

Endnote: Business discourse and language teaching

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Abstract

This paper discusses the link between empirical research in business discourse and the development of appropriate teaching materials for the teaching of business language. It highlights three key areas of interest; new media, the organizational context and the impact of national culture, and it suggests a number of activities that could be used to raise student awareness of these three areas within international business communication.

1. Introduction

The research papers showcased in this Special Issue represent current empirical work in the investigation of business discourse. All the researchers concerned are involved both in research in business contexts and in the teaching of business language. But how are we to reapply their research-based ideas in a classroom situation, be that with pre-experience general business language courses or vocational courses designed to train established business people in language for specific purposes? It is this theme that I wish to pursue here.

Elsewhere I, and others, have discussed the fact that research in business discourse consistently points to three main areas of concern for those of us involved in teaching business language: (1) the need to incorporate the genres associated with new media into our teaching; (2) the need to take the organizational, i.e., business, context into account; and (3) the need to understand the interface between local communicative genres on the one hand and global business genres on the other (see Nickerson 2001; Nickerson 2000; Akar and Louhiala-Salminen 1999; St John 1996). The research studies represented in this Special Issue suggest that these three areas of interest should remain a priority, if we are to present our students with appropriate teaching materials. This short paper will deal with each of these areas in turn, illustrating them with examples taken from this Special Issue, together with further examples in

IRAL 40 (2002), 375–381

0019042X/2002/040-0375

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other work. At the end of each section I will suggest a number of activities that could be used to raise student awareness of the specific area of interest.

2. New media

The papers by Akar and by Gimenez in the present volume emphasise the role that new media play in today's business world. Akar shows the importance of fax communication in the corporations she studied in Turkey and Gimenez provides us with a fascinating discussion of the allowability of fax communication as a legally binding document, as opposed to the non-official status assigned to email. Nonetheless, in Gimenez's study, email was used unofficially to transmit information, particularly in situations where the corporation he studied was experiencing technical problems with the fax. Other studies that have focussed on fax communication include Louhiala-Salminen (1999), and Akar and Louhiala-Salminen (1999), and recent studies on email are provided by Collot and Belmore (1996), Gains (1999), Mulholland (1999) and Gimenez (2000). Studies such as these show a steady increase in the use of new media in business contexts, particularly in the form of fax and email communication, and a corresponding decrease in the use of more traditional genres such as the business letter and memo. Most recent work by Yates and Orlikowski (2002) also discusses the impact of new technologies on communication in the workplace in the United States and shows that these are now becoming increasingly integrated into workplace communication.

In terms of teaching it seems clear that the interests of our students will best be served by incorporating the communicative genres associated with new media into our teaching materials. Although we need to keep established genres, such as the business letter, memo and business report in mind, we also need to provide our students with practice in the type of real time spontaneous communication associated with the fax machine and with email. Those of us working with post-experience students can draw on their experience in contemporary business contexts to identify the communicative genres of most use to them – and the contexts within which these occur – and those of us working with pre-experience students should be aware of the business environments they will be entering after college or university, and adapt our teaching materials accordingly. The studies by Louhiala-Salminen (1996), Barbara et al. (1996) and Nickerson (2000), provide useful examples of survey-based research that could easily be adapted to identify the most used genres within a given context. In addition, a corpus of authentic examples provides a useful discussion point, particularly for students at higher levels of proficiency. Where time allows, particularly for pre-experience students, small scale survey- and corpus-based research projects can be easily managed and provide an effective way of familiarizing students with the genres used in today's business world.

- Provide opportunities to practise spontaneous communication, such as fax and email communication
- Investigate the use of new media in the organizational contexts students are likely to be working in
- Collect a corpus of authentic examples to use for discussion
- Incorporate small-scale survey- and corpus-based research projects into teaching materials
- Use role-plays or business simulations
- Incorporate electronic forums such as Blackboard into teaching

Figure 1. *The incorporation of new media into the teaching of business language*

In order to improve language proficiency, the business genres associated with next media are ideally suited to role-plays or business simulations – if possible happening in real time, to simulate the type of spontaneous task-driven communication that is required in business. Electronic forums such as Blackboard (<http://www.blackboard.com>) provide excellent resources for teachers to set up and oversee a business simulation via an electronic environment. These may easily be linked between institutions at a physical distance from each other, in much the same way that businesses communicate using both new and traditional media. Figure 1 summarizes a number of points related to the incorporation of new media into the teaching of business language.

3. The organizational context

An area closely related to the use of new media in business contexts, is the need to take the wider organizational context into account. All four of the empirical investigations featured in this Special Issue refer to varying degrees to the interface between language use and the contexts within which communication (as discourse) occurs. For instance, Akar's discussion of two corporations in Turkey shows the impact of the organizational context on all aspects of the discourse, including the genres used, the salutations preferred and the politeness strategies included. Likewise, Gimenez leaves us in no doubt as to the influence of the organizational context, specifically in terms of corporate culture and the corresponding effect on the preferred form that internal communication should take. Beyond this Special Issue, the excellent book-length study by Boden (1994), provides an accessible account of how organizations in fact bring about action through the business of talk. Other studies that also focus on the organizational context include Driskill (1989), Suchan and Dulek (1998) and Van Nus (1999). When working with students, it is vital that we work towards raising their awareness of the particular organizational contexts within which they are already working, or are likely to work. At the very least,

business language should not be taught in isolation, but as with new media, as far as possible it should be incorporated into situations such as role-plays or simulations, as closely matched to real-life business situations as possible. It is crucial that students (and teachers for that matter!) understand language as discourse in business contexts, i.e., as the fundamental way in which a business organization communicates both with its own employees, and with its suppliers and customers, constructing and reconstructing itself as it does so.

