



Helping Spanish SMEs Staff to Develop their Competence in Writing Business Letters

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the development of a website tool aimed at helping Spanish small and medium enterprises (SMEs) staff to write their commercial correspondence in English. It describes the steps involved in the tool system design process, making an emphasis on the methodological criteria and rational that guided us to develop the site. In order to obtain the material, a corpus of commercial correspondence written in English was collected and later analysed, applying a genre-based approach as established by Bhatia (1993) and Swales (1990). The findings provided the move structure and strategies of each type of letter as well as the lexico-grammatical realizations of each move which later would be standardised and presented to be used systematically in the composition of letters with the same communicative purpose. This work illustrates how a genre-based approach can successfully be applied to ESP materials development.

KEYWORDS: Discourse analysis, genre, business correspondence, web-based learning tool

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1. INTRODUCTION

The language of business communication has been frequently defined as ‘ritualistic’ and ‘formulaic’ (Ellis & Johnson, 1994; Vergaro, 2004), and although the community members’ nationality can be very varied, there are certain aspects of business communication that are culturally shared throughout the world for pragmatic reasons. The participants of this international community may speak different mother tongues and come from different cultural backgrounds, which surely structure discourse in different ways (e.g. Connor & Tuija, 1988; Ellis & Johnson, 1994; Jenkins and Hinds, 1987; Kong, 1998; Valero-Garcés, 1996; Vergaro, 2004), but in the context of global commerce they are bound to use English in an international accepted way in order to make themselves understood and carry out their transactions accordingly.

All this requires the members of the business discourse community not only to have a generic competence in their native language, but also to know the rules and conventions that govern communication in English in international commerce practice. However, surveys conducted by InterAct² (see ELISE report³) pointed out that English speaking companies regularly come across language and cultural barriers when they want to make business with companies abroad, especially with small and medium enterprises (SMEs). This is true when trading with Spain, where, although most employees of large companies and organizations use English regularly in their foreign business relations, there are still many entrepreneurs and employees of small and family businesses who have insufficient knowledge of this language. Even those who have good command of grammar rules and lexicon fail to communicate appropriately and effectively in particular social interactions, because they do not master the unwritten specific rules of these communicative events in English and this may affect their business relationships. The violation of socio-pragmatic rules create miscommunication problems that may not be forgiven by native speakers or other interlocutors or readers who are better trained in social interaction, as highlighted by Al-Ali (2006), Boxer (1995), Koike (1995), Maier (1992) and Thomas (1983), among others.

With this in mind, we set up to develop a tool capable of helping the small businesses' staff in our region. The answers to a basic questionnaire distributed among a large number of regional SMEs confirmed that correspondence is the most common communicative activity in their international business relations. Consequently, commercial letters were to be the focus of the study because of their central importance in the course of international transactions carried out by the target SMEs. A commercial transaction includes

² InterAct is a management consultancy specialising in international cross-border communication and the use of languages which has undertaken several research studies on how languages are used in business, including the Leonardo da Vinci project ELISE. <http://www.interactint.com/> (last retrieved on 29th May 2009)

³ ELISE is a European language and cultural training project supported by the European Commission, whose report *European Language and International Strategy Development in SMEs* is available at http://cst.dk/elise/ENG_overview.rtf (last retrieved on 29th May 2009)

several stages performed by different communicative events such as making enquiries, providing and confirming information, quoting prices, establishing terms, placing orders, requesting payment etc, most of which are realized by letters.

Since the content of the body of a business letter is not as rich in vocabulary and expression as that of general English, and it is based on a core of the most useful structures and vocabulary for this context, their writers and readers do not always need to know the full complexities of English grammar and idiom. The contacts are ritualised and the language used is formulaic and polite, short and direct, referential and objective rather than subjective and personal and, therefore, there is a preference for clear, logical concise discourse (Ellis & Johnson, 1994). Due to the relative uniformity of the move structure and lexico-grammatical content of the letters, we thought that an immediate and operative tool to help employees of small businesses in our region to write their commercial correspondence in English would be possible. Therefore, the website (**the full name of the website has been omitted to avoid the authors' identification**) was developed with ready-to-use materials, easy-to-manage and flexible enough to serve both as a helping tool at work and as an autonomous e-learning device. The aim was to compile a comprehensive collection of sentences, phrases and even paragraphs of high occurrence in business letters which could be used as patterns in a wide range situations or communicative events likely to happen in the process of an international commerce transaction, and thus fulfil the requirements of the potential letter writers. This meant examining the generic options and identifying regularly occurring component moves which are employed to articulate the communicative purpose of the different types of commercial letter and that distinguish a particular communicative event from another. The analytical approach chosen for the study was that of genre as established by Bhatia (1993) and Swales (1990).

