The Effective Use of the 7-Step Plan and the Communicative Approach in Writing Business Reports

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Abstract

Business writing plays a vital role in business communication throughout the world. However, most Myanmar students are not familiar with business writing, especially in writing a business report due to the well-thought ideas or concepts to be included it. The survey was conducted with a total of 30-third year- students specializing in accounting, population studies, development studies and public administration of Yangon University of Economics. The study can be categorized as a design of giving a pre-test, pilot teaching and post-test, recording the students' score of both tests and comparing them with 'Testing Paired Comparison 't' Test'. This research paper mainly focuses on how learner can be empowered and inspired to write a business report using a communicative approach and 7-step plan. The results have some good effects on the students as a key role in writing a business report with such concept and knowledge, students become proficient and confident business report-writers. It is highly recommended that they should contribute to their working environment successfully as professional business report-writers in the future.

Key Words: *'writing business reports', '7-step plan', 'communicative teaching', 'students of YUEco', 'Testing Paired Comparison 't' Test'.*

1. INTRODUCTION

This research paper 'Empowering students with the communicative teaching on how to write a business report using a 7-step plan' submitted to YUEco Paper Reading Occasion presents how to empower students to write a business report using a 7-step plan and communicative approach. Firstly, this paper explains the 'background of the study and aims and scope of the study under the 'INTRODUCTION' section briefly. Then 'Literature Review' will be presented. After that, the 'Methodology and Materials' used in the research, which also covers 'The Nature of Data and Data Collection' are expressed. Next, 'Results and Discussion' followed by 'Pedagogic Implications and suggestions' on teaching writing a business report will be stated. Lastly, 'Conclusion' section is presented together with 'Recommendations.'

In fact, being skillful at writing a business report plays a key role to perform the tasks or projects, etc. better and successfully at their workplace as it can help decision-makers make plans and objectives in the company. Moreover, business owners will be able to anticipate any issues involved in making an investment or purchase, etc. by analyzing recommendations and suggestions in a high-quality business report. This is the great significance of doing this research on teaching writing business reports.

1. 1. The Background of the Study

It can be assumed that business reports are forever formal, objective and heavily researched. A business report must include clear and verifiable regardless of whether the report focuses on a single situation or examines the overall performance of an entire company. As objectivity is vital in a business report, subjective descriptions that tell the readers how to feel should be avoided and thus a business report should remain impersonal and framed from the company's perspective.

As a good business writing skill which is one of the most important requirements that leads to a successful business becomes useful and necessary, young learners should urgently learn to write a report and the term 'report' will be used to be short from now on.

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Therefore, if we can investigate their difficulties in writing reports and find ways to help and train them to become quality business report-writers, they can largely contribute to the business successfully.

This study hypothesizes that '*if learners are exposed to writing reports and trained how to write them by suing 7-step plan, they will be able to produce quality reports.*' Being professional report-writers, they can be successful at their workplace and thus it is surely worth learning in the long run. These are the background of the study.

1. 2. Aims and Scope of the study

The aims of the study are:

1. Firstly, to identify problems in writing reports that students of YUEco encounter.
2. Secondly to examine what are to be included as ingredients ('heading' and 'sub-headings') in a report following the conventions of 'Market Leader'-Course book (Intermediate Level) – 3rd edition.
3. Finally, to do the communicative pilot teaching to students to find out whether the programme is successful in using 7-step plan for teaching writing reports.

The researcher assumes that the findings of the present research will solve the problem of writing reports that most students of YUEco face. Furthermore, it will give teachers who are exploring more effective teaching methodology or other ways of valuable insights into not only the 7-step plan but also other more creative methods or ways of teaching writing reports.

The research area is mainly focused on teaching how to write reports. Research questions are:
1. Do students know the overall layout or appearance of a report?
2. Can the messages in a report help the person in authority make informed decisions?
3. Is this 7-step plan really effective to produce a report with a creative and well-thought out manner?

