Discourse Structure of Telephone Enquiries in Malaysian Business Context

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the discourse structure of telephone enquiries used by Malaysian English as a Second Language (ESL) speakers in simulated service encounters in the business context. The specific objectives of the study were to identify the structure of the opening and closing exchanges of the telephone conversation and the structure of the service encounters. Oral interaction data were collected from 28 ESL speakers from an English for Professional Purposes course participating in paired role play situations involving restaurant reservation, hotel holiday package and products. The results showed that only three out of 14 interactions had the obligatory Sale Request ^ Sale Compliance ^ Sale ^ Purchase ^ Purchase Closure structure of service encounters found by Halliday and Hassan (1985). For the telephone conversation, only half of the openings followed the Greeting, Identification and Statement of Availability sequence but 12 out of 14 closings had the Preclosing ^ Leave-taking sequence taught in the course. The discourse structure of the telephone-mediated service encounter in the business context was found to be difficult to master for most participants in the study.

Keywords: Discourse structure, service encounter, transactional domain, telephone enquiries, Malaysian business discourse

INTRODUCTION

Language is a resource for making meaning in the social context in which the language is used (Halliday, 1975). We use language "to represent the world as we experience it" and "to influence how things happen in the world, specifically in our relations with other people" (Thornbury, 1999, p. 5). To put it broadly, the representational and interpersonal functions are manifested in different registers of language use.

The different functions of communication are achieved through the use of linguistic features and discourse structure. For example, when the purpose of communication is to provide an explanation of why or how a phenomenon such as earthquake happens, this usually begins with an identification of the phenomenon to be explained, followed by a series of sequenced steps (see Derewianka, 1990). The explanation is characterised by the use of present tense to show the timelessness of the phenomenon. Passive voice and nominalisations are also used to focus attention on the actions taking place. The explanation may appear in science textbooks, television documentaries, and children picture books, where there would be adaptations of form to suit the audience and the media but the distinguishing structure and linguistic features of the explanation genre would still be evident. According to Swales (1990), a genre is a set of recognisable communicative events each with

a similar purpose and a conventionalised social and schematic structure. The schematic structure consists of stages (obligatory and optional) which lead to the realisation of the communicative purpose in the discourse community in which the language is used.

In the business context, Mitchell (1957) found the structure of a typical buying and selling market transaction was Salutation ^ Enquiry as to Object of Sale ^ Investigation ^ Bargaining ^ Conclusion (cited in Eggins and Slade, 1997, p. 54). Based on this early framework, Halliday and Hassan's (1985) analysis of service encounters yielded the following generic structure with obligatory and optional elements (with an asterisk):

Vendor:	Who's next?	*Sale Initiation**
Customer:	I think I am.	
	I'll have ten oranges and a kilo of bananas, please.	*Sale Request*
Vendor:	Yes, anything else?	*Sale Compliance*
Customer:	Yes.	
	I wanted some strawberries but these don't look very ripe.	*Sale Enquiry**
Vendor:	O they're ripe all right. They're just that colour kind a' greeny pink.	
Customer:	Mm, I see.	
	Will they be OK for this evening?	*Sale Enquiry**
Vendor:	O yeah, they'll be fine; I had some yesterday and they're good very sweet and fresh.	
Customer:	O al right then, I'll take two.	*Sale Request*
Vendor:	You'll like them cos they're good.	*Sale Enquiry**
	Will that be all?	*Sale Compliance*
Customer:	Yeah, thank you.	

Vendor:	That'll be two dollars sixty nine please.	*Sale*
Customer:	I can give you nine cents.	*Purchase*
Vendor:	Yeah OK thanks eighty, three dollars and two is fine. Thank you.	*Purchase Closure*
	Have a nice day.	*Finis**
Customer:	See ya'.	

