

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR: RESULTS OF CORPUS ANALYSIS

Zina Romova & Dr. John Hetet

Unitec Institute of Technology

Abstract

In this paper, which is part of a wider study on corpus nexus genre approach to teaching writing to advanced EAL learners, we aim to show how corpora can provide teachers and learners with information about dominant lexical and grammatical characteristics of civic genres. We report on findings from one part of the project, a corpus of 50 letters to the editor of the New Zealand Listener gathered over a six-month period. The application of two corpus software programmes, WordSmith Tools-5 and ConcGram, allows us to offer some fresh insights into familiar language features. Creating a corpus of L2 tertiary students' civic texts at the next stage in the project and identifying gaps between learner civic writing language and the findings on the native corpus characteristics will prompt the types of interventions to recommend in the teaching of civic writing.

Keywords: *civic writing, letters to the editor, genre, corpus analysis, language features*

Introduction

Civic writing is the ability of a citizen to write for civic or political purposes and to convey in writing their ideas and opinions on matters of public life. Stotsky (1996) defines it as “participatory ... unpaid writing that citizens do as part of the process of democratic self-government” (p. 227). With the increase in migrants in New Zealand and other countries, the teaching and acquisition of skills needed for the migrants' effective and responsible participation in civil society becomes a major condition of the success of the democratic process and democratic citizenship in these countries.

Developing an ability to express themselves to the public is beneficial for the migrants themselves as it leads to increased chances of becoming engaged, active citizens, with confidence and facility to achieve a level of inclusiveness that enhances their opportunities in life. Facilitating this process therefore means meeting students' social, political and cultural needs beyond the classroom.

The purposes of civic writing can include: obtaining information or assistance; providing public information; evaluating public officials or services; advocating for people, causes or organisations and promoting the common good; supporting,

opposing or modifying existing or proposed laws or policies. The civic genre therefore includes a variety of sub-genres: written speeches, petitions, resolutions, newsletters for political or civic groups, letters to legislators and newspapers, submissions on city council plans. The texts can be written by individuals expressing their positions or by groups of individuals trying to achieve a common goal.

Because civic writing ability is so important for both individuals and the community, an issue arises as to how teachers can help students develop the required skills. On the way to achieving this, the first step is for the teachers and learners to understand the requirements and principles of the genre. For this, we require a systematic means of describing native English writers' texts. Since the start of genre studies in 1990 (Swales, 1990), in identifying the principles and regularities of text types, genre analysts have been often assisted by the use of corpus analysis. Analysis of a genre based on data obtained from a small corpus of texts has become a widely used method of obtaining information about language use (Ghadessy, Henry & Roseberry, 2001; Handford, 2010). Such genre analyses have derived information about academic genres (e.g. Tribble, 2002; Swales & Lee, 2006), as well as about English genres in professional settings (e.g. Bhatia, 2004; McCarthy & Handford, 2004). Yet, some civic genres of writing, letters to a newspaper editor in particular, present an under-researched area in both genre and corpus studies (O'Keffe, 2006). The first stage of a project on corpus nexus genre approach to teaching writing reported in this paper is designed to fill the gap.

By comparing the information derived from a native writer corpus of letters to the editor and that of tertiary L2 students, we hope to be able to add to the growing number of genre studies that have contributed to developing corpus-informed syllabi, teaching and learning materials, and classroom activities.

Literature Review

Corpus-based genre studies

Corpus-based genre studies have been providing descriptions of specialist selected genres for many years. Fries (1940), long before the term corpus-based was coined, provided an early descriptive study of grammatical features of a corpus of 2000 letters written to the US government, which served as a base for his path-finding work *American English Grammar*. Since the start of computer-based corpus linguistics, Biber (1988) has examined the language features of 23 different genres and proposed a framework for text analysis largely based on the analysis of its linguistic features.

Since Swales's (1990) seminal book on genre, the notion of genre has been extremely significant in L2 research (Bhatia, 2004; Paltridge, 2001; Swales, 2004), and its

development has gone in two directions. One has been a more detailed analysis of the concept of discourse community (Miller, 1994; Swales, 1998). The other, which is strongly supported by corpus application, has involved detailed analysis of specific language features used in particular genres (Hyland, 1998; 2004). Corpus-based genre studies have over the years provided insights into prototypical linguistic features of specific genres – hence insights for syllabus and material design (Swales & Feak, 2000, 2004). The majority of these studies have focussed on various academic genres (Hyland, 2000; Conrad, 1996; Biber, 2006, 2010) and on professional or workplace genres (Dos Santos, 2002; Connor & Upton, 2004; McCarthy & Handford, 2004; Koester, 2006; Flowerdew & Wan, 2010).

Corpus-based research has shown interesting differences between genres, and between different areas and disciplines within the same genre. Examples of these are: the interesting variations in the use of hedging in different academic disciplines and in articles published in academic journals and those in ‘popular’ ones (Myers, 1992; Bloor & Bloor, 1993); the differences in the use of epistemic modality and downtoners across genres and across different disciplines within the academic genre (Rizomilioti, 2006); the different functions of lexical bundles in published academic prose in different disciplines (Cortes, 2004); and differences in citation practices across different disciplines (Hyland, 1999, 2005, 2008; Hunston, 2000; Bloch, 2009). Dudley-Evans (2000) therefore argues for a theory of genre that “goes beyond the ideas of prototypicality to acknowledge that variation in the discourse structuring of genres is a key factor” (p. 10), and the teaching of academic writing in particular needs to reflect this variation. Bhatia (2004) emphasises the related concepts of “convention and constraint” (p.23) in a genre, and how these concepts find realisation in lexico-grammatical forms. Studying genre can show how to link the use of these forms to the social practices of the users.