The study can be categorized as a design of giving '*pre-test', 'pilot-teaching'* and '*post-test'* including recording the students' scores of both tests and comparing them. Both tests cover up writing reports individually based on the questions asked and this study can be put into two sections as follows:
1. Showing the subjects, a sample report first to be able to draw some ideas from it and then as a pre-test, giving them a question to answer to submit the assignments individually. Each answer of the assignments was analysed and graded at the '*Fail', 'Pass', 'Credit'* and *'Distinction'* categories in terms of 3 aspects: '*layout*' (format), '*contents*' (messages) and *'accuracy'* (language, spellings and punctuations) to do the data collection. Then their grades were recorded.
2. Providing the two weeks' communicative pilot teaching to them by using 7-step plan (6 hours of teaching in total plus 1 hour each for pre-test and post-test including recording their grades to do the data collection.

How each answer in their assignments of both tests is graded at four categories will be explained in 'Data Collection' section in details.

1. ## 3. Literature Review

'*Despite the wide use of writing in today's world, learning how to master the skill of business writing does not have to be a difficult task*' ['**Business Writing: Clear and Simple.**' – 1st edition, New York – Learning Express, LIC; 2007]. Therefore, it is necessary for business English teachers and learners to do a good and empirical research on this kind of business writing: writing reports.

'*Specialized English is best learnt as a second layer built upon a firm general English foundation.*' ['**Teaching English as a Foreign Language**'. London: Routledge; 1978 – Broughton G. Brunfit C, Pincas A.D. Wilde. R.].

Business writing, especially writing reports that support as informative and effective document is necessary and popular among other forms of writing after getting the English foundation. When producing pieces of business writing, we need to 'be creative in thought, but practical in application' ['**Business Writing: Clear and Simple**.' – 1st edition, New York – Learning Express, LIC; 2007]. In fact, learners have to be enlightened about the objectivity and reliability that are involved in a report to help the person in authority make informed decisions using 7-step plan.

Business writing and communication expert, Ms. Shirley Taylor, personally designed this 7-step plan and she is also a pioneer to enhance business writing skills of students. Shirley's tips and techniques are excellent models to follow for effective and successful communication. Once students learn, they will gain surprises, confidence in their ability and they will succeed later.

Alan Meyers (2005) has viewed 'writing' as an activity in a process and a way of producing language. In order to achieve goals, writers work through the writing process: describing how to discover and organise thoughts, how to write them down, how to rewrite and revise them step by step.

The review of literature shows that designing activities for writing reports depends on the principles of 7-step plan that is adopted in this study. Regarding the 7-step plan to write a report, no one has ever done research on 'writing business reports' in Myanmar.

2. ## METHODOLOGY AND MATERIALS

The 7-step plan personally designed by Ms. Shirley Taylor who used to be an examiner in the secretarial skills for a major examining board (LCCI-Level 2: EB) (UK) will be used and '*communicative approach* is mainly adopted to teaching creating reports in this study. Before starting with the communicative pilot teaching on how to create reports *using 7-step plan*, the following information used as *materials* is introduced to let the students know all about a report. *Materials* used for teaching writing reports were as follows. report should stay impersonal and framed from the company's perspective.

2. 1. Background Information of a Business Report

Basically, there are some features of a report that are introduced so as to make the students be equipped with the knowledge of a report. A report is an organised summary of the main ideas or the most important information but it does not include every fact and detail, just stating the results of meetings, discussions, research, etc. clearly and accurately. Therefore, we need to make the information easy for the reader to grasp.

In fact, depending on the types of events, first, we collect facts as materials that lead to decisions, votes, activities or actions to write a report. Focusing on the essential information highlighted in our notes, then we select and arrange the materials. After organizing the facts, we need to consider the guidelines: the purpose of the event, its outcome, main ideas to be expressed clearly. Finally, based on the guidelines we arrange the report chronologically, composing its outlines. This is how we can prepare to write a report in process.

