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

VOLUME ONE

PUVENESVARY d/o MUTHIAH

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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 [Signature] Date 8 Jan 2003

PUVENESVARY d/o MUTHIAH
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my beloved dad (Muthiah), mum (Neelavathy), brothers (Suresh, Prasad), sisters (Geeta, Cheila), 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)
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ABSTRACT** ................................................................. II

**DECLARATION** ................................................................ IV

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** ...................................................... V

**DEDICATION** ................................................................. VII

**CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION** ............................................. 1

  I. **OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY** ........................................ 1
  II. **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM** ................................. 2
  III. **OVERALL PURPOSE** .................................................. 4
  IV. **RESEARCH QUESTIONS** .............................................. 4
  V. **SCOPE OF THE STUDY** .............................................. 5
  VI. **DEFINITION OF TERMS** ............................................. 5
  VII. **BACKGROUND OF THE ENGLISH FOR BUSINESS COURSE** .......................... 7
      A. **Nature of the English For Business Course** .................. 7
  VIII. **CONCLUSION** ........................................................... 11

**CHAPTER 2: THREE APPROACHES TO GENRE THEORY** ........ 13

**PART A: NEW RHETORIC GENRE THEORY** .......................... 16

  I. **INTRODUCTION** ........................................................ 16
  II. **NOTION OF GENRE AS SOCIAL ACTION** ......................... 16
      A. **Genre Theory From A Socio-Cognitive Perspective** .......... 20
  III. **WRITING IN ACADEMIC VS WORKPLACE SETTINGS** ........ 25
  IV. **ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH** ........................................ 28
  V. **CONCLUSION** ............................................................ 36

**PART B: THE NOTION OF GENRE IN THE SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL GRAMMAR TRADITION** .... 37

  I. **INTRODUCTION** ........................................................ 37
      A. **Language in context** ............................................. 37
  II. **OVERVIEW OF THE SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL TRADITION** ....... 39
      A. **The notion of register (context of situation)** ............... 40
B. The notion of genre (context of culture) ........................................... 51

III. CONCLUSION ...................................................................................... 58

PART C: ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES ..................................... 59

I. INTRODUCTION .................................................................................. 59

II. MAJOR APPROACHES IN ESP ....................................................... 65

A. Register Approach ........................................................................ 65

B. Rhetorical functions ...................................................................... 66

C. The Process-Oriented Approach .................................................. 67

C. The social constructionist approach ......................................... 69

D. The Genre Approach In ESP ......................................................... 70

III. CONCLUSION .................................................................................. 85

IV. COMPARISON OF THE THREE APPROACHES TO GENRE THEORY ... 86

CHAPTER 3: VERBAL PROTOCOLS ....................................................... 91

I. INTRODUCTION .................................................................................. 91

A. Verbal protocol methodology .................................................... 92

B. Major concerns in using the verbal protocol methodology ...... 99

II. CONCLUSION .................................................................................. 111

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY .............................................................. 112

PART A: PILOT STUDY ......................................................................... 112

I. INTRODUCTION .................................................................................. 112

A. Aim Of The Pilot Study ............................................................... 112

II. FIRST PHASE OF THE PILOT STUDY ............................................ 114

A. Trialling Of The Methodology ..................................................... 115

III. FINDINGS ...................................................................................... 116

A. Mail Survey .................................................................................. 116

B. Verbal Protocol Session ............................................................. 117

C. Interview Session ...................................................................... 119

IV. 2ND PHASE OF THE PILOT STUDY .............................................. 120

A. Verbal Protocol Sessions ............................................................. 121

B. General ......................................................................................... 122
V. DATA ANALYSIS ................................................................. 122
   A. Developing A Coding Scheme .................................... 122
VI. CONCLUSION .................................................................. 123

PART B: INVESTIGATION PROPER ........................................... 124

I. INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 124
   A. Stages In Data Collection ........................................... 124
   B. Collecting verbal protocols from bank officers ............... 132
   C. Analysis of Verbal Protocol Data .................................. 135
   D. Interview With Business Practitioners ........................... 138
   E. Verbal Protocol With ESL Instructors ............................ 142
   F. Interview With ESL Instructors .................................... 143
II. CONCLUSION ..................................................................... 143

PART C: TEXT ANALYSIS .......................................................... 144

I. INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 144
   A. The analysis of grammatical errors- Memo 1 & Memo 2 ... 144
   B. The analysis of grammatical errors - Reply 1 and Reply 2 ... 147
   C. Analysis of tenor for Memo 1 and Memo 2 ................. 154
   D. Analysis of tenor for Reply 1 and Reply 2 ................. 162

