

A Case Study on Communication Errors in Proforma Invoice and Order Confirmation Emails

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KEYWORDS: International Business Correspondence, Proforma Invoice, Order Confirmation, Communication Errors, 7C Framework, Incoterms 2020

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Publication Date: 21 August-2026

DOI: [10.55677/GJEFR/05-2026-Vol03E8](https://doi.org/10.55677/GJEFR/05-2026-Vol03E8)

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ABSTRACT

Effective communication is essential in international trade, especially on important documents like proforma invoices and order confirmation emails. This paper examines communication mistakes in a simulated trade scenario, involving a Chinese exporter and Bangladeshi importer. Based on the 7C principle of business communication, cross cultural communication theory and Business Document Standardization theory, this study identifies major problems including missing Incoterms, unclear and inconsistent pricing, informal language style, vague delivery terms and lack of essential commercial information. The findings show that these errors will often lead to delays, misunderstandings and contractual disputes that can significantly harm new or inexperienced trading companies. Optimized versions of the emails were recreated to illustrate how well formed, complete and culturally relevant communications increases clarity, lowers risks and smoothens trade. The research provides some practical advice for SMEs and new comers to international business in terms of understanding the importance of communication skills as well as adherence to international documentation standards. The findings have important implications for improving trade communication practices and of smooth cross-border transactions.

Cite the Article: Apurba, Z. M. (2026). A Case Study on Communication Errors in Proforma Invoice and Order Confirmation Emails. *Global Journal of Economic and Finance Research*, 3(8), 549-557. <https://doi.org/10.55677/GJEFR/05-2026-Vol03E8>

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of international trade correspondence

With the rapid progress of economic globalization and information technology, email has become one of the most important and common communication tools for international business. E-mail message is faster, more convenient, less expensive and written record when compared with fax and phone for traditional communication methods. Consequently, virtually all commercial negotiations, the drafting of agreements and exchange of documents for international trade are now carried on by email. Email is considered an important instrument in international trade, getting specially highlighted as one of the promotion aspects of “paperless trade” that strives to make transaction more efficient and lower operational costs.

It has become increasingly popular and more widely used in recent years. According to research, more than 90 percent of large US companies and over 70 percent of international corporations use email as their chief mode of business communication. [1] Tens of thousands of international business deals are concluded on diverse computer networks that facilitate the quick dissemination of commercial data. Email is also a major factor in sustaining global inter-organizational relationships, and offers flexible opportunities for negotiations, confirmations and documentation across borders.

In the international trade quotation correspondence, proforma invoice and order confirmation email have a very important place in the trading. Proforma invoice is a pre-arrival supplier's commercial document that indicates the price, quantity of goods to be delivered and delivery terms and payment condition etc. It is the fundamental from which the importer can then organize apply for payment, or issue a letter of credit. Once the buyer confirms the proforma invoice, he will receive order confirmation email informing that the trading contract has been accepted.

Poor or ambiguous communication via e-mail at these points can result in severe repercussions. The missing information will lead to the delay of payment, contract dispute and a serious case failure of shipment and loss for trader. Hence, the precision and uniformity of proforma invoice and order confirmation emails are most critically important in world trading.

However, formal international trading rules such as Incoterms and payment terms remain a problem in numerous developing markets, particularly for small to medium sized traders. Furthermore, the lack of professional knowledge on import–exports and limited capacity to employ people as import-export specialists by small-sized companies significantly augment the danger of miscommunication in emails concerning international business.

1.2 Literature Review

Previous research has shown that international business correspondence is always essential for the global trade and can frequently act as a quasi-legal proof of business deals. Inadequate or unclear email communication has been shown to contribute to, operational and contractual misunderstandings (Guffey & Loewy, 2018). [2] The 7C principles of business communication, especially clarity, completeness, and correctness, are commonly used to evaluate the effectiveness of messages and reduce communication failure in business contexts (Bovee & Thill, 2017). [3] In addition, standardization of trade documents such as proforma invoices and order confirmations is highlighted in international business literature as a way to clarify payment terms, allocation of delivery responsibilities and contractual intent (Daniels et al., 2018). [4] Cross-cultural communication research also indicates that disparity in level of formality, directness, time perception may intensify misunderstandings in international email correspondence (Hall, 1976). [5] However, Nevertheless, studies on business communication theory and trade documentation appear to be independent, with little focus on the empirics of email-based communication errors in proforma invoice (P/I) and order confirmation exchanges particularly from the perspective of new exporters and small and medium-sized enterprises in developing countries. This paper aims to fill this gap by drawing together communication principles, cross- cultural theory and document standardization in a case-based analytical perspective.

