The Discoursal and Formal Analysis of E-Mails: A Cross Disciplinary Genre Analysis

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Abstract
Electronic mail (e-mail) as a means of fast and effective communication which has removed the barriers of distance and time has become very commonplace and important in institutional environments. Speakers of English as a foreign language across different disciplines need to enhance their awareness of the generic and formal features of the e-mail genre in order to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of their correspondence. Following genre analysis studies such as Swales (1990), Bhatia (1993), Santos (2002), Vergaro (2004), and Samraj and Monk (2008), and in line with studies on electronic messages such as Gains (1999), Gimenez (2000, 2006), and Jensen (2009), the present genre-based research was conducted to analyse e-mails exchanged between EFL teachers and biology professionals for the purposes of requesting and providing information at two criteria of the macro-textual and micro-levels of the two corpora to present a tentative model. The results revealed clear discrepancies between the parallel constitutive moves, strategies and formal features due to cross-disciplinary variations and the prevalence of intertextuality. The findings of this study have pedagogical implications for devising courses, preparing teaching materials and raising ESP instructors' awareness of learners' problems.

Key Words: E-mail genre, ESP, Formal features, Move analysis

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Introduction

Genre is defined by Swales (1990, p. 58) as a class of communicative events engaged in by specific discourse communities whose members share some set of communicative purposes. Generic analysis as an insightful description of academic and professional texts which has become a powerful tool utilized in the area of teaching English for specific purposes (Bhatia, 1993, 2008 ; Swales, 1990) has turned out to be one of the most important and influential concepts in language education which can compensate for the inadequacies of other text analytic approaches.

The present study is a genre study in the tradition of Swales' (1990) and Bhatia's (1993) work that sets up categories (moves) and then analyses the lexico-grammatical realizations of these moves in electronic messages which were exchanged for the purposes of 'requesting and providing information' among EFL teachers and biology professionals to see where the differentiating factors across the two corpora lie.

In this regard, this study followed Genre-based research on a variety of professional genres which have adopted a contrastive cross-disciplinary stance- such as letters of application (e.g. Bhatia, 1993), grant proposals (e.g. Connor & Mauranen, 1999), research articles (e.g. Samraj, 2002), sales promotion letters (e.g. Vergaro, 2004), tax computation letters (e.g. Flowerdew & Wan, 2006), short texts accompanying research articles (e.g. Ayers, 2008), and graduate program applications (e.g. Samraj & Monk, 2008). The results have revealed the pedagogical importance of this approach in raising students' awareness of the most appropriate schematic organization of these texts for different discourse communities and purposes.

Electronic-mail, as one instance of genres reflecting responses to social needs and technological advancement, is not bound by personal schedules, geographical limitations, or time zones. It can be sent and received at the convenience of the participants, and it can facilitate intercultural communication. Research (Gonzalez-Bueno, 1998; Gains,

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1999; Gimenez, 2000; Lewis, 2005) has shown that Computer-Mediated Communcation (CMC) is creating a language variety which may be characterized in terms of its similarities and differences with written or spoken language. The findings have revealed a tendency towards a more flexible register closer to casual speech than to paper based genres in electronic messages.

Interested in a broader range of linguistic and textual features that might be exhibited in the electronic mail medium, Orlikowski and Yates (1993) conducted an exploratory study. The analyses presented evidence of lexico-grammatical features typically associated with oral discourse.

Likewise, Baron (1998) noted that e-mails, apart from being stylistically informal, tend to be shorter than telephone exchanges and often start with conventional opening and closing.

Despite the prevailing theory that e-mail is considered an information transaction medium, Jensen's (2009) analysis of 46 e-mails collected from the managing director of a Danish company revealed that e-mail can be used to reach interaction goals and build long-term business relationships using English as a lingua franca.

Since most studies on e-mail communication so far have concentrated on linguistic and stylistic conventions of this new genre (Gains, 1999; Gimenez, 2000), its role in the business communication process (Gimenez, 2000, 2006; Jensen, 2009), and its comparison with conventional letters (Amirian & Tahririan, 2003) and due to the scarcity of a cross-disciplinary research on the discoursal and formal features of electronic messages, the present study was carried out.

