THE USE OF SFL GENRE THEORY FOR THE ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' WRITING SKILLS IN ESP

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ABSTRACT. *This paper presents the findings of the SFL-based genre analysis of a corpus of UNED students' essays. This analysis has revealed the existence of certain types of lexico-grammatical errors which have been subsequently grouped into categories corresponding to the three macro-functions. The claim is that a genre-based approach within SFL can help to highlight the difficulties in writing for those learning Business English as an L2. Explicit modelling of the target genre, with scaffolding of the generic structures, could help writers to produce more effective and accurate texts in the future. Thus, with better control of the canonical forms of the genre, they could start to be more unconventionally creative, but within the language system.*

KEY WORDS. *Systemic Functional Linguistics, Genre Theory, ESP, Corpus analysis.*

RESUMEN. *Este trabajo presenta las conclusiones de un análisis de corpus de ensayos de estudiantes de la UNED basado en la Lingüística Sistémico Funcional. Este análisis ha mostrado la existencia de ciertos tipos de errores léxico-gramaticales que han sido posteriormente agrupados en categorías correspondientes a las tres macro-funciones. Se establece que un enfoque basado en la Teoría de Género dentro de la LSF puede ayudar a destacar las dificultades en la escritura de los estudiantes de inglés de negocios como L2. El modelaje del género objeto, con el andamiaje de su estructura genérica, podría ayudar a los estudiantes a producir textos más adecuados y efectivos en el futuro. Así, con un mejor control de las formas canónicas del género, pueden empezar a ser creativos más allá de las convenciones pero dentro del sistema lingüístico.*

PALABRAS CLAVE. *Lingüística sistémico-funcional, teoría del género, Inglés para fines específicos, análisis de corpus.*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper presents the findings of an analysis of students' writing skills in English for Specific Purposes (ESP henceforth) based on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL

henceforth) and its theory of grammar, that is useful to reveal the problems faced by the students in achieving an appropriate level of writing. The analysis refers in particular to the writing skills of UNED students, but it could also be representative of many other groups and situations within the UNED or elsewhere, as will become apparent in the study. The UNED (*Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia*) is nowadays the largest university in Spain with over 260000 students and offering 26 degrees, 43 masters, over 600 programs of Lifelong Learning and 12 language courses. Distance learning presents added difficulties to the normal commitment that studying represents and in the particular case of languages this fact is even more noticeable. This is one of the reasons why research into ways to improve the situation is constantly carried out in this institution.

Moreover, ESP is a discipline independent from general English Language Teaching which emphasizes practical outcomes of a language instruction program (Dudley-Evans and St. John 1998; Hutchinson and Waters 1991) and thus requires specific tuition and attention to detail. ESP should also be understood as the instructional response to the fact that, since World War II, the English language has become a primary communications medium in business, science, education, and diplomacy (Hutchinson and Waters 1991). Research in business settings has revealed that more employees are now required to perform a larger share of correspondence themselves using the fax and the email (Gimenez 2000), because a large part of the work is done at a distance. It is therefore evident that knowledge and application of the relevant conventions of text processing and other forms of written production in the context of the specific business reality should be given greater attention. Thus, studies on written genres in professional and academic settings as initiated by Swales (1990) are of practical importance. However, the study of language use in the workplace is still limited compared with other fields (Forey 2004; Hewings 2002; St John 1996; Swales 2000), even though business texts have distinctive and highly complex structures.

The framework proposed for this analysis is based on SFL, and in particular its view on Genre Theory because the SFL model is focussed on 'theoretically the dynamic and co-evolutionary relationship between context and language' (Royce 2008), and on language resources within culturally constructed situations (Hasan 1985). Thus, the study commenced with the gathering of a corpus of student essays built by the author to analyse how the three macrofunctions of language were expressed: the representation of experience (ideational), the interaction with others (interpersonal), and the creation of a connected and coherent discourse (textual).

