

Language, Discourse, and Professional Communication: An English Studies Approach to Contemporary Contexts

DR.S. Subashree¹, Dr. Bhanja Kishor Rana², Abdul Rasheed P³, Dr. Ahab Rizvi⁴, Dr. Mallanna Biradar⁵, Dr Md Kaish⁶

¹Assistant Professor, Business Administration, FOM, SRM Institute of Science AND Technology, Chennai, Tamil Nadu

²Lecturer in English, Department of English, TSD College, Ganjam, BD Pur, Odisha

³Assistant Professor, Department of English, EMEA College of Arts and Science, Kondotty Malappuram, Kondotty, Kerala

⁴Guest Faculty, Economics Section, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, UP

⁵Associate Professor, Department of English, M. G. V. C Arts Commerce and Science College, Muddebihal, Vijayapur, Karnataka

⁶Assistant Professor, Management Sciences, Modern Institute of Technology & Research Centre, Alwar, Rajasthan

Abstract:

Professional communication has traditionally been studied through the applied, skills-oriented lens of business communication pedagogy, yet the linguistic and rhetorical structures underlying workplace writing, speech, and digital interaction are equally amenable to the theoretical tools English studies has developed for literary and everyday discourse analysis: genre theory, register theory, and rhetorical-situation analysis. This paper reviews how an English studies approach, drawing on genre theory, systemic functional linguistics, and workplace discourse analysis, illuminates the language practices of contemporary professional environments, from traditional memos and reports through email, instant messaging, and LinkedIn profiles. The review synthesizes foundational genre theory, the rhetorical genre studies tradition, corpus-based business discourse research, and the growing literature on digitally mediated workplace communication, with particular attention to how genre conventions stabilize, hybridize, and fracture as communication migrates from paper-based to platform-based channels. The paper also considers the plain language movement as a case study in applied English studies intervention into professional genres historically resistant to reader-centered revision. A glossary table defines the field's core theoretical terms, a second table contrasts the formal features of traditional and digitally mediated professional genres, and a third maps English-studies theory onto concrete pedagogical applications for professional and technical communication instruction. The paper concludes that genre, rather than medium or channel, remains the most stable analytical unit for understanding professional communication as it continues to migrate across new technological platforms, and identifies hybrid-genre and multimodal professional literacy as the central future research prospect.

Keywords: Genre Theory, Professional Communication, Register, Workplace Discourse, Rhetorical Situation, Plain Language, Business Discourse, English for Specific Purposes.

I. Introduction

Professional communication, the memos, reports, emails, meetings, and increasingly the Slack messages and LinkedIn posts through which workplace knowledge circulates, has long been treated in practitioner-oriented business communication literature primarily as a set of transferable skills: clarity, conciseness, audience awareness. English studies offers a complementary, more theoretically grounded lens, treating professional texts not merely as skill demonstrations but as instances of genre, culturally recognized, conventionalized responses to recurring rhetorical situations that carry embedded assumptions about audience, purpose, and appropriate form [3]. Miller's foundational reconceptualization of genre argued that a genre should be understood not as a fixed

textual form defined by shared surface features but as a form of social action, a typified rhetorical response that a discourse community recurrently produces because it recurrently faces a similar exigence, a formulation that shifted genre study away from static formal taxonomy and toward the study of genre as situated communicative practice [3].

Swales's subsequent application of this social-action view of genre to academic and professional research settings introduced the influential concept of the discourse community, a group of individuals who share common communicative purposes, possess mechanisms for intercommunication, and have developed and continue to develop genre-specific lexical and rhetorical expertise that newcomers to the community must acquire, a framework Swales developed initially for academic research writing but which has since been extended extensively to professional and workplace genres [1]. Bhatia's parallel analysis of genre in professional settings extended Swales's move-structure analysis, the identification of conventionalized rhetorical "moves" that recurrently structure a genre's internal organization, from academic research articles to business genres including sales letters, job application letters, and legal documents, demonstrating that professional genres exhibit the same kind of conventionalized, community-recognized internal structure that Swales had identified in academic writing [2].