1.3 Case background

The present study draws on a simulated yet realistic international trading correspondence scenario between a Chinese exporting company and a Bangladeshi importer. The exporter is a medium-sized manufacturer in Zhejiang province of China for consumer electronic accessories, such as wireless earphone and mobile charger. The importer is a private owned trade company located in Bangladesh that deals primarily with wholesale of electronic production to domestic retailers. From an international B2B marketplace, both the buyer and supplier became known to each other and communicated through email.

During the initial phase of cooperation, the Bangladeshi importer ordered 10,000 units of wireless earphone as a trial order. The Chinese exporting producer then sent the company by e-mail a proforma invoice containing basic information such as description of the product, price per unit that was only indicative, delivery arrangements and how the goods would be packed. The importer after receiving the proforma invoice confirmed the purchase and sent an order confirmation email to move ahead. Nevertheless, the negotiations encountered several misunderstandings primarily because of poorly worded issues in key trade terms and missing information both on the proforma invoice and order confirmation e-mails. As a result, this case serves as a typical model for the study of proforma invoice and order confirmation emails in conducting international trade with respect to common communication errors. And this is a typical case of the first time cooperation between trading companies in China and Bangladesh, the communication mostly depend on email, and generally the professional trade knowledge are not very enough.

1.4 Research Objectives and Significance

This paper sets out to determine the typical pattern of errors made in proforma invoice and order confirmation e-mails in international trade. Based on an in-depth case study, this paper intends to analyze how an insouciant and imprecise language, a lacuna in the information or a linguistic misuse may generate aspects of corrections of business letters accuracy. The study also attempts to explore the reasons for these communication problems following the relevant theories of international business communication and document standardization.

Equally significant, this work aims to standardize and restore the original e-mails by giving a professionally edited rendition of them and in line with international trade customs and usages as well as the norms that apply to the communication on a broad level. By contrasting the source and refined versions, we aim to illustrate successful practices in enhancing coherence, completeness and formality of trade emails.

Both practically and academically, this study is important. In practice, this can give practical advice to exporters, importers and trade doer in lessening communication risk and increase transaction efficiency. Academically, it enhances the case-based study of international business correspondence and provides a basis for further research in similar fields. The results of this study are expected to offer some pragmatic information for small and medium-sized trading enterprises, beginner exporters and importers, and international trade students to enhance the quality of email communication, and avoid operational risks.

1.5 Research Methods

Taking a specific international trade case as the research object, this paper will use the case study method to analyze communicative failures in proforma invoice and order confirmation emails. In order to find general issues, a document analysis is used to check

the content, speech and structuring of the chosen emails. Furthermore, a comparative analysis technique is employed to compare the incorrect emails initially written with their optimized versions that explains the effect of assigned improvements and optimization strategies. The combination of the qualitative case analysis and documentation comparison helps to guarantee both empirical topicality and analytical dependability of our research results.

1.6 Structure of the Paper

This paper includes five chapters. Chapter 1 is the introduction of this paper, outlining the research background, case background, research objectives, methods and organization of entire text. The second chapter describes the case and points out primary communication barriers. Chapter Three focuses on the theoretical framework and instrument of analysis. Chapter Four discusses optimization and reconstruction of the emails with filtering comparison. Chapter Five presents a conclusion of the main findings and implications for practice to close closure on the research follow up the study. This logical structure helps ensure a clear connection between problem identification, theoretical analysis, and practical optimization.

2. CASE DESCRIPTION AND PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION

2.1 Description of the Proforma Invoice Email (Wrong Version)

According to the trade situation illustrated in Chapter 1, we, at this point, center on the proforma invoice email issued in an early phase of our previous intervention. Once the tentative unit price was established through a B2B website, the South Asian importer asked the Chinese exporter to send him a proforma invoice for internal approval and payment arrangement. The exporter replied as follows by proforma invoice email. While there is a price per unit, it also misses a whole slew of important trade terms and suffers from the typical communication problems.

