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Students' attitudes towards the use of imagination and humour in teaching and learning business correspondence and their implications for teaching

Abstract

The purpose of the study has been an investigation of students' attitudes towards the teaching of business correspondence in English with the use of imagination and humour, as expressed in the questionnaire and reflected in the students' writing. It was assumed that the use of imagination, creativity and humour would motivate the students to practise business writing and develop their skills. The study is based on both an analysis of students' actual writing as well as a questionnaire regarding their attitudes towards simulation and humour in practising business correspondence. As the results show, the students' writing varies considerably, ranging from standard letters modelled on textbook examples, up to humorous letters from and to imaginary companies. Similarly, the questionnaire reveals a variety of attitudes: some students regard simulations of this kind as interesting and motivating, while others find them artificial. They also tend to prefer learning serious correspondence, which is closer to their future professional work. It can thus be concluded that, while using imagination and even humour has some benefits, such as motivating students and developing their creativity, the focus of teaching should be on more authentic business correspondence, closer to that which they will use in the future.

Keywords: business correspondence, motivation, creativity, Ludic strategy, simulation

Introduction

The present study investigates university students' attitudes towards the use of elements of role-play and simulation, involving the imagination and, to some extent, humour, in

the teaching of business correspondence skills in English. Even though simulations in teaching Business English are generally associated with the development of oral skills, such as participation in business negotiations, it can be assumed that writing to or on behalf of a fictional company, enquiring about a fictional product, but using authentic Business English, constitutes a kind of simulation. As will be explained in more detail below, a simulation allows its participants to experience a certain kind of situation (Siek-Pisko-zub, 2001: 28–29), in this case, writing business letters. Since business correspondence as a subject focuses on writing skills (unlike, for example, business negotiations), such activities as writing letters to imaginary companies, enquiring about imaginary products, or exchanging business letters between students are regarded here as forms of simulation and role-play respectively. Indeed, following Aronson and Carlsmith's (1968: 26, as quoted in Luganskaya, 2013: 282) definition of role-play as "an 'as-if' experiment in which the subject is asked to behave as if he [or she] were a particular person in a particular situation", it is assumed that behaving as if one were writing a business letter to a company involves a kind of role-play.

The study analyses the students' attitudes towards business correspondence classes with the use of imagination, role-play or even humour, as well as their actual writing as a reflection of those attitudes, paying special attention to their creativity in assuming the roles of sales managers or other company employees, and customers. It is assumed that activities involving creativity and positive emotions may motivate students to learn business correspondence, and that writing to, or on behalf of, imaginary companies is a good way to practise it. According to Siek-Piskozub (2016: 99–100), the Ludic strategy, or a teaching strategy based on the use of leisure activities, such as games, simulations, role-play, etc., can motivate students to learn by concentrating on goals other than mastering the language material, for example, winning a game, experiencing joy or establishing a good relationship with one's classmates. It could thus be assumed that students focusing on writing humorous business letters to imaginary companies would also acquire the rules of business writing in a pleasant atmosphere and thus appreciate such activities.

At first sight, one might think that business writing, as a serious activity, should also be taught in a serious way. In their future jobs, the students will have to obey certain commonly accepted rules because, as Ashley (2003: 5) has remarked, correspondence "reflects on the competence and professionalism of the person who has written it and the company he or she works for." It also contributes to the efficiency of cooperation between companies: unclear correspondence can result in misunderstandings and, consequently, worsen business relations (ibidem: 5). However, at the time of the predominance of email, the rules of business writing are changing and becoming less strict than in the case of paper mail. As shown by Włosowicz and Kopeć (2017), there are considerable differences between the letters created by students attending a business correspondence course at university, largely based on textbooks, and those (especially emails) written by company employees who have learnt business correspondence in an informal setting at work, following the examples provided by foreign partners rather than textbooks. Certainly, in order not to disturb communication, such informal correspondence also has to be clear and comprehensible, but the letters focus on conveying information and, for example, the

use of politeness formulae is less strict. Moreover, even though it is unlikely that serious business writing will include humour in the future, creativity will surely remain a useful skill, and so will business correspondence skills, that is why they should, arguably, be taugh in an interesting and motivating way.

1. English in the international business community

Undoubtedly, the language of international business is English. However, it is largely used as a lingua franca, that is, a common language shared by people from different linguacultural backgrounds and often none of the interlocutors is its native speaker (Jenkins, 2009: 200–201). Business English as a lingua franca (BELF) is therefore neutral, not being the native language of any of the participants, and shared, as it is "used for conducting business within the global business discourse community" (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, Kankaanranta, 2005: 403–404, as quoted in Sing, 2017: 326). It is possible that our correspondence partner will not be a native speaker, but rather a speaker of English as a foreign language, prone to lexical, grammatical and/or pragmatic mistakes; he or she may even have some difficulty understanding us. Indeed, speakers of English as a lingua franca adjust to the interlocutor, for example, by simplifying their language if he or she is less fluent (Kankaanranta, Louhiala-Salminen, 2010: 207, as cited in Sing, 2017: 329).

According to Gerritsen and Nickerson (2009: 180, as cited in Sing, 2017: 325), Business English is mainly used in two types of communicative settings: external communication (e.g. between a company and its customers), and "intra- and inter-company communication." While external communication is governed by the corporate language policy, communication between employees can be quite informal. In other words, employees form a "discourse community" in which "the communicative needs of the goals tend to predominate in the development and maintenance of its discourse characteristics" (Swales, 1990: 24, as quoted in Sing, 2017: 330). As Sing (2017: 331) observes, learning is dynamic in nature and involves participating in a given community of practice, gradually "acquiring [a] new, enterprise-related, as well as efficiency-governed notion of appropriateness concerning the use of English […] and acting competently according to it" (Ehrenreich, 2009: 138, as quoted in Sing, 2017: 331). In Sing's (2017: 340) view, teaching and learning Business English should aim at building a community of practice and participating in it, rather than individual knowledge enrichment.

