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DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ACADEMIC AND BUSINESS WRITING

ABSTRACT

Most upper-division courses taken by foreign language majors and minors in US colleges and universities involve some form of academic writing. Students who transpose this writing style to the business setting risk being unsuccessful. The purpose of this article is to highlight how these styles of writing differ so that language instructors teaching business courses in departments of modern languages can better prepare students for the needs of the twenty-first-century workplace. Our students need to be taught explicitly the differences and given an opportunity to practice the business style of writing.

KEYWORDS: Spanish for Specific Purposes, foreign language learning, business writing, international business education

The Spanish-speaking population is a fast growing segment in the world at large and especially in the United States.¹ A report released by the US Census Bureau shows that in 2010 the US Hispanic population was growing at three times the rate of the overall population (Ennis, Ríos-Vargas, & Albert, 2011). According to Jeff Humphreys, author of the 2012 annual *Multicultural Economy* report from the Selig Center for Economic Growth at the University of Georgia, the purchasing power of Hispanics in the United States was \$1.2 trillion in 2012.

The New York-based marketing analysis firm Nielsen has projected that this number will reach \$1.5 trillion by 2015, soon making the Hispanic community the world's ninth largest economy, which prompted Monica Gil, a Nielsen vice-president to say "Any company that wants to develop and grow in the United States has to attract the Hispanic consumer" ("Hispanic Purchasing Power," 2012). As entrepreneurs and corporate executives across the country are awakening to the economic importance of the Hispanic community, companies serious about attracting the US and international Hispanic population as consumers want their new employees to possess a high level

¹ This article is derived from my presentation at the 2013 CIBER Business Language Conference in Bloomington, Indiana (March 21–23, 2013).

of proficiency in Spanish. They seek professionals who have solid writing skills and mastery of a wide spectrum of company communication genres, such as emails, memos, sales materials, contracts, training materials; professionals who can also produce professional quality presentations and reports in Spanish.

In the world of business, if international managers and some members of their staff do not possess strong language skills, the negative economic impact can be serious (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012). The real cost of mishandling language barriers is the loss of trust that can occur if the linguistic gap is not satisfactorily bridged and the message is distorted. Ultimately, this poor communication can result in a delay or a failure to deliver the products and services requested that causes companies to lose potential clients as well as current customers. Some research shows that language barriers cost companies more than the money that would be required to pay professional translators and interpreters or trained bilingual technical writers, options some organizations choose to bridge the linguistic gap (Harzing, Köster, & Magner, 2011).

Besides tarnishing the image of the company, deficient writing skills in Spanish can have a negative impact on productivity when employees from overseas branches and international clients must re-read, perhaps several times, poorly written material to decipher the intended meaning. The outcome can even be disastrous if the poorly drafted document deals with safety measures or proper handling of products and equipment. Referring to the training materials that some clients require in their native language, the Language Flagship organization states in a recent report on global skills needed in business that “[m]isunderstandings or mistakes in conveying that type of information cost time, relationships, and money” (Language Flagship, 2009). For these reasons, business professionals need to be able to communicate well not only verbally in person but also in writing.

Today most of the upper-division courses taken by foreign language majors, minors, and heritage students in colleges and universities in the United States are centered on developing the oral communication skills and some academic writing skills in the second language. While these are worthwhile goals to pursue, if departments of modern languages want to play a more significant role in forming professionals to meet the real demands of globalization, some changes are called for.

This article will compare and contrast both styles of writing, business and academic, in terms of typical content, genres, structure, purposes, readership,

format, tone, style, as well as ownership and typical life span. Business language instructors in departments of modern languages must recognize that the writing their majors and minors will be required to do on the job is different from most academic writing they are practicing in humanities classes. They must understand that effective business writing is essential for their students' individual career advancement as well as success in business operations. With this greater awareness and understanding, business language instructors are better equipped to propose curricular changes at the program level or make adjustments to the course(s) they teach to better prepare their students.

In modern language departments in the United States, it is still often the case that after much grammar instruction, majors and minors are required to take a core composition course. This is generally the one and only course students take that is centered on writing skills *per se*. In such a course, foreign language instructors "often assign topics that incorporate rhetorical devices, such as description, narration, exposition, definition, analysis and classification, comparison and contrast, and cause and effect" (Reichelt, Lefkowitz, Rinnert, & Schultz, 2012). Students are taught to construct an "argumentative essay." The models provided typically come from the literary world: texts by famous poets, short story writers, novelists, and essayists. After all, great poets often express their feelings in their descriptions, while short story writers entertain us with their narrations, and essayists express their viewpoints on profound issues. Students are asked to write multiple drafts and obtain ample feedback before the final product is due.