2. REVISION OF THE LITERATURE

The linguistic description of research of the workplace context could be undertaken from several perspectives such as the study of a general organisation (Grant and Iedema 2005), or a particular type of organisation (Forey and Nunan 2002), the study of a communication style (Ghadessy 1993; Gimenez 2000; Harrison and Young 2004; Zhu 2005), the study of the cross-cultural communication (Emmett 2003; Forey

and Nunan 2002) and the study of a particular genre (Iedema 1995, 1997, 1999; Mizusawa 2007). Among these, several studies have been conducted from the SFL point of view. For example, Ghadessy and Webster (1988) and Ghadessy (1993) analysed business letters using a register analysis.

As stated by Eggins (2004), *genre analysis* is a first step towards making explicit the cultural and social basis of language in use, and can help us:

- to make explicit why some texts are successful and appropriate while others are not, and to carry out critical text analysis.
- to contrast types of genre and understand similarities and differences between non-fiction and fiction genres.

The first point is particularly relevant to us as the last decade has seen increasing attention given by scholars to the notion of genre and its application in language teaching and learning (Tardy 2006; Martin 2009). This is largely a response to changing views of discourse and of learning how to write, thus incorporating a better understanding of how language is structured to achieve goals and purposes in specific contexts of use. These theoretical advances have been particularly welcomed by teachers as they have emerged in a period of considerable social and demographic change in education in many countries. We are witnessing the growth of modular and interdisciplinary programmes which increase the complexity of academic writing. Moreover, with the expanding numbers of students, classrooms are now more culturally, socially, and linguistically diverse places than ever before.

The genre approach is growing with force in teaching contexts in different parts of the world as much in EFL (Biber et al. 1998; Hyland 2003), as in L1 (Painter 1985; Martin 2009). There is an increasing recognition of the need for teachers to take account of language varieties, text-types, and genres in developing both reading and writing curricula (Wignell 1994) and that also applies to the specific case of ESP (Luzón 2005), where the term *genre* was first introduced in 1981 in an article by Tarone and her colleagues (Paltridge 2001).

Researchers in ESP are interested in genre as a paradigm for analysing and teaching the spoken and written language required of non-native speakers in academic and different professional settings (Bhatia 1993; Flowerdew 1993; Hopkins and Dudley-Evans 1988; Swales 1990). These scholars have framed genres by their formal properties and their communicative purposes within social contexts.

Swales (1990, 2000, 2001, 2004), a crucial figure in the development of Genre Theory in ESP, describes genres as "communicative events" that are characterized by their "communicative purposes" and by various patterns of "structure, style, content and intended audience" (Swales 1990: 58). Genres are important for ESP because knowledge of genre provides what Johns (1997: 21) calls "a shortcut for the initiated into the processing and production of [...] texts". Moreover, research has shown that in higher education settings, the goals of advanced literacy are linked to academic success in general and to disciplines and their diverse way of make meanings in particular (Hinkel

2005). Thus, ESP researchers consider that academic success depends to a large extent on the ability to negotiate meanings in three major genres: lectures, textbooks and research articles.

The situation for business ESP is slightly different because, as Mawer (1999: 60) points out, "the workplace is the curriculum". This changing communicative environment presents a definite need to learn issues on intercultural communication (Roberts 2005). In workplaces, as Burton (2002) remarks, "there are many different styles of business communications: messages, memos, letters (both internal and external), etc. Writing is a major activity of any workplace, even with the concept of the paperless office" (Burton 2002: 121-122). In summary, although the nature of the written language is high lexical density with elaborated and complex structures (Halliday 1994), differences may occur depending on text types.

Most writing tasks in the field of business are conventionalized regularities in the organization of various communicative events (Bhatia 1993). A business letter, for instance, has to show certain conventions in writing opening or closing remarks to be accepted by the business community as such. Certain form-function correlations exist within the texts too, and ESP learners need to be made aware of their usage if effective business purposes are to be achieved through them.

3. METHODOLOGICAL TOOLS

3.1. *Corpus building*

The object of this study is the writing skills of UNED students who have taken the ESP: Business course in the UNED. It is an optional first cycle subject of ten credits and can be taken as part of the degree in English Studies or a number of others. It is ten credit yearly subject with two exams which correspond to the two terms in which the Spanish academic year is divided. Thus, the students whose essays are analysed in this work have already had another exam earlier in the year in January/February.