Still, participation in an international community is not limited to the possession of language skills, as one also needs intercultural competence. However distant the participants' native cultures are, intercultural communication involves "a system of shared values, attitudes, beliefs and ways of doing things across cultural contexts" (Bhatia, Bremner, 2012: 430, as quoted in Sing, 2017: 345). One of those things shared across contexts is the general rules of business correspondence; in spite of differences, in order to avoid misunderstandings, one needs to obey such rules. According to Kankaanranta, Louhiala-Salminen and Karhunen (2015, as cited in Sing, 2017: 345), "Global Communicative Competence' consists of 'multicultural competence, competence in BELF and business

knowhow" (Sing, 2017: 345), which are interconnected, as language use cannot be separated from contextual knowledge (Kankaaranta et al., 2015: 130–131, as cited in Sing, 2017: 345). Thus, business correspondence skills can be assumed to be quite complex and to involve not only linguistic, but also subject-matter knowledge.

2. The development of business correspondence skills

Business English, as a branch of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), is multidisciplinary by nature. As mentioned above, it requires linguistic and intercultural competence and business know-how. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987, as cited in Dudley-Evans, St John, 1998: 2–3), ESP is an approach rather than a product, and it is based on learners' needs rather than on a particular methodology or material. In a similar vein, Robinson (1991, as quoted in Dudley-Evans, St John, 1998: 3) defines ESP in reference to two criteria: it is usually goal-directed and involves a needs analysis, or what "what students have to do through the medium of English" (Robinson, 1991: 3, as quoted in Dudley-Evans, St John, 1998: 3). While people learning Business English in companies know their actual needs, in the case of English Philology students, even specialising in Business English, it is more difficult to foresee what needs they will have in the future, that is why Business English courses at university can be designed only approximately and, however much their future work will diverge from the textbooks, they should, arguably, learn some general standards first, and later use, for example, informal email if this is required in their jobs.

Still, the spread of email has not eliminated formal letters completely. As Flowerdew and Wan (2006: 136, as quoted in Beer 2017: 156) have remarked, "posted letters still pay [sic] a very important role in certain forms of business communication." The importance of effective written communication in business is also emphasised by Washington (2014, as cited in Szanajda, Ou, 2017: 38). However, as shown by Stowers and Barker (2003, as cited in Szanajda, Ou, 2017: 38), students tend to believe their business writing skills are sufficient, contrary to the opinions of their teachers and business owners, that is why motivation plays a crucial role in the development of students' business writing skills. Therefore, arguably, business correspondence teachers should look for effective ways of motivating students, such as the choice of interesting writing activities.

A particular role in ESP writing is played by genre awareness, which includes understanding both the conventions of the genre (in this case, business correspondence) and "the fact that genres evolve with time and change in accordance with changes in the communities that use them" (Dudley-Evans, St John, 1998: 114–115). However, it is also necessary to plan, draft and revise one's business writing, to fulfil its purpose and make it appropriate for the intended readers. According to Dudley-Evans and St John (1998: 115), if the reader is not specified (a colleague, a customer, etc.), one should at least imagine the future reader, taking into account the expectations of the discourse community.

Yet, such expectations may vary and, as shown by Puvenesvary (2003, as cited in Zhang, 2013: 145), business memos and letters produced by students were evaluated

differently by academics and business people. While the academics, who were Business English teachers, focused on linguistic accuracy, text formats and the fulfilment of test requirements, the business practitioners were mainly concerned with power relationships, workplace culture as well as time constraints, whereas language errors were more important to them from the point of view of the corporate image, not language proficiency in itself. Moreover, as Zhang's (2013: 154) study shows, the variety of the business professionals' responses indicates that there is no single business professional identity, but rather it varies from one context to another. From the results, Zhang (2013: 154) draws the following pedagogical implications: first, genre knowledge should be taught as a transferable skill and should "narrow the gap between the academy and the workplace" (ibidem: 154), second, given the flexibility of the genre, there should be more emphasis on specificity, including the situated interaction, role relationships, industry-specific practices, etc., and third, teaching business genres should be holistic and treat "the formal, process, rhetorical and subject-matter dimensions of genre knowledge" (ibidem: 154) as equally important.

3. The role of affective factors in foreign language learning

It has long been known that affective factors, such as motivation, play an important role in foreign language learning. As a long-term process, language learning requires sustained motivation, and, as emphasised by MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012: 199), a sense of time is related to both the L2 self-system (Dörnyei, 2005; 2009, as cited in MacIntyre, Gregersen, 2012: 199) and to future selves (MacIntyre, Mackinnon, Clement, 2009, as cited in MacIntyre, Gregersen, 2012: 199). In fact, as Dörnyei (2009: 24) observes, possible selves are particularly relevant to language learning, especially in foreign language contexts (i.e. learning the language in one's native country, not where the language is spoken), because such learners are less likely to develop integrative motivation as willingness to come closer to the target language community (Gardner, 2001, as cited in Dörnyei, 2009: 22). Therefore, Dörnyei (2009: 29) has proposed an L2 motivational self-system, which encompasses the Ideal L2 self (for example, if one assumes that one's ideal L2 self speaks the L2 fluently, one will try to reduce the gap between the actual self and the ideal one), the Ought-to L2 self ("the attributes that one believes one *ought to* possess to meet expectations and to *avoid* possible negative outcomes," ibidem: 29, his emphasis), and L2 Learning Experience. In his view, imagining one's ideal L2 self constitutes a more powerful motivator than some abstract integrative motive, yet he does not deny integrativeness completely. Indeed, "the more positive our disposition toward these L2 speakers, the more attractive our idealised L2 self" (ibidem: 28). Similarly, the ideal L2 self is related to instrumental motivation, if we imagine ourselves as professionally successful (ibidem: 28). According to MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012: 211), the discrepancy between the possible selves can be reduced by using imagination and the power of positive emotion. Apart from visualising oneself as a fluent L2 speaker, one can also use visualisation for relaxation purposes, imagining a peaceful place or situation, such as relaxing on the beach (ibidem: 207).

