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The importance of cross-cultural awareness in writing sales promotion letters

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Abstract

It has been confirmed that different cultures structure discourse in different ways. Therefore, in order to communicate effectively in business world, business people not only need to learn how to write business letters, but also they need to know the differences in writing style of different cultures. So, cross-cultural studies on different genres need to be done. The present study is a contrastive analysis of sales promotion letters in English and Persian. The differences found between the two categories clearly demonstrated how cultural factors affect the way business people organize their letters.

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1. Introduction

Teaching writing in a second language is far beyond teaching some grammatical and structural points. During the last few decades more attention has been paid to the nature of writing in various situations. This means that many studies have been done by focusing on models and key features of texts written for a particular purpose, which is known as genre analysis.

Different cultures use different rhetorical strategies for writing letters. Therefore, being aware of similarities and differences in the writing practices of particular cultures will help business letter writers learn to write effectively for an intended audience. One way to learn about the local socio-cultural
constraints in order to achieve cross-cultural understanding is through contrastive analysis of each selected genre in a particular context.

Business English is one branch of English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) which itself is a subdivision of English for specific Purposes (ESP). There are four major communicative genres within Business English: negotiations, meetings, e-mail and business letters, although this is not an exhaustive list. In spite of widespread developments in communication technology, business letters are still widely used as a main channel of business correspondence. Within the genre ‘business letter’ it is possible to distinguish some universal sub-genres such as chasing money, requesting, offering, promoting sales, etc.

According to Bhatia (1993), a sales promotion letter is an unsolicited letter addressed to a selected group of prospective customers (they may be individuals or companies) in order to persuade them to buy a product or service. Since most of these prospective customers may not be interested in the product or service that one is trying to promote, the writers of these sales promotion letters have a difficult task not only in capturing their attention but also in sustaining their interest, and eventually convincing them of the benefits of the product or service being promoted.

It is difficult for non-native people involved in business to communicate their ideas in a business letter. Business people often have difficulty in meeting the demands of the kind of writing required of them. In order to communicate effectively in business world, on one hand they need knowledge about how to write business letters and, on the other hand, they need to know the differences in writing style of different cultures.

According to Zhu (2005), the free market economy, which is characterized by competition, helps nurture an individualistic cultural environment and encourages individual achievements. The individuals are therefore encouraged to maximize their contribution to society by meeting customers’ needs or the economic demands of the society. This phenomenon, she believes, also leads to the specific interpersonal context or one-to-one reader-writer relationships, in which the writer or the sales managers writes to an individual as a targeted reader. For example, sales letters are often sent to targeted readers by means of selecting the addressees from the names listed in the local telephone directory.

The findings of this study may be helpful for understanding rhetorical strategies employed by American and Iranian people in writing sales promotion letters in their own language. This awareness will help Iranian and American business letter writers and business students to cultivate in themselves the development of a metacognitive awareness about their own culture’s writing conventions and thus help them observe and experience other cultures’ conventions.

2. Methodology

The corpus used for the present research consisted of 50 authentic sales promotion letters, 30 Persian letters and 20 English letters. The letters in the corpus were chosen based on their prototypical discourse features as well as their specific communicative purpose they were meant to achieve, that is promoting a product or service. The method of selecting the letters was random from a variety of different companies while the availability of the companies also played a role.

In order to compare and contrast the English and Persian sales promotion letters, different steps had to be taken. First, we needed a framework based on which to identify different parts of the English and Persian sale promotion letters. The analytical method employed in the study was move analysis first proposed by Swales (1990). A move can be thought of as part of a text which contributes in some way to fulfilling the overall purpose of the genre. After finding the different parts, i.e. moves, in both English and Persian letters, they were compared and contrasted against each other.

3. Results and Discussion
Having analysed the English and Persian sale promotion letters in terms of the rhetorical strategies employed in the two categories, some interesting differences have been found. Below are the differences between English and Persian sale letters concerning the rhetorical strategies used by each group in order to persuade the readers of the letters to buy the products or services mentioned in the letters.

3.1. Brevity of Persian Letters

Persian sales letters were much shorter than English letters. The corpus in this study comprised 50 sales promotion letters, 20 English letters written by American English speakers and 30 Persian letters written by Iranians. They consisted of a total of 6662 and 6441 words respectively. The average number of words for English letters was 333, the longest 649 words and the shortest 179. In the case of Persian letters these were 215, 385, and 92 respectively.

