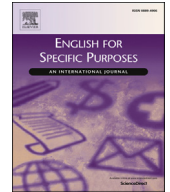


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Analysing options in pedagogical business case reports: Genre, process and language



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ABSTRACT

Analysis of options has been identified as comprising an important element in the writing of pedagogical business case reports (Easton, 1993; Forman and Rymer, 1999a; Mauffette-Leenders, Erskine, and Leenders, 1997; Nathan, 2013). Based on a corpus of 23 options analysis texts extracted from business case reports (17,931 words) written by NS and NNS postgraduates at a UK university business school, this paper uses Swalesian genre move analysis as a framework for proposing a rhetorical structure for the options analysis move. The move structure proposed incorporates an initial introductory 'orientation to the analysis' move, followed by a cycle of rhetorical moves focussing on each option under consideration in turn. Moves in the cycle are (1) identifying the option; (2) providing a rationale/motivation for option consideration; (3) establishing the feasibility of the option; and (4) providing evaluational information about the option. A range of sub-moves are identified within each move, with further cycling at deeper levels found within move 3 and its functional equivalents. Frequency counts evidence differences in NS and NNS deployment of moves and sub-moves. Linguistic analysis using the Wordsmith Tools program indicates functional and rhetorical differences in NS-NNS deployment of modal verbs.

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1. Introduction

Business case reports, also referred to as case studies and case analyses, are written across the range of specialisms on higher education business programmes, from Human Resource Management to Banking and Finance, from Accounting to Organisational Behaviour, and from Marketing and Marketing Management to Project Management (BAWE, 2008; Bridgeman and Carlson, 1984; Canseco and Byrd, 1989; Cooper and Bikowski, 2007; Horowitz, 1986; Zhu, 2004). The writing of these business case reports comprises a key vehicle for the promotion of student learning and a substantial component of student assessment on both undergraduate and postgraduate business degree programmes (Easton, 1993; Nathan, 2013).

Linguistic research on the characteristics of these reports has been conducted in a range of contexts, with genre move structures and other core language elements identified in ethnographically focused New Rhetoric genre studies (Forman and Rymer, 1999a,b; Freedman and Adam, 1996) as well as through Swalesian genre analysis (Nathan, 2013). All of the rhetorical structures presented incorporate moves which include forms of analysis and recommendation. An additional core move reported by these researchers requires the proposal and analysis of alternatives or options for action.

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The importance of this options move has been widely recognised (Easton, 1993; Forman and Rymer, 1999a; Mauffette-Leenders, Erskine and Leenders, 1997; Nathan, 2013), with options analysis identified as representing, in many business cases, a key step towards formulation of the recommendations for action which are crucial elements in these case reports (Nathan, 2013).

Nathan's research (2010, 2013) has posited roles and purposes of these options sections within the business case report, and examined the frequency of option move occurrence as well as aspects of modal verb deployment within this move. However, key aspects of the options move, particularly its constituent move structure and grammatical and lexical characteristics, have not been described.

A preliminary examination of options analysis sections written on preparatory Business programmes by NNS writers, conducted prior to the more systematic options analysis research on degree programme texts presented in this paper, identified difficulties in the structuring of option analysis components, as well as with specific report language, in particular related to deployment of modal verbs.

Given the difficulties identified for these preparatory course NNS writers in writing these options analysis sections, the importance of options analysis in pedagogical business case reports and the absence of research on options analysis, it was decided to investigate options analysis writing, focussing specifically on structural aspects of these texts and the more micro-linguistic elements required for the effective realisation of options analysis. As part of this study, it was decided to compare NS and NNS options analysis writing with a view to identification of any systematic differences which might inform the teaching of options writing to NNS students.

Additional to its relevance for business case report writing, such research was seen as having potential relevance to disciplines beyond the Business School, such as Medicine and Psychology, where case analysis is used to support learning and assessment, as well as having relevance to other academic genres in which learners need to identify and evaluate alternate theories, explanations and actions (Nesi and Gardner, 2012) and for the writing of non-academic genres such as business reports (Yeung, 2007).

2. Background to the study

2.1. Business case reports

Also termed 'case studies' (Freedman and Adam, 1996; Freedman, Adam and Smart., 1994) and 'case write ups' (Forman and Rymer, 1999a,b), pedagogical business case reports comprise one of a range of responses to business cases which may include case presentations, case analyses and case critiques (BAWE, 2008; Nathan, 2013). These case reports are generated within the context of case method teaching wherein business students are taught and learn through situated business problems or 'cases' usually presented in the form of substantial documentation, which are subject to discussion within the lecture and classroom context (Easton, 1993; Mauffette-Leenders et al., 1997; Russell, 2002). The cases themselves comprise descriptions of businesses and their operating environments, often including market information, company financial data, and information about personnel and management strategies, and are selected in line with disciplinary, programme and course objectives.

Case method teaching is approached in different ways dependent on teaching context. In the best-known method, the Harvard Method, students' case responses are written then brought to class for discussion. However in other contexts there is no in-class discussion of case reports, which are instead written over the period of a business programme, or in seen-examinations where students receive case data prior to the exam, only receiving the actual task in the examination (Easton, 1993; Mauffette-Leenders et al., 1997). The business case reports themselves can vary in length from a single page to three or four thousand words in continuous assessment tasks (Forman and Rymer, 1999a; Nathan, 2013).

Genre move structures have been proposed for business case reports. Based on a corpus of short MBA management case reports and interviews with faculty at a US University, the New Rhetoric genre researchers Forman and Rymer (1999a) identified six explicit non-sequential moves in their case report genre model, framed within different writer roles. According to this model, in the role of problem solver, student writers identify significant problems in the case and propose and analyse alternative solutions (options analysis). In a manager role, writers make logical recommendations and develop an implementation plan; and as disciplinary thinkers, writers connect course materials to the case and demonstrate understanding of disciplinary tools and principles.

Using a range of documentation from business programmes, including course handbooks, case report texts, as well as focussing on situational and contextual features, Nathan (2013) defined the communicative purposes of pedagogical business case report texts as:

persuasion of/demonstration to the lecturer reader that the writer has knowledge of, understands, and can apply core business specialist concepts as taught during the course programme, and further can generate appropriate, logically justified and effective advice for action presented in an appropriate academic style and format.

(Nathan, 2013, p. 60)

Within the context of this communicative purpose, and from study of a corpus of 69 business case reports originating from the specialisms of marketing, marketing management, project management and management accounting, Nathan identified

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