

IDENTIFYING GENERIC FEATURES OF EFL STUDENTS' ONLINE DISCUSSION POSTINGS

Yupaporn PIRIYASILPA
(Macquarie University)

ABSTRACT: Online discussion activity has become an important part of many language classrooms, and has been employed as an alternative medium for students to communicate in the target language. This paper reports on a research project into the use of online discussions in a writing curriculum for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students at a University in Thailand. The study investigates the rhetorical structure of the students' writing in online discussion postings over a 16-week course using Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). It was found that SFL genre can be used as a framework for the analysis of online discussion postings and such texts are often a combination of texts realising different genres. This study claims that treating the online discussion posting as a macro genre (MARTIN, 1994) is useful to the language teacher and researcher when observing students' contributions in this particular medium of communication.

KEYWORDS: Online discussion, SFL, genre analysis, EFL

1. Introduction

Online discussion learning has increasingly become an important part of tertiary education in the area of English language teaching (ELT). In many language classrooms, this activity has been employed and it plays a significant role as an alternative choice for students to communicate in the target language out of class. As the online discussion is a new medium and different to the traditional way of learning in the classroom, by using this medium; teacher and students encounter a new educational context, which exposes them to a new social context. This new social context is making different demands on the people who want to communicate. That is, they have to take different social roles, for instance a discursive role, when communicating in this new medium. Findings in different studies also agree that technology can alter the linguistic features of messages to be different to the typical spoken or written language. Baron (1998, p. 136), for example, found that the change in linguistic features in the online texts includes 'orthography, vocabulary choice, syntactic structure, and conventions governing semantic appropriateness'. While Baron focuses mainly on the use of language in lexicogrammar and appropriateness of semantic meaning, the rhetorical structure of online texts was not investigated. Given that a meaningful text is construed from a combination of schematic stages in addition to smaller units other than individual units of language and that successful communication of different text types is based on the construction of certain stages, it is important to examine further the linguistic features in online texts in order that the results will reflect how the rhetorical structures of texts constructed through this new mode of communication are composed and whether or not these structures are stable.

Using a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) framework, this paper investigates the linguistic features in the online discussion texts composed by Thai students through the online discussion lists, in order to identify generic stages in this particular medium of communication. An online discussion list is a forum, 'where many people post messages to be read by everyone with access to (it)' (MCPHERSON and MURRAY, 2003, p. 81) and 'one email message can be sent simultaneously to thousands of email addresses' (WARSCHAUER et al, 1996, p. 2).

In SFL, if the texts share the same general purposes, they often share structural elements and they belong to the same genre or text type (BUTT et al, 2000, p. 9). SFL has a long tradition of research in and application to educational contexts (e.g. FEEZ, 1998;

BURNS and DE SILVA JOYCE, 1999; BUTT et al, 2000; CHRISTIE, 2000; MARTIN, 2001). In non- educational contexts, the study which uses SFL as a framework is, for example, Eggins and Slade (1997). Eggins and Slade (1997) are interested particularly in the rhetorical organisation of everyday conversation. Their study sets up models and ways to identify discourse structure of different types of casual talk e.g. gossip and telling stories. In terms of the study of rhetorical structure of online discussions, the only study which follows SFL as a framework is Coffin, Painter and Hewings (2005). The study finds that technology in online conferencing influences language and literacy practice to become dialogic-like and shapes the argumentative pattern to be different to the traditional written or spoken languages. In their study, the argumentative structure of the entire online discussion incorporating all the individual postings is the main focus, and it examines how all the online discussion postings together constitute the discussion and what generic features they have. However, generic structures of individual online discussion postings are left uninvestigated.

Rather than investigating how people learn content through collaborative discussion or argumentation, the main focus of this study is on language teaching and learning by looking at individual learner's ability in using the language in online discussion postings. To address this particular issue, this paper looks at individual postings composed by students rather than the entire discussions. Generic structures as constructed for different topics assigned are explored and social purposes of the online discussion postings are linked to generic structure. As the SFL tradition of genre emphasises explicitly on the relationship between grammar, meaning and context (e.g. HALLIDAY and MATTHIESSEN, 2004; MARTIN and ROSE, 2003), this study is working on SFL framework in order to identify the rhetorical structure of online discussion postings conducted by EFL students.