The corpus of texts that was subject of this analysis was built from a random selection of 30 student essays written as part of the exam taken on 24th May 2007. There was another second term exam two weeks later in June, but, as the exam wordings are different on each occasion, the selection for the corpus was made from just one set of exams so that all the students in the corpus had answered the same question.

In the specific case of ESP, the need for written accuracy is essential as "up to 30 percent of letters and memos in industry and government do nothing more than seek clarification of earlier correspondence or respond to that request of clarification" (Piotrowski 1996). Most of the students enrol in this subject in the first or second year of the first cycle of their degree. Their level of English competency tends to be between A2+ and B1 and that is generally adequate to obtain a pass grade in their examinations. Students whose level is below A2 tend to fail. As Alderson et al. (2004: 53) remarked: "The ability to write in a foreign language is one of the most difficult to develop, and

one of the least often taught". The aim of the study is to identify (and subsequently treat) the areas where most of the errors in the written texts that they produce occur.

According to the research carried out by McEnery and Wilson (1996), a corpus is any collection of more than one text, but the texts selected to build the corpus must be homogenous, so that they must deal with the same domain, be written by the same type of persons, be used by the same type of persons, and correspond to the same type of communication, etc. (López Sanjuán 2006). The corpus in this study obviously follows such guidelines. Many linguists (Biber et al. 1998) share the opinion that linguistic study based on corpus is scientific and rigorous and has the following advantages:

- Their accuracy, as they represent real data.
- The simplicity, capacity and efficacy of the processing.
- The possibility of recycling methods and results.
- The verifiability, which is a necessary requirement in any scientific research.
- They are essential sources of information for applied linguistics, such as language teaching, grammatical correctors, etc.
- The assistance for non-native speakers of language, etc.

One of the criticisms of research based on corpus is that these can never be sufficient so as to accommodate all the possibilities for the sample. In the case of the present corpus, the essays represent an array of the typical marks obtained by the students in such exams, where 15% fail, 30% achieve a C grade, 40% a B, and 15% an A. This condition of a representative sample is one of the requirements for a corpus. However, it still has limitations (Hunston 2003):

- A corpus cannot show information about whether something is possible or not, it can only show if it is frequent.
- A corpus can only show its contents. The data obtained can represent approximate deductions and not proven results.
- A corpus can only give evidence about the examples within it; only the speaker intuition can interpret them.
- A corpus represents language out of context.

These objections can be addressed by saying that a corpus does not have to answer all the questions that a linguist can put forward, but it can help within a specific context, by offering examples for linguists to develop and contrast their theories. This is the reason for this analysis to be carried out. This corpus contains 30 essays from students who took the same exam on the same date and answered the same question. The total number of words in the sample is 3456, divided among 30 texts which range from 46 to 220 words in length. About half of the texts are below 100 words. The corpus is certainly representative and domain specific.

The data was manually typed, and not a single error was corrected. The intention throughout the process was to keep the integrity of the information by including all

details such as the student's use of capital letters, punctuation marks, paragraph arrangement, misspellings, etc.

3.2. *Theoretical framework*

The theoretical framework of this research is SFL because this theory provides a greatly enhanced insight into text, offers the right instruments to analyse aspects related to form and content, and it concentrates on functions or purpose of the text (Martínez Lirola 2006). The functional model asserts that meanings are realized through linguistic choices drawn from "a network of systems or interrelated sets of options for making meaning" (Halliday 1994: 15). The model describes language in terms of "sets of choices of meaning", with every choice made in terms of the potential choices *not* made. These choices, though not conscious, are learned and provide various ways to get things done in a given culture.

Eggins, in the opening chapter of her book *An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics* (Eggins 2004), describes SFL as "social semiotic" (Halliday 1978) and based on this view of language she enumerates SFL's "four main theoretical claims about language": language use is functional; its function is to make meanings; these meanings are influenced by the social and cultural context in which they are exchanged; and the process of using language is a semiotic process, a process of making meaning by choosing. These four points, that language use is functional, semantic, contextual and semiotic, can be summarized by describing the systemic approach as a functional-semantic approach to language. While SFL accounts for the syntactic structure of language, it places its function as central (what language does, and how it does it), in preference to more structural approaches, which place the elements of language and their combinations as central. SFL starts at the social context, and looks at how language both acts upon and is constrained by such social context. This fact makes this framework very appropriate for the study of ESP which must account for the distinctive –and often deviational– formal and organisational semantic aspects of language.