Above all, being entirely objective, a report does not include any opinions of the writer and subjective descriptions that tell the readers how to feel should be avoided. Therefore, it can be said that reports are always assumed to be formal, objective and heavily researched. Whether the report focuses on a single situation or examines the overall performance of an entire company or not, every fact or data must be clear and verifiable. In fact, a report should stay impersonal and framed from the company's perspective.

2. 2. How can a business report be created effectively?

Basically, there are <u>three</u> aspects of a report to be considered and they are
  (i)   layout of a report (format)
  (ii)   its contents (messages)
  (iii)   its accuracy (language + spellings + punctuations)
A report should be well-organised with information in a logical order. Regarding the <u>first aspect</u> **‘Layout’ (format),** there is no set *‘layout’ (format)* for a report but here we will follow the conventions of writing a report in ‘*Market Leader’ (Intermediate Level – Page 130).* Firstly, what need to be included in the ‘layout’ of a report as *ingredients (‘Heading’ and ‘Sub-headings’)* are (i) title (ii) executive summary (iii) introduction (iv) findings (v) conclusion (vi) recommendations (vii) signature (the candidate's) (viii) date and these ingredients need to be put in this order too. The <u>second aspect</u> we need to consider before writing a report is **‘Contents’ (messages).** In a report the ‘*Executive Summary’* is a summary of the main points and conclusion of the report. It gives the readers a quick overview of the total situation and lets people learn the highlights quickly without having to read the whole document. The *‘Introduction’* shows the points that will be looked at. The ‘*Findings*’ are the facts and data discovered and they are relevant to the purpose stated in the background. Moreover, they should be clear and specific as the whole report depends on the information in this section. Under ‘*Findings*’, there should be no opinions on what has been found out. The ‘*Conclusion’* is what we think about the facts and how we interpret them. In fact, the ‘*Conclusions’* are the explanations of the findings and a discussion of what they mean to the firm or the person who asked for the report. *‘Recommendations’* are practical suggestions to deal with the situation and ideas for ensuring future activities run more easily. In fact, under the ‘*Recommendations’*, the solutions to any problems mentioned in the *‘conclusions’* are recommended and how these solutions would work is summarized. The ‘*Signature’* is usually placed at the end of a report. The ‘*Date’* is usually the one on which the report is written.

The <u>third aspect</u> of a report is ***'Accuracy'*** that consists of '*language'*, *'spelling'* and *'punctuations*. In general, the language must be clear and overly-complicated sentences should be avoided as they are difficult to understand. Conventions for a report are neutral language and precision. In a report, there should not have misspellings and wrong uses of punctuations too. The key to language in a report has to be factual and unemotional.

2. 3. What are 7 plans?

The following are the 7 steps used to create a business report effectively and these steps really have great impacts on teaching writing reports with objectivity and clarity in all aspects.

Step 1. Identifying the task: Writing a business report

Step 2. Layout of the report

Step 3. Contents (message) of the report

Step 4. Grouping and sequence of the messages

Step 5. Format and presentation techniques of the report

Step 6. Designing a report

Step 7. Checking– (by putting a tick for the 'yes' answer after asking the following by themselves):

    (i)   Is this appropriate response to the question?

    (ii)   Is the layout acceptable?

    (iii)   Have we selected the messages sensibly?

    (iv)   Have we organized them logically?

    (v)   Does the format meet the needs of the task and is it appropriate to the message?

    (vi)   Can it be read easily?

    (vii)   Have we checked every step from 1 to 6? etc.
    Are there any grammatical errors and obvious spelling errors? etc.
    Are my alterations clear?
    Have I checked the names and words given in the question?

After being taught using 7-step, the students are highly motivated and equipped with confidence, empowerment, and well-thought in writing a report. To overcome the challenge that teachers of writing reports are facing in their own context, this 7-step plan is useful and powerful in such a way that it is helping the students to become professional and successful business report-writers. Therefore, it can be said that not only students but business people at their work place can use

this 7-step plan to create a report. The following material (Fig. 1) is the sample report shown to the students to draw some ideas from it.