Apart from motivation, learning should involve positive emotions connected with a particular task. One of the factors increasing concentration on the task and motivation for it is flow, defined by Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2002: 89) as "complete absorption in what one does". It includes focused concentration, "merging of action and awareness," a "loss of reflective self-consciousness," a sense of controlling one's actions, a "distortion of temporal experience" (i.e. time seems to pass faster) and the perception of the activity as intrinsically rewarding (ibidem: 90).

Another way to build positive affect is the use of humour in the classroom. As shown by Deiter (2000: 21), humour makes class material more memorable, it motivates students to listen to the teacher, and they also experience less anxiety and feel more comfortable asking questions. As Deiter (2000: 22) notes, "[t]he use of humor should be a teaching tool that, if effective, will increase the amount of "what" is taught that is actually learned by students." Certainly, humour is no substitute for subject matter, but it can create a more positive, motivating classroom environment. Moreover, as shown by Goodman (1995, as cited in Deiter, 2000: 23), there is a relationship between humour and creativity, and creativity is undoubtedly a useful trait, not only in the arts, but in most professions, including business. Simonton (2002: 195) distinguishes between small-c creativity, which enhances problem-solving skills, and big-C creativity, which contributes to culture and history. In such fields as research, development or marketing, creativity is often used collectively (Dunbar, 1995, as cited in Simonton, 2002: 196), as people working together can achieve more than working separately, though that requires special conditions. Simonton (2002: 196) emphasises that "creativity consultants in industrial and organizational settings must do their utmost to ensure that these particular conditions are met."

In summary, it can be assumed that Business English students can use their imagination to visualise their ideal L2 selves as successful company employees, proficient in business communication. However, they should also enjoy learning and be in flow while practising business writing. Arguably, the use of imagination and humour can contribute to increased motivation and better learning outcomes, that is why techniques which involve them should be applied in teaching Business English.

4. The benefits of role-play and simulation

In general, role-play and simulation overlap to a certain extent, as they involve assuming particular roles related to language functions (e.g. a dialogue in a restaurant, business negotiations, etc.) and act them out. In fact, Luganskaya (2013: 283) defines role-play as "a simulation exercise where persons take on assumed roles in order to act out a scenario in a contrived setting." As a teaching and learning technique, role-play has a number of benefits, because it prepares learners for unpredictable communication situations, makes them aware of the listener, and involves emotion and creativity (Gastão Saliés, 1995: 6). It also increases students' self-confidence, and it develops autonomy, moving from controlled utterances to autonomous communication (ibidem: 13–14). Role-play is goal-oriented, it allows learners to practise grammar, vocabulary and speech patterns (making proposals,

agreeing, etc.), it helps them to notice gaps in their knowledge, it can be fun and relaxing, but at the same time, it prepares students for actual situations they may encounter at work, simultaneously making them exercise their decision-making and problem-solving skills (Luganskaya, 2013: 283). According to Luganskaya (2013: 284), another motivating factor, especially for adults, is team work. In her study, Luganskaya (2013) used simulations of job interviews and a discussion about saving money in a marketing company. She concludes that role-play constitutes a powerful teaching technique which helps achieve a number of aims, from language practice, through the creation of a favourable learning environment, to "making classes more interactive and student-oriented" (ibidem: 285).

However, not only are there both similarities and differences between simulation and role-play, but their definitions and classifications vary among researchers. As Siek-Piskozub (2001: 28–29) explains, following van Ments (1983: 4, as cited in Siek-Piskozub, 2001: 28–29), a simulation constitutes a simplified reproduction of a selected part of the world, which aims to make its participants experience and understand the situation, whereas drama uses the participants' ideas to amuse the viewers. Still, it is questionable whether drama and role-play in language teaching are the same thing. Çerkez, Altınay, Altınay and Bashirova (2012) do not distinguish between them, but, arguably, the difference is related to the purposes of their application. For example, pupils acting out a scene in a shop or a visit to the doctor use role-play to practise the language, but even if they amuse their classmates, the main aim is the practice of relevant vocabulary and phrases. By contrast, Garvey (1969: 206–207, as cited in Siek-Piskozub, 2001: 28) classified games, role-play and sociodrama as the three subtypes of simulation. The difference between role-play and simulation is thus not fully clear-cut, but, as defined by Siek-Piskozub (2001: 34), simulation as a pure category is, first, dynamic and, second, it must imitate a real situation and/or be close to it.

Therefore, simulation can also take place in writing, for instance, students can write business letters imitating those which they will write in their future work in companies. As early as 1970, Bale and Coonrad used a simulation task in a business writing course. The task involved writing a report based on a management game. As the students later admitted in the questionnaire, they had enjoyed the activity, because the task had involved bringing theory into reality, it had given them a glimpse of what they would do in their future work, they could see how unpredictable some people could be, etc. (Bale, Coonrad 1970: 10). What proved particularly motivating was competition between "companies" (the students had been divided into groups playing the roles of different companies), but also communication within and between the groups, and the application of concepts from other areas (ibidem: 11). It can thus be assumed that combining simulations with imagination and humour may be even more motivating and allow students to be in flow.

In fact, nowadays, simulations in the teaching of business writing can also involve technology. For example, as shown by Stoddart, Chan and Liu (2016, as cited in Szanajda, Ou, 2017: 39), the use of wiki-based and cloud-based collaboration can be very useful in teaching business writing. In teaching business processes and concepts, simulation programs aim to give students authentic tasks and facilitate learning by doing (Szanajda, Ou, 2017: 41–42). Therefore, in their study, Szanajda and Ou (2017) applied simulations to the teaching and assessment of business writing and, as they conclude, "simulations

have an undeniably important place in the teaching of business practices, and this can certainly be extended to business writing" (ibidem: 45).