The unit of analysis for SFL linguists is the text, because the functional meaning potential (the representation of what a language user can do) of language is realized in units no smaller than texts. Of course, the study of texts is typically performed by examining elements of the lexicogrammar and phonology (or graphology), but these smaller units must be viewed from the perspective of their contribution to the meanings expressed by the total text in context. "For a linguist, to describe language without accounting for text is sterile; to describe text without relating it to language is vacuous" (Halliday 1985: 10). The length of the text is not important and it can be either spoken or written, although for the purpose of this analysis, any reference to text is to the written form. The important factor is that it is a harmonious collection of meanings appropriate to its context. This unity gives a text both *texture* and *structure*: texture comes from

coherence in the way that the meanings fit together, and structure from certain obligatory elements appropriate to the purpose and context of the particular text (Butt et al. 2003).

Language is viewed as a "resource for making meaning", where language and context are inseparable (Butt et al. 2003: 257). In order to study language, it can be seen as a series of levels or strata.
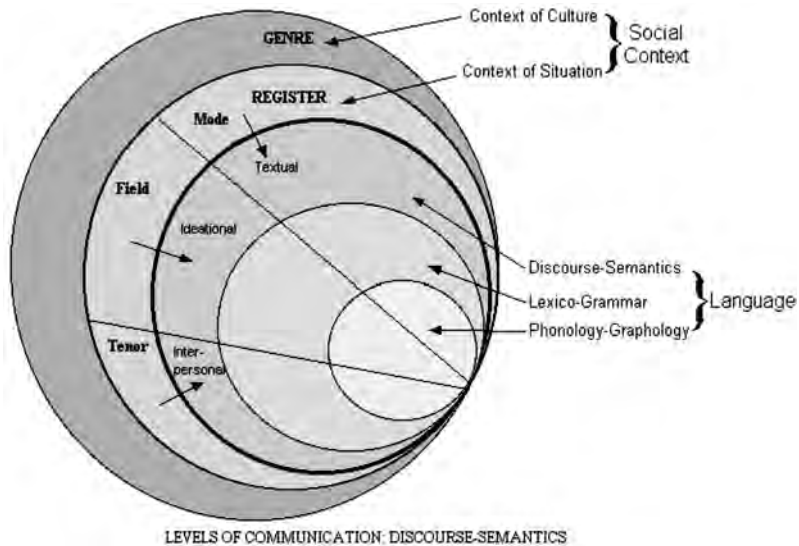

Figure 1. *Levels of Communication: Discourse-Semantics*.

The parameters of context of situation affect language choices precisely because they reflect the three main functions of language. Drawing on Halliday's SFL model of language (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004), Butt and his colleagues (Butt et al. 2003) have succinctly summarised these functions as central to the way grammar works in the language system:

1. Language has a representational function and it is used to encode the personal experience of the world; it conveys a picture of reality. Thus, it allows encoding meanings of experience which realise field of discourse (EXPERIENTIAL MEANING).

2. Language has an interpersonal function and it is used to encode interaction and to show how defensible the different propositions are believed to be. Thus, it allows encoding meanings of attitudes, interaction and relationships which realise tenor of discourse (INTERPERSONAL MEANING).

3. Language has a textual function and it is used to organise experiential and interpersonal meanings of text development which realise mode of discourse (TEXTUAL MEANING).

Texts selected from the corpus were analysed in three different ways for Transitivity, Mood and Theme. Each analysis corresponded to the exploration of field, tenor and mode.

4. RESULTS

The texts within the corpus analysed in this study belong to the explanation genre. Although identifying the schematic structure of a genre is a major part of generic analysis, it cannot be performed accurately without an analysis of the realizations of each element of schematic structure. It is obvious that all that needs to be analysed about genre is language – the words and structures speakers use. Technically, we can see that it is through language that genres are realised. It is through semantic, lexico-grammatical and graphological patterns of the language code that the contextual level of genre is realised through, or expressed in, language. There are two clear consequences of this. Firstly, if genres are different ways of using language, then we should find that text authors make different lexico-grammatical choices according to the different purposes that they want to achieve. Secondly, if each genre is made up of a number of different functionally related stages, then we should find that different elements of schematic structure will reveal different lexico-grammatical choices.

