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Variations in Business English letters written by Spanish learners

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ABSTRACT

Writing in a second language does not follow a fixed pattern in the different parts of the sentence or text. We can find variations in discourse due to the conceptual implications of language production. Even if we are considering genres which follow stereotyped structures, a standard pattern is not always followed. Language is dynamic and changes depending on the socio-communicative, linguistic and cognitive characteristics of its users. The objectives of this paper are, first, to show that language variation exists in business English, specifically, in stereotyped business letters. Although the rules are established in books and the same structures are repeated, students do not follow this recommended structure. The second objective is to find out if there are variations between second language students in the organisation of the text, in the use of connectors and in the communicative objectives of application letters. The third objective is to know if these variations affect communication in business English. At the end, we discuss the didactic and pragmatic implications of these results in teaching how to write an English application letter. The results of this study could be useful to educators and teachers responsible for planning business writing courses as we question the effectiveness of giving clear guidelines to students instead of focusing on a pragmatic approach. Furthermore, we show in the results in which part of an

application letter appears language change. Finally, we consider that it is due to cultural reasons and the influence of the mother tongue, as a consequence, it should not be considered negative, as we communicate in an international language.

Keywords: business English, letters, variations, language.

1. Introduction

Teaching and learning English as a second language (L2) has been researched for several decades as a result of being used as an international language spoken in many different contexts. Teachers and researchers have been looking for easier ways for students to learn English, due to the fact that learning encounters many obstacles such as the socio-cultural influences of the students' nationality. Therefore, the research of second language acquisition is not only limited to linguistics but it is also open to fields like psychology, anthropology, education and communication.

The growth of global economy, science and technology caused an increasing interest for the study of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) during the 60s because the English language was already becoming a very important language for international communication at that time. ESP was divided into two areas, English for Academic Purposes and English for Occupational Purposes (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998, p. 2). However, the latter has suffered an enormous development lately, especially English for commercial purposes, given that the expansion and growth of the international trade and businesses has also increased. Nowadays, learning English is a necessity due to the technical and scientific development and to the international communication systems (Crystal, 1997, p. 86).

Business English is subdivided into two branches, the occupational and the academic one. On the one hand, many companies hold business English training courses for their employees in order to give them specialised training in such areas as marketing, imports and exports, etc. This one is called English for Occupational

Purposes (EOP). On the other hand, there are many students of specific degrees such as Economic Studies, Business Administration, Business Sciences, who learn Business English, consequently this is Business English for Academic Purposes.

Conscious of the specific requirements, teachers work really hard using new methodologies which are more communicatively and collaboratively oriented, involving students in their own education. However, there is still lack of knowledge when students finish their studies; consequently, they are not as linguistically prepared as they should be. One of the reasons is that Business English is used by many speakers with different mother tongues; subsequently, it is influenced by a wide cultural and linguistic diversity. Differing from Academic English, which has a well-established English pattern, Business English has no previous pattern to follow due to the international features of this genre (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, p. 72).

We live in a global society where borders are not limited any more, people travel very easily either for academic or working reasons; therefore, it is important to produce effective and accurate communication (Alcaraz, 2000, p. 149). Internet has revolutionised the way we communicate with other people through writing, this fact has also affected the use of the English language as the cultural influences of the different writers are causing variations in its production. Bhatia explains this situation in the following way (Bhatia, 1993, p. 37): “It has been well known for some time that various cultures organize and develop ideas differently when writing expository texts and these differences persist when users of these languages learn to write in a new language”.

The interest of researchers in language variation in the broad field of English for Specific Purposes seems to have been centred mainly on rhetorical aspects or the structure of Academic English (Samraj, 2005; Yakhontova, 2006; Samraj and Monk, 2008; Durrant, 2009) or on analysing how genres vary across linguistic disciplinary lines (Samraj, 2004; Freddi, 2005; Yakhontova, 2006; Charles, 2007; Ozturk, 2007), while others have focused on investigating variation across communities, associating particular discursive features with different linguistic backgrounds (Yli-Jokipii and Jorgensen, 2004; Hinkel, 2009; Schleaf, 2009). The interests of yet another group have lain in detecting the variations in text features when their writers come from different cultural backgrounds, mainly those between English and Spanish (Salager-Meyer, Alcaraz Ariza and Zambrano, 2003;

Martín Martín, 2003; de Haan and van Esch, 2005; Moreno and Suárez, 2008). The aim of these analyses is to describe, through contrastive rhetoric, differences in discourse patterns that sometimes operate as a barrier to effective communication. These studies have shown that languages and writing traditions exhibit considerable variation in this respect, which may lead to cross-cultural misunderstanding and put communication at risk.

