CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Scenario

Computer-mediated communication (CmC), primarily in the form of electronic-mail (e-mail), has become a dominant mode of communication both within and between organizations in the last few years. Networking and e-mail software can support communication of messages, sending of attached files and team working (Rowley: 1998). In recent years, rapid developments in Information Technology (IT) have revolutionized the business arena in Malaysia and various business institutions are spending large sums of money on technology (Le Vasan: 1994, 46). Communication by electronic mail has become increasingly commonplace and important in corporate and institutional environments, many of which have developed their own in-house electronic systems both for "national and intra-national communications" (Louhiala-Salminen: 1996; cited in Gains: 1999, 82).

More and more of our students will enter the workforce to find that their jobs involve using electronic systems for communication; therefore we need insights into the nature of this mode of communication and ascertain ways in which we can assist our students in acquiring "its particular characteristics, in the same way we teach spoken English, writing, and the use of telephones" (Murray, 1988:4). As Chitavelu (1993: 29)
has also pointed out:

*Today the primary modes of written communication in the larger companies are E-mail and fax. The obvious conclusion for this for those practised in needs analysis is that E-mail and fax are important and authentic forms of written communication in the business sector and therefore have to be included in the education of a novice or potential member of this discourse community.*

It is with the aim of educating the "novice(s) or potential member(s)" of the business community found among tertiary students, that this study seeks to achieve. According to Angell & Heslop (1994) the fast-paced e-mail medium "makes different demands on writing style and has its own unique conventions". What then are these demands on writing style and the unique conventions of e-mail communication in the local business community? These are some of the issues which the present study hopes to address.

Studies have shown that word processing and electronic-mail are currently the most widely used systems in the commercial world (Le Vasan: 1996, Chan: 1994). In her study on computer-mediated discourse in a Malaysian manufacturing company, Le Vasan's findings revealed that all the 20 managers in the company indicated that they used electronic-mail in 80-100% of their tasks and "used it many times routinely in one working day" (Le Vasan: 1996). In Chan's (1994) survey of 300 IT professionals in Singapore, data indicated that e-mail was ranked as the most significant electronic
channel currently used at the workplace. Furthermore, more than half of Chan’s respondents recommended that e-mail writing be taught to students and samples of authentic texts of e-mail from the workplace be given during training. The need for students to learn e-mail writing as expressed in Chan’s study, and the prevalent use of e-mail in communication at the workplace shown in Le Vasan’s findings have inspired this researcher to investigate what it is that constitutes the discourse of e-mail in a business community.

Academic research studies of the 80s and 90s have also shed some light on the nature of CMC and the features of e-mail texts (Halpern: 1985, Murray: 1985 and 1988, Le Vasan: 1996, Zubaidah Alsree: 1997, Gains: 1999). While Halpern’s study revealed the effects of electronic technology on the composing process of on-the-job writers, Murray’s (1988) findings disclosed to us the structure or format of e-mail texts. With the exception of Zubaidah Alsree’s (1997) and Le Vasan’s (1996) work, most of the studies were conducted in settings outside Malaysia. The researcher is interested to conduct a study related to the Malaysian context as she feels that there is a need for "more locally-based research by local practitioners ... into target discourse communities" (Johns: 1993), a view echoed by Robinson:

As an international language, English is used as the means of communication in business transactions, between people none of whom is a native user of the language. Therefore any study of authentic business English must include data on the forms and strategies employed by practising business people
who are non-native speakers of English.


It is for the reason of studying the "forms and strategies" in e-mail communication which are employed by "practising business people who are non-native speakers of English" that the researcher has chosen to study the e-mail communication of executives of a local company in the IT industry. As all the executives are non-native speakers of English, their e-mail communication in a business environment is seen as a rich source of data to provide information on the target language situation that learners from local tertiary institutions may encounter upon entering the working world.