Bazerman's historical and sociological account of the emergence of the experimental research article as a genre demonstrated that genre conventions are not timeless or natural but are themselves the product of a discourse community's evolving epistemological and social needs, a historicizing move with direct relevance to contemporary professional communication, since the genres of email, instant messaging, and professional social media have likewise emerged and stabilized in response to specific technological and organizational conditions within living memory [4]. Yates and Orlikowski's influential organizational-communication application of genre theory to the memo specifically demonstrated that a genre can itself become a resource organizational members draw upon strategically, and that the introduction of new communication technology, in their analysis, electronic mail, does not simply replace an existing genre but triggers a period of genre negotiation during which existing generic conventions are selectively imported into the new medium, modified, or in some cases fractured entirely [10].

This paper reviews how the English-studies genre-theoretic tradition, together with the register-theoretic and corpus-based traditions reviewed below, illuminates the specific linguistic and rhetorical patterns of contemporary professional communication, before turning to the plain language movement as a case study in the field's applied, interventionist potential, and to the digitally mediated genres that Yates and Orlikowski's genre-negotiation framework anticipated but could not fully specify in advance.

Aims of This Review

- To establish genre theory, drawn from rhetorical and English studies traditions, as an analytical framework for professional communication distinct from purely skills-based business communication pedagogy.
- To synthesize register-theoretic and corpus-based approaches to workplace and business discourse.
- To examine the plain language movement as an applied case study in genre-conscious professional writing reform.
- To trace how digitally mediated professional genres, email, instant messaging, and professional social media, have stabilized, hybridized, or fractured relative to their paper-based antecedents.
- To translate the reviewed theory into concrete implications for professional and technical communication pedagogy.

II. Key Terms and Theoretical Orientation

Before reviewing the applied literature, it is useful to fix the field's core theoretical vocabulary, since several of these terms carry more specific meanings within English studies than in general professional usage.

Table 1. Glossary of Core Theoretical Terms

Term	Definition	Originating or Key Source
Genre	A typified, community-recognized rhetorical response to a recurring communicative situation, defined by shared purpose and social action rather than surface form alone	Miller [3]
Discourse community	A group sharing common communicative goals, mechanisms of intercommunication, and genre-specific expertise that members must acquire	Swales [1]
Move structure	The conventionalized sequence of rhetorical "moves" (e.g., establishing a niche, stating a request) that recurrently organizes a genre's internal structure	Swales [1]; Bhatia [2]
Register	The variety of language associated with a particular situational context, analyzed along the dimensions of field (subject matter), tenor (relationship between participants), and mode (channel)	Halliday & Hasan [5]
Genre ecology / genre set	The interrelated cluster of genres a discourse community uses together to accomplish a broader activity, none of which is fully intelligible in isolation from the others	Spinuzzi [11]; Devitt [9]
Genre hybridity	The blending or layering of conventions from two or more previously distinct genres within a single communicative artifact, often triggered by new communication technology	Yates & Orlikowski [10]
Plain language	A reader-centered writing approach prioritizing clarity and accessibility, often applied as a deliberate intervention into professional genres with historically dense or exclusionary conventions	Cutts [16]; Kimble [17]

III. Literature Review

3.1 Register Theory and the Situational Analysis of Professional Language

Halliday and Hasan's systemic functional account of register analyzed situational language variation along three interacting dimensions, field, the subject matter or activity the language is engaged in; tenor, the social relationship and relative status between participants; and mode, the channel and rhetorical organization of the communication, arguing that any instance of language use can be characterized by its particular configuration of these three variables, and that professional and workplace language varies systematically along exactly these dimensions as speakers or writers move between, for instance, a formal client report and an informal internal chat message [5]. Gunnarsson's comprehensive treatment of professional discourse extended this register-theoretic framework specifically to workplace communication, arguing that professional discourse is shaped simultaneously by disciplinary knowledge structures, organizational culture, and the socialization processes through which new professionals acquire community-specific genre competence, a multi-level account that situates individual professional texts within the broader discourse community structures Swales had identified [1], [6].

