Unit of Study Teaching Report

Teaching Professional Email Writing in the SEE Program
(A Genre-Based Approach for Adult Vocational Learners)

Odonchimeg Tserentsogzol

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1. Executive summary

This report presents a unit of study developed for learners enrolled in Certificate II in Skills for Work and Vocational Pathways (FSK20119) within the MTC SEE program, with a focus on professional email writing. In today's digital workplaces, effective email communication is essential, and this unit aims to equip adult learners with the practical skills needed to compose clear, appropriate, and professional emails tailored to workplace contexts.

The unit is grounded in a genre-based pedagogical approach informed by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Martin & Rose, 2008) and principles of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) (Hyland, 2007; Basturkmen, 2010). This framework emphasises understanding the linguistic features and social purposes of texts, enabling learners to navigate workplace genres such as emails effectively. The unit also integrates task-based learning (Nunan, 2004) and functional language instruction (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987), focusing on authentic communicative purposes relevant to learners' employment goals.

2. LSP Teaching Context

Learners in the SEE program at MTC Gosford are predominantly adult students aged 18–45 from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, mostly non-native English speakers with CEFR levels ranging from A2 to B1. Their primary motivation is to improve employability through enhanced workplace communication skills. A needs analysis (Huhta, Vogt, Johnson, & Tulkki, 2013; Long, 2005) involving surveys, interviews, and stakeholder consultations revealed challenges in structuring emails, adopting a professional tone, and navigating digital platforms.

Stage	Subgroup (stronger)	Subgroup 2 (weaker)
1	Building the field: Lead-in discussion	
2	Teacher input on Professional email writing	
3	Students work with no supervision on input follow-up activity (work on both appendices)	The teacher supervised and advised the group to review and reinforce the input, working together on (work only Appendix A)
4	The class discusses the activity together after both groups are finished.	
5	Joint construction: Students work with no supervision on a scenario given.	
6	Students work on an open writing task with no scaffold	Students work on writing with added support, a partially written text, or a list of ready-made phrases

Reflecting the teaching and learning cycle outlined by Rothery (1996), the unit is structured into three main phases: **deconstruction**, where learners and teachers explore the purpose, context, and features of workplace emails; **joint construction**, where the class collaboratively composes a formal email; and **independent construction**, where learners draft and edit their emails using scaffolded support. This approach ensures the gradual development of linguistic competence and confidence in digital communication.

Learners will develop the ability to identify the structure and tone of formal and informal emails and produce workplace emails for real-life situations, such as requesting leave or responding to supervisors, thus improving their professional communication skills and digital literacy.

When it comes to teaching at the SEE program, many learners bring informal or transferable experience even if they haven't written formal workplace emails before. Most learners:

- Have used these virtual communication tools, like WhatsApp, SMS, or email for personal communication
- Understand hierarchies when talking to bosses, clients, coworkers etc.,
- Have worked casually, voluntarily, or participated in other job-related activities

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- Know the reason that they might need to request leave, report being sick, ask for rosters, etc.

On the other hand, some may lack confidence or formal digital literacy. For example:

- May not have used email communication before
- May struggle with grammatical patterns typing, spelling, or structure
- May not understand tone or formality in writing, using a grammatical metaphor (Liardet, 2016),
- May come from cultures where written communication at work is rare or hierarchical

Most SEE learners do have relevant experiences, but they may also need help bridging from:

- Spoken to written communication
- Informal to formal register
- Digital skills for email use

These learners benefit from explicit teaching of workplace genres, especially those involving digital communication, which is now integral to employability in service and administration sectors (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Giltrow & Stein, 2009).

3. Instructional Guide: Unit of Study

3.1 Stage 1: Building the Field (Session 1)

In this section, **as a lead-in discussion**, we will explore our experiences of professional communication through open-ended questions, as adult learners have more experiences to draw upon (Harmer, 2015) compared to young learners. And they have abstract thoughts to engage in conversation.