This study intends to conduct a discourse analysis of executives' e-mail communication with their interactants. The researcher agrees with calls by proponents of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to go into the natural setting to observe the actual goings-on at the workplace (Bhatia: 1994, Chitavelu: 1993, Robinson: 1991). For this reason, she has decided to gather and analyse actual e-mail messages from a business community as well as other relevant information from the community in which the e-mail communication was conducted. It is hoped that the findings will yield some clues as to how people go about communicating via e-mail at the workplace and for what purposes, and the linguistic features involved. It is envisaged that this study would contribute to the existing pool of local research on e-mail in business (Le Vasan: 1996, Zubaidah Alsree: 1997).
1.2 The Role of English in the Malaysian Business Community

In the Malaysian business community especially in the private sector, English is widely used in business correspondences, business transactions and social networkings (Tham: 1998). In a survey to investigate the use of English in the commercial sector of the Malaysian economy, Goh and Chan (1993) found that out of the 137 companies which responded to the survey, 32.8% said that they had foreign investment and English was the medium of communication between their company and their foreign investor(s) (Goh and Chan: 1993, 130). This shows that a fair percentage of the commercial sector did use English in their business dealings and thus confirms the premise that English does play a significant role where communication with foreign investors is concerned. However, according to the survey, this does not mean that English was not used at all when the companies (67.2%) did not have any foreign dealings. When such companies were asked on the use of English among business executives, more than three-quarters of the respondents (78.8%) reported that their business executives used English in their jobs (Goh & Chan: 1993, 131). According to Professor Asmah (1994) in "Directions in ESP Research: Implications in Malaysia", the 1980 UMSEP survey of professional needs of English in Malaysia showed that in business and banking, both spoken and written English was necessary, and overall, between 75% and 90% of activities were in English.

To sum up, English does play an important role in communication among participants of the Malaysian business community. Thus, it can be seen that any research that can contribute towards preparing students for workplace communication ought to
include a study on the use of this language in a business context and in a mode of communication which is widely used in that context at present, that is the electronic mail.

1.3 The Business Community Selected

The business community selected for this study consisted of 23 executives in a public limited company in Malaysia, henceforth to be known as ASC in this study (for reasons of confidentiality, the real name of the company is not used in this report). ASC provides a broad range of IT solutions and services, specializing in software design and development, systems and network integration and engineering services. This company has been acknowledged as the most preferred IT organization in Malaysia by Computerworld, in its July 1996 Volume 8 edition.

Established for over 27 years in Malaysia with its head office in Petaling Jaya, the company has 23 branch offices strategically located throughout Peninsula Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak with a staff strength of about 550 employees. Among its business partners are some world class IT vendors like IBM, Microsoft, Novell, Epson, Hewlett Packard, Compaq and Sun Microsystems. ASC has also been able to deliver and implement highly complex and large business oriented IT projects locally and overseas. Examples are services to UMW - EDS Technologies, Binariang Sdn Bhd and Tenaga Nasional Berhad.

The executives whose e-mail messages were examined in this study are holding
with a wide distribution list to which a recipient can append another piece of information" (Murray: 1988). Like e-mail, forums do not require simultaneous log on.

1.5 The Rationale and Purpose of the Study

In light of the scenario portrayed in 1.1, this study attempts to investigate the linguistic features of e-mail discourse in the selected business community, the functions of the discourse in the community and the factors which may contribute to the linguistic features of e-mail discourse at the workplace. The study is based on the rationale that:

- "a discourse analysis that is not based on grammar is not an analysis at all, but simply a running commentary on a text" (Halliday: 1985, xvii);

- discourse analysis for ESP should not only be descriptive but should also be explanatory; a writer's purpose(s) should also be examined, not just the forms in the discourse (Robinson: 1991).

E-mail messages will therefore be examined not only in relation to their linguistic features but also to the functions they serve in the organization that they are found in.

The study aims to describe, explain and interpret the following:-

- the typical or recurrent grammatical features of e-mail discourse in relation to their functions in the business community;
• the influence of the electronic mail system on linguistic features.

• the differences between language in the e-mail discourse of the local business community and language in conventional business writing;

1.6 Research Questions

Based on the above rationale and purpose of the study, the researcher has attempted to find answers to the following research questions:

1.6.1 What are the typical or recurrent grammatical features of e-mail discourse and their functions in a local business community?

1.6.2 How does communicating using the electronic mail system influence language forms in the e-mail discourse of the local business community?

1.6.3 What are the differences between language in the e-mail communication of the local business community and language in conventional business writing?

