

# Culture and identity on intercultural business requests: A genre-based comparative study

**Bertha Du-Babcock and Haiying Feng**

City University of Hong Kong (Hong Kong) and University of International Business and Economics (China)

enbertha@cityu.edu.hk & fhy@uibe.edu.cn

## Abstract

Situated in an intercultural communication setting, this study explores the impact of the writer's and the receiver's national cultures and the writer's professional identity on the move structures of persuasive email requests. The paper particularly compared persuasive email requests written by Hong Kong Chinese and Japanese university students. For triangulation, the pre-writing group discussions and post-writing reflective essays produced by the same groups of students were also analyzed. By employing the genre analysis framework developed by Bhatia and Swales, we identified eight structural moves in email messages and observed similarities and differences in the use of these moves across the two corpora. The findings suggest that culture and identity construction interactively play important roles in affecting the students' use of persuasive strategies.

**Keywords:** persuasive writing, cultural impact, identity construction, Hong Kong, Japanese.

## Resumen

*El impacto de la cultura y de la identidad en solicitudes comerciales en un contexto intercultural: un estudio comparativo basado en el análisis del género*

Este estudio se enmarca en un contexto de comunicación intercultural. Su objetivo es explorar el impacto de la cultura nacional del escritor y del receptor y, por otro lado, examinar la identidad profesional del escritor a través de los

‘movimientos retóricos’ de una solicitud comercial. En este trabajo se compararon las solicitudes comerciales persuasivas escritas por estudiantes de universidades de Hong Kong China y Japón. Para la triangulación de estos datos, se analizaron también las discusiones de grupo previas al proceso de redacción de este tipo de textos, así como los ensayos de reflexión producidos por estos estudiantes tras la redacción de estos textos. Utilizando el marco del análisis de género propuesto por Bhatia y Swales, en el presente estudio se identificaron un total de ocho movimientos retóricos en los mensajes electrónicos de los dos corpus utilizados para este estudio. Los resultados sugieren que la cultura y la construcción de la identidad juegan un importante papel, en tanto que determinan el uso de estrategias de persuasión por parte de los estudiantes.

**Palabras clave:** escritura persuasiva, impacto cultural, construcción de la identidad, Hong Kong, japonés.

## 1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, English as a lingua franca is commonplace where English is used as the language of communication between business practitioners with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This phenomenon has posed challenges to students who are non-native English speakers and new to their chosen professions. In the context of writing business letters in intercultural settings, student writers have to demonstrate on the one hand awareness of communicative norms and writing conventions that are generally accepted in their profession so as to construct themselves as competent members of the discourse community (Swales, 1990; Bizzell, 1992). On the other hand, they have to take into account that these conventions might be different from those in their own culture. Research has provided empirical evidence for the impact of culture on individuals’ linguistic behaviors in intercultural communication settings (e.g., Du-Babcock, 1999, 2005 & 2006; Tanaka, 2006 & 2008; Scollon, Scollon & Jones, 2012; Du-Babcock, 2013; Du-Babcock & Tanaka, 2013). However, how a non-native English writer’s own culture, the receiver’s culture, and the writer’s perception of his/her own identity affect the structure process of writing a business letter has become a topic of increasing importance yet is still under research.

To investigate this issue, we developed a simulated case scenario where student writers wrote a requestive email message to a potential business collaborator who is a British. In this study, we recruited two groups of non-

native English speaking university students from Hong Kong and Japan. While Hong Kong and Japanese are often categorized as collectivist cultures (Hofstede, 2001), two cultures exhibit distinctive communication behaviors (Du-Babcock & Tanaka, 2013). Consequently, the study examines persuasive strategies used by Hong Kong and Japanese students in order to determine whether there is a convergent or divergent pattern in writing the requestive message. We adopted a genre analysis approach (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993) to investigate the move structures of requestive messages written by the two researched groups. We also explore the role of cultures and identities constructed by student writers (as students or as business practitioners).

## 2. Literature review

The present study is situated in an intercultural setting, and explores the impact of culture (the writer's vs the receiver's) and identity (student vs professional) on constructing persuasive email messages. Studies on (1) requestive email messages, (2) culture and communication styles, and (3) the writer's identity construction are reviewed.

### 2.1. Requestive email messages

Email communication is a hybrid medium of communication, situating along a continuum between formal written letters and informal conversations (Gimenez, 2000; Baron, 2003; Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007). An extensive research on email communication compares requestive messages written by native English speakers (NESs) and non-native English speakers (NNEs) including Taiwan Chinese (Chang & Hsu, 1998), Jordanians (Al-Ali & Sahawneh, 2008), Thai (Swangboonsatic, 2006), and mixed Asians (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007). Results revealed that while NESs tend to use more indirect syntactical forms (e.g., interrogatives) and hints, NNEs tend to use direct forms (e.g., imperatives) (Chang & Hsu, 1998; Scollon, Scollon & Kirkpatrick, 2000; Al-Ali & Sahawneh, 2008). In terms of the order of structural moves, NESs employ a "request-reason" pattern while Asian NNEs prefer to a "reason-request" pattern (Chang & Hsu, 1998; Swangboonsatic, 2006). Past research has also suggested that both native and non-native writers take in consideration situational factors (e.g., weighting of the imposition, power distance) and vary the request strategies when writing a requestive message (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007).

Based on the literature reviewed, we put forth research question 1.

RQ 1: How did Hong Kong and Japanese students construct their requestive messages? Did they converge to or diverge from the moves of composing requestive messages?

## 2.2. Culture and communication style

British is regarded as an individualist culture; whereas, Hong Kong and Japan are often viewed as collectivist societies (Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2004; Gesteland, 2005). Individualistic societies emphasize individual differences and accept deviation from group norms while collectivist societies value group interest over individual desire and needs, and place emphasis on harmonious relationships (Redding, 1997; Nishiyama, 2000; Hofstede, 2001; Debroux, 2003; Selmer & de Leon, 2003).

Cultures also differ greatly in terms of communication style. British are reported to use low-context communication styles where directness and explicitness are preferred. Effective persuasive discourse can be characterized by the “Aristotle” dictum; that is, “state your case and prove it” (Matalene, 1985). There is a linear development of writer’s ideas (Park, Dillon & Mitchell, 1998). In contrast, Hong Kong and Japanese people tend to use high-context communication styles where indirect forms of writing are preferred. Making connection between the messages and the background context is left to the readers (Scollon et al., 2000). Nevertheless, there have been critiques of these traditional views towards Eastern and Western writing styles (Akar & Louhiala-Salminen, 1999; Scollon et al., 2012) that could be signaling a change in communication norms.

Although Hong Kong and Japan belong to collectivist cultures, they exhibit different communication behaviors. Hong Kong, being a “hybrid society” (Redding, 1997: 111), has more exposure to the Western culture. Hong Kong is more westernized than other Chinese societies such as Mainland China and Taiwan (Goodman, 2013). In examining Chinese students’ use of rhetoric strategies for argumentation, Kirkpatrick (1995: 225) argues his subjects’ English writing was “influenced by Western rather than by traditional Chinese styles”. Moreover, Hong Kong people are described as materialistic and pragmatic (Lau, 1982) and therefore emphasize individual achievements and interests rather than those of their company (Levin & Yeung, 1996).

In contrast, Japanese business people value long-term relationship rather than temporary profits (Nishiyama, 2000; Debroux, 2003). When presenting an argument, the Japanese place the central point towards the end but the supporting reasons were likely to be absent or unclear (Suzuki, 2010). Likewise, reasons and background are usually provided before the request is delivered (Kameda, 2014). Haneda and Shima (1982) further asserted that the common AIDA (attention, interest, desire, and action) approach in request letters is not applicable in Japanese context.