2. The study

In this study, students worked in groups of five or six members and participated in five online discussions. There are in total 281 postings posted by both the teacher and students throughout the whole semester. In this paper two students' postings from different discussions will be analysed to illustrate how they organised their rhetorical structure for different purposes.

3. The findings

It was found from the study that online discussion postings combine more than one type of genre in each posting.

In the first discussion of the course, students were supposed to provide a self introduction at the beginning, followed by their reaction to a movie which they have all watched. Text 1 below is the contribution of Student A in the first discussion.

He everyone. I am N... Please call me "A". Now I am 22 years old. I was born in B... at S...Hospital. I graduated from K...School. The reason that I study here because I can passed the examination and it is not far from my house. First time I decided to be an engineering student here but this university did not accept M.6 so I decided to choose EIC. Now live in K...near T...School.
About the movie "February" I agree with G... but I do not agree with N... because I think everything happens by yourself it is not involve destiny or fortune. If you love someone, it depends on yourself that you love her or not. I think destiny is only believe of some people and in truth it is not because we can not prove the destiny. Example, my friend felt in love a girl and he thought it is destiny to lead him to meet her so he decided to ask his close friend to contact her for him. But when the time passed, that girl had felt in love his close friend and he was very sad. Is this destiny? If this is destiny why the boy and the girl din not have a chance to love each other?

Text 1. Student A's contribution in the first discussion

From Text 1, Student A begins the contribution with an introduction giving information about himself. The argument presented here is that Student A's initial posting has two broad moves: interpersonal and experiential. A salutation given at the initial stage of his discourse is an interpersonal move. Then, a self- introduction is given as a response to part of the task assigned by the teacher that students are required to give information about themselves. In so doing, declarative sentences are usually composed at this stage of his discourse, using past tense of relational, mental and material processes and first person pronoun ('I') is mainly used in Themes. Time markers (i.e. 'now', 'first time', 'now') are used to organise the phase temporally. The structural elements at this first stage of his discourse realise a '*first person biography*'. The generic stages of the first stage of Student A's posting can be formatted in Figure 1 below.

Salutation	Biography
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Interpersonal move Experiential move

Figure 1. Generic stages of Student A's first posting

His introduction of a new topic is made through a circumstance of matter and the linguistic features in this latter part of his discourse turn to be similar to an exposition as demonstrated in Table 1 below.

Schematic Stages	Common Recognition features (GEROT and WIGNELL, 1994)	Text	Remarks
Thesis position	Introduces topic and indicates writer's position	About the movie "February" I agree with Gik but I do not agree with Nok because I think everything happens by yourself it is not involve destiny or fortune.	Genre: exposition with a recount embedded Language features (some do not exist in this text): focus on generic human and non- human participants, use of simple present tense, use of relational processes, use of internal conjunction to stage argument, reasoning through causal conjunction or nominalisation (GEROT and WIGNELL, 1994)
Argument Point	Present argument supporting writer's position	If you love someone, it depends on yourself that you love her or not. I think destiny is only believe of some people and in truth it is not because we can not prove the destiny.	
Elaboration	Develops and supports each point or argument	Example, my riend felt in love a girl and he thought it is destiny to lead him to meet her so he decided to ask his close friend to contact her for him. But when the time passed, that girl had felt in love his close friend and he was very sad.	Genre: embedded anecdote Language features (some do not exist in this text): use of exclamations, rhetorical questions and intensifiers (really, very quite, etc.) to point up the significance of the events, use of material processes to tell what happened, use of temporal conjunctions (GEROT and WIGNELL, 1994)
Reinforcement	Restates the writer's position	Is this destiny? If this is destiny why the boy and the girl din not have a chance to love each other?	Genre: exposition (continued)

