

Company to Company

A new approach to business
correspondence in English

Teacher's Book

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INTRODUCTION

Company to Company is a new approach to the teaching of business letter and telex writing. The basic idea behind the book won an English-Speaking Union English Language Award (presented, Buckingham Palace, 1984).*

1 Who is the course for?

Company to Company is intended for students with a lower-intermediate knowledge of English who may be studying in language institutes, commercial schools or the upper classes of secondary schools.

2 How is the course organised?

Each of the eight units has two sections – a study section (A) and an activity section (B).

In the study section, students learn the conventions and common expressions of business correspondence and practise these through short exercises and letter-writing tasks. This part of each unit teaches students how to do things in English – such as complain, ask for information, request action and so on.

In the activity section, students are placed in a business situation where different students (normally working in groups) represent different companies. Through a series of role cards at the back of their book (three for each company), students become involved in writing and replying to each other in order to accomplish a business goal – such as ordering some goods or arranging a business trip. When the activity has finished, there is a feedback stage where, with the teacher, students look at what they wrote and the problems they had.

3 What is the purpose of the activity section?

As mentioned above, in the study section students learn how to do certain things in English and then practise what they have learnt through exercises and letter-writing tasks. This process is a vital part of learning business corre-

* The paper that won the award is called 'Task-centred writing activities', by Andrew Littlejohn and Diana Hicks. Published in *Lancaster Practical Papers in English Language Education*, Vol. 7, Eds: C. N. Candlin and D. F. Murphy. Prentice-Hall 1987.

2 *Introduction*

spondence – but there is also another aspect that must be taken into account: the context in which letters are written.

Normally, writers of business letters want to achieve a purpose – such as ask for a quote or apologise for a delay. They have to think about who the reader is and what may happen as a result of the letter. This means that writers need to draw on all the language at their disposal and choose the appropriate forms to use. Most letter-writing exercises, however, do not require students to make these kinds of decisions or try to accomplish any real purpose. Students generally know that any letters they write will not be read for the information in them and that nothing will actually happen as a result of the letters. Also, since these exercises usually practise forms just presented, students only have to choose from a narrow range of language.

The main aim of the activities, therefore, is to provide a purpose and context for writing. In the activities, each letter that one group sends to another will be read for the message it contains. This means that when composing a letter, students need to view their writing through the eyes of the reader. In addition, as the activity progresses, they have to think not only about the correctness of the language they use but also of what has happened and what may happen as a result of their letters. In so far as is possible in the rather artificial setting of a classroom, the activities try to mirror the circumstances in which business letters are produced in real life.

There is, however, a further purpose for the activities. Language learning in general involves taking risks. Students need, therefore, opportunities to try things out and see if they really can communicate what they want to say. These experiments with language are important because it is through them that students can get a better idea of what they are able to do in English and, thus, what they still need to learn. It is, after all, only when students have a clear idea of their goals that effective language learning takes place.

4 *How long does the course take?*

Each unit will provide enough material for five to six classroom hours. Normally, Section A of each unit will take two to three hours, Section B will take two hours and the feedback stage (see page 7) will take a further hour. The book as a whole, then, will take between 40 and 48 hours.

5 *Is it possible to make the course shorter?*

It is relatively easy to make the course shorter. There are many possible ways to do this, depending on how much time you have available. Here are some possibilities.

- Tell the students to prepare the practice exercises in the study section at home.
- Omit study sections that present language that your students can already handle.

- At the appropriate time, either omit the study section of Unit 8 (revision and consolidation) or tell the students to do it at home.
- If the students have done a conventional letter-writing course but need further practice, omit some or all of the study sections.
- If the course is just intended to provide the students with a basic knowledge that they can refer to later in their own time – rather than with a working ability – omit some or all of the activity sections.
- After discussing the lead-in material to the activity section, tell the students to write their first letter at home. The activity can then begin next lesson with the students delivering their letters to the right 'company' and then referring to their second cards.
- Omit some or all of the feedback stages after the activities and collect in the students' letters for correction.

GENERAL GUIDANCE

Detailed guidance on teaching the study sections and running the activities is provided in the notes for each unit. Below are some general points that apply to all units.