In the present study, there was no possibility to use simulation programs or cloud-based collaboration, so the students wrote their simulated business letters by hand or used text editors, such as Microsoft Word or Open Office. However, what is original about this study is the emphasis on creativity and motivating students to use their imagination, both to practise writing different kinds of business letters and to be in flow.

5. The study

5.1. Participants

The overall study was carried out with ninety-six participants, fifty-one at the University of Ostrava, where the present author was temporarily teaching in 2015, and forty-five at the University of Silesia, at the English Philology department in Sosnowiec. However, while the questionnaire was completed by all the forty-five students from the University of Silesia during their Business English classes, in Ostrava it could not be carried out in class and, as it was sent to the students by email, only seven returned it. Therefore, the statistics based on the questionnaire (See Sections *Method* and *Results* below) were calculated for fifty-two students: forty-five at the University of Silesia and seven at the University of Ostrava, whereas the business letters were analysed for all the ninety-six participants.

All the participants were English Philology students following a Business English programme. Their native languages were Polish (45 participants) and Czech (51), they were advanced in English (approximately C1, though there was no possibility of conducting a placement test before the study; in the questionnaire, they indicated "C1" or "advanced"), and, as other languages they had studied, they mentioned German (16 participants), French (16), Spanish (7), Russian (3), Italian (3), Portuguese (1), Arabic (1) and Latin (1). It might be surprising that not all of them indicated other languages, but it is possible that they misinterpreted the question and thought that "studying another language" referred to another philology, or, alternatively, they may have regarded other languages as irrelevant to Business English.

5.2. Method

The study was conducted using a combination of a questionnaire which aimed to reveal the participants' attitudes, and of an analysis of their actual writing as a reflection of those attitudes. In the case of the Czech students from Ostrava, the present author analysed their written assignments in business correspondence produced over three months and sent them the questionnaire by email. (The questionnaire concerned their attitudes towards role-play in foreign language learning and different aspects of business correspondence, and it is presented in the appendix at the end of the article. However, the questionnaire was only one of the research instruments, serving to reveal the students' attitudes towards, for example, the use of imagination and humour, and to interpret their business writing in the light of their responses.) The text types analysed here include an enquiry, a CV,

a covering letter, a complaint, and an enquiry written in class, followed by a reply to it (a form of role-play in writing). There was considerable emphasis on the style and the formal features (e.g. the layout of a business letter), but the students were free to invent the contents, to write to or on behalf of imaginary companies, and even to include some humour (e.g. ask about strange or imaginary products), to enjoy writing and develop their business correspondence skills in the process.

On the other hand, the Polish students participated in a one-off study: they wrote business letters in class (they could choose between an enquiry, a reply to an enquiry, a CV and a covering letter, but they all chose to write enquiries, possibly as the most representative type of letter practised in business correspondence courses), followed by the same questionnaire as in Ostrava.

The research questions were as follows: First, what are the students' attitudes towards role-play in foreign language learning in general? (If they are negative, it is possible that they do not like the form of role-play involved in practising business writing either. Here, role-play is assumed to be a kind of simulation where students take on the roles of customers, company employees, etc. and the situation imitates that of writing to or on behalf of a company.) Second, what are their attitudes towards the study of business correspondence, different activities and skills related to it, and the use of imagination and humour in particular? Third, to what extent do the students use their imagination and humour in simulated business correspondence? In particular, do they modify model letters from the textbook, changing mainly the names of the companies and/or senders or recipients, or do they really use their imagination in a creative way?

5.3. Results

As revealed by the questionnaire, the participants moderately like role-play in foreign language learning, but their attitudes vary considerably, especially at the University of Silesia, while the students from Ostrava seem more unanimous. On a 1-to-5 Likert scale (1 – not at all, 5 – very much), the mean for both groups is 3.288 (SD = 1.143), 3.429 (SD = 0.976) for Ostrava and 3.267 (SD = 1.76) for the University of Silesia. However, as shown in Table 1, the students give more arguments for liking than for disliking role-play. (The sums of the percentages exceed 100%, as the participants could mark several answers.)

Table 1. The reasons for liking and for disliking role-play in foreign language learning

Reasons for liking role-play (percentages)

University of Ostrava							University of Silesia						
More natural situations	Imagination and creativity	Vocabulary and grammar practice	Coope-ration with friends	Feeling like somebody else	Fun	Other	More natural situations	Imagination and creativity	Vocabulary and grammar practice	Coope-ration with friends	Feeling like somebody else	Fun	Other
71.43	57.14	57.14	14.29	0	42.86	0	53.33	42.22	62.22	33.33	20	28.89	2.22

Reasons for disliking role-play (percentages)

University of Ostrava						University of Silesia					
Artificial or childish	Difficult to invent things	Uncom-fortable pretending	I prefer other activities	It is boring	Other	Artificial or childish	Difficult to invent things	Uncom-fortable preten-ding	I prefer other activities	It is boring	Other
14.29	14.29	28.57	0	14.29	0	8.88	11.11	11.11	8.88	8.88	2.22

Source: Own research.