Table 1. Generic features in Student A's contribution in the first discussion

After stating the topic of the second part of the experiential move, a statement of position showing his agreement with a friend is made using mental process in declarative Mood. Then, his argument is made by the expansion of the previous argument made by a friend using the same pattern of language of mental process. Before terminating this stage of his text, a reinforcement is made to reaffirm his position made at the initial stage. The overall linguistic features in this move of his discourse have the structural elements of an exposition - ‘*statement of position*’ ^ ‘*argument*’ ^ ‘*elaboration*’ ^ ‘*reinforcement*’. Moreover, it can also be noticed that an anecdote is embedded when elaboration is made to clarify his point. In so doing, past tense of material and mental processes are also frequently used together with time marker (e.g. ‘But when the time passed’) to relate the events logically. Figure 2 below illustrates the rhetorical structure in the second stage of Student A’s first posting, constituting an exposition with an anecdote embedded.

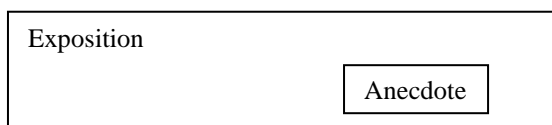


Figure 2. Generic features in the second stage of Student A’s first posting representing an exposition with an anecdote embedded

Overall, Student A’s posting in the first discussion is composed of two main moves: interpersonal and experiential moves and within the experiential move, there is a combination of more than one genre. The rhetorical structure of Student A’s discussion is illustrated in Figure 3 below.

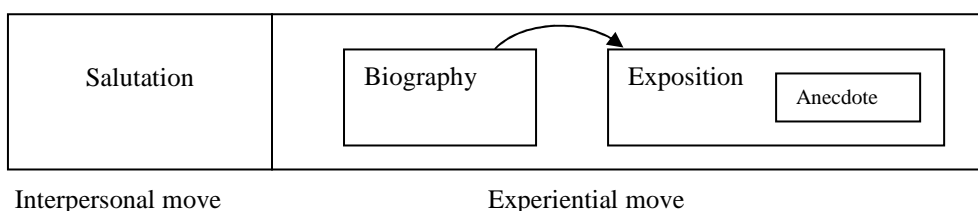


Figure 3. Rhetorical structure of Student A’s posting

Figure 3 shows that the interpersonal meaning is made through a salutation at the beginning of Student A’s posting, followed by the experiential move, which is composed of more than one genres i.e. it is built up by a relationship of serial expansion between a biography and an exposition. Moreover, there is also a complex structure organized within an exposition as well in that an anecdote is also embedded in an elaboration of his argument. In this study the beginning of the posting with a salutation to fore-ground interpersonal move at the beginning of the online discussion postings can also be found in other students’ postings whereas the experiential move with a combination of different genres is demonstrated in almost all of the students’ texts throughout the five discussions as the texts are composed in response to the task assigned by the teacher. Interpersonal move then can be claimed as an optional stage in the macro structure of the online discussion posting composed in this study (see Figure 3).

In later discussions, the topics given were about something else other than the writer. Students’ postings are mainly composed as a combination of more than one genre. In this section, Student B’s text in discussion three will be further examined as an instance of students’ text composed in later discussions. Text 2 below illustrates the contribution of Student B in the third discussion.

Hey! N... I have read your Faqy's message. You are a sychiatrist, aren't you? (Just kidding) What you have said is true. Although I am not a psychiatrist, I know some reasons why people get a psychosis. I think the main reason is person's mind condition. You know I have had lot of problems since I was young. I had never been hopeless or unconscious. I always thought that I have my brain, my mind and my good body. I could set my life. I had to be patient and try to walk along to the right way. I think 100% of people, who have a mental disease, have a family problem. Some have no family. Some lose their lover. Some fail their business and other reasons. Because of these reasons, people are full of fancies and imaginations. Somsornng, who has full of fancies and imaginations, perhaps lose her family. I think if she was patient and conscious, she would not be like this. In addition, if other people accepted what she was and there is someone takes care of her, she would be better.