Wrong Proforma Invoice Email

Subject: Proforma Invoice for Earphones

Dear Sir,

We send you the PI for Wireless earphones as discussed before. The price is USD 5.2 per piece. The total amount will be based on your final order quantity. We can ship the goods next month. Please check the PI and arrange payment soon after your confirmation.

The shipment will be by sea to your port. We will arrange production after receiving your payment.

Waiting for your fast reply.

Best regards,

Li Wei

Sales Department

Zhejiang AudioTech Co., Ltd

This email may look like a mail that contains general info about trading, it doesn't give details of several important trade issues such as Incoterms, total contract amount, the date and time of the shipment, conditions of payment, term of offer. These shortcomings might easily cause misinterpretation, and possible commercial disputes that will be discussed in the next section.

2.2 Communication Errors in the Proforma Invoice Email

In the above-mentioned proforma invoice, e-mail contains several traditional faults in communication, which can give rise to huge misunderstandings and commercial risks when conducting an international transaction.

First, the Incoterms are completely omitted in the email. The exporter simply declares "by sea to your port" in the export price, without specifying if it is FOB, CIF or other Incoterms. Lack of clear Incoterms, the duties, expenses and either parties risk are unable to be defined. According to Incoterms® 2020 issued by the International Chamber of Commerce, the absence of an Incoterms rule in a proforma invoice makes the allocation of cost and risk legally unclear (ICC, 2020).

Second, the pricing information is not clear. While the unit price is indicated at USD 5.2/piece, the final value of contract is not mentioned in the mail due to not confirming min quantity. This in turn creates obstacles for the importer to make payment or seek internal approval. A proforma invoice must clearly state unit price and total contract value to serve as a basis for payment and contract formation (Czinkota et al., 2019). [6]

Third, the payment term is not apparent. The email asks importer to "arrange payment soon", not indicating whether it is T/T, L/C or other methods of payment and does not specify the time of payment. The absence of explicit payment terms in trade correspondence significantly increases financial risk for both exporters and importers (Daniels et al., 2018). [7]

Fourth – It does not mention validity period of the proforma invoice in the mail. The absence of a validity date allows the exporter to alter the price or delivery conditions at a later time, which raises trade uncertainty. A proforma invoice without a validity period weakens its legal effectiveness as a formal commercial offer (Albaum, Duerr, & Strandskov, 2016). [8]

Finally, the email has too casual and vague tone, which reduces its professionalism and legal effectiveness in a formal business transaction. Business emails in international trade function as quasi-legal documents and therefore require a formal and professional tone (Guffey & Loewy, 2018). [9]

2.3 Description of the Order Confirmation Email (Wrong Version)

After the importer had an email from the exporter with a proforma invoice, he opts to start ordering upon these basic specifications. However, the proforma invoice was incomplete and trade terms were not clear, so the importer remained uncertain about some essential conditions. Following was the order confirmation mail sent by importer to confirm purchase. As shown below, though, the email says it wants to put in an order yet still contains several unclear and inconsistent details.

Wrong Order Confirmation Email

Subject: Order Confirmation

Dear Li Wei,

We confirm the order for the Bluetooth earphones mentioned in your PI. We will take 10,000 pieces. **Please reduce some price as we are buying a high quantity.** Please arrange shipment as soon as possible because we need the goods urgently.

We will try to send the money this month. Hope you can arrange everything quickly. Let us know when the goods are ready.

Thanks.

Best regards,

Ahmed Rahman

Import Manager

Navana Trading Co.

2.4 Communication Errors in the Order Confirmation Email

The importer's order confirmation e-mail has major language issues that may affect upon the performance of the contract.

One concern is the quantity mismatch issue. While importer has claimed the order quantity of 10,000 pcs, but this number was not also specifically mentioned in proforma invoice. Because the order total and production plan is based on confirmed quantity, this may cause some confusion or dispute in future. In international sales contracts, the order quantity must be clearly consistent with the proforma invoice to ensure contract validity (Schaffer et al., 2020). [10]

Second, there is no known delivery date. The importer only indicate to the exporter "arrange shipment at earliest date possible" without quotation of exact time, or latest date of shipping. These indefinite time statements leave the exporter unable to schedule production and shipping. Under the CISG, the seller is required to deliver the goods at the time fixed or determinable from the contract (United Nations, 1980). [11]