Du-Babcock and Tanaka (2013) compared communication behaviors of Hong Kong and Japanese business professionals in decision-making meetings. They found that Japanese participants tended to avoid direct disagreement in order to maintain group harmony while Hong Kong participants tended to be assertive in expressing disagreements, especially in the intercultural meetings.

Research in contrastive rhetoric has documented that writers transfer first-language communication patterns and strategies to second-language writing (Connor & Kaplan, 1987). Similarly, in professional and academic writing, while writers tend to demonstrate disciplinary-specific discourse features (Fløttum, Dahl & Kinn, 2006), the influence of communication norms of the writer's native language is evident (Abdi, 2009). Thus, when writing across cultures, miscommunication can accrue if writers continue to use discourse patterns that are effective in their home cultures but may not be suitable in other cultures. Therefore, we put forth our second research question as follows.

RQ 2: How did writer's and receiver's cultures influence the construction of the requestive messages written by Hong Kong and Japanese students?

### **2.3. Identity construction**

Identity is “formed and shaped through action” (Richards, 2006: 3) and actions are accomplished through communication. As such, identity construction is a complex process situated in actual interactions and wider sociocultural contexts (De Fina, Schiffirin & Bamberg, 2006). Communicators may actively construct their identities through their choice of communication devices (Feng & Du-Babcock, 2016). As Dunn (2011: 3644) argued, communicators' use of communication strategies may not be “simply a matter of mechanical conformity to social norms; rather speakers use their knowledge of the indexical meanings of these forms to actively construct desired social roles and relationships”.

Identity is formed when writers become members and situate themselves in discourse communities. Individual discourse communities can be identified through the conventionalized communication patterns shared by members of the community (Swales, 1990; Bizzell, 1992; Hyland, 2012). To claim membership and be accepted within a particular discourse community, members use the writing conventions that are frequently used in the community (Swales, 1990; Bizzell, 1992). Nevertheless, some writers (e.g., Hyland, 2012) may choose not to follow the same writing convention. Consequently, identity formation can be a process of conforming to become a member of a discourse community, or possibly non-conformity to develop an individualized identity.

We also adopted Piaget's (1968) concepts of stage theory to connect the writing of persuasive messages with identity. As college students, individuals are likely to think and act as students who see themselves members of student discourse community while professionals think and act according to their accepted code of conducts in the professional discourse community. There is a transition from being students to professionals by exposing to professional education in classroom and work experience at workplace. In this transition students can continue to use "student talk" in student-to-student communication but professional genre in the classroom and at work. In sum, students are exposed to differing influences, and it is important to understand these influences in order to understand how students compose their persuasive messages. Thus, we put forth research question 3.

RQ 3: How did identity influence the construction of requestive messages written by Hong Kong and Japanese students?

### 3. Research method

The present study draws on three sets of data produced by 80 undergraduate students, 40 each from a Hong Kong university and a Japanese university. Participating students were sophomore or junior- year students, majoring in English for Professional Communication or business administration. On average, Hong Kong students achieved an IELTS score between 6 and 7 while Japanese students achieved between 5 and 6. Despite English language proficiency differences, both groups of students were able to write long essays in English. To mitigate the impact of the students' language

proficiencies, this study examined the data at a discourse level and focus on the writer's use of persuasive strategies (see Data analysis).

### 3.1. Procedure

At the time of data collection, students were required to take a business communication course to fulfil their program requirements. A writing task was designed and incorporated into business communication courses. The same task scenario and instructions (see Appendix A), with slight modifications to localize the names and monetary denominator, were used for consistency. Based on the scenario, students composed an email request in English. All participating students were informed of the study and their consent was sought before the commencement of the data collection process.

To increase its authenticity, students assumed the role of the manager of the corporate communication department (Hong Kong students) or the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) (Japanese students) of a local company (the writer's own company, hereafter called subject company or "SC"). The SC intended to expand its business by importing products of a British speaker manufacturer (target company, hereafter "TC"). However, TC already had an exclusive distributor (rival company, hereafter "RC") in the respective local region (Hong Kong or Japan). In addition, the president of RC had a close personal relationship with CEO of TC. The task required students to write an email message to the Executive Director, International Sales Division of TC to request for business collaboration. The writer and the receiver met at a reception of the TC's new product exhibition six months ago.

This task was chosen for three reasons. Firstly, it was situated in an intercultural communication setting as the receiver was of a culture (British) different from the writer's own (Chinese or Japanese). The norms and practices that were deeply rooted in writer's native culture could greatly influence the choice of communication strategies unconsciously or consciously. Secondly, students had to draw on their business and communication knowledge in order to strategically formulate the request in a way that they believed to be able to convince the receiver to respond to the request. Thirdly, the task assigned students a professional role (as a manager). The students were required to demonstrate the knowledge of how to write a persuasive request in English in a business setting in order to construct their identity as a (competent) member of the business discourse community.

The assigned task involved three in-class activities: pre-writing group discussion; persuasive message writing; and post-writing reflection (see Appendixes B and C for descriptions). In pre-writing group discussion, students formed groups of 4 to 6 persons to generate ideas on what and how to write. In order not to bias the results, the students were only given the lecture on how to write persuasive requests after they completed their individual written task. The reason for doing so is to truly reflect their own culture without being influenced by the lecture. Students also wrote individual reflections discussing reasons for writing the requests the way they were. The group discussions and post-writing reflections not only elicit justifications of their persuasive writing strategies, but more importantly, as Olinger (2011: 274) argued, they “provide a window into the embodied construction of identities”.

### 3.2. Research data

This study draws on the three data sets (pre-writing group discussions, individual writing requests, and individual reflective essays) collected from the Hong Kong and Japanese students. The Hong Kong corpus consists of six pre-writing group discussions, 40 individual persuasive requests and 40 reflective essays while the Japanese corpus includes seven pre-writing group discussions, 40 persuasive requests and 40 reflective essays. Each pre-writing group discussion lasted about 40-50 minutes and was digitally recorded and later transcribed.

We analyzed the 80 requestive messages by using the genre analysis framework developed by Bhatia (1993) and Swales (1990). While Swales’s (1990) genre analysis of the move structure aims for academic articles, Bhatia’s (1993, 2004) framework concentrated on a range of business promotional genres. According to Bhatia, promotional genres share a communicative goal and usually contain the following moves: (1) establishing credentials, (2) introducing the product/offer, (3) product details/offering incentives, (4) enclosing documents, (5) soliciting response, (6) using pressure tactics, and (7) ending politely.

The messages examined in the present study can be classified as a promotional genre because the main communicative purpose is to promote SC to TC and persuade TC to respond to the request. By adapting Bhatia’s (1993, 2004) structural moves, we devised a move scheme (see Table 1) to code the 80 requestive messages. The messages were coded by two raters and



the interrater reliability was .90. All instances of inconsistent coding were scrutinized and discussed until consensus was reached.

Although the English proficiency levels of the student writers varied, this study analyzes the messages at the discourse level rather than at the lexical-grammatical level. We particularly focus on how the communication goal of the message is achieved through the construction of the steps and moves shown in Table 1. The analysis of the pre-writing group discussions and reflective essays allow the authors to link the three data sets to perform a triangulation and examine the intricacies and interplay of culture and identity construction.