The findings of this analysis may have pedagogical implications for ESP teachers to raise their students awareness about the structure and conventions of this genre to enhance the ability of ESP students to produce electonic messages effectively.

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Method

Corpus

Primarily, 300 e-mail messages were randomly selected from among correspondences of both native and non-native members of EFL teachers and biology professionals (henceforth EPs and BPs respectively) around the world (150 texts from each group). These e-mail messages were obtained from different sources. EFL teachers' e-mail messages were mainly obtained from listservs. Biology professional e-mail messages were gathered from listservs, as well as from the Faculty and Department of Biology at Isfahan University. To achieve a homogeneous data in terms of the communicative purposes, a preliminary analysis was carried out on the initial corpora of 300 e-mail messages. Subsequently, 80 e-mail messages (40 messages from each group) which had purposes of 'providing and requesting information' were chosen for the main analysis.

Procedure

With the aim of determining the move schemata and strategies realizing each move in the electronic messages, Santos' (2002) model for letters of negotiation exchanged for the purposes of 'providing or requesting information' was adopted due to its comprehensiveness and recency. The choice of this model was also based on the model shared information exchange purposes with the corpora and its use of telecommunication technology as the messages were deployed through fax. For purposes of identification and easier access, the electronic messages of each group were coded separately. The symbols used were E-em standing for the electronic messages of EFL teachers coded from number (1-40) and B-em standing for biology professional electronic messages coded from (1-40). Based on Santos' (2002) framework, they were analyzed to identify the obligatory and optional moves and the strategies in each move as well as their frequencies and sequences. Santos (2002, p.171) followed Swales' (1990) interpretation of moves as a series of obligatory and optional segments presenting different propositions that constitute a genre. The main communicative purpose together with content, intention, and function, guided the division of this

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genre into obligatory and optional moves and strategies. While obligatory moves are necessary in forming the conventional framework of each genre and are responsible for the content of the messages fulfilling their communicative act, optional moves and strategies seem not to be shared by all the members of a discourse community producing the same genre. During the analysis if an element was encountered that Santos (2002) had not covered in his model, that element was recognized and added to the model. Moreover, if some elements in his model were absent in the data, they were recognized and marked. Chi-square tests were applied for each move and strategy separately in order to find out whether the differences between the parallel moves and strategies in the two corpora were significant. Some examples of moves and strategies are presented in the following pages.

Results

After analysing the electronic messages, a tentative coding scheme based on the identified moves and the related strategies for their realization was developed. Table 1 provides a summary of the profile of the schematic move structures of electronic messages. The following electronic messages are presented as authentic examples of the communicative purposes of 'requesting for information', e.g., (B-em21) and 'providing information', e.g., (E-em 20) from the two corpora.

B-em21:

Date: *Sun, 2 Sep 2004 13:32:26* Defining the participants

Reply –To *'CLINGEN-L: Clinical Genetics'*

From: *Saqib Mahmood<sasm@LHR.PAKNET.COM.PK>*

Subject: *dup (9) (q 12 to q 13)*

Hi, Opening

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What is the clinical significance of a female with a karyotype 46, xx, dup (9) (q 12 to 13).	Requesting information or answers
She is 27 years old, married to her first cousin, and has two children with hydrocephlus. *Karyotype of husband is normal and chromosomal analysis is yet to be done of the children.*	Introducing or providing background knowledge
Best regards	Ending politely
Saqib Mahmood	Adding signature line
Department of Medical Genetics	
The Children's Hospital	
Pakistan	
E-em20	

From: *wwwsrv@hgu.mrc.ca.uk*	Defining the participants
Date:*Tue, 17 Jan 2004*	
To: *'David chitayat,M.D.' <dchhitayat@HOME.COM>*	
Subject: *HGM2004 Abstract Submission*	
Thank you for your submission to HGM2004.	Thanking the addressee
The organising committee are pleased to inform	Providing information

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you that your abstracts have been accepted	
for a poster presentation.After all abstract have been	
received, five will be chosen	Adding, continuing
for oral presentation at each workshop.	
Further details of poster board will be sent to you.	Indicating plans
In the meantime check the meeting	Advising about the message
web side for regular updates.	
We look forward to hearing from you.	Encouraging further response
HGM2004 Organising Committee	Signing off

