

A Critical Literature Review on Written Business Discourse

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to shed light on critical literature review on written business discourse. The most important study results: the use of language in 'authentic business situations', the relationship between research and pedagogy in the teaching of business English is still 'weak' also the contribution of applied linguistics research into Business English has brought forward useful information on the nature and the prominent features of business communication. It is this relationship that is in a great need to be strengthened, and warrants a study so as to investigate the causes and the possible ways to overcome this problem.

Key words: Written Business Discourse, Corpus, and Discourse.

Introduction

It is claimed that the initial notion of the phrase 'business discourse', and respectively the introduction of 'the language of business' into the academic writing arena are attributed to Johns (1980, 1986). Bargiela-Chiappini et al. (2007: 3) describe business discourse as being 'all about how people communicate using talk or writing in commercial organizations to get their work done', and as a 'social action in business contexts'. Daniushina (2010: 224) refers to business discourse as the 'verbalization of business mentality, realized in the form of an open multitude of thematically correlated texts on a wide range of business issues, considered in combination with their extra-linguistic contexts'. Although Bargiela-Chiappini offers a broad definition, she fully acknowledges the difficulty in defining business discourse. This is due to the complexity of this field involving a 'multidisciplinary scholarship' that incorporates, 'linguistics, communication studies, organisation studies, ethnomethodology, critical studies, sociology, international management etc'. This inevitably leads to each discipline viewing business discourse from its own perspective (Bargiella-Chiappini 2009:1-2).

Broadly; let us consider business discourse chiefly comprising two facets which serve to establish communication for business purposes through the use of various means in diverse contexts. The first is referred to as spoken business discourse and exemplified in business meetings, interviews, presentations, etc; whereas the second is known as written discourse and consists of emails, faxes, letters, business reports, etc. It is the latter that is of interest in this essay with the intention to present a critical literature review focusing on two aspects: the research methods used to investigate written business discourse, and the relevance of the findings for the teaching of Business English (BE) in terms of how they may be applied in the classroom.

Literature Review

A number of studies have emerged in different parts of the world involving scholars from various disciplines particularly in the last two decades. These studies in business discourse have used different methods to investigate certain aspects, and are influenced by the researcher's area of interest and his/ her scholarly affiliation. (Bragiela-Chappini, 2009).

Some of these studies which reflect the diversity in methods, interests and approach have emerged from Europe covering a wide scope of topics through investigation, and contextualisation of their approach. Nickerson (2000) conducted a study on emails involving Anglo-Dutch multinational corporations so as to investigate the influence of the organisations and culture on the realisation of discourse. In doing so, she applied two different research methods; questionnaire-based survey and the analysis of two different text Corpora. The questionnaire-based survey was aimed at identifying the contextual factors which influenced the use of written English among those companies. The first Corpus consisted of authentic texts written in English by Dutch employees of multinational corporations which were collected and analysed to fulfil two aims; firstly, to identify some of the genres of organisational communication deployed in English within those establishments, and secondly, to describe their substantive and prescribed characteristics, and any context-related factors that might be determinant of the situations in which written English was resorted to and the shape it took. Similarly, the second corpus was collected and analysed, and consisted of authentic texts in English, but in this instance, written by both Dutch and British employees of one multinational corporation. Besides the first aim indicated for the first corpus, the second corpus second aim was; to examine 'natural culture' specifically as a contextual factor that shape up the linguistic realisation of organisational genres, and instrumentally executed by way of applying comparative analysis of texts written by both nationalities (Nickerson 2000:8- 9). It is possible to argue that the above study represents a sociolinguistic perspective and a multidimensional methodology.

Other studies sought different linguistic approach that is apparent in the nature of their investigation and the methods used. For example; Arvani (2006) conducted a contrastive study adopting a pragmatic approach. The aim of his study was to investigate differences between English letters written by native speakers (British) and those written by non-native speakers (Iranians) in a business context. The results in this study demonstrated that the Iranian letters writers had given all their attention to surface linguistic features at the expense of utterly overlooking the pragmatic characteristics of language such as; the use of politeness strategies. In terms of methods used, the researcher collected fifty exchanged letters between four Iranian companies in Tabriz (Iran) and their business partners in nine companies in England (UK). The letters were 'follow-ups' in the context of international business (import and export), and generally written to request or to provide information about goods, packaging and delivery methods and modes of payment (Abid: 13-14). Noticeably, the researcher uses different approaches and methods to analyse the letters which he divides into two corpora consisting of 25 letters written by Native English speakers and 25 letters written by non-native speakers of English (Iranians). He relies upon Halliday (1985)'s concept of lexical density and deploys a corpus method to identify the number of content (lexical) words (e.g.: verbs and nouns) per clause, and the number of grammatical words (e.g.: pronouns, articles, prepositions, conjunctions, finite verbs), then the information is computed and the lexical density calculated. The results indicate that there exists no significant difference between the two sets of writers in this regard. The researcher also applies genre analysis exploring Swale (1990)'s concept of schematic structure to investigate the 'moves and steps' in the follow-ups letters in order to pinpoint the communicative purposes of the discourse. The findings in this particular area show that both set of writers shared similar features in their follow-ups writing to establish business relationships. From a linguistically pragmatic perspective, Brown and Levinson (1987)'s model of politeness is used through the exploration of positive and negative politeness to investigate the politeness strategies within the compiled corpus; as well as relying on interviews of the non-native speakers of English in which the latter express their lack of familiarity and awareness of the politeness strategies normally used by the native speakers of English. This

is also reflected in the samples collected. If anything, this is a blow to the claim of universality of such strategies and a clear indicative that different cultures perceive politeness differently.

