

**A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE CRITERIA EMPLOYED BY
ACADEMICS AND WORKPLACE PROFESSIONALS IN EVALUATING
BUSINESS CORRESPONDENCE**

VOLUME ONE

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ABSTRACT

The study was motivated by dissatisfaction expressed by employers in the private sector in Malaysia about recent graduates' ability to write in English. In the light of these complaints, the study aimed to investigate the potential gaps between the criteria applied by workplace professionals and academics in the evaluation of business correspondence in an ESL context. Despite the extensive literature in the area of English for Specific Purposes, there is limited research that investigates the criteria of good writing as viewed by workplace professionals and by ESL teachers. Three conceptual frameworks were used to inform the study: New Rhetoric genre theory, Systemic Functional genre theory and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) genre theory. The theme of the study is that context determines the evaluation of the texts produced in a particular environment, and that this has implications for the teaching of ESP.

The study was carried out in the context of an English for Business course in a tertiary institution in Malaysia. The subjects of the study were ESL teachers teaching the English for Business course and bank officers in Kuala Lumpur. Two types of business correspondence were used in the study: memoranda and replies to letters of complaint. The data for the study were collected using the verbal protocol methodology, and interviews.

In the study, both bankers and teachers were trained to provide verbal protocols in their respective contexts. They both evaluated memoranda and replies to letters of complaint generated under test conditions by undergraduates pursuing the English for Business course. The bankers and teachers were also interviewed in order to establish the link between their working contexts and the views they had about the texts they evaluated. The findings of the study revealed that context is integral to text production and evaluation. The bankers' judgements of the texts they evaluated were largely influenced by their banking context. Similarly, the teachers' judgements of the texts were influenced by their academic context. The

findings are discussed in light of their implications for the teaching and assessment of ESP courses. The thesis also provides a critical review of the methodology used and gives suggestions for future research.

DECLARATION

Except where due acknowledgement has been made in the text to other materials, this thesis contains only original work by the writer. Parts of this thesis are based on work which have been presented at conferences.

The length of this thesis, exclusive of excerpts from data, tables, bibliographies and appendices, is less than 100,000 words.

Signed..... M. Puvanesvary

Date..... 8 Jan 2003

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my beloved dad (Muthiah), mum (Neelavathy), brothers (Suresh, Prasad), sisters (Geeta, Chela), husband (Geoff Favaloro), sisters-in-law (Pauline Monteiro, Chelvi), nephews (Aaron, Adrian, Darish, Raja Yogan), nieces (Sarah, Jayshree, Rema Shree) and good friend (Ravi Rao). Last but not least to Achee Girl (my pet dog). Love & Light.

*Unity—liberates. Freedom—unites.
Ultimately nothing is mine or yours—everything is ours.
Just be one with yourself and you will be one with all,
at home in the entire universe.*

(Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, 1973)

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

I. OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

In the light of the dissatisfaction expressed by the business community in Malaysia about the performance of recent graduates' English, this study was undertaken to investigate the potential gap between the criteria applied by teachers of English as a second language (ESL) and business practitioners (bankers) in the evaluation of business correspondence in an ESL context. Both groups evaluated the same texts and the data were collected using a verbal protocol methodology and interviews. The theme of this study is that the context determines the evaluation of texts produced in a particular environment, and that this has implications for the teaching of ESP.

The study is organised into seven main chapters. In the introductory chapter provides insights into the problem statement, overall purpose of the study, the research questions posed, the significance of the study and a description of the context in which the study was carried out. Chapter 2 reviews the literature relevant to three approaches to genre theory: New Rhetoric genre theory, Systemic Functional Grammar and English for Specific Purposes, in order to establish the theoretical basis of the study. Chapter 3 introduces the verbal protocol methodology used to investigate the research questions. Chapter 4 describes the pilot study and the main study, discusses the methodological issues that inform the main study and presents the researcher's interpretation of the texts used in the study. Chapter 5 reports the findings from the data drawn from the banking environment. It focuses on the working context of the bankers and the implicit criteria used for evaluating memoranda and replies to letters of complaint in the workplace setting. Chapter 6 reports the findings in relation to the ESL teachers: their working context and implicit criteria they use for evaluating business correspondence (memoranda and replies to letters of complaint) in the

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