

THE MOVE STRUCTURE OF CONFIRMATION EMAILS: A GENRE BASED INVESTIGATION OF A SUB-GENRE OF BUSINESS EMAILS

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Received: 17.06.2013; Accepted: 27.08.2014; Published online: 17.12.2014

This exploratory study provides a genre-based analysis of a small corpus of confirmation emails written by Hungarian business students, as well as tests the applicability of Zsubrinszky's (2009) Email Genre Model (EGM) to the corpus. Besides contributing to genre based research, it also aims to generate information about Hungarian students' emails for pedagogical purposes. Thus, typical linguistic features expressing the rhetorical moves and common language mistakes are identified. Results indicate that the EGM is suitable to describe the student emails with slight modifications. The analysis of linguistic structures revealed that students use a large number of formulaic expressions, which might also be the reason for the relatively few but typical language mistakes in the corpus. The results can be used to formulate pedagogical implications for the teaching of Business English in Hungary.

Keywords: ESP, genre, business, higher education, writing, email

As email has been the most frequently used medium in business for at least a decade (Louhaila-Salminen, 2002), it has been getting more and more attention in research as well. Genre-based studies on emails have been carried out analyzing several sub-genres of emails by professionals of different cultural backgrounds. However, research on students' business writing is scarce and has been conducted on letters not emails. Nguyen and Miller (2012) investigated the rhetorical differences between Vietnamese ESP students' and business professionals' letter writing and found that students write in a more rigid way, use more formulaic expressions and are more polite than business professionals. Therefore, the aim of this study was to carry out a generic analysis of ESP students' emails written in response to a task and to find out whether the Email Genre Model (EGM) designed by Zsubrinszky (2009) for the description of professionals' emails can describe students' emails as well. A further aim was to identify typical linguistic structures expressing the moves and steps, as well as common mistakes at lexical, grammatical and discourse level. The results of the study will provide data for teaching Business English both on a theoretical and a practical level.

Research on business correspondence: business letters and emails

How discourse communities operate is an important area in business English research. As the ultimate aim in business communication is to communicate effectively, it is crucial to know what determines the language and discourse used in specific communities. According to Dudley-Evans and St John (1998), three contextual factors are the most influential: the length of the business relationship, the balance of power between the communicators and their cultural values. These factors determine the choice of language as well as the choice of medium and genre.

Business letters are the most formal genre in business communication with elaborate syntactic structures and fixed conventions; hence they are used in formal situations, such as customers writing to companies for the first time (Gimenez, 2000). Emails resemble spoken conversations, thus the language used is mostly informal, straightforward with abbreviations, contractions, a more personal style and a wider range of strategies (Amirian & Tahririan, 2003; Gimenez, 2000). However, considerable variation in style and register can be found within both genres. The degree of formality may depend on several aspects including the three factors mentioned above. Amirian and Tahririan (2003) found in a study comparing email and letter use in an academic community that some emails, mostly by non-native speakers or by professionals of lower status to higher status, preserve the conventional format of letters. The length of business relationship has also been observed to influence the style of emails written by native speakers (Gimenez-Moreno, 2010) and non-native speakers (Jensen, 2009), with a progressive relaxation of style from formal to neutral and casual as the relationship progresses. Results of an interview study with Hong Kong professionals (Evans, 2012) suggest that contextual background and intertextuality are crucial for the choice of email style: previous messages from clients determine the formality of the reply.

The intertextual nature of business writing has also been stressed by other researchers (Bremner, 2008; Louhaila-Salminen, 2002; Zhu & White, 2009). Louhaila-Salminen observed a Finnish business manager's activities for one day and discovered that the sequences of his discourse activities were interrelated using different spoken and written genres for realizing a communicative purpose. Zhu and White came to the same conclusion when they interviewed the employees of two companies in the USA about their use of emails. They found that the same communicative purpose might be expressed by several genres, such as email, voicemail and memo, especially if the message is particularly important. Bremner investigated the issue from a pedagogical perspective analyzing eight business communication textbooks and found that intertextuality is acknowledged only implicitly in the tasks. Consequently, they cannot prepare students for real-life business communication.