In this study, we stress the need of teaching university students' business English skills needed in their future job, such as writing reports, memos, letters and e-mails. Swales (1990) and Connor (1996) study the use of Academic English in specific settings, contrasting the use of different writing styles. Swales (1990, p. 58) defines genre as the discourse shared by a community in its "structure, style, content and intended audience" in order to communicate adequately. The communicative code should be shared by the writer and the reader, on the contrary, the discourse is misunderstood. Furthermore, Bhatia (1993, p. 59) carried out an analysis of the promotional letters based on the genre analysis approach including the sales promotion letters and the application letters. He subdivided the macrostructure into seven movements focusing on the communicative objectives of each one of them (1993, p. 93). These movements are the following: to establish credentials, candidate's presentation, to incentive offer, to enclose documents, to ask for a reply, to use pressing tactics and to end politely.

Some authors pay specific attention to business interaction and the rhetorical features used in business letters (Louhiala-Salminen, 1996; Giménez, 2000; Okamura and Shaw, 2000; Pinto dos Santos, 2002; Nickerson, 2005; Giménez, 2006 and Bremmer, 2008). Business communication should be concise and clear and "should not be treated as something separate from the real business" (Louhiala-Salminen, 1996, p. 50). This is a characteristic which should be shared by genres focused on an international audience, although this is not always certain. Language changes and varies depending on the cultural, linguistic or social background of the speaker.

The main purpose of the present paper is to discern if the mother tongue (Spanish) influences in the structure of business English writing, specifically, in letter structure. The specific objectives are, first, to know if the standard norms proposed in a business English class are generally followed or ignored by Higher Education students; second, to find out if there are variations among second

language students in text organisation, in the use of connectors and in the communicative objectives of application letters; and third, if these variations affect communication in Business English. At the end, we discuss the didactic and pragmatic implications of teaching how to write an application letter in English. The results of this study could be useful to educators and teachers responsible for planning business writing courses as we question the effectiveness of giving clear guidelines to students instead of focusing on a pragmatic approach.

2. Methodology

In the initial stage of this research, we compiled several Business English handbooks (Ashley, 1992; Tullis & Trappe, 2000; Jones y Alexander, 1989; Naunton, 2000; Loughheed, 2003 and Cotton, Falvey & Kent, 2000), which are often used at Higher education colleges in Spain to teach English as a second language. Consulting these handbooks, we could establish the guidelines they set for the students to follow when writing application letters besides the directions given by teachers in class.

The corpus selected to obtain the results was based on a reply to a job advertisement extracted from the handbook *New International Business English-Intermediate*. The job broadcasted was clearly and concisely presented in the advertisement, which explained the requirements needed for the position. The next step was to elaborate an outline of guidelines for the students to follow, and afterwards it was shown to them in a slide as it can be observed in Figure 1:

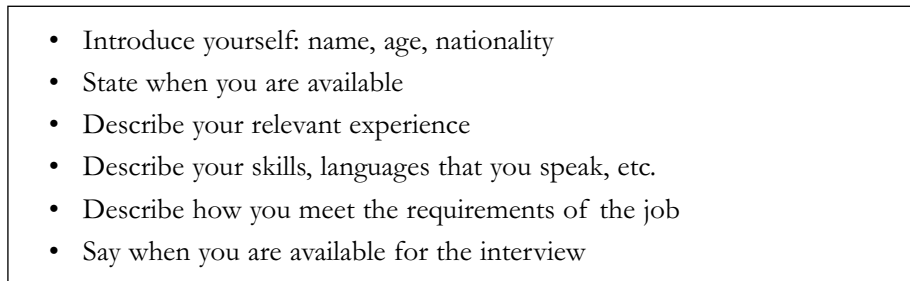
- 
- Introduce yourself: name, age, nationality
 - State when you are available
 - Describe your relevant experience
 - Describe your skills, languages that you speak, etc.
 - Describe how you meet the requirements of the job
 - Say when you are available for the interview

