

An empirical study of business request emails in the context of Business English as a Lingua Franca

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Abstract

This paper reports on a linguistic analysis of request emails written in English by young Business English (BE) graduates working in trading companies in China. The emails were extracted from a corpus of 307 messages (34,837 words) between these graduates and their clients around the world, mostly in countries where English is only used as a Lingua Franca. The BE graduates often dealt with multiple clients simultaneously, under considerable time constraints, and made use of templates and prefabricated phrases to speed up the writing process. The findings have interesting implications for English language teaching and the teaching of Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF). The writers of the emails collected for this study clearly had a restricted command of English, and for this reason English language teachers might be unwilling to use authentic texts of this kind as models for their students' writing. However, BELF usage may help to achieve business writers' purposes more effectively than 'textbook English', and there may be a case for concentrating, in the Business English classroom, less on grammar and more on ways to minimise the risk of losing face. .

Key words: BELF; English as a Lingua Franca; business requests; email; Business English; English for Professional Purposes

Introduction

In this paper we will examine the linguistic features and pedagogical implications of Business English Lingua Franca (BELF) emails sent by Mainland Chinese salespeople to their international clients. Emails are written documents, of course, but they are generally considered to have a speech-like quality in that they are stylistically informal and tend to be more candid than other forms of written

communication (Baron 2000, Goldstein & Evans Sabin 2006). Emails produced in BELF contexts may be particularly similar to speech as they are typically produced under similar circumstances to spontaneous conversation – at speed and with little time for editing.

The ‘directive’ email speech act (Goldstein & Evans Sabin, 2006) requests information or invites some kind of action. Directives were particularly common in our data, because salespeople need information and commitment from their clients in order to close business deals. The directive is, however, a face-threatening act, with the potential to damage both the writer’s positive face and the reader’s negative face (Brown and Levinson 1987). For the success of business transactions it is essential that salespeople learn how to manage and mitigate this threat: BELF sales emails need to build up trust and rapport by being both accessible (to clients with varying levels of English language proficiency) and indicative of respect and warmth.

The emails we examined were sent from small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Mainland China, to clients almost entirely based in countries where English is used as a foreign rather than a second language - the ‘Expanding Circle’, as defined by Kachru (1985). In contrast to multinational companies, SMEs have fewer resources for language training and for ensuring that language use is standardised (Incelli 2013: 515), and we might therefore expect quite a lot of non-standard English usage in our data, some of which might be specific to BELF. As Li (2016) points out, so far there have been very few studies of email etiquette in business settings, and the role of emails in modern business communication is not yet adequately reflected in business English training materials. Our findings regarding the formulation of email requests will therefore be of relevance to Business English teachers and corporate trainers internationally, perhaps providing food for thought regarding the relative importance of accuracy, fluency, and pragmatic effectiveness in BELF.

The participants and their context

The writers who contributed the emails analysed in this paper had recently graduated in Business English from a university in Mainland China. They were employed as international salespeople in nine small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Shenzhen, Ningbo, Hangzhou and Taizhou. These SMEs do not manufacture their own goods, but act as mediators between Chinese manufacturers

and service providers and clients in other countries. They trade in electrical goods, household goods and building supplies, or deal with international logistics or exhibition services. At the time of data collection the Chinese email writers had been employed for about six months. As new Business English graduates they would normally expect to work as international salespeople for 12 to 18 months in order to gain experience, before being promoted to administrative positions or establishing their own independent trading companies.

International salespeople in SMEs in China generally work in cubicles within open-plan offices. In the first few months of their employment they receive some training in business email writing, and in some cases they are given templates to fit different communicative situations, for example when contacting customers for the first time, or when asking for confirmation of an order. These templates are intended to save time when working under pressure, but we did not see much evidence of their influence on the language of the emails in our dataset, and interviews with our participants revealed that they had their own banks of phrases, developed over time with reference to the language used in emails sent by other more experienced colleagues.

Salespeople in SMEs in China have very long working hours because they have to correspond with clients across a range of time zones. They also have to deal with a large volume of correspondence, often engaging with several clients simultaneously. Their aim is to attract and retain their own set of clients and to establish as many sustained relationships as possible, leading to multiple transactions. They work on commission, to supplement a basic salary that is often below the living wage.

The client companies featuring in our dataset were distributed all over the world, in the Americas (Brazil and the USA), Europe (Germany, France and Russia), the Middle East (Dubai and Israel) and East Asia (Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam). Although only one client company was based in an Inner Circle country (the USA) the correspondence was always in English. This was even the case when both interlocutors were Chinese, as was the case with clients from Hong Kong and Singapore. Interlocutors seemed to regard themselves as having roughly equal status in terms of power, and as being relatively close in terms of social distance. Most were likely to have been quite young, and at an early stage in their careers.

