

Text Organisational Strategies in University Students' Letters of Complaint

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This paper examines how Francophone university learners of English make use of text organization strategies in their letters of complaint. Building on Connor et al (1995) Text Organization Model and Penelope Brown and Levinson (1987) Politeness theory, it was found out that these learners' scripts suffer from some text organization and politeness errors. These students face problems with their use of enclosures, buffers, addresses, complimentary close and signature. In fact, only 5 (10%) of the letters had enclosures, none had buffer (00%) and 10 (20%) had request for action. It was realized that though most of the letters had subjects, they were, however, wrongly placed above the salutation. As far as politeness strategy is concerned, most of the letters were void of polite language. This might be as a result of their linguistic background. We therefore suggest that to help solve the issue of linguistic interference and communicative competence, teachers teaching these students should employ the comparative and contrastive methods of language teaching highlighting the commonalities and dissimilarities between English and French grammar.

Keywords: text, organizational strategy, letters of complaint, lettres modernes Francaise

Introduction

Writing is the ability of creating pieces of written work such as poems, essays, dissertations. It has been observed over the years that people are less paying attention to the way they write and are unable to produce flawless texts. The advent of the New Information and Communication Technologies (NICT) is greatly influencing people's communication habits. According to Awake (February 2012), people that use NICT do so because they are cheap and less time consuming compared to sending traditional letters. Everyone is connected to the Web. Just a click and we are open to the window of the world. This situation has restricted the writing of traditional letters to more formal contexts including job application, petition writing, taking permission and complaining about unpublished marks to name these few. In Cameroon, the addictive use of NICT goes hand in gloves with the falling standards of written language. Students are more concerned with the message than with the form. Many schools and universities have replaced hand written applications or complaints with complaint forms. A cursory look at the formal written production of secondary school learners attests to this fact. Their writings are full of shortening and abbreviations, syntactic reduction, punctuation and capitalization innovations, grammar and spelling, use of emoticons, letter/number homophones, phonetic respelling, accent stylizations,

omission of punctuation, “G” clipping, letter substitution, graphic fusion, letter omission, letter appellation and letter transposition. It is against this backdrop that this study sets out to examine the letters of complaint by francophone learners of English in a bid to establish the text organizational strategies implore by these students to put across their message.

Background

The concept of communicative competence means the progressive acquisition of the ability to use a language to achieve one's communicative goals. It involves the negotiation of meaning between two or more persons sharing the same symbolic system. It is context-specific and based on a communicative situation. Communicators should master the appropriate choice of register and style as well as the apt use of communicative acts. However, the normal progression in the learning of any language, that is listening, speaking, reading and writing, should be scrupulously followed when dealing with ESL and EFL learners. This is so since many learners can perfectly speak a language, but they cannot write it perfectly since they ignore or fail to recognize the context of writing (Njwe, 2012). To compound the issue, francophone learners of English are exposed to official letter writing only at the second cycle of secondary school education. Francophone learners of English are exposed to Pidgin English, national languages and Camfranglaise which influenced their written production. The students' first language rhetorical patterns and norms influence the second language behavior. In fact, the students should be taught to use language for a range of different purpose and functions. They should equally vary the language according to the setting and the participants. Knowing how to produce different types of texts for various communicative intents is equal vital. By and large, their knowledge of grammar (linguistic competence) is as important as their knowledge of pragmatic (Communicative competence). Many researchers have found out why most second language learners' performances in essay writing are below expectations. Their works are generally based on argumentative and descriptive essays. However, very little has been investigated on formal letter of complaint. Connor et al. (1995) presents a work on text organizational errors found in Korean letter writing with regard to the politeness strategies and socio-cultural transfer.

Aims of the Study

This study sets out to examine the various text organizational strategies employed by Lettres Modernes Française (LMF) students of the University of Yaounde 1 in their letter of complaints in English. The study equally intends to state the various politeness strategies used by these students. Furthermore, paper examines the grammatical errors found in the letter of complaints written by the students. Finally, the study proposes pedagogic solutions in order to ameliorate students' letters of complaints.