It can thus be seen that the majority of the students perceive role-play as an opportunity to practise grammar and vocabulary (62.22% of the Polish and 57.14% of the Czech students), they perceive it as more natural than studying the textbook (71.43% in Ostrava and 53.33% in Sosnowiec), and they admit that it allows them to use their imagination and creativity (57.14% and 42.22% respectively). The only student who marked "other" explained his choice as follows: "best practice is practical practice," thus stressing the practical aspects of role-play. By contrast, very few participants find role-play artificial or childish, difficult because of the need to invent new situations, uncomfortable or boring. Only one student stated it was stressful (the one who marked "other" in the Polish group). The results were compared by means of a chi-square test and the differences between the groups were not statistically significant. Table 2 below is the contingency table for the chi-square test. The abbreviations UO and US stand for the University of Ostrava and the University of Silesia respectively. The chi-squares as well as Cramér's Vs and Pearson's contingency coefficients were calculated using Microsoft Excel.

Table 2. Contingency table for the chi-square test concerning the students' reasons for liking role-play

University	More natural situations	Imagination and creativity	Vocabulary and grammar practice	Cooperation with friends	Feeling like somebody else	Fun	Other	Total
UO	5	4	4	1	0	3	0	17
US	24	19	28	15	9	13	1	109
Total	29	23	32	16	9	16	1	126

Source: Own research.

In the case of liking role-play, p = 0.9999, df = 6, which means that the students' preferences do not depend on the group. The result was later verified by means of Cramér's V as well as Pearson's contingency coefficient (C), adjusting the χ^2 value for the sample size (Hartmann, Krois, Waske, 2018; Kotowicz, 2020: 27; Więckowska, 2022: 328). As V = 0.352, the relationship is indeed weak, which confirms the results of the chi-square test. Given the small size of the table, following Więckowska (2022: 328), the maximum value of C was calculated at 0.7. As C = 0.03516, this again confirms that the relationship between the university and the students' reasons for liking role play is weak.

As for the arguments for disliking role play, the difference is not significant either (p = 0.871, df = 5). Table 3 below is the contingency table for the chi-square test.

Table 3. Contingency table for the chi-square test regarding the students' reasons for disliking role play

University	Artificial or childish	Difficult to invent things	Uncomfortable pretending	I prefer other activities	It is boring	Other	Total
UO	1	2	2	0	1	0	6
US	4	5	5	4	4	1	23
Total	5	7	7	4	5	1	29

Source: Own research.

The results of the chi-square test were later confirmed by Cramér's V, where $V = 0.252$, which indicates that the students' reasons for disliking role-play did not depend on the university. Again, adjusting the maximum value of Pearson's correlation coefficient to the size of the table, $C_{max} = 0.7$ and $C = 0.244$, which further confirms the weakness of the relationship.

As for their attitudes towards practising business correspondence, first, the students were asked what roles they preferred to take, for example, whether they preferred to write serious or humorous letters, to use their own or imaginary names, etc. The percentages are given in Table 4 below.

Table 4. The choice of roles in practising business correspondence (percentages)

Role	University of Ostrava	University of Silesia
As authentic and serious as possible	42.85%	48.88%
Serious letters to or from imaginary companies, own name	57.14%	20.00%
Serious letters to or from imaginary companies, imaginary name	42.85%	71.11%
Humorous letters to or from existing companies, own name	0.00%	6.67%
Humorous letters to or from imaginary companies, own name	0.00%	2.22%
Humorous letters to or from imaginary companies, imaginary name	42.85%	8.88%
Serious letters, neither the company's, nor one's own name	0.00%	17.77%
Humorous letters, neither the company's, nor one's own name	0.00%	2.22%
Other	0.00%	2.22%

Source: Own research.

Table 5. Contingency table for the chi-square test concerning the students' choices in practising business correspondence

University	Authentic and serious	Serious/ imaginary company/ own name	Serious/ imaginary company/ imaginary name	Humorous/ existing company/ own name	Humorous/ imaginary company/ own name	Humorous/ imaginary company/ imaginary name	Serious, neither the company's nor one's name	Humorous, neither the company's nor one's name	Other	Total
UO	3	4	3	0	0	3	0	0	0	13
US	22	9	32	3	1	4	8	1	1	81
Total	25	13	35	3	1	7	8	1	1	94

Source: Own research.

As the above results show, the students prefer to write serious letters to, or on behalf of, imaginary companies, using imaginary names (71.11% in Sosnowiec and 42.85% in Ostrava), or their own names in the case of the Czech students (57.14%; only 20% of the Polish students like using their own names in such letters). Still, a large part of them like writing serious letters which seem as authentic as possible (48.88% at the University of Silesia and 42.85% at the University of Ostrava). This suggests that, whatever the use of their imagination, the students want to practise the kind of correspondence they will conduct in their future jobs. However, 42.85% of the Czech students like to write humorous letters to, or on behalf of, imaginary companies, using imaginary names, as opposed to only 8.88% of the Polish students. Indeed, as will be discussed in more detail below, some really funny business letters were observed only in the Czech group, though some of the Polish students also included humorous elements in their letters, such as bags that were degradable after two days (supposedly ecological, but in reality such bags would be extremely perishable and impossible to store). Again, the difference between the groups, calculated by means of a chi-square test, was not statistically significant, $p = 0.19$, $df = 8$. The contingency table for the chi-square test is Table 5.

The lack of a statistical difference between the students of the University of Ostrava and the University of Silesia was later confirmed by Cramér's V, where $V = 0.345$. Similarly, admitting $C_{max} = 0.7$, Pearson's correlation coefficient $C = 0.326$ shows that the relationship is indeed weak.