Figure 1. Guidelines to write an application letter

The case study we developed herein was carried out within a second year Business English class of Business Studies in 2009. Those students were enrolled in the subject *Business English III* of the Business Administration Degree offered at Facultad de Estudios de la Empresa (FEE). It was a written practice for 34 low intermediate level students carried out in the language laboratory of the FEE at Universidad Católica de Valencia. The English language level of the students was determined at the beginning of the academic year (October) through a placement test which was carried out to all the students enrolled in the Business English subject.

The students who had a low intermediate level were asked to write an application letter in reply to the advertisement. Afterwards the guidelines slide was shown to the students and the teacher gave them the directions that can be seen in Figure 2:

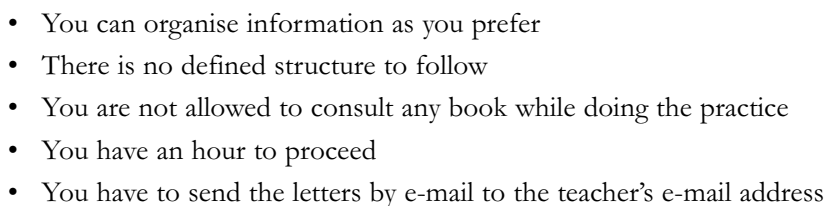
- 
- You can organise information as you prefer
 - There is no defined structure to follow
 - You are not allowed to consult any book while doing the practice
 - You have an hour to proceed
 - You have to send the letters by e-mail to the teacher's e-mail address

Figure 2. Guidelines given to the students

When this activity was finished, several principles were considered in order to analyze variations in business letters. We studied text organisation, the use of connectors and the communicative objectives in the 34 application letters written by students. The following aspects were analysed in our research:

- a) Text organisation: Organisation and number of paragraphs, i.e. order of ideas in paragraphs; letters with no division into paragraphs, i.e. no paragraph differentiation.
- b) Use of connectors: Sentence cohesion; textual cohesion.
- c) Communicative objectives: The students use/do not use the application letter to self-promote themselves; the students give personal details in the letters.

Once the students finished writing the letters, we collected and analysed them in order to find and classify the different variations. Firstly, the letters were classified keeping in mind organisation and thus, they were divided into two groups. One group was formed by the letters that were divided into paragraphs and the other one was formed by the letters that were not divided into paragraphs. Secondly, we analysed the way the ideas were organised and ordered, calculating their percentages.

Afterwards, we carried out the analysis of connectors. This analysis was separated into two levels: sentence cohesion and text cohesion (Halliday, 1976). In order to analyse the connectors, all the letters were read again and all cohesion elements were underlined, counting their occurrences and percentages and classifying them.

Finally, we studied the communicative objectives of the letters. We looked for self-promotion expressions and words that stated personal details. Then, the frequencies were counted and the percentages calculated.

After carrying out the analysis, the next step was to find out the causes that produced these variations and their analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results in text organisation

As mentioned above, two major groups were established in text organisation: those with paragraph division and those without paragraph division. The results of this first step are shown in Table 1. We can observe that the percentage of letters with paragraph division is higher (64.7% out of the total).

Total of letters with no paragraph division	12 letters (35.30%)
Total of letters with paragraphs division	22 letters (64.70%)
Total	34 letters (100.00%)

Table 1. Paragraph division

We are now going to detail the results obtained in both groups.

3.1.1. Results in the letters with paragraph division

In Table 2, the number of paragraphs used in the application letters which followed paragraph division is shown. There are not remarkable results because all the occurrences are similar. Students decided to divide the letters at random, without a fixed pattern.

