

Transferring Results of Intercultural Communication Research to Business English Classroom: Structure and Register Fluctuation in Business Emails from British, Polish and Spanish Companies

Hanna Skorczynska, Universitat Politècnica de València, Spain

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Abstract

Emails are the most common communication means in the present business world. A broad range of email studies focused on cultural variations in business email writing, but very few approached intercultural business communication in Europe. In one of them, Gómez-Moreno and Skorczynska (2013) described variations concerning the prototypical move structure and register in a corpus of over 100 emails of response to business requests written in English by employees from companies based in the UK, Spain and Poland. The study revealed that the move structure in this type of intercultural communication is more complex than current templates and existing published materials show, and that register variations detected should be transferred to the business English instruction in the European context, which typically uses native speaker writing samples. As the awareness and adaptation to different writing styles in the intercultural business communication within Europe is absent in the published textbooks and related materials, I have proposed a classroom activity, based on authentic email messages taken from the above-mentioned corpus. Students identified the prototypical move structure in examples of British, Spanish and Polish emails and discussed the variations detected. The activity also focused on the language features and the tone used. Business English students can certainly benefit from working with authentic texts, especially in case of both language and cultural awareness raising activities, which can help improve their communication skills for today's globalized world.

Keywords: business, communication, culture, email, register, variation

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Introduction

This study reports on an application of the research conducted on intercultural business communication in the classroom of business English at the graduate level at the Universitat Politècnica de València in Spain. More specifically, the classroom application focused on the identification of the structure and register fluctuations in business emails from British, Polish and Spanish companies. It is, therefore, shown how the knowledge gained about the variations in this type of emails can be transferred to and used to teach students to spot cultural nuances in business communication in Europe.

The research of business emails has been extensive, especially in the area of intercultural communication and business discourse analysis. A clear trend towards progressive informalisation and heterogeneity of email register has been addressed for the past many years (e.g. Gains, 1999; Pérez-Sabater *et al.*, 2008; Waldvogel, 2007). On the other hand, changes in the levels of formality were also discussed in terms of their interrelation with the communicative context and the participants' roles, conventional and intentional, which may oscillate, and in this way, introduce different registers within the same email (Giménez-Moreno, 2006; 2011a). Regarding the use of English as a lingua franca in business emails, it has been the focus of a broad range of studies. For instance, Giménez (2002) examined emails between an Argentinean subsidiary and its European offices; Nickerson (2002) analysed electronic communication between Dutch and British in a Dutch-owned multinational company; Louhiala-Salminen *et al.*, (2005) focused on email exchanges between Swedish and Finnish members of a merged Swedish-Finnish company; or Carrió-Pastor and Muñiz-Calderón (2013) looked into variations in emails from India and China. Finally, Giménez-Moreno and Skorzynska (2013) analysed register variations in replies to requests written by British, Polish and Spanish employees of travel agencies.

Despite the variations discussed, there seems to exist an agreement that writers tend to use a “semi-formal” co-operative tone of expression in business emails (Gains, 1999; Giménez-Moreno, 2011a). The features of this type of professional neutral register are: predominant informative function; use of shorter sentences, bullet points and conventional abbreviations; open use of direct speech (direct questions) but expressed in formal language; use of modality, mitigation and hedging; explanations carefully avoiding colloquialisms or slang; and finally, avoidance of opinions, personal comments and subjective or emotive language. However, Giménez-Moreno (2006; 2011b) suggests that the professional register includes many subtleties and small variations which mirror the specific communicative context, as well as the roles of the participants and their intentions, like for example in employer-employee communication. In this sense, and on a more general level, the author proposes four macro-registers: family, amicable, social and professional with different tones for each macro-register; informal, neutral and formal. Therefore, the professional register would also oscillate from informal to formal, including the following lexicogrammatical features (see Figure 1).

| A (+) INFORMAL/CASUAL (Showing commitment, involvement and closeness) | B (+) FORMAL/RITUAL (Showing deference, neutrality and objectivity) |
|--|--|
| 1. Personal expressions | 1. Impersonal expressions |
| 2. Active verbs/expressions | 2. Passive verbs/expressions |
| 3. Direct speech | 3. Indirect speech |
| 4. Ordinary reporting verbs (e.g. say) | 4. Specific reporting verbs (e.g. mention) |
| 5. Ordinary connectors (e.g. so) | 5. More elaborate connectors (e.g. furthermore) |
| 6. General terms/expressions (e.g. man) | 6. Precise terms/expressions (e.g. technician) |
| 7. Emotive/subjective/attitudinal terms (e.g. guess) | 7. Neutral/objective terms (e.g. inform) |
| 8. Phrasal verbs and informal idiomatic expressions | 8. Latin terms and standard formal expressions |
| 9. Use of contractions, abbreviations and "fast language" | 9. Detailed and concrete expressions without contractions using nominalization and modifiers |
| 10. Straight statements and direct commands | 10. Politeness, caution and mitigation markers |