Text 2. Student B's contribution in the third discussion

From Text 2, Student B begins the first stage with a dialogic pattern of communication as demonstrated in Table 2 below:

Schematic Stages	Generic Structure	Text	Remarks
Salutation		Hey! N...	
Recollection	Statements presuming previous arguments made by friends	I have read your Faqy's message.	Genre: exchange structure
Reaction	- The speakers' reaction to their own story (EGGINS and SLADE, 1997, p. 245) - Outburst of laughter, a gasp indicating horror or fear or an expression of amazement (ibid., p. 247) Personal comment or judgment to the story	You are a sychiatrist, aren't you? (Just kidding)	Linguistic features: present perfect, relational and verbal processes, 1 st and 2 nd person pronouns, declarative Mood,

Table 2. Schematic stages in Student B's contribution in the third discussion

Table 2 clearly demonstrates that Student B begins the posting with a dialogic pattern of communication by referring to a previous message made by his friend to represent his/her turn ('I have read your Faqy's message') and then he contributes his turn from that ('You are a sychiatrist, aren't you?'). The key structure taken at this stage of his discourse is '*salutation*' ^ '*recollection*' ^ '*reaction*'. The mention of previous arguments made by peers before making own argument mirrors an '*exchange structure*' (MARTIN, 1992) in the process of negotiation made in face to face communication. That is to say a recollection is representing '*initiating move*' and his reaction is functioning as '*a responding move*'. According to Martin (ibid.), in order to negotiate interpersonal meaning, interlocutors have to agree on what they are negotiating about by ensuring that the experiential meaning under consideration is shared (p. 67). The track of ideas mentioned in previous turn then represents a discursive structure of this generic stage.

When discussing their opinion online, students normally write to an intended audience, who is not present. To make their discussion complete, students usually bring people or previous texts into their text partly that there is no text to respond. This is a common feature of postings throughout this corpus. In this case, Student B uses a nominalization of his friend's text before making his own point. A recollection of others' previous ideas is Student B's text is actually representing a turn to be taken by others and his arguments or contributions are built up as a responding turn from that. Moreover, interpersonal meaning is made through a frequent use of first and second person pronouns in this move of Student B' text and that the reaction made in student B's online discussion posting means that the reader is taken as part of his discussion, which builds up solidarity between the writer and reader. The linguistic features of, for example, the use of first and second person pronouns, question tags and expressions of laughter and amazement at this

stage of Student B's discourse are similar with those of a casual conversation (see EGGINS and SLADE, 1997). This dialogic conversation constructed at the beginning of the texts is another common feature at this point of most students' postings throughout all discussions aiming to foreground interpersonal move before shifting to the experiential move in the text, and can be claimed as representing an optional generic stage of the online discussion postings in this study. Figure 4 below illustrates the instance of interpersonal move organized as an optional generic stage at the beginning of the posting before the discussion of experiential move in Student B's posting.

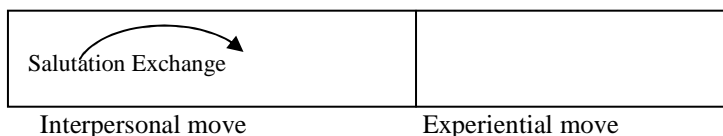


Figure 4. Interpersonal move organized as an optional generic stage in Student B's posting

When the discussion is on the content of the topic, Student B's text mainly contains the linguistic features of an exposition as illustrated in Table 3 below.

