testing students' grammar and vocabulary knowledge per se, the choice of discipline-specific materials allows students to demonstrate their application of the grammar and vocabulary skills in context, which is critical for any successful business communication.

The business case in Part II, which is used as a prompt, is written by staff from the CAES and then reviewed by business communication experts from FBE. Based on current factual information collected from multiple sources, the case, which is authentic and rich in content, was written using a topic and genre (business case) that business administration students are expected to be familiar with. To demonstrate their written communication skills, students, who are given a specific role, are asked to present their analysis to a specific audience to fulfil designated purposes as required by the writing task. And to do so, students are expected to first understand the case and then select relevant information as support which leads to an analysis that entails identification and presentation of critical issues, illustration of viable ideas, demonstration of strong control of rhetorical features and display of accurate language and appropriate register. The writing task, which is based on an original case, is also designed to reduce the likelihood of memorized answers.

A pilot assessment was administered among the first-year Economics and Finance (E&F) students in August 2008 and it is intended to fulfil two major purposes: (1) assess the test logistics and clarity of assessment instructions; and (2) assess the time given and the level of difficulty as perceived by assessment participants. E&F students were invited to take part in the pilot assessment as their backgrounds and admissions requirements were very similar to those of the BBA students.   A total of 33 E&F students took part in the pilot.

Profile of First-year Students (2008-2009)

A total of 340 first-year BBA students took part in the BCA in September, 2008. Among them, 136 (40%) were male and 204 (60%) female. Table 1 below shows the academic streams of the students.

Table 1: Academic Streams

Academic Streams	Number	%
Accounting and Finance (A&F)	192	56.5
Information Systems (IS)	35	10.3

International Business and Global Management (IBGM)	28	8.2
BBA Law (LAW)	73	21.5
BBA	12	3.5
TOTAL	340	100

Table 2 shows the admissions backgrounds of the students.

Joint University Programmes Admissions System (JUPAS) students are those who have finished the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination (HKALE) after completing seven years in local secondary schools, while the Non-JUPAS students are those who are admitted into the university with an overseas academic qualification or those who do not come through the mainstream local secondary education system. Early Admissions Scheme (EAS) students refer to students who have finished the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) after completing five years in local secondary schools. These students are admitted into the university 1 year earlier due to their outstanding academic results.

Table 2: Admissions Backgrounds

Admissions Backgrounds	Number	%
Mainland China	36	10.6
JUPAS (Joint University Programmes Admissions System)	217	63.8
Non-JUPAS	33	9.7
EAS (Early Admissions Scheme)	47	13.8
EAS Non-JUPAS	5	1.5
Internal Transfer	2	0.6
TOTAL	340	100

BCA Results: Applied Grammar and Vocabulary (Part I)
Students' results in the Applied Grammar and Vocabulary section are reported in Table 3.

Table 3: Applied Grammar and Vocabulary

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Results (Max = 30 marks)	13.87	4.58	1-26

Table 4 below shows students' results in this section by academic streams.

Table 4: Applied Grammar and Vocabulary by Academic Streams

Academic Streams	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
A & F	12.95	4.33	1-23

IS	11.37	3.73	4-18
IBGM	15.86	4.35	7-26
LAW	16.60	4.26	8-26
BBA	14.75	4.16	9-21

Students from the LAW stream performed the best in this Applied Grammar and Vocabulary section with a mean of 16.60 out of 30, while the performance of IS students was the weakest in this area with only 11.37 marks on average.

An Analysis of Variance between groups (ANOVA) was performed to see if there was any statistical difference in means between students from different academic streams. Results in Table 5 shows that the mean difference was statistically significant at $p < 0.001$ level [$F_{(4,355)}$ – 14.441].

Table 5: ANOVA - Applied Grammar and Vocabulary by Academic Streams

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1046.753	4	261.688	14.441	.000***
Within Groups	6070.809	335	18.122		
Total	7117.562	339			

Table 6 below shows students' results in Applied Grammar and Vocabulary by admissions backgrounds.

Table 6: Applied Grammar and Vocabulary by Admissions Backgrounds

Admissions Background	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range
Mainland	15.33	3.38	7-23
JUPAS	12.97	4.49	1-26
Non-JUPAS	13.88	4.86	3-23
EAS	16.68	4.24	8-26
EAS Non-JUPAS	14.80	5.59	7-20
Internal Transfer	17.00	1.41	16-18

Discounting the two internal transfer students, students admitted through the Early Admissions Scheme (EAS) and those from the Mainland performed very well in this section with average marks of 16.68 and 15.33 respectively, while students admitted through the Non-JUPAS and JUPAS schemes were the weakest here with average marks of 13.88 and 12.97 respectively.

ANOVA was performed and the results show that the mean difference between students of different admissions backgrounds was statistically significant at $p<0.001$ level [F (5(334) = 6.682). Please see Table 7 for details.

Table 7: ANOVA - Applied Grammar and Vocabulary by Admissions Backgrounds

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	647.200	5	129.440	6.682	.000***
Within Groups	6470.362	334	19.372		
Total	7117.562	339			

BCA Results: Writing Task (Part II)

Students' mean writing band was 2.84 (Max = 6), with a standard deviation of 0.85 and a range of 1 to 5. Table 8 below shows the spread of the writing bands across the first-year students.

Table 8: Banding of Writing Task

Writing Band (Ideas & Task Fulfillment; Organization, Coherence & Cohesion; Language Use)	Number of Participants	%
Band 1 (Weakest)	15	4.4
Band 2	104	30.6
Band 3	145	42.6
Band 4	70	20.6
Band 5	5	1.5
Band 6 (Strongest)	0	0
Invalid	1	0.3
TOTAL	340	100

Table 9 below shows the writing band with reference to students' academic streams.