Third, there is the blatant contract disparity. Although the email is called an "order confirmation," it still states the importer needs to ask the exporter if they could "please reduce some price." This means that the price has merely not yet been completely determined which runs against the idea of an order confirmation and leads to contracts that are more uncertain. Renegotiating price after order confirmation undermines contractual certainty in international trade (Goode, 2016). [12]

Lastly, the tone and politeness of your email are not professional. "I will ask to decrease some price" or "We would try to make payment this month"—those are informal and ambiguous statements, they dilute legal nature of the instruction and not a measures of persuading in effective business communication. An appropriate professional tone in business emails is essential for maintaining trust and legal seriousness in commercial communication (Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson, 2002). [13]

2.5 Summary of Major Communication Problems

Based on the analysis of the proforma invoice email and the order confirmation email, the major communication problems identified in this case are summarized in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1

Error Type	PI Mail	Order Confirmation
Price clarity	Unclear total price	Price renegotiation
Payment Term	Missing	Unclear
Delivery time	Vague	Vague

Incoterms	Missing	Not mentioned
Contract consistency	Weak	Inconsistent
Professional tone	Informal	Informal

From the table above it can be seen that there are serious deficiencies on the proforma invoice email and on the order confirmation email. The most common are non-standard trade terms, uncertain payment and delivery conditions and loose contract certainty. These issues are normal risks of small and inexperienced trading corporations in the communication with international businesspersons. If these errors are not fixed promptly, it could result in payment delays, contract disputes and trade failures. It is thus important for the existing problems to be further researched in this paper with relevant theories and the feasible optimization measures would be given in the subsequent sentences.

3. ANALYTICAL TOOLS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Principles of International Business Correspondence: The 7C Framework

International business correspondence plays a vital role in order to enable seamless international transactions, when especially important documents such as proforma invoices and order confirmation mails. To have effective and risk-less communication, business messages are commonly evaluated using the 7C principles of business communication which include Clarity, Conciseness, Completeness, Correctness, Concreteness, Consideration, Courtesy. [14]

As to clarity, it means to employ clear and unambiguous words so the recipient of a message will know what he is getting across. The vagueness of terms such as price, delivery date or responsibilities can cause misinterpretation in global trade.

Conciseness highlights keeping ideas concise - eliminating unnecessary words, contributing to efficiency in rapid trade communication.

Completeness requires all necessary information — like product details, payment conditions, Incoterms, period of validity and delivery time – in business related emails to be fully disclosed. Failure to provide necessary information frequently leads to disagreement or delay.

Correctness is the absence of errors in amount, unit price or dates. Wrong in these may lead directly to contract discrepancies.

Concreteness eliminates vague expressions like “soon” or “reasonable price,” replacing them with specific, detailed information.

Consideration focuses on being reader-oriented and respecting the interests and needs of the trading partner.

Courtesy is about maintaining a polite, professional and respectful tone in all interactions – nothing could be more important when communicating with diverse groups clearly.

In this paper, 7C model is utilized as the core analysis tool to analyze the communication errors in the PI and OC e-mails as well providing a guidance for enhancing them.

3.2 Cross-Cultural Communication Theory

The theory of cross-cultural communication answers why there are differences in written business exchange in international trade. Hall (1976) contrast these two as high-context and low-context communication. Chinese communication tends to be heavy on implied meaning, whereas many South Asian trading partners — particularly in the early days of a deal — appreciate more face-to-face time and straight talk. It is very easy to get cross reading in a trade email. [15]

Politeness theory is also in this connection important. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), the use of polite forms serves indication of the speaker's respect for the hearer. If emails are written using a conversational tone or vague instructions, they can come across as unprofessional to the receiver. [16]

Time experience differences also interfere with communication. Some cultures can be categorized as clock time cultures and others event time ones (Hall & Hall, 1990). Therefore, the problem here is that a fuzzy delivery date leaves room for ambiguity. [17]

Gesteland (2012) adds that each culture of business has its expectations in terms of formality and directness. Certain cultures need precise information and structure while others value more a context-based relationship. In addition, those differences influence how trade emails are interpreted. Overall, the cultural aspect explains many things in facets of the case such as unclear language, casual speaking style and fuzzy timelines. [18]