However, since we have only one language to use to realise all these different stages, it cannot be a question of stages using totally different words, or totally different structures from each other. Rather, we would expect to find that different stages use different configurations of words and structures, different clusterings of patterns. Genre analysis implies the characterisation of these three different strands of meaning: the ideational, the interpersonal and the textual. In identifying these three main types of meaning, Halliday (1985) suggested that of all the uses we make of language, language is designed to fulfil three main *functions*: a function for relating experience, a function for creating interpersonal relationships, and a function for organising information.

4.1. *Experiential meaning*

The experiential function of language is realised through combinations of Participant(s) and Circumstance(s) around the obligatory Process. This means that when using language to talk about the world, the three general categories of human experience are applied to build a picture of reality which tells "*Who does what to whom under what circumstance*" (Butt et al. 2003: 46). The organisation of these three categories is achieved through Transitivity, which explains how a phenomenon is represented in language use.

An overall examination of the Transitivity choices made by the whole group of students reveals that they have selected a range of processes commonly seen in Explanations, namely, Material, Mental, and Relational processes, in order to realise the experiential meanings of the field (Droga and Humphrey 2003). When examining some

examples closer in the transitivity analysis, it becomes clear where the lexicogrammatical problems lie. The main type of processes in the corpus is the Material Processes, as expected in the Explanation Genre. This is consistent with the language features explained by Butt et al. (2003). Typical of the social purpose of this type of texts is the use of technical terms, a sequence of material processes, the use of passive voice, the presence of nominal groups, and circumstances of place. The sequence in this genre should be a beginning with an identifying statement followed by an explanation sequence. These features are often not achieved.

There are many spelling mistakes (in bold) such as:

> if terrorism becomes an issue as due to the **unstability** and **unsecurity** (Text 3).
>
> Due to the terrorism and wars some companies are afraid to invest in other countries outside they **alredy** now (Text 4).
>
> to take in consideration regarding the stock market **nowdays** (Text 5).

Some mistakes are a consequence of the influence of the Spanish language: *certains foreign*s, *terrorism attack*, *consecuence*, *comparation*, *the occidental world*, *centres commercials*, etc. Others are errors arising from a generalisation of an English language rule: *influenciated*, *unsecurity*, *meaned*, etc.

The passive voice, which is characteristic of the explanation genre, is used less often than it should in the corpus. However, the students who have used it show a good command of the tense. There are examples of problems with other verb tenses:

> Is that the risk **exist** (Text 5).
>
> This **has result** in airlines announcing bankruptcy, (Text 6).
>
> It is a well known fact that the effects of terrorism on the woilwide stock market trends **could** really terrible. (Text 15).

Mistakes or vagueness in pronoun reference:

> But there are others **that** have wider aims – we all know Al Qaeda's objectives and their actions. (Text 1).
>
> However **that** sell weapons have made a huge profit at the cost of many lives. (Text 2).
>
> And even though the risk of an attack has been token into consideration in order to calculate the price of the shares, **is** true that the risk exist. (Text 5).

Errors or lack of punctuation:

> The prices of the shares goes up and down more influenciated for the trend of the market than for rational or fundamental bases, so any news about the risk of a terrorism attack affect the stock market sharply allowing a great gap between the lowest and highest prices, in a trader day when roomons about a terrorist attack exist. (Text 5).
>
> Every investor escapes from companies or markets affected by terrorism, because investors are looking for benefits they hate insecurity, sudden changes. (Text 16).

Changes of register which are not appropriate to the required level of formality:

> therefore the investers want [**to get rid of** their shares] (Text 11).

> because they didn't know [**what was going on**], (Text 15).

Mistakes in the use of *its/it's:*

> The competition on earning profits on the worldwide stock market **its** increasing with no limits, (Text 20).