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Table 1
The schematic move structure and strategies realizing each move in EP and BP electronic messages

Moves	Strategies	Expression(s)
establishing the communication information chain	-defining the participants	From: Jim Hodge To:'David Chiat, M.D.' <dchiat@HOME.COM> Subject: 2004 Abstract Submission-
	-opening	Dear colleagues,
establishing the territory	-thanking the addressee	Thank you for your submission to….
	-introducing the topic	coordinate a citizenship project in ….
	-giving a quote	>I'm privileged to know a lot of… <
providing information or answers	-providing information	The organizing committee is pleased to inform you…
	-continuing, adding or updating	After all abstract have been received..
	-indicating wishes or plans	Further details of poster board will be sent to you.
	-advising about the message	Check the meeting web side….
requesting for information or action	-requesting for information	What is the clinical significance of…?
	-exchanging ideas	Do you think that … is justified?
	-asking for materials or documents	Would it be possible to send me…
	-requesting for action	Please be sure to include…
evaluating	-giving personal opinion	I assume…
	-making comments	This is an interesting idea for us to…
	-agreeing	You are right that…
	-showing opposition	What you wrote was rude.
closing	-encouraging further response	I look forward to hearing from you.
	-thanking	Thanks again for your interest.
	-ending	With kind regards
	-signing off	Ujwala Samant
	-adding signature line	Anne Raymer, Head of St. Joseph Library..

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Macro-textual Level: Move Structure Analysis

As Table 1 shows, the data analysis revealed six functional moves across the two corpora and the related strategies through which they were realized.

In 'establishing the communication information chain' move, the writers set the scene and provided the referenced information that linked a previous e-mail message to the next one. The 'defining the participants' strategy which is automatically inserted in the header position of all e-mail messages was one of the obligatory strategies across the two corpora. While no significant differences were seen in the realm of this strategy in the two corpora, considerable variety of topics were observed in BP messages. For instance, throughout the whole initial EP corpus (150 messages), only four main topics were observed whereas in the BP messages, 35 different topics were identified.

The 'opening' strategy, which conveyed the conventional complimentary greeting, had various realizations across the two corpora (Table 2). Although the BPs favored messages with 'dear +title or surname', the EPs preferred messages without any opening or messages with vocatives (recipients' names).

The discrepancy between different forms realizing the 'opening' strategy across EP and BP e-mail messages was shown to be significant according to the chi-square results. Assuming a 0.05 level of significance and a degree of freedom (df)=1, the values were 12.67, 4.11, 5.61, and 8.42 for 'dear + title + surname', 'dear + group', 'recipient's name', and 'messages without this strategy' respectively.

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Table 2
The frequency and percentage of different forms realizing 'opening' strategy across EP and BP e-mail messages

form of opening	EP		BP	
	frequency	Percentage	frequency	percentage
dear + title + surname	2	5	21	52.5
dear + group (e.g., colleagues, all)	1	2.5	7	17.5
recipient's name	6	15	0	0
hello (all)	2	5	4	10
messages without this strategy	29	72.5	8	20

In the optional 'establishing the territory' move, which has the function of providing background knowledge, the correspondents try to activate their addressees' relevant schemata. The BPs frequently used formulaic expressions to appreciate their addressees' responses by referring to previous messages in order to provide them with some context in 'thanking the addressee' strategy, e.g.
1. Thank you for your submission to HGM2004. (B-em 36)

The EPs on the other hand, relied on 'giving a quote' strategy through which, by quoting some parts of the previous messages or the whole previous letters, they provided more context or background information. The chi-square results revealed a significant difference between 'giving a quote' strategy across them (X^2=8.42, p <0.05, df=1). With regard to the 'introducing the topic' strategy both groups acted almost the same in setting the scene and providing background knowledge by indicating their intention and introducing themselves or their cases, e.g.
2. I am an ESL teacher…. I have a…(E-em 38)
3. I have a prenatal case with a…(B-em 18)

The propositional content of the electronic messages was reached by the two central moves of 'providing information and answers' and 'requesting information or answers' in the messages sent for these purposes.