Research Questions

In order to carry out this research, the following research questions were asked and answered in this study:

- (1) What constitute the macro-structure of LMF students' letters of complaint in English?
- (2) What text organizational strategy errors do they commit?
- (3) What politeness strategies do they employ in their letters?
- (4) What accounts for these errors?
- (5) What pedagogic measures can be instituted to overcome these problems?

Hypothesis

This study is built on the hypothetical premise that the letters of complaints written by LMF students of the University of Yaounde 1 in English suffer from text organizational strategies.

Theoretical Framework

Connor, David and Rycker (1995) Text Organisational Model is deemed appropriate for this study. They came up with meaningful components that a letter of complaints should have. They elaborated on the following aspects: the address of the addresser, address of the addressee, the subject, identification of the problem, request of action, a topic shift or buffer, signature, name, title, enclosure and complementary close. The second theory used in this study is Brown and Levinson's (1997) Politeness Model. They hold that politeness strategies have to do with maintaining face and softening face threats.

Review of Related Literature

Murphy and New (1996) conducted a case study on contrastive rhetorical strategies for complaints in international business letters written by Koreans and American. Their findings illustrate that the native English speaker's complaint messages were direct and linear in their rhetorical patterns and impersonalizing the problem by their lexical choice while Korean speaker's letters presented emotional expression personalizing the writers.

Suhyum and Seungwan (1998) examine politeness cross-cultural differences. It is a linguistic survey on how American and Korean participants respond to the given situations using politeness strategies. They investigate the interface between pragmatics and sociolinguistics and studied the manifestation of politeness strategies. The participants were asked to borrow a laptop from their boss or from a friend because theirs were out of order. Asking from a friend will lead the participants to use a NPS. While asking from their boss would lead to use PPS. The channel of communication used here is a questionnaire. They compared the results between model persons of each national and find that they show some similarities.

Jihyon Park (2001) analysed Koreans EFL learner's politeness strategies used in their complaints. In this study, the speech acts set of complaints produced by Korean EFL learners by Koreans was analysed. The issue is to see their pragmatic transfer in their complaints from their Native language (Korean) to English. Students were asked to complain about their grades. The findings suggest that participants' performance of speech act reflects their inter language transfer which they established in their Second Language independent of their First Language.

Bruce Fraser (2010) focused on the new approaches to hedging. He noticed the fact that when non-native speakers fail to hedge appropriately, they may be perceived as impolite, offensive, arrogant or simply inappropriate. His work illustrates diverse ways of hedging with reference to Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies.

Simo Bobda (2000) distinguished the different characteristics of a formal letter and its macrostructure and some problems related to it in the Cameroonian context. According to him, formal correspondence in Cameroon violates some of the conventions of the Anglo-Saxon formal letter model. He stated some examples at the level of the place of the sender's and receiver's addresses, the salutation and opening sentences just to name a few. He equally laid emphasis on the misuse of punctuation marks.

George Echu et al. (2008) presented a course on letter writing and some samples of formal and informal letters. According to them, the official letter is formal and it shows a high degree of linguistic correctness, factual precisions, economy and respect whereas, an informal letter is circulated to friends, family members and acquaintances. They emphasized the point that a letter is very similar to an essay or a composition because, it must be organized in such a way that the ideas flow logically.

Data Presentation

This section focuses on the presentation and analysis of data collected from 50 francophone learners. The data was analysed following Connor et al (1995) Text Organisational Strategies and Levinson and Brown (1987) Politeness Strategies.

The Addresses

Most of the letters studied had only one address. Very few of them had two. In fact, by way of percentage, 78% of the letters had just an address while 22% had two addresses. However, all the letters which had a single address had the addresses located at the right-hand corner. In most of the letters, the PO Box and the telephone number of the sender are written on the same line and generally immediately below the name. The word PO Box is variably written as P.O. Box (61%), P.O box (20%) or PO: box (19%). As far as the date is concerned, most the date begins with the name of the town. For example, Yde le 19th March 2013 (52%), on the 15th March 2013 (11%), 19/03/2013 (32%) and 21 March 2013 (5%) are the various versions of date indentified. However, concerning the receiver's address, it was realized that it contained only the name of the receiver and or his profession. For example, Dr wanji Elvis (71%), Language Lecturer (10%) and Dr Wanji Elvis, lecturer of language (19%).