Interestingly, it is in the area of English for Specific Purposes where corpora are now taking on an increasingly mainstream role (Belcher, 2006; Flowerdew, 2009) with the compilation of small “localised”, “specialised” corpora sometimes compiled by the class tutor or the students (Flowerdew, 2002; Handford, 2010). Unlike mega-corpora, compiled of differing texts, small, specialised corpora help the researcher identify the particular characteristics of texts used in particular discourse communities or environments that distinguish them from texts used in other discourse communities or environments (Flowerdew, 2004; Lee, 2008).

Researchers have widely used small, specialised corpora (Hyland, 2002; Tribble, 2002) since they are effective in raising teachers’ and students’ awareness of the nature of particular genres, a goal consistent with ours. For example, J. Bloch (2010) aims to develop a database of sentences which could be later used for developing teaching materials or could be accessed on line specifically for helping academic writing students use reporting verbs appropriately to their rhetorical purpose. Brian Rutherford (2005) demonstrates the value of a corpus approach to analysing

accounting narratives in corporate annual reports. John Flowerdew and Alina Wan, exploring the genres of tax computation letters (2006) and the company audit report (2010), conclude that the linguistic, corpus-based approach can be effectively complemented by the contextual approach to genre analysis including ethnographic techniques of observation and interview. Michael Handford (2010) shows how small, specialised corpora, providing for the use of a combination of genre and corpus approaches, can answer the main point of criticism levelled at corpus linguistics, that of decontextualisation.

Civic genres: letters to the editor

The important need to understand and practise civic written genres for the health of a democratic society gets regularly reinforced in literature on mass media (Stotsky, 1996; Simmons, 2010; Bean, 2011). Communication scholars, with their interest in journalism, argue that in reality access to newspaper-mediated public debate is limited by the concerns of the editors and publishers and the need for good copy. Nevertheless, letters-to-the-editor are important because they are among the few concrete phenomena that, having the rhetorical purpose to persuade, “give the abstraction ‘the public debate’ whatever reality it has” (Nielsen, 2010, p. 21). Analysing letters-to-the-editor in the Danish newspaper *Politiken*, Nielsen places them into three sub-genres: storytelling, criticism, and appeal. Pounds (2006) employs contrastive analysis to compare Italian and British examples of letters-to-the-editor as forums for public participation. Bean (2011) turns his attention to the need to understand how language is used by members of the discourse communities that the genres belong to: “before writers can revise effectively, they must appreciate what readers expect and need within a given genre” (p. 32).

However, what has emerged from surveying this selection of research literature is the notable absence of examples of corpus-based analyses of civic writing.

The study

This study is based on a larger study that aims to create a corpus-informed syllabus for teaching civic genres of writing. Therefore, the broad research question that guides the wider study is: What language areas should instructional interventions focus on in the teaching of genres of civic writing? The first stage of the project reported in this paper however focuses on the question: What are the distinctive key words characteristic of letters-to-the-editor produced by native English-speaking New Zealand writers, and what are the significant patterns of language use characterising this genre?

Our approach to genre is informed by Swales, Hyland, and the associated English for Specific Purposes school. Our research follows the tenet that “the most useful corpus for learners of English is the one which offers a collection of *expert performances*” (Bazerman, 1994, p.131) in genres which have relevance to the needs and interests of the learners (Tribble, 2002).

Design and participants of the study

To study the features of the genre, we selected 50 letters-to-the-editor (10,675 words) written to the weekly magazine the *New Zealand Listener* in the first half of 2011 and put them onto an electronic database, where they were turned into *plaintext* to enable corpus linguistics software to carry out specific analysis. The letters included were all those published in the electronic issues of the magazine over the named period of time although the electronic version of the magazine often contains fewer letters than the print version.

With a total circulation of 63,238 and an estimated weekly readership of 287,000, the *New Zealand Listener* is the country’s most-read weekly current affairs magazine (New Zealand Audit Bureau of Circulation, 2011). Letters-to-the-editor provide a significant forum for public debate on issues specific to the New Zealand context and the selection of the letters for our analysis presents a cross-section of those issues at the time. The identities of the letter writers are protected and no information is available on their age, gender, education, or background.

Our corpus was further manipulated and searched using corpus software programmes WordSmith Tools 5 (Scott, 2008) and ConcGram 1.0 (Greaves, 2009). WordSmith has three search tools: WordList, KeyWords and Concord. The WordList tool supplies a list of the words used in the corpus in the order of their frequencies. KeyWords provides information about words (key words) which stand out in the corpus under analysis as having an unusually high or low frequency in comparison to a base reference corpus – the Wellington Corpus of Written New Zealand English (WCW) in our case – and may therefore characterise a text or a genre. The first step in generating a keyword list was producing a frequency list from the small corpus (letters-to-the-editor), which then was compared to a larger reference list (WCW) to find the differences in rankings.