This paper reports on the methodological criteria and the rationale behind the development of the tool, and describes the steps involved in the design process:

- Identification of the target user/learner, their specific context and needs
- Collection and classification of a corpus of commercial letters
- Study of the generic options to establish the move structure patterns and strategy that are employed to articulate the communicative purpose of each type of letter
- Selection of the lexico-grammatical realizations of each move, which will be used for the composition of the letter texts
- Design of the content delivery in the form of a user-friendly website.

The purpose is to illustrate how the discourse analysis of the commercial letters genre has provided the conceptual framework for the selection, organisation and presentation of

the content materials, which has turned out to be a practical means for the planning and design of an operative web tool with comprehensive and realistic materials, presented in a user-friendly format.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The corporate world possesses language genres to accomplish commercial aims (Van Nus, 1999) and research into the language register used in business practice has led to the classification of its constituent texts into specific genres, being business letters one of them (Bhatia, 1993; Ghadessy, 1993). As Swales' (1990: 58) general notion of genre describes, this shared purpose constitutes the rationale for the genre that shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constraints choice of content and style. The notion of 'move' has widely been used in the analysis of discourse patterns, being 'move' a meaningful unit represented in lexical-grammatical forms and related to the communicative purposes of the activity in which members of a community are engaged. There seems to be a consistency in the way specialists organise their overall message, and the analysis of structural organisation of text-genres reveals preferred ways of communicating intention in specific areas of practice (Bhatia, 1993).

As such genre, business letters have a recurrent schematic discourse structure which is recognised and used by the members of the business community. Bhatia (1993) studied the move structure of promotion letters and job applications to confirm that writers tend to use similar patterns of move structure across the textualisations of individual genres, according to the genre communicative purpose, and suggested that the findings of the discourse analysis of the professional genres can have a wide range of applied linguistics purposes, specially for designing ESP teaching resources. Henry and Roseberry (2001) also examined a small corpus of application letters written by native speakers of English in order to identify their component moves and their most frequent linguistic features. Dos Santos (2002) followed Swales and Bhatia's model to analyse the communicative purposes, moves and salient lexico-grammatical realisations in a corpus of business letters, which she called "business letters of negotiations". Flowerdew and Wan (2006) examined the move structure of a small corpus of tax computation letters and demonstrated the power of traditional genre analysis, as developed by Bhatia and Swales, and praises the value of the data obtained from language in use which can be carried into the teaching of ESP.

It can be claimed that within the genre of business letters, it is possible to distinguish other universal sub-genres or repertoires (requesting information, offering prices, placing orders, promoting sales etc) which can be easily classified, since they are clearly intended to perform a determined action within the business organization (Miller, 1984). Ghadessy (1993:162) states that "Written business communication comprises a chain of

communicative events each of which is realized in the form of a letter –an extended turn-with a certain discourse structure”. However, as it is almost impossible to determine the components and length of this chain, due to the vast concerns of modern business practice, we limited our study only to communicative events in the form of written correspondence that take place in the actual commercial transaction between supplier and buyer. This chain of events can be compared to a simple chronological sequence of ‘initiation’ and ‘response’ as in a question answer situation in which each occurrence of initiation or response can be considered as a ‘completed turn’ with their particular discourse structure (Ghadessy, 1993), and all the occurrences together perform a commercial process.

The types of the commercial letter can be as varied as the different situations that arise in the social context of an enterprise. Therefore, in order to classify them, the regular transactions carried out between seller and buyer, which are the source and reason for the written interaction between both agents, have to be taken into account (Marcén, 1998). Giannetti (1996: 578) describes what a business transaction represents as “a particular instance of social and economic exchange and consists of a *business interaction* and a logically and chronologically ordered set of actions (...) to be carried out in the real world by both agents”. These chronologically ordered set of actions which implicitly comprise a usual commercial transaction can be classified according to what Yli-Jokipii (1994) calls ‘transactional stages and situations’, and that she groups into three main categories where all the commercial correspondence can be included:

| Transactional Stage | Situation Type |
|---------------------|--|
| Pre-deal | Inquiry Request for quotation Offer Quotation |
| On-deal | Order Acceptance of order Shipping Payment arrangements |
| Post-delivery | Reminder Complaint Adjustment |

Table 1. Yli-Jokipii’s (1994: 51)

This classification was to be used as the basis for the criteria to follow for our letter collection and later classification. However, the variety of letters collected showed four more communicative situations than in Yli-Jokipii’s classification (see table 2).