> Still caused such an uproar and panic that the New York Stock Exchange had to close **it's** doors for two or three days. (Text 23).

Errors in the use of capitals:

> It seems nothing has been the same on the worldwide stock market since **september** the 11th. (Text 28).

Probing for experiential meaning can show two things, first, that a long and complex nominal group with one or more clauses in the Qualifier remains a single functional unit within the clause; second, that a clause can take up the meaning potential of a participant slot inside another clause, thus, becoming a constituent of that clause (Butt et al. 2003). In order to master a specialised English domain, such as business English, it is essential to be able to manage the expression of field through experiential grammar. In everyday contexts grammatical structures encode specific, everyday experiences of the world. In specialised disciplines experience is organised in generalised, systematic and technical ways. If students are to manage specialised varieties of English, they must manage the relevant grammar to encode the discipline by: adapting their writing to the purpose of the communication and the context; selecting the adequate technical words; using nominalisation; using circumstances to enhance precision; using different linguistic devices or choices to construct degrees of formality, etc.

4.2. *Interpersonal meaning*

At the same time as it is used to build experiential and textual meaning, language is used to interact with others: that is, to negotiate relationships and to express opinions and attitudes. The linguistic resources used to achieve this domain of meaning include clause structures, Modality and Appraisal.

What follows are some examples of high modality taken from the corpus:

> The most convincing conclusion I come to is that we **must** analyse the reasons why a terrorism act is commited. (Text 15).

> Terrorism **always** has a strong and negative effect on the worldwide stock market. (Text 25).

> The consumption's habits have changed because people is afraid to eat **certains** foreings foods.

> **I believe** that terrorism has not yet had a major long-term impact on the worldwide stock market trends. (Text 10).

The following are examples of medium modality from the corpus:

> it **will** have its effect in every single way in the rest of the countries of all over the world. (Text 11).

> **Usually**, when the companies stay in these owns countries, their economics fall in comparison to other companies that are in countries cheapest. (Text 4).

> However, fear is **probably** the biggest effect terrorism can have on the international stock market. (Text 23).

These are also some examples of low modality:

> so they **may** turn their eyes towards national production or products from other places, that **may** not be as good. That's how prices rise and fall constantly, and why there are national stocks of products **may** be needed in times of hardship, or shortage. (Text 1).

> Investors **may** decide to withdraw the money they have invested in the country, if terrorism becomes an issue as due to the unstability and unsecurity the companies performances are not longer assured to remain efficient. (Text 3).

> However this **may** well change in the future if there are more spectacular attacks and investors loose confidence in the ability of their governments to keep terrorism under control. (Text 10).

The social purpose of Explanation in a business text dictates that it should be impersonal, with the presence of only declarative mood statements and this is an aspect that is not achieved in most cases in the corpus. The intended effect is that of objectivity but the excessive use of Modal elements make the texts appear more subjective (Droga and Humphrey 2003). According to Butt et al. (2003), the resource of *Appraisal* serves to draw the reader to a particular point of view or interpretation of the content, which is also typical of this genre, however, the texts analysed present negative evaluations.

There are some expressions of negative mood of discourse in the corpus:

> However, **fear** is probably the biggest effect terrorism can have on the international stock market. (Text 23).

> Therefore people and enterprises don't want to invest in the businesses which are affected for **fear** to lose their money or because they don't want to have a decrease in the value of their shares. (Text 24).

There are many expressions of negative judgment:

> Unfortunately, terrorism has always meant a **bad** effect in our society, not only for the victims, but also for the economic world. (Text 17).

> As a consecuence, there are some enterprises which succeed in that situation, but **unfortunately**, there are much more that can't affort such a big amount of expenditures. (Text 24).

> – The aircraft industries was **badly** hit and so were the airline companies with the potential passengers afraid of flying. (Text 7).

And also there are very few examples of positive or negative appreciation in the corpus:

> But not all are losses, although the stock exchange situation could be badly damage if a good broker runs the risk of taking profit from these shifts, then the scene could change sharply. (Text 29).

The Subject and Finite in the Mood Block are the pivotal elements of the clause that make all types of interaction possible. The order of the Subject and Finite is a grammatical sign of the type of exchange taking place and determines whether the clause is declarative, interrogative or imperative. The elements of the Mood Block are often small, especially if the Finite is an auxiliary and the Subject is expressed by a pronoun.