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS OF BANKERS ........................................ 183

PART A: THE WORKING CONTEXT OF BANKERS ..................... 183

I. INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 183
II. BANKING SYSTEM IN MALAYSIA ...................................... 184
III. USE OF ENGLISH IN THE BANKING CONTEXT .................. 185
   A. English Language Proficiency Of Recent Graduates ........... 185
IV. NON LINGUISTIC WEAKNESSES OF RECENT GRADUATES ........ 188
   A. Analytical And Problem Solving Skills ......................... 188
   B. Knowledge Of Banking ............................................... 189
   C. Knowledge Of The World ............................................. 190
V. THE GAP BETWEEN WORKPLACE AND ACADEMIA .................. 190
VI. RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING ......................................... 192
   A. Analytical Skills ....................................................... 193
B. English Language Proficiency ........................................................................ 194

VI. HOW LEARNING OF WRITING TAKES PLACE IN BANKS...................... 194

VII. CONCLUSION ......................................................................................... 199

PART B: BANKERS’ FRAMEWORK FOR MEMORANDUM.............. 201

I. INTRODUCTION ....................................................................................... 201
   A. Moves ............................................................................................... 205
   B. Power Relations .............................................................................. 214
   Summary .............................................................................................. 225
   C. Time Constraints ............................................................................ 226
   D. Unrealistic Expectations .................................................................. 227
   E. Professionalism ............................................................................... 227
   F. Test Task Realisation ...................................................................... 232
   G. Format ............................................................................................. 234
II. CONCLUSION ......................................................................................... 235

PART C: BANKERS’ FRAMEWORK FOR REPLIES TO LETTERS
OF COMPLAINT ............................................................................................. 237

I. INTRODUCTION (3252W) ................................................................. 237
   A. Professionalism Of The Bank .......................................................... 239
   B. Power Relations ............................................................................ 265
   C. Format ............................................................................................. 268
   D. Test Task ......................................................................................... 270
II. CONCLUSION ......................................................................................... 271

CHAPTER 6: THE FINDINGS OF TEACHERS............................... 273

PART A: THE WORKING CONTEXT OF TEACHERS ............... 273

I. INTRODUCTION ....................................................................................... 273
   A. Profile Of ESL Teachers ................................................................. 273
   B. Academic Institutional Constraints .............................................. 275
   C. What Counts In The Writing Of Business Correspondence? ...... 283
   D. How Can Teachers Better Equip Themselves as ESP Teachers? 291
II. CONCLUSION ......................................................................................... 295
PART B: ESL TEACHERS' FRAMEWORK FOR MEMORANDUM

I. INTRODUCTION .......................................................... 297
   A. Teachers' Perception Of Language Errors .................. 300
   B. Register ............................................................... 306
   C. Moves ................................................................. 311
   D. Format ................................................................. 319
   E. Test Task Realisation ............................................ 320
   F. Power Relations .................................................... 322
   G. Perception Of The Workplace Culture ...................... 329

II. CONCLUSION ............................................................. 330

PART C: ESL TEACHERS' FRAMEWORK FOR REPLIES TO LETTERS OF COMPLAINT ............................................. 332

I. INTRODUCTION .......................................................... 332
   A. Teachers' Perceptions Of Language Errors ............... 334
   B. Register ............................................................... 344
   C. Test Task Realisation ............................................ 346
   D. Moves ................................................................. 348
   E. Format ................................................................. 360
   F. Power Relations .................................................... 363
   G. Perception Of The Workplace Culture ...................... 365

II. CONCLUSION ............................................................. 367

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION/ CONCLUSION .................................. 369

I. INTRODUCTION .......................................................... 369
   A. Research Questions .............................................. 369
   B. Sub-Questions ...................................................... 370

II. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS .............................................. 370
   A. Working Contexts: Bankers And ESL Teachers ........... 370
   B. Evaluation Of Memos: Academic And Workplace Context .... 377
   C. Evaluation Of Replies To Letters Of Complaint: Academic And Workplace Context ........................................ 382
III. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FINDINGS .................................................. 389

A. Teaching .................................................................................. 389

B. Assessment .............................................................................. 404

IV. CONCLUSION ........................................................................... 407

V. SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATION FOR TEACHING ................. 409

VI. LIMITATIONS OF MY STUDY .................................................. 411

A. Methodological Issues ................................................................. 412

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH .................. 413

VIII. CONCLUSION ......................................................................... 414

BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................................................. 415