Move	Step	Example
<b>Move 1. Establishing credentials</b>	Step 1a. Greeting	Hello (JPN1) How are you? (HK13)
	Step 1b. Introducing the writer	My name is [NAME]. I am the CEO of XYZ Corporation in Japan. (JPN1)
	Step 1c. Introducing SC	We are a distributor specializing in high quality audio equipment in Japan. (JPN3)
	Step 1d. Referring to the previous meeting	It was my pleasure to meet you at your company's new product exhibition six months ago. (HK2)
<b>Move 2. Attracting reader's attention</b>	Step 2a. Praising TC or TC's products	I was deeply impressed by the outstanding performance and quality of the audio products of your company. (HK2)
	Step 2b. Indicating an increasing demand for TC's products in the region	Our marketing research showed that there is a sustainable demand in your company's amplifiers and speakers in the local market (HK23)
	Step 2c. Expressing SC's interest in TC's products	I am very interested in your products. (JPN10)
<b>Move 3. Making the request</b>	Step 3a. Introducing the request	I want to make a new proposal for your company. (JPN1)
	Step 3b. Requesting to be a sole distributor	I would like to become your new sole exclusive distributor in Japan. (JPN10)
	Step 3c. Requesting to be an additional distributor	Therefore we would like to establish a business partnership with ABC and to become one of ABC's distributors in Hong Kong. (HK41)
	Step 3d. Requesting to import TC's products	We are seeking the honor of working with your company to import ABC products to Hong Kong. (HK4)
	Step 3e. Requesting to do business with TC	We would like to do business with your company. (JPN28)
<b>Move 4. Providing reasons for collaboration</b>	Step 4a. Highlighting SC's achievements	Our business is expanding rapidly over the past 5 years, with our sales turnovers increased from HK\$ 1.0 billion to HK\$ 9.0 billion. (HK2)
	Step 4b. Offering specific incentives to TC	Not only can we promote your brand to Hong Kong people and expose the products to your target customers, we can also promise a double or triple increase of your company's sales turnover. (HK2)
	Step 4c. Offering non-specific incentives to TC	With a large market share, we are able to provide more distribution channels for our [your] products, hence this will increase the sales turnover of your company (HK35)
<b>Move 5. Enclosing documents</b>	Step 5a. Attaching documents	I have attached our company's information as an attached document to this e-mail. (JPN34)
	Step 5b. Providing SC's	More information is on our website

	website address	http://www.xyzcorp.xxx (JPN31)
<b>Move 6. Using pressure tactics</b>	Step 6a. Acknowledging the relationship between TC and RC	We understand that you have a sole and exclusive distributor, Fortune Audio Co. (HK8)
	Step 6b. Describing RC in a positive tone	[RC] is a respected company in the industry, yet there is currently a decline in their sales volume. (HK41)
	Step 6c. Describing RC in a negative tone	[RC] is a respected company in the industry, yet there is currently a decline in their sales volume. (HK41)
	Step 6d. pointing out TC would lose competitive strength if not collaborating with SC	As Mr. Wong [RC director] is aging, without the help of major salespersons, he might not be able to increase your company's product sales as expected. (HK32)
	Step 6e. Other pressure tactics	I strongly believe that that is a very good business opportunity that ABC should not miss (HK10) I sincerely hope your company to consider this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity we offer to your company. (HK26)
<b>Move 7. Soliciting a response</b>	Step 7a. Specifying a format	I am planning to visit England on November and would like to talk about it further. Would you please arrange a 2-hour meeting? (HK25)
	Step 7b. Providing contact info	If you are interested in our company and would like to know more about us, please feel free to give us a call on 29183932. (HK2)
	Step 7c. Specifying a reply-by date	Please reply me the detail arrangement by 30th, October. (HK25)
	Step 7d. Soliciting a response with no specifications	If you are interested in our company, we can make an appointment to talk about our company. (JPN34)
<b>Move 8. Ending politely</b>	Step 8a. Expressing desire for a reply/ for doing business with TC/ for meeting with the reader	I am looking forward to hearing from you soon. (JPN 12) I look forward to the opportunity of doing business with you. (JPN 5) I look forward to meeting with you soon. (HK 1)
	Step 8b. Expressing gratitude	Thank you for reading my email. (JPN 12) Thank you very much for your time (HK 40) Thank you for your consideration. (JPN 25)

Table 1. Move scheme used to analyze the email messages in this study.

## 4. Results and interpretations

In this section, we describe findings of the three research questions.

### 4.1. RQ1: How did Hong Kong and Japanese students construct their persuasive messages? Did these student writers converge to or diverge from the moves of composing requestive messages?

To answer Research Question 1, we conducted a move analysis of 80 persuasive messages by using the coding scheme presented in Table 1. We then employed Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) tests to compare the move frequencies in messages written by Hong Kong students (hereafter, HK corpus) and

messages written by Japanese students (hereafter, Japanese corpus). The significant level was set at 0.05. We observed that each message can be constructed by up to eight moves, and each move can be accomplished in two to five steps. While some steps (e.g., greeting, self-introducing the writer, attaching documents) appear once in the message, other steps (e.g., praising the TC to gain interest, highlighting the SC's achievements, offering non-specific incentives) appear multiple times. As shown in Table 2, we identified 606 units of steps in HK corpus and 517 units in Japanese corpus. In the following, the eight moves are discussed.

Move	HK (n=40)	JPN (n=40)	Chi-Square score	p-value
Move 1. Establishing credentials	86	109	9.2527	0.026113*
Move 2. Attracting attention	65	38	6.5555	0.037713*
Move 3. Making the request	71	76	41.0261	0.00001*
Move 4. Providing reasons for collaboration	228	151	7.7014	0.021265*
Move 5. Enclosing documents	6	22	19.0909	0.000012*
Move 6. Using pressure tactics	74	60	7.4473	0.114054
Move 7. Soliciting a response	37	16	6.7734	0.079482
Move 8. Ending politely	39	45	0.1436	0.704738
<b>Total</b>	<b>606</b>	<b>517</b>		

\* The significant level is at  $p < 0.05$

Table 2. A comparison of move structures between Hong Kong and Japanese students.

#### 4.1.1. Move 1: Establishing credentials

Move 1 often occurs in the beginning to establish the writer's credentials. Table 2 shows a significant difference in constructing this move between the two groups. While in both corpora, Steps 1c (Introducing SC) and 1d (Referring to the previous meeting) are the most frequently used steps, Steps 1a (Greeting) and 1b (Introducing the writer) are rarely found in the Hong Kong corpus (see Figure 1). The finding reveals that Hong Kong students are likely to consider Steps 1c and 1d are sufficient in establishing writer's credentials while Japanese students regarded all four steps equally important to accomplish this purpose.

The finding of Hong Kong students differs from Zhu (2000) which states that greetings and self-introduction are typical moves in Chinese business letters and serve to establish or maintain long-term relationships. Moreover, all of the greetings found in both corpora are expressed in either "hello" or "hi", which is commonly used in spoken contexts and displays an informal and personalized register in email communication (Gimenez, 2000),

suggesting these students viewed the email message as an informal communication channel.

Results of Move 1 suggest that in establishing credentials Japanese students place more emphasis on interpersonal relationship and used more relational practices than those of Hong Kong students. This finding is consistent with general observation that Japanese people value interpersonal relationship (Debroux, 2003).

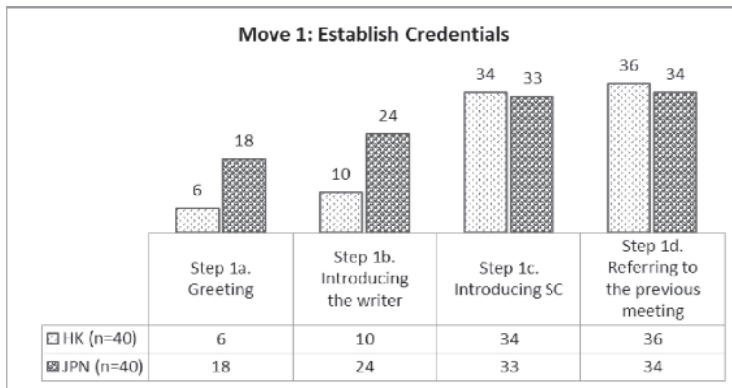


Figure 1. A comparison of Move 1 at a Step Level.