Regarding the general structure of business letters, there are fixed elements considered ‘stable units’, or what Van Nus (1999) calls ‘standard structural units for business letters’ – letterhead, inside address, reference, date, salutation, subject line, pre-close, close, signature and postscript-, which together with a structured body of the letter that adjusts to some conventional rules, differentiate them not only from general English letters but from other business language genres too. Nevertheless, non native speakers often find difficulties to write the main body of the letter, which follows a less predictable form (Flowerdew & Wan, 2006). This comes to reinforce our initial intuition that we should focus on the body content of the different types of commercial letter and try to find the most prototypical patterns, which would constitute the basis for the development of the learning material to be applied by the target users of the tool when writing letters with similar communicative purpose.

Following Bhatia (1993) and Swales’ (1990) model, and other genre analysts such as Al-Ali (2004, 2006), (Baker 2001), Dudley-Evans (1994), Mauranen (1993) and (Skelton, 1994), the analysis of the letters was to be carried out at both discoursal and lexicogrammatical levels, placing the focus not just on the language, but also on the conventions and the procedures which determine such (sub)genres. Analysing the moves and smaller stretches of language in their textual and social contexts involves assigning functional aspects and a pragmatic function to the sections of language which contribute the schematic structure through which the communicative purpose of a text is achieved. The results will provide the required genre-specific features that will be used for the explanation of the content, function and structure, as well as for the instructions on the composition of each type of letter.

III. METHOD

The first phase of the project implied making decisions to determine the discourse community for which *inglescomercial* was to be aimed at, the corpus to be collected for validation and the procedure to carry out the analysis.

III. 1. Discourse community

First, it was required a definition of the target group for whom the web tool was meant. We wanted to know their profile, their needs, constrains and context as well as their level of the foreign language. A survey instrument was, therefore, developed with a view to confirming the activities for which the employees of local SMEs need to use English and the linguistic difficulties they encounter when carrying out such activities. For that, the following decisions were made:

- Limit our research to the small and medium businesses of our community

- Seek a sample size of about 300 SMEs
- Devise a questionnaire showing
 - a) The activities in which the employees needed to communicate in English
 - b) The actual linguistic needs of the SMEs and the English level and skills of their employees
 - c) The potential suitability for a supporting self-access-web based tool to help business people with their communication in English.

Since not all the questionnaires were answered and returned, the data collected provided only an example of the SMEs in the region, rather than a statistically valid sample representative of the entire small business sector. However, the sample supplied valuable information and the findings were relevant to look for issues suitable to cater for the SMEs linguistic needs.

According to the results obtained in the survey, we could determine that the potential users of the tool are professionals of local SMEs involved in international commerce and are not in the educational system any longer. They want to achieve precise objectives, are strongly influenced by the sense of purpose and highly aware of their time constraints. The level of English of these Spanish professionals is intermediate, they have not received any training in using the foreign language in the context of business, but have some experience in letter writing. Nevertheless, they often apply wrong vocabulary and structures and are not fully acquainted with the protocol and the strategies which rule this type of discourse. This may be due to the influence of their mother tongue and their cultural background as well as of the patterns for formal letters in Spanish.

The needs analysis also confirmed that commercial correspondence is the most frequent means of communication in the process of a commercial transaction and it becomes of higher reliance in the case of international transactions, where regular face-to-face communication is not possible. As the language of international commerce is English, the informants reported that they do not feel confident enough when they have to write the letters in that language, and that this may become a stressful task since the success of the transaction often depends on the efficiency of the correspondence with the prospective buyer or seller. Moreover, letters in the context of commerce have not only an informative nature, they also have legally-binding value. The survey also showed that employees are unable to improve their English level by themselves and, consequently, cannot develop sensitivity and awareness of the socio-pragmatic resources of this language, mainly because of discontinuity in their study. Thus, courses of English and specific textbooks or guides on how to write business letters do not often turn out effective due to constraints of time and,

sometimes, cost. Therefore, the suggestion of the development of a self-access and operative online tool to help employees of small businesses in our region to write their commercial correspondence in English was welcome.