In both Bilbow's account of meeting discourse in Hong Kong and Poncini's account of a multinational and (at times) multilingual meeting in Italy, the role played by the non-native speaker in business contexts comes to the fore. Traditionally in language teaching, there has been a preoccupation with language proficiency and the types of miscommunications that can occur in interactions between native and non-native speakers of a given language. In Bilbow's succinct comments on the strategies and perceptions of the Chinese (non-native) English speakers in the meeting he examines, we see that cultural differences also play a role, for instance, a Chinese reluctance to initiate conversation versus a Western tendency to be spontaneously vocal, and not just the Chinese speakers' perceived "linguistic weakness". In Poncini's discussion of a multicultural encounter, where all the participants were non-native speakers of English, the emphasis is on how various linguistic features contribute to the relationships between the meeting participants and to the construction of the organizational context. Both investigations describe commonly occurring communication situations in international business, i.e., situations in which English (or another language) is used as a common language and situations in which all the participants are non-native speakers. It may be of interest to students and teachers of business language to investigate what kind of situations are most likely to occur in their own cultural context, for instance, is this likely to be only occasional contact with speakers of languages other than their own or rather a daily need to speak and write effectively in at least one foreign language.

In addition, both Akar's and Bilbow's investigations identify the strategies achieved (or not achieved) through using the linguistic surface features under analysis. Viewing the action achieved through language in this way, may help students to understand the role that a particular linguistic choice makes to the effectiveness of communication in a business context, and therefore to communicative competence as a whole, rather than simply considering whether it is grammatically correct or incorrect. Examples of studies that discuss the contribution of various linguistic features to the effectiveness of communication in different forms of business discourse are provided by Yamada (1997), Charles (1996) and Halmari (1993), for meetings, negotiations and telephone calls respectively, and by Maier (1992), Bhatia (1993) and Mulholland (1999), for letters of apology, sales letters and email. All of these studies provide useful,

- Use role-plays or business simulations matched to real-life business situations
- Make students aware of the role of language as a fundamental contributor to organizational communication
- Investigate the role of the target FL in the organizational contexts students are likely to be working in
- Discuss the action achieved by a particular linguistic choice and its contribution to the effectiveness of the communication

Figure 2. *The use of language and the organizational context*

illuminating examples that could be adapted for use with students at varying levels of proficiency. Figure 2 summarizes a number of points related to the relationship between the use of language and the organisational context.

4. Local versus global genres

The final area of interest I wish to discuss is the need to understand the interface between local genres and global genres within the business context. Of the four papers in this Special Issue, this is highlighted most particularly by Akar, in Turkish business discourse, and Gimenez, in the (mis)match between an Argentinian subsidiary and its European head office. A local versus global genre conflict may occur at many different levels, such that Gimenez identifies a local preference for face-to-face contact at the level of communicative medium, and Akar demonstrates a contrast between two Turkish companies in their textualizations of the same genre, the memorandum, as a direct result of how internationally oriented the corporations were. I have discussed this in detail in previous work (see for example, Nickerson 1999) and I have identified empirical work in business contexts that highlights local versus global differences both in genre *content* (Bhatia 1993; Sims and Guice 1992) and in several aspects of genre *form*, including the conventional *layout* the genre follows (Jenkins and Hinds 1987; Nickerson and Bargiela-Chiappini 1996), the *medium* used for its transmission (Sifianou 1989; Yli-Jokipii 1994), the *language* (e.g., English, Dutch, French etc.) preferred (Herrlitz and Loos 1994; Vandermeeren 1999) and its actual *discourse textualization*, e.g., lexis and text organization (Bhatia 1993; Tebeaux and Driskill 1999). All of these aspects of the form and content of a genre offer a rich area of investigation for students and teachers alike, particularly in identifying communicative genres unique to their own cultures and in investigating the differences between the textualizations of genres used for a similar communicative purpose across different cultures. Figure 3 shows a summary of the local versus global dilemma in terms of business genres, which may be incorporated into teaching materials.

- Identify any communicative genres unique to students' own local culture
- Identify local preferences for different types of media, e.g., face-to-face contact versus written communication
- Collect a corpus of contrastive examples to discuss local versus global differences in content, layout, medium, language and discourse textualization

Figure 3. *Business genres and the local versus global dilemma*

5. Conclusion

In this short article I have attempted to pinpoint a number of different areas that may be useful to consider in re-applying the findings of empirical research in a teaching or training context. I have discussed three key concerns and have suggested how these might be translated into practical activities for both students and teachers. In this way, my intention has been to shed some light on how we may best raise our students' awareness of the complexity of elements they may have to learn to negotiate, if they are to become successful communicators in the international business arena.

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