

Language for Specific (Professional) Purposes – A Critical Genre Analysis inspired view

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1. Overview

Language for Specific Purposes (LSP), in its early incarnation, was developed to address the language needs of students from specific disciplines. Inspired by functional descriptions of language use in disciplinary contexts, LSP teachers were motivated by a variety of approaches to discourse analysis as register and genre with focus primarily on the discursive practices of specialists in academic contexts (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993). In more recent years, the academic world has become increasingly multidisciplinary where law students, for instance, are being introduced to business courses, or technologists similarly are required to take courses in law and management. The LSP community across the world has readily responded to such requirements by designing and offering interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary LSP programmes. In addition to these developments, the professional world has also become increasingly multicultural as well as digitally inclined and motivated as a result of the invasion of web-mediated digital communication. The targeted world for LSP thus has become more complex, bringing in a diversity of interdisciplinary and intercultural input not only to discursive but also to professional practices. LSP researchers and practitioners now have to confront the increasing complexities of a changing academic and professional world (Bhatia, 2025a). In order to integrate discursive and professional practices in authentic contexts of professional engagement, LSP theory and practice needs to respond to such challenges, focusing particularly on interdiscursive performance of expert professionals in the multidisciplinary, multilingual, and multicultural contexts of the academic as well as professional world, which requires rethinking in terms of both the theory as well as practice of LSP in the broader context of

disciplinary and professional cultures (Bhatia, 2004, 2008a, 2017). In this paper, I would like to identify some of these challenges and discuss their implications for the future of LSP practice.

2. Issues and challenges

The challenges posed by the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary nature of academic discourse have been largely identified, discussed, and taken into account in LSP theory and practice in Swales (1990), Swales and Feak (2004), and Hyland (2006), and many more publications in the last several years. However, a relatively modest amount of research has been undertaken on discourses typically used and exploited in professional contexts. In this rapidly changing context of the present-day world of professions, researchers in discourse and genre analysis, designers of LSP programmes, and teachers and practitioners of LSP face several challenges, some of which concern us here. Let me identify some of the most critical issues that have challenged the LSP community in the last few years.

Invasion of web-mediated digital communication

One of the most challenging aspects of today's professional life is the overwhelming invasion of web-mediated technology in all aspects of professional practice, including the discursive forms, modes of communication, professional actions, and several others. Web-mediated digital communication helps a corporation to structure its organisation. E-mail, in the world of work, has made interpersonal communication informal, personalised, and efficient (Gimenez, 2000, p. 249). Similarly, blogging, texting, and tweeting are being seen as real, and authentic writing in business, and therefore form an important aspect of digital literacy in professional contexts. Above all, social networking has become a resource to connect with people, who exploit these customer services to communicate with corporations. Web-mediated digital communication thus provides a powerful resource for an original and authentic input to LSP materials and is viewed as an essential tool for LSP teaching and learning.

Multiperspective contexts of professional practice

It is interesting to note that professional genres display disciplinary overlaps,

on the one hand, and disciplinary conflicts, on the other. Published literature on discourse and genre analysis has conventionally viewed genres as the study of situated linguistic behaviour in institutionalised, academic and professional settings, where one often gets the impression that disciplinary distinctions do not play an important role. As a result, disciplinary characteristics have often been ignored in most of the analyses of genres. However, in later studies of professional discourses (Hyland, 2000; Bhatia, 2008a, 2008b, 2010; Hewings & Nickerson, 1999) disciplinary distinctions have been found to play a significant role, especially in professional and workplace practices, where disciplinary boundaries are being renegotiated, giving rise to interdisciplinary discourses that make professional genres complex as well as multidimensional. LSP therefore cannot afford to ignore such interdisciplinary dynamics and hence needs to account for this aspect of discourse construction, interpretation and use. Understanding and analysing such specialised genres require an essentially multiperspective framework (Bhatia, 2017).

Interdiscursive hybridity in professional practice

The complexity of the real world can also be accounted for in terms of two rather different but related views of the world, one based on ‘socially recognised’ conventions, and the other as a consequence of ‘exploitation’ or ‘manipulation’ of socially recognised conventions (Bhatia, 1994). So, on the one hand, we find a range of genres in a variety of interacting relationships with one another, unfolding rich and often complex patterns of interdiscursivity, whereas on the other hand, we also find professionals exploiting this richness to create new and often hybrid forms. Another factor that makes professional genres more complex and dynamic is the increasing interdiscursive appropriation of digitally mediated forms in the recontextualisation, reformulation, reframing and resemiotisation of professional discourses. Some of these concerns are being addressed in more recent analyses of discourses and genres in professional contexts (Bhatia, 2004, 2010, 2017; Candlin & Maley, 1997; Fairclough, 1995, 2006).