3.2 Objective

After this discussion and with careful observation, I will group the class into stronger and weaker students for further activities.

3.3 Activities

- Brainstorm situations where emails are used at work.
- Discuss email vs other forms of communication (e.g. texting, calling).
- Explore basic email vocabulary (e.g., subject, greeting, attachment, CC, sign-off).
- Examine job-related communication scenarios (e.g., calling in sick, asking about shifts).

3.3 Materials: Discussion questions (Appendix C)

1. **Modelling the Genre (Session 2–3)**

Objective: Identify structure and language features of effective workplace emails. Both learners and teachers explore the purpose, context, and features of workplace emails.

4.1 Rationale for Text Selection

We will analyse model emails used for requesting a shift swap **as an input** of the genre. These emails (Appendix A & B) are presented to learners as an example of professional digital communication. They are chosen for their genre structure, appropriate level of formality, practical relevance to vocational learners in the SEE program and differences of formality and informality. I used a genre-based pedagogical framework informed by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Martin & Rose, 2008), which allowed me to guide students through the email's purpose, structure, and language features.

4.2 Genre Structure

We will discuss the model emails; both demonstrate the typical generic stages of a workplace email: *subject line, salutation, purpose statement, elaboration, polite request, closing,* and *contact details*. For example, in the "Emily Nguyen" email, the subject line is explicit: "Request for shift swap on 5 November." This supports workplace readability and adheres to digital communication standards. The greeting, "Dear Sarah," sets an appropriately formal tone, marking the hierarchical relationship between the staff member and the supervisor. At the same time, Emily's email is the contrast of how it can be shown as informal and less professional.

4.3 Interpersonal Metafunction

Using SFL's metafunctions, we will analyse how the email constructs meaning. From an interpersonal metafunction perspective, the email establishes a respectful and cooperative relationship through modality ("Could you please...", "I would appreciate...") and the use of hedging language. This is in contrast to a more informal message also shown to learners (Appendix B), which has a conversational tone and is less suitable for workplace settings. The choice of full name, role, and phone number in the sign-off reflects an understanding of workplace conventions and contributes to professional ethos.

4.4 Ideational Metafunction

From an ideational metafunction standpoint, the email organises experiential meanings. The sender presents a problem ("I am unable to work on this date") and proposes a solution ("happy to cover another team member's shift"). This encourages students to view email writing not just as language production but as problem-solving within social contexts. The vocabulary choices are context-

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appropriate (e.g., "scheduled shift," "family commitment," "resolve this smoothly"), offering a model for vocabulary development.

4.5 Textual Metafunction

The textual metafunction is realised through logical progression and cohesion. The text is sequenced in a way that supports clarity, as it opens with a rationale, then presents the request, and subsequently includes contingency strategies. Paragraphing is effective, with one idea per section, a key marker of writing competence in the ACSF framework. Although workplace emails rarely display grammatical metaphors (Liardet, 2016), nominalised phrases such as 'shift request' or 'leave notification' may serve as foundational structures for later abstraction in academic or bureaucratic writing.

4.6 Comparative Learning

With this comparison, I also encouraged learners to compare this email with the informal one (Appendix B), where the language is fragmented, and the tone is overly casual ("Hey," "I'll just miss it, I guess"). Through guided discussion, learners could identify why certain choices in grammar, tone, and formatting matter in professional contexts. This genre-focused activity helped learners bridge the gap between informal digital communication (e.g., texting) and professional workplace emails. It also allowed me to integrate language, purpose, and register —key principles of ESP and genre-based literacy (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Hyland, 2007) — into meaningful classroom practice.

4.7 Activities:

- Read and annotate 2–3 sample emails (e.g., formal and informal).
- Label parts: subject line, greeting, body, closing, sign-off.

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- Compare tone: friendly vs formal.
- Focus on useful expressions:
    - "I am writing to…"
    - "Please find attached…"
    - "Let me know if you have any questions."