#### 4.1.2. Move 2: Attracting receiver’s attention

Move 2 functions to capture the receiver’s attention to continue reading the message. A significant difference was found in constructing Move 2 (see Table 2). Of the three steps, Hong Kong students were more likely than Japanese students in praising TC or TC’s products (Step 2a), or indicating the increasing demand of the TC’s products (Step 2b).

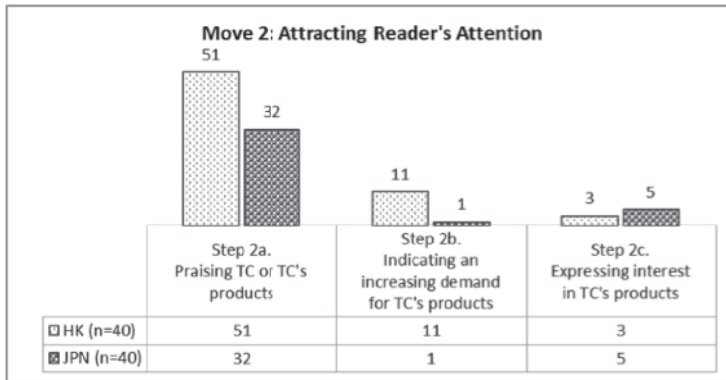


Figure 2. Results of Move 2 at a Step Level.

#### 4.1.3. Move 3: Making the request

The result reveals the significant difference between the two groups when making the request. Meanwhile, in comparing the frequencies of varying strategies in making requests, the analysis shows while Japanese students tended to request to be the sole distributor ( $\chi^2 = 5.84, p < .05$ ), Hong Kong students requested to be an additional distributor ( $\chi^2 = 27.66, p < .05$ ).

A close examination of the messages reveals that a range of strategies (Steps 3b-3e) were employed in constructing the Move 3. Some students boldly asked for replacing the current sole distributor (Step 3b). Others took a lesser assertive approach by proposing to be an additional distributor (Step 3c), or used an implicit strategy by expressing their intention to import the TC's products (Step 3d) or to do business with TC (Step 3e). Figure 3 shows that while Hong Kong students requested to be additional distributors (Step 3c), the majority of Japanese students requested to be sole distributors, followed by requesting to import TC's products. The analysis also reveals that both Hong Kong and Japanese students reiterated their requests in different parts of the email message. For instance, 17 of Hong Kong students and 16 of Japanese students repeated the same requests to be sole distributors or additional distributors in their messages. It was also observed that these students used different strategies when making the requests. While ten Hong Kong students and nine Japanese students repeated the same requests in various parts of the messages, six Hong Kong and five Japanese students started with an implicit request to import TC's products (Step 3d) or to do business or have collaboration with TC (Step 3e) and

followed by an explicit request to be a sole distributor (Step 3b) or an additional distributor (Step 3c).

The analysis also reveals that the Japanese students were more likely than the Hong Kong students to introduce the request (Step 3a) before making the actual request (19 versus 9).

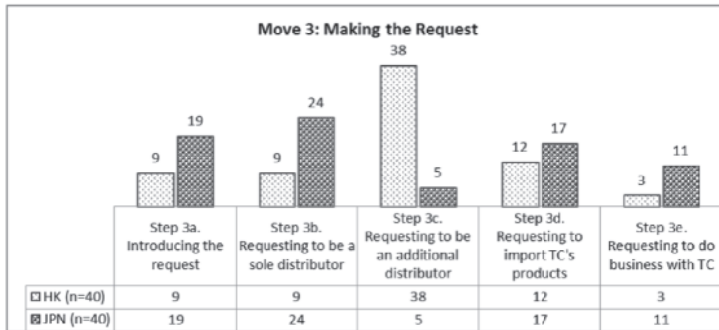


Figure 3. Results of Move 3 at a Step Level.

It is worth noting that, when comparing strategies of making the request, Step 3b brings most benefits to SC, yet it is likely to put TC in a difficult position given the fact that CEO of the TC has established a close relationship with the existing sole distributor, RC. TC might decline the request to avoid damaging the relationship with the current sole distributor. Consequently, the strategy of requesting to be an additional distributor (Step 3c) is likely to be accepted in that both RC and SC are entitled to import TC's products to the local market.

Our data indicates that most of the Hong Kong students adopted an explicit yet compromised approach when making the request. This approach aligns with the general description of Hong Kong people being strategically pragmatic (Lau, 1982). In contrast, while some Japanese students adopted an explicit and assertive approach in requesting to replace the existing sole distributor, others used an implicit and indirect approach to propose business collaboration with TC. The former approach seems contradictory to the general impression that the Japanese are polite and value good relationships and harmony among all parties while the latter approach is consistent with the general impression.

#### 4.1.4. Move 4. Providing reasons for collaboration

Move 4 is the most frequently occurring move found in both corpora, and the significant difference ( $\chi^2= 7.7014$ ) is observed. In comparing the types of strategies to rationalize the collaboration, Figure 4 reveals that the Hong Kong students tend to highlight SC's achievements (Step 4a) more than Japanese (150 versus 92). To Hong Kong students, it is important to convince TC that SC is young but grows rapidly, and the rapid increase of the total revenue is a proven record. Moreover, the Hong Kong students also tended to provide specific incentives (Step 4b) (18 versus 4) to entice TC to collaborate with SC.

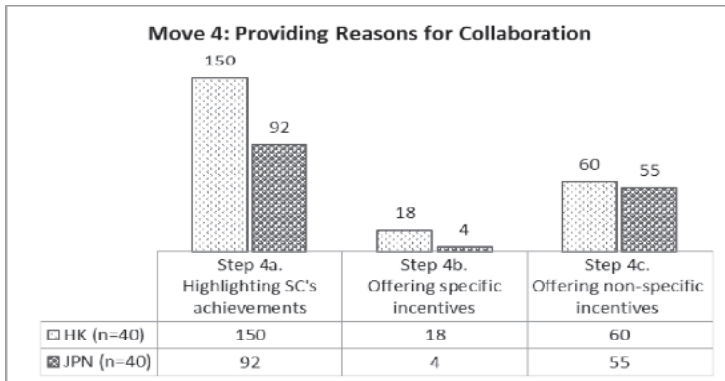


Figure 4. Results of Move 4 at a Step Level.

#### 4.1.5. Move 5: Enclosing documents

Move 5 is the least frequently used move in both corpora. Figure 5 shows that the Hong Kong students enclosed relevant documents (company's annual report) (Step 5a) while the Japanese students included the company's website address (Step 5b). The difference may explain why Japanese students preferred less detailed messages, as the receiver could browse the company website for details if necessary. This interpretation is also supported by the data from the pre-writing discussions that three of five Japanese group members mentioned that shorter email is desirable and that the company website should be provided.

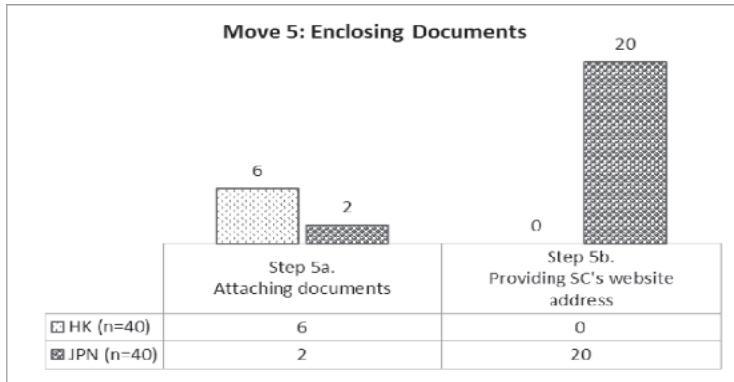


Figure 5. Results of Move 5 at a Step Level.