Salutation

Close to 35 letters did not have opening salutation. In 15 letters it appears after the subject instead of before. In 14 it appears between the receiver's address and the subject. It is often times followed by a comma and most often by a full stop. It is written as follows: Dear Sir (50%), Dear sir (30%), Language Lecturer (16%), Mr Professor of Language (4%).

The Subject

The subject appears down the receiver's address and always begins with a preposition. For example: *for a complain about my mark of language, about a complaining in language, a complain about my bilingual formation mark*. In about 41 (82%) letters, it is preceded by the word *objet* or *subject* and it is underlined.

Identification of the Problem

This section is located below the subject of the letter. Here, the learners present themselves and give some information about the purpose of the letter. We had expressions such as 'I am writing to expose my problem about the problem that I saw in the result board', 'I was exceedingly shocked when I saw a mark which is negative in my copy after the delivery', 'It is with big pleasure that I write this letter to your big personality for an important cause'.

Discussion of Relevant Information

Only 7 (14%) letters provided details about the problem already presented. The rest did not. Most of the writers were circumlocuting instead of giving relevant information as if they ignore the reason for which they are writing. Those who stated the relevant information usually begin with 'in fact', 'at this effect' and 'to state'.

Request of Action

Only 10 (20%) letters request for action. The other 40 (80%) did not. Those which had request for action, it should be noted that they were not well formulated. For example, *I want you doing the correction of my copy\ I would like to tell you to see this mark.*

Topic Shift

21 (42%) letters developed information about an improvement in performance or promise to work harder.

Complementary Close

Most letters did not carry this. When they did, they wrote two or three in the same place. For example: Yours faithfully, your student, Faithful, thank you, Your faithfully, at your student, thank you, your fateful. Only 11 (22%) letters had complementary close while the rest 39 (78%) did not. Among those who had, only 2 (4%) letters had it correctly.

Signature

10 (20%) letters were not signed. They forget to understand that signatures are obligatory elements.

Name and Title

They are always absent for the reasons that they appear at the sender's address.

Enclosure

These students barely enclosed their letters. The enclosure appears before the complementary close and stands as a whole paragraph: *I enclosed my script.*

The table below summarizes the data discussed in the study.

Table 1

Text Organisational Items Frequency of Occurrence

Learners' strategies	Number of letters with items	percentages	Number of letters without items	percentages	Total
Sender's address	39	78%	11	22%	100%
Receiver's address	07	14%	43	86%	100%
Salutation	29	58%	21	42%	100%
Subject	41	82%	09	19%	100%
Identification of problem	45	90%	05	10%	100%
Discussion of relevant information	07	14%	43	86%	100%
Request for action	10	20%	40	80%	100%
Topic shift	21	42%	29	58%	100%
Buffer	00	00%	50	100%	100%
Complementary close	11	22%	39	78%	100%
Signature	10	20%	40	80%	100%
Name and title	00	00%	50	100%	100%
Enclosure	05	10%	45	90%	100%

Politeness Strategies

It was observed that most learners made use of some semantic and linguistic devices such as lexical choices, personalization and formulaic politeness to achieve linguistic politeness.

Lexical Choices

In terms of diction, the learners made use of various address terms and greetings. The latter appear before the subject of the letter and are written as follows: Dear sir, Mr Wanji, language lecturer, Sir. At times address terms are used such as your honorable personality, your high personality, professor of language, imminent personality.

Personalisation

Learners make use of a lot of personal pronouns to designate their teacher by *you* plus the active voice describing the action he performs when he gives them poor marks. They use the following expressions: *A mark you give me in my new bulletin, you have marked my paper with less attention, you reduced my mark, you refused to count my bonus.*

Formulaic Politeness

Students use a variety of formulae in order to address their teacher. The latter appears in the identification of the problem or the request for action. For instance: I am coming to your honorable personality, I greet you respectfully, I address to you my high considerations in a rest favorable, received the expression of my profound respect, you have my honour, I extend my sincere condolences to you, thank you in advance.