The Concord function was employed, following M. Scott’s (2010) recommendation, to derive concordance lines with the discovered frequent words and keywords highlighted as the central words on these lines. The concordance lines allowed us to investigate a wide range of language patterns. Together, the software tools revealed the lexico-grammatical choices made by the letter writers, helped determine reoccurring language patterns and create a list of lexical and grammatical patterns characteristic of the genre.

Findings

Frequencies

Table 1: Word frequencies – Wordlist

1	the	609	5.7983 %	39	its	32	0.3047 %
2	to	338	3.2181 %	40	will	32	0.3047 %
3	and	320	3.0467 %	41	has	30	0.2856 %
4	of	298	2.8373 %	42	if	29	0.2761 %
5	a	231	2.1994 %	43	when	29	0.2761 %
6	in	177	1.6852 %	44	been	28	0.2666 %
7	is	138	1.3139 %	45	people	27	0.2571 %
8	that	110	1.0473 %	46	who	27	0.2571 %
9	for	103	0.9807 %	47	what	26	0.2475 %
10	as	89	0.8474 %	48	can	25	0.2380 %
11	I	84	0.7998 %	49	one	25	0.2380 %
12	not	77	0.7331 %	50	So	25	0.2380 %
13	it	76	0.7236 %	51	should	25	0.2380 %
14	with	74	0.7046 %	52	work	25	0.2380 %
15	are	73	0.6950 %	53	had	24	0.2285 %
16	be	72	0.6855 %	54	up	24	0.2285 %
17	have	68	0.6474 %	55	there	23	0.2190 %
18	on	66	0.6284 %	56	us	22	0.2095 %
19	New	65	0.6189 %	57	years	21	0.1999 %
20	this	63	0.5998 %	58	government	20	0.1904 %
21	we	63	0.5998 %	59	them	20	0.1904 %
22	was	62	0.5903 %	60	any	19	0.1809 %
23	by	58	0.5522 %	61	life	19	0.1809 %
24	our	57	0.5427 %	62	no	19	0.1809 %
25	you	47	0.4475 %	63	such	19	0.1809 %
26	from	46	0.4380 %	64	than	19	0.1809 %
27	Zealand	44	0.4189 %	65	which	18	0.1714 %
28	they	40	0.3808 %	66	your	18	0.1714 %
29	but	39	0.3713 %	67	because	17	0.1619 %
30	more	39	0.3713 %	68	July	17	0.1619 %
31	my	38	0.3618 %	69	out	17	0.1619 %
32	an	37	0.3523 %	70	these	17	0.1619 %
33	their	36	0.3428 %	71	those	17	0.1619 %
34	at	35	0.3332 %	72	would	17	0.1619 %
35	or	35	0.3332 %	73	his	16	0.1523 %
36	about	33	0.3142 %	74	into	16	0.1523 %
37	all	33	0.3142 %	75	only	16	0.1523 %
38	were	33	0.3142 %				

Note: modal verbs are in **bold**, and pronouns and *it* and *that* are in **bold italics**.

The frequency wordlist obtained from *ConcGram WordList* search tool picks up areas for investigation out of the 10675 words contained in the 50 letters- to-the-editor. The majority of the first 75 words in the Table 1 are grammatical words that are commonly most frequent in most written texts (Kennedy 1998; O’Keefe, McCarthy & Carter 2007) and the words *New Zealand*, *government*, *July*, *years*, *people* occur frequently for obvious reasons in a New Zealand periodical. Except for prepositions, articles, conjunctions and conjunctive adverbs, the words in the list fall into three groups: personal and possessive pronouns in the nominative or the objective case, modal verbs and the grammatical words *it* and *that*.

Keywords

The significance of the three named word groups in the genre was confirmed by the data obtained from the Keyword tool. Out of those words, the pronouns *our* and *we* stand out particularly, showing high keyness (80.67 and 40.09) and occupying positions 3 and 14 on Table 2 respectively.

Table 2: Keywords

KeyWords									
File Edit View Compute Settings Window Help									
N	Key word	Freq.	%	. Freq.	RC. %	eyness	P	mmas	Set
1	S	78	0.73	578	0.05	254.92	000000		
2	ACC	17	0.16	5		133.81	000000		
3	LONG-TERM	13	0.12	0		120.28	000000		
4	OUR	57	0.53	1,292	0.12	80.67	000000		
5	JULY	17	0.16	73		71.50	000000		
6	ASYLUM	11	0.10	16		65.59	000000		
7	CLAIMANTS	7	0.07	0		64.76	000000		
8	SEEKERS	7	0.07	2		55.27	000000		
9	T	17	0.16	161	0.01	48.29	000000		
10	JOCKEY	6	0.06	2		46.55	000000		
11	REBSTOCK	5	0.05	0		46.26	000000		
12	DOESN	5	0.05	0		46.26	000000		
13	REFUGEES	6	0.06	4		42.13	000000		
14	ACTORS	7	0.07	11		40.92	000000		
15	PIKE	5	0.05	1		40.87	000000		
16	WE	67	0.62	2,773	0.26	40.09	000000		
17	UK	7	0.07	12		39.99	000000		
18	TOUR	14	0.13	136	0.01	39.15	000000		
19	PARENTING	5	0.05	2		37.92	000000		
20	MINE	12	0.11	98		37.14	000000		
21	EUTHANASIA	4	0.04	0		37.01	000000		
22	ISN	4	0.04	0		37.01	000000		
23	MAPS	7	0.07	16		36.81	000000		
24	ACHIEVEMENT	8	0.07	32		34.61	000011		
25	ZEALAND	48	0.45	1,805	0.17	34.21	000020		
26	SHEDS	5	0.05	5		32.49	000090		
27	EARTHQUAKE	8	0.07	38		32.25	000106		
28	CANCER	7	0.07	29		29.87	000434		