Schematic Stages	Generic Structure (from HAMMOND et al.; GEROT and WIGNELL, 1994)	Text	Remarks
Statement of position	Introduces issue and indicates writer's position in regard to issue	What you have said is true.	Genre: Exposition with a description embedded Language features: focus on generic human and non-human participants, use of simple present tense, use of relational processes, use of internal conjunction to stage argument, reasoning through causal conjunction or nominalisation (from HAMMOND et al.; GEROT and WIGNELL, 1994)
Preview	Outlines the main arguments to be represented	Although I am not a psychiatrist, I know some reasons why people get a psychosis.	
1 st argument Point	Restates main argument outlined in Preview	I think the main reason is person's mind condition	
Elaboration Identification Description	Identifies phenomenon to be described Describes parts, qualities, characteristics	You know I have had lot of problems since I was young. I had never been hopeless or unconscious. I always thought that I have my brain, my mind and my good body. I could set my life. I had to be patient and try to walk along to the right way.	Genre: Embedded Description in an elaboration Language features: focus on specific participants, use of attributive and identifying processes, frequent use of Epithets and classifiers in nominal groups, use of simple present tense (from HAMMOND et al.; GEROT and WIGNELL, 1994)
2 nd argument Point	Restates main argument outlined in Preview	I think 100% of people, who have a mental disease, have a family problem.	Genre: Exposition (continued) Language features: focus on generic human and non-human participants, use of simple present tense, use of relational processes, use of internal conjunction to stage argument, reasoning through causal conjunction or nominalisation (from HAMMOND et al.; GEROT and WIGNELL, 1994)
Elaboration	Develops and supports each point or argument	Some have no family. Some lose their lover. Some fail their business and other reasons. Because of these reasons, people are full of fancies and imaginations. Somsornng, who has full of fancies and imaginations, perhaps lose her family. I think if she was patient and conscious, she would not be like this. In addition, if other people accepted what she was and there is someone takes care of her, she would be better.	

Table 3. Generic features in Student B's contribution in the third discussion

When Student B responds to the task given by the teacher, he begins with a statement of position showing agreement with his friend. In so doing, relational process is used in declarative Mood to introduce his position ('What you have said is true'). Then, a preview of arguments is made using mental process and the sentence is linked logically with conjunction ('Although I am not a psychiatrist, I know some reasons why people get a psychosis'). Mental process is also used when his arguments are made. After stating the point in each of his argument, elaborations are made to clarify the ideas and these are linked logically through additives ('and' and 'in addition') and causal conjunctives ('because of these reasons'). The key structural elements in this part of his text are 'statement of position' ^ 'preview' ^ 'arguments', which resemble an exposition. However, another kind of genre also exists in the experiential move of his discourse i.e. a description (GEROT and WIGNELL, 1994), embedded as an elaboration of his first argument by giving a description about himself. In this embedded phase, first person pronoun ('I') is frequently used together with attributive relational Processes. Table 3 above is re-formatted and the schematic structure in the experiential move of Student B's third posting is demonstrated in Figure 5 below:

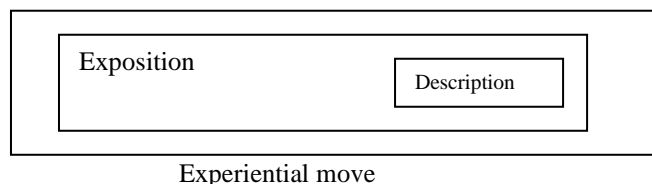


Figure 5. Generic structure in Student B's experiential move, representing an exposition with a description embedded.

Taking a broader perspective of the overall structure of Student B's third posting, there are two major moves operating within his text: interpersonal and experiential moves. Interpersonal move is composed as an optional generic stage to build up solidarity with the reader and representing a dialogic conversation through a salutation and an exchange structure. Meanwhile, experiential move is constructed as an obligatory stage when his discussion focuses on the task assigned by the teacher and this experiential move is composed of more than one genre. The macro structure of his third posting is demonstrated in Figure 6 below:

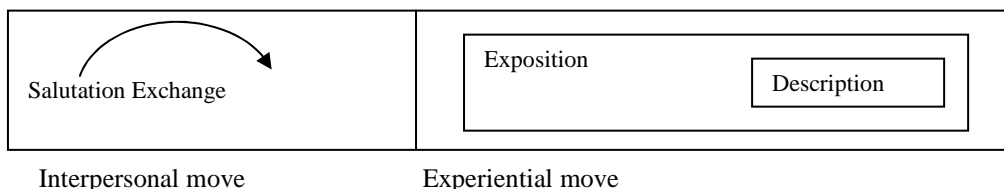


Figure 6. A combination of generic stages in Student B's posting

The findings in terms of linguistic features and schematic stages in Student B's posting demonstrate that the generic stages which exist in the online discussion posting in this social context seem to compose of two significant moves: interpersonal and experiential moves and an interpersonal move is an optional generic stage. In the experiential move, there is often a combination of more than one genre used when responding to the task. This development of text out of elemental genre is called a macro genre (MARTIN, 1994, p. 49) and is consistent with those found in Student A's and other students' texts. In many postings,

students also end their contributions with a third move, which is also interpersonal, and this overall structure shows how students balance the educational purpose of the discussion (responding to the task as required by the teacher) with the social purpose (maintaining relationships through interaction with peers and teacher) by adopting and adapting features typical of both spoken and written language.

4. Discussion

The findings from the study bring about some important issues for the language teacher to take into account prior to employing the online discussion activity as part of the classroom activity.

It was found from the study that SFL genre framework can be used to analyse the rhetorical structure in the online discussion postings and that any particular posting may combine more than one genre. In Student A's posting, the discourse is organized by two moves: (1) a salutation, and (2) the combination of a self introduction and his opinion about the movie. The two moves in his posting are consistent to his peers' postings and reflect two generic stages of an interpersonal move and an experiential move.

Meanwhile, Student B's posting is also composed of two broad moves. The initial contains a salutation and a dialogic exchange recollecting previous arguments and responding to that. The latter explains the writer's position and arguments, holding structural elements of an exposition. Furthermore, an embedded description also exists in an elaboration of his second argument. These two broad moves in Student B's posting represent interpersonal and experiential moves.

The findings reflect that two significant moves which are made in students' online discussion postings in this study are interpersonal move as an optional generic stage when solidarity is made at the beginning of the posting and experiential move as an obligatory stage holding a combination of genres when a response to the task provided by the teacher is made. The linguistic features used by students in this study may also be consistent with online discussion postings in other contexts where tasks are assigned by the teacher.

Furthermore, the structural elements in the two students' contributions clearly demonstrate that there is a combination of more than one genre in each of the students' contributions and that a stable pattern of schematic stages which would indicate an 'elemental' genre of online discussion posting does not exist. This suggests that the discussion posting is not a genre, but a macro genre, which is defined by Martin (1994, p. 49) as the way that texts are developed out of elemental genres, making use of the various structuring devices associated with ideational, interpersonal and textual meaning. The understanding of the combined genres in the online posting is very important for the language teacher when employing this kind of activity as a complement to classroom activities and examining schematic stages taken in students' postings.

Moreover, the beginning of the text as an exchange through the use of first person pronoun, joking and amazement made in Student B's contribution (see Table 2) is a consistent strategy often made by other students in the classroom and reflects the mediation of both dialogic and monologic patterns of communication of the online discussion postings showing that online discussions fall on a continuum somewhere between spoken and written language. This paper argues that by understanding the macro genre nature of the online discussion, the language teacher can make use of its features to help students learn successfully. In other words, by treating these special characteristics as common features of online discussion postings and focusing particularly on experiential part when working on developing learners' writing, the online discussion activity can still become an efficient resource for students to practice the learnt language out of the classroom.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have examined the rhetorical structure of two students' online discussion postings constructed under different topics assigned. The findings show that SFL genre framework can be used to analyse the online discussion posting and that there is a combination of more than one genre. The paper argues that the unique rhetorical structure of the online discussion posting demonstrates a macro genre, which holds both the characteristics of spoken and written language and it is important for the language teacher to be aware of these special features when assigning the task for students and when assessing their contributions, whether formally or informally.

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