Table 9: Writing Task and Academic Streams

Academic Streams	Mean Writing Band	Standard Deviation	Range
A & F	2.66	0.84	1-5
IS	2.66	0.76	1-4
IBGM	3.25	0.70	2-5
LAW	3.21	0.82	1-5

BBA	3.00	0.85	1-4

While the results indicate that IBGM students performed the best in the writing task, both A&F and IS students' performance was the weakest here. And ANOVA in Table 10 showed that the differences in mean among students of different academic streams are statistically significant at p<0.001 level [F (4, 334) = 8.137].

Table 10: ANOVA – Writing Task by Academic Streams

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	21.790	4	5.447	8.137	.000***
Within Groups	223.608	334	.669		
Total	245.398	338			

Table 11 below shows the results of writing task by students' admissions backgrounds.

Table 11: Writing Task and Admissions Backgrounds

Admissions Background	Mean Writing Band	Standard Deviation	Range
Mainland	2.56	0.81	1-4
JUPAS	2.74	0.88	1-5
Non-JUPAS	3.18	0.81	1-5
EAS	3.27	0.58	2-5
EAS Non-JUPAS	2.8	0.84	2-4
Internal Transfer	3.00	0.00	3

Similar to the Applied Grammar and Vocabulary section, EAS students performed the best in the Writing Task. However, while Mainland students performed well in the Applied Grammar and Vocabulary section, their performance was the weakest in the written task. ANOVA results showed that the writing band differences were statistically significant at p<0.001 level [F (5,333) = 5.245]. Please see Table 12 for details.

Table 12: ANOVA – Writing Task by Admissions Backgrounds

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	17.915	5	3.583	5.245	.000***
Within Groups	227.484	333	.683		
Total	245.398	338			

Summary of Results

As far as the Applied Grammar and Vocabulary section is concerned, LAW and IBGM students performed the best, while IS students were the weakest. By admissions backgrounds, the EAS and Mainland students performed the best in this section, while JUPAS students' performance was the weakest.

In terms of the Writing Task results, again IBGM and LAW students performed the best, while IS and A&F students' performance was the weakest. The EAS students, again, performed the best in this section, while Mainland students' performance was the weakest .

Statistical analyses show that differences in students' results in both BCA sections in terms of their academic streams and admissions backgrounds are statistically significant.

Implications on Curriculum Design (2009-2010)

As a result of the initial data gathered and analysed from the BCA (2008-2009), specific course curriculum modifications and changes have already been made in 2009-2010. The following are a list of recent changes and updates that have been incorporated into the FBE Business Communication courses thus far:

1. BUSI1504: Business Communication for Technical Professionals (Yr. 2, Hong Kong & Mainland students)

The predominant writing assessment is in the form of a Formal Report which also incorporates company and industry research. Students submit the Report Draft, which is worth 10% of their mark, and feedback and suggestions are provided by their instructor within 1 week so that they have ample time to prepare their Final Reports. This measure has been undertaken to provide the Information Systems and Business major (dual degree) students with more detailed and timely feedback for improvement as we know that they tend to be weaker in terms of written communication skills. The Final Draft which is worth 25% of their mark is not due until another 2 - 3 weeks after the first draft is received so that students have adequate time to consider and amend the assignment as necessary before their final submission. In total, the Report Writing cycle is spread over approximately 4 weeks.

2. BUSI0081: Advanced Business Communication (Yr. 2 & 3 Hong Kong, Mainland & International students)

The formal writing requirements for the course are a Formal Proposal and a Formal Report. Both of the formal writing assessments require the incorporation of demographic, economic and financial as well as company and industry research. The format of the course follows a 2 hour Case Class and a 1 hour Writing Lab per week. The Writing Labs run for approximately 1 hour/week for the entire semester and the focus is on the production of the 2 formal written assignments. Sentence level grammar and vocabulary are discussed and reviewed, and samples of Business Proposals and Reports are analysed and used as a basis for in-class group work. The sentence level and paragraph level writing exercises are based on samples of student writing (past written assignments). In addition to this, 1-2 samples of Formal

Business Proposals and Business Reports are also used for in-class analysis. These samples consist of 1 proposal and 1 report written by the faculty's Business Communication Team as well as an industry sample of a proposal and a report. This provides the more advanced students with ample opportunities to study, discuss and better understand the writing demands and requirements of the 2 genres of Business Writing: The Business Report and The Business Proposal.

3. Vocabulary: Contextualised and Embedded in Case Studies

Vocabulary items are found in the reading texts (Case Studies) and embedded within the course materials. They are divided as follows:

a) General New Vocabulary
b) Technical New Business Vocabulary (Business Terms and Jargon)

Students are encouraged to use the new vocabulary items in their formal writing assignments and during Writing Lab practice sessions so as to further broaden their linguistic repertoire, specifically within the area of Business Communication.

Conclusion

Although more extensive data will be compiled and analysed when the entry batch of students from 2008 prepare for graduation in 2011, several key trends can be observed at the present time. There are significant differences among and between the various groups of entry level students which should be considered fully when courses and assessment tools are developed. An emphasis on the practical application of skills should be a key feature of course objectives so as to challenge all students, regardless of their academic and linguistic backgrounds. And, perhaps most importantly, the linguistic demands of the programme majors should be carefully considered on entry so that students who are admitted, are offered places in programmes where they will be able to realise their full potential as successful communicators in their chosen professions.

Acknowledgements

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