Business Software plc
Product report
Executive summary

We have been contacted by Lenz AG, a German manufacturer of mobile telephones, and asked about the possibility of a co-operation agreement. We would adapt out business software for use in their products. Tests shoe that their product is a very good one and popular with our target market.

Introduction

This report will look at:

- The hardware manufacturer and their equipment

- Software that could e used on their mobile phone

- The advantage of working together

- Recommendations for action.

Findings

1. Lenz has been developing cheap, small-scale electronic devices for 35 years. In the last five years, they have focused on more expensive mobile phones for businesspeople. These have been very successful. One in four mobile phones for the business market is a Lenz.

2. Our new Executive Organiser software has a lot of attractive features for the travelling businessperson (e.g. add: book, e-mail, video & voice recorder, street-finder function, etc.).

3. Market research shows that there is a lot of interest in our products being used on machines apart from computers.

Conclusion

The two companies have products which fit well together.

Recommendation

We should have a meeting with representatives from Lenz as soon as possible to discuss a joint

venture between our companies, with the aim of putting our software onto their mobile phones.

Tracy Cruickshank
Research and development Director
19 October

Fig 1. Sample Business Report ('*Market Leader*' – Intermediate Level – Course Book, Page 130) -3rd edition

2. 4. The Nature of Data and Data Collection

In this study, the survey was conducted with a total of 30-third year- students specializing in accounting, population studies, development studies and public administration of Yangon University of Economics. The study was made tangible by collecting data by means of *a pre-test*, *pilot teaching, post-test* design in order to investigate whether the 7-step to teaching creating reports would facilitate their business writing skill in business context. This was measured by grades of individuals obtained from each test: pre-test and post-test. The same grading systems in both tests with the same time allowance before and after pilot teaching were used so that there would not be any variations in managing the tests. After being given one hour for showing the subjects a sample business report to draw some ideas from it and for the pre-test, the experiment was started with communicative teaching writing reports using the 7-step for two weeks (6 hours) of teaching. Three-stage procedure: elicitation, highlighting and practice (controlled and free) was mainly focused in this method of teaching. At the elicitation stage, the subjects were introduced with the necessary information about a report mentioned above as materials. Then they were shown sample reports and the three main aspects: '*layout, contents and accuracy*' of a report and some graphic devices used for to be clear such as white space, bullets, number points, etc. were pointed out. Next, they were given an activity (a question) as a control practice by eliciting and highlighting the important messages using the 7-step. In each step, the subjects were asked to create a business report systematically and practically to make the messages clear and to be acted on being a facilitator. When completing it, they were explained in terms of the three main aspects to make them familiarize with how to create a report successfully. Lastly, they were given a question to write a report as a group activity at the free stage. Then, with the demonstration of their reports, they could compare their works and pay a particular attention to the features used in others' reports. As feedback, why each of their works were placed at each category: *'Distinction, Credit, Pass and Fail'* were pointed out and explained in details in Table 1. Please observe Table 1 below.

Table 1
Showing marks allocation for each category and its features in a report.

Sr.	Category	Marks	Some features found in their works
1.	**Distinction**	≥ 75 marks	*Layout* – excellent in all aspects, the use of bullets and numbers being especially proficient. Forming the answer logically and precisely. *Contents* – excellent, being clear and well-analysed/ '*Findings*' – the skeleton of the report, framework to the '*Conclusion*'/ '*Recommendations*' – based on '*Findings*' and '*Conclusion*' *Accuracy* – excellent: no error of grammar or of spelling / strong answer