The nature of emails

As it was mentioned in Section 2, email is regarded to be similar to spoken conversations (Amirian & Tahririan, 2003); a hybrid form of communication between written and spoken language (Munter, Rogers & Rymer, 2003) or a spoken nature with a written representation (Gimenez, 2000). Its similarity to spoken genres determines its style, which is mostly informal, personalized

with straightforward language and contractions (Amirian & Tahririan, 2003; Gimenez, 2000). However, register variation in emails can be a tool to facilitate communication and improve relationships (Gimenez-Moreno, 2010), therefore writers need to be able to identify and use the registers' distinguishing features. The generic purpose of emails is "getting work done" (Zhu & White, 2009, p.292), thus, the messages are usually short and functional (Evans, 2012) and writers might even omit openings and closings (Mulken & Meer, 2005). Similarly, they do not express emotions or describe any relational content apart from work (Zhu & White, 2009). Dekay (2010) compared the effect of emails with traditional features, and ones with colourful clip-art and no typical email format and found that the former are more effective. He concluded that the generic features of emails must be taken into account to write effective messages. The importance of the embeddedness of emails, where the previous messages determine the style was emphasized by Gimenez (2006) and Evans (2012). Gimenez argues that the chain of email messages are embedded in the culture of a corporation as well, therefore they can only be analysed together with the other messages of the chain and the culture of the company. Evans concluded that emails are not only tightly interwoven with other emails in the chain, but other texts as well, such as letters, reports and spoken discourses. Thus, all these text types should be incorporated in a sequence of tasks in teaching business email writing to reflect "real world" situations.

Genre analysis

Genre is a very complex phenomenon and several attempts have been made to provide a definition that covers all its aspects. Most researchers use the working definition for genre by Swales (1990:58). Bhatia (1993) broadens this definition by adding a psychological factor. He claims that professional writers follow the rules and convention of genres, although they can exploit genre constraints to make their writing more effective and original.

Based on Swales's definition, business letters or emails do not constitute one genre, since they do not share one communicative purpose or a set of purposes. They can be called "*a supra-generic assembly of discourse*" (Swales, 1990:53) which includes several genres. The same idea is supported by Gains (1999), who claims that emails may be written in a similar convention but serve various communicative purposes. A different view is expressed by Zsubrinszky (2009), who argues that business email is a separate genre with the communicative purpose of exchanging information and request for reaction. One of the aims of this study is to test her Email Genre Model on the students' confirmation emails and see if the model developed for general business emails is applicable for one particular type.

The notions of *moves* and *steps* as units of genre analysis were introduced by Swales (1990), and have since been applied by several researchers. A move is a structural unit that realizes a communicative intention that contributes to the writer's overall communicative purpose, while steps are lower level units or strategies within a move that are needed to realize that intention. For example, the move *Establishing the communication chain* can be expressed by several steps, such as *Greeting*, *Reference to earlier communication* or *The purpose of writing* (Zsubrinszky, 2009).

Research on the genre analysis of business letters

As it was pointed out in Section 2.2, business letters are not regarded as one genre but include several genres. Considerable research has been conducted on specific business letter genres, whose move structures usually share some characteristic features but also show some genre-specific features. On the basis of an analysis of sales promotion and job application letters, Bhatia (1993) concluded that both are examples of the *promotional genre*. He argued that they share a communicative purpose of promoting and a seven-move structure as well.

Sales promotion letters were analysed by Vergaro as well (2004), who identified eight moves in the structure of the letters. While letters of application were found to have four obligatory moves by Henry (2001), Upton and Connor (2001) identified seven moves in the same genre. Business request letters were investigated by Kong (1998) and Nguyen and Miller (2012), business letters of negotiation by Dos Santos (2002), follow-up business letters by Arvani (2006) and tax computation letters by Flowerdew and Wan (2006).

Research on the genre analysis of business emails

As email is a relatively new medium compared to business letters, fewer studies have focused on its rhetorical structure. Business emails within one multinational company were analysed by Kankaanranta (2006) and Zsubrinszky (2009). An average number of four moves were found in the different sub-genres of emails: company replies to customer inquiries (Mulken & Meer, 2005), emails of request and providing information (Amirian & Tahririan, 2003), and emails by EFL teachers and biology professionals (Abbasian, 2008).