(in Halliday and Hassan, 1985, p. 61)

In this service encounter, the salutation or greeting stage is optional. The transaction opens with the customer's Sale Request for oranges and bananas, followed by an optional Sale Compliance stage where the vendor shows interest in providing the service and informs the customer of the availability or non-availability of the service. This is followed by a Sale Enquiry whereby the customer asks about various features of the product or service. When the vendor senses the customer's satisfaction with the product or service, he/she presents the deal with the price (Sale) and the customer confirms the Purchase. The obligatory Sale, Purchase, and Purchase Closure may be verbalised as shown in this excerpt or indicated by paralinguistic cues and other signs. For example, Jong's (2004) study of ordering food and drink in fast food restaurants in Kuching, Sarawak showed that the order is confirmed by the cashier before the amount to be paid is stated (Sale), and the transaction is closed with the customer handing over the money (Purchase) and the cashier giving back the change (Purchase Closure), sometimes without a single word being exchanged. However, Jong found the expression of thanks by the cashier to be obligatory for completing the transaction.

Other forms of service encounters such as enquiries about hotel accommodation and lodging of complaints are more complex as there may be recurring stages, particularly in the Sale Enquiry stage where the service provider may find out various aspects of the customer's needs and provide information to address these needs before moving to the Sale.

For service encounters mediated by the telephone, the encounter also shows the opening and closing characteristics of telephone conversations. Openings are used to exchange greetings and to perform a basic process of identification and recognition. Research has shown that opening sequences include greeting and identification (Douglas-Cowie and Cowie, 1998; Pantahachart, 2003), but Palloti and Varcasia (2006) have identified the presence of the availability stage as well. For example, "Good evening. X Hotel. How can I help you?" (Blue and Harun, 2003, p. 80).

Studies on telephone closings have shown that pre-closing and leave taking stages are compulsory stages (Douglas-Cowie and Cowie, 1998). Words used to signal pre-closing of a telephone conversation are "well" (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973; Takami, 2002) and "ok" (Colonel-Molina, 1998; Halmari, 1993; Pantahachart, 2003; Steuten, 1997). Leave-taking is characterised by the use of "thank you" (Douglas-Cowie and Cowie, 1998; Halmari, 1993; Takami, 2002) and "bye-bye" (Douglas-Cowie and Cowie, 1998; Pantahachart, 2003). These findings in different settings showed that the linguistic features, for the compulsory pre-closing (e.g. well, ok) and leave-taking (e.g. thank you, bye-bye), stage do not vary much. Meanwhile, the optional closing sequences are new topic initiation (Colonel-Molina, 1998) and recapitulation (Halmari, 1993).

Service encounters are considered complex enough for some organisations to provide explicit training for their staff, for example, international hotel chains. Tertiary institutions often include professional telephone etiquette as part of English for Professional Purposes or Business Communication courses. The aim of this study was to examine the discourse structure of telephone enquiries used by Malaysian English as a Second Language (ESL) speakers in simulated service encounters in the business context. The specific objectives of the study were to identify the structure of the opening and closing exchanges of the telephone conversation, as well as the structure of the service encounters.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

This study took place at a public university in Malaysia. The participants were 28 ESL learners, aged 30-40. The four who were found to be more proficient were older and had more exposure to English. The participants were enrolled in an English for Professional Purposes (ESP) course, with a maximum of 30 students per class. In the course, they were taught professional telephone etiquette, preparing curriculum vitae, writing memos, letters and reports, as well as conducting meetings and writing minutes of meetings. For telephone conversations involving service encounters, participants were taught to begin the conversation with greetings and an identification of the organisation and themselves, followed by a statement of Availability (e.g. Good morning. May Hotel. Laura speaking. How can I help you?). For the closing exchange, the participants were taught to ask "Is there anything else?" as a pre-closing cue, and to say both "Thank You" and "Good-bye" in the leave-taking.

