

When genre studies and ICT marry, reliable offspring is guaranteed: the case of a web-based tool for text writing

Carmen Foz Gil, Mercedes Jaime Sisó

E-mail: mjaime@unizar.es, foz@unizar.es

Universidad de Zaragoza (Spain)

Abstract

The international business community members speak different mother tongues and come from varied cultural backgrounds which structure discourse differently. However, in the context of global commerce, professionals are bound to use English in a universally accepted way, in order to make themselves understood and carry out their transactions accordingly. This requires not only good command of the foreign language, but also to know the rules and conventions that govern communication in English within international commerce practice.

Aware of this need, the research team Inglés para Fines Académicos y Profesionales, conducted a survey among a large number of SMEs in Aragón, whose informants confirmed that correspondence is the main communicative activity in their international business relations, but employees lack the necessary skills to write letters in English properly.

This paper reports on the development of a website aimed at helping Spanish small business staff write their commercial correspondence in English efficiently, and it describes the steps involved in the process of designing the tool.

The presentation of the contents obeys to the commercial transaction chronological order. Instructions and language have been categorised relating to each other by a general-to-specific click stream which connects them in a sequence of parallel deeper planes. The explanations offered do not contain any linguistic or technical terminology; they have been presented in communicative terms with the purpose of making the user aware of the strategies that an expert writer of this genre employs to achieve his/her communicative goals. It is assumed that the learner shares the knowledge, experience and some conventions of the specialist community associated with commerce.

The result is the website www.inglescomercial.net, which provides ready-to-use- materials, easy-to-manage and flexible enough to serve both as a helping tool at work and as an autonomous-learning resource, which is already being used by a large number of Spanish professionals in their international business transactions.

1. Introduction

The participants of the international business community speak different mother tongues and come from diverse cultural backgrounds, which makes speakers structure discourse in different ways (Ellis & Johnson [1], Jenkins & Hinds [2], Valero-Garcés [3], Vergaro [4], among others), but in global commerce practice they are bound to use English in an international accepted way in order to make themselves understood and carry out their transactions accordingly.

English speaking companies claim that they regularly come across language and cultural barriers when they want to make business with companies abroad, especially with small and medium enterprises (SMEs). This is true when trading with Spain, where even those who have good command

of grammar rules and lexicon fail to communicate appropriately and effectively in particular social interactions, since they do not master the unwritten specific rules of these communicative events in English. The violation of socio-pragmatic rules creates miscommunication problems that may not be forgiven by native speakers or other interlocutors or readers who are better trained in social interaction, as highlighted by Al-Ali [5] Koike [6], Maier [7] and Thomas [8] among others.

A questionnaire distributed among a large number of regional SMEs confirmed that correspondence is the most common communicative activity in their international business relations. Consequently, commercial letters were to be the focus of our study. The writing of business letters is ritualised and the language used formulaic and polite, short and direct, referential and objective rather than subjective and personal and, therefore, there is a preference for clear, logical concise discourse [1]. Due to the relative uniformity of the move structure and lexico-grammatical content of the letters, we thought that an operative tool to help employees of SMEs in our region write their commercial correspondence in English would be feasible. The analytical approach chosen for the study was that of genre as established by Bhatia [9] and Swales [10].

This paper reports on the methodological criteria and the rationale behind the development of a website, and describes the steps involved in the design process. We will illustrate how the discourse analysis of the commercial letters genre has provided the conceptual framework for the selection, organisation and presentation of the content materials, contained in a user-friendly format.

2. Method

2.1. Target community

A definition of the tool target users was required: their profile, needs, constraints, context and level of English. We devised a questionnaire for a sample size of about 300 SMEs in our community. The data collected provided only an example, rather than a statistically valid sample representative of the entire small business sector, but enough to allow us to determine:

- The potential users: professionals of local SMEs involved in international commerce who are **not in the educational system any longer, and are highly aware of their time. constraints.**
- Their level of English: intermediate, without training in Business English, but with some experience in letter writing. They often apply wrong vocabulary and structures and are not fully acquainted with the protocol and the strategies which rule this type of discourse.
- Communication needs: commercial correspondence is the most frequent vehicle in the process of international commercial transactions, where regular face-to-face communication is not possible.
- Their lack confidence when writing letters in English, which may become a stressful task since letters in the context of commerce have not only an informative nature, but also legally-binding value.

2.2. Corpus collection and classification

The selected data consisted of 117 original commercial letters: 59 produced by British companies and 58 provided by local Spanish SMEs, all written by native speakers of the corresponding language.

We also included secondary data from manuals.

The letters were classified according to the regular transaction events between seller and buyer. Giannetti [11] describes a business transaction as "a particular instance of social and economic exchange and consists of a business interaction and a logically and chronologically ordered set of

actions (...) to be carried out in the real world by both agents". Yli-Jokipii [12] states that these actions can be classified according to 'transactional stages and situations' and be grouped into three main categories where all commercial correspondence can be included (pre-deal, on-deal and post-delivery).