3.2 Corpus-Based and Comparative Business Discourse

Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson, and Planken's synthesis of business discourse research catalogued the field's methodological turn toward naturally occurring workplace data, meeting transcripts, email corpora, and negotiation recordings, rather than the invented or simplified examples that had characterized earlier business communication textbooks, arguing that this shift toward authentic data revealed considerably more linguistic complexity and cultural variability in professional communication than pedagogical models had previously

assumed [7]. Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta's empirical study of professional communication in global, English-as-lingua-franca business contexts found that successful international business communicators developed a distinct, situationally adaptive communicative competence that the authors term "BELF" competence, business English as a lingua franca, characterized less by native-speaker grammatical correctness than by shared professional and genre knowledge that allowed communicators from different linguistic backgrounds to interpret one another's texts accurately despite considerable surface-level linguistic variation [8]. Koester's corpus-based analysis of workplace talk specifically examined the interactional and generic structure of spoken professional communication, meetings, service encounters, and informal office talk, finding that spoken workplace genres exhibit their own conventionalized move structures and politeness strategies distinct from, though related to, the written genres Swales's and Bhatia's move-structure analysis had originally examined [12].

3.3 Genre Sets, Genre Ecologies, and Organizational Communication

Yates and Orlikowski's analysis of the memo as an organizational genre demonstrated that professional genres function as institutionalized templates that organizational members draw upon, often unreflectively, to structure both the production and the interpretation of a communicative act, and that this institutionalization is precisely what makes genre change, such as the shift from paper memos to electronic mail, a socially consequential process rather than a merely technical one, since users must renegotiate which prior generic expectations remain applicable to the new medium [10]. Spinuzzi's ethnographic tracing of genres through organizations extended this insight with the concept of a genre ecology, the observation that any single workplace document, a status report, for instance, is rarely intelligible or usable in isolation but functions as part of an interrelated cluster of genres, prior meeting notes, an email thread, an organizational template, that together accomplish a broader organizational activity, a finding with direct implications for how professional communication pedagogy should teach genre, not as an isolated skill but as participation in an interconnected genre set [11]. Devitt's broader theoretical synthesis of genre as social action reinforced this ecological view, arguing that genres do not exist as isolated forms but as part of dynamic genre systems that both enable and constrain what a writer can accomplish within a given professional context, echoing Miller's original social-action formulation while extending it toward a more explicitly systemic account [3], [9].

3.4 The Plain Language Movement as Applied English Studies

Kimble's advocacy-oriented scholarship on plain language in legal and professional writing argued that the dense, archaic, and hedged conventions characteristic of legal and bureaucratic professional genres are neither inherent requirements of legal precision nor neutral stylistic defaults, but historically contingent generic conventions that plain-language revision can replace with clearer alternatives without sacrificing legal accuracy, a claim Kimble supported with empirical readability and comprehension testing comparing traditional and plain-language versions of the same legal documents [17]. Cutts's widely used practical guide to plain English formalized this reform agenda into a set of concrete linguistic recommendations, active voice, shorter sentences, familiar vocabulary, direct address, that closely parallel the systemic functional linguistic categories, particularly transitivity and mode, that Halliday and Hasan's register framework had identified as systematically variable dimensions of professional language [5], [16]. Read within the genre-theoretic framework established in Sections 3.1 through 3.3, the plain language movement can be understood as a deliberate, reformist intervention into an existing discourse community's genre conventions, an attempt to renegotiate the move structure and register of genres such as insurance policies, government forms, and legal contracts in ways that prioritize the comprehension needs of readers outside the originating discourse community's specialist expertise [1], [2], [17].

