

Using genre analysis to unlock the language learning potential of infomercials

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Although the value of infomercials on late night television may be debatable, they are fertile grounds for second language development. This paper explains how a genre analysis can unlock the educational value of infomercials by breaking apart this complex communicative event into four separate moves. Each move in turn provides learners with a context in which they can examine and experiment with different aspects of the English language ranging from vocabulary to discourse patterns. This paper also includes examples of students' work that demonstrate why infomercials are a *must* in any class focusing on oral presentation skills.

深夜の情報コマーシャルの価値は論争の余地があるにしても、第2言語発達のための肥沃な基盤です。この論文は、ジャンル分析が複雑なコミュニケーションの事柄を4つの状態に分け、ばらばらにすることによってどう情報コマーシャルの価値が教育的に開放されるかを説明しています。それぞれの部位は単語を選択し英語言語がどう構成されるか、異なる局面から調べ試みる背景を学習者に提供します。更にこの論文は情報コマーシャルが、どの授業にも口頭発表技術に焦点を合わせるのに必要なものである理由を示す学生の作業例も含まれています。

Although the value of infomercials on late night television may be debatable, they are fertile grounds for second language development. Infomercials provide students with an opportunity to work on two important speech acts: explanation and persuasion. The challenge for students is to skillfully weave these acts together into an effective presentation that leads to the sale of their product. Students, however, are often uncertain about what they need to say and how to organize their information. These hurdles can be overcome with the use of genre analysis. This analytical approach involves two interlocking areas of interest: the features found in a similar group of texts in relation to the social context of their creation and use, and the choices/constraints that these features place upon text producers wishing to

write in a particular genre (Hyland, 2002). In other words, a genre analysis of an infomercial not only provides learners with an analytical framework to break apart this complex communicative event into its component parts or moves (Swales, 1990), but it also helps learners to gain a deeper understanding of the structure, form, and style expected of this particular type of advertising.

The infomercial genre

The genre of infomercials can be divided into four moves (Reppert, 1995, April). Table 1 shows that each of the moves have a specific purpose which together provide an extended explanation of a product with the intent of persuading potential customer(s) to buy it.

Table 1. The basic moves of an infomercial.

Move	Purpose
Introduction of the product	Spark the audiences’ interest in the product.
Description of the product	Describe the product’s special features.
Introduction of the price	Reveal the product’s price and any related deals.
Summary of the sales pitch	Leave the audience with a positive and memorable impression of the product that hopefully leads to a sale.

The first move is the introduction of the product to be sold. The key here is to establish an immediate connection between the product and the audience. Students need to determine what the audience’s needs are and how their product can satisfy them. Creating a catchy product name

is also very important when trying to spark the audience’s interest. Success in these areas will transform the audience into potential customers. The second move is the description of the product. Students need to clearly explain what makes their product is so special and how each feature will improve their customers’ lives. The third move is the introduction of the product’s price. This move can be especially tricky because an expensive product can quickly kill an audience’s interest. To offset any potential sticker shock, students can offer a special deal to entice potential buyers. The final move is a summary of the sales pitch. Students need to close with a strong finish that motivates their audience into action (i.e. reaching into their wallets and buying the product).

Within each of these moves, there are numerous opportunities for second language development. Students are not only focused upon the relationship between form and meaning, but they must also attend to the functional properties of what they write. The specific purpose of each move also directs students to attend to a host of different language issues ranging from selecting appealing vocabulary (e.g. Rush, 1998) to organizing information into a persuasive discourse structure. These focal points are also firmly grounded in a specific communicative purpose—convincing the audience that they need to buy the product. In short, a genre analysis divides an infomercial into manageable contexts in which students can develop a whole range of second language competencies.

The remainder of this paper provides a description of the different moves that compose an infomercial, accompanied by excerpts of students’ speeches illustrating how they met the different challenges each move presents. The excerpts

of the students' work contain some grammatical errors and word usage problems. My intent is give readers of this paper a true reflection of the level of communicative competence of these students.

This paper will demonstrate that infomercials provide numerous benefits for learners with a wide range of language abilities. The students described here are first year science majors attending a national university in Tokyo. Infomercials are the second to last speech that the students give in their one-semester required oral presentation course. In order to heighten student interest as well as create an enjoyable classroom atmosphere, students are randomly assigned a crazy invention to sell to their fellow classmates. These unusual products always ensure lots of laughter in the class as well as some very inventive sales pitches. Teachers interested in using this type of material can find it with relative ease on numerous websites using the keywords *crazy* + *inventions* in any Internet search engine. The products featured in this paper can be enjoyed in the Appendix.