However, the communicative purposes of the items in our corpus did not always coincide with the 11 situation types in Yli-Jokipii's [12] list, so we had to adapt the model, and the result was a classification of 13 types of commercial letter, named after their function (communicative purpose) in the transactional process:

A. Pre-deal letters

First contact and enquiries

Reply to enquiries: offering prices and conditions

B. On-deal letters

Placing an order

Acceptance of order

Variation/changes in the order

Refusing an order

Delay in delivery

Advising of despatch

C. Requesting payment

Sending invoice

Advice of payment

Requests for payment

First reminder

Second reminder

Third reminder

2.3. Analysis

The analysis of the corpus was carried at various linguistic levels -discoursal and lexico-grammatical- in the context of sociolinguistics and cognitive constraints; we focused not just on the language, but

also on the conventions and procedures which determine such (sub)genres. Initially, the corpus confirmed the structural elements (letterhead, inside address, reference, date, etc.) which are common to the initial and final parts of all letters. Nevertheless, non native speakers' difficulties appear when composing the main body of the letter, which follows a less predictable form [13]. Therefore, our main concern was to detect the set of component moves used by writers to organise the body text of the letters to identify coincidences that could reveal patterns of language use. Based on the notion of move stated by Swales [10] and Bhatia [9], and following genre analysts such as Al-Ali [5] Dudley-Evans [14] and Skelton [15], we determined the component moves by assigning a function to each stretch of

written portion of the texts with a particular minor function in relation to the overall purpose of the genre.

2.4. Selection of the lexico-grammatical realizations of each move

We were interested in features directly relevant to the situation context. More attention was given to searching for relevant groups and phrases, as meaningful units, rather than to isolated words –which, nevertheless, were later used to elaborate a specific glossary. The results of the analysis were simplified and selected according to their frequency of occurrence. The actual texts of the authentic letters were modified to present standard and comprehensive models for better understanding and practical use of the target audience.

The following table illustrates how we dealt with the findings related to the letters of enquiry. The resulting moves and lexico-grammatical representations were typified and standardised for the user to choose the most appropriate according to their particular communicative situation.

Table 1: Moves and their definition in the **English letters of enquiry** (pre-deal), with some examples

| Structural moves | Description of their function | Examples of sentences, phrases & expressions for each move |
|---|--|--|
| <p>Move 1: Referring to the source of information.</p> | <p>The writer states where, how and when s/he learnt about the addressee:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - At a trade fair - In a publication - Through an institution, organisation or person. | <p><i>I/We saw (product) displayed/demonstrated on your stand at X Exhibition that was held in...</i></p> <p><i>With reference to your advertisement in the (name of publication)...</i></p> <p><i>We were given your name by/ Your name has been given us by...</i> <i>You were recommended to us by ...</i></p> |
| <p>Move 2: Establishing credentials</p> | <p>The writer gives a brief introduction of the Business s/he represents by giving some information about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - business activity + size of the business | <p><i>We are a SME in the sector of ...</i> <i>We are one of the main producers of...</i> <i>We are a large store/shop/chain of retailers involved in...</i> <i>We are (leading) dealers in...</i> <i>Our business is involved in...</i></p> |



| | | |
|---|---|---|
| <p>Move 3. Soliciting action</p> | <p>- size of the market</p> <p>This is where the writer makes the actual enquiry, requesting</p> <p>- catalogue, price list, product details, samples etc</p> <p>- quotation, terms, and information about other transaction details</p> <p>- solicitud de visita de un representante</p> | <p><i>There is a steady/large demand here for (product) that you manufacture... Demand for this type of (product) is not high, but sales this year will probably exceed €---</i></p> <p><i>Please send us... Could/Would/Will you please send... Please let us have details of... I/We would appreciate a sample of...</i></p> <p><i>Please quote us for... We are (also) interested in... I/We would (also) like to know whether... Could you please tell/inform us Could you please give me/us further information about</i></p> <p><i>I should appreciate it if you arrange for your representative to call...</i></p> |
| <p>Move 4: Polite ending</p> | <p>The writer ends the letter with a polite and conventional expression</p> | <p><i>Thank you for your attention We/I look forward to hearing from you. We/I would be grateful for an early reply.</i></p> |

The same procedure was applied to the findings collected from the other 12 types of commercial letters. In total, we coded 46 moves for the 13 (sub)genres, and 353 standardised phrases, for later inclusion in the instructions on how to write the sections or paragraphs corresponding to each move. Additionally, we selected 146 items of vocabulary and commercial terms (e.g. methods of payment, transport arrangements etc.) for the construction of a glossary.

3. Design of the web site

3.1. Contents

The web page *inglescomercial* was not designed as a course syllabus. Its contents did not require time planning or progress gradation, there is no tutor or other students to interact with, unlike those in a regular course. Language presentation was arranged according to the internal discursal organisation of each type of letter and these, in turn, classified by the chronological course of actions they realize. The materials are constrained by the target group needs, their context and the channel.