THE STUDY SECTION (A)

1 *The letters and exercises*

The study sections normally open with a short introduction to a situation, which is then followed by two or three questions and some letters. The questions are intended to give the students a purpose or focus in reading the letters. Students should therefore read through the questions *before* they read the letters. They are of two types: questions about the content (e.g. Why is there a delay in the delivery of the goods?) or questions about the language (e.g. How exactly does the writer apologise?). After allowing the students to read the letters silently, ask for answers to the questions.

The questions about the language serve as an introduction to the material in the rest of the section. This presents the students with various ways of achieving a particular purpose (such as giving reasons, warning, complaining) in business correspondence in English. Each presentation is followed by short practice exercises. The final exercise is normally a letter-writing task, where the students have to draw together the points covered in the section as a whole.

2 *The role of the teacher*

Your role for most of the study section will mainly be as a *manager* of the lesson. You will need to direct the students' attention to the material in the book, set them working on the exercises or reading the letters, and then finally discuss the answers with the class as whole and move the lesson forward to the next piece of material.

For much of the lesson the students will be writing. During this time, go round the class helping out and giving guidance on the exercises (see *Correcting written work*, page 9). Obviously the kind and amount of guidance you need to give will vary considerably from student to student and group to group but, where possible, try to give hints or clues rather than direct answers. This should help the students develop the ability to write without your assistance. Some teachers, for example, instead of telling their students

how to spell certain words, like to keep a few bilingual and monolingual dictionaries in the classroom for the students to use. You may feel that this is a slow and time-wasting procedure, but it will help the students form a habit that they will almost certainly need when the course is over.

THE ACTIVITY SECTION (B)

For the activity, you will normally need a double lesson (but see point 5 in the *Introduction*, page 2).

1 *The introductory material*

Each activity section opens with some material that introduces a business situation, with questions to focus the students' reading. As with the study section, allow the students to read this through silently before discussing their answers or looking at it in detail. This introductory material is not intended to teach any new language, apart from a few vocabulary items that will be needed for the activity. Try to move through it as quickly as possible so as to get the students started on the activity.

2 *Dividing the class into groups*

Once you are sure that the students fully understand the situation presented in the introductory material, divide them into groups. There are two principal ways of doing this.

The first way is to divide the class into three groups, with each group representing a different company and sitting away from the other two groups. Ideally, each group should have no more than four or five students (see *Large classes*, page 9, if you have more than 15 students). As an alternative, if you have a fairly small class or if you feel that, for one reason or another, the students would not work productively together, you can divide the class into groups of three, with each individual student in each group representing a company. Many teachers, however, have found that the first method of grouping is more effective since the students can learn a lot from discussing what and how they will write (see *Working in groups*, page 6).

Once you have grouped the students, tell them to turn to their first role cards. The number of the first role card is given at the end of the introductory material in the Student's Book and the cards appear in random order at the back of the book. (There is an index of all the cards at the back of the Teacher's Book for quick reference.) The role cards give some further information and tell the students what they must write and to whom. Most cards also include a 'letter plan' to help them. Stress to the students that they must produce neat business letters that are clear in meaning and as correct as possible in terms of spelling, grammar, vocabulary, phrases and expressions. You may like to photocopy the letterheads at the back of the Teacher's Book

(pages 113–20) onto blank sheets of paper, for the students to use when writing their letters.

3 Working in groups

If the students are in groups, they will begin working together to produce their first letter. Exactly how they do this will vary from class to class and group to group. Initially, it is usually a good idea to say that each student in each group must write a letter but that they should help each other and discuss exactly what to write. Whether the students are working to produce a single letter together or several individual letters, experience shows that they become involved in intense discussion within their groups about phrasing and layout. Since the aim of the activity is to develop their writing ability, it does not matter whether the students discuss in English or – with a monolingual group – in their own language. In fact, if you insist on an ‘English only’ rule, communication may become difficult and thus defeat one of the purposes of the activity: to encourage students to help each other become more aware of what they should write. You should, however, insist that any communication *between* the groups is in English and in writing.