Other Strategies

They include disagreement, apology and exaggerated sympathy. Talking about disagreement, 21(42%) students show disagreement of their mark by saying that they do not understand the marking guide or they have the impression to see the language teacher's methods improved upon. 25 (50%) students in their letters decided to behave as if they had no problem. The rest of the students concentrated on flattering the teacher. The table below summarizes their politeness strategies.

Table 2

Politeness Strategies in the Letters of Complaints

<i>Politeness Strategies</i>	Number of letters with items	Percentages	Number of letters without items	Percentages	Total
<i>Lexical choices</i>	32	64%	18	36%	100%
<i>Personalisation</i>	28	56%	22	44%	100%
<i>Formulaic politeness</i>	31	62%	09	38%	100%
<i>Other strategies</i>	35	70%	15	30%	100%

Commentary

The fact that the addresses are presented this way accounts for the reason that the complainers are from a Francophone background. The learners think about the same situation in French as if they were writing in French. The consequence is that they construct a sort of abnormal letters in English language. In French, the sender's address is also written with the name of the sender for quick identification of the provenance of the document. Most often, the receiver's address starts with the preposition 'to'. This is a case of lexical interference which accounts to the fact that in French we always say 'A Monsieur le Directeur general de Razel-Cameroon'. Many

students also write 'BP' instead of PO Box for the reason that they want to avoid to fall into the following trap "P.O box, PO:Box". According to Sala (2008) PO BOX is just an acronym for Post Office Box. However, in British English, full stops or colon are not written after *P* and *O*.

Talking about the date, it is written as follows: Yde le 18th March 2025, on the 5th March 2025, 03/06/2025. The first form is copied from the French way of writing in which the town where the letter is written is specified. It is not advisable to write the date in figures because, 03/06/2025 can be read in two ways either the 3th of June 2025 or 6th of March 2025 depending on the variety of English that one speaks.

As far as salutation is concerned, most of the students used salutations such as: Dear Sir, Dear English Teacher and Professor of English. The asymmetric use of names and address terms is often a clear indicator of power differentiation. In Cameroon, especially in francophone schools, learners call their teachers in secondary schools as 'professeurs' for instance 'professeur d'anglaise' instead of 'enseignant d'anglaise'. This is a case of abuse of language because 'professeur' is a title given to certain class of university lecturers. The use of 'professeur' is equally a case of linguistic transfer. Furthermore, some students address the teacher by name 'Dear Mr Wanji'. In as much as this is a demonstration of closeness toward the addressee, it should, however, be noted that it is not advisable to call the addressee by his name as especially in relationship presented as +D(distance) (Scollon & Scollon, 1995).

It was equally realized that these students do not master the use of the complimentary close options: 'yours faithfully' and 'yours sincerely'. In fact, these two words were used interchangeably. They failed to understand that 'Yours faithfully' is used when the addressee is referred to as 'Dear Sir/Dear Madam' and 'Yours Sincerely' when the addressee's name is used 'Dear Wanji'.

Conclusion

From the analysis, it has been observed that most francophone learners of English written complaints are characterized by many errors as far as text organization strategy is concerned and the use of politeness strategy. The learners do not master the organizational layout of an Anglo-Saxon letter of complaint. They usually fall back to what they know already; letter of complaint in French. They equally fail to be polite and as Fraser (2010) states 'when u fail to be tactful, you are perceived as impolite or arrogant. From the above therefore, this study stands to recommendation the following: Learners should be exposed to authentic source of the language such as short novels or stories written in English. This might help solve the issue of linguistic interference and communicative competence. Furthermore, teachers teaching these students should employ the comparative and contrastive methods of language teaching highlighting the commonalities and dissimilarities between English and French grammar. This will help the students to identify deceptive cognates and be able to keep both languages apart.

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