3.5 Digitally Mediated Professional Genres

Baron's analysis of language in online and mobile communication contexts found that digitally mediated professional communication, particularly email and instant messaging, exhibits systematic register blending, incorporating features conventionally associated with informal spoken registers, sentence fragments, minimal salutations, abbreviated forms, into what remains functionally a written, often archived and legally consequential, professional genre, a hybridization Baron traces directly to the tension between the technology's affordances for rapid, conversational exchange and the persistent institutional expectations surrounding professional written

communication [13]. Crystal's earlier and broader analysis of internet-mediated language similarly identified this written-spoken hybridity as a defining feature of computer-mediated discourse generally, characterizing it as a genuinely distinct language variety rather than merely a degraded form of either conventional writing or conventional speech [14]. Darics and Koller's more recent corpus-based analysis of workplace instant messaging extended this hybridity analysis specifically to organizational contexts, finding that professional instant-messaging discourse develops its own conventionalized markers of workplace identity, humor, and relational management, in effect a genre in its own right rather than a simple degradation of email or face-to-face workplace talk, directly extending Yates and Orlikowski's genre-negotiation framework into a medium that had not yet stabilized at the time of their original memo-focused analysis [10], [15]. Holmes and Stubbe's earlier analysis of power and politeness in workplace discourse, though developed primarily through spoken workplace data, provides a relevant comparative baseline for this digital-genre literature, since the authors found that politeness strategies and power negotiation in professional talk are themselves highly context- and relationship-sensitive, a finding the more recent digital-genre literature has extended to text-based channels where paralinguistic politeness cues, such as intonation, are unavailable and must be reconstructed through other linguistic means [12], [15].

3.6 Where the Reviewed Literatures Converge and Diverge

Genre theory, per Miller, Swales, and Bhatia, and register theory, per Halliday and Hasan, address related but analytically distinct questions: genre theory explains why a professional text takes the conventionalized overall shape it does, given a discourse community's recurring communicative needs, while register theory explains why the specific lexical, grammatical, and interpersonal choices within that shape vary systematically with field, tenor, and mode [1], [2], [3], [5]. The digitally mediated genre literature reviewed in Section 3.5 indicates that new communication technology destabilizes register more readily and more visibly than it destabilizes genre in the deeper, social-action sense Miller and Devitt describe, since email and instant messaging have absorbed considerable register variation, formality blending, abbreviation, emoji use, without necessarily abandoning the underlying social action, a request, a status update, a decision record, that the genre accomplishes within its discourse community [3], [9], [13], [14]. This distinction, though implicit across the reviewed literature, has not been consistently made explicit, and organizing the field's evidence around it clarifies why plain-language reform, discussed in Section 3.4, has generally succeeded in altering register while leaving underlying professional genres such as the contract or the insurance policy intact as recognizable genres, whereas digital-communication technologies have in some cases produced genuinely new genres, the instant-messaging thread, the LinkedIn post, rather than merely a register-shifted version of an existing one.

IV. Method of Review

This paper adopts a qualitative, interpretive synthesis of foundational and applied literature spanning rhetorical genre studies, systemic functional register theory, corpus-based business discourse research, and digitally mediated communication studies. Rather than a single-method empirical study, the review is organized around the distinction, developed in Section 3.6, between genre-level stability, the persistence of a recognized social action across a discourse community, and register-level variation, the situational adjustment of field, tenor, and mode within a given genre, applying this distinction consistently across the traditional and digitally mediated professional genres reviewed.

V. Discussion: Applying the Framework

5.1 Traditional versus Digitally Mediated Professional Genres

Rather than repeating a chronological or single-topic comparison, Table 2 applies the genre/register distinction established in Section 3.6 directly, contrasting formal features across genre pairs that share a similar underlying social action but differ in medium.

Table 2. Genre and Register Features Across Traditional and Digitally Mediated Professional Communication