One of the major criticisms of LSP teaching has been that although students, when placed in professional settings, can handle textual features of some of the professional genres, they are still unaware of the discursive realities of the professional world. The blame does not rest with the learners but with the teachers and researchers who often treat professional genres primarily as textual artifacts (Bhatia, 1993; Swales, 1990). Although it is true

that much of genre analysis has been undertaken within the general background of contextual factors emerging from relevant professional practices and cultures, these interdiscursively hybrid formations critically exploited in professional practices have not been adequately accounted for, which seems to explain the perceived gap between what LSP teachers design, teach and practice in the classroom, and what is expected of students and newly initiated professionals in their day-to-day interactions. Let me now turn to Critical Genre Analysis, which I have proposed as a development on conventional genre analysis, and see how it can help us understand and account for some of the issues and identified here.

3. Insights from Critical Genre Analysis (CGA)

As briefly mentioned above, analysis of professional discourse, which forms the basis of LSP theory and practice, has often been constrained by its focus on textual characteristics, paying limited attention to professional practice in disciplinary, institutional, or organisational contexts. This view has been extensively visible in much of genre analysis for a long time, and a consequence of such a predominantly textual perspective is that we often get a limited view of what happens in real life professional contexts. We often forget that professional genres and cultures have multiple perspectives and hence their analysis requires integration of discursive practices with professional, organisational and institutional practices, which are essentially realised through such genres. Myers (1995) also points out that disciplines are like cultures as their members have shared beliefs that are encoded in language and embodied in practice. The beliefs are negotiated through professional conversations and practices amongst the informed and practising members, who invariably share their objectives as well as the constraints on the way discursive and professional actions are carried out. Members of the legal community, for instance, seem to have typical ways of conducting their day-to-day activities, which also ensure that they are part of the same community of practice. This kind of shared understanding and interest also ensures much better communication not only in terms of the construction of specialist genres but also in their interpretation as well as strategic manipulation of communicative resources. This also indicates a typically shared mindset that most members of the profession have and how they think and behave in specific contexts. This shared knowledge is one of the most important factors in their acquisition of professional expertise,

which in turn plays an important role in the pragmatic success of their professional actions. So, it is of critical importance to pay equal, if not more, attention to performance in professional practice, in addition to the construction of professional genres. It is precisely for this reason that Critical Genre Theory (Bhatia, 2017) pays specific attention to professional practice, in addition to the analysis of genres, which requires a multiperspective framework for a comprehensive and rigorous analysis, including some of the ethnographic procedures. Let me highlight some of the key aspects of CGA.

Key aspects of Critical Genre Analysis

Critical genre analysis (Bhatia, 2017, 2025b) considers three essential aspects of professional communication, genre as action, interdiscursivity, and professional practice within a multiperspective analytical framework, which can be represented as shown in Figure 1.

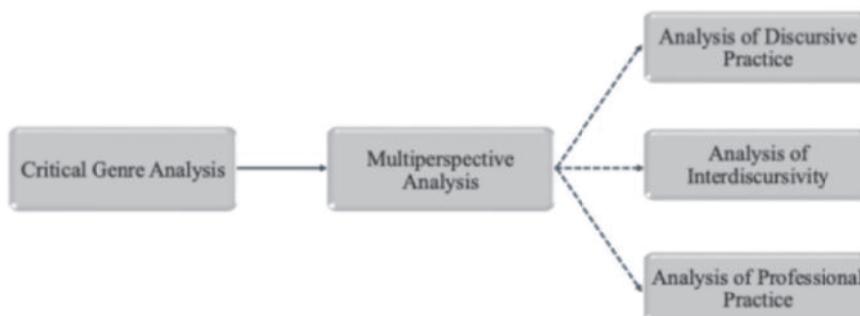


Figure 1. Key aspects of Critical Genre Analysis (adapted from Bhatia, 2017).

CGA is an attempt to account for the realities of the professional world by further developing the conventional framework and make it more comprehensive and rigorous by assigning a privileged status to professional practice and interdiscursivity as appropriation of text-external resources.

