The Genre of Consultations

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Abstract

This study was conducted to investigate the genre moves pattern used in teacher-student consultations which given as support for portfolio learning at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT). The subjects were the undergraduates in KMUTT, who were studying Science or Engineering. The main instrument used in this study was the transcripts from the consultations. In the findings, five compulsory genre moves together with a further three optional moves were found. It is hoped that this five-move pattern may be useful for developing consultations.

General Background

Currently, in English Language Teaching there is an increasing interest in independent learning. Therefore, many institutes including King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) promote independent learning.

To promote independent learning, KMUTT provides a Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) which includes various kinds of facilities (descriptions of the SALC can be found in Tantisawetrat and Chongsuphajaisiddhi, 1995). In addition to providing the SALC, KMUTT is now implementing a new curriculum which aims to provide more learner independence (see Watson Todd, 2000).

The courses in the new curriculum are primarily task-based, but also incorporate autonomous learning, projects and content-based learning. As part of one of these courses, students were required to keep a portfolio and study grammar by themselves through self-access learning. To support student's learning through self-access, consultations with the teacher were provided.

In this situation, teachers act as counsellors who provide guidance and advice to students. From the situation, it is quite clear that teacher's role has changed. Gardner and Miller (1999) argue that the teacher's role dramatically changes from a person who manages the traditional classroom to a counsellor who stands aside and supports students.

The growth in the use of consultations is an important aspect of teaching that teachers need to know about. This has led to some recent research into various aspects of consultations, including the strategies used by counsellors (see Sutthanu, 2000).

However, there has been no previous research into the overall patterns which consultations take. The purpose of this research, therefore, is to provide a basic description of the stages and functions of consultations. In other words, it attempts to provide a functional description of the genre of consultations.

The Genre of Consultations

At present, there has been an increasing interest in the study of genre analysis. Genre analysis is "the study of texts as social phenomena where recurrent patterns of structure and behavior help organize structures and behaviors into comprehensible and effective forms" (Connor and Mauranen, 1999, p. 48).

One key factor in genre analysis is the study of genre moves which are the stages and functions that show a specific communicative purpose (see more details in Bhatia, 1993). The important moves of one genre were once illustrated by Swales' (1990) analysis. Swales discovered that writers of academic research paper displayed similarities in the way they organized their article introductions. The communicative purpose of the article introductions could be divided into four rhetorical moves. Each of these moves serves a communicative purpose or function, which taken together give the genre its communicative purpose (Bhatia, 1993).

In this paper, it is posited that consultations form a genre with a common communicative purpose, and that this purpose is reached through a series of moves. The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to identify the genre moves in a consultation.

Situation

This study was conducted at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, a technological university which is well-known in Thailand. Most students at the university are engineering or science undergraduates.

As has been mentioned above, as part of an English language support course for these undergraduates, teacher-student consultations were provided to support portfolio learning. The consultations were generally given to students in groups of three, pairs or individually. One consultation for each group lasted about 10 minutes.

The main purpose of the consultations was to help students to solve their language problems which may have arisen during self-directed learning and to provide them with paths for future improvement.

The data of this study come from twenty-two consultations. I am both the teacher and researcher who conducted all these consultations. I did not have experience in giving consultations. However, I am quite familiar with the learning situation, and know the characteristics of the students.

As mentioned above, the students came for the twenty-two consultations either in groups of two or three, or individually. There were seven consultations with groups of three students and eleven consultations with groups of two students. The other four consultations were with individual students. All of these students were undergraduates taking evening courses in the faculties of science and engineering.

Methodology

The twenty-two consultations with students were all recorded and the recordings were transcribed. The transcriptions were used as the instrument in this study.

To identify the genre moves from the transcripts, firstly, the transcripts were segmented to identify the stages in consultations. Then, the function served by each stage was identified. This process was conducted recursively. From the stages and functions of stages identified through this process, the frequently occurring functions or genre moves were found. Any moves which occurred in over 80% of consultations were included as the standard genre moves within the consultations. Other function of stages which occurred less frequently were included as optional genre moves within the overall genre of consultations.