Other key words revealed by the Keyword tool are those that depict the themes of public discussions in the country at the time of writing: *ACC*, *long-term*, *insurance dispute*; *asylum*, *seekers*, *refugees*, *granting refugee status*; *Pike*, *mine*, *mining disaster*; *parenting*, *achievement*; *euthanasia*, *pro and con arguments*, *debate*; *earthquake*, *Christchurch disaster*; *cancer*, *topical health issue*; *workplace*, *bullying*, *office conflicts*. Although these language items appear to be relevant for discussing the social issues of the day only, they often reveal socio-cultural beliefs of New Zealanders and give the language learner the opportunity to acquire a voice in authentic social matters.

Thus both the grammatical and the lexical groups interest us as to how they behave in a civic text, namely, what lexical and grammatical patterns they enter.

Lexical patterns

The Concord function casts light onto the lexical opportunities of the noun *asylum*, which appears to enter only a limited number of collocations: with the verb *to seek* preceding it, with a variation of this pattern including the adjective *safe*, or collocations with the noun *seeker(s)* following it, thus placing the noun *asylum* into an adjectival position towards *seeker(s)* (see concordance lines below).

is clear all people have a right to seek safe asylum and receive a fair hearing. Some 15 years ago, six as “queue jumpers” suggested those who seek asylum by boat act illegally. Although smuggling people Although smuggling people is illegal, seeking asylum is not. The suggestion there is a queue to jump sh protect its future? I welcome your editorial on asylum seekers and refugees but wish to correct the misst is somehow discretionary, his reference to asylum seekers as “queue jumpers” suggested those who see norance of the horrific reality that refugees and asylum seekers face on a daily basis. When faced with the

A point of interest presents itself in the fourth line, where the intuitively expected *refugees and asylum seekers* changes the order of its components thus turning into the collocation *asylum seekers and refugees*.

The following concordance lines demonstrate the semantic prosody of the adjective *long-term*, the use of which in *long-term claimant(s)*; *long-term disability*; *long-term benefit dependency*; *long-term sickness*; *long-term unemployment (rate)*, ACC’s *long-term clients* is connected with a negative result or a problem as in *long-term benefit(s)*.

adict the working group’s claim of high levels of long-term benefit dependency. In international terms the character of people who tended to stay on [long-term benefits] and targeted early intervention with Any medical insurance scheme has long-term claimants. If you suffer a serious disability, you justified, will solve nothing. As one of ACC’s long-term clients, I take issue with some of the things Paul have a character disorder rather than a genuine long-term disability. If this were so, ACC’s desire to get reality is he is likely to go off ACC and onto a long-term sickness benefit. He will then not be entitled to lowest unemployment rate and the 5th lowest long-term unemployment rate in the OECD And although unemployment, and especially long-term unemployment, is corrosive to families and

In the debate on the roles of family and the school in the upbringing and academic success of New Zealand children, both the noun and the adjective *parenting* take a keyword role: *parenting style*; *parenting practices*; *parenting views*; “*the wedge approach*” *to parenting*; *aspect of parenting*:

There’s much research available on this aspect of parenting. Above all, nurture your intensely. This is called the “wedge approach” to parenting.

Chua openly admits her parenting practices are focused on describing “her fierce, achievement-oriented parenting style”.

Perhaps we can learn from a variety of parenting views and here in New

as well as the noun *achievement*: *academic achievement*; *in terms of achievement*; *achievement-oriented*.

whatever scale is used in assessing academic **achievement** (“Achieving child, controlling happy child was the ultimate goal in terms of **achievement** because “there’s more to admits her parenting practices are focused on **achievement**, but does this make them Amy Chua’s book, describing “her fierce, **achievement**-oriented parenting style”

The Pike River mine tragedy in the South Island of New Zealand sparked a serious discussion of mine safety responsibilities and legislation employing the word combinations: *run a mine; inspect the mine; coal mine; acoustic mine; a Chilean mine miracle; mine manager; mine safety*. In an attempt to convince the public of the value of their opinion, the writers often become emotional, a state that comes through in their use of extreme language such as *mine disasters*, and metaphoric language such as *mine-level decision making* and *a Chilean mine miracle*. In the final collocation, we observe a case of semantic change as Chilean stops denoting the geographical location of the mine and acquires the meaning of a happy end in a dramatic situation because of the well known positive outcome of what had been expected to fetch tragedy in Chile.