III. 2. Corpus collection

The first basic corpus oriented action was to choose realistic exemplifications of commercial letters. The selected data for the study consisted of 117 original letters, 59 of which had been produced by British companies and the other 58 were provided by local Spanish SMEs and were obtained either through contacts or as a result of a number of visits to the actual enterprises. In both cases, letters were written by native speakers of the corresponding language, and only those whose communicative purpose was related to one of the events in the process of a commercial transaction were taken into account. As companies are reluctant to release data from their files and the corpus was a small one, for the analysis we also included secondary data from manuals. The following decisions and criteria were taken for their collection:

- There should be letters covering the Yli-Jokipii's three comprehensive transactional stages.
- The letters should be classified according to the logical sequence of events within their transaction stage, and named after the function (communicative purpose) they realize by themselves in the transactional process.

III. 3. The analysis

The first stage of our analysis was to classify the letters of our corpus according to Yli-Jokipii's (1994) stages, and then look for examples which could represent the events within each stage. However, the communicative purposes of the items in our corpus not always coincided with the 11 situation types in Yli-Jokipii's list. Since we could not obtain examples related exclusively to 'shipping' nor to 'complaint' and 'adjustment', but we had several letters related to payment and claiming for late payment, we decided to introduce 'Requesting payment' as the third category. The result was a classification of 13 types of commercial letter, named after the function (communicative purpose) they realize by themselves in the transactional process.

1. Cartas previas a la transacción (Pre-deal letters)

- 1.1. Inicios de contactos y solicitud de información (First contact and enquiries)
- 1.2. Contestación ofreciendo precios y condiciones (Reply to enquiries: offering prices and conditions)

| |
|--|
| <p>2. Cartas durante el desarrollo de la transacción (On-deal letters)</p> <p>2.1. Solicitud de un pedido (Placing an order)</p> <p>2.2. Confirmación de un pedido (Acceptance of order)</p> <p>2.3. Comunicación de variaciones en el pedido (Variation/changes in the order)</p> <p>2.4. Rechazo de un pedido (Refusing an order)</p> <p>2.5. Retraso en la entrega (Delay in delivery)</p> <p>2.6. Aviso de envío (Advice of despatch)</p> <p>3. Cartas posteriores a la transacción: pago y reclamaciones (Requesting payment)</p> <p>3.1. Envío de la factura (Sending invoice)</p> <p>3.2. Confirmación de pago (Advice of payment)</p> <p>3.3. Reclamaciones de pago (Requests for payment)</p> <p>3.3.1. Primera reclamación (First reminder)</p> <p>3.3.2. Segunda reclamación (Second reminder)</p> <p>3.3.3. Tercera reclamación (Third reminder)</p> |
|--|

Table 2

This is the classification of the commercial letters as presented on the homepage of *inglescomercial* (an English version has been added now for this paper).

The second step was to analyse the move structure of all the selected specimens. Initially, the analysis of the corpus confirmed the structural elements which are common to the initial and final parts of all letters, as already represented by the original list of standard structural units provided by Van Nus (1999):

| |
|---|
| <p>Letterhead: Carries company information such as name, address</p> <p>Inside Address: Gives name and address of receiver</p> <p>Reference: Encodes the letter for filing purposes</p> <p>Date: Includes date and town from where the letter was sent</p> <p>Salutation: Signals the beginning of the letter</p> <p>Subject Line: Prepares the body of the letter (optional)</p> <p>Pre-close: Prepares for the close</p> <p>Close: Closes the letter</p> <p>Signature: Includes information about sender such as name, position</p> <p>PostScript: Gives additional information after the close of the letter (if needed)</p> |
|---|

Table 3

They would later be taken into account for the instructions on the layout of a business letter.