Once the students have finished writing, they deliver the letter (or one of the letters, if the students have each written one) to the appropriate ‘company’. You should then quietly tell them the number of their next role card (shown in the appropriate unit in the Teacher’s Book and in the *Index*, page 112). This will introduce new information and change the situation in some way. Meanwhile they may also have received a letter from one of the other groups and they will have to take this, together with the new information, into account when they write their second letter. When they have finished writing it, they again deliver it to the appropriate group before moving on to their third and final card. (Note that the students can move on to their next role card as soon as they have delivered their letters. They do *not* have to wait for a reply, since each group’s cards function independently.)

4 The role of the teacher during the activity

Your main role during the activity will be to tell the students their next role card number as they complete and deliver their letters. You will also need, however, to move round the class, making sure that the students understand what they have to do and giving help where necessary. As mentioned above, try, where possible, to give hints or clues rather than direct answers in order to encourage the students to think about what and how to write (also see *Correcting written work*, page 9).

If the students have problems in writing their letters, there are a number of ways you can help them:

- go through the letter plan on the role card with them and get them to suggest what they could write;
- refer them back to the appropriate sub-section of Section A where the

language they are having difficulty with is presented. (The *Index of key words* in the Student's Book will help you or the students find the right sub-section.)

- refer them to an appropriate model letter (see the *Index of model letters* in the Student's Book);
- if all else fails, let them read the example letter in the Teacher's Book.

5 The feedback stage

The feedback stage is an important part of the activity. This may take place in a separate lesson from the activity itself.

Once the students have finished, ask them, in their groups, to look through the letters they received from the other students and to mark on the letters any problems they had in understanding, any mistakes that they notice in spelling, grammar, vocabulary, layout or expressions, or any comments they might have on the tone of the letter (e.g. the level of politeness). While they are doing this, move round the class looking at the letters with the students. This should take ten minutes or so.

Next tell the students to pass each letter back to the group that wrote it. The students should then check through their own letters and try to identify any further mistakes or problems and correct them. Also tell them to look back at the role cards and compare their letters with the instructions they were given. In the same way as above, move round the class, helping and commenting. Make a note of any important or common mistakes/problems and go through these on the blackboard or OHP. Finally, if you wish, you can collect the letters in for correction. If you feel that it is necessary, you can ask the students to rewrite some of the letters as a homework task.

6 Example of a feedback stage

Below is one teacher's account of how she ran the feedback stage with a class of Arab students who had done an earlier version of the activity 'From quote to sale' (Unit 4B). In common with many Arab students, their oral abilities were much better than their written abilities. This was the first activity that the students had tried.*

'After we had finished the activity (it took two hours) I started a discussion next lesson by asking how the students had felt while they were writing. All of them said that they had found the activity very useful because it was "real" in the sense that they could imagine themselves doing this kind of task when they were at work. The discussion then moved on to

* This is an edited version of an account that first appeared in 'Task-centred writing activities' by Andrew Littlejohn and Diana Hicks, *Lancaster Practical Papers in English Language Education*, Vol. 7, Eds: C. N. Candlin and D. F. Murphy. Prentice-Hall 1987.

the familiar problem of handwriting. Sometimes they had found the letters difficult to read, they said. When asked why, they replied that sometimes there was insufficient space between words, sometimes the writing was not on the line and sometimes the paper used was too small. One student even commented that although letters which had been "printed" were clearer to read, they would like to be able to write clear "joined-up" writing. The class then decided that they would like a few lessons in handwriting.

Next, I asked the students to compare the letters with the original cards. From this I wanted them to focus on the spelling errors. They were generally much slower in recognising their own errors than in seeing others' mistakes. However, by making close comparisons between the cards and the letters they soon picked up words like "discount", "Febrary", "Engiland", "tolat" (total) and "therefor". One student said that he thought a few spelling errors in a letter would not matter but the others pointed out that sometimes it meant that the receiver would not understand the word or sentence (as, in fact, had happened with the word "tolat") and that it did "not look good" in a business letter. The students became very involved in this discussion and it seemed to me that in future they would look more closely at their own writing for spelling mistakes and that they now saw how important correct spelling is. Until this point, I think they thought spelling mistakes could only be detected by me ("it is the teacher's job") and so they didn't make much effort to self-correct. It will be interesting to see if their spelling improves much during the next activity that we do.