4.8 Materials:

- Sample workplace emails (Appendix A & B)
- Email deconstruction sheet
- Board work on tone, sentence starters

2. **Stage 3: Joint Construction (Session 4)**

5.1 Objective:

- Reinforce structure, language features, and purpose of the genre;

- Support learners who aren't yet confident enough to write on their own

- Co-construct a formal workplace email as a class.

5.2 Scenario: Requesting a shift change due to a personal appointment.

5.3 Activities:

- Draft an email together, sentence by sentence.
- Discuss tone, clarity, and professionalism.
- Review for grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

5.4 Materials:

- Smartboard and screen
- Sentence starters and email template

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3. Stage 4: Independent Construction (Session 5)

6.1 Objective

Learners write and edit their email for a selected scenario.

Scenario	Subgroup 1: Formal Complaint to Supplier	Subgroup 2: Requesting a Day Off
Context	You are responsible for ordering supplies. A recent delivery was late and had missing items.	You have a family event and need to request one day off next Friday.
Email Task	Write a formal complaint email to the supplier: • Explain the issue • Give specific details (date, missing items) • Request a solution or update	Write a polite email to your supervisor: • Request one day off • Mention the date • Give a reason
Challenges / Support	• Use a clear, professional tone • Stay polite despite frustration • Use factual language • Organize ideas into paragraphs	• Use a formal greeting and sign-off • Write a clear subject line • Keep the message simple and polite • Give an apparent reason for the leave

6.2 Activities

- Learners plan and draft emails.
- Peer review using a simple checklist to concept understanding
- Revise and submit a final version as typed since they are keen to develop digital literacy
- Send email via a mock platform or real email account.

6.3 Assessment:

- Based on ACSF Writing Indicators (e.g., structure, clarity, purpose)
- Checklist: appropriate format, tone, grammar, spelling