However, our main concern was to detect the set of component moves used by writers to organise the body text of the letters, so as to identify coincidences which could reveal patterns of language use. Based on the notion of move stated by Bhatia (1993) and Swales (1990), and following genre analysts such as Al-Ali (2004, 2006), Dudley-Evans (1994), Mauranen, (1993) and (Skelton, 1994), we determined the component moves by assigning a function to each stretch of written portion of the texts which had a particular minor function in relation to the overall purpose of the genre. We coded the moves for each of the 13 types of commercial letter or (sub)genre, guided by knowledge of the generic rhetorical

organisational conventions, inference from content, text divisions and explicit linguistic clues.

The next step in the analysis was to search for the most frequent lexico-grammatical realisations of the component moves. We were interested in those features that were directly relevant to the context of the situation. For example, a lot more of attention was given to searching for relevant groups, phrases and sentences, as meaningful units, rather than to isolated words.

In the analysis, we selected the most recurrent moves of each type of commercial letter and their corresponding lexico-grammatical realizations, which then could be standardised and used for the composition of the commercial letters. It is important to point out that, as the aim of the work was to develop an easy-manageable tool for business people who do not have a high level of English, the results of the analyses were simplified and selected according to their frequency of occurrence in the specimens studied, and with the intention of representing several cases:

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| Type of letter | no. of letters | no. of typified moves | no. lex.-gram. items |
|------------------------------|----------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| First contact and enquiries: | 9 | 4 | 35 |
| Reply to enquiries: | 5 | 4 | 59 |
| Placing an order: | 8 | 5 | 72 |
| Acceptance of an order: | 3 | 2 | 19 |
| Variation in the order: | 3 | 3 | 18 |
| Refusing an order: | 5 | 3 | 27 |
| Delay in delivery: | 5 | 4 | 21 |
| Advice of despatch: | 4 | 4 | 17 |
| Sending invoice: | 3 | 3 | 8 |
| Advice of payment: | 4 | 3 | 8 |
| First reminder: | 4 | 2 | 7 |
| Second reminder: | 3 | 2 | 6 |
| Third reminder: | 3 | 4 | 6 |
| Total: | 59 | 43 | 319 |

Table 4

Due to space limitations, in this paper we will illustrate, by means of a schematic representation, only how we have dealt with the findings of the analysis of the letters enquiry (1.1. First contact and enquiries, in table 2), in order to show how the resulting moves and lexico-grammatical representations have been typified and standardised for further development of the materials of the web tool. Table 4 represents a summary of the findings.

| Structural moves | Description of their function | Examples of sentences, phrases & expressions for each move |
|--|--|---|
| Move 1: Referring to the source of information. | The writer states where, how and when s/he learnt about the addressee: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - at a trade fair - in a publication - through an institution, organisation or person. | I/We saw (product) displayed/demonstrated on your stand at X Exhibition that was held in... With reference to your advertisement in the (name of publication)... We have seen/read your advertisement in the (name of publication)... We were given your name by/ Your name has been given us by... You were recommended to us by ... |
| Move 2: Establishing credentials | The writer gives a brief introduction of the Business s/he represents by giving some information about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - business activity + size of the business - size of the market | We are a SME in the sector of ... We are one of the main producers of... We are a large store/shop/chain of retailers involved in... We are (leading) dealers in... Our business is involved in... There is a steady/large demand here for (product) that you manufacture... Demand for this type of (product) is not high, but sales this year will probably exceed €--- |
| Move 3. Soliciting action | This is where the writer makes the actual enquiry, requesting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - catalogue, price list, product details, samples etc - quotation, terms, and information about | Please send us... Could/Would/Will you please send... Please let us have details of... I/We would appreciate a sample of... Please quote us for... We are (also) interested in... |

| | | |
|------------------------------|--|---|
| Move 4: Polite ending | other transaction details | I/We would (also) like to know whether... Could you please tell/inform us Could you please give me/us further information about |
| | - the visit of a representative | I should appreciate it if you arrange for your representative to call... |
| | The writer ends the letter with a polite and conventional expression | Thank you for your attention We/I look forward to hearing from you. We/I would be grateful for an early reply. |

Table 5

We proceeded the same way with the findings collected from the other 13 types of commercial letters

Additionally, we selected 146 items of vocabulary and commercial terms (e.g. methods of payment, transport arrangements etc.) for drawing up a glossary. Thus, the genre analysis showed the shared features by each type of commercial letter, in terms of discursal organisation and the lexico-grammatical realizations of their functional text units, which were to be taken as the basis for the contents of *inglescomercial*.