In the next part of the questionnaire, the students were asked to what extent they agreed with sixteen statements concerning business correspondence (on a 1-to-5 Likert scale, where 1 meant 'completely disagree' and 5 – 'fully agree'), and how much they liked to practise business correspondence by writing to, or on behalf of, imaginary companies (1 – not at all, 5 – very much). The results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. The students' attitudes towards selected aspects of business correspondence

Statement	University of Ostrava		University of Silesia		Both groups	
	mean	SD	mean	SD	mean	SD
Writing to and from imaginary companies develops my creativity.	3.857	0.6900	3.333	1.087	3.404	1.053
Writing "imaginary" business letters develops my creative thinking.	3.714	0.7560	3,133	1.036	3.212	1.016
Writing to imaginary companies feels authentic enough.	4.286	0.7560	3.386	1.185	3.510	1.173
I have fun inventing funny names, products, etc.	2.714	1.2540	2.711	1.471	2.712	1.433
Combining Business English with imagination is very motivating.	3.714	0.9510	3.250	1.102	3.300	1.081
Writing to and from imaginary companies is easier.	4.286	1.1130	3.489	1.290	3.596	1.287
Even writing to existing companies involves some imagination.	3.714	1.3800	3.533	1.160	3.558	1.178

Statement	University of Ostrava		University of Silesia		Both groups	
	mean	SD	mean	SD	mean	SD
Collaboration is particularly motivating.	2.429	0.7870	2.909	1.03	2.843	1.007
I like this kind of exercise anyway.	3.143	0.6900	3.378	0.984	3.346	0.947
I dislike this kind of exercise anyway.	1.857	0.8997	2.222	1.085	2.173	1.061
Writing to and from imaginary companies feels artificial.	2.286	1.1130	2.533	1.236	2.5	1.213
I would rather learn business correspondence working in a company.	3.143	0.8997	2.888	1.335	2.923	1.281
Writing to imaginary companies is even more difficult.	1.714	0.9510	2.195	1.268	2.216	1.238
Writing to and from imaginary companies seems childish to me.	1.571	0.7870	2.25	1.278	2.157	1.24
I avoid humorous elements in order not to use them accidentally.	3.000	1.5280	2.773	1.379	2.804	1.386
I prefer to write serious business letters to use them as models later.	3.714	1.1130	3.864	1.322	3.843	1.286
How much do you like to practise business correspondence writing to, or on behalf of, imaginary companies?	3.571	0.9760	3.622	0.716	3.615	0.745

Source: Own research.

It can thus be seen that the students admit that writing "imaginary" business letters develops their creativity and the ability to think creatively ("outside the box"), but not to a great extent, as the means indicate (and, judging by the standard deviations, the Czech students are fairly unanimous, but the Poles are less so). However, they find writing to imaginary companies authentic enough to feel that they will write similar letters in the future (mean M = 4.286 for the Czech students, 3.386 for the Polish ones, and 3.51 for both groups). Possibly, they realise that the examples from the textbooks are also imaginary, at least to some extent (the names and other data have surely been changed). This overlaps to some extent with the statement that role-play is similar to authentic language use (see Table 1). Thus, even writing to an imaginary company, using an assumed name, one can feel that the task at least resembles real business correspondence. Therefore, they also generally disagree that it is artificial (mean M = 2.286 for the Czech group, 2.533 for the Polish one, and 2.5 for both groups, though the high standard deviations indicate some variation between them) or that it is like a children's game (here the means are 1.571, 2.25, and 2.157 respectively).

In general, they only moderately like to practise business correspondence to, and on behalf of, imaginary companies (mean M = 3.622 for the Polish group, 3.571 for the Czech one, and 3.615 for both groups) and they seem quite unanimous about it. However, even

though they prefer to write serious letters which can later serve as models, the means are not much higher. It is possible that, whether imaginary or serious, business correspondence is not a very pleasant activity in itself. Still, they do not tend to avoid humorous elements in order not to use them accidentally in the future; apparently, they can separate humour from serious writing and do not need to be afraid to confuse them. The responses to item 9 ("I like this kind of exercise anyway") confirm this tendency, as the means are 3.143 (Ostrava), 3.378 (Sosnowiec), and 3.346 (both groups), while the mean responses to item 10 ("I dislike this kind of exercise anyway") are much lower (1.857, 2.222 and 2.173 respectively).

The attitudes towards combining Business English with imagination as a motivating activity (item 5) are positive but not enthusiastic (mean M = 3.714 for Ostrava, 3.25 for Sosnowiec, and 3.3 for both). They tend to think that writing to, or on behalf of, imaginary companies is easier, especially the Czech students (mean M = 4.286, as opposed to 3.489 for the Poles, but the relatively high standard deviations reflect differences between them). However, this does not mean that they have fun inventing imaginary company names and products, as the means are 2.714, 2.711 and 2.712 respectively. Moreover, the results do not confirm Luganskaya's (2013) observation that writing in collaboration is particularly motivating (means: 2.429, 2.909 and 2.843 respectively). It is possible that in oral activities cooperation is more motivating than in written ones, but this would need to be empirically verified.

Surprisingly enough, the students do not quite agree that they do not think they can learn business correspondence at university and they would rather learn it in a company. While the Czechs agree with this statement more (mean M = 3.143, SD = 0.8997), the Poles rather disagree with it (mean M = 2.888), but their opinions vary considerably (SD = 1.335). It might be supposed that, while hands-on experience in a company would be very useful, the students realise that it is good to learn the basics at university first.

As for the students' actual writing, it ranges from very original, creative letters to ones which seem based on the textbooks. However, while certain standard elements need to be included, such as reference to an advertisement, a request for information, etc., more creativity is possible in the choice of product types, names and brands. Some examples of names and products are given in Table 4 below (the original spellings are retained).