Most *workplace* writing is primarily transactional in nature: it affects all those involved; it seeks to inform and often recommend a course of action (Severson, n.d.). Thus, it must be clear, complete, coherent, concise, and compelling. Furthermore, it must be well organized and visually effective so that reading will be quick and easy. For much of written communication in business, employees do not have the time or luxury of writing multiple drafts. Mastery of grammar is taken for granted by the employer. The opportunity to fix errors under the patient guidance of a colleague seldom exists. Recent graduates are expected to know how to write well and "get it right" the first time, with little supervision.

What does it mean for us as instructors? We need to rethink how we teach writing. Spanish for business textbooks on the market typically introduce students to the terminology associated with companies, products, services, human resources, marketing and trade, banking and finance, international business, import and export, etc. For each of these content areas, the same

format is adopted: a reading is followed by a series of activities aimed at checking comprehension and practicing new terms. Cultural information is often added as supplemental, not always fully integrated, and at times overgeneralized. The chapter then concludes with a model business letter that students are instructed to rewrite, changing a few facts, a name and a date, or substituting, for example, an order of office paper for one of pens and staples. In other cases, students are told to write a letter very different in content, purpose, and tone from the sample business letter in the chapter, without further guidance. A third type of activity commonly found is to ask students to translate a letter from English to Spanish, overlooking the fact that accurate translation is a combination of skills that takes years to develop. Thus, the different genres of business writing are not closely examined. In the end, the process of communicating in writing in the business environment is hardly discussed.

It would be incorrect to argue that business writing shares nothing with academic writing. Indeed, they have several characteristics in common: both need clarity, purpose for writing, and familiarity with the reader, for instance. Other fundamentals are organization in a logical and convincing manner, and using the amount of space appropriate to adequately cover their points. Also, both forms of writing have in common the use of the same *general* vocabulary and grammatical rules, with the exception that ads sometimes intentionally break rules to create a desired effect.

As mentioned earlier, *academic* writing in advanced-level courses in many departments of modern languages consists of essays and research papers, as well as exams, often related to civilization and literature. These are the most common *genres*. The main *purposes* for such writing are for students to explore topics related to cultural issues and literary topics discussed in these upper-level courses, present their personal views, or demonstrate that they understood the concepts taught. The reader is the instructor, who is an expert in the field or, at the very least, knows more about the topic than the student does. He or she evaluates the work and returns the assignment with a grade that reflects how well the student has understood the material, argued a viewpoint, or researched a topic. Such exploratory writing focused on the development of thought is often described as a “writing to learn.” Organization is important, but somewhat flexible, allowing for some individual expression.

Business writing encompasses different *genres*: e-mails, memos, letters, work orders, contracts, company brochure, sales materials, manuals, proposals, presentations, reports, and business and marketing plans. While

in academic writing, at the undergraduate level, many essays share a similar *structure* (introduction with thesis, body, and conclusion), business writing in each of these *genres* has its own *structure* and often a somewhat rigid *format*, and readers expect those to be followed closely.

Because it arises in response to a different set of problems and needs, business writing serves different *purposes*. This form of writing frequently focuses on conveying concrete facts, offering recommendations, and instructing the audience on a specific course of action. Generally business writers do not “write to learn,” to demonstrate that they have acquired some knowledge (Severson, n.d.).

Business writing may need to convince others, but the context and style are unlike those of the argumentative essay. A resume and a letter of presentation have to persuade a potential employer to offer an interview. A report has to persuade employees to follow certain procedures in order to improve performance or correct errors or problems in the company. A letter may try to persuade a customer to purchase a product or service.

Readership in the business environment may be managers, employees, customers, technicians and engineers, regulatory agencies and lawyers, stockholders, even the media, i.e., persons inside or outside of the organization (Severson, n.d.). There can be one single type of reader or multiple readers addressed simultaneously in the same document. On the other hand, in academic writing, students are seldom expected to target multiple audiences, particularly concurrently, and instructors seldom share undergraduate students’ writing with others.

The *format* in the academic papers second language learners produce in civilization and literature courses typically follows the requirements prescribed by the instructor, usually one-inch margins, double-spaced, twelve-point font, with the minimum or maximum number of words or pages specified. Usually visual appeal is not given much consideration or value.