The oral data for this study were collected from participants who were participating in role play situations involving telephone enquiries about tour packages, restaurant reservations, and products. The task required pairs of participants to act as a client and vendor in one situation chosen by casting lots. The participants were required to make enquiries and desicions whether to confirm booking or purchase goods. Participants were given 3 minutes to prepare for the role-play and they could make notes. Before the discussion began, the participants were reminded of the principles of turn-taking to minimise monopoly of conversation. The participants were informed that the role-plays would be audio-taped for research purposes. The 14 service encounters included in this study comprised enquiry on travel (8), restaurant booking (5), and hand-phone purchase (1) (see Appendix 1). The interaction is considered successful if the client has obtained enough information to make a purchase decision and the vendor is able to provide relevant information to the customer and clinch the deal.

The role-plays took place in the quietness of the instructor's office in the first researcher's presence. Admittedly, this was not the best situation to generate natural talk for the purpose of research, as the participants might have been affected by the presence of the audiotape, either raising their level of anxiety and thus lowering their performance or greatly heightening their impetus to perform better. As video recording was not used, contextual information such as body language, facial expression, and hand gestures was not taken into consideration. Fillers (e.g. ah, eh) and pauses (e.g. ...) captured by the audio-recording were noted in the transcription, but since the paper is on discourse structure, these features of spoken language were not analysed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, both the quantitative and qualitative results on the opening and closing sequences and the discourse structure of telephone enquiries of 14 pairs of participants are presented. The participants are referred to Vendor 1 and Client 1 for Situation 1, and so on.

Openings of Telephone Enquiries

The opening of a telephone enquiry includes the Greeting ^ Identification ^ Statement of Availability. In the analysis of the opening exchange, the situations where the vendor produced the sequence in whole or in part upon prompting by the client are classified as "None" as professional telephone etiquette requires the

vendor to answer the call with the sequence before the client speaks (e.g. Brieger, Comfort, Hughes and West, 1987; Palstra, 1987).

The results showed that 7 out of 14 pairs demonstrated the use of the Greeting-Identification-Statement of Availability sequence taught as a part of the professional telephone practice in the course (see Table 1). For example, "Hello, Santubong Beach Resort. Hapsah speaking. How can I help you?" (Vendor 14). This was the only case with both organisational and personal identification in the data set. Also considered acceptable is the perfunctory telephone greeting "hello" followed by the organisational identification (Vendors 11 and 13) which affirmed to the client that he/she had reached the correct number. In the same light, an organisational identification followed by an offer to help is also acceptable, but this was not found in the data set. In the absence of the organisational identification, the caller has to confirm this before proceeding to the reason for the call, which is what happened in five of the telephone enquiries examined in this study, as illustrated in Excerpt 1:

Excerpt 1

Client 2 : Hello, good afternoon. I am Ursula and I am calling from Kuching. Is this Kohan Agency?

Vendor 2 : Yes?

Client 2 : I come … ah … come across your advertisement about the tour to Niah Caves and I am interested to go …

TABLE 1
Patterns of openings of telephone enquiries

Opening Sequences	Frequency
Greeting ^ Identification ^ Availability	7
Greeting ^ Identification	2
Greeting	1
None	4
Total	14

Note that in this interaction, Client 2 identified herself first and had to ask *"Is this Kohan Agency?"* to check if she had reached the correct number before proceeding to the business of the call. Lee's (2006) analysis of a corpus of Korean telephone openings revealed that there was a second summon for inviting recognition in the second turn of the opening sequence – underscoring the importance of self-identification for facilitating recognition. The absence of organisational identification in the opening exchange is a matter of some concern, as about one-third of the participants playing the role of the vendor did not include this despite being taught in the course.

Further analysis on the caller identification showed that 10 of the participants playing the role of the client identified themselves at the beginning whereas four did not. For these 10 interactions, four vendors remembered the client's name and used it during the conversation, and four vendors asked for the client's name again before closing the conversation, while two other vendors waited for the client to volunteer their name again. In the four interactions where the clients did not mention their names in the opening exchange, three of the conversations ended with the vendor not knowing the caller's identity but one vendor asked for it towards the end. The good practice of using the client's name during the telephone conversation was a rare occurrence, but at least one-third of the vendors remembered to ask for the caller's name and contact details in the closing of the telephone enquiry.