Table 7. Selected examples from the students' business letters

Type of examples	University of Ostrava	University of Silesia
People's names	John and Lily Swift; C. Complainer; Leah Haus; Petr Novák; Hana Smutná; Ms B. Kaasen; John Smith; Frank Smell; K. Perry; Anna Marie Nova; Taylor White; Mike Jordan; Karl Lagerfeld.	P. Gerard; John Adams; Dolan Trump; Marlon Brando; John Smith; Anna Nowak; Ann Nowak; Katarzyna Kowalska; Peter Parker; XYZ; Thomas Mate; Rafael Boston; Jenifer Bix; Mary Flower; Katarzyna Kot; Michael Bigben; Irina Spalko; Andrew Andrew, Victoria Secret, Jiži Senkov; Izabela Notatka.
Names of companies	Sunsearch Holidays; Avon; Plenty o'Fish Ltd.; GO FOR IT! Ltd; Cycle it! s.r.o; SVENSKA Ltd.; Bookstore Apfel; Compuvision Ltd.; Nesson House; Carls company management; Taste of Brazil; Chez Chat Noir; The Glam.	B.A. Electronics Ltd.; Co-Smetic Ltd., Powder Coating Department, Philippines Inc.; Casio Ltd.; Down Company; Up Company; Computers Ltd.; New Technologies Ltd.; Toys like dolls Inc.; Presents and gifts Ltd.; Golden Gate Engineering; Miodzik Ltd.; Hortex Sp. z o.o.; Melting and Potting Ltd., Green Bags; Orango; Lemo; Škoda Auto PCA.
Brand names	Chanel Prime; IKEA 2.0; Nimbus 2000; Samsung Galaxy Note III; Moon paint; Brown Men.	HP printer; Eko bag; the "NOVA" Sofa; 1.9 TDI engines; Casio 868, Delta Database, Bonduette.
Product and service types	Perfume; fishing gear; waterproof hats; mountain and road bikes; high-quality chairs; a flying broom; organic lipsticks; a house; mobile phones; white tops unisex, trousers and lab coats; coffee, a machine gun.	A course on Quality Control; wedding cakes; toy-soldiers; printers; Fluorocarbon Coating of Structural Aluminium Materials; eye-makeup products; bags that are degradable after two days; CD players; kitchen equipment; mineral water with strawberry taste; rose liquor; waterproof watches.

Source: Own research.

As the examples show, the students displayed considerable creativity. The letters contained a wide range of products, people's and companies' names. Some of the names were those of existing companies (Hortex, Casio) or famous people (Karl Lagerfeld, Marlon Brando), others were slightly changed (e.g. Dolan Trump), still others were stereotypical (John Smith, Anna Nowak, Petr Novák, Computers Ltd.), or, on the contrary, quite original (C. Complainer as the sender of a complaint, Izabela Notatka (which can be translated

as Isabella Note), Melting and Potting Ltd., Miodzik Ltd. ("miodzik" is a diminutive of "miód", which means "honey" in Polish)). The brand name "Bonduette" ("your rose liquor 'Bonduette' that was of utmost quality") was most probably based on the brand of tinned vegetables "Bonduelle." Some of the Czech students also used their real names, but they are not included in the table because of the European data protection law. On the other hand, such names as "Ms B. Kaasen", "P. Gerard" and "Compuvision Ltd." were taken from Ashley's (2003) book. Some of the enquiries did not specify the product type, but wrote, for instance, "a catalogue of your firm's products", assuming that it would be obvious to the recipients anyway.

A few letters are indeed humorous, such as Frank Smell's complaint to Bookstore Apfel that the flying broom does not fly, or the enquiry about bananas beginning with: "As a passionate banana lover, I could not have missed the fact that bananas grown on your plantations are the most luscious ones." In fact, some of the letters might seem funny, not because they are deliberately humorous, but because of certain incongruities. For example, a customer asks the company "Samsung Polska" (Samsung Poland) about "your HP printer", an address includes "4850 Maryland, England," or "Philippines Inc." seems to be the name of a company and not that of a country.

6. Conclusions

To answer the research questions, first, the students' attitudes towards role-play in general are fairly positive. Even though the means are not very high, more of them marked arguments in favour of role-play than against it. In fact, the results for role-play and simulations in business writing overlap to some extent, for example, both activities are regarded as authentic enough to provide relevant language practice.

Second, as in the case of role-play, the students moderately enjoy business correspondence activities. Though they tend to prefer serious letters, such as the ones they will write in their future jobs, they do not avoid humour completely and, as shown by their business letters, they do use humour while practising business correspondence. They admit that writing to, and on behalf of, imaginary companies develops their creativity, but again, the means are not very high. Apparently, there are more interesting ways to develop one's creativity, for example, creative writing connected with literature rather than business. They also find writing to, and on behalf of, imaginary companies easier, but it is not necessarily fun. The opportunity to use imagination is motivating, but not to a great extent either. Simultaneously, even though they might be expected to prefer to learn business correspondence in a company rather than at university, the results do not confirm it. It seems that they need to learn the basics at university first and only then practise them in authentic settings.

Third, their actual writing reveals considerable creativity and a certain dose of humour. As for the structure of the letters, the ways of presenting information, etc., they seem largely based on the textbooks, but this is also part of the course objectives: mastering the rules of official business communication, as informal email would not be enough. However, they invent a number of names, and even humorous content (such as the complaint about

a flying broom), so it may be supposed that at least some of them experience positive emotions, focus on writing original letters and are motivated to do so.

It can thus be concluded that the students are fairly consistent in their attitudes, as their answers to the questionnaire reveal a moderate liking for imaginative business writing and, similarly, their business letters tend to be quite serious. They may use their creativity more freely in inventing company and brand names, but relatively few of them write humorous letters as such.

Last but not least, motivation for learning such modern skills as business correspondence does not have to be purely instrumental (related to professional success, the salary, etc.), but it can also be developed by building positive affect and engaging imagination and creativity. Still, even though the use of humour and imagination in the practice of business correspondence has some benefits, the focus should be on serious business writing, in accordance with the requirements of the international business community, for which the students will work in the future.