Sr.	Category	Marks	Some features found in their works
2.	**Credit**	≥ 65 marks 65 – 74	*Layout* – being clear/ effective use of white space *Contents* – precise, concise and accurate / *'Recommendations'* – sensible and can follow from the 'Conclusion' *Accuracy* – some inaccuracies e.g. misspellings , incorrect verb forms, lack of recognition of a sentence, etc.
3.	**Pass**	≥ 50 marks 50-64	*Layout* – generally good / too general in title, no date, etc *Contents* – incomplete information about the 'Executive Summary' and 'Introduction' / no clear information / No specific 'Findings'/ Simple & sound 'Conclusions' & 'Recommendations'. *Accuracy* – some faults / misspellings / incorrect agreements / missing words e.g. prepositions, articles, etc.
4.	**Fail**	≤ 50 marks	*Layout* – no clear information given under the *'Headings'* due to the rare uses of white space, bullets and numbered points. *Contents* – cannot give necessary information in *'Executive Summary'*/ uncertain *'Conclusion'* due to the faulty and unclear expressions/ no specific *'Recommendations'* *Accuracy* – several weaknesses e.g. misspellings, lack of understanding of sentence formation, weak expression, misuses of words, etc.

These processes of communicative teaching writing reports can be illustrated in the following pyramid approach as in Figure 2. Please see Figure 2 below.
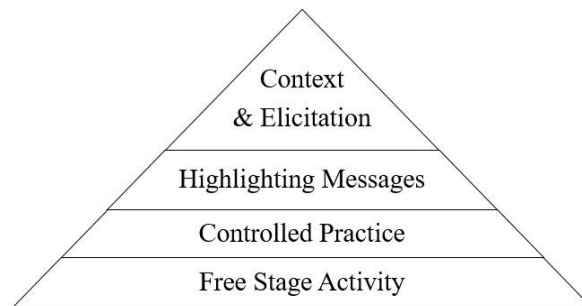

Fig. 2. The Communicative Approach to Teaching Writing Reports [Ur. (1996)]

After being given enough practices of creating reports, they were given a post-test. Then, their answers of both tests were analysed and graded at four categories and each data of both tests was collected. To do the research on teaching creating reports, it took two weeks (8 hours: 7 hours for giving a pre-test and pilot teaching and 1 hour for a post-test) using the 7-step plan.

3. RESULTS (FINDINGS)

Testing Paired Comparison 't' Test
To find out the scores of the pre-test and post-test, testing paired comparison in student's 't' test using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) was conducted to compare the average scores of pre-test and post-test. The mean score of pre-test is 53.5 with the standard deviation of 14.839 and the mean score of post-test is 60.9 (61) with the standard deviation 9.686. Since the

paired sample correlation is 0.864 with the probability level of 0.000, there is a very strongly positive correlation between pre-test and post-test in Table 3. Please observe Table 3. It can be concluded that the mean score of the post-test is significantly different from that of the pre-test with the paired comparison in statistical t-test that is 5.001 (p-value=0.000) at 1% level of significance. There was a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test, and the mean difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of students was 7.4. The statistical confidence interval estimates show that the 95% confidence interval of the difference is between 4.373 and 10.427 in Table 4. Please observe Table 4.

Table 3
A comparison between the pre-test and post-test scores.

Paired Sample	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Paired Sample Correlation
Post-Test	60.9	30	9.686	1.768	0.864 (0.000)
Pre-Test	53.5	30	14.839	2.709	

Table 4
A paired comparison test difference between the pre-test and post-test.

