
A Corpus Analysis of Proposals: A Description and Implications

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This is a preliminary investigation into the use of corpus analysis in teaching writing, in particular professional writing. It describes how a grammatical analysis of text might be used in the preparation of teaching materials and in assisting students to learn independently.

BACKGROUND

Professional writing in the Malaysian context is an area which has generated much interest in the light of the objective of Vision 2020 to create a society of Malaysians equipped with necessary knowledge to compete with or be on par with global technology. It is imperative that professionals be able to communicate with the international community and until a new language takes over from English as the international language for business, Malaysian professionals have to possess the required skills in communicating in English. Writing, being perhaps the most complex in the hierarchy of language skills, is always looked at with utmost apprehension by local professionals as it represents a permanent record of their thoughts which ultimately becomes accessible to everyone. Good writing requires its creator to produce a text which is acceptable for the intended audience and worthy of the expected professional standing of the writer.

Can local professionals write adequately well as required in their chosen areas? Some of the comments that are made by employers as well as the writers themselves suggest that this skill is not sufficiently developed and acquired by local professionals. When asked about the major problems that impede writing, many employers comment, and the writers themselves admit,

that it is the 'rules' of the language that stump them. Their problems with the English grammatical structure can be so frustrating that they see it as a great barrier for them to convey their ideas in writing. One might say, but these people have gone through, on the average, at least 15 years of English instruction and most of them are graduates, why do they still have difficulties with the language? They may have many years of exposure to the language, but the fact that they are not specifically taught professional writing anytime during that 15-year span and that this type of writing is not the same as the essays that they produced in school and the university may be strong contributing factors to their lack of mastery in those aspects of the grammatical system of English most used in the new genre.

Writing is a communicative act in which the writer is expected to participate in a social interaction with the community of readers and responders in a culturally defined communicative context (Donin et al, 1992). Not only does he have to be able to write but he also has to provide a document which is both comprehensible to his readers and appropriate for the situation. The difficulty of fulfilling these requirements is further compounded by the fact that he also has to be aware of the characteristics—i.e. lexical, syntactic, and semantic—of different genres that exist in specific writing situations. Much work has been carried out in investigating the problems encountered by students when they read and write a particular type of text. For example, Halliday (1990) studied the way in which scientific English texts constitute learning problems, more specifically grammatical problems, for students beginning to study the subject. Roe (1978) looked at the notion of complexity in mathematical manipulations of scientific texts. What is being observed is that most of the work done in this respect, however, centres around the area of academic writing while similar work has yet to be carried out for professional writing.

Professional writing is an area which resembles a very complicated family tree—with branches breaking out at every turn and corner. It is extremely difficult to be an expert on 'professional writing' because the writer has to be familiar with and be at ease with the norms of the specific community for which he writes before he can produce the many different types of genres existing in professional writing. Not only does he have to contend with this fact, but he also has to abide by the variety of in-house styles required by different professional institutions.

Thus, writers in this field are forced, due to time and economic constraints, to specialize in certain types of writing that are pertinent to their profession

Let us work on the premise that our potential students are instrumentally motivated to learn, that is they write to fulfill any of these objectives: furthering a career; getting a promotion, competing/bidding for a major project, or simply wanting to complete a written project. These individuals need the quickest way possible to learn a particular type of writing. They might not be so concerned about learning the mechanics of the language but maybe are rather more interested in being able to produce immediately. They may require a method which allows learning to be done within a limited time but where the piece of writing nevertheless meets the expectation of their superiors and audience.

It cannot be denied that there are many books written on the subject of technical writing but the reality is that even after perusing such books, a trainer or an instructor still cannot claim expertise because (s)he is not a *bona fide* member of the target discourse community and most probably has never written in this genre. (S)he herself/himself is a novice who needs to do a lot of ground work before embarking on teaching such a course. As mentioned earlier, there are many aspects to be considered. —lexical, syntactic and semantic (just to name the major considerations) — in the writing process. Assuming that the grammar of professional writing can be made clear and available to the students, they can very quickly check on a particular rule for grammatical the other aspects involved in this genre. This study is an attempt to find out a way in which pedagogically relevant information can be gleaned by an investigation of the grammatical aspect of professional writing and how it can be utilized to facilitate the teaching-learning process

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following are the research questions investigated in this study

- i) Would a corpus analysis of proposals result in a grammatical description that can assist both learner and instructor?
- ii) What are the pedagogic objectives that can be attained from this investigation?