IV. APPLICATION OF THE RESULTS TO A WEB-BASED SYSTEM LEARNING TOOL

We set out to devise the web page *inglescomercial* bearing in mind that it was not to be designed as a course syllabus. Its contents did not require time planning or progress gradation as different from those in a regular course, nevertheless, the selection and presentation of contents had to be carefully planned. Language presentation would be arranged according to the internal discursal organisation of each type of letter and these, in turn, would be classified by the chronological course of actions they realize. Although they are specific language materials lodged in the Internet to meet the specific needs of a target group, they are not learning online materials, there is no tutor or other students to interact with. These are materials constrained by the needs of the target group, their context and the channel; they provide standardised language to serve as models to write business correspondence related to international trade.

Inglescomercial was meant to be an electronic and automatic tool which could provide immediate access to the aid or language required to fulfil the writer's purpose when writing letters in English, and we also had to ensure a clear browse system to lead users easily about the contents of the website.

IV.1. Contents

Once completed the comprehensive analysis of each type of commercial letter and at sight of the findings, the following considerations for the selection of contents were taken into account:

- The range of letters had to cover the main and basic procedures of a commercial transaction.
- The examples of letters had to serve as type models⁴ (additional specimens were also chosen for further reference and exemplification of different text contexts or more specific situations).
- Explanations about each type of letter had to include its general function, protocol and commented move structure.
- The collection of phrases and sentences had to be enough as to provide several choices for each move and style of addressing the reader depending on the degree of formality/familiarity.
- A corresponding number of complete stretches of language and short paragraphs contextualising the phrases were to be included too.

The enumeration of the structural elements which are common to the initial and final parts of all letters -as already represented by the list of standard structural units provided by Van Nus (1999) -constituted the basis for devising the first content item of the web tool: instructions on how to edit the layout of a business letter. Additional explanations of each element communicative purpose, together with protocol indications for salutation and close of the letter are given. This section is addressed to those users who are novice in the writing of business letters.

It was also decided to add some complementary useful materials such as an English-Spanish glossary containing the most frequent vocabulary, commercial and transportation terms and acronyms, together with a number of classified freely available web links, which were considered valuable resources that can enhance the benefits of the original tool. They provide ready online information concerning business letter writing, international trade proceedings and links to bilingual and monolingual, general and specific language dictionaries.

Further considerations led us to assess the usefulness of a compendium of well chosen and contextualised sentences in English to be used by people who might not have enough command of the foreign language to understand their meaning. In order to make sure that they would be used accurately, it was concluded that, taking the Spanish letters from the

⁴ The actual texts of the authentic letters have been modified, in order to present standard and comprehensive models for better understanding and practical use of the target audience. Thus, none of the letters included in the website, either as models or as examples, reproduce the original text.

corpus as a reference, an equivalent translation of all phrases and sentences into the users' mother tongue should be added as well as clear instructions on how to complete their textual context.

IV. 2. DESCRIPTION OF THE WEBPAGE INTERFACE AND THE CRITERIA FOR THE PRESENTATION OF THE CONTENTS

The core materials of the website, those concerning commercial letter writing, had to be presented according to clear criteria, and the leading criterion was to proceed from the general to the particular, i.e. from the sections and language general to all commercial letters to the specific discursual features of each type of letter and of their corresponding moves. It was paramount to achieve an interface which could provide practical usability and conform to our target group's needs and constrains. According to Jakob Nielsen's (2000) usability studies, more than half of all the Internet users are unwilling to look around a website and want to find specific information as fast as possible; a website needs a clear structure and user-friendly navigation properties and this must be true not only on the home page but on all pages of the site. For this, a logical and accurate categorisation of the contents had to be determined as well as the design of a simple browse system to lead users easily about the website.

Categorisation is a process of bringing order out of confusion by organising information according to logical criteria. The aim of categorisation in a website is to offer a range of possibilities and options to help users find the specific information they are looking for. The following basic actions have helped to shape the design of the web-content and are further described below:

- Classify a range of categories under which contents could be organised on the website.
- Choose clear criteria for the supracategories: instructions on how to edit the letter layout, stage of the transaction and purpose of the letter, example letters, glossary, acronyms and additional online resources.
- Choose criteria for the subcategories: moves, lexico-grammatical items and its examples.
- Finding suitable headings for each category and subcategory.
- Present a logical search structure which linked ranges of supracategories and subcategories.
- Make some of the information accessible from different categories.
- Write the language of descriptions and explanations in a complete but concise manner, appropriate for the user and the channel.