Students need to be made aware that the Mood Block accounts for some of the most challenging aspects for the accurate use of English such as subject-verb agreement, the presence of auxiliary verbs, the appropriate use of tense, the appropriate use of Mood tags (based on the Subject and the Finite), etc. It is important to learn to adjust experiential meanings in texts as an effective reader would recognise the patterns of interpersonal meanings layered over the text, such as modulation and appraisal. Factual texts should present information, ideas and issues to inform, enlighten and persuade the reader. Their content should be presented from a particular perspective, although this might not be overtly stated or even suppressed in order to appear objective.

4.3. *Textual meaning*

To organise a text into a coherent whole, writers and speakers need to keep their readers and listeners well informed about where they are going. This is done through Theme and Rheme development. The second signpost involves cohesion which includes reference, ellipsis, substitution, lexical cohesion and text connectives. These resources are discussed below.

Theme can be identified as the first element in the clause, functioning as the starting point or signpost to signal what the message is about (Butt et al. 2003). According to Halliday, Theme is "what the message is concerned with: the point of departure for what the speaker is going to say" (Halliday 1994: 38) or "the element the speaker selects for "grounding" what he is going on to say" (Halliday and Matthiessen

2004: 58). The rest of the clause is called the Rheme, which is the "point" of the clause where the meanings have been heading (Butt et al. 2003: 151). Theme is Given or what is already known or accessible to the reader, and New falls within the Rheme. It is the interplay of these two functions, the Given and the New, that generates information in a clause. Themes can be divided into three main types: Topical, Textual and Interpersonal. Topical Theme foregrounds experiential meaning. Textual Theme highlights relationships between parts of text. Interpersonal Theme is shown through the use of finite and modal elements.

The theme patterns in the corpus are not completely successful. In many cases the texts are only groups of long and isolated sentences:

> The terrorism, a military act, produces in stock markets a decrease in the transactions. The exact reason why this happens I am not 100% sure, **but** could be, **because** countries in power of the exportation of petrol world wide, which has big influence in the stock market, leaves the brokers expectant to what big companies are going to do. The time at this level could mean a lot of millions. (Text 21).

Cohesion, the relations of meaning that exist within the text and define it as such (Halliday and Hasan 1976), is not always achieved. In other words, cohesion, the way in which the text "hangs together" (Halliday and Hasan 1985: 48) and the resources within language that help to relate ideas and information and make links between different parts of the text, are often not present:

> Even bull market, [when surging or booming], can convert highs to lows in just one day of trading. Still caused such an uproar and panic that the New York Stock Exchange had to close it's doors for two or three days. (Text 23).

> Usually after an act of terrorism (such as the one to the Twin Towers in New York) the shareholders don't want to make any operation and keep safetly their shares. In this way, their prices are significantly reduced. (Text 25).

> One effect of terrorism is to stall and not do any trading at all which means no gains. Another effect is the desire to pull out all your money **but** to quit would be a bad example. **However**, fear is probably the biggest effect terrorism can have on the international stock market. (Text 23).

Most of the theme choices in the corpus are unmarked topical and focus the attention of the reader on major participants and sequence of time. This follows the characteristics of its genre. Theme is the signpost for the writer's point of departure. Usually the part of the message that the writer considers interesting or important comes in the Rheme. Readers need to be reassured that they are following the development of the text; therefore, the position of Theme and Rheme and the repetition of meanings is crucial in subsequent clauses. A parallel textual system to Theme/Rheme is the system of Given and New information. Writers choose their Theme and their New information to guide their audience effectively through their texts. The choices influence the organization of experiential and interpersonal meanings, such as the use of passive voice.

By examining the patterns of Theme, students can learn to identify the internal design of the text and the writer can learn to anticipate the needs of the reader/(s). Language learners must understand how to organize meanings effectively into clauses, clause complexes, paragraphs and texts, by making the beginning and the end of all units of language organizational focal points. They also need to know how to order them within texts. Student writers who struggle with basic clause structure write texts made of clauses which do not have an effective progression of topical Themes. The quality of business English can improve dramatically if attention is given to the thematic progression of information in texts. They also need to control the use of textual Themes, that is, conjunctions and other connecting words and phrases. Learning how to manage interpersonal Themes is also important for those learning how to manage spoken interaction.