three-legged stool, developed after 150 years of **mine disasters** in the UK – where more than 100,000 mine MV Derrycunihy, broke away and sank. An acoustic **mine**, dropped by the Luftwaffe, blew up as they restart with the training and experience to guide the **mine-level** decision-making. This is where the inquiry’s professional Mines Inspectorate and also the **mine-level** worker-safety inspector, known as the check Pike River stool had only one leg. One or two **mine managers** cannot run a modern coal **mine** by River tragedy was never going to be a Chilean **mine miracle**. Those of us familiar with the coal level in the European Union and Australia. Our **mine safety** legislation and approach came from Britain, that gives them a right to speak out, inspect the **mine themselves** through their own trained and

Clearly the topical issues of the day are evaluated through idioms and phrasal verbs that impart the emotive and moral concerns of the writers. It is, however, the economic uncertainties that unleash the greatest range of idioms: *tighten our belts, passing the buck, paying lip service, living beyond our means, face the real costs, get off the couch, at the heart of, be up to the job, cold comfort, keep up with, catch up with, propping it up, rap over the knuckles* and *ring alarm bells*.

To live beyond our means, we are simply **passing the buck** to the next generation.
Animal cruelty should be **at the heart of** the 1080 debate

Reporting verbs

As writers acknowledge the topical articles or editorials printed in the *Listener*, they often draw upon past personal experience and employ a range of reporting verbs so that they place their opinions and personal experiences in the context of the ongoing debate. The credibility of the letter writer with their claims, observations and demands is established via the choice of reporting verbs. As the choice of reporting verbs shows, this is one of a number of lexico-grammatical devices in the writers’ toolbox to express a stance on a topical issue and to connect or align themselves with

the readership. Hyland (2008) states that the choice of reporting verb is important in academic writing; we observe that it is also clearly important in this genre of letters to the editor as the writers need to employ, with great economy, a variety of rhetorical devices to show logical clarity and persuasive opinion.

Thus the list of reporting verbs below shows how writers report and comment on the issues of the day as well as challenge and question claims made in the magazine:

Laugesen's article ("Cold comfort", October 1) **asks** "Will household electricity prices keep rising at which Wells **asked** a harpist whether she had been **asked** to play the harp nude, and a doctor about testis morning so he could distribute the new version. I **asked** what the difference was, and was invited to comp

that they wanted to come here because they **believed** New Zealand had an independent approach to human what it is that you would wish you readers to believe. You **propose**, it would seem, that marginal increases

treatment for it, and two have died from it. I **conclude** we know quite a lot about how to treat cancer, and

(Wine, July 9)? As a permanent resident, I also **find** this exclusion exists in the area of New Zealand I

Not only did the Prime Minister's comments **imply** protection of refugees is somehow discretionary, insurance premiums' undoubted escalation doesn't **mention** is that New Zealanders blindly voted for politician

her case against ACC at review recently, it was **reported** ACC refused to reinstate care. Any medical

entrenched opinion, as Professor Barry Gustafson **revealed** in his Muldoon biography, Muldoon held the view

Corrections Minister Judith Collins **says**, "Drug and alcohol units are responsible for the British Geological Survey in Edinburgh as **saying**: "Christchurch has never been identified as a and natural decline of very old forests, I can **say** there is no doubt possums are the major cause of As one parent commented: "What I have always **said** ... is if at the end of the day you can say to yours were safer than others. I was very impressed and **said** so. Then he told me that unfortunately these maps "Good artists copy, great artists steal." So **said** The existing "intellectual property rights"

the light of this information. Recent figures **show** our economy making a fragile recovery. However, work environment must be addressed. Reports **suggest** that workplace bullying is common and seriously

to unite in improving their lot. If producers **think** dividing the creative community will help them economists and credit-rating agencies seem to **think** is so important when considering a nation's solven a self-indulged interviewer to be part of it? I **thought** New Zealand television had scraped well through the northern half of the North Island, initially **thought** to be insect-related. Apart from humans and their

ion with them." ACC is less than subtly trying to **tell** the public that long-term claimants have a character that for the sake of convenience) can't actually **tell** you whether the forcing resulting from atmospheric people they should be able to work is like **telling** paraplegics they should be able to run. If you can of being identified as "pushy", yet they are also **told** to support and encourage their children and to others. I was very impressed and said so. Then he **told** me that unfortunately these maps had been recalled

As well as their derivatives, reporting verbs often occur outside patterns of reported speech, further underlining the stance of the writer on a particular issue.

some parents of talented children **think** about achievement and as such is culturally open debate as a result. My critical **thinking** skills and the need to understand all July 9). Contrary to received **thinking**, the Government strenuously opposed the virtuous, popular uprising is shallow **thinking**. USING 1080 Having spent 40 years to late August was \$67.15 – which I **thought** excessive for a person living alone in a small

directly contradict the working group's **claim** of high levels of long-term benefit dependency

“Fatal failure” (March 5) with interest. No **mention** was made of the energy absorbing

insects or carcasses. New studies **reveal** the inadequate data and bad STRESS LESS Thank you for the **revealing** and insightful article on stress

which only recognise inventions **considered** “novel”, “non-obvious” and “useful” (the the inquiry should begin, before even **considering** the proximate causes of the gas –