Closing Sequences of Telephone Enquiries

The analysis of the closing exchange of the 14 simulated telephone enquiries showed that 12 had the Preclosing ^ Leave-taking sequence, with two intercepted by topic initiation (see Table 2). Out of these 12 closing exchanges, the clients were found to have initiated five of the pre-closing and six of the leave-taking sequences, indicating that when the clients had received adequate information to decide whether to make a purchase, they took steps to terminate the service encounter. Similarly, when the vendors felt that they had provided enough information to make a sale, they signalled the pre-closing stage with "OK" (9 participants) and "Alright" (3 participants), before requesting payment (e.g. OK, what about the payment, Sir?) or the client's contact details (e.g. May I have your contact details?). Excerpt 2 shows how the service provider (Vendor 7) indicated that the service encounter was coming to a close with the use of the word "OK" before asking for contact details.

Excerpt 2

Vendor 7 : If you want, we can bring you to the shopping complex. You can shop for very good things. OK. May I know your name, address and the phone number?

Client 7 : I am Ms Chow from Kuching and my phone number is 082-622-3881. And my address is 63 Jalan Setia, 94300 Kuching. When can I collect my voucher?

TABLE 2
Patterns of closing sequences of telephone enquiries

Closing Sequences	Frequency
Preclosing ^ Leave-taking	10
Preclosing ^ Topic Initiation ^ Leave-taking	2
Preclosing	1
None	1
Total	14

Vendor 7 : Two months from … now er … three weeks from now.

Client 7 : Three weeks from now [mumbling]

Vendor 7 : Let me just … your name is Ms Chow and you want to make reservation at … from 15 to 20 January for 3 persons, your phone number is 082-622-3881, your address is 63 Jalan Setia, 94000 Kuching. Is it correct?

Client 7 : [No response]. I think that's all for now. If I need any enquiry, I will call you again. *Thank you*.

Vendor 7 : You're welcome. *Bye-Bye, Thank you.*

Following that, Vendor 7 also verified whether she had correctly taken down the important details of the transaction. Client 7 took leave with a "Thank You" which was reciprocated with "You're welcome, Bye-Bye, Thank You." The results on the common usage of the word "OK" to signal pre-closing and "Thank you" for leave-taking concurred with some other studies (e.g. Colonel-Molina, 1998; Halmari, 1993; Pantahachart, 2003; Steuten, 1997). Similarly, Bangerter, Clark and Katz (2004) in their study of the entry, body and exit of 2500 switchboard telephone conversations and 756 directory enquiries also found that "when *okay* and *all right were* used, it was to move out of the body [of the call] to the exit phase, or event to end the call" (p. 19). However, the usage of the word "well" for pre-closing was not found in this study.

In this data set, two service encounters were ended without the customary leave-taking. For example, Vendor 5 said "you can come to my agency for the more detail and deposit and for the reservation for the package" and Vendor 6 said "complete with the confirmation." These utterances brought the service encounter to an abrupt end, and are usually not reflective of the real-life situations.

When the results on the openings and closings of the simulated telephone enquiries were compared, it seemed that the ESL learners in this study were better at handling closings than the openings. The opening exchange of the telephone conversations could have been more difficult as it is remarkably different from personal calls, where the caller asks to speak to the person upon hearing a "hello" from the recipient of the call. Moreover, shifting from an interpersonal to a professional context was not easy for the participants.