Cultural differences in written business communication

Considerable research has been conducted on cultural differences between native (NS) and non-native (NNS) speakers' business letters and emails. The move structures of NS and NNS letters and emails were found to be similar with some differences in the order of moves (Kong, 1998), different moves preferred by native speakers (Mulken & Meer, 2005) or a modified step order within the moves (Zsubrinszky, 2009). Concerning the formality of writing, researchers' findings are varied. While Vietnamese (Nguyen & Miller, 2012), Chinese (Kong, 1998) and some Iranian speakers (Amirian & Tahririan, 2003) seem to write in a more rigid way with more formulaic expressions than native speakers, most Iranian writers appear to use a more informal and direct language (Arvani, 2006). However, Belgians and Finns (Upton & Connor, 2001), as well as Hungarians (Zsubrinszky, 2009), have been found to employ fewer formulaic expressions and a less patterned style than native speakers. Vergaro (2004) analysed the politeness strategies used in emails and concluded that Italians prefer negative, whereas native speakers positive politeness strategies.

Zsubrinszky's Email Genre Model (2009)

Zsubrinszky developed the Email Genre Model (EGM) based on Swales's (1990) CARS model and Bhatia's (1993) Promotional Genre Model. She identified four moves and 16 steps in her corpus of English L1, Hungarian L1 and L2 business emails (Table 1). After analyzing the emails in the three sub-corpora, she found that the four moves are the same for all of them but there are several differences in the steps realizing the moves.

Table 1.

Move 1	Establishing the communication chain
Step 1	Greeting
Step 2	Reference to earlier communication
Step 3	The purpose of writing
Move 2	Providing information
Step 1	Introducing the topic
Step 2	Adding/updating information
Step 3	Raising questions
Step 4	Apologizing
Step 5	Enumerating tasks
Step 6	Evaluating a) giving personal opinion b) making comments
Step 7	Offering something: a) availability b) plans, intentions c) favours d) drawing attention to something
Step 8	Explaining/clarifying
Move 3	Requesting information/favour
Step 1	Explaining/clarifying/confirming
Step 2	Opinions/suggestions
Step 3	Favours of documents/help
Move 4	Ending the communication
Step 1	Thanking for something, saying goodbye
Step 2	Signature/status/company credentials

Source: Zsubrinszky's (2009) Email Genre Model

Methods

The present genre-based study aims to investigate the move structure of emails written by first-year commerce-marketing students at Budapest Business School (BBS), the typical language that expresses the different moves and steps, and the typical language mistakes students make. For the analysis Zsubrinszky's (2009) Email Genre Model was applied and tested if it was suitable for the description of confirmation emails written by the students at BBS. In this section first the research questions and the corpus used for the analysis will be presented. Then a description of the participants and the procedures of analysis will be provided.

Research questions

The research questions guiding the study were the following:

1. Can the Email Genre Model (EGM) developed by Zsubrinszky (2009) describe the emails written by Hungarian first-year students studying commerce and marketing at Budapest Business School?
2. What typical language use characterizes the various moves and steps in the emails written by Hungarian first-year students studying commerce and marketing at Budapest Business School?
3. What typical language mistakes can be identified in the emails written by Hungarian first-year students studying commerce and marketing at Budapest Business School?
4. What pedagogical implications do the results have for the teaching of Business English in Hungary?

Data

The data consisted of 12 emails (E1-E12) written by 1st year commerce-marketing students at BBS in response to a task in their course book *New market leader intermediate* (Cotton, Falvey & Kent, 2005). The writing task was a follow-up to a case study, where students had to choose a hotel for a company seminar. The task included four stages; two telephone conversations, one discussion and one writing task. The first three parts were done in the classroom, while the fourth part was given for homework. All the information required was given in the course book and students were told to write to the hotel that their group had chosen for the seminar.

Participants

All students are Hungarian native speakers at B2 level of English with previous learning experience of writing emails. The emails had to be uploaded to the group's site on the college's virtual learning environment by a set deadline and students were told that they were going to get a grade for their writing.

Procedures of analysis

In order to answer the research questions the communicative purposes present in the emails had to be identified first. As a next step, the descriptive features of the emails were produced by counting and classifying words, clauses and sentences. Then the moves and steps were identified and characteristic linguistic features expressing them were described. Finally, typical language mistakes were searched for in the corpus. As the basic unit of analysis the clause has been chosen, based on Zsubrinszky's (2009) argument that one sentence may contain several communication purposes. Furthermore, using the same unit of analysis also ensures the comparability of findings.

Results

In this section first the descriptive features, then the move structure of emails will be presented. After that the linguistic features expressing the moves and steps will be described, followed by the typical language mistakes students make.