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4. Conclusion

This professional email writing unit responds directly to learners' communicative and digital literacy needs in vocational contexts. Grounded in ESP and SFL principles, the unit prioritizes genre awareness, linguistic functionality, and authentic task engagement. By fostering learners' ability to produce structured, context-appropriate emails, the unit contributes to their workplace readiness and professional confidence.
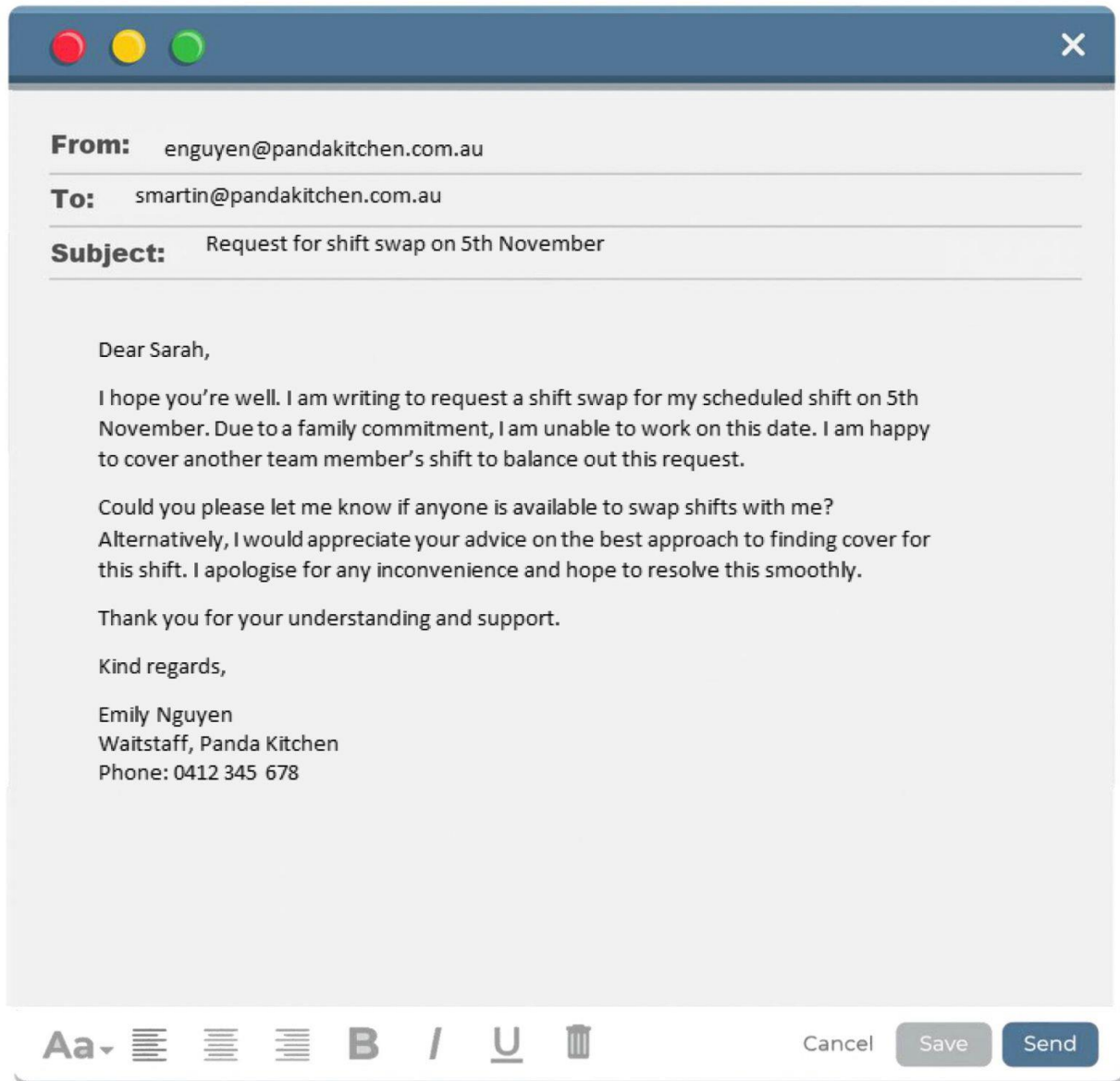
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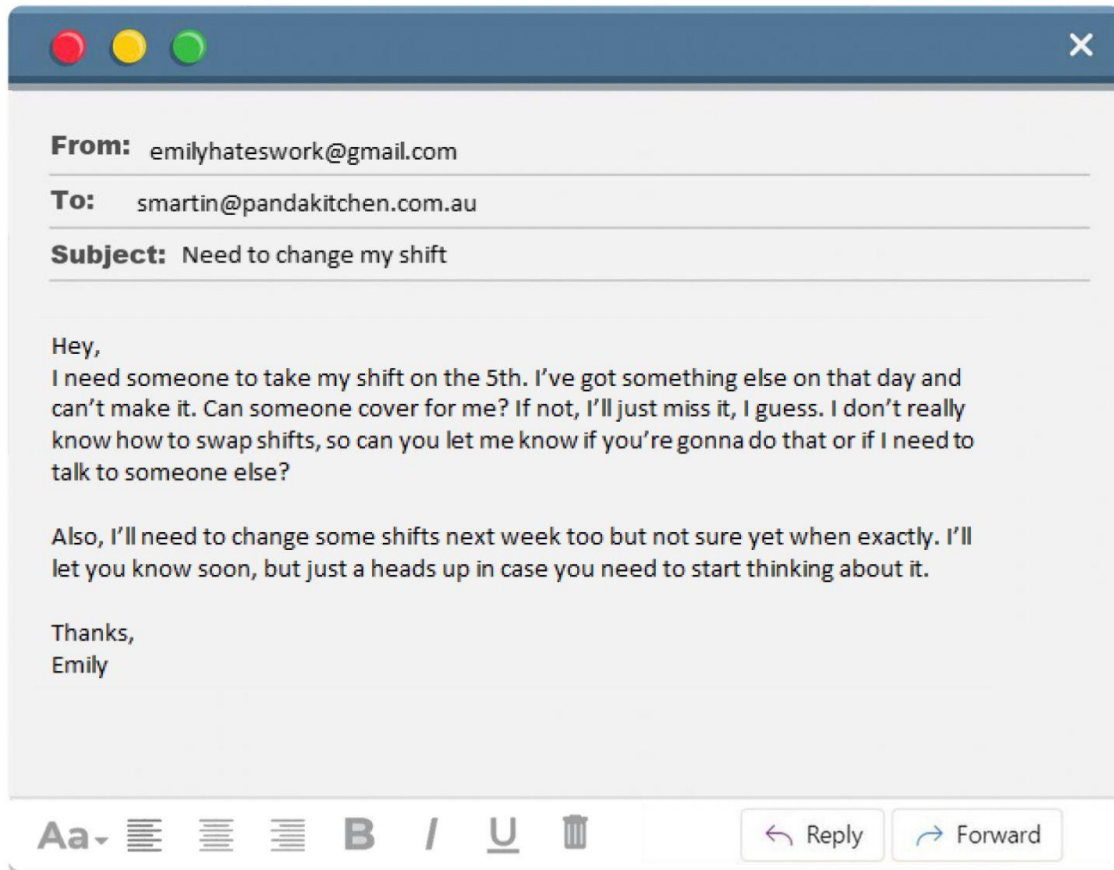
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Appendix A