#### 4.1.6. Move 6: Using pressure tactics

Move 6 is the use of pressure tactics to further lure the receiver to accept the requested collaboration. In comparing the steps of using these tactics, Figure 6 shows that the most frequently used step is describing the RC in negative tone (Step 6c) (26 versus 28), and followed by acknowledging the relationships of the TC and the RC (Step 6a) (24 versus 14). The use of actual pressure tactics (Steps 6d and 6e) is not frequent in both corpora (10 versus 12).

One possible explanation for the infrequency is that any pressure strategies appear to be confrontational and do not align with Hong Kong and Japanese cultures that value harmony and good interpersonal relationship (Redding, 1997; Nishiyama, 2000). A close examination of Move 6 reveals that in the Hong Kong corpus more than half of Move 6 (38 out of 74) devoted to neutral or positive descriptions of RC (Steps 6a and 6b) while such descriptions only made up one-third of the total frequency of Move 6 (20 out of 60) in Japanese corpus. The result reveals that the Hong Kong students were more capable than their Japanese counterparts to strategically use pressure tactics by addressing the relationship issue and mitigating the negative impact with a balanced view of RC.



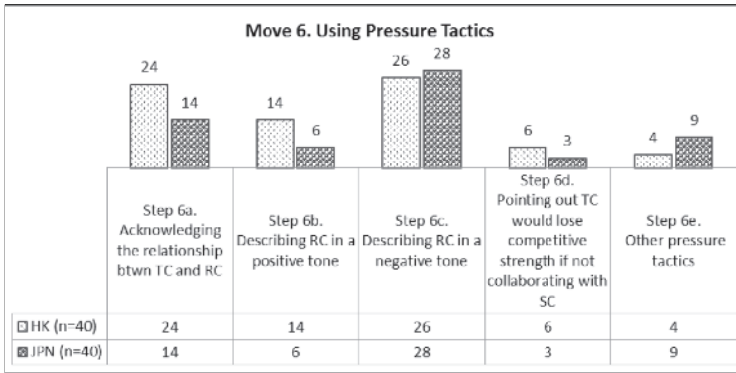


Figure 6. A comparison of Move 6 at a step level.

#### 4.1.7. Move 7: Soliciting a response

This move functions to invite the receiver to respond to the request. Move 7 is important in business promotional letters (Bhatia, 1993), yet it is the second least frequently used move in the present study. When examining the individual steps, Figure 7 shows that the Hong Kong students were more likely than the Japanese students to include specific details that arouse the receiver’s interest to reply to the request (Step 7a), the contact information (Step 7b), and the deadline of the response (Step 7c). The total frequency of these three steps is 30 in the Hong Kong corpus but only 9 in the Japanese corpus. This finding is consistent with the previous observation that Hong Kong students tended to provide more details in their messages while Japanese tended to write in a less detailed manner.

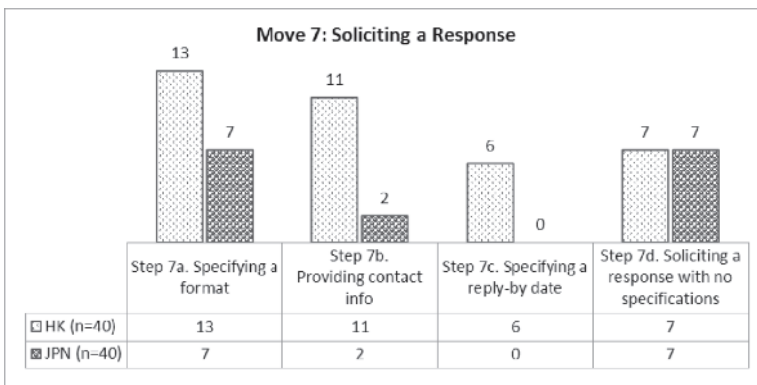


Figure 7. Results of Move 7 at a Step Level.

### 4.1.8. Move 8: Ending politely

Move 8 functions as a formal closure to the message. Two common closings in our data are the expression of their desire to hear from the receiver or for establishing a long-term relationship (Step 8a) and the expression of gratitude for reading the message or considering the request (Step 8b) (see Table 1 for examples). Table 2 and Figure 8 show that the messages are ended in a similar fashion in the two corpora ( $p>0.05$ ). Of the two steps for ending the message politely, Step 8a was more frequently used than Step 8b (30 versus 9 in the Hong Kong corpus and 33 versus 12 in the Japanese corpus).

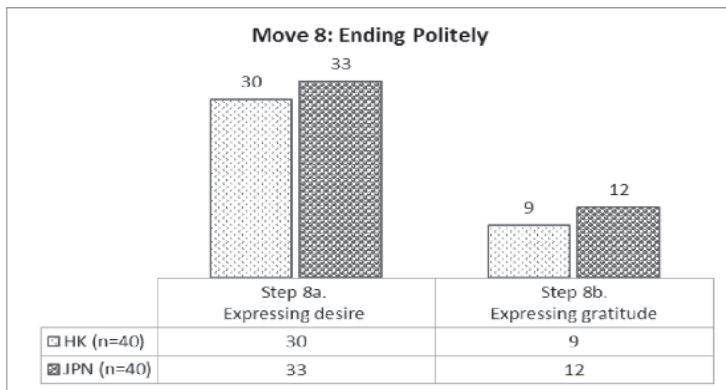


Figure 8. Results of Move 8 at a Step Level.

In sum, the comparative analysis of the eight moves reveals similarities and differences. While Hong Kong and Japanese students constructed their requestive messages in a similar sequence of moves, the discursive strategies used to rationalize the collaboration and to persuade the receiver differ across the two groups of students. It was repeatedly observed that the Hong Kong students tended to highlight SC’s achievements but downplay the RC with factual numerical data and evidence to persuade the receiver, whereas the Japanese students tended to compose the messages in a succinct but less detailed manner.

### 4.2. RQ2: How did the writer’s and the receiver’s cultures influence the construction of the requestive messages written by the Hong Kong and the Japanese students?

Research Question 2 is addressed by analyzing pre-writing discussions and post-writing reflective essays. In analyzing the transcripts of the pre-writing discussions and post-writing reflective essays, it became evident that culture plays an important role in determining the students' choice of persuasive strategies, whether to adapt the message to the receiver's culture (conscious choice) or to transfer the writer's culture when writing the requestive message (probably an unconscious choice). The analysis reveals that the students on one hand attempted to accommodate the receiver's culture but on the other hand were bounded by their own culture. This is particularly true for Hong Kong students.

In the pre-writing discussions, the Hong Kong students frequently explored strategies that would increase the possibility of having their request accepted. Excerpt 1 is an illustration in that Speaker B puzzled in Turn 19 whether they should introduce the purpose of writing first or provide the writer company's background information first. In response to her query, Speakers C and D collaboratively proposed the steps to start the email message. In Turn 24, Speaker B gave her positive support to Speaker D's proposal of praising TC's products. In Turns 25 and 27, Speaker C agreed and pointed out that the writer should "build a common ground, so that [the receiver is] more willing to accept our suggestions". It is clear that the students oriented to the needs of the receiver and attempted to construct the message from the perspective of the receiver's benefits.

Excerpt 1: Hong Kong pre-writing group discussion, Group 3

T19 B: ... I think that we have to say like what's the purpose of writing first and then we say um our background at the end though (.) or like (.) we say our purpose first and then it's just like our previous contacts like you know (.) but not that the pre the previous contact first and then the purpose of writing

[...]