Discourse Structure of the Service Encounters

For the analysis of the discourse structure of service encounters, Halliday and Hassan's (1985) framework for the generic structure of service encounters was used. Table 3 shows that only three out of the 14 interactions exhibited the obligatory Sale Request ^ Sale Compliance ^ Sale ^ Purchase ^ Purchase Closure structure, whereas six others had the Sale Request, Sale Compliance without the Sale and Purchases stages before the Purchase Closure. The Purchase took place after the Sale, but there were only three service encounters ending

TABLE 3
Obligatory elements in simulated service encounters

Patterns of Stages in Service Encounter	Frequency
Sale Request ^ Sale Compliance ^ Sale ^ Purchase ^ Purchase Closure	3
Sale Request ^ Sale Compliance ^ Purchase Closure	6
Sale Request ^ Purchase Closure	1
Sale Request ^ Sale Compliance ^ Sale	1
Sale Request ^ Sale Compliance	3
Total	14

with purchases, not unexpected given that the situation was presented as an enquiry.

The results also showed that the Sale Request and Sale Compliance were iterative stages with repeated Sale Enquiries before and after the Sale. This is because there were many features of the product or service which needed to be discussed. For example, in the interaction between Vendor 14 and Client 14 on a hotel holiday package, there were 13 Sale Enquiries revolving around the price of the package, the number of adults and children included in the package, hotel complimentary breakfast, check-in and check-out time, jungle-trekking, and other activities. However, an extensive Sale Enquiry stage did not necessarily result in the client agreeing to purchase the product or service.

The analysis also revealed that interactions with a greater number of Sale Enquiries were more authentic, whereas those with fewer turns were characterised by the participants playing the role of the vendor giving huge chunks of information in monologue style. Such scripted dialogues tended to be shown by the participants who were less proficient in English. Although they were not allowed to refer to the notes they made prior to the role-play, they had more or less rehearsed what they wanted to say and were set on saying their piece. In addition, there was little joint-construction of meaning as shown in the interaction between Vendor 9 and Client 9 (Excerpt 3).

Excerpt 3

Client 9 : … So can I know the cost of the package to Niah Caves?

Vendor 9 : Our agency has offered a package to Niah Caves from Kuching which ah … the package is … ah … the flight ah … the flight from Kuching to Miri. Ah … it costs seven hundred ringgit excluding food but eight hundred ah … if you need … ah … we to provide food … ah it cost you eight hundred fifty ringgit. Do you need … do you have any question?

Client 9 : Ah … about the cost of the flight. Seven hundred ringgit is for two ways or one way only?

Vendor 9 : Seven hundred is for two ways.

Client 9 : For two ways only. I hope, I … I … I take the flight to Miri. So you can jot down my … do you really book my flight number?

Vendor 9 : Ah … hold on Miss. Ah … what about the accommodation? Are you really interested in it?

Vendor 9 was talking about the cost of the tour package with and without food, but Client 9 missed the point and asked whether the flight was for one way or two ways. Client 9 continued to ask about the flight booking but this query was ignored. Instead, Vendor 9 wanted to know about the client's accommodation arrangements when the type of tour package and flight were not settled. The situation of Client 11 and Vendor 11 was similar to that described above, but in other cases the less proficient participants were able to ask for information and respond appropriately. This excerpt of Situation 9 also illustrates the implicit Sale Compliance found in this study in that the vendor did not explicit state interest in providing the service but immediately moved into describing features of the service. This happened in six interactions but the other eight had an explicit Sale Compliance stage (e.g. *"Is there any tour package available now or in the new year?" "Yes, there is"*).

To sum up, the proficient participants (Vendor 4, Client 4, Vendor 8, Client 8) successfully achieved the purpose of the telephone enquiry in that they used the complete opening and closing exchanges as well as the compulsory stages of the service encounter identified by Halliday and Hassan (1985). In brief, they were able to use the discourse structure of the telephone-mediated service encounter taught in the course.