Acknowledgements

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Streszczenie
Postawy studentów wobec użycia wyobraźni i humoru w nauczaniu i uczeniu się korespondencji biznesowej i ich implikacje dla nauczania

Celem artykułu było zbadanie postaw studentów wobec nauczania korespondencji biznesowej w języku angielskim z użyciem wyobraźni i humoru, wyrażonych w kwestionariuszu i odzwierciedlonych w pracach pisemnych. Zakładano, że wykorzystanie wyobraźni, kreatywności i humoru będzie motywować studentów do ćwiczenia korespondencji biznesowej i rozwoju umiejętności. Badanie oparte jest zarówno na analizie prac pisemnych studentów, jak i na kwestionariuszu dotyczącym symulacji i humoru w ćwiczeniu korespondencji biznesowej. Jak wskazują wyniki, prace studentów znacznie różnią się od standardowego listu, którego wzór znajdziemy w podręczniku. Również kwestionariusz pokazuje różnorodne postawy: jedni studenci uważają tego typu symulacje za ciekawe i motywujące, natomiast inni odbierają je jako sztuczne. Studenci wolą uczyć się poważnej korespondencji, która jest bliższa ich przyszłej pracy zawodowej. Można wyciągnąć wniosek, że chociaż używanie wyobraźni i humoru ma pewne zalety, takie jak motywowanie studentów i rozwijanie ich kreatywności, to nauczanie powinno skupiać się na autentycznej korespondencji biznesowej, jaką będą prowadzić w przyszłości pracownicy.

Słowa kluczowe: korespondencja biznesowa, motywacja, kreatywność, strategia ludyczna, symulacja

Appendix: The questionnaire used in the study

Business correspondence

Sex: F_/M_

1. Your experience in language learning:
   English (time of study, level of proficiency): _____
   What other languages have you studied? (Please, indicate your proficiency levels.)

2. To what extent do you like role-play in foreign language learning in general? (1 – not at all, 5 – very much)

   1   2   3   4   5

   If you like it, please, indicate why. (You can choose as many answers as you want.)
   □ It motivates me to practise the language in situations which feel more natural than just studying the textbook.
   □ It allows me to use my imagination and creativity.

□ It allows me to practise the vocabulary and grammar I have learnt.
□ It allows me to learn in cooperation with my friends.
□ It allows me to feel as if I were somebody else.
□ It is fun.
□ other (please, explain)

If you dislike it, please, indicate why. (You can choose as many answers as you want.)
□ It feels artificial or even childish.
□ It is difficult for me to invent situations in which I have not been.
□ I feel uncomfortable pretending to be somebody else.
□ I prefer other activities. (Which ones? Please, specify.)
□ I find role-play boring.
□ other (please explain)

3. While practising business correspondence in English, you prefer to (you can choose more than one answer):
   □ write letters as authentic or as probable as possible (i.e. serious letters to, or on behalf of, existing companies, albeit without sending them), using your own name
   □ write serious letters to, or on behalf of, imaginary companies, using your own name
   □ write serious letters to, or on behalf of, imaginary companies, using an imaginary name
   □ write humorous letters to, or on behalf of, existing companies, using your own name
   □write humorous letters to, or on behalf of, imaginary companies, using your own name
   □ write humorous letters to, or on behalf of, imaginary companies, using an imaginary name
   □ write serious letters, using neither the company's, nor your own name
   □ write humorous letters, using neither the company's, nor your own name
   □ other (please, explain)

4. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?
(1 – completely disagree, 5 – fully agree)
(1) Writing business letters to imaginary companies or on their behalf allows me to develop and use my creativity.   1   2   3   4   5
(2) Writing such "imaginary" business letters develops my ability to think creatively, "outside the box."   1   2   3   4   5
(3) Writing business letters to imaginary companies feels authentic enough for me to feel that I write such letters as I will write to real companies in the future. 1   2   3   4   5
(4) I have fun inventing funny names of companies, ordering strange or funny products, etc.
1   2   3   4   5
(5) Writing business letters to, or on behalf of, imaginary companies is very motivating because it allows me to combine practising Business English with the use of imagination.
1   2   3   4   5

(6) Writing to, and on behalf of, imaginary companies, is easier, because I do not have to know, for example, the Sales Manager's name, the company's address, etc., and I can invent anything I want.   1   2   3   4   5

(7) Even if I write a letter to an existing company for the business correspondence classes, I invent many of the details (the address, the addressee's name, the name of the product, etc.), so there is always some imagination involved anyway.   1   2   3   4   5

(8) What I find particularly motivating is writing in collaboration with my friends, for example, if I write an enquiry to a friend and he or she replies to it.   1   2   3   4   5

(9) It is hard to say whether I prefer writing serious business letters to, and on behalf of, existing companies, or humorous ones to, and on behalf of, imaginary companies. I LIKE this kind of exercise anyway.   1   2   3   4   5

(10) It is hard to say whether I prefer writing serious business letters to, and on behalf of, existing companies, or humorous ones to, and on behalf of, imaginary companies. I DISLIKE this kind of exercise anyway.   1   2   3   4   5

(11) I do not like writing to, and on behalf of, imaginary companies, because it feels very artificial to me. I thus write serious letters to existing companies, only I do not send them.
1 2   3   4   5

(12) I do not think I can learn business correspondence at university. I would rather learn it by working at a company and participating in real business correspondence.
1 2   3   4   5

(13) Writing to imaginary companies is even more difficult for me than writing to real ones, because I do not have enough imagination and I do not know what to write.
1 2   3   4   5

(14) I do not like writing to, and on behalf of, imaginary companies, because it resembles a children's game and seems childish to me.   1   2   3   4   5

(15) I avoid using humorous elements because I am afraid I may get used to them and accidentally use them in real business correspondence in the future.   1   2   3   4   5

(16) I prefer to write serious business letters in order to use them as model letters in the future.   1   2   3   4   5

5. How much, in general, do you like to practise business correspondence by writing to, or on behalf of, imaginary companies? (1 – not at all, 5 – very much)

                                1   2   3   4   5

   Why? (Please, explain.)
   Thank you very much. ☺