Analysis of discursive practice

Genre Analysis, initially inspired by LSP, has undoubtedly been the most popular approach to the teaching and learning of LSP for more than four decades. Genres (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993) are embedded in the discursive practices of members of specific disciplinary and professional cultures,

which reflect the conventions used by professionals. Genres are thus products of a shared understanding of disciplinary or institutional conventions, which are responsible for regulating generic constructs, giving them an identity and integrity of their own. Much of conventional genre analysis has focused on functional variation in professional discourses, with somewhat modest attention to text-external aspects of context in which such discourses are constructed, interpreted, used, and often exploited to achieve specific professional objectives. Rhetorical or cognitive organisation of genre as move-structure has been overly employed in conventional genre analysis. Analysis of discursive genres has been adequately conceptualised, analysed, and discussed in published literature (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993, 1994, 2004), so let me briefly discuss the other two key aspects, namely interdiscursivity and professional practice, as part of the multiperspective framework.

Interdiscursive appropriation of generic resources

Although genres are products of conventional knowledge typically characterised by their generic integrity, they are often exploited interdiscursively through appropriation of text-internal as well as text-external resources across other genres, professional practices, and even disciplinary culture (Bhatia, 2010, 2017). Expert professionals constantly operating within and across generic boundaries often create novel or hybrid forms to give expression to their 'private intentions' within the shared generic norms and communicative practices (Bhatia, 1994, 2004, 2010, 2017). Interdiscursivity therefore is often based on shared generic or contextual characteristics across two or more discursive constructs, and some awareness of these shared features is a necessary condition for an adequate understanding of the new construct. Interdiscursivity thus can be viewed as a function of *appropriation of generic resources* across three kinds of contextual, primarily text-external, boundaries, namely, disciplinary genres, professional practices, and their specific disciplinary cultures. Swales (1998) similarly points out that for a comprehensive and evidence-based awareness of the motives and intentions of disciplinary and professional practices, one needs to look closely at the multiple discourses, actions, and voices that play a significant role in the formation of such interdiscursive practices. In more recent professional contexts, we see a need to analyse and account for the increasing hybridity as a result of the use of web-mediated digital genres which are being exploited in all forms of professional communicative practices.

Professional practice

Foucault (1981) rightly points out that discursive practice is based on the assumption that discourse is not simply a systematic arrangement of semiotic resources, but more importantly it is what we do with language in order to achieve professional goals as part of professional practice. Discursive practices thus constitute and are, in turn, constituted, constrained, empowered, or exploited by professionals in their daily practices. The focus in critical genre analysis therefore has to be on the description of interdiscursive interactions distinguishing them from what might be regarded as professional practices, where interdiscursive interactions represent the actual instances of genres constructed and interpreted by members of the professional communities in the process of accomplishing their professional practices to achieve their goals and objectives. This focus on integrating discursive forms that realise professional actions seems to be a key element in the reorientation of any approach to LSP.

Multiperspective analytical framework

When conducting research on professional practices, several methodologies can be employed, each with its strengths and limitations. Qualitative research methods, such as certain aspects of ethnographic processes that Swales (1998) calls ‘textography’, allow researchers to gain deep insights into the experiences, challenges, and perspectives of professionals that conventional analysis of genres might overlook. This also allows researchers to have some understanding of the mindset of a professional community to appreciate why these professionals use the language the way they do. Corpus assisted analysis of discourse, on the other hand, involves the collection and analysis of discursive practice to identify textual and cognitive patterns. Such multiperspective approaches are necessary as they offer a more comprehensive understanding of complex issues within professional practices.

4. Accounting for professional practice

Professional genres and professional practices are invariably seen as complementing each other, in that they not only influence each other but are often co-constructed, thus making it necessary for the intended users of such genres to interpret them in a much wider socio-pragmatic space (Bhatia, 2004), with particular attention to intertextuality and interdiscursivity as well

as the professional practices they often realise in specific contexts. The focus in the analysis of professional practice therefore should remain on “how language participates in the performance of professional tasks, creating environments, identities, social relations” (Bonini, 2010, p. 485). With the use of digital modes of communication in academic and professional discourse, manipulation of genre conventions by expert members of professional communities has encouraged widespread appropriations of all forms of semiotic resources leading to manipulation of interdiscursive resources, which makes it necessary to account for such legitimate appropriations and creative extensions of available linguistic and generic resources, not necessarily flouting of conventions. Accounting for such innovative appropriations is crucial for our understanding of professional practice.