3.3 Business Document Standardization Theory

Business document standardization theory suggests that these formal trade documents, including proforma invoices and order confirmations, should be in a uniform format, complete with data elements required by international rules of commerce. Standardized contracts mitigate dispute, reinforce legal certainty and facilitate transactions. The improvement of standardized communication improve the effectiveness of global trade by reducing misunderstanding from inconsistency or inadequacy in documentation; (Cateora, Gilly and Graham 2020). [19]

In international trade, a proforma invoice is used as a working document; it is not regarded as a 'true' invoice because the seller does not record a pro forma invoice as an accounts receivable and the buyer does not record a proforma invoice as an accounts payable. Given that this kind of document is missing only one among these three elements, the reliability and commercial risk for

access to it rises. Similarly, order confirmation emails are in the form of written acceptance of seller's offer and must show all terms as per our proforma invoice.

Standardization also brings the communication in most documents into line with international tools as the Incoterms® 2020 of the International Chamber of Commerce assist to make obligations for buyers and sellers more clear. When compliance with these existing norms is not met in the completion of the documents, then the risk increases of disputes, time-consuming delays and financial losses (especially for less-experienced or SME trading companies).

3.4 Analytical Framework of This Study

This study integrates the 7C principles, cross-cultural communication theory and business document standardization theory, carries out a systematical research on the errors of communication in PI (Proforma invoice) and OC (Order confirmation) e-mails. We pursue three steps in our analytical approach.

First, we take the 7C model to judge whether the two emails are clear, complete, correct, courteous and concrete enough. Missing Incoterms, unclear delivery dates, wrong volumes and informal tone all being offenders of various aspects of the 7C principles, which helps identify the exact communication problems and their impact on the transaction.

Second, cross-cultural communication theory explains why such errors are common in Sino-South Asian exporter-importer interactions. Miscommunication occurs due to the variation in communication style (high-context vs. low-context), politeness expectations, and time orientation, vague language, divergent price-discussion styles such as indirect instead of direct bidding, and inconsistencies in confirmation information.

Finally, the theory of business document standardization supplies us with definitions of what a proper PI/OC is. This theory is the basis for reconstructed optimal emails according to following international documentation conventions and Incoterms® 2020 rules. Through this integrated framework, this study connects theory with practice and offers a systematic means for detecting errors and improving the reliability of communication in international trade.

4. OPTIMIZATION PLAN AND RECONSTRUCTION

4.1 Optimization Principles and Objectives

Optimization of the two emails are from the perspective of accuracy, legal completeness, trade efficiency and risk prevention.

First off, enhanced accuracy will help to ensure that all trading terms — increased visibility on product specification, price, Incoterms and delivery date — are described in a clear manner (i.e., no room for different interpretation).

The second emphasis is legal completeness in the emails, so that they comply with legislation as well as with Incoterms® 2020, payment terms and offer validity.

Third, improving the efficiency of transaction means to use short structured professional words so that both sides can quickly process information and no misunderstanding occurs.

Lastly, risk prevention seeks to minimize possible disputes, delayed deliveries and financial loss by avoiding ambiguities in language and ensuring that all major terms are established in writing.

The optimization of Proforma Invoice (PI) and Order Confirmation (OC) emails adhere to these optimization principles to enhance the quality of information exchange and the trustworthiness for both transacting sides.

4.2 Optimized Proforma Invoice Email (Correct Version)

Corrected Email — Proforma Invoice

Subject: Proforma Invoice No. PI-2025-015 for Bluetooth Earphones – 1000 Units

Dear Mr. Rahman,

Thank you for your inquiry. Please find below the Proforma Invoice for your review:

Product: Bluetooth Earphones (Model BE-20)

Quantity: 1000 units

Unit Price: USD 5.20

Total Amount: USD 5,200

Incoterms: FOB Ningbo

Payment Term: 30% T/T advance, 70% before shipment

Delivery Time: 20 days after receiving advance payment

Packing: Standard export carton

Validity: This offer is valid until 28 February 2025.

If all details are correct, kindly confirm so we may proceed with production.
We look forward to cooperating with you.