T22 C: maybe we can start with a sentence saying that we would like to import their products to Hong Kong and (.) um and then we (.) say that (.) um we have met him at a reception of their new product exhibition six months ago

T23 D: and we have to briefly introduce ourselves and to praise their products and to tell them (.) and that potential to increase the sales in Hong Kong yep

- T24 B: I think praising is a good way to started praising their products maybe like um (.) how the (.) how they do in their exhibition is a good way to start
- T25 C: yep (.) because we have to build like a common ground between us
- T26 B: Yes
- T27 C: so that they are more willing to accept our suggestions (.) yea.

The influence of the receiver's culture was brought up in all pre-writing group discussions and 28 reflective essays by Hong Kong students. In reflective essays, it is repeatedly disclosed that Hong Kong students tried to accommodate the receiver's culture by focusing on facts and figures or rational arguments (10 essays), adopting a direct approach (6 essays), and explicitly expressing the purpose of writing (6 essays). It is evident that the receiver's national culture plays a significant role in affecting Hong Kong students' approaches to constructing their persuasive messages (See Excerpt 2 for illustration).

Excerpt (2) Reflective essay, HK29

As the receiver was coming from a low-context culture, they based on a cause-and-effect thinking pattern, so I tried to mention the facts and sales rate of our company to provide them reasons in choosing our company and the benefits they could have. I intended to stir up their interests in our company and provide them further information, like annual sales rate reports upon requested.

The frequent consideration of the receiver's culture can be used to account for the recurrent pattern that Hong Kong students provided specific information to support their arguments. Similarly, the students' own cultural values also reveal great impact on their persuasive writing. Twenty-five students reflected that they were influenced by their Chinese culture and 14 of them stated that they were influenced by the Chinese writing styles, particularly the indirect approach of argumentation. Maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationship in Chinese culture was also the focus of the pre-writing discussions. Both researched groups devoted a considerable amount of time to exploring appropriate ways of dealing with the close personal friendship between the CEOs of TC and RC. The central discussion points include what type of distributorship it should be and how

RC should be mentioned in the message. Most students were inclined to avoid direct competition against or comparison with RC, or chose to focus on the strengths of the writer's own company.

Japanese students also regarded the close personal relationship between TC and RC as challenging and against their preference for harmony. Although a considerable amount of time was devoted to discussing this issue, there is a mixed opinion in handling the relationship and the possibility of winning a distributorship. While some Japanese students considered it impossible to win the contract regardless of RC's performance, other students believed that the TC's CEO would be able to separate business gain from personal relationship. The mixed opinions in handling relationship issue were also displayed in reflective essays. Among 15 students who included negative remarks on RC, four students stated that they just presented the fact (to accommodate to the communicative norms of the receiver); two students explained that the inclusion was for comparison purposes; and one student expected the receiver, being a British, would accept the negative comments. In contrast, eleven students who did not include negative comments of RC indicated that giving negative comments may create bad impression which should be avoided, while two students claimed that the focus should be on building up relationship with TC first, implying they viewed such behaviors negatively.

Taken together students' self-reflective essays and pre-writing group discussions, it becomes evident that students who adopted non-threatening approaches were influenced by their own collectivist culture while those students who decided to take an assertive strategy may be influenced by their own perceptions of acceptable behavior in the receiver's individualist culture.

#### **4.3. RQ 3: How did identity influence the construction of the requestive messages written by Hong Kong and Japanese students?**

Our analysis also suggests that the difference in formulating their persuasive messages between the two researched groups can be explained by the way students constructed their identity. Kankaanranta and Planken (2010) suggested that competent BELF communicators possess adequate business specific knowledge. Our data reveals that Hong Kong students appeared to be more knowledgeable than their Japanese counterparts in constructing their identity as business professional in this context. In pre-writing discussions, Hong Kong students frequently used business-specific

vocabulary (e.g., high/low-context communication, direct/ indirect plan) and raised questions about how to convince the receiver. Moreover, personal pronouns such as *we* were used to refer to the SC and *they* to refer to TC or RC. As compared to their Japanese counterparts who from time to time seek the teacher's preference and raise questions about how to structure a business letter, Hong Kong students are more competent in constructing themselves a professional, instead of a learner identity.

Excerpt (3) illustrates that Hong Kong students possessed a good knowledge of doing business, particularly how to deal with conflict situations in business settings. For example, Hong Kong students drew on their knowledge of doing business to assess the effectiveness of a strategy in successfully convincing the receiver. The recording of group discussions shows that the students were aware of different ways to import TC's products, including requesting TC to revise the current sole distributor policy and add the writer's company as an additional distributor, or to replace the existing sole distributor with the writer's company. Students also agreed that instead of mentioning the weaknesses of the existing sole distributor (Move 6), they should emphasize possible benefits (Move 4). Two groups (Groups 4 and 5) proposed to mention the new market demands (Step 2b), and one group suggested they mention only to be the distributor of TC's new products. All these strategies serve one single purpose; that is, to maximize the possibility of having their request accepted.

Excerpt 3 (Professional Identity construction by Hong Kong students)

. . . and maybe we can say that we have we have done research on the customers' needs in this market to show that we have we have the knowledge about the market (HK Pre-writing discussion, Group 5, Turn 128, Speaker C)

The students' behavior seems to be consistent with the literature that describes Hong Kong people as pragmatic (Lau, 1982). This pragmatic value may explain why the request for an additional distributorship occurs 38 times in Hong Kong corpus but only 5 times in Japanese corpus (see Figure 3). Moreover, through the use of business-specific vocabulary (e.g., one more distributor, benefits, good partners) and the plural pronoun *we*, the Hong Kong students demonstrated their business knowledge and constructed themselves as a team of business professionals rather than students.

The writer's knowledge of doing business may also explain why Hong Kong students chose to explicitly state the purpose of writing and request to be an additional distributor (Move 3). To successfully achieve the goal, the Hong Kong students highlighted their company's achievements and possible incentives in a detailed manner (Move 4), provided additional documents to support their request (Move 5), used pressure tactics in combination with the mentioning of RC in a positive manner (Move 6), and particularly made the messages direct, explicit, and detailed. In this connection, the students' knowledge of doing business overwrites the influences of the writer's collectivistic culture. In contrast, Japanese students tend to take a student role rather than a business practitioner role as the task requires. Excerpt 4 from two Japanese group discussions is a good illustration.

Prior to Excerpt 4, the topic was on how to enhance the long-term development of the writer's company. Speaker D jokingly remarked that they should buy RC. Speaker C stated that the teacher may like this idea, foregrounding the impact of the course teacher. Similar comments were also observed in another two pre-writing discussions, including "Teacher cares about this" (Group F, Speaker A) and "We can ask [the teacher]" (Group A, Speaker B about what benefits most the writer's own company). By paying attention to teacher's preference or relying on the teacher to make decisions, Japanese students played a learner's role rather than a business practitioner's role, a phenomenon which is absent in the Hong Kong data set.

Excerpt (4): Identity construction by Japanese in pre-writing discussion, Group B.

T156 D: We should buy Nippon Audio. Buy Nippon Audio??

T157 All: Hahaha

T158 D: We can buy...

T159 C: It's possible...I think Dr. [teacher name] like that kind of idea.

## 5. Conclusion

This exploratory study examines the impact of culture and the writer's professional identity on composing persuasive email requests. The writing task involved three connected activities: pre-writing group discussions, persuasive message writing, and post-writing reflective essays. The genre

analysis framework developed by Bhatia (1993) and Swales (1990) were employed to examine the moves in students' requestive messages.