Descriptive features of emails

The descriptive features of the twelve emails (E1-E12), including the number of words, clauses and sentences in each email can be seen in Table 2. As the task was to write an email of 150-200 words, most emails fall within this range.

Table 2. Descriptive text features

	E1	E2	E3	E4	E5	E6	E7	E8	E9	E10	E11	E12
words	252	120	159	169	190	172	184	161	146	190	211	150
clauses	36	21	19	23	30	28	22	24	21	28	22	22
sentences	19	15	11	10	12	13	13	15	13	16	12	15

There is only one below (E2) and two above the required number of words (E1 and E11). The number of different types of sentences in each email can be seen in Table 3, while Table 4 shows the total number of words, clauses and different sentence types in the corpus.

Table 3. Sentence types

	E1	E2	E3	E4	E5	E6	E7	E8	E9	E10	E11	E12
total	19	15	11	10	12	13	13	15	13	16	12	15
simple	7	12	6	2	3	2	7	11	6	11	3	11
complex	12	3	5	8	9	11	6	4	7	5	9	4
subordinate	10	2	5	1	4	5	2	3	2	3	1	2
coordinate	2	1	0	7	5	6	4	1	5	2	8	2

Sentence types are fairly varied in the twelve emails of the corpus (Table 4), with only 4 emails (E2, E8, E10, E12) which are dominated by simple sentences and 4 emails (E4, E7, E9, E11) where far more coordinate than subordinate sentences were used. Thus, Zsubrinszky's (2009) finding that Hungarians tend to prefer simple sentences and coordinate sentences within complex ones does not seem to describe student emails.

Table 4. Total and average number of sentence types

	total number	average number
words	2104	175.3
clauses	296	24.7
sentences	164	13.7
simple	81	6.7
complex	83	7
subordinate	40	3.3
coordinate	43	3.6

The move structure of emails

To answer the first research question, whether Zsubrinszky's (2009) Email Genre Model (EGM) can describe the emails written by Hungarian students at Budapest Business School, the moves and steps were identified in the 12 student emails. The number of rhetorical moves in each email is shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Rhetorical moves in the students' emails

	Steps	E 1	E 2	E 3	E 4	E 5	E 6	E 7	E 8	E 9	E1 0	E1 1	E1 2
Move 1	1 Greeting	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	2 Reference to earlier comm..	2	2	1	2		2	1	3	2	2	1	3
	3 The purpose of writing	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	1	1	2	1
Move 2	1 Introducing the topic	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	2 Adding /updating info	7	10	8	11	14	12	15	13	14	14	10	12
	3-8												
Move 3	1 Explaining /clarifying /confirming	1											
	2 Opinions /suggestions					1	1				2	1	
	3 Favours of documents/help	2		3	2			1				3	
Move 4	1 Thanking, saying goodbye	1	1			2	1				1		1
	2 Further contact	2	1	1	2	1	1	1	1		4	1	2
	3 Signature/status	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

The results of the email analysis show that the EGM is suitable for the description of the 12 emails written by BBS students with slight modifications. As it can be seen from Table 5, all three steps in Move 1 (*Establishing the communication chain*) are realized by almost all the students. However, Step 3 (*The purpose of writing*) comes before Step 2 (*Reference to earlier communication*) in seven cases, which means that the students prefer to start communication by stating their purpose. In Move 2 (*Providing information*) only Steps 1 and 2 (*Introducing the topic* and *Adding or updating information*) could be identified, the latter at an average of 11.7 times. This is probably due to the fact that the communicative purpose of the emails was to provide information. Move 3 (*Requesting information/favour*) is not very frequent in the corpus. Step 1 (*Explaining/clarifying/confirming*) only occurs once, while Step 2 (*Opinions/suggestions*) four times and Step 3 (*Favours of documents/help*) in five emails. In Move 4 (*Ending the communication*) above the 2 steps in EGM (*Thanking for something, saying goodbye* and *Signature/status/company credentials*), one extra step seemed to be present in 11 emails *Initiating further communication*. Although this step could be seen as part of Step 1, its clear presence in the emails suggested that it should be a separate step and it was added as Step 2 in Move 4. The fact that this step is mentioned in previous research as well (Abbasian & Tahririan,

2008), even as a separate move (Amirian & Tahririan, 2003; Mulken & Meer, 2005) also supported its addition.