METHODOLOGY

i) Corpus

The analysis is restricted to proposals written by one company which manufactures information technology (IT) products of a certain internationally acclaimed brand as well as provides support service to its clients.

The sections which were looked at in the proposals were the sections entitled 'Company Profile' and 'Management Summary'. These two were chosen because these sections contained more verbal text than the rest of the sections which were primarily figure and equation-laden and therefore required a different kind of analysis that involves deciphering the equations and the figures. These sections comprise information regarding

- i) company background and history
- ii) management style
- iii) type of services provided

The resulting corpus comprised 19,849 words.

ii) Tools

The proposals were scanned using the Wordstar Version 6 program. The concordance program used was the Longman Mini-Concordancer (LMC) developed by Brian Chandler (Longman UK Limited, 1989).

iii) Types of processing done

First, a frequency list search was carried out on a total of 19,849 words ('types' as used in LMC). Next, deletions were made of all commonly used function words (articles, prepositions, determiners, pronouns, common adverbs, conjunctions, negation words) as the intention was to look at words that carry concrete ideas (as opposed to those that have structural functions). The content words i.e. verbs, nouns, adjectives were then processed. Proper nouns however were purposely left out. Out of the content words, the top 10 percent of the most frequently occurring words were picked out as this group of words was the one most heavily used and therefore it was felt that a more detailed look at these words would result in worthwhile insights regarding their use which could be highlighted for the students. The concordance

list of the 33 words (top 10 percent) was then called out in the hope of finding answers to the research questions.

FINDINGS

As indicated in Figure 1, nouns made up the bulk of the list. There is a group labelled 'verbs/nouns/adjectives' because of their possible multiple functions when looked at initially in the frequency list (e.g. service(s) (noun/verb), support (noun/verb), open (verb/adjective)).

	Count	%
Nouns	24	72.72
Verbs	2	6.06
Verbs/Nouns/Adjectives	7	21.21
TOTAL	33	

Figure 1

Lexical items categorized as 'nouns' and 'verbs' do not meander from the function they are assigned to. But in the 'verbs/nouns/adjectives' group, it was found that functions (e.g. mostly serve as to only one use (i.e. used totally as nouns) throughout the corpus. There are seven lexical items in this group—service, services, support, range, open, needs and operating. All seven items are used predominantly as nouns for technical terminology characteristic of the domain of the proposals studied—Information Technology. Due to space limitation I shall describe the usage of three such items—service(s), open and needs.

Lexical item 1 (LX1) : 'service(s)'

Both singular and plural forms will be looked at separately as they appear on the frequency list. Figure 2 displays the usage of both lexical items, service and services.

	COUNT	%
AS VERBS		
service	2	0.89
AS NOUNS		
service	105	46.67
services	118	52.44
TOTAL	225	

Figure 2

The two verbal uses of LX1 appear twice in two different proposals

service organisations to *service* XYZ clients through

99 11% of LX1 is used as nouns, with the words appearing in several different positions

products and *service(s)* is vital (by itself)
 complete *service*, network design *services*
 Correction *services* (ending)
 International Network *Services* Limited (center)

When LX1 is used as a noun, it mostly refers to a technical term while a few appear as business/marketing terms

Electronic Mail and Messaging-*Service*
 hardware *service*
 Telephone Pager Standby *Service*
 Media and Supplies *Service* Desk
 Nationwide *service* centres
 Corporate Information *Services*
 Professional *Services* Management Consultant

What is interesting to note is that when LX1 functions as a noun and appears in combination with adjectives—Adj + LX1—and verbs—(verb) + LX1 + (verb)—the adjectives and verbs carry with them certain attributes which on the whole denote positive and at times 'persuasive' tones while maintaining a customer-centered approach

Adj + LX1

on-going service
complete service
better service
full range of services
standby service

LX1 + verb

service to enable
service will be regular
services and provide IT life
services to set the right business

verb + LX1

provide services
offered services
customers can choose the service options
fine-tune service offerings

These examples are congruent with the function of proposals which, apart from being able to sell, also have to 'present, communicate and explain, but above all, they must *persuade* (sic)' (Holtz & Schmidt, 1981: 13)