Paired Sample	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
Post-Test – Pre-Test	7.4	8.105	1.480	4.373	10.427	5.001	29	0.000

The results of the current study suggest that communicative teaching creating reports using 7-step plan has some good effects on the students. The scores of pre-test and post-test can be compared by means of multiple bar chart and line graph like these as in Figure 2 and 3. Please observe Fig. 2 and Fig. 3.
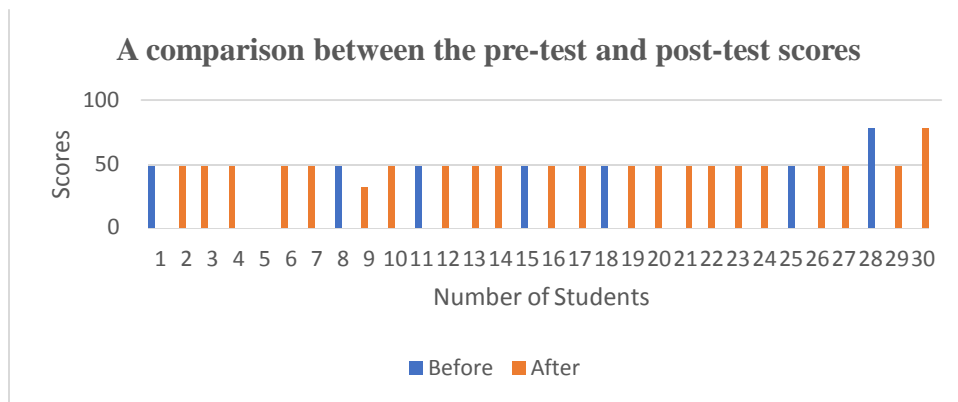

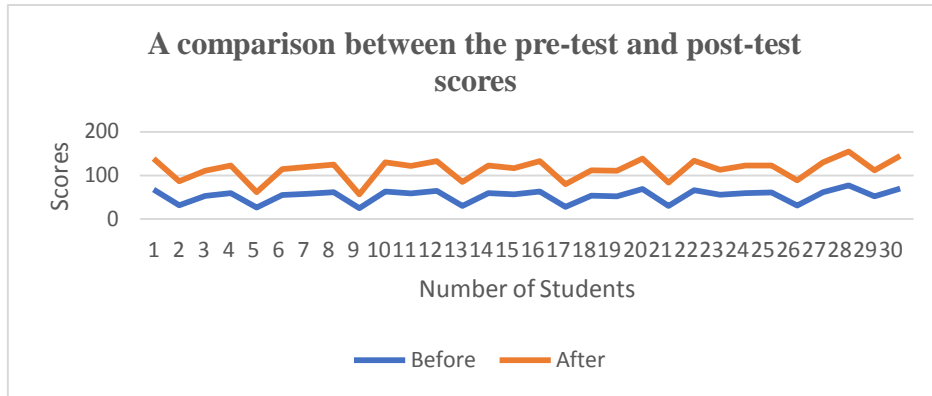**Fig. 2. A bar chart showing a comparison between the pre-test and post-test scores**

Fig. 3. A line graph showing a comparison between the pre-test and post-test scores

The number of students who were placed at '*Fail, Pass, Credit* and *Distinction*' in pre-test and post-test can be compared and shown by 'percentage' as in Table 5. Please observe Table 5.

Table 5

A table showing a comparison between the number of students placed at each category in both tests by percentage

Particular	Pre-Test		Post-Test	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Fail	7	23.3	2	6.7
Pass	17	56.7	19	63.3
Credit	5	16.7	7	23.3
Distinction	1	3.3	2	6.7
Total	30	100.0	30	100.0

The number of students who were placed at 'Fail, Pass, Credit and Distinction' in pre-test can be shown by 'percentage' as in Figure 4. Please see Figure 4.