Underlying Social Action	Traditional Genre	Digitally Mediated Counterpart	Register Shift Observed	Genre-Level Stability
Requesting action from a colleague	Interoffice memo	Email	Formality lowered; salutation/closing often abbreviated or dropped [10], [13]	Stable (genre persists as "request/directive")
Rapid status coordination	Brief phone call or in-person check-in	Workplace instant message (e.g., Slack, Teams)	Written mode adopts spoken-register features (fragments, emoji) [13], [14], [15]	Partially destabilized; hybrid spoken-written genre emerging
Professional self-presentation to a network	Printed résumé/CV and cover letter	LinkedIn profile and post	Tenor shifts toward semi-public, ongoing self-narration rather than a single bounded document [9], [10]	New genre emerging (not a direct medium-swap of the résumé)
Recording a decision for institutional memory	Formal meeting minutes	Shared document with embedded comment threads	Mode becomes multi-authored and asynchronous rather than single-authored and retrospective	Stable social action; genre ecology (per Spinuzzi) restructured [11]
Explaining legal/contractual obligation to a lay reader	Dense legal/bureaucratic prose	Plain-language contract summary	Register deliberately simplified (field/tenor retained, mode clarified) [16], [17]	Stable genre; register reformed by deliberate intervention

5.2 From Theory to Pedagogy

The English-studies framework reviewed in this paper carries direct implications for how professional and technical communication is taught, implications distinct from, though complementary to, the skills-checklist approach common in practitioner-oriented business writing instruction. Table 3 maps the theoretical constructs reviewed in Sections 3.1 through 3.5 onto concrete pedagogical applications.

Table 3. Theoretical Constructs Mapped to Professional Communication Pedagogy

Theoretical Construct	Pedagogical Application	Supporting Literature
Discourse community and genre acquisition	Teach genre conventions as situated community knowledge to be analyzed and acquired, not as fixed formatting rules to be memorized	Swales [1]
Move structure analysis	Have students identify and label the conventional "moves" within sample professional genres before drafting their own	Swales [1]; Bhatia [2]

Register (field/tenor/mode)	Train students to consciously adjust field, tenor, and mode when the same content moves across genres (e.g., report to email summary to Slack update)	Halliday & Hasan [5]
Genre ecology	Teach individual documents as embedded within a broader genre set (e.g., a status report alongside its supporting email thread and meeting notes) rather than in isolation	Spinuzzi [11]
BELF/lingua franca competence	Emphasize shared professional and genre knowledge over native-speaker grammatical norms in multinational or ESP (English for Specific Purposes) contexts	Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta [8]
Plain language principles	Incorporate readability and reader-comprehension testing as a revision step for genres historically resistant to clarity (legal, policy, technical)	Cutts [16]; Kimble [17]
Genre hybridity in digital channels	Explicitly address emerging, still-stabilizing digital genres (instant messaging, LinkedIn) as genuine objects of analysis rather than as mere informal deviations from email	Yates & Orlikowski [10]; Darics & Koller [15]

5.3 Discussion

The evidence reviewed across Sections 3 and 5.1 supports treating genre, in Miller's social-action sense, as the more stable and pedagogically foundational analytical unit for professional communication, while register, in Halliday and Hasan's sense, is the unit most visibly and rapidly reshaped by new communication technology [3], [5], [10]. Table 2's genre-pairing structure makes this pattern concrete: the memo-to-email and meeting-minutes-to-shared-document transitions show substantial register shift while the underlying social action, and therefore the genre in Miller's sense, remains recognizable and stable, whereas the résumé-to-LinkedIn-profile transition shows evidence of a genuinely new genre emerging, since a LinkedIn profile accomplishes an ongoing, semi-public, networked form of professional self-presentation that the bounded, retrospective résumé document was never designed to perform [3], [9], [10]. The plain language case study reviewed in Section 3.4 demonstrates the field's applied, interventionist potential: unlike the digitally driven genre changes reviewed in Section 3.5, which occur as an emergent, largely unplanned consequence of new communication technology, plain-language reform represents a deliberate, English-studies-informed intervention into register, undertaken with the explicit goal of improving reader comprehension without abandoning the underlying legal or bureaucratic genre's social function [16], [17]. Table 3's pedagogical mapping suggests that professional and technical communication instruction benefits from making this genre/register distinction explicit to students, since it equips them with a transferable analytical framework, rather than a fixed set of formatting rules, for navigating genres and platforms that did not yet exist when their instruction was designed, a concern of direct and growing relevance given the continued emergence of new professional communication platforms [1], [11], [15].