Droga and Humphrey (2003) identified five different cohesive resources: reference, ellipsis, substitution, lexical cohesion and text connectives. Reference makes links by referring back to something previously mentioned in the text or by pointing forward to something further on. In other words, reference can serve to point back to words in the text itself; the information can be retrieved either from the previous text or the following text. On the other hand, referring words can be deployed to point outside the text itself – to objects, experiences and understandings that "are shared and 'understood' by the speakers" (Droga and Humphrey 2003: 105). The first type of textual reference, termed endophora, is typical of written language, while the situational reference, termed exophora, is typical of spoken discourse (Halliday and Hasan 1976: 33). They identified three types of reference: personal, demonstrative and comparative.

The most frequent personal pronoun referents in the corpus is *they*, with a total number of 29 mentions. It is followed by *we,* which is present in 13 occasions. The only other pronoun in the corpus is *you* and it is only used 4 times.

The article *the* is very frequent (279 times), the rest of the demonstratives are not as much: *this* (19), that (12), *those* (5) and *these* (2). The comparatives have a little presence in the corpus and in order of importance are: *other* (9), *more* (9), *less* (2), *same* (2), *-est* (7), *-er* (5).

5. FINAL REMARKS

The corpus of student essays was built by the author to analyse how the three macrofunctions of language are expressed: the representation of experience (ideational), the interaction with others (interpersonal), and the creation of connected and coherent discourse (textual).

As previously explained, a feature of a mature written text within this genre is the appropriate use of connecting devices and the change from personal to impersonal voices. In some cases this effect is successfully achieved, but not in all of them. Effective writing requires a careful choice of vocabulary, grammatical patterning, sentence structure, etc., all of which contributes to create a style which is appropriate

to the domain and purpose of the text. In a specialised English domain, such as business English, it is essential to be able to manage the expression of field through experiential grammar. In specialised disciplines experience is organised in generalised, systematic and technical ways. Students need to adapt their writing to the purpose of the communication and the context, selecting the adequate technical words, using circumstances to enhance precision, linguistic devices or choices, such as nominalization, to construct degrees of formality, etc. It is important to learn to adjust experiential meanings in texts as an effective reader would recognise the patterns, such as modulation and appraisal. Factual texts should present information, ideas and issues to inform, enlighten and persuade the reader. By examining the patterns of Theme, students can learn to identify the internal design of the text and the writer can learn to anticipate the needs of the reader/s. This is achieved by organising meanings effectively into clauses, clause complexes, paragraphs and texts, and by making the beginning and the end of all units of language organizational focal points. It is also important to know how to order them within texts. Student writers who struggle with basic clause structure write texts made of clauses which do not have an effective progression of topical Themes. The quality of business English can improve dramatically if attention is given to the thematic progression of information in texts. The corpus also reveals that they need to control the use of textual Themes, that is, conjunctions and other connecting words and phrases. Learning how to manage interpersonal Themes is important for those learning how to manage spoken interaction and also the production of certain types of written documentation.

The study revealed that the corpus did not contain many examples of the linguistic features of mature texts (Christie 2002). Nominalisations are not very frequent which evidences that there is a certain lack of ability with word formation. The meaning and cohesion in clause complexes is sometimes lost. The adequacy of the texts to the purpose for which they are written is not always consistent. There are examples of both interlingual transfer (interference with the native language) and intralingual transfer (influence of generalisations within the given language). Finally, inadequacy to register and spelling mistakes are very frequent and errors with subject-verb agreement, word order and faulty reference which are surprisingly still present at B1 level.

In summary, this research has attempted to demonstrate that SFL-based Genre Theory can provide the teacher with a highly effective framework to capture and formalise the students' prototypical difficulties of a given sublanguage. This research has been undertaken with the ultimate purpose of helping students to improve their writing skills by viewing the text as a whole piece of language which carries meaning in a communicative context.

NOTES

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