Interdiscursive performance in professional practice

As discussed in the preceding sections, genres are invariably used to give voice to professional practices or actions, which need to be integrated with discursive practice to study interdiscursive performance of professionals in their day-to-day activities (Wei, Bhatia & Han, 2020). The tendency to focus entirely on textual space, undermining socio-pragmatic space (Bhatia, 2017) can prevent analysts from arriving at evidence-based insights about the use of professional discourse to achieve professional objectives. There are two sides to this issue, first from the point of view of the writer primarily responsible for the discursive construction of the text and, second, from the recipient of the text who is responsible for the uptake. Thus, we need a shift in focus from an exclusive linguistic description of genres towards a more comprehensive and grounded analysis and explanation of the conditions of production and reception of genres and their communicative purposes. Interdiscursive performance thus accounts for not only the discursive and professional practice in interdiscursive contexts, but also the recipient's uptake in professional contexts. In my last section, I would like to suggest a more comprehensive account of one of the key aspects of LSP programme design, namely the need analysis in LSP.

5. Negotiating specificity in needs analysis

Needs analysis is one of the defining features of all forms of LSP programmes, which distinguishes specific language teaching from general

English programmes (Dudley -Evans & St John, 1998). It is often considered as the first step in the design of LSP programmes. However, as Hyland (2006, p. 73) pointed out, it is “an umbrella term that embraces many aspects, incorporating learners’ goals and backgrounds, their language proficiencies, their reasons for taking the course, their teaching and learning preferences, and the situations they will need to communicate in”. Similar views have been expressed by LSP scholars and practitioners often defining it as a mix of several overlapping and, at the same time, distinctive aspects and perceptions of learners’ needs, some of which include target situation analysis, present situation analysis, deficiency analysis, learning situation analysis, means analysis, to mention only a few (Belcher, 2006; Bocanegra-Valle, 2016). However, one of the most significant aspects of needs analysis that has often been undermined is the insights from discourse variation studies across interdisciplinary as well as hybrid contexts, including digital (and now AI supported) modes of communication so pervasively used in professional contexts, highlighting the need to account for interdiscursive performance. This makes needs analysis much more complex than hitherto envisaged and practised. What is needed in such complex and often dynamic contexts is the view of ‘angle of specificity’ defined more flexibly in terms of disciplinary overlaps, on the one hand, and the depth of discourse analytical insights, on the other. It may seem quite a complex exercise, but individual designers and practitioners may decide to choose specific angles of specificity depending on their target learners, time for research and teaching available, and relevant published research accessible, and of course, their own expertise (Bhatia, 2025c). The general principles and procedures may be displayed as in Figure 2.

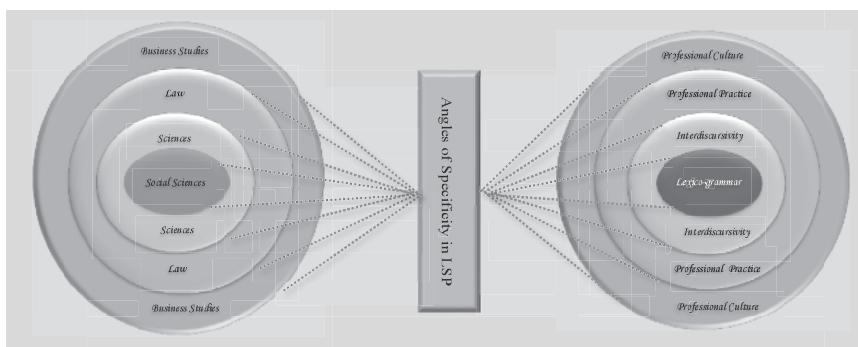


Figure 2. Negotiating ‘specificity’ in LSP (Bhatia, 2025c).

With needs articulated in terms of genres situated within the wider discourse communities in which they are produced and enacted, the ethnographic dimension of needs analysis has received considerable attention in recent years. Hyland (2006, p. 66) suggests that an ethnographically oriented needs analysis combined with studies of discourse variation can offer a comprehensively grounded insider's perspective account of data from multiple sources that develops a conceptual framework. Some of the instruments often used include survey questionnaires, structured and follow-up interviews, focus group discussions, case studies, observations, and many more. These instruments providing different research perspectives offer useful complementary ways of exploring the nature and range of communicative demands placed on students, some of which may include learner perspective (often questionnaires and focus groups), teacher perspective (questionnaire and structured interviews), curriculum perspective (follow-up interviews), learner performance perspective (observation and textual analysis), discourse variation perspective (discourse and genre analysis), and importantly workplace perspective (most often individual and focus group interviews).

6. Designing LSP materials

It is crucial that LSP teaching materials, whether published and borrowed, or individually designed, meet the needs of learners (Bocanegra-Valle, 2010). The teachers therefore need to evaluate, adapt, design and develop materials for use in the classroom. So, in designing LSP materials. Ellis and Johnson (1994, p. 115) point out that the choice of materials has a major impact on what is taught and learnt in the course, having implications for methodology, relevance and motivation. Similarly, Hyland (2006) points out that the materials design process typically begins with the identified learner needs followed by the teacher exploring a given area in order to gain a better understanding of the likely success in meeting the needs identified at the onset of the materials design process, typically through teacher judgements.