Introducing the product

One of the greatest challenges for students when giving a presentation is to establish a connection with their audience. Student attention is often directed towards themselves (i.e. worrying about standing up in front others and having to speak English). An infomercial shifts this preoccupation to the audience. The first line of an infomercial should directly address a common problem facing people in the audience. One student started his infomercial by asking, "Are you tired? Do you have enough time to sleep nowadays?" This series of rhetorical questions resonated well with his

audience, especially since his oral presentation class was offered in the first period on Monday mornings. Now the audience was ready to hear how the *commuter's hardhat* (product #1) could help them get through their first period class.

Rhetorical questions are only the beginning. Once the speaker has attracted their audience's attention, he or she needs to maintain that interest with a catchy product name. Coming up with just the right product name can make or break a sale. Ideally, students want a name that not only sounds good, but is also easy to remember. Teachers can help students by introducing the phonological concept of alliteration (Goddard, 1998). The aim is to come up with a product name that starts with same initial sound. A very simple way of introducing this concept is to ask the class, "What is the most popular soft drink in the world?" Someone will immediately reply, Coca-Cola, which features two consecutive "k" sounds. This well-known product will inspire students to come up with their own smooth sounding product name. One of my favorites is *I-wish-eye-wash* for a product designed to help people with their eye drops (product #2).

Students can also experiment with the root meanings of words to come up with captivating product names. One example is a student who first broke the world helmet into its component parts, *hel* and *met*, and then replaced the first component with *hair*. The result was a catchy name product name, hair-met, which also articulates the most unique characteristic of a helmet designed for people with long hair (product #3). Product names that describe their product's important features also serve to segue to the next move

in an infomercial, where students describe their product. One student came up with name *butter beat* for product #4. Initially, I thought it was an interesting alliteration, but a bit confusing. “What does beat have to do with butter?” I asked. My student replied, “It is the latest thing from Korea. It features a MP3 player. So while spreading your butter on your toast, you can enjoy Korean music such as the BGM of Fuyusona.” This example illustrates how a catchy product can sound good as well as create cognitive confusion, which in turn strengthens the audience’s commitment to listening to the rest of the speech. They want to know the origins of a product’s name.

In summary, the first move of an infomercial requires students to capture their audience’s attention right from the start. To meet this challenge, students can experiment with rhetorical questions, alliterations, the root meanings of words, and cognitively perplexing product names. Each of these techniques in turn provides students an opportunity to examine how different aspects of the English language can help improve their presentation.

Describing product features

Once the speaker has captured audience attention, they need to build on this interest with a convincing description of their product. To do so, the speaker should constantly attend to potential needs of their audience as they describe their product. The following student’s description of a special tripod for commuters (product #5) provides an excellent example on how to constantly relate the different product features to customers’ potential needs.

“The chin rest is so soft and good smell because it’s made of Italian leather. It stands on the floor by the three legs and its tough straight pipes support your jaw so that you won’t fall down. *Standing Sleep Stand* is made of a new material Ns (NASAnium) developed by NASA. It weighs 1.5 kg, so you can carry it easily. *Standing Sleep Stand* is perfect for people who start their day early.”

Practically each line of this description clearly explains how the product’s features can improve a customer’s commute to work or school. Moreover, the new metal alloy, NASAnium, is an interesting inclusion. It reflects the speaker’s acute attention to details such as the academic background of her audience: first year chemistry majors. The speaker also does a nice job concluding her description by identifying her target audience.

In summary, the second move of an infomercial requires students to describe their product in a manner which is constantly in tune with the audience’s potential needs. This challenge in turn prompts students to consider who their audience is, what they might need, and what might be appealing to them. The answers to these questions help students write with purpose. They are not describing their product just for sake of description, but rather they are writing descriptions that clearly relate to people’s needs. This purpose thus reinforces the importance of the audience when writing a speech.

Revealing the product’s price and any special offers

After an explanation of all the great features a product possesses, audience interest will peak. The price of the

product, however, may induce an immediate decline of interest. Speakers must skillfully reveal the cost of their product without scaring away potential customers. A monologue is an effective means of addressing any anxiety that the price may induce. This type of discourse allows the speaker to control how the conversation unfolds since the speaker plays the role of the sales person as well as the potential customer. A good example is this student's monologue which starts by asking,

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|
| How much is it? 10,000 yen? | (question) |
| No, cheaper! | (response, comment) |
| 5,000 yen? | (question) |
| No, it's only 2,900 yen. | (response) |
| Wow, so cheap! | (comment) |

The elegance of this presentation rests in the student's repeated use of the question, response, and comment sequence. This predetermined turn allocation procedure (Schegloff, 1992) effectively controls who contributes to the conversation and what they say.