Grammatical patterns and their functions

Pronouns

The most noticeable feature of the frequency word list appears to be the predominance of personal and possessive pronouns, particularly of the first and second person. In the word list, *I* (used 84 times), *we* (63), *our* (57), *you* (47), *they* (40), *my* (38), *their* (36) and *us* (22) are in the top 56 most frequent words. This predominance of pronouns is also reflected in the Table 2: Keywords, where *our* and *we* occupy positions 3 and 14 respectively. It can be argued that these pronouns mark interpersonal interaction and personal involvement, and are used by the writers as a rhetorical device to express personality and subjectivity. At the same time, these pronouns serve as devices that establish and confer rapport and solidarity with the readers and seem to show that the writers are representing their communities. For example, the concordance lines below show that *we* helps the writers to connect with the readership, to involve them in the writers' arguments, thus providing the audience with a sense of inclusiveness, unitedness and involvement with the topical issues.

of a life than a benefit ever did. When **we all** get together now as adults

This disaster is one **we all** should contribute to.

If **we** continue to live beyond our means, **we** are simply passing the buck

to families and communities, and **we as** a nation should always be doing more

the de facto recession **we** are experiencing is that the private housing

This figure will show **we** are living beyond our means,

It is interesting to note that *we* is sometimes followed by *as a nation* and often by *all*, which reinforces the sense of unity of and with the community as far as the argument goes. At the same time, this pronoun participates in assuming a tentative tone and in

hedging the writers' claims when followed by the modal verb *can* and is often preceded by *perhaps*.

is open for discussion. Perhaps **we can** learn from a variety of parenting

We can also explicate the writers' logic or method regarding their arguments or procedures.

as **we** can manage. And once rebuilding commences, **we can** expect the Christchurch economy to recover and two have died from it. I conclude **we know** quite a lot about how to treat cancer,

The first person *our* is widely used in the letters to convey a sense of national identity and bond between author and reader: *our beaches, our borders, our community, our country, our leading economists, our native birds, our own public money, our welfare system, our adversarial system, we keep shipping our coal to China, our country, our diplomacy, our economic future, our future, our history, our health, our (main) legacy, our life, our means, our fellow humans, our labour and skills, our policy, our national and personal well-being, our insurance companies, our "clean, green" image, our mine safety legislation, our growing Asian population.*

The pronoun 'I' allows the writer to inject a personal tone into the text.

Australians or New Zealanders. Nor, as far as **I am aware**, did any of my five
The smoker in the family does not have cancer. As **I am keen** to live, I eat my broccoli and

Alternatively, it gets involved in expressing feelings.

I achieved to the best of my ability', then **I am happy**. I don't need him to be getting 100
and even as a 15-year old **I was impressed** by the strong intellectual and
if this is possible. Earlier this year **I was shocked** and horrified to watch a 3 News item

As illustrated below, *my* is employed extensively to set the scene to personal anecdotes.

personally work for or earn. I inherited only **my attitudes** to the three "E"s: education, ethics,
NZ Super we receive, and enjoy each day. In **my student days** (long ago) during a

A particularly strong pattern is referring to family members: *siblings, children* and especially *mothers* and *fathers*.

although I didn't know it at the time. Men like **my father** kept workers in the higher-risk industries
As far as sun exposure and cancer, **my father** was a nudist and by rights should have got
this inquiry should start, I want to talk about **my father**. A ship's engineer, he came back
the six children she took with her when she left **my father**. The benefit fed her addiction
My point is that because of the regular handout **my mother** gathered fortnightly from the Government,
myself as a product of the welfare state. **My mother** separated from **my** father not long after the
huge impact on **my** life and those of **my** siblings. **My mother** wasn't a particularly good mother

Modal verbs and their functions

The writers' purpose to state their opinions and positions on topical issues clearly and loudly is a purpose often served by *must*, *should*, *will* and *can*.

management to develop a happy work environment **must** be addressed. Reports suggest that workplace bullying is a major problem in 24 of maintaining tools and buying milk and tea. We **will** never have enough money to buy a "shed", and

Society **should** be putting a lot more effort into trying to improve the functioning of staff. Bullying **should** become a dismissible offence.

This disaster is one we all **should** contribute to. We **should** face the real costs of such actions enough to kill 20 million people. We **should** face the real costs of such actions. Any suggestion that all "white" people **should** feel guilt because of historic sins

There is a strong semantic prosody in the way *should* is often connected with *we*, *all*, *we all*, and abstract subjects such as *society*, *humanity*, *inquiry* and *bullying*. There is an overriding inclusiveness and a sense of rallying the readership in the use of *we can...* and the rhetorical questions starting with *How can we...?* as in the example: *How can we ensure Men's sheds have a shed...*

While the above modals convey the writers' strong stance and confidence, caution and evaluation of the views of others are introduced through the use of hedges such as *could* and *might*.

and possibly of other staff. This **could** be a starting point for improved productivity. A supportive workplace is one action that **might** be taken. Also, short courses could be arranged

The modal meaning of the adverb *perhaps* brings it into the same category of hedges.

considering the proximate causes of the gas – and **perhaps** coal-dust – explosion. Before Polynesians ventured into the Pacific. **Perhaps** Maori discovered its medicinal properties through