A coding system was used to conceal the identity of writers and preserve confidentiality. For example, SZM3(a) refers to a salesperson in a foreign trade company in Shenzhen. SZ indicates the location, M indicates the sector (manufacturing), and 3(a) is the salesperson's identification number. Clients were given the same code as the salesperson with whom they corresponded, with the addition of a letter code to indicate their nationality. For example, SZM3(a)'s French client was coded as SZM3(a)F.

Analytical frameworks

The emails examined in this paper came from a dataset of 307 messages. We classed 154 messages as directives, meaning that they had the overarching purpose of requesting information or directing the reader to perform some action; 80 of these were written by the Chinese salespeople and 74 by their clients. In this paper we will focus particularly on the emails written by the Chinese salespeople, with reference to the three main request strategies identified by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984): Direct, Conventional Indirect, and Non-conventional Indirect. We will also refer to the structure of the emails, drawing on Kong's framework for Hong Kong business request letters (1998), and Yang's classification of small talk in Mainland Chinese spoken business negotiations (2012).

Kong divided request letters into the following seven moves:

Move1: source of reference

Move2: make the request

Move3: introduce background

Move4: justify the request

Move5: state the conditions

Move6: inquire about other related items or matters

Move7: cordial conclusion

Kong's framework did not include an Offer or a Phatic (small talk) move, but these additional moves were also found to occur in many of the emails we examined. The Offer move promises or suggests something of benefit to the recipient, helping to lessen the imposition of the request. The Phatic move helps to build rapport and/or provides background information of possible relevance to the negotiation.

In her study of spoken business negotiations, Yang (2012: 120) identified two types of small talk activity which helped to "construct the frame of a negotiation": off-task

social small talk in opening and closing sequences, and on-task work-related small talk during the central negotiation process, used to gather information and inform decisions. Both types of Phatic move occurred quite often in the emails we examined, reflecting the fact that they were closer to face-to-face oral negotiations than the paper-based business letters analysed by Kong (1998).

Findings

All seven moves in Kong's framework occurred in our data, but only Move 2 was obligatory. Their relative frequency is shown in Table 1.

Move1	Move2	Move3	Move4	Move5	Move6	Move7
43%	100%	61%	43%	23%	27%	73%

Table 1: Move frequencies in the Mainland Chinese request emails

By way of example, Table 2 shows the structure of the request email SZM3(a)001, written by the Chinese salesperson SZM3(a) from a manufacturing company in Shenzhen.

Move	Function	Text
3	Inform	This is XXXX
Phatic	Social Small Talk	I felt so glad to talk with you at Skype.
	Social Small Talk	How's your journey to India?
	Work-related Small Talk	I was on my vocation too, for 7 days....
	Mitigation	Hehe...
	Work-related Small Talk	And i'll come back to work on 8th May.
4	Justification	Last week you said that your design will be ok this week.
2	Request	you can send it to me through Email,
Offer	Promise	and then i'll give you an answer on 8 th
	Suggest	Also, we can talk about it at Skype this Sunday.
2	Request	How do you think about it?
7	Cordial Conclusion	I'm looking forward to your reply.

Table 2: The move structure of SZM3(a)001

This email begins with some social small talk (*How's your journey to India?*) but then moves to more work-related small talk which can be interpreted as an apology for absence (threatening the negative face of the writer), signalled and mitigated by laughter "*Hehe...*" and followed by a promise of redress in the form of a return to work:

I was on my vacation too, for 7 days...; hehe... And i'll come back to work on 8th May.

The Move 2 Conventional Indirect requests ("*you can send it to me through email*" and "*How do you think about it?*") are embedded within a frame of small talk, justification and offers. The first request is immediately preceded by a justification ("*Last week you said that your design will be ok this week*"). An offer in the form of a promise ("*i'll give you an answer on 8th*") and a suggestion of benefit to the client ("*we can talk about it at Skype this Sunday*") precede the second reinforcing request. Move 7 is a Cordial Conclusion, as described in Kong (1998) ("*I'm looking forward to your reply*").