Findings

The main findings of this study, then, are the genre moves within the genre of consultations. Within twenty-two transcripts of the 47 students which are the data for this study, the following eight moves were found. Numbers in brackets after each move show the numbers of consultations in which that move occurred.

1). Teacher and students greet one another. (21)
2). Students report on the work done. (17)
3). Teacher checks students' understanding. (12)
4). Teacher asks students to talk about their problem. (20)
5). Teacher gave explanation or advice to students. (6)
6). Teacher asks students to express their attitudes toward consultation. (22)
7). Teacher asks students to talk about autonomous learning. (9)
8). Teacher and students say good-bye. (16)

From this, we can describe the genre moves of consultations as having the following pattern:

Move 1:   Greeting
Move 2:   Reporting on work
Move 2a: (Checking students' understanding)
Move 3:   Description of problem
Move 3a: (Giving explanation/ advice)
Move 4:   Eliciting students' attitudes
Move 4a: (Guiding towards autonomous learning)
Move 5:   Farewell

Note: Moves in brackets are optional.

To illustrate what each of these moves looks like, the following are examples of transcripts of each moves:

Move 1: Greeting

Student: Good evening teacher, my name is Somwang Chingching.
Teacher: Hello.

Move 2: Reporting on work.

> Student: My topic is present perfect tense. Verb form consist of subject…
> ah … verb to have and participle. Use for show the activities and
> events which start in the past and continue to the present.
>
> Teacher: A-ha … O.K. … very good!

Move 2a: Checking students' understanding.

> Teacher: When can we use present simple tense?
> Students: Ah…. Ah at present.
> Teacher: At the present time!
> Student: Yeah, at present time
> Teacher: O.K., very good.

Move 3: Description of problem.

> Teacher: What is or what are you problem?
> Student1: Ah… problem is my … ah the structure of sentence… I don't
> know … (laugh).
> Student2: (smile)
> Teacher: Oh! You don't know the structure of sentences!
> Student1: (Nod)
> Teacher: How can you solve the problem?
> Student1: You make example sentence, and you tell me structure.
> Teacher: O.K., you want the teacher to teach you, right?
> Student1: Yeah.
> Student2: (Nod).

Move 3a: Giving explanation/advice.

> Student: Um … I don't know difference when we use ah … between
> present perfect and past simple.
> Teacher: O.K., … um … present perfect began in the past and it's still
> going on in the present, while … past simple began in the past
> and finished in the past. It won't be in the present.

Move 4: Eliciting students' attitudes

> Teacher: How do you feel when I ask you to study grammar by yourself?
> Student: Ah…exciting!
> Teacher: Exciting! Are you happy or not happy to study by yourself?
> Student: Happy.
> Teacher: Can you tell me why?
> Student: Because I can get a new thing or the tip when we… when… I
> don't remember … um the tense every tense.
> Teacher: Um….

Move 4a: Guiding towards autonomous learning

> Teacher: Sompong, do you want me to teach you grammar?

> Student1: Uh…no.
> Teacher: No! Why?
> Student1: I learn grammar in self-access room.
> Teacher: How about Sompit? Do you want me to teach you grammar?
> Student2: Yes.
> Teacher: Why?
> Student2: I … I begin learning no good…(laugh.)
> Teacher: So, you don't think that you are good at English now, and you want me to help you, right?
> Student2: (Nod)

Move 5: Farewell.
> Teacher: Thank you for coming. See you on Friday.
> Student: (smile)

Conclusion

This research was introductory and descriptive. Thus it is not clear the extent to which the moves identified in this research will be helpful for learning. However, I hope that this preliminary research has provided some useful information for both teachers and students.

Teachers who do not have experience in giving consultations and who do not know how to start consultations may use the genre moves as a pattern or model to follow. This pattern may be helpful for them to see how they should begin and run their own consultations.

For teachers who have experience in consultations, they may see whether their consultations follow the same genre moves as this. If they do not, they might consider why are different. This leads to the question: Should they change their consultation pattern to fit the pattern identified in this research or should they keep their own pattern because it is preferable?

From these situations, it is hoped that the genre moves identified in this paper would help to make feedback consultations more productive and more useful leading to greater student learning.

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