Structures with link-verbs

Verbs of reduced lexical meaning, *seem*, *appear*, *look*, often serve the purpose of making a general claim coming from specific examples. As hedging devices, they help present an opinion in an objective way.

ures similar to those used in the case of tobacco **seems** likely to have a much better chance of success without becoming embroiled in the vitriol that **seems** to exist in the US in response to Chua's book. The article also quoted him as saying that "it now **appears** likely that the Christchurch quake resulted from

Discourse markers

(so allegedly bringing the opposite). Clouds, **for example**, have a cooling effect. Have these 'climate scientists' especially when there are children. **As an example**, consider a property ladder with 1000 homes built to the parliamentary complex, **an incredible example** of innovative, skillful and expensive engineering

National's plans to sell New Zealand assets **such as** the power company SOEs, traumatised people they should be able to work **is like** telling paraplegics they should be able to run.

The next homeowner also borrows and does **the same** thing. This continues until a homeowner near the t
Men like him in the Mines Inspectorate did **the same** in the nation's mines.

fit margin. The New Zealand electricity system is **similar** because it is dominated by hydro power. The water
duced the legal limit further. Employing measures **similar** to those used in the case of tobacco seems likely

The above concordance lines indicate that unlike the range of discourse markers used in an academic argument, the discourse markers appearing in the letters-to-the-editor could be grouped into two categories: those serving to support an argument with examples – a clear indication of the persuasive nature of the genre, and discourse markers of similarity, rather than contrast, which help to tell a story and to convince.

It-clauses

It-clauses are employed by writers to persuade readers of the validity of the position they have taken. *It* can create the impression that the information being presented is objective and impersonal. This is termed the *anticipatory/dummy it*, with the *extraposed subject* shifted to the end of the sentence, usually in the form of a clause or a non-finite phrase. The key information, or the rheme, is loaded to the end of the sentence.

The article also quoted him as saying that “**it** now appears likely that the Christchurch comment that “contracts were offered and **it's** absolutely the choice of the individual to creative interaction and teamwork at its core. **It's** misleading to say actors are “the best- builds toward its final recommendations, **it's** worth noting that an independent her case against ACC at review recently, **it** was reported ACC refused to reinstate

Similarly to the anticipatory *it*, the emphatic *it* also functions as the sentence subject and serves to show the writer's evaluation of the topic under discussion, but puts semantic and logical emphasis on the word/phrase that immediately follows the verb.

if I can encapsulate in a few lines what **it** is that you would wish you readers to believe.
the perpetual nature of the housing market, but **it** is the relative nature of property that
seen in chewing of the foliage, the study showed **it** was the harvesting and damage of new

That and that-clauses

In dealing with social issues, the writers extensively use *that* and *that*-clauses, which we categorise according to their function.

a) The Referential *that*:

ngs for centuries, of course, nothing novel about **that**. Australian aborigines used manuka medicinally for

societies like Japan, Norway, Finland and Sweden. **That** gap matters because the evidence shows that with world while sipping tea and eating stale biscuits. **That** helps get rid of some of the frustration, but next

b) Object *that*-clauses in reporting:

the heat of the day. But I am yet to be convinced **that** all the millions spent on cancer research have don't work environment must be addressed. Reports suggest **that** workplace bullying is common and seriously impairs

c) Relative defining *that*-clauses (*the*+noun+*that*+clause):

about's figures do not account for the \$7 billion **that** would be forgone by stopping National's plans to release that specifically included the advertising **that** shows "Dan Carter and Ngahua Williams, on super-s

d) Relative disclosing *that*-clauses (*the*+abstract noun+*that*+clause):

ethics, and effort – nothing more. Any suggestion **that** all "white" people should feel guilt because of hi professionals has waned. Robin Scholes's comment **that** "contracts were offered and it's absolutely the ch w of "locking them up" retains traction. The fact **that** alternative methods of treatment – before reaching ore robust future unfortunately lie with the hope **that** a government can be formed **that** has members ve in. No one chooses to be traumatised. The idea **that** you just get over it would be all very well if it

e) The Substitutional *that*:

he very scientists (well, anyway, let's call them **that** for the sake of convenience) can't actually tell y r domestic stock, the only significant impact was **that** of possums, which could defoliate and kill a matur nts' parents. A primary focus for discussion was **that** of the parents' understanding of what the phenome

g) Complementary *that*-clauses (*be/seem/appear*+*that*+clause):

ered to check where the benefit went. My point is **that** because of the regular handout my mother gathered of the de facto recession we are experiencing is **that** the private housing market has "propped itself up

Discussion and conclusion

In answer to the research questions of this study, the analysis of the corpus of 50 letters to the editor of the *New Zealand Listener* demonstrates how the lexical and grammatical features characteristic of the genre are employed to satisfy the demands of the writers' persuasive goals in combination with expressing their personal feelings about important topics of the day. These two major applications of a number of language items make up the essence of the genre.

The use of this small corpus has allowed us to examine a considerable amount of text (10,675 words) to identify the frequency of words and grammatical patterns, to reveal key language items in the genre, and to study and describe the features of the genre. This should enable teachers to target key items in class and students to learn to write them more effectively. The lexico-grammatical features characterising the genre

include: personal and possessive pronouns, modals, vocabulary used in public discussions at the time the letters were published, idioms, reporting verbs, hedging devices, exemplifying and comparative discourse markers, certain types of *it*- and *that*-clauses. The co-occurrence of several features beside each other in a sentence fulfils the function of presenting densely packed information.