Another observation worth highlighting is the use of LX1 as a noun and a noun modifier. The following list is used to illustrate this point ('LI' refers to other lexical items)

As Noun Modifier

service + LI

service + activities
service + business
service + desk
service + division

service + manager

service + personnel

As Noun

LI + service

financial + service
design + service
network + service
Corporate Information + service
Software Error Correction +service
Standard Telephone Pager Standby + service

It is noticed that in the LI + service collocation, most of the time the combination refers to a specific service related to a

device or process. The list for service + L1 collocation comprises 8 items while the other is longer with 31 items. The proportion for the collocations of 'services' is even more — 27 for services + L1 and 29 for L1 + services. It is observed that whenever 'services' is in final position, it again refers to a type of service provided by the company and its affiliates. This constitutes the majority of items in the list.

Lexical Item 2 (LX2) : open

LX2 concordance provides the following findings

	Count	%
AS VERBS	1	1.35
AS ADJECTIVES	12	16.21
AS NOUNS	61	82.43
TOTAL	74	

Figure 3

The following is the single occurrence of LX2 as a verb

we will shortly *open* our first service centre (2 instances)

It was noted that adjectival and nominal uses of LX2 are differently

part of a name for a process or a concept and can be categorized as premodifiers for noun phrases

Open Systems Interconnection
leaders in the *Open* System Movement
Open portability guide
references to International *Open* Systems Standards

Those which are contained as adjectives

the first "*open*" mainframe operating system

Release 4.0, an accepted "open" operating system
highly portable with "open" architecture system design
standards for completely "open" in processing

Lexical Item 3 : needs

LX3 appears in a shorter list than the other two items discussed above. In all 36 occurrences, it functioned as a noun. What can be highlighted is its collocation with other words. A look at the collocation of LX3 reveals some sort of a commitment made by company XYZ to their products and services (realised in LX3's collocation with specific verbs that appear to be customer-oriented):

catering for various needs
meet the needs
understanding customers needs
match changing needs
satisfying the needs of our customers

LX3 collocates with these adjectives

generic IT needs
growing needs
detailed customer needs
immediate needs

All these adjectives augur well, creating as they do, an image of a company sensitive to its customers' needs.

IMPLICATIONS

I am in no position to make claims that this analysis is true for all types of proposals as my analysis is restricted to proposals written by one company. As the corpus is very small, the findings should not be regarded as conclusive. However, I think that there are significant pedagogic implications that are worth considering by both parties involved in the teaching and learning of professional writing.

For the instructor, this type of analysis is crucial and extremely helpful since many instructors are not experts in this particular type of writing. I am suggesting that through corpus analysis, we can identify the structures which are the most frequent and therefore perhaps also most useful to learners. This will help the teacher to highlight lexical items whose usage students are

not sure of by showing them how these structures are used in contexts relevant to their specific needs. This is the best proof of how lexical items and specific structures are used in a natural writing environment thus learners need very little persuasion in accepting and utilizing them. After being taught how to make such an analysis, learners can quickly get access to the concordance and use the procedural knowledge acquired through exposure to the learned items highlighted in the classroom. With such training, learners when they are taken away from the classroom situation, will be able to solve the structure-related problems in their own writing by going straight to the corpus and discovering the patterns of use in words they themselves have a need for. The learner is no longer handicapped by his lack of complete mastery of English syntax. He is provided with a method of learning independently—something which hopefully will serve him for the rest of his professional life. With the vast wealth of already written documents at his disposal which he can analyse, he is on his way to becoming an independent writer. In the Malaysian context, a person in the professional sector normally does not get adequate training in writing professional texts before he joins the workforce. When he is required to write, he finds himself facing the language problem as well as time constraints. The method described above will minimize the problems faced in terms of lexical and grammatical accuracy so that he can concentrate on the less mechanical properties of the written genre.

CONCLUSION

The measure of success in professional writing depends largely on whether the finished product communicates with its intended audience. Not only that, the document, for example a proposal, has to have the ability to persuade in order to convince and ultimately be accepted by the community of readers it is targeted for. This is due to the nature of business where factors such as time and economy play very important roles in determining the success and continuity of a company. A method that can save time in the process of producing a document is a bonus that is worth looking at seriously. Although the analysis described above needs further investigation and development, it serves to demonstrate one of the ways in which the writer can achieve

his writing target and fulfill the requirements put on him in producing a successful written document.

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