The Critical Genre Analytical approach to LSP favours a more comprehensive framework for materials development, driven primarily by research informed authentic input and insightful analysis, leading to a focus on text-task supporting practice to meet specific needs of learners (Swales, 1990), which I hope will ultimately lead to a better understanding of

interdiscursive performance and effectual acquisition of professional expertise, and finally to the ownership of specific genres. Without going into any detailed specification due to paucity of space, I would like to summarise the essentials of designing CGA inspired LSP materials based on authentic input as in Figure 3.

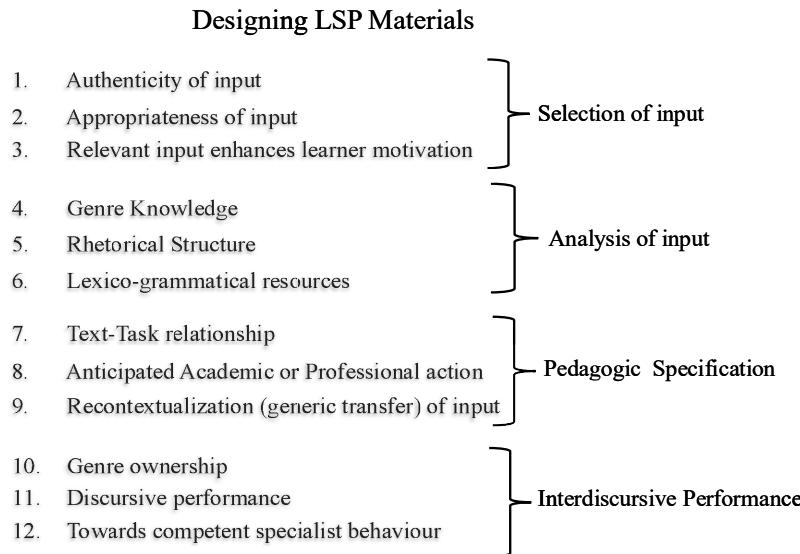


Figure 3. Critical genre-based LSP materials design process.

7. Critical Genre Analysis inspired LSP

In this final section, I would like to argue for a more integrated analytical perspective on genres in the designing of LSP programmes in order to have an evidence-based view of the knowledge producing, consuming and disseminating practices of the professionals, especially in the present-day context of digitally mediated actions in professional practice. I have proposed a multiperspective and multidimensional approach to LSP integrating the analysis of discursive and professional practices in the context of specific disciplinary cultures. In doing so, I have made an attempt to highlight the nature, function and importance of interdiscursive appropriation in the analysis of professional genres, taking it as one of the most significant functions of interdiscursive performance in LSP. This

approach is an attempt to develop the conventional genre-based analysis towards more meaningful contextualisation (Bhatia, 2004, 2017), underpinning the crucial role of text-external factors not only for the construction of professional discourses, but also for the demystification of professional activities typically undertaken by professionals to achieve their professional objectives. To adequately account for the complexities of such an enormous undertaking we need an equally complex and dynamic multiperspective analytical framework which encourages greater integration of analytical tools from various disciplines and frameworks to account for the realities of day-to-day professional practices.

In terms of student learning, such an enormous variety of interdiscursively related genres is very likely to engage learners in what Swales (1990) refers to as text-and-task, thereby raising their rhetorical consciousness regarding genres relevant to their needs. New technology provides space where learners can collaboratively use a variety of tools and information resources to engage in and achieve their learning goals by completing problem-solving activities. It also allows student-initiated research-based, problem-solving, critical-thinking and creative tasks. It provides a more exciting teaching and learning environment that adds new understandings, and capabilities promoting constant interaction with self-selected input to explore and understand interdiscursive appropriation of text-internal and text-external resources across genres and other professional boundaries leading to effective communication in authentic contexts. It will certainly inspire learners to independent and critical thinking to identify, analyse, and appropriate textual input leading to pragmatic success in professional practice, ultimately paving the way towards genre ownership through interdiscursive performance in specific professional contexts. To sum up, it is more appropriate and pedagogically effective for learners of LSP, and at the same time, more convenient for teachers and trainers to encourage learners towards greater participation in their own learning, not simply in the classroom but in the outside world of work, so that they become properly initiated into the professions they may be interested in.

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