From: enguyen@pandakitchen.com.au

To: smartin@pandakitchen.com.au

Subject: Request for shift swap on 5th November

Dear Sarah,

I hope you're well. I am writing to request a shift swap for my scheduled shift on 5th November. Due to a family commitment, I am unable to work on this date. I am happy to cover another team member's shift to balance out this request.

Could you please let me know if anyone is available to swap shifts with me? Alternatively, I would appreciate your advice on the best approach to finding cover for this shift. I apologise for any inconvenience and hope to resolve this smoothly.

Thank you for your understanding and support.

Kind regards,

Emily Nguyen
Waitstaff, Panda Kitchen
Phone: 0412 345 678

This image is a screenshot of a **workplace email interface** displaying a formal email written by an employee named **Emily Nguyen**. The email is composed using a simulated or stylised email client with a minimal interface.

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Appendix B

From: emilyhateswork@gmail.com

To: smartin@pandakitchen.com.au

Subject: Need to change my shift

Hey,
I need someone to take my shift on the 5th. I've got something else on that day and can't make it. Can someone cover for me? If not, I'll just miss it, I guess. I don't really know how to swap shifts, so can you let me know if you're gonna do that or if I need to talk to someone else?

Also, I'll need to change some shifts next week too but not sure yet when exactly. I'll let you know soon, but just a heads up in case you need to start thinking about it.

Thanks,
Emily

This image is a screenshot of a **casual and informal email** written by an employee to their manager. It provides a contrast to the previous, more professional email and can serve as an excellent teaching tool for comparing **tone, structure, and appropriateness** in workplace communication.

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Appendix C

1. **General Use & Frequency**

- How often do you write emails at work?
- What kinds of emails do you typically write (e.g., reports, requests, updates, complaints)?

2. **Purpose & Audience**

- Who are your most common email recipients (e.g., clients, supervisors, coworkers)?
- How do you adjust your tone and language depending on the recipient?

3. **Skills & Confidence**

- How confident do you feel about your email writing skills?
- What parts of writing an email are easy or difficult for you (e.g., greetings, grammar, clarity, tone)?

4. **Structure & Style**

- Do you follow a specific structure or template when writing emails?
- How do you ensure your email is polite and professional?

5. **Challenges & Mistakes**

- What challenges do you face when writing emails in English (or another language)?
- Have you ever had a misunderstanding because of an email? What happened?

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