In contrast, Severson (n.d.) observed that professional business writers often design their documents to be easily scanned and skimmed, allowing for readings at different paces. Empty space is strategically incorporated to help focus the reader’s attention. With the use of headings and subheadings as well as bullet points, they also deliberately make the structure of their documents more apparent. Tables, graphs, pictures, and other visual elements facilitating reading further are more common.

Yet another aspect in which the two styles of writing differ is *tone*. It expresses the writer’s attitude. In language programs, for several semesters

students are prompted to write primarily about themselves and their limited perspective. This use of the first person mirrors the natural language acquisition progression. In more advanced courses, students recognize that in research papers the tone is usually formal, authoritative, and often more detached, but inadvertently, they occasionally incorporate informal expressions and idioms that they have heard in a conversational context, possibly picked up during a study abroad stay, unaware that these are more appropriate in the colloquial oral register than in writing.

In business writing, the choice of *tone* varies with the content of the message, the situation, and the target reader or readers. The tone used to inform customers about a new product differs greatly from that used in a letter demanding immediate payment, from that of a memo informing employees of a new policy, or a message aimed at persuading them to adopt a new business practice. The tone is adjusted to what the writer might perceive as the reader's attitudes and values. Achieving the right tone is very important since this often determines whether or not a reader will be convinced to take action. When business writers inadvertently choose an inappropriate tone for their texts, it can lead to costly misunderstandings.

Business writing also frequently needs to be more condensed and concise than academic writing (Harvard Business, 2003), particularly when the primary purpose of the business document is to communicate hard facts. This is a significant difference in *style*. Chatty texts and the inclusion of filler sentences are more than a mere annoyance in business communications. Time is money. Simplicity and being straightforward are particularly valued, but this does not mean that the writing is mediocre. In their writing of business letters, our language majors tend to produce texts that are wordy, and include much unnecessary information. Increasingly with the expansion of digital communications, a concise style with content that is precise and clearly presented is expected.

On the other hand, to further develop their awareness of the variety of business genres, students should also analyze authentic ads in the second language, to discover the salient features of the language of advertising. This is another genre of business writing that differs significantly from the academic writing they normally practice. In advertising each word is carefully selected for maximum impact, and traditional rules of syntax are often broken, making the message more memorable. Advertisers often play with the language and are the source of many innovations that are later incorporated in the general lexicon.

Finally, our students must be aware that *ownership* and *life span* of the text are other essential differences. At the university, undergraduate students own their writing, but in business, the company or organization owns what is produced by its employees, some of which may be proprietary or confidential information that must be protected. Business documents may even end up as evidence in legal proceedings. Also, documents with business content are often stored on electronic databases and can be used over an indefinite period of time with the content mined long after the document was produced for use in long-term studies or for comparative ends.

On the other hand, college papers written by most undergraduates have a limited life span, typically that of the duration of one course. When instructors hand the assignments back, some need to be polished and submitted a second time after attempting to address the needs expressed by the course instructor. Then they often find their way to the recycling bin. (Severson, n.d.)

CONCLUSION

Many of our students will be hired in positions where they will need to basically set aside their academic writing style and adopt a *workplace style*. When we consider teaching business writing to non-native speakers and heritage students, we need to ask ourselves not only what knowledge they need, but also what skills these learners need to acquire to produce effective documents within the specific business environment.

It would be ideal to create composition courses that guide students to understand and practice how to write within their chosen major field, in our case, a course specifically designed to prepare students of Spanish for the demand of writing in that professional business context. Students transposing the writing style they have learned and practiced in the traditional curriculum risk being unsuccessful when applying those same techniques to business. In business, poor writing skills reflect negatively not just on the person who wrote the message, but also on the company as a whole.

Our students need to be taught explicitly the differences between academic and business writing, and given an opportunity to practice extensively the business style of writing used in the cultural and linguistic community with which they will work. Business language instructors need to expose students to a greater variety of business genres and model how to appropriately address multiple audiences, sometimes simultaneously. They should help students become more proficient in using different formatting, and might consider designing activities to practice economy of words, and maintain the tone and

level of formality in the documents. These recommendations overlap in part with what Reichelt, Lefkowitz, Rinnert, and Schultz (2012) have identified as key issues in foreign language writing.

Effective written communication in business requires the development of many skills and competencies in language learners currently not addressed in the textbooks on the market. And, although this is not specifically addressed in this article, culture should not be overlooked. As was pointed out by the HuffPost Latino Voices (2012) and Llopis (2013), to successfully tap into the Latino market, the focus should be dual: on language *and* culture.

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