This shows that Persian sales letters are brief. There are some possible reasons for this. One reason may be that the first sales letter is considered as a kind of relationship building by Iranians and they only inform the readers about their existence and mostly introduce the company than the products or services. So they think there is no need to be detailed, and they postpone the detailed description of the product or service to the later communication between the two companies if the receivers of the letter show their interest for future cooperation. The other possible reason is that Iranian people are not aware or not interested in using persuasive strategies in their letter writing and that is why their letters are so brief.

3.2. We- Orientation vs. You-Orientation

The other difference between English and Persian sales letters in terms of the use of language was about the orientation of the letters. According to Bhatia (1993), to establish the credentials of the company, the writer refers to the needs or interests of the readers. This is ‘you orientation’ kind of establishing credentials. Another way of establishing the credentials of the company is through talking about the reputation of the company. This is ‘we orientation’ kind of establishing credentials.

Persian letter writers mostly adopted ‘we orientation’ during the whole letters by frequently talking about themselves and their achievements in order to show the readers that they represented a successful company. This was done by highlighting the achievements of the company and its long experience through stating that the company’s products were used in different countries, indicating that the services were provided by experts from all over the world, and reminding readers about the company’s previous products or services used by the reader. Following is the example of such strategy:

\textit{It is announced that XYZ Company with 19 years of experience in designing and exporting leather gifts, prides itself on providing leather gifts to hundreds of companies, organizations and governmental institutes...}

English letter writers, on the other hand, mostly adopted ‘you orientation’ by constantly talking about the needs and interests of the readers and the ways of fulfilling those needs. This was done through reminding readers about their needs or interests and asking them some related questions, then indicating to them that the writer was aware of their interests or needs and he/she could help them. This was either in question form asking the reader about his/her needs or interests or in statement form. Following is the example of such strategy:
We know that in today’s economy and workplace change happens quickly. We also know that companies such as yours constantly look for ways to improve business processes in order to reduce costs and optimize productivity.

3.3. Use of Persuasive Strategies

Concerning the typical moves in each category, three moves were typically English and three moves were typical of Persian letters. In ‘headline’ and ‘postscript’ that were typical of English letters, the writer included the most attractive information about the offer in order to persuade the readers to buy the product or service. In ‘Introduction’ which was again typical of English letters, the writer tried to build a close relationship with readers by finding a common ground with them. On the other hand, ‘name of God’, ‘greeting’ and ‘subject’ that were typical of Persian sales letters were formulaic moves which could be found in other business letters as well. So they were kind of clichés that had nothing to do with sales promotion letters.

Also, concerning the other persuasive moves in sales promotion letters that were common in English and Persian – i.e. ‘offering incentives’ and ‘using pressure tactics’ – English sales letter writers used these two moves more frequently than Persian sales letter writers.

These two facts clearly show the lack of persuasive strategies in Persian sales letters. It means that Iranian sales letter writers hardly ever use persuasive strategies in their letters in order to convince their readers to buy their products or services. This may be because of their lack of knowledge about these strategies or maybe because of the fact they think that it is not necessary to include all the details in the letter because they can be discussed later in subsequent business correspondences.

3.4. Use of Formulaic Structures

The other important difference between English and Persian sales letters in terms of the use of language was about the use of certain formulaic structures or words. While Persian sales letter writers tended to use certain formulaic structures or words in some moves, English sales letter writers opted for the flexible use of language. Here are some examples of formulaic structures used in Persian and English sales letters.

In ‘name of God move’, which was present in 15 letters in the corpus, 7 letters used the phrase [be naamekhodaa] and 8 letters used [be esmehitaalaa] both of them meaning in the name of God, however, the second one is Arabic. The word [mozoo]meaning subject was present in all the ‘subject moves’. The ‘greeting move’, which was present in 21 letters, consisted of the phrase [baa salaam] meaning hello (in 16 cases), or the phrase [baa salaam va (some other greetings)] meaning hello and ... (in 5 cases). So, the phrase [baa salaam] was present in all the letters containing greeting move. The phrase [be estehzarmiresaanadke] meaning it is announced that was present in 17 letters out of the 30 letters in corpus, sometimes began with the phrase [khaaheshmandast] meaning it is requested (in 7 cases) and ended with the phrase [tamaashaaselfarmaayid] meaning make a phone call (11 cases). ‘Ending politely move’, which was present in 11 letters, usually began with the phrase [omidastke] meaning it is hoped that (in 7 cases). ‘Closing salutation’ contained the phrase [baa tashakor] meaning with thanks in 16 letters, and the phrase [baa taghdimeheteraam] meaning with offering respect in 8 cases.

Such formulaic structures were hardly seen in English sales promotion letters. Other than the structure dear in ‘opening salutation’ which was used frequently (in 18 cases out of the 20 letters), and sincerely (in
9 cases) and yours sincerely (in 5 cases) in ‘closing salutation’, and the phrase looking forward to in ‘ending politely’ (in 8 cases), there were no other formulaic structures in the English sales letter corpus.

3.5. Level of Formality

Another important difference was about the level of formality. Iranians tended to be very formal in their business letter writing practice. They used honorific words frequently, and the use of conditionals, indirect structures and plural forms of verbs were prevalent in Persian letters. They sometimes used the third person pronouns or passive forms of verbs in order to avoid addressing the readers directly. English letter writers, on the other hand, did not use formal language so much; they used conversational tone by using second person and directly addressing readers from time to time. Here are some examples of honorific words used in Persian sales letters.

In ‘opening salutation’, which was present in all the Persian letters, the honorific word [mohtaram] meaning honourable was present in 24 letters; and for addressing the person to whom the letters was written, all the letters contained last name or the general terms showing the position of the person in company. While in English letters, there were cases in which only the first name of the person was used for addressing him/her (in 6 cases). The word [ehteraman] meaning with honour, at the beginning of the body of the letter, whether in ‘establishing credentials move’ or in ‘introducing the offer move’ was present in 21 letters out of the 30 letters. While such honorific words were absent in the English corpus.

The frequent use of formulaic structures and honorific language in Persian letters suggests that Iranians tended to adopt a very formal tone whereas English letters exhibited flexibility in their writing and adopted less formal tone. This can be explained by Iranian letter writer’s tendency for negative politeness strategy and respecting the readers through accepting the distance between them and using honorifics, and indirect structures such as passive voice and conditionals. On the other hand, American letter writers tended to use positive politeness strategies through seeing themselves as equals who have some common ground by using conversational tone and direct structures.

4. Conclusion

Having analysed the move structure of English and Persian sales promotion letters, we found that both English and Persian sales letters use strategies based on their own socially shared values as well as culture-specific values and norms in order to achieve their intended purposes. The main purpose of both English and Persian sales promotion letters is promoting a product or service. Other than that, each of the two categories has their own specific communicative purposes determined by social and cultural factors. The use of unique moves in each category is largely based on these specific purposes.

Writing an effective business letter is an important part of running an efficient business. So, the main task is to learn in what way these findings may be of theoretical and practical values for those who want to correspond internationally in the world of business. Freedman (1999) poses an insightful challenge concerning genre education: "Can the complex web of social, cultural and rhetoric features to which genres respond be explicated in a way that can be useful to learners?" (P. 766). So the question is how to use the findings of the study in order to put cross-cultural genre analysis into action and look at possible ways of enhancing cross-cultural generic competence in students. To answer this question, we need some background knowledge about different approaches to genre and teaching genre.

Different scholars have different ideas about explicit or implicit teaching of genre. For example, Freedman (1993) argues that it is impossible to teach genre explicitly because genre features are too complex to present to student in systematic way in the classroom. Swales (1990) and Johns (1997), on the
other hand, believe that through exposure alone, students, unless they are competent, will fail to acquire significant features of a particular genre. So, they suggest that explicit teaching of the rhetorical structure of the text of a particular genre is necessary.

Concerning the above mentioned theories, it seems that both approaches can be applied in teaching a particular genre such as sales promotion letter in the classroom. First, we should make students aware of Iranian and American culture’s rhetorical preferences by making their own rhetorical tradition noticeable to them contrastively. In the light of the findings of the study, we can cultivate such awareness by helping students to observe, notice, compare and contrast differences in the discourse pattern characterizing Persian and English sales promotion letters.

References