Findings show a converging as well as diverging pattern of structural moves in two corpora and the pattern is generally similar to the moves in English promotional genres in Bhatia (1993, 2004). We also examined the transcripts to explore how cultural differences and the writer's construction of identity affect the use of persuasive strategies in composing requestive messages. It is plausible to conclude that culture and identity interactively play important roles in using persuasive strategies. The coexistence of these identified variables show that culture and identity are incorporated with international identity in the context of cultural globalization. Consequently, the reality is that in English persuasive writing, the writer's and the receiver's cultures are mutually influenced. Both Hong Kong Chinese and Japanese students, on one hand, may reconcile their native language writing convention in order to accommodate to English pragmatic convention. On the other hand, they may also unconsciously cling to their own native-language writing in English.

The present study also reveals that the writer's perception of their own professional-student identity plays a crucial role in determining the diverging patterns observed in two corpora. The findings confirm that when communicating in a language other than one's first language, a competent communicator is likely to shift their communication styles in order to accommodate to the communication styles of the audience (Du-Babcock, 2003; Du-Babcock, 2005; Kankaanranta & Planken, 2010; Rogerson-Revell, 2010; Du-Babcock & Tanaka, 2013; Feng & Du-Babcock, 2016).

## 6. Limitations

The current research design was set up to explore whether students of two similar cultures (Hong Kong and Japanese) wrote requestive messages differently, and how culture and identity affect the use of persuasive strategies at the discourse level. The lexical and grammatical differences in the messages are beyond our scope. We acknowledge that language proficiency might have affected the students in composing the messages or in engaging in the pre-writing group discussions and post-writing reflection. The inadequate English language proficiency of some students (particularly in the case of Japanese students) may have limited their expressing of viewpoints. Because the research design only intended to capture the three-



way, triangulation of pre-writing discussion, actual writing, and self-reflection, it might be possible that the result could be different if the students were allowed to conduct their pre-writing group discussions using their native language.

Another limitation is the use of a simulated case scenario to generate dialogues and writing samples. Even though simulations are considered as a valid data collection method (Félix-Brasdefer, 2010; Planken, 2012), the use of authentic business correspondence from bilingual managers in business firms are preferable. This limitation was mitigated in the present study by the quasi-experimental design that made possible the direct comparison of the two researched groups from the perspectives of the pre-writing discussions, actual writing, and post writing self-reflective essays.

### **6.1. Pedagogical implications and future studies**

Against the background of the findings and limitations of our study, we suggest that additional research be conducted on bilinguals' writings in using both their native language and English. These studies would ideally contrast how and whether the bilinguals compose persuasive messages differently. Additional studies could be conducted to find ways of examining how collectivist bilinguals accommodate to their counterparts who come from similar and/or different cultural backgrounds. These studies could be conducted within the framework of communication accommodation theory to measure and assess the accommodation between high-context and low-context languages.

The findings yielded from this study have important pragmatic and pedagogical implications. Our findings and reflections could provide useful insights for instructors in teaching intercultural business communication and persuasive communication. It is suggested that instructors should encourage students to understand the complexity of culture by observing and engaging in authentic or simulated intercultural communicative events. Secondly, instructors are suggested to reflect upon their teaching practice regularly to see if they have unintentionally implied the superior authority of native-speaker norms and devalued local culture and traditions. In so doing, instructors should instill the concept of diversity and encourage students to integrate strategically other cultural forms while maintaining their own. More importantly, students should be encouraged to draw upon communicative strategies that are suitable for a particular communicative event or a genre.

## Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Beijing Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Sciences (Grant number: 14WYB024) and the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, City University of Hong Kong (Grant number: CRG 9610239). The generosity and kind support of the funding sources are gratefully acknowledged. We also acknowledge the valuable comments by the chief editor and anonymous reviewers.

Article history:

Received 11 July 2016

Received in revised form 28 November 2016

Accepted 01 December 2016

## References

- Abdi, R. (2009). "Projecting cultural identity through metadiscourse marking: A comparison of Persian and English research articles". *Journal of English Language Teaching and Learning* 5(2): 1-15.
- Akar, D. & L. Louhiala-Salminen (1999). "Towards a new genre: A comparative study of business faxes" in F. Bargiela-Chiappini & C. Nickerson (eds.), *Writing Business: Genres, Media and Discourses*, 207-226. New York: Pearson Education Ltd.
- Al-Ali, M.N. & M.B. Sahawneh (2008). "An investigation into the generic features of English requestive e-mail messages". *LSP and professional communication* 8(2): 40-64.
- Baron, N. (2003). "Why email looks like speech: Proofreading, pedagogy, and public face" in J. Aitchison & D.M. Lewis (eds.), *New Media Language*, 85-94. London: Routledge.
- Bhatia, V. (1993). *Analyzing Genre: Language Use in Professional Settings*. London: Longman.
- Bhatia, V. (2004). *Worlds of Written Discourse*. London: Continuum.
- Biesenbach-Lucas, S. (2007). "Students writing emails to faculty: An examination of e-politeness among native and non-native speakers of English". *Language Learning & Technology* 11(2): 59-81.
- Bizzell, P. (1992). *Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness*. Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press.
- Chang, Y. & Y. Hsu (1998). "Requests on e-mail: A cross-cultural comparison". *RELJ Journal* 29(2): 121-151.
- Connor, U. & R. Kaplan (1987). *Writing across Languages: Analysis of L2 Text*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Danet, B. (2001). *Cyberpl@y: Communicating Online*. Oxford: Berg.
- Debroux, P. (2003). "Culture and Management in Japan" in M. Warner (ed.), *Culture and Management in Asia*, 99-114. London: Routledge.
- De Fina, A., Schiffrin, D. & M. Bamberg (2006). "Introduction" in A. De Fina, D. Schiffrin & M. Bamberg (eds.), *Discourse and Identity*, 1-24. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Du-Babcock, B. (1999). "Topic management and turn-taking in professional communication: First-versus second-language strategies". *Management Communication Quarterly* 12(4): 544-574.
- Du-Babcock, B. (2003). A comparative analysis of individual communication processes in small group behavior between homogeneous and heterogeneous groups. *Proceedings of the 68th Association of Business Communication Convention*, Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA, 1-16.
- Du-Babcock, B. (2005). An analysis of communication behaviors between intra-and inter-cultural decision-making meetings. *Journal of Asian-Pacific Communication* 29: 147-168.
- Du-Babcock, B. (2006). An analysis of topic management strategies and turn-taking behavior in the Hong Kong bilingual environment: The impact of culture and language use. *Journal of Business Communication* 43(1): 21-42.