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 2.1: SIMILARITIES OF THE THREE APPROACHES TO GENRE THEORY ... 87
TABLE 3.1: VERBAL REPORTING TERMINOLOGY ............................................ 93
TABLE 4.1: PROFILE OF ESL TEACHERS ...................................................... 127
TABLE 4.2: PROFILE OF BANK OFFICERS .................................................... 129
TABLE 4.3: GRAMMATICAL ERRORS IN MEMO 1 ....................................... 145
TABLE 4.4: GRAMMATICAL ERRORS IN MEMO 1 ....................................... 146
TABLE 4.5: GRAMMATICAL ERRORS IN REPLY 1 ..................................... 149
TABLE 4.6: GRAMMATICAL ERRORS IN REPLY 2 ..................................... 153
TABLE 5.1: DEFINITIONS OF CATEGORIES .............................................. 203
TABLE 5.2: MOVES ........................................................................... 205
TABLE 5.3: POWER RELATIONS ............................................................ 215
TABLE 5.4: LANGUAGE ERRORS ............................................................ 231
TABLE 5.5: SUMMARY: MEMO EVALUATION BY BANKERS (N=15) ........ 235
TABLE 5.6: DEFINITION OF CATEGORIES AND SUBCATEGORIES ............ 237
TABLE 5.7: PROFESSIONALISM OF THE BANK ...................................... 239
TABLE 5.8: MOVES (TACTICS) IN REPLIES TO LETTERS OF COMPLAINT
(R1&R2) .................................................................................. 241
TABLE 5.9: LANGUAGE ERRORS (R1&R2) ............................................... 260
TABLE 5.10: POWER RELATIONS .......................................................... 265
TABLE 5.11: FORMAT AND TEST TASK ................................................. 268
TABLE 5.12: ASPECTS IN REPLIES TO LETTERS OF COMPLAINT (R1 & R2) .... 271
TABLE 6.1: PROFILE OF ESL TEACHERS (n=12) ..................................... 274
TABLE 6.2: CATEGORIES AND DEFINITIONS ........................................... 298
TABLE 6.3: LANGUAGE ERRORS ................................................................... 301
TABLE 6.4: ASPECTS OF TEXTUAL ORGANISATION (M1 & M2) ................. 311
TABLE 6.5: ASPECTS OF MOVES .............................................................. 313
TABLE 6.6: CONCISENESS AND CLARITY .................................................. 315
TABLE 6.7: TEST TASK REALISATION ....................................................... 321
TABLE 6.8: KNOWLEDGE OF THE BANKING SYSTEM ................................ 323
TABLE 6.9: SUMMARY OF MEMO EVALUATION BY TEACHERS (n=12) ....... 331
TABLE 6.10: DEFINITION OF CATEGORIES ............................................... 332
TABLE 6.11: LANGUAGE ERRORS ............................................................. 335
TABLE 6.12: TEST TASK REALISATION .................................................... 346
TABLE 6.14: MOVES IN THE TEXTS .......................................................... 349
TABLE 6.15: CLARITY AND CONCISENESS .............................................. 358
TABLE 6.16: FORMAT OF THE TEXTS ....................................................... 361
TABLE 6.17: POWER RELATIONS ............................................................. 363
TABLE 6.18: PERCEPTION OF WORKPLACE CULTURE ............................. 366
TABLE 6.19: ASPECTS OF TEXTS—REPLY 1 & REPLY 2 ......................... 368
TABLE 7.1: COMPARISON OF BANKERS’ AND TEACHERS’ EVALUATION OF MEMOS ........................................................................ 381
TABLE 7.2: EVALUATION OF REPLIES TO LETTERS OF COMPLAINT BY BANKERS .................................................................. 384
TABLE 7.3: MOVES IN THE TEXTS: COMPARISON OF BANKERS’ AND TEACHERS’ VIEWS ................................................................. 386
TABLE 7.4: EVALUATION OF REPLIES TO LETTERS OF COMPLAINT BY BANKERS AND TEACHERS ..................................................... 388

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 2.1: A MODEL OF TEXT IN CONTEXT (MARTIN, 1993A, P. 120) ....... 56
FIGURE 2.2: ELEMENTS OF THE COMPOSITION OF TEXT (KRESS, 1993, p. 35)
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, discuss 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
The contents of the thesis is for internal user only
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426


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438