Best regards,
Li Wei
Sales Manager
Zhejiang AudioTech Co., Ltd

Explanations: What Got Better and Why

- **Added Incoterms (FOB Ningbo)** – complies with Incoterms® 2020 while specifying responsibilities.
- **Included full pricing details** – enhances precision and accuracy under the 7C framework.
- **Specified payment term** – prevents misunderstanding for money and consistent with usual documentation.
- **Added delivery time and time of validity** – provides legal completeness and avoids doubts as to the timeline.
- **Used formal tone & the organized format** – met with cross-cultural politeness norms and professional emailing conventions.

How It Improves Trade Safety

- Reduces misunderstandings
- No more hidden charges or dispute over delivery
- It provides documented proof that both parties consented to the contractual terms.
- Improves trust and professional cooperation

4.3 Optimized Order Confirmation Email (Correct Version)

Corrected Email — Order Confirmation

Subject: Order Confirmation for PI-2025-015 (Bluetooth Earphones – 1000 Units)

Dear Mr. Li,

We have reviewed your Proforma Invoice No. PI-2025-015 and are pleased to confirm our order as follows:

Product: Bluetooth Earphones (Model BE-20)

Quantity: 1000 units

Unit Price: USD 5.20

Total Amount: USD 5,200

Incoterms: FOB Ningbo

Payment Term: 30% T/T advance, 70% before shipment

Delivery Time: 20 days after advance payment

Packing: Standard export carton

We will arrange the 30% advance payment within two working days. Kindly proceed with production after receiving the payment.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Best regards,
Ahmed Rahman
Import Manager
Navana Trading Co.

Explanations: What Got Better and Why

- Ensured the order details match the PI exactly- improves accuracy and avoids contract dispute.
- Removed vague phrases like “reduce price”- adds concreteness and clarity to bargaining.
- Specified payment timing– Improved predictability and lower financial risks.
- Used polite, professional tone – meets cultural communication standards.

- Organized the information well – enhances readability and conciseness.

Practical Business Effect

- Faster processing of orders
- Reduced operational delays
- More trust and more seamless cross-border communication

4.4 Before–After Comparison and Improvement Analysis

Table 4.1 Comparison of Wrong and Correct Emails

Item	Wrong Version	Correct version	Improvement Reason
Price	Not clearly stated	USD 5,200	Prevent pricing disputes
Incoterms	Missing	FOB Ningbo	Defines buyer–seller responsibilities
Payment Term	Not mentioned	30% advance, 70% before shipment	Ensures financial security
Delivery Time	Soon	20 days after payment	Avoids timeline misunderstanding
Tone	Informal	Polite & professional	Strengthens trust
Validity	Missing	Offer valid to 28 Feb 2025	Adds legal completeness
Quantity	Incorrect	Accurate (1000)	Avoids order errors

Key Improvements Explained

- Inclusion of Incoterms** - Eliminates ambiguity regarding payment of shipping cost, transfer of risk points and port responsibilities.
- Clear numerical accuracy** - Contract correctness and dispute risk is eliminated by validating Quantity, Price and Delivery.
- Professional tone and structured format** - Lowers the amount of cross-cultural misunderstanding and enhances relationships.
- Added validity and payment terms** - Enhances enforceability of the contract and eliminates any delay or financial risk.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study focused on miscommunications in a proforma invoice and an order confirmation email in an international business context with communication taking place between Chinese exporter and Bangladeshi importer. Several issues were identified in the analysis: no mention of Incoterms, unclear pricing, inaccurate quantities, vague delivery terms used in an informal tone and without legally required information such as offer validity or payment terms. Based on the 7C principles, cross-cultural communication theory and business document standardization theory, this paper illustrated how the above mistakes can create misunderstandings that cause a delay in shipments, increase financial risks and possibly result in contract disputes.

The optimized versions of the two emails proved that systematical, integrated and culturally appropriate communication significantly improves trade effectiveness as well as cutting off transaction risk. Through adding standardized form elements, formal expressions and commercial terms, the formalized e-mails establish a more explicit mutual expectation between two sides and enhance the legal reliability and operability of trade.

The findings offer practical implications for small and new trading companies, especially in developing countries such as Bangladesh where the knowledge related to trade documentation, Incoterms and professional correspondence might be absent. The case illustrates the need to educate employees about international business communication, and to use standard email formats that can prevent expensive errors.

While the research applies a hypothetical case, it is typical issues encountered by SMEs in international trade. Future studies may continue extending the analysis with different real-life cases or investigate how digital tools and AI-supported writing can be used to accelerate the process of international trade correspondence.

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