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The obligartory move of 'providing information and answers' which helped the writers to achieve the communicative purpose of the genre by providing the requested information was more prominent in the EP messages. They achieved this purpose by employing four strategies of 'providing information', 'continuing, adding, or updating', 'indicating wishes and plans', and 'advising about the message' represented respectively in the following examples:

4. In response to your inquiry…(E-em 30)
5. I would like to inform you that, we…(B-em 22)
6. The task can be viewed on the following web site….(E-em 2)
7. His present mailing address is as below…(B-em 25)

The BPs mainly favored the obligatory move of 'requesting for information or action' through which they asked a professional question, raised an issue or requested for an action to be done. In 'requesting information or answers', 'asking for materials, documents' and 'requesting for action' strategies, a variety of interrogative forms with a large number of modals were employed.

8. Would it be possible to spare me a copy of….(B-em 36).
9. If you don't mind, plz fill it up and send it to… (B-em 26)

However, the EPs' contribution to the content of the ongoing issues was triggered by requesting their interlocutors for opinions and ideas and the need for explanation or clarifying problematic issues or dicussing debatable topics, e.g.

10. Please e-mail me on list or off list with any advice and information regarding…(E-em 1).

The optionality of 'evaluating' move in which the writers revealed their emotional feelings and intentions through assessing the raised issue and expressing their opinions can be related to the preferred communicative purposes in them. The communicative function of this move was realized by employing the 'giving personal opinion', 'agreeing', and 'showing opposition' strategies through which a collocation of first-person singular pronoun with private verbs

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expressing personal opinion conveyed content about a subject or disagreement on a debate. The most typical linguistic structures employed to realize these strategies were as follows:
11. I think … (E-em 34).
12. I agree… (B-em 22).
13. I disagree with the content of what you said (E-em 7).

In the 'making comments' strategy, third-person plural pronouns were quite frequent which indicates the potential of electronic medium connecting large groups of people together, e.g.
14. This is an interesting idea for us to… (E-em 35).
15. We have identified… (B-em 31).

The comparison of distribution of the 'evaluating' move across the two corpora by conducting a chi-square test yielded a significant difference (X^2=5.92, p <0.05, df=1).

The obligatory move of 'closing' characterized the closing of all electronic messages in the data. The 'encouraging further response', 'thanking' and 'signing off' strategies in which the interlocutors encouraged further communication by being persuasive, expressing appreciation towards the addressees, and claiming the ownership of the messages respectively were used with almost the same distribution across the two corpora. The formulaic expressions used in these strategies were as follows:
16. I look forward to hearing from you (E-em 13).
17. Thanks again for your interest (B-em 10).
18. John Chapman…. (B-em 3).

The 'ending politely' strategy was realized through mentioning complimentary phrases or even their absence (Table 3). While the use of such words as 'cheers' or 'sorry' especially in the EP messages revealed the use of conversational features in these messages, the use of such phrases as 'best regards' or 'kind regards' seem to appear widely in electronic messages. Among these realizations ‘Dear all’ or ‘Dear

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colleagues' also reflected the power of the new medium which can handle a large number of audience at the same time.

The chi-square test displayed significant differences in the realm of different forms of the 'ending politely' strategy. Assuming the 0.05 level of significance and df=1, the values were 5.27, 7.33, and 6.87 for 'best or kind regards', 'sincerely' and 'e-mail messages with no ending' respectively.

Table 3
The frequency and percentage of different forms materializing the 'ending politely' strategy across EP and BP e-mail messages

form of ending	EP		BP	
	frequency	Percentage	frequency	percentage
best or kind regards	3	7.5	13	32.5
(yours) sincerely	1	2.5	11	27.5
(all the) best (wishes)	2	5	3	7.5
Sorry	1	2.5	2	5
Cheers	1	2.5	0	0
messages without ending	32	80	11	27.5

Micro-textual Level: Lexico-grammatical Analysis

At the micro-textual level, some lexico-grammatical features such as verbs and pronouns were studied. Determining the pattern of tense variation across the two corpora, the most typical verbs used in the messages were 'present tense' and 'active voice'. The use of active voice may indicate the correspondent involvement. Verbs expressing personal attitude such as 'assume',' think', and 'believe' occurred frequently in EPs' messages. In both corpora, present verb forms and active voice greatly outnumbered past tense forms and passive voice. The higher use of active as opposed to passive forms seemed to be conditioned by discoursal functions of some moves and strategies. For instance, in the 'providing information' and 'evaluating' moves and 'advising about the messages' and 'giving personal opinion' strategies in which the correspondents' own arguments and opinions rather than the procedural description of the work of others seemed to predominate, higher use of