- Du-Babcock, B. (2013). English as business Lingua Franca: A comparative analysis of communication behavior and strategies in Asian and European contexts. *Ibérica, Journal of the European Association of Languages for Specific Purposes* 26,3: 101-132.
- Du-Babcock, B. & H. Tanaka (2010). Turn-taking behavior and topic management strategies of Chinese and Japanese business professionals: A comparison of intercultural group communication. *Proceedings of the 75th Association of Business Communication Convention, Chicago, USA*, 1-17.
- Du-Babcock, B. & H. Tanaka (2013). A comparison of the communication behaviors of Hong Kong Chinese and Japanese business professionals in intracultural and intercultural decision-making meetings. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 27: 263-287.
- Dunn, C. (2011). "Formal forms or verbal strategies? Politeness theory and Japanese business etiquette training". *Journal of Pragmatics* 43: 3643-3654.
- Félix-Brasdefer, J.C. (2010). "Data collection methods in speech act performance" in A. Martínez-Flor & E. Usó-Juan (eds.), *Speech Act Performance: Theoretical, Empirical and Methodological Issues*, 41-56. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Feng, H.Y. & B. Du-Babcock (2016). "Business is business": Constructing cultural identities in a persuasive writing task. *English for Specific Purposes* 44: 30-42.
- Fløttum, K., Dahl, T. & T. Kinn (2006). *Academic Voices*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Gesteland, R.R. (2005). *Cross-cultural Business Behavior: Negotiating, Selling, Sourcing and Managing across Cultures*, 4th ed. Copenhagen: Copenhagen Business School Press.
- Gimenez, J.C. (2000). "Business e-mail communication: some emerging tendencies in register". *English for Specific Purposes* 19: 237-251.
- Goodman, M.B. (2013). *Intercultural Communication for Managers*. New York: Business Expert Press.
- Haneda, S. & H. Shima (1982). "Japanese communication behavior as reflected in letter writing". *Journal of Business Communication* 19: 19-32.
- Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations across Nations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- House, R.J., Hanges, P.J., Javidan, M., Dorfman, P. & V. Gupta (2004). *Leadership, Culture, and Organizations: The GLOBE Study of 62 Societies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hyland, K. (2012). *Disciplinary Identities: Individual and Community in Academic Discourse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kameda, N. (2014). "Japanese business discourse of oneness: A personal perspective". *International Journal of Business Communication* 51: 93-113.
- Kankaanranta, A. & B. Planken (2010). "BELF competence as business knowledge of internationally operating business professionals". *Journal of Business Communication* 47: 380-407.
- Kirkpatrick, A. (1995). "Chinese rhetoric: Method of argument". *Multilingua* 14: 318-335.
- Lau, S. 1982. *Society and Politics in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press.
- Levin, D.A. & S. Yeung (1996). "The Hong Kong work ethic" in I. Nish, S.G. Redding & S.H. Ng (eds.), *Work and Society: Labour and Human Resources in East Asia*, 135-154. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Matalene, C. (1985). "Contrastive rhetoric: An American writing teacher in China". *College English* 47,8: 789-808.
- Nishiyama, K. (2000). *Doing Business with Japan: Successful Strategies for Intercultural Communication*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Olinger, A.R. (2011). "Constructing identities through "discourse": Stance and interaction in collaborative college writing". *Linguistics and Education* 22: 273-286.
- Park, M.Y., Dillon, W.T. & K.L. Mitchell (1998). Korean business letters: Strategies for effective complaints in cross-cultural communication. *Journal of Business Communication* 35,3: 328-345.
- Piaget, J. (1968). *On the Development of Memory and Identity*. Barre, MA: Clark University Press with Barre Publishers.
- Planken, B. (2012). "The changing landscape of business communication: Developments and directions in research" in P. Heynderickx, S. Dieltjens, G. Jacobs, P. Gillaerts & E. de Groot (eds.), *The Language Factor in International Business: New Perspectives on Research, Teaching and Practice*, 17-40. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Redding, S.G. (1997). "Culture and business in Hong Kong" in G. Wang & S.L. Wong (eds.), *Dynamic Hong Kong: Business and Culture*, 85-

117. Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, The University of Hong Kong.
- Richards, K. (2006). *Language and Professional Identity: Aspects of Collaborative Interaction*. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave.
- Rogerson-Revell, P. (2010). "Can you spell that for us nonnative speakers? Accommodation strategies in international business meetings". *Journal of Business Communication* 47,4: 432-454.
- Scollon, R., S.W. Scollon. & R.H. Jones (2012) *Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach*, 3rd ed. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Scollon, R., S.W. Scollon & A. Kirkpatrick (2000). *Contrastive Discourse in Chinese and English: A Critical Appraisal*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Swales, J. (1990). *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Swangboonsatic, C. (2006). "Different requestive style". *NIDA Language and Communication Journal* 11,11: 62-84.
- Zhu, Y. (2000). "Structural moves reflected in English and Chinese sales letters". *Discourse Studies* 2: 473-496.

**Bertha Du-Babcock** is Associate Head and Associate Professor at City University of Hong Kong. She has received the Fellow of the Association (2016), Distinguished Member Award (2010), the Kitty O. Locker Outstanding Researcher Award (2008), and the Meada Gibbs Outstanding Teaching Award (2004). She also received Outstanding Article Awards in 2007 and 2001.

**Haiying Feng** is Associate Professor and Executive Director of International Writing Center at the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing, China.

## Appendix A: Case scenario and instructions to students for writing the persuasive message

The same case scenario was provided to the Hong Kong students and the Japanese students, with slight modification to localize the meeting venue, monetary denominator, and company names.

### Case Scenario

Your company is a very aggressive distributor specializing in high quality audio equipment, such as stereo speakers and amplifiers. You have 12 branches. In order to further expand, your company has decided to approach ABC, a world-famous British speaker manufacturer, about the possibility of your company importing their products into Hong Kong. If your company could import the ABC products, you could easily double or even triple your sales turnover in a year.

However, there is a problem. ABC has a sole and exclusive distributor in Hong Kong, which means that your company is not able to sell ABC products. If your company wants to sell ABC products, you will have to persuade ABC to change its policy of selling through an exclusive distributor. This means that ABC would replace its present distributor with your company or discontinue the exclusive distributor policy by adding your company as an additional distributor. The present sole and exclusive distributor, Fortune Audio Co. Ltd., is an old, reputable, and family-owned company. The company is not as active as before. The company president, Mr. Wong, is

advancing in age and several employees including their top salesperson have recently left the company. You know that there is a close personal relationship between Mr. Wong and the CEO of ABC.

Your company was established in 2005. Your major shareholders include one of the top five trading companies in Hong Kong, two leading local investment banks, and a dozen local big business companies. Your sales turnovers in the past five years have been HK\$1.0 billion, HK\$1.8 billion, HK\$3.5 billion, HK\$5.0 billion, and HK\$9.0 billion. Your company presently is the sole and exclusive distributor for several major high quality, famous, and expensive brands of home stereo products.

#### Your task

With the above data write an email to Mr. Alvin Brown, Executive Director, International Sales Division, ABC Corporation. You met him at a reception of ABC's new product exhibition six months ago at the Island Shangri-La hotel.

## Appendix B: Three-Stage Writing Process

At the first pre-writing stage, students were asked to form groups of four to six persons to generate ideas, organize information, and conduct discussions on what and how to write this designated persuasive message. The discussions lasted about 40-50 minutes and were audio recorded and later transcribed. While the students were allowed to choose the medium of language for discussion, it ended up that all discussions were conducted in English.

At the writing stage, students were given approximately one hour to complete this in-class writing task based on their group discussions.

After the writing task, the instructors offered a mini-lecture on how to write persuasive messages using a well-written request composed by a US student based on a similar case scenario as an example. The rationale for providing the lecture after instead of before the writing task is to avoid any possible influence of our instructions on students' writing, so as to tap into the students' perceived ways of communicating persuasive messages and their cultural identity construction in the process. The purposes for conducting the lecture before the writing of reflective essay are (1) to ensure every student has some knowledge of western styles of persuasive writing, and (2) to facilitate the writing of reflective essay.

After receiving the lesson on writing persuasive messages, at the third stage, for the follow-up, students were required to write individual reflective essays discussing reasons for writing the persuasive requests the way they were. Some guiding questions (Appendix C) were provided to facilitate the students' reflection.

## Appendix C: Guiding questions for post-writing reflective essays

**Reflect upon your writing process and ask yourself why you constructed the message the way it is:**

- A. Did you state your purpose in the opening paragraph or later in the message? Did you state your purpose explicitly or implicitly? Why?
- B. What persuasive strategies have you used or not used? Why?
- C. Did you refer to the rival company? Positively or negatively? Why?
- D. Do you think that the Chinese or Japanese tradition writing pattern influences the way you write?
- E. Do you think that you were trying to accommodate the English culture when you were writing?