Number of paragraphs used	Occurrences and percentages
3 paragraphs	6 letters (27.30%)
4 paragraphs	4 letters (18.20%)
5 paragraphs	4 letters (18.20%)
6 paragraphs	5 letters (22.70%)
7 – 8 paragraphs	3 letters (13.60%)
Total of letters with paragraph division	22 letters (100.00%)

Table 2. Paragraphs in application letters

In the following Tables 3, 4 and 5, we detail the organisation followed in the introduction, body and conclusion of the analysed letters, in order to determine the structure model followed by the writer. We would like to settle on if the students followed the model suggested by the handbooks selected or if they structured the parts of the letter in a different manner.

Letter introduction	Occurrences and percentages
Letters beginning with self-introduction (suggested guidelines)	16 (72.80%)
Letters beginning referring to the job	3 (13.60%)
Letters that mentioned the ad	3 (13.60%)
Total	22 (100.00%)

Table 3. Occurrences in the introduction of the letters

Body of the letter	Occurrences and percentages
Letters that followed the suggested guidelines	15 (68.18 %)
Letters with different patterns	7 (31.82 %)
Total	22 (100.00%)

Table 4. Occurrences in body of the letters

Ending and conclusion	Occurrences and percentages
Letters with an ending	7 (31.82 %)
Letters with no ending	15 (68.18%)
Total	22 (100.00%)

Table 5. Occurrences in ending and conclusion

It is important to notice that in the introduction, 72.80% of the total of the corpus started the letter with a self introduction, which is what the handbooks usually recommend. As long as the body of the letter is concerned, 68.18% followed the guidelines suggested in the handbooks. Finally, only 31.82% included an ending paragraph, which was the handbooks' proposal. On the contrary, most of the students preferred to avoid the use of an ending paragraph.

3.1.2. Results in the letters with no paragraph division

The following results belong to the 12 letters which did not follow a fixed structure and were not divided into paragraphs:

Letter introduction	Occurrences and percentages
Letters beginning with self-introduction	10 (83.30%)
Letters starting without introduction	2 (16.70 %)
Total	12 (100.00%)

Table 6. Occurrences in letter introduction

Body of the letter	Occurrences and percentages
Letters that followed the suggested guidelines	7 (58.30 %)
Letters with different patterns	5 (41.70 %)
Total	12 (100.00%)

Table 7. Occurrences in body of the letter

Ending and conclusion	Occurrences and percentages
Letters with ending	5 (41.70 %)
Letters with no ending	7 (58.30%)
Total	12 (100.00%)

Table 8. Occurrences in ending and conclusion

The results shown in tables 6, 7 and 8 that should be highlighted are the following: 83.3% of the total started the letters introducing the applicant. Although these students did not consider paragraph division a relevant aspect to follow, they self introduced in the introduction part of the letter, following the handbooks' recommendation.

Regarding the body of the letter 58.3% of the letters followed the suggested guidelines in the handbooks, although skipping some information. However, almost the same percentage of students followed other patterns in this section,

so it seems students do not consider relevant all the practical done about business letters.

Finally, 58.3% of the students omitted an ending paragraph, a very similar number to the ones that followed the handbooks' guidelines. It seems that as the students did not divide the letters into paragraphs, they did not follow other standard guidelines provided by handbooks and classroom practices.

3.2. Results of the cohesion analysis

The results obtained from the cohesion analysis were divided into two levels: linking words that were related to text cohesion and those related to sentence cohesion. As it is shown in Table 9, the highest number of connectors used was observed at sentence level and the lowest at text level. As a consequence, the texts created by students were quite poor due to the underuse of words which join the text as a whole means of communication.

Total connectors	Sentence connectors	Text connectors
245 (100.00%)	238 (97.10%)	7 (2.80%)

Table 9. Connector occurrences

3.3. Results of the communicative objectives

The final part of our study is the analysis of the communicative objectives of the writer. The analysis was based on two main variation features: on the one hand, the use of the letter as a means of self promotion and, on the other hand, the fact of offering personal information in the letter of application. The results in Table 10 show that the highest percentage belongs to the second feature, i.e. to provide personal information such as marital status, not relevant working experience, etc.