THE NUMBER OF STUDENTS
PLACED AT EACH CATEGORY IN
PRE-TEST

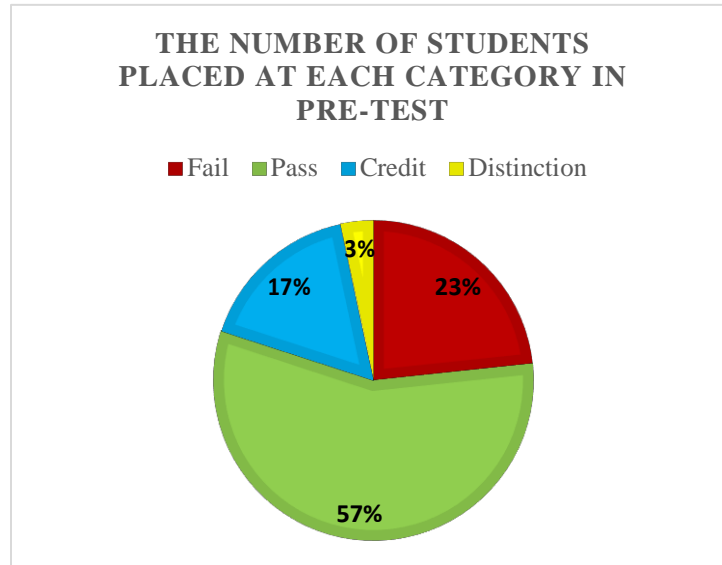■Fail ■Pass ■Credit ■Distinction

3%
17%
23%
57%

Fig. 4. A Pie Chart showing the number of students placed at each category in pre-test.

The number of students who were placed at 'Fail, Pass, Credit and Distinction' in post-test can be shown by 'percentage' in Figure 4. Please see Figure 5.
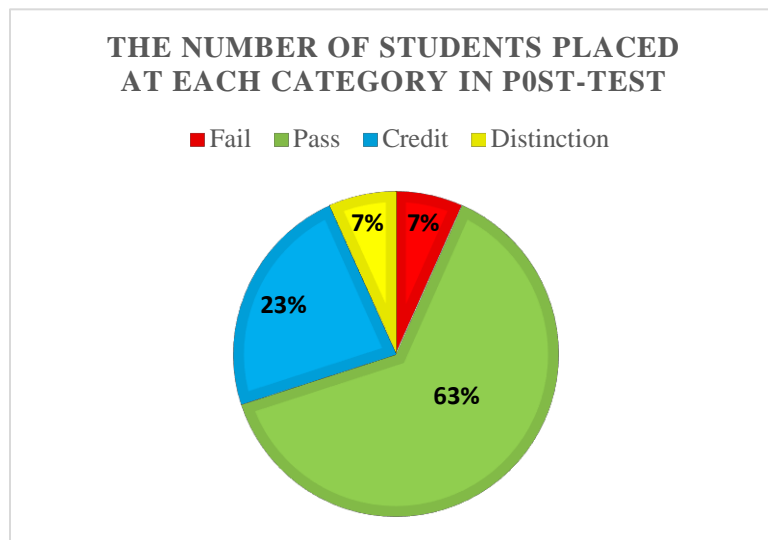

THE NUMBER OF STUDENTS PLACED
AT EACH CATEGORY IN P0ST-TEST

■Fail ■Pass ■Credit ■Distinction

7% 7%
23%
63%

Fig. 5. A Pie Chart showing the number of students placed at each category in post-test.

4. DISCUSSION

The results of the current study suggest that two-week treatment has some good effects on their skill of creating reports. A bit more students passed and very fewer ones failed after being taught as it was highly significant that the number of subjects who passed and failed increased from 56% to 63% and 23% to 7% respectively shown as in Figure 3 and Figure 4. Besides a few more subjects and quite more subjects got 'credit' and 'distinction' respectively as it was quite and rather significant that the number of 'credit' and 'distinction' subjects increased from 17% to 23% and 3% to 7% shown as in Figures 3 and 4 respectively.

According to the results, they seem to be weak in accuracy other than the other two aspects: layout and contents. Therefore, it can be said that they know how to make the reports clear and effective and can also convey the important messages to the company owner as most subjects passed and some more got 'credit' and 'distinction'. Moreover, they can infer or conclude from the findings and also make suggestions and recommendations for future actions for the person in authority to make decisions easily and successfully as quite more subjects got 'credit' and 'distinction'. Therefore, it can be said that this 7-step plan is really effective to create a report.