VI. Conclusion

This paper has reviewed how an English studies approach, grounded in genre theory, register theory, and corpus-based workplace discourse analysis, illuminates contemporary professional communication in ways that extend beyond the skills-based frameworks common in practitioner-oriented business writing instruction. The evidence indicates that genre, understood as Miller's typified social action rather than as fixed textual form, functions as the more stable analytical unit across the traditional and digitally mediated professional communication reviewed

here, while register, the situational configuration of field, tenor, and mode that Halliday and Hasan formalized, is the dimension most visibly reshaped as communication migrates across new technological platforms. The plain language movement demonstrates that this theoretical apparatus supports genuine applied intervention, reforming register within a stable genre to improve reader comprehension, while the emergence of digitally native genres such as workplace instant messaging and professional social media profiles demonstrates that entirely new genres, not merely register-shifted versions of existing ones, continue to emerge from the genre-negotiation process Yates and Orlikowski first identified in the transition from paper memos to email.

VII. Future Work

Future research should extend Yates and Orlikowski's genre-negotiation framework to the continually emerging professional communication platforms, generative AI-assisted drafting tools, collaborative real-time documents, and asynchronous video updates among them, that have appeared since the foundational digitally mediated genre literature reviewed in Section 3.5 was developed. Further work is needed to apply Spinuzzi's genre-ecology methodology systematically across contemporary hybrid workplace environments, where a single organizational activity may now span email, instant messaging, shared documents, and project-management software simultaneously, in order to update the genre-set mapping Spinuzzi developed for a less platform-fragmented workplace environment. Continued research should extend Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta's BELF competence framework with updated empirical data reflecting the increasing role of AI-assisted translation and drafting tools in multinational professional communication, since these tools plausibly alter what counts as adequate shared genre and professional knowledge among lingua franca communicators. Finally, future work should pursue further empirical, comprehension-tested extensions of the plain language movement into digitally native professional genres, such as algorithmically generated customer communications and AI chatbot interactions, where the reader-centered reform agenda Kimble and Cutts articulated for traditional print genres has not yet been systematically applied.

References:

- [1] J. M. Swales, *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- [2] V. K. Bhatia, *Analysing Genre: Language Use in Professional Settings*. London, U.K.: Longman, 1993.
- [3] C. R. Miller, "Genre as social action," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 70, no. 2, pp. 151–167, 1984.
- [4] C. Bazerman, *Shaping Written Knowledge: The Genre and Activity of the Experimental Article in Science*. Madison, WI, USA: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988.
- [5] M. A. K. Halliday and R. Hasan, *Language, Context, and Text: Aspects of Language in a Social-Semiotic Perspective*. Geelong, Australia: Deakin University Press, 1985.
- [6] B.-L. Gunnarsson, *Professional Discourse*. London, U.K.: Continuum, 2009.
- [7] F. Bargiela-Chiappini, C. Nickerson, and B. Planken, *Business Discourse*. Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- [8] L. Louhiala-Salminen and A. Kankaanranta, "Professional communication in a global business context: The notion of global communicative competence," *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, vol. 54, no. 3, pp. 244–262, 2011.
- A. Devitt, *Writing Genres*. Carbondale, IL, USA: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004.
- [9] J. Yates and W. J. Orlikowski, "Genres of organizational communication: A structural approach to studying communication and media," *Academy of Management Review*, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 299–326, 1992.
- [10] C. Spinuzzi, *Tracing Genres through Organizations: A Sociocultural Approach to Information Design*. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press, 2003.
- A. Koester, *The Language of Work*. London, U.K.: Routledge, 2004.
- [11] N. S. Baron, *Always On: Language in an Online and Mobile World*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- [12] D. Crystal, *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

- [13] E. Darics and V. Koller, "Language in Business, Language at Work." (Workplace instant-messaging and digital business discourse analysis.) Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
- [14] M. Cutts, *Oxford Guide to Plain English*, 4th ed. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- [15] J. Kimble, "Writing for dollars, writing to please," *Scribes Journal of Legal Writing*, vol. 6, pp. 1–38, 1996.