The final part of the feedback discussion was mostly about grammatical errors. Again, I encouraged them to do this by comparing with the cards. It took them much longer to find their grammatical errors but they managed to pin-point mistakes such as "we can delivered", "packing and freight charges is", "inform you that our prices as follows".

I didn't want to move on to some of the errors in information, style, etc. partly because we were running out of time (our discussion went on for over an hour!) but mainly because I didn't think they could absorb anything more. There were a lot of things wrong with their letters, I know, - starting a letter "Dear Mr Midtec" is not really right - and frankly most of them would not have been acceptable in business. Still, most of the students clearly enjoyed the activity and want to do another one.

SUMMARY OF STEPS IN RUNNING THE ACTIVITIES

- 1 Students read the introductory material.
- 2 Teacher asks questions to check they understand the situation.
- 3 Teacher divides the class into three groups, each group representing a

- company in the activity. (Alternatively, the class can be divided into groups of three with each individual student representing a company.)
- 4 Students turn to their first role card, write the letter and deliver it to the appropriate group.
 - 5 Teacher tells them their next role card number.
 - 6 Students write and deliver their next letter.
 - 7 Teacher tells them their final role card number.
 - 8 Students write and deliver the last letter. The activity ends.
 - 9 Teacher tells students to look through the letters they received and indicate any problems in understanding the letters and any mistakes in layout, spelling, grammar, etc.
 - 10 Letters are given back to the students. They look over them and try to correct any mistakes.
 - 11 Teacher circulates, helping and commenting.
 - 12 Teacher goes through any important problems on the blackboard or OHP and, if he or she wishes, collects in the letters for correction.

LARGE CLASSES

If you have more than 15 or so students, you will need to have two or more sets of the activity running at the same time. This will give you six or more groups since three groups are necessary for each activity. This need not be as difficult as it sounds. Some of the activities have been tried out very successfully with classes of over 36; in one case, the students were seated in fixed double desks. With a large class, the easiest thing to do is to get students to work in pairs, seated in three rows (e.g. in a class of 30, there would be five pairs in each row). Each row can then be a different company, and as the students finish their letters they can pass them across to the appropriate pair. Instead of quietly telling each pair their next role card number, put the number on the blackboard. You can move up and down the rows while they are working, helping with any problems. The feedback stage would be the same as described above.

CORRECTING WRITTEN WORK

As mentioned above, some teachers find it more productive to give hints or clues to the students rather than direct answers. One way in which you can do this when you are correcting their written work (either in class or at home) is to use a marking scheme. When you see a mistake, you can put a symbol in the margin showing only the *type* of mistake that has been made, e.g. S = spelling, WM = word missing, T = tense, WF = wrong form (e.g. 'He work very hard'), WW = wrong word, P = punctuation, ? = 'I don't understand!'. Normally, it is best if you correct some homework using the marking scheme

and give it back to the students. They will then be interested to find out what the symbols mean and you can explain. Give the students some time to put their mistakes right, but if they cannot do it then tell them what is wrong.

GENERAL NOTES ON BUSINESS CORRESPONDENCE

It is not necessary for teachers to be familiar with business correspondence in order to use *Company to Company* successfully since detailed guidance is provided throughout this Teacher's Book. However, some background information may help you.

1 *Business letters*

During the last few years, there has been a definite move away from the very formal, long-winded English that you used to find in business correspondence. Nowadays, you will hardly ever find phrases such as 'We beg to acknowledge receipt of your letter of 11th instant'. The tendency now is to be much more direct: 'Thank you for your letter of 11 March'. *Company to Company* teaches only this more modern, clearer style of expression. This is particularly important as very often neither the writer nor the reader of the letter is a native-speaker of English.

Many of the strict conventions of letter-writing have also been relaxed and it is quite usual to find a lot of variety in the way letters are laid out or worded. Writers often use informal expressions and forms (e.g. contractions) whereas previously this would have been avoided. This makes things much more difficult for the language learner since, used inappropriately, informal forms can cause offence. For this reason, *Company to Company* has two units dealing with personal business correspondence.