Figure 1: Lexico-grammatical features of register variation in professional communication (adapted from Giménez-Moreno, 2010: 302)

An additional feature of business emails is mixing of registers and tones (Giménez-Moreno, 2011b). The professional register may oscillate from a more informal to a more formal tone in business emails, but it is also possible to find features of the social register visible in the presence of personal information about the writer or colleagues, the use of subjective or emotive expressions, as well as in references to health, holidays, sports and leisure. The amicable register can also be identified in the mentions to the common previous history, the expression of spontaneous emotions, complicity and confidentiality, as well as in the use of peculiar terminology and abbreviations.

Replies to requests

Replies to requests have been less researched than request emails (Zhu, 1997; Kong, 1998), for which thousands of templates have been created in the market to provide support to communicate more effectively in company-to-company exchanges (Sandler & Keefe, 2008). However, as Schaefer (2010) pointed out, replies to requests are often a priority in business writing courses along with apology emails. The study by Giménez-Moreno and Skorczynska (2013), used as a basis for the present report, analysed 111 replies to requests sent by British, Polish and Spanish travel agencies. These replies followed an enquiry (in two formats: formal and informal), asking about a business trip to a main European city in order to carry out team bonding activities. Half of the messages received replied in the informal tone, and the other half in the formal one. Most replies came from the British agencies, followed by the Spanish and the Polish ones. Significant variations were found in the identification and analysis of the message moves. In general terms, the acknowledgment and the promise to submit a proposal for a trip later was notably more frequent in the British and Polish emails. Questions concerning the proposal details, such as the preferred destination, the dates, or the room type, were included in the three types of emails, but the requirements themselves varied according to the nationality. Another feature, that is, the inclusion of a proposal was present mostly in the British emails. Figure 2 shows the percentages of specific moves per type of reply (informal and formal) and the respondent's nationality.

| Move | Informal (%) | | | Formal (%) | | |
|---|--------------|--------|---------|------------|--------|---------|
| | British | Polish | Spanish | British | Polish | Spanish |
| Salutation | 26 | 100 | 100 | 76 | 100 | 100 |
| Thanking | 60 | 55 | 50 | 53 | 20 | 40 |
| Willingness | 60 | 55 | 50 | 65 | 70 | 40 |
| Requesting info | 42 | 55 | 100 | 47 | 30 | 70 |
| Requested info/materials | 32 | 45 | 0 | 24 | 20 | 0 |
| Additional info about request | 28 | 25 | 0 | 35 | 0 | 50 |
| Close | 53 | 15 | 50 | 53 | 40 | 70 |
| Ending | 85 | 95 | 100 | 76 | 70 | 80 |
| Signature | 92 | 45 | 100 | 76 | 80 | 80 |
| Complete info about co | 53 | 60 | 75 | 53 | 60 | 70 |
| Additional co/country info and links to other pages | 14 | 15 | 0 | 24 | 20 | 0 |
| Attachments | 0 | 15 | 0 | 6 | 20 | 20 |

Figure 2: Move variation in informal and formal messages: percentage of messages including moves (source: Giménez-Moreno & Skorczynska, 2013: 90)

As can be seen in Figure 2, the move pattern is similar in all email types, but there are many slight differences. For instance, a more frequent use and a broader range of salutations was found in the Polish and Spanish emails: “Dear Jean”, “Hi Jane”, “Dear Madam” or “Dear Sirs”. Thanking was included in 50-60% of emails regardless of the level of formality, except for the formal Polish emails. Willingness to help was also present in all emails except for the formal Spanish emails. Nearly all of the Spanish emails requested information, but none of them included requested information or materials. The reference to the additional information about the request was also absent in the informal Spanish emails and the formal Polish messages.