Thus, in *inglescomercial*, the initial classification of the core materials obeys to the commercial transaction chronological order, but then, instructions and language have been

categorised relating to each other by a general-to-specific clickstream which connects them in a sequence of parallel deeper planes.

The classification of the 13 letter types (as it appears in table 2) is presented on the homepage of the website as part of the table of contents, where each item has been converted into an electronic entry-link to the corresponding description of the (sub)genre. This description includes a model example of the particular letter type and an explanation of the purpose of the corresponding communicative event. In the model letter the main rhetorical moves are set by numbering the corresponding paragraphs or text stretches. These moves are described as the steps needed for the appropriate realization of the letter in question. This first introductory page on the type of letter is meant to help the learner understand and interpret the generic structure of the particular (sub)genre, and it highlights the main discursual strategies that are conventionally used to achieve the corresponding communicative purpose.

At the end of each explanatory paragraph associated to its corresponding discursual move there is an entry-link to a different page which provides the linguistic realizations of the move in question, in the form of phrases or sentences, discursual conventions which are typically associated with the (sub)genre, and that are exemplified into appropriate textual context. These, are accompanied by instructions on how to complete them with the business/transaction details and/or how to contextualise them in their corresponding paragraph. In most cases, they only need to be adapted to the details of the enterprise and the transaction which is taking place by introducing the particular data.

All realizations of moves and their possible variations are further illustrated in full textual context in several examples of letters to which the user can access by additional links presented below every set of phrases/sentences. Additionally, a glossary of key vocabulary and commercial terms appearing in these commercial letters is provided.

The following flow chart attempts to represent the clickstream of the search for information about how to write a letter of enquiry:

Inglescomercial homepage shows three transaction stages → first stage: letters of enquiry → model letter + move structure + explanation of function → choose move → language to be used in the move + explanation and contextualised examples → choose other moves to complete the letter (at all the composition stages there are links to see language contextualised in full example letters and their corresponding translation into Spanish)

The user can always return to initial explanations or other types of letter from the bar menu at the top of the page.

The explanations do not contain any linguistic or technical terminology; they have been presented in communicative terms. The purpose of such explanations is to make the

learner aware of the strategies that an expert genre writer employs to achieve his/her communicative goals. It is, of course assumed that the learner shares the knowledge, experience and some conventions of the specialist community associated with commerce.

V. FINAL REMARKS

This paper has reported on the creation of a tool in the form of a website aimed at helping Spanish small and medium enterprises staff to write their commercial correspondence in English, thus showing how a genre analysis approach can be applied to the development of ESP materials for professional use. In order to ensure that the materials were relevant to the users, a needs analysis was carried out to obtain information on the linguistic needs related to the practice activities of the SMEs of a small community of Spain. The results of the analysis confirmed that writing letters is the most typical communicative activity carried out in international business transactions; it also showed the difficulties many small business staff encounter in carrying out such activity in English.

The material contained in *inglescomercial* has not been developed with teaching purposes, but as a helpful tool for individuals involved in international business transactions; nevertheless, it can also be used and exploited by teachers as complementary teaching material in and outside class, since in its design, both pedagogical and methodological issues, very similar to those required for the design of a course of ESP, have been considered.

The contents of this particular website did not require time planning, unlike those in a regular course, but their classification by categories had to be carefully established. Thus, a pattern of interface was devised with which users could easily get acquainted and could quickly find what they needed to write their letters. For this, a clear classification by categories and subcategories electronically linked to each other was established, making it possible to move from general to specific: from the description of a type of letter, function and moves to the particular sentence or word writers need to use.

Although tests and assessment of the web usability and the content utility have not been performed yet, many users have reported its benefits through different media and business institutions. As Bhatia (1993: 193) suggests “The real test or success of any ESP course should be based on the performance of learners in actual target-situations, academic or professional, for which they have been trained”. The good acceptance of the web tool and its dissemination in some Spanish media (TV, radio and newspapers) give also some evidence of its usefulness.

However, we are aware there are many issues this paper does not address, such as the influence of both corporate and national culture in the choices of linguistic items, to mention

only some. In addition, implementation of a method of evaluation and assessment of the web tool is also needed and it is object of our next work.

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