Some letter-writing conventions, however, remain very much alive. Presentation, for example, is still very important. Few people will want to do business with a company that sends out badly typed, badly worded, or badly laid-out letters. Seemingly minor details can also irritate the reader of the letter and give a negative impression. The author, for example, knows one businessman who rejected a quotation simply because the covering letter ended 'Yours faithfully' instead of 'Yours sincerely'. (See Unit 1A, 1.4, for details of this vital point!)

2 *Telex*

The use of telex has also changed considerably. Previously, due to the very high cost of sending telexes, the emphasis was on brevity – using as many abbreviations and condensed forms as possible. Now, however, as telex has become relatively cheaper, the emphasis is much more on clarity. Messages

are short and direct, but generally easier to read with only the obvious words being abbreviated.

3 Memos

Memo-writing is not actually presented and practised in *Company to Company* since, as the name suggests, the course is intended to teach correspondence between companies rather than within companies. Many of the role cards for the activities are, however, in the form of memos so, if the time allows, your students may be interested in knowing more about memo-writing. Many large, multi-national companies actually use English for all their internal correspondence irrespective of the country in which the office is located.

There are many possible layouts for memos and normally companies have their own printed memo paper. Most of them provide space for the same basic information:

To / For the attention of / FAO

From

Re/Ref/Subject/Concerning

File No.

Date

Often initials are used instead of the full name (e.g. RI for Robert Ingram) or the person's title (e.g. MD for Managing Director).

The style of the memo is usually very direct. Greetings or closings such as 'Dear . . .', 'Yours sincerely' etc., are not normally used. Instead the memo opens directly with the message.

MEMORANDUM

To: JEB

Date: 3 March 87

Ref.: Coffee machine

From: RI

File No.

The coffee machine in the staff lounge has broken down again. This is the third time this week. Please could you arrange for the maintenance people to look at it.

Thank you.

If there are a number of points in the memo, these are often listed.



MEMORANDUM

FAO: Diana Hicks, MD
Date: 24 April 1986

From: Tom Lander, SO
Subject: Fire on 3rd floor

- 1 We have now inspected the damage caused by the fire. Two guest rooms will need to be redecorated and the contents of the linen room at the end of the corridor have been completely destroyed.
- 2 I estimate the total cost involved to be approx. £15,000.
- 3 In view of the risk of further fires, I recommend that smoke detectors are placed in all the hotel rooms, corridors and lobbies.

If you wish to give your students practice in writing memos, many of the situations in *Company to Company* can be adapted to provide a context for a memo. Some situations can be changed so that the students have to write a memo asking someone else to take some action. For example, Unit 4A, 4.2, has an exercise in which students have to write a sentence asking the telephone company to put another telephone in their office as soon as possible. This could be adapted as follows:

You want another telephone in your office and you need it urgently. Write a memo asking the maintenance staff to contact the telephone company. (Tell them exactly where you want the telephone.)

In other cases, the model letters can be used to provide a situation for writing a memo. For example, the second letter in Unit 4A, 4.1, could be used as follows:

You have just received this letter. Write a memo to your Chief Engineer telling him what Haga Verktyg said.

Students might then produce a simple memo like this:

MEMORANDUM

To: CE
Date: 30 May 87

From: Mgr
Subject: Kraftborr drills

I have received a letter from Haga Verktyg, Sweden. They say that they will send our order at once.

TO THE NEW OR INEXPERIENCED TEACHER

If you have only just started teaching, you may feel that the activities are rather complicated and difficult to handle. In actual fact, once the activity is running, the task of the teacher is very small – it is the students who do most of the work. Your real work is *before* the activity begins. Make sure that you understand exactly what the situation is and what the students will have to do. Read through the teacher's notes for the activity and make your own notes of what you have to do and the sequence of the role card numbers. Have the notes near you during the lesson. The most important thing is to make sure that the students understand what they have to do. If this is clear and you tell the students their next card numbers as they finish each letter, the activity should run without any problems.

The first time you do one of the activities you may find that it does not go entirely as planned. Don't worry. This does not mean that the students have wasted their time. They can benefit from the experience of having to work out what to do. Don't give up! The next one you do will be better as you and the students get more practice and you will soon find that the activities become a very valuable part of your course.