Inglescomercial provides standardised language to serve as models for composing commercial letters, ensuring a clear browse system to lead users easily about these contents:

- Range of letters covering the main and basic procedures of a commercial transaction.



- Examples of letters as type models.
- Explanations about each type of letter including its general function, protocol and commented move structure.
- Phrases and sentences to provide several choices for each move and style of addressing the reader depending on the degree of formality/familiarity.
- Complete stretches of language and short paragraphs contextualising the phrases.
- Two glossaries (English-Spanish/Spanish-English) containing the most frequent vocabulary, acronyms and incoterms.
- A number of classified freely available web links which were considered valuable resources to enhance the benefits of the original tool.
- Electronic bilingual and monolingual, general and specific language dictionaries.

In order to ensure an accurate use of the contents, an equivalent translation of all phrases and sentences into the users' mother tongue was added, together with clear instructions on how to complete their textual context.

3. 2. Interface

The materials of the website are presented proceeding from the general to the particular, i.e. from the sections and language general to all commercial letters to the specific discursual features of each type of letter and of their corresponding moves. This provided the conceptual framework for the organisation and presentation of the contents, which has turned out to be a practical means for the planning and design of the web tool.

According to Jakob Nielsen's usability studies [16], more than half of all the Internet users are unwilling to look around a website and want to find specific information as fast as possible; a website needs a clear structure and user-friendly navigation properties and this must be true not only on the home page but on all pages of the site. For this, a logical and accurate categorisation of the contents had to be determined as well as the design of a simple browse system to lead users easily about the

website. The aim of categorisation in a website is to offer a range of possibilities and options to help users find the specific information they are looking for.

Thus, in *inglescomercial*, the initial classification of the core materials obeys to the commercial transaction chronological order, but then, instructions and language have been categorised relating to each other by a general-to-specific clickstream which connects them in a sequence of parallel deeper planes.

The following flow chart attempts to represent the clickstream of the search for information about how to write a letter of enquiry:

Inglescomercial homepage shows three transaction stages → first stage: letters of enquiry → model letter + move structure + explanation of function → choose move → language to be used in the move + explanation and contextualised examples → choose other moves to complete the letter (at all the composition stages there are links to see language contextualised in full example letters)

The user can always return to initial explanations or other types of letter from the bar menu at the top of the page.

The significance of this work lies in that it illustrates how a genre-based approach can successfully be applied to ESP materials development. The web page www.inglescomercial.net offers ready-to-use materials, which are easy-to-manage and flexible enough to serve both as a helping tool at work and as an autonomous-learning resource. This has been proved by the large number of Spanish professionals who, on a self-access basis, are already using the materials for their correspondence in international commercial transactions.

References

- [1] Ellis, M., & Johnson, C. (1994). Teaching business English. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [2] Jenkins, S., & Hinds, J. (1987). Business letter writing: English, French, and Japanese. *TESOL Quarterly*, 21, 327-349.
- [3] Valero-Garcés, C. (1996). Contrastive ESP rhetoric: Metatext in Spanish-English economics texts. *English for Specific Purposes*, 15:4, 279-294.
- [4] Vergaro, C. (2004). Discourse strategies of Italian and English sales promotion letters. *English for Specific Purposes*, 23:2, 181-207.
- [5] Al-Ali, M. N. (2006). Genre-pragmatic strategies in English letter-of-application writing of Jordanian Arabic-English bilinguals. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 9:1, 119-139.
- [6] Koike, D. (1995). Transfer of pragmatics competence and suggestions in Spanish foreign language learning. In S. Gass & J. Neu (Eds), *Speech acts across cultures: Challenges to communication in a second language*. New York: Mouton de Gruyter. 257-281.
- [7] Maier, P. (1992). Politeness strategies in business letters by native and non-native English speakers. *English for Specific Purposes*, 11:3, 189-205.
- [8] Thomas, J. (1983). Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics*, 4:2, 91-112.
- [9] Bhatia, V. K. (1993). *Analysing genre: Language use in professional settings*. New York: Longman.
- [10] Swales, J. M. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [11] Giannetti, A. (1996). Business communication plans and strategies: texts and tools. *Pragmatics*, 4:4, 575-598. (p. 578)
- [12] Yli-Jokipii, H. (1994). Requests in professional discourse: A cross-cultural study of British, American, and Finnish business writing. *Suomalainen tiedeakatemia*. (p. 51).
- [13] Flowerdew, J. & Wan, A. (2006). Genre analysis of tax computation letters: How and why tax accountants write the way they do. *English for Specific Purposes*, 25:2, 133-153.
- [14] Dudley-Evans, T. (1994). Genre analysis: An approach to text analysis for ESP. In M. Coulthard (Ed.), *Advances in Written Text Analysis*, London: Routledge. 219-228.
- [15] Skelton, J. (1994). Analysis of structure of original research papers: An aid to writing original papers for publication. *British Journal of General Practice*, 44, 455-459. (p.456).
- [16] Nielsen, J. (2000). *Designing Web usability*. Indianapolis: New Riders Publishers.