Linguistic features in the moves

In Move 1 *Establishing the communication chain*, Step 1 and 3 (*Greeting* and *The purpose of writing*) are characterized by formulaic expressions. Step 1 is realized by *Dear + title + surname* ten times, which shows that students are aware that this is a follow-up email to a telephone conversation, thus the writer probably knows the receiver's name. *Dear Sir* and *Dear Sir/Madam* are used in one email each, with only one of them referring back to a conversation, which makes the greeting sound strange. In Step 3 seven students use *I am writing to confirm the booking*, while four students prefer the structure *I would like to confirm/make the booking*. There is only one example of a structure which is not a fixed expression: *I would like to tell you some details about the seminar* (E12). This confirms Nguyen and Miller's finding (2012) that students replicate formulas, as opposed to business people's more flexible writing. However, it contrasts Zsubrinszky's (2009) results that Hungarian writers use fewer formulaic expressions when writing in English than English native speakers.

Move 2 *Providing information*, which accomplishes the communicative purpose of confirmation emails, had various realizations in the corpus. Most students used a future form to give details about the seminar with the majority preferring *will*. Two students did not use any sentences in Move 2 but listed the requirements with bullet points. The linguistic realizations in Move 2 can be seen in Table 6.

Table 6 Linguistic realizations in Move 2

Linguistic structure	Number of uses	Number of emails
will	28	8
going to	11	3
would like	15	9
need	18	9

In Move 3 *Requesting information/favour*, the structure *please + verb* is the most frequent (five emails), with *I'd like to ask you* as the only alternative that occurs in this move.

Move 4 *Ending the communication* is characterized by formulaic expressions again. Step 3 *Signature* is realized by *Best regards* six times, *Best wishes* five times and *Yours faithfully* once. For Step 1 *Thanking, saying goodbye* and 2 *Further contact* a wide range of less formulaic expressions are used such as *Thank you for your arrangements* and *I hope to meet you soon personally*.

Language mistakes

From a pedagogical point of view, it is important to look at students' language mistakes in the emails. The analysis of the emails has shown that students' emails contain relatively few language mistakes. One reason for this could be the fact that student use a large number of formulaic expressions. Added to this, the task in the course book included several details in English that students could simply insert in their emails. However, several typical problems can still be found, including the use of uncountable nouns, articles, relative clauses and the verb *suggest*. Therefore, all these

linguistic features need more attention in the courses of Business English writing in Hungary. Examples for the mistakes can be seen in Table 7.

Table 7. Examples of language mistakes

Email code	Incorrect example	Problem
E1, E3, E4 E8, E10 E10	equipments informations basic datas	uncountable nouns
E5 E10	I suggest we meet I suggest you another meeting	the verb 'suggest'
E6, E8, E10	one man uses wheelchair	no article
E12	any detail what is	wrong relative pronoun
E1 E6	information, that is the details, that I	comma in relative clauses

Conclusion and limitations

This experimental study made an attempt to provide the genre-based analysis of a small corpus of confirmation emails written by students, thus its results are not generalizable. However, it can contribute to the findings of genre-based research, in that the results indicate the applicability of a genre-based model of professional business emails to a specific type of email written by students.

One of the aims of this project was to test the applicability of Zsubrinszky's (2009) Email Genre Model to confirmation emails written by students of the Budapest Business School. The results of the genre analysis show that the EGM is suitable for the description of emails with slight modifications. The differences can be found in the order of steps (Move 1 Step 3 comes before Step 2), several steps missing (Move 2 Steps 3-8) or even the infrequency of a move (Move 3) and an additional step not described in the EGM (Move 4 Step 2).

The research also aimed at identifying typical linguistic structures expressing the moves and steps. The results confirmed previous studies' findings that students and non-native speakers use a high number of formulaic expressions (Amirian & Tahririan, 2003; Kong, 1998; Nguyen & Miller, 2012), especially in certain steps. For example in Move 1 *Establishing the communication chain*, *Dear + title + surname* is typical for Step 1 *Greeting* and *I am writing to confirm the booking* for Step 2 *The purpose of writing*. Move 4 *Ending the communication*, Step 3 *Signature* is realized by *Best regards*, *Best wishes* and *Yours faithfully*.

As for language mistakes, the students' emails contained relatively few but typical problems in the use of uncountable nouns, articles, relative clauses and the verb *suggest*.

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