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present verbs and active voice were observed. The frequency of occurrence of tense type and voice are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5
Frequency of occurrence of the most typical tense types and voice in the two corpora

Fields	Tense		Voice		modals
	past	Present	active	passive	should, could, and would
EP	27	282	263	19	5
BP	45	197	252	34	17

The most frequent personal pronouns were first-person pronouns (I, we) across the two corpora. The predominance of 'it' and 's/he' in BPs' messages was in line with fulfilling their need to explain their case or describe their background information. Indefinite pronouns such as 'one' or 'anyone' were found to refer to any researcher in the listserv to stress the shared goals or knowledge. The use of first-person-singular pronoun was a powerful means of self-representation. It revealed the explicit correspondents presence in the electronic messages and their personal relationship. The use of the pronoun 'we' reflected the level of formality and the extent to which the writer identified himself or herself with the group. Frequencies of occurrence of personal pronouns are presented in Table 6. Chi-square results showed significant differences just for first-person-plural (X^2=3.58 p<0.05, df=1).

Table 6
The frequency of occurrence of personal pronouns in the two corpora

personal pronouns	frequency	
	(EP)	(BP)
I	93	46
You	13	39
It	3	23
S/he	1	18
We	12	24
They	14	2
one/ anyone	6	5

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Analysis of Different Conversational Features

To empirically examine the range of style in each set of data, conversational features were also studied. The considerable number of discourse markers, abbreviations, decapitalizations, and contracted forms in the data, specially in the BPs' messages, provided evidence for the stylistic similarity of electronic messages with informal spoken discourse. Discourse markers are defined according to Schiffrin (1987, p. 31) as sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk. So, the use of 'well' and 'okay' in the corpora seemed to mark boundaries of discourse and initiate topics. These conversational features are presented in the following examples:

19. Well… (E-em19)
20. Okay... (B-em31)
21. BTW…(conventionalized abbreviation, i.e., by the way E-em21)
22. plz…(personalized abbreviations, i.e., please B-em5)
23. I'm priviledged… (E-em17)
24. i had forgotten (B-em 12)

The frequency of occurrence of conversational features across the EP and BP e-mail messages is summarized in Table 7.

The results of chi-square tests, assuming the 0.05 level of significance and df=1, revealed significant differences between the frequency of discourse markers, abbreviations, and the lack of capitalization across the two corpora (X^2=5.62, 3.87, and 10.38 respectively).

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Table 7
Frequency of occurrence of conversational features across EP and BP e- mail messages

conversational features		frequency	
		EP	BP
discourse markers		0	6
abbreviation	Standard	8	1
	non-standard	2	9
contracted forms		21	29
decapitalization		6	28

Discussion and Conclusion

The results revealed that the overall schematic organizational pattern in the two corpora was the same due to the shared communicative purposes. The observed discrepancies in the strategies used to realize the moves illustrate the dynamic nature of e-mail genre accommodating to the rhetorical and functional needs of the discourse communities and purposes. The presented tentative model for the electronic messages can facilitate efficient and effective reproduction of this genre by providing a conscious recognition of its schematic organizational pattern (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993, 2008).

At the level of moves, the findings indicated six functional moves across the two corpora. The imposed requirement of the new medium on the electronic discourse can be responsible for the obligatory nature of 'establishing the communication chain' and 'closing' moves which acted as a frame for other moves as they were inserted automatically in all electronic messages. Moreover, fulfilling the communicative act of the electronic messages exchanged for the purposes of providing information and requesting information can explain the obligatory nature of the 'providing information' and 'request for information' moves conveying the content of the messages. Packaging information effectively by using the 'evaluating' and 'establishing the territory' moves in different proportion across the two corpora revealed the degree of

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'optionality' (Bhatia, 1993) of these moves rather than their absolute presence or absence.