On the whole, the results of the present study show that they are basically aware of how to write reports. Besides, as the creativity in ideas and well-thought-out manner are found in their works, it is believed that if they train themselves using 7-step repeatedly, they will become confident and skilful and then professional business report-writers. Above all, it can be said that being professional and high-quality report-writers, they can largely and successfully contribute to the business. It can be said that this 7-plan is a really effective method for teaching writing reports as the results of the current study suggest that the adoption of communicative approach and using this 7-step plan have some good effects on the students as a key role in creating reports successfully. In fact, what they have learnt in the classroom is practically applicable to the real business situations and thus upskilling the young learners in creating reports is remarkable for doing this research.

4. 1. Pedagogic Implications and Suggestions

The achievements of students in the study have a lot of implications for 7-step plan and communicative teaching creating reports. It is implied that most students need activities which are exciting, challenging and stimulating their curiosity. If they often train themselves in getting involved in something active and arousing their interest, they can gradually become professional business report-writers. In addition, useful implications can be drawn for evaluation of teaching 'creating reports' in the curriculum at the post-grad level. Moreover, teachers are responsible for helping students to enhance their professional skills of writing reports. It is also implied that with the use of this 7-step systematically, urgent measures or future actions to be put right or taken will surely be included in the report and thus the person in authority can take actions on it successfully and effectively due to the quality business report.

The following are suggested for teaching creating reports in business context:

1. Eliciting learners before introducing writing reports in order to arouse their interests by showing them sample reports.

2. Pointing out the three main aspects: *layout, contents* and *accuracy* that are important and essential to be considered in a report.

3. Putting emphasis on highlighting the graphic devices such as white space, bullets and numbered points with heading and sub-headings to make the report clear and to be worked on it effectively and successfully. Making students have a lot of practice which is challenging and thoughtful in authentic situations to write a report is further suggested.

In fact, this 7-step is also useful for producing other forms of business writing as it can really up-grade the students' proficient levels of other skills such as creativity and thinking, etc. Therefore, other forms of business writing such as business letters, memos, notices, etc. with a lot of practice are highly-recommended in the courses of business students at the higher education level. For further study, other forms of business writing mentioned above should be selected to do better research using other ways or methods as they are mostly used at their workplace.

5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This paper emphasizes the effective use of 7-step plan to develop the students' writing skill in business: writing business reports and to help both teachers and learners to be more aware of the benefits of writing quality reports for effective and successful business communication at workplace in authentic situation in the future.

To prove the hypothesis "*if learners are exposed to writing reports and trained how to create them by using 7-step, they will be able to write quality reports*", a total of 30 third-year students of YUEco were given a communicative pilot teaching for creating reports using 7-step for two weeks *(6 hours for teaching + 2 hours for pre-test and post-test)* and their grades were analysed. It was found that most students received **'pass'** category due to the correct layout with the 'conclusion' and 'recommendation' being simple and sound in spite of their faults that rarely interfere with communication. Besides, there were only a very small number of students placed at '**fail'** category due to their faults and weaknesses in all aspects that interfere communication. There are also some more students who are more thoughtful, skilful and thus they got **'credits'** and in addition to these skills, for the students who are more creative in ideas and well-thought, being excellent and quite distinguished from others, they were awarded '**distinctions.'**

It is highly recommended that young learners practically create business reports by using this 7-step plan engaging in the real business situation provided. In fact, it can be said that there are such benefits of learning creating reports as 'sharpening their professional skills', 'getting incentives from co-operating with the business owners' etc. in this fast-paced communication-crazy world. In fact, the more creative, thoughtful and skilful the young learners, the more engaged in and successful in writing business reports in the HEART of business communication.

On the whole, in this study, it can be claimed that this 7-step plan designed by Ms. Shirley Taylor really provided the learners with a wonderfully interactive, engaging and rewarding teaching and learning experience and helped them to create powerful and effective reports at workplace and thus contribute to business, being professional high-quality business report-writers in the future.

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