1.7 Definition of Relevant Terms

Some of the terms used in this study are known to have more than one interpretation; thus the researcher feels that it is pertinent to define those terms here.

text the written, verbal record of a communicative event or
communicative act which conveys a complete message (Nunan: 1993, Brown & Yule: 1985) and is a product rather than a process (Fairclough: 1989)

discourse

the whole process of social interaction of which a text is just a part; it is related to communicative events and involves language in context or in use (Nunan: 1993, Fairclough: 1989, Brown & Yule: 1985)

interactants

"persons involved actively in a verbal interaction" (Ruqaiya Hasan: 1977), referring to both addressee and addressee, or sender of the e-mail message and recipient of the message

functions

"represent the intention of the speaker or writer, for example, advising, warning, describing ... They can be approximately equated with the communicative acts that are carried out through language" (Hutchinson & Waters: 1995).

communicative event

"a piece of oral or written interaction which contains a complete message" (Nunan: 1993)

culture


non-native speakers

speakers whose mother tongue is not English and who use English as their second or third language

style

the choices one makes in language to create the tone of a message (Angell & Heslop: 1994, 55)

tone

the feeling or impression a message conveys (Angell & Heslop: 1994)
1.8 Significance of Study

The reason behind this study is pedagogical in nature as it is hoped that the exploration of business communication through e-mail would not be an end in itself. The researcher hopes that the investigation can lend itself to the development of situations and materials for similar forms of e-mail communication to take place in English for Business Communication (EBC) classrooms.

There is a need for our tertiary students to understand the "conventions, the concerns, the intentions and above all, the environment in which decisions are taken" (Bhatia: 1994, 26) by members of the Malaysian business community as the students may become members of this community when they graduate. Furthermore, as communication via technological mediums like the e-mail is currently used in the business world on a significant scale, it is hoped that this study will, in the words of Le Vasan (1996), "inform students and teachers of the ways language and technology are evolving and continuing to change patterns of communication in the business world". This study therefore attempts to seek information on the language and "patterns of communication" in a business community which has been involved in using e-mail as a medium of communication. This might in turn help the EBC instructor "who is not generally a bona fide member of the discourse community" (Chitravelu: 1993) to be aware of the purpose(s) e-mail discourse fulfils in the business community, and the features as well as levels of language expected in that community. With such awareness, it is hoped that EBC instructors or course designers would be better equipped to prepare
learners for communication in the business world.

Since this study adopts the approach of discourse analysis and examines the e-mail communication that routinely occurs in a business community, its findings might provide some insights on the writing needs our tertiary learners have to face with regards to e-mail communication in real business world contexts. A knowledge of such writing needs would help the instructor or course designer to set suitable writing tasks for learners in the business writing class. As Khatijah Shamsudin (1994, 110) has so aptly put it, the ESP teacher as a "facilitator in a professional writing class needs to tailor-make activities based not on hypothetical situations but on real day-to-day writing needs of learners for meaningful learning to take place". It is with the intention of investigating the "real day-to-day writing needs of learners" in the e-mail communication of the business world that this study has decided to examine e-mail messages of executives in a company which were collected over a period of six months.

1.9 Limitations of Study

This study is focused on an examination of a cross-section of electronic mail discourse as used in a particular business community in which it occurs. This research is therefore context-specific. It is done on a particular form of computer-mediated communication (CmC) as used within a particular setting, at a particular point of time. The variables are context-sensitive, particular to this type of context. Any generalizations
are therefore applicable to other contexts of similar or recognizable variables.

This is not a study about computers and computer technology but is a research on a particular form of computer-mediated communication (CmC) namely electronic mail conducted in a local business community. Data on other forms of CmC like e-messages and forums are not considered in this study.

The study examines grammatical features and other discourse features of e-mail messages, and the factors in the environment which helped to shape those features. However, it must be emphasized here that this is not an ethnographic study of the community selected for this study as permission was not granted by the management of the company concerned for such an inquiry to be conducted.

The corpus consists of e-mail messages sent by executives in the community selected to their colleagues, business partners and clients, and do not cover company circulars or monthly reminders distributed among various departments or staff of the company. It must also be stated here that the analysis of data in this study does not cover e-mail messages sent to those executives by their clients or business partners.

1.10 Conclusion

This chapter thus discusses the purpose and rationale of the study. The important role played by English in the Malaysian business community has also been brought to our attention. In addition, the chapter also provides some background information on the
community selected for this study. More detailed information on the community is provided in Chapter 3. The profile of computer-mediated communication and the definition of relevant terms used in this study are also highlighted here. The chapter closes by setting forth the significance as well as the limitations of the study. The next chapter will proceed to reviewing the literature relevant to this study.