CONCLUSION

The study examined the discourse structure of telephone enquiries in the Malaysian business

context, as reflected in ESL learners' role plays in an English for Professional Purposes course at a Malaysian university. The findings on the telephone openings indicated that only half of the participants demonstrated the Greetings ^ Identification ^ Statement of Availability sequence, whereas almost all of them had the Pre-closing and Leave-taking stages of a telephone closing. The findings on the service encounter indicated that about 20 per cent of the participants exhibited the Sale Request ^ Sale Compliance ^ Sale ^ Purchase ^ Purchase Closure which represented the obligatory elements of a service encounter (Halliday and Hassan, 1985). Although generalisation of findings may be somewhat limited due to the use of learner data, the study has revealed that the opening exchange is a difficult aspect of service encounters mediated by the telephone. Telephone openings produced by a portion of the participants in the study did not comply with conventions taught in the course and those found by studies conducted in other settings (e.g. Palloti and Varcasia, 2006; Steuten, 1997). In view of these findings, it is therefore suggested that extensive training be conducted to inculcate the professional practice of opening and conducting a telephone-mediated service encounter in the business context, be it in professional communication courses at college and university or staff training courses in organisations.

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APPENDIX

ROLE PLAY SITUATION 1 – RESTAURANT RESERVATION

Caller

Your boss has asked you to book a private room in a restaurant for dinner in order to celebrate his birthday with his family. Call the restaurant manager to make queries for any information you need to obtain, and inform him/her of the following details:

• Date for reservation
• Number of people attending the dinner
• Menu preferred
• Entertainment
• Payment
• Contact information

Decide whether to book a private room in the restaurant.

Receiver

You are the manager of Rasa Sedap Restaurant. You receive a call from someone who wants to make a reservation for dinner. Entertain the caller and supply him/her with necessary details about your restaurant.

• Popular menu: Steamed Crabs, Deep Fried Prawns with Thai sauce, Lemon Chicken, Salted Fish Kailan, and Mushroom Soup.
• Special order (customer can give their own menu)-(a week before the special event plus RM100 for deposit).
• Types of rooms:
• Private rooms: can accommodate 2-4 people.
• Family rooms: can accommodate 6-10 people.
• Dine & karaoke rooms: can accommodate 10-20 people.
• Payment: Cash & Credit Card.
• If the customer agrees to book a room at your restaurant, get the relevant information from him/her.

ROLE PLAY SITUATION 2 – ENQUIRY ON TOUR PACKAGE

Caller

You plan to take your family on a tour to the Niah Caves. You came across an advertisement put up by Kohan Tour Agency in the newspaper. Call the travel agent and find out more about the tour package.

- Cost of package
- Accommodation
- Food – provided or not?
- Places of interest included in tour
- Date of departure

Decide whether to go on the tour.

Receiver

Your company recently put up this advertisement in the local newspaper and you received a call from an interested customer.

<div align="center">

Tour Packages to Niah Caves
Good deals! Too good to miss!

</div>

- 3 days, 2 nights tour from Kuching to Miri.
- Places included in the tour: Niah Caves, Iban longhouses, jungle trekking, Lambir Waterfall Park.
- Beautiful chalets at RM100/night.
- Canteens and food stalls nearby.
- RM700/person excluding food. RM850/person including food.
- Two tours per month: 1st-5th and 15th-20th.

Call us to find out more!

<div align="center">

Kohan Tour Agency
123 Gajus Road
93150 Kuching
Sarawak
Tel: 082-451323

</div>

ROLE PLAY SITUATION 3 – ENQUIRY ON HANDPHONE

Caller

You came across an advertisement in the newspaper about the latest model of a Nokia 101 handphone. Call the shop and find out more.

- Cost of handphone
- Special features
- Money back guarantee

Decide whether to buy the handphone.

Receiver

Your company recently put up this advertisement in the local newspaper and you received a call from an interested customer.

Nokia 101
Special Offer

- Normal price RM699
- Special offer RM550 – while stock lasts
- Special features: miniature size, crystal buttons.
- Good after sales service

Call us to find out more!

Cellular Sdn Bhd

Tel: 019-8551323, 016-8094346