The concordance lines have given us “instances of language use when read horizontally and evidence of system when read vertically” (Hyland, K. 2004, p. 216). The following are examples of uncovered information about both use and system:

- the preferred patterns of the use of personal and possessive pronouns are associated with writer stance, reader involvement, claims, evaluations and criticisms;
- the semantic prosody, or the connotative meaning, of the adjective *long-term* is that of unfavourable implications because of its association with nouns indicating problems;
- the expression *Chilean mine* has undergone the process of semantic change because of the context of its recent use;
- expressions of certainty are frequent, but they are often hedged for the purposes of presenting an objective position, description or evaluation;
- *It* followed by *that* in the near vicinity is used frequently for emphasis, referencing or substitution purposes, or to express an evaluation of whether the following statement is likely to be true or not.

Once again, armed with this kind of information about their target genre, EAL students are able to make choices that are better informed, guided by expert practice and expectations of the discourse community that uses the genre: the readership of a magazine. The high productivity of the items above justifies the inclusion of them in courses aimed at teaching civic writing.

In this light, there is clearly a need for more descriptions of the genre to enable L2 writers to control their texts. This study is a broad look at the linguistic features of letters to the editor, and specific studies on the details of the use of specific features are to follow. We also need a greater understanding of the relationship between civic genres, and between civic and other persuasive genres, the academic genre in particular. This need is justified by the fact that many of the language features derived from this study of letters to the editor may be characteristic of other persuasive genres too, such as argumentative essays, where similar functions occur.

It is always important to contextualise genres in the classroom by discussing their purpose, audience, and underlying beliefs and values before discussing their language features. Since the relationship between civic genres and ideology is strong, the study of text features of letters to the editor particularly needs to be combined with the study of social and cultural practices surrounding these texts. Students need to

understand how the civic genre is not just about forms, but part of political and cultural life.

Interestingly, our small corpus of 50 letters to the editor has offered sufficient information to allow not only a description but also an interpretation and explanation of the items in question. Being also the compilers of the corpus, we were familiar both with the whole texts that went into the corpus and with the socio-cultural circumstances depicted in them. We can therefore state that the role of a small corpus lies in its ability to uncover how participants perform and how their goals and practices are evidenced in the data, thus answering Bhatia's (2004) call for movement from textualisation to contextualisation to social spaces. In summary, this study can be regarded as an addition to the literature claiming that specialised corpora are "contextually driven" (Handford, 2010, p. 262) and present a base for combining genre and corpus approaches.

Consideration should be given to the fact that the study has resulted in a significant amount of information, which may have to do with the discourse requirement of the genre (brevity), and a question arises whether and how so much linguistic information can be handled in the classroom. One suggestion here could be that the type of data to prioritise for teaching is probably the one that is relevant at all times rather than the vocabulary related to discussions of the day only. Perhaps the comparison with the findings on the learner corpus of letters to the editor, which are to be made in the next stage of the project, will help teachers decide which of the features should take priority places in the civic writing syllabus.

References

- Bazerman, C. (1994). Systems of genres and the enactment of social intentions: Rethinking genre. In A. Freedman & P. Medway (Eds.), *Genre and new rhetoric* (pp. 79-88). London: Taylor & Francis.
- Bean, J. C. (2011). *Engaging ideas: The professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Belcher, D. (2006). English for specific purposes: Teaching to perceived needs and imagined futures in worlds of work, study, and everyday life. *TESOL Quarterly*, 40, 133-156.
- Bhatia, V. (2004). *Words of written discourse: A genre-based view*. London: Continuum.
- Biber, D. (1988). *Variation across speech and writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Biber, D. (2006). *University language: A corpus-based study of spoken and written registers*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Biber, D. (2010). What can corpus tell us about registers and genres? In A. O'Keeffe, & M. McCarthy (Eds.). *The Routledge handbook of corpus linguistics*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Bloch, J. (2009). The design of an online concordancing programme for teaching about reporting verbs. *Language, Learning and Technology*, 13, 59-78.
- Bloch, J. (2010). A concordance-based study of the use of reporting verbs as rhetorical devices in academic papers. *Journal of Writing Research*, 2 (2), 219-244.
- Bloor, M. & Bloor, T. (1993). How economists modify propositions. In W. Henderson, A. Dudley-Evans & R. Backhouse (Eds.), *Economics and language* (pp.153-169). London: Routledge.

- Connor, U. & Upton, T. (Eds.) (2004). *Discourse in the professions: Perspectives from corpus linguistics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Conrad, S. (1996). Investigating academic texts with corpus-based techniques: An example from biology. *Linguistics and Education*, 8, 299-326.
- Cortes, V. (2004). Lexical bundles in published and student disciplinary writing: Examples from history and biology. *English for Specific Purposes*, 23, 397-423.
- Dos Santos, V. B. M. P. (2002). Genre analysis of business letters of negotiation. *English for Specific Purposes*, 21, 167-199.
- Dudley