Communicative objectives	Occurrences and percentages
Using the application letter as self promotion	14 (41.17%)
Giving personal information not required	20 (58.83%)
Total	34 (100.00%)

Table 10. Occurrences in the communicative objectives

After observing all the results obtained from the corpus, we analysed some guidelines aimed at writing business letters in Spanish, in order to compare the characteristics and contrast the results. Some recommendations are (www.scribd.com):

“En la introducción se expone el asunto de la carta y en ocasiones se hace referencia a alguna carta o contacto anterior. Generalmente, está formada por frases hechas, que se eligen según el contenido de la carta o la oportunidad del momento.”

Other recommendations about the different parts of business letters written in Spanish are (Rey, 1995, p.8):

The main guidelines to be followed in Spanish business letters are: to write different paragraphs which refer to an introduction, a body of the letter and a conclusion. The style of the letter should be direct and concise.

4. Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to find out if there was L1 influence when writing application letters in English as a second language and if this influence caused variations in the writing of letters of application by business students. It was also our objective to discern the type of variations in text organisation, in the use of connectors and in the communicative objectives of the students, and if these variations affected communication. Furthermore, we aimed at finding out if students followed the guidelines to write business letters suggested by handbooks.

First of all, it should be mentioned that the results commented above show that language variations were found in letter writing. As regards the use of sentence connectors, the number of variations found in this part was the highest of all, especially in the level of sentence connectors, more precisely in the use of the connector *and*. However, the adversative and causative connectors were less used. Another interesting result was the use of text connectors. They were hardly used and the connection between paragraphs was sometimes nonexistent. Therefore, communication was in occasions difficult and the ideas were in some parts of the letter hard to understand. From our point of view, this is due to the very little attention given in handbooks to the use of English connectors. It is important to explain the use of connectors in English: when to use one type or another, when to use them with other cohesion elements, etc. Moreover, it is also important to do some practical classes about text cohesion, which is not frequently done due to the grammatical approach suggested in many English handbooks. This is one of the reasons students tend to memorize the use of cohesion elements and feel very insecure when using them in classroom practices.

Second, concerning the results extracted from the analysis of text organisation the highest result corresponded to the group that divided letters into paragraphs, although this division varied from one letter to another. The usual division suggested in the handbooks and explained in class was: introduction, body of the letter and conclusion. This pattern was only followed by six students, the rest of the students followed very different patterns, dividing their letters into four or even eight paragraphs. The organisation and distribution of ideas in this group of letters followed a logical order as the one that was presented by Bhatia (1993). First they introduced themselves, although there are some that referred to the job or the advertisement in the first place. Secondly, they included the required information. And thirdly, they ended the letters greeting, however a high number of letters were finished without a greeting.

Third, it is important to say that Spanish undergraduate students have very limited writing training during Secondary Education, and therefore, this fact clearly affects their writing production, especially in Business English writing.

In our corpus, the group of letters without paragraph division was lower. However, the distribution of ideas was similar to the ones in the other group except for the concluding part, which was mostly omitted in this group. The

understanding of this group of letters is harder not only for the lack of division, but also because some relevant information was omitted and the writing style was closer to the one used in an e-mail. This variation is due to the fact that in Spanish the text is not divided into so many paragraphs as in English; therefore, it was a clear influence of the L1. The increased use of e-mails also affects traditional writing, especially the generation born in the technology age.

Finally, we must refer to the communicative objectives of the students. Regarding the use of the application letter as self-promotion the results have been lower, 41.17%. Students mostly used business letters to give personal information, but they did not try to persuade the reader. Students even included personal information not required in a business letter, such as marital status. This type of information is not required in countries such as the USA and the UK, so it is surprising our students included this information in business letters. A high percentage of students also included information regarding work and training experience, which was neither required.

Concluding our study, we suggest the possibility that handbooks could add some information related to writing techniques, such as the use of connectors, paragraph structure, etc. Students are concerned about learning how to organise information, text coherence, etc. They are not just interested in reading comprehension and grammar exercises.

There is also a need of explaining how to write English application letters considering the different communicative objectives implied in each culture. English is a lingua franca that is used by many different cultures and so we should reflect its variations in the different genres and their manifestations. Most of the available handbooks only present English patterns, which are standard, nevertheless it would be interesting to include some variations that exist due to the international nature of Business English.

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