It will be noted that much of the language in this email departs from conventional standard English. Transcribed laughter ("*Hehe...*") is used to mimic the aural aspect of face-to-face interaction; this, and visual features such as emoticons (☺; ☹) and happy and sad face punctuation devices (:) and :() were frequent throughout our data. In SZM3(a)001 there are also spelling mistakes ("*journey*" ;"*vocation*") and unconventional uses of prepositions ("*at Skype*"; "*through Email*"), and question forms ("*How do you think*" rather than "*What do you think*"). All these features are indicative of the writer's restricted command of English and the constraints on her processing time, as is the use of the vague "*ok*" in "*your design will be ok*". In other messages, abbreviations are also used to save time. Some, such as "*asap*", "*B/Rgds*", "*fyi*", "*cnfm*" (confirm), "*pls*" (please) and "*Tks*" (Thanks) were clearly encouraged by the companies employing the salespeople, as they appeared in the training templates. Others such as "*be4*", "*cuz*", "*lol*" and "*u*" were the salespeople's own 'textspeak' usages.

The following excerpts from exchanges between a Chinese salesperson (SZL8) and his Brazilian client (SZL8B) show how the use of abbreviations and visual features in social small talk helped to establish friendly informality and thus maintain rapport:

SZL8: *By the way Nov.2 is National day in Brazil, right? Just have fun and forget all these annoying stuffs. :)*

SZL8B: *lol... thanks XXXX. It was a great Holiday, unfortunately it's over ☹*

Apart from speeding up communication, the use of vague, informal and non-standard forms may have helped the salespeople achieve their own professional aims. “*Hehe....*”, for example, was a common external modifier of head-acts used, and thus a quick means of minimising personal loss of face or the possibility of clients taking offence. Its role in mitigating requests can be seen in the following excerpt from another email (SZE194) which also includes “*I know u busy*”, a face-saving acknowledgement of the recipient’s workload:

I know u busy, but could u pls spare some time to send the copies to me? hehe.. (SZE194)

Vague language had the benefit of placing fewer demands on the reader than more precise alternatives: SZM3(a) could have described her client’s design as “*complete*” or “*approved*”, for example, but her use of a less specific word, “*ok*”, is less face-threatening because it allows for a wider range of possibilities. Similarly, although non-standard grammatical and lexical forms may have been produced unintentionally, it is likely that they had a disarming effect on recipients whose own level of English was not high. Non-standard forms signal to the reader that accuracy is not a priority, and errors will not entail any loss of face.

‘Conventional Indirect’ strategies involving suggestions, or references to preparatory conditions (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984) were the most frequent request strategies in our data, and typically achieved indirectness through the use of the interrogative form, as in the following examples:

Would you pls inform me a date?

Can it be less, say, 500 pcs?

May I know what kind of payment terms you would like to do?

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain’s ‘Non-conventional Indirect’ request strategies also occurred quite frequently. These took the form of hints, often with a Wh-interrogative. The following message from SZE192 shows a Non-conventional

Indirect request (“*when u will give us the relative invoice?*”) following a justification (Kong’s Move 4):

As u’ve known, we have applied for booths in International Gateway Space Section n Apple area in the North llounge Pavilion respectively, so when u will give us the relative invoice?

The following message from SZM3(a) also shows a Non-conventional Indirect request using a Wh-interrogative (“*How’s your project of iphone cases going?*”) as a means of requesting an update on an order. This is followed by a Conventional Indirect request:

How’s your project of iphone cases going? Isabelle, if you have any questions or if there’s any updated new about your project would you pls let me know?

There were 121 Direct requests in our data, as compared to 157 Indirect requests. Direct requests mostly involved the imperative form, which is syntactically simple and therefore has the advantage of being easy for BELF interlocuters to produce and understand. This form was particularly favoured when the required action was of benefit to the client and the imposition was not great, as in the following examples, where the potentially face-threatening effect is also mitigated by the use of ‘*please*’ (or ‘*pls*’ / ‘*plz*’):

if any questions, please inform me timely.

Btw , pls offer CMBV its invoice so that they can arrange the payment.

Here enclosed is the exhibitors’ payment list plz check.

Conclusion

Many ELF researchers, such as Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005), Cogo and Dewey (2012), and Friedrich (2012), have argued that meaning takes precedence over grammatical accuracy in international business communications. This study also draws attention to the importance of establishing and maintaining good relationships in business, and proposes that the management of face-threatening acts should be considered as a key BELF skill, especially in contexts where the risk of giving and taking offence is high, as is the case when deals are negotiated at a distance, between interlocuters who have never met face-to-face and have only moderate knowledge of English.

The BELF writers in our study were skilled communicators who made up for their lack of accuracy by employing strategies that did not depend on grammatical knowledge. We think that most teachers of Business English would be wary of using their emails in the classroom as examples of good practice, because of their many non-standard elements. Nevertheless, these emails would probably be more successful in the workplace than the standard textbook examples, and for this reason we would argue that there is a place for them in BELF training, if only for the purposes of awareness-raising, and as a stimulus for discussion about the strategy choices appropriate in different business contexts.

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