Students can also introduce an interactive component into their speech to create an opportunity for some audience participation. This technique involves picking someone out of the audience to help deliver the sales pitch. One student incorporated a two-way dialogue in her speech to convince her audience that a full-length umbrella (product #6) was very reasonable. The dialogue started with the member of the audience asking,

Audience: Such a special item might be expensive. How much is it?

Sales person: Well, you can get one for only \$10.

Audience: Oh, I can buy it.

Sales person: Wait! Wait!

Audience: What?

Sales person: If you order two, it's only \$15.

Audience: No way! It's a great present for a couple.

Upon completion of this two-way dialogue, the speaker has not only revealed the price, but has also introduced a special price if the customer buys two umbrellas. However, it is interesting to note that it is the member of the audience and not the sales person who identifies that this product is perfect for a couple (Crook, 2004). The scripted conversation thus allows the speaker to retain control over the speech's content when recruiting another person to help convince other potential customers that the product is a deal not to be missed. This technique thus relies upon the old adage *there is strength in numbers*. Moreover, it can be extremely useful technique for students who are less confident when speaking English in front of others.

Offering a free gift when someone buys a product is another effective means of making a sell. This type of promotion also provides the speaker with an additional opportunity to address the audience's needs. One student enticed her audience with the following deal for a set of motorized chopsticks (product #7). "If you buy it, you can get a free cup-a-noodles. You can choose seafood, curry, soy, or regular flavor. Then you can see how good our product is." This offer is a certain deal maker with hunger

being surprisingly so rampant among first year university students. A free gift can also be skillfully used to anticipate and address potential objections which may stop someone from buying a particular product. One student realized that a helmet designed for people with long hair (product #3) might not be for everyone so he included in his sales pitch, “You say, I can’t wear it, I have short hair. Don’t worry. If you buy now, you will get a free wig with braids.” This offer was met with a roar of laughter from the audience, which then had no excuse for not buying his product.

In summary, the third move of an infomercial allows students to experiment with different types of discourse such as monologues and scripted conversations to reveal their product’s price in the best possible light. Moreover, special offers can be effectively used to not only meet their audience’s special needs such as hunger, but also address any concerns that the audience may have about the product. The combined effect of these techniques will surely convince the audience that they need to buy the product before it’s too late!

Summarizing the sales pitch

A successful infomercial requires a strong finish that will solidify the audience’s need for the product. Students can achieve this aim through the use of intertextual references (Fairclough, 1995) that tie their product to the success of another product. One means of accomplishing this connection is for students to borrow a popular slogan of another product to promote their own product. For example, one student concluded that his unique tissue dispenser (product #8) offered “Extended blowing and feathery soft comfort”, which was then punctuated with

the closing phrase “I’m lovin’ it!” This slogan is taken directly from McDonald’s most recent advertising campaign. A more skillful application of this technique involves slightly altering the intertextual reference. This student’s proclamation at the end of her infomercial for the same product provides a good example. She closed her speech by boldly stating, “No tissue. No Life.” This wonderful slogan draws its inspiration from the slogan of Tower Records, “No music. No Life.” The result is a very complex media message that invites the audience to determine the origins of her slogan (Fuentes-Olivera, Velasco-Sacristán, Arribas-Baño, & Samaniego-Fernández, 2001).

In summary, the final move of an infomercial challenges students to simplify their message into a single impact statement. This is easier said than done. Often students spend considerable amounts of time crafting just the right closing that will leave the audience with only one thought in their mind: *I need to buy this product now!*

Conclusion

Although this paper focuses upon the composition of an infomercial, a genre analysis can also help learners deliver more informative and persuasive speeches. For example, delivery speed is important when revealing product price. Students should slow their speech when explaining any special deals; whereas, they might want to speed through any unfavorable conditions of sale such as numerous payments required to own the product. Unfortunately, an investigation into the various links between the different moves in an infomercial and speech delivery techniques is beyond the scope of this paper.





The usefulness of a genre analysis is not limited to infomercials (Weaver, 2002). There are number of other types of speeches such as third person introductions that can be broken into their component parts or moves. A genre analysis is thus a valuable analytical framework that provides learners with a focused learning environment where they can examine and experiment with how form, meaning, and function interact to achieve a particular communicative purpose within a social context. This paper provides a concrete example of how a genre analysis helped students write infomercials that were not only informative and persuasive, but also very entertaining. This accomplishment within an oral presentation class hopefully heightens student motivation and advances their current level of English knowledge.

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Appendix

<p>Product #1</p> 	<p>Product #2</p> 
<p>Product #3</p> 	<p>Product #4</p> 

<p>Product #5</p> 	<p>Product #6</p> 
<p>Product #7</p> 	<p>Product #8</p> 