In spite of the similarities across the two corpora, two principal justifications may explain the noticed discrepancies affecting both macro- and micro-textual levels. The first one can be related to the effects of context on text posited in the cross-disciplinary contrastive studies on genres made by other researchers (Vergaro, 2004; Samraj, 2002; Samraj & Monk, 2008). The effect of the new medium on the electronic discourse (Gimenez, 2006) can be viewed as another aspect of the contextual constraints.

In line with Flowerdew's and Wan's (2006) and Bremner's (2008) findings on the of importance of generic intertextuality, the second justification may be related to the notion of 'intertextuality' that somehow encompasses the concept of transfer, from either the first language or previously learned related texts (traditional pen and paper letters in this case).

The various rhetorical preferences emerged from the two corpora can be ascribed to features about the two fields. While the BPs favored the 'request for information' move due to the applied nature of their field to deal with their immediate problems, the prominence of the 'evaluating' move in the EPs messages can be ascribed to the subjective and theoretical nature of their field, contributing to ongoing issues by giving personal opinion or making comments on the current topics.

The differences observed at the level of strategies used for realizing each move across the two corpora lended support to previous genre analysis studies in which the major differences across disciplines and subcultures were mainly noticed in the constituent strategies (Samraj, 2002; Vergaro, 2004; Flowerdew & Wan, 2006; Samraj & Monk, 2008).

The higher frequency of 'giving a quote' and 'indicating wishes or plans' strategies in the EPs' longer messages which dealt with subjective

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issues, and the EPs' noticeable awareness of the medium due to their high level of English proficiency, along with their perceived importance of effective referencing to previous parts of the messages can also be contributed to the features inherent in English discipline. While in the EPs' messages, a posed question or a raised issue usually resulted in a prolonged debate with similar topics remaining as the main focus or thread of discussion, the BPs preferred shorter messages with various subject lines associated with the higher frequency of discoursal function of the 'request for information' move in these messages.

The prevalence of intertextuality noticed in the BPs reliance on the well-established norms and conventions of traditional letters, and transferring the same information packaging strategies over into their electronic messages may be responsible for the higher frequency of 'opening', 'ending' and 'adding signature line' strategies. However, by breaking the conventions of traditional letters frequently, the EPs wrote their e-mails in a context and genre sensitive way independent of their background knowledge of the traditional letters. The heterogeneous nature of the 'opening' and 'ending' strategies across the two corpora as well as their wide range of realizations, initiating and terminating the messages, revealed the creativity and flexibility inherent in this genre allowing more personal idiosyncrasies to emerge (Baron, 1998; Gains, 1999; Gimenez, 2000).

The contextual effect of either the electronic medium or the discipline on e-mail genre was also manifested in the distributional patterns of the lexico-grammatical features. A remarkable number of present tense and active voice and the scarcity of the passive voice in the two corpora might be attributed to the interactive and spontaneous nature of on-line discourse demanding correspondent involvement in putting forward an idea or argument in present tense rather than past or future tenses. The potential of this medium connecting large groups of people in a discourse community together was reflected in the relatively high frequency of third-person plural. Moreover, the EPs' tendency to

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express their personal opinion frequently was observed in the notable number of first-person singular in their e-mail messages.

The inherent confusion of style observed in BPs' e-mail messages was revealed through the high frequency of 'discourse markers', 'non-standard abbreviations', and 'decapitalizations' in these messages on the one hand, and their heavy reliance on the conventions of traditional letters on the other hand. The existence of these two contradictory factors revealed inconsistency of style in the electronic messages supporting the general consensus among researchers (Baron, 1998; Gonzalez-Bueno, 1998; Gains, 1999; Gimenez, 2000) that electronic messages are a hybrid of both oral and written discourse. However, the EPs' uniformity of written style in their longer production of consistent and well contextualized messages showed that electronic messages display a distinct mode of communication in their own right rather than spoken, written, or a combination of both. The findings thereby supported previous studies (Gimenez, 2006; Jensen, 2009) that the highly facilitative nature of e-mail as a medium with its greater tolerance in respect to correctness, makes it less threatening for the correspondents to exchange their messages despite their deficiencies.

The results of this study promise pedagogical implications for devising courses, preparing teaching materials and raising ESP instructors' awareness about learners' problems. Since changes in professional communities create new demands which are then manifested in the discoursal and formal features of e-mail genre, further cross-disciplinary research needs to be undertaken to capture other aspects of e-mail genre.

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