Gimenez 2000 uses a different approach than the ones sought in the studies mentioned above in their investigations of business written discourse. His study is concerned with the affects of spoken language on e-mail messages within the context of business written discourse/ communications, and the analysis of these e-mails focuses on three distinguished characteristics; register, style and contextual elements. In regard to the data used for analysis, a print of 63 e-mails and a further 40 letters sent to and from and to a UK based import and export company, and to and from customers from across the world are obtained. Both modes of correspondence are external in nature and mostly (51 out 63 e-mails) written for purpose of either request or provide information about products in relation to their price and availability. The register is explored through the existing established relationships between the company and the customers, and focuses on examining the syntactic structures such as; the use of short sentences in the business emails as opposed to the long sentences found in the sample business letters. In terms of style, the researcher points to the informality that characterises the business e-mails sampled, and explores this area through the analysis of their use of abbreviation (pls instead of please) and the personalised style. Again, he uses the letters to draw a comparison and to reach the above conclusion. Finally, the contextual elements are expressed via the exploration of the positive aspects of e-mails as opposed to letters as in for example; emails can be sent even on Sunday which cannot be the case for letters, and they are more informal and therefore culturally appropriate. Conversely, the negative aspects are discussed as evident in the presence of the exact time and date within sent e-mails; 'lack of privacy'. The findings of the above research suggest that the influence of spoken language on 'business written communication' has already started and has consequently led to 'a more flexible register' (Ibid: 246-247).

In the light of the discussion above, a major question must be posed vis-à-vis the relevance of these studies to the teaching of business English, and how some of their aspects can be applied in the classroom.

Having reviewed some of the methods applied in the research of written business discourse (Nickerson 2000; Arvani 2006; Gimenez 2000), the relevance of such studies for the teaching of business English has become more evident. This is because, they appear to offer the latter a great insight into various factors affecting the production of discourse and into various ways to analyse it.

Similarly to students of discourse analysis, when business English students are given a single text or multiple texts to work with, they are in fact asked to analyse the discourse of those texts within a given specific purpose. This indicates that the very same research methods used in research could effectively be used as methods in the teaching and learning of English for specific business purposes (ESBP). All three studies mentioned above emphasise the use of authentic materials, the important of context and situation, and the affects of cultural and organisational on the production of discourse. Also, key to these studies, the use of corpus analysis as well as the focus on genres is prominent; which are key areas for the teaching of (ESBP).

Through such studies a wealth of information emerges in regard to what is to be taught and methods that could be used for the teaching of written business discourse. In stating so, this is very useful for curriculum developers, teachers and learners. For curriculum developers, these studies offer a comprehensive perspective which can be used to guide them in the development of materials that is in harmony with the demands and the needs of our contemporary business world in terms of communication.

For teachers, they provide teaching methods which can be used in the classroom to help learners understand the complexity and the nature of written business English. For the latter, they emphasise the role of students as researchers, and this is exemplified in the use some of the discourse analysis methods found in research and assuming an active role rather than a passive one it is through such analysis that students come to understand how language is used appropriately to suit its business purposes and the factors which determine each final realisation.

Woods (2007), asserts that studies which involve some form of discourse analysis bring forward 'the opportunity to pursue a wide variety of practical learning and teaching practices'. He goes on to suggest a number of classroom activities that reflect the use of some of the methods in the studies reviewed in this essay. For example; he stresses the benefit of using mini corpora (e.g. e-mails, letters, business reports), and argues that students should be driven to collect their own corpora and analyse the specific type of discourse that is relevant to their careers. Students can also immensely benefit from carrying out comparative analysis as illustrated in the above studies (Dutch writers versus British writers; Iranian writers versus British writers; business e-mails versus business letters), and from conducting a critical investigation of a type of organisational discourse that is typically used in their real-life working environment; and in which they actively participate on a regular basis. This type of analysis help students to develop an understanding of the conventional formats associated with written business discourse within organisations.

Besides, it is through such practices that students are able to identify thematic relations in texts, analyse structure, examine how meaning is constructed in discourse, determine the genre and the register the texts are part of and examine the suppositions formulated in relation to the rapport between the message writer and its recipient. These are practices reflected in the methods of data collection and analysis used in the three studies subject to this discussion in this review. It is also important to emphasis the importance of students engaged in such activities which without them, students will be unable to produce appropriate business discourse that is fit to serve the purpose of smoothing and maintaining business relationships with the prime intention of making profit.

Conclusion

Despite the fruitfulness of research in business discourse in the past two decades and the insights their findings have offered into the use of language in 'authentic business situations', the relationship between research and pedagogy in the teaching of business English is still 'weak'(Chan 2009: 1-2). Similarly, Koester (2007) argues that the contribution of applied linguistics research into Business English has brought forward useful information on the nature and the prominent features of business communication. Nonetheless, he goes on to quote, the survey conducted by Nickerson (2005) on Materials for teaching English for specific business purposes (ESBP) suggests that reference to pertinent research in this area appeared to be minimal and found only in a small number of the books surveyed (p. 1). It is this relationship that is in a great need to be strengthened, and warrants a study so as to investigate the causes and the possible ways to overcome this problem.

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