Regarding the language features of the formal and informal emails, Figure 3 shows the variations identified.

| Register | Distinctive features | British | Polish | Spanish |
|---|---|---------|--------|---------|
| | | % | % | % |
| Casual/Informal | Personal expressions | 75 | 65 | 50 |
| | Active verbs/expressions | 17 | 35 | --- |
| | Direct speech/Direct questions | 35 | 65 | --- |
| | Ordinary reporting verbs (“say”) | --- | --- | --- |
| | Ordinary connectors (“so”, “but”) | 10 | 15 | --- |
| | General terms/expressions (“man”) | 39 | 45 | 25 |
| | Emotive/subjective/attitudinal expressions | 10 | 45 | 1 |
| | Phrasal verbs and idiomatic expressions | 28 | --- | --- |
| | Contractions, abbreviations and “fast language” | 14 | 15 | --- |
| Straight statements and direct commands | 17 | 60 | 25 | |
| Formal | Impersonal expressions/“there is”, “there are” | 18 | 20 | --- |
| | Passive verbs/expressions | 12 | --- | --- |
| | Indirect speech/Indirect questions | 18 | 30 | 40 |
| | Specific reporting verbs (“mention”) | 12 | --- | --- |
| | Elaborate connectors (“furthermore”) | 12 | 10 | 30 |
| | Precise terms/expressions (“technician”) | 35 | 60 | 40 |
| | Neutral/objective terms (“inform”) | 24 | 20 | 10 |
| | Latin terms and standard formal expressions | 47 | 60 | 70 |
| | Detailed and concrete nominalization and modifiers, evaluative adjectives | 29 | 30 | 30 |
| | Politeness, caution and mitigation markers | 47 | 50 | 60 |

Figure 3: Language features in formal and informal emails: distribution by the respondent’s nationality (source: Giménez-Moreno & Skorczynska, 2013: 92)

As can be observed in Figure 3, the broadest range of distinctive language features has been found in the British emails, both formal and informal. The casual form is

also more marked in the Polish emails, where most of the corresponding features were found (e.g. personal expression, active verbs, direct questions, or phrasal verbs and idiomatic expressions). The Spanish informal emails included the most limited number of language features, namely, personal expressions, general terms, straight statements and direct comments. Regarding the formal Polish and Spanish emails, they used most of the characteristic language forms, such as indirect speech and questions, technical words, or Latin terms and standard formal expressions. Finally, the significant presence of politeness, caution and mitigation markers was also noted in the Polish and Spanish emails.

In summary, the British emails included a broader range of features from both ends, formal and informal, which were evenly distributed across the texts. The Polish and Spanish emails showed fewer language features and a stronger dependence on language formula and standards. Finally, the Polish emails fluctuated more explicitly towards the amicable and social registers as a persuasive strategy in the use of phrases such as “So don’t be afraid we will find suitable hotels”, “Have a good day” or “Hi Alison”. Therefore, it can be seen that subtle register variations in the emails studied are notable and meaningfully related not only to the use of English as the first or second language, but also possibly to writing conventions used in the companies from the three countries.

Classroom application

The classroom application of the research reported (Giménez-Moreno & Skorczynska, 2013) was carried out with a group of graduate students completing a course of business English. This particular group of 25 students was truly multicultural representing different European and non-European nationalities. The activity designed aimed to introduce students into intercultural communication in Europe and help them notice variations in the structure, functions and language used in business emails produced by British, Polish and Spanish writers. It consisted in an analysis of sample emails extracted from the corpora used for the research reported. The analysis was preceded by a warm-up debate on cultural differences and similarities. The students talked about their experience in contact with or living in a country with a different national culture. Those with work experience also discussed how they approached workplace situations in multicultural contexts. The final topic to discuss was the impact of culturally motivated misunderstandings in email communication on the company’s performance. This type of introduction served as a suitable preparation for the analysis of sample emails.

The students were given three replies to the request of information for a bond-building business trip with the following instructions:

- The emails that you can read below had been received in reply to a message sent by a British company requesting information about a three-day trip for its employees. The request message was general without specifying the services requested.
- Below you can read a British, a Polish-English and a Spanish-English reply.
- Compare the layout of each message (salutation, close, signature, additional information, etc.), the structure (moves), and the tone (formal/informal).

- What similarities and differences did you find? Can you associate the variations detected to the writer's national culture? Can these variations be attributed to the knowledge of English by Polish and Spanish speakers?

The British reply can be seen below:

Dear Mary

Thank you for your enquiry.

We are happy to send you a quote for your business/leisure trip to Finland.

Before quote I would like to ask few questions.

How old are the team members going on this trip?

Would you be travelling from London?

Are you looking for activities that are related to your industry (for example wine testing) or would rather do outdoor activities for purely team building puposes?

I would also kindly ask how much you are willing to spend per person for this 3 day trip (Thu-Sun) since that would be significant in order me to plan the itinerary.

I am looking forward to hear from you.

With kid regards

Jane Smith

ABC Travel Ltd

Tel XXXX

Fax XXXX

Emal XXXX

Please follow us on Facebook

<https://XXXXXX>

1A XXXX

London XXXX

The following is the Polish-English reply:

Dear Sirs

We have received your letter enquiring about trip for 8-12 members of the management team. Happy Travel will be glad to organize this event for you.

I suppose till the end of the week I'll send you first proposal, but before that, I would like to ask you a few details.

Does your enquiry consider several destinations or you are planning to go only to Warsaw?

There are more men or woman in the group?

Would you like me to book Single rooms or double rooms?

I would appreciate a prompt reply,

Yours sincerely,

Anna Smyk

Project Manager

<http://XXXXXX>

Happy Travel Sps z o.o.

Ul. XXXX 51

XXXX Warszawa

Mob. XXXXX

Tel. XXXXX

Fax. XXXXX

Finally, the following is a Spanish-English reply:

Dear Mary,

I need some information for the budget:

- *Do the group need accommodation on the hotel? If yes, how many nights are they going to be staying in Sevilla? (approximately)*

- *Do they need transfers?*

- *Do they need options for activities in Sevilla? Meals?*

About the one-day seminar, how long is it going to be (4h or 8h)? do they need any media systems?

Waiting for news.

Regards.

Elena Suárez

Viajes Sevilla Tours S.L.

Phone: XXXXX

Fax: XXXXX

E-mail: XXXXX

The students were asked to fill in a table with the information about the layout of the three emails, the moves (or the communicative functions) identified, as well as the tone used. Table 1 includes the summary of the answers provided by the students.

| General layout | British email | Polish email | Spanish email |
|----------------------------|---|---|--|
| Salutation | <i>Dear Mary</i> | <i>Dear Sirs</i> | <i>Dear Mary</i> |
| Close | <i>With kind regards</i> | <i>Yours sincerely</i> | <i>Regards</i> |
| Signature | Name + surname | Name + surname + position | Name + surname |
| Additional info | Company name Tel/Fax number Email address Facebook address Address | Web page address Address Mobile phone Tel/Fax phone | Company name Registry number Tel/Fax number Email address |
| Moves | | | |
| Thanking | <i>Thank you for your enquiry</i> | <i>H.T. will be glad...</i> | - |
| Confirming the quote | <i>We are happy to send you a quote.</i> | <i>H.T. will be glad to organize the event for you.</i> | - |
| Requiring more information | Explicit introduction: <i>Before quote I would like to ask a few questions: age, point of departure, type of activities, cost per person</i> | Explicit introduction: <i>I would like to ask a few questions: destinations, men/women, single/double room, length of seminary</i> | Explicit introduction: <i>I need some information for the budget: accommodation, number of nights, transfers, length of seminar, media systems needed</i> |
| Closing | <i>I am looking</i> | <i>I would appreciate</i> | <i>Waiting for news</i> |

| | | | |
|-------------|--|---|---|
| | <i>forward to hearing from you</i> | <i>a prompt reply</i> | |
| Tone | Informal, but respectful | Formal, but a little bit too direct as compared to the British tone | Informal and direct, lack of politeness as compared to the British tone |

Table 1: Students' analysis of the three emails

After filling in the table, the students compared and discussed their answers. They agreed that the tone in the British and Spanish emails was more informal than in the Polish one. However, the informality in the Spanish emails was attributed to the unfamiliarity with this particular register. They also highlighted that the company's web page address in the Polish email suggested looking for more information and not calling the company first. Thanking for the enquiry was explicit in the British email, while there was a confirmation of the enquiry in the Polish email, and this particular move was absent in the Spanish email. The British and Polish emails included the expression of willingness to provide a quote, and again this move was missing in the Spanish email. On the whole, the British and Spanish emails were informal, while the British and Polish emails were more explicit.

Conclusions

The research results, as is the case of this study, have been successfully transferred to the classroom. The students responded with much interest to the use of corpus-based materials, as they reflected a real-life situation frequently taking place in business communication among European companies. They students acted as researchers and experienced learning by discovering. The identification of the layout, move and tone variations will certainly help them to be more aware not only of the email writing conventions, but also of certain variations that could be attributed to the influence of the national culture and also to the use of English as a foreign language. The main disadvantage of this type of activities is that more classroom time is needed to introduce the students to the research topic and method. These activities may also be challenging conceptually, as students have to understand such concepts as register or move. Transferring research results to the classroom, therefore, can be useful if a realistic approach is adopted in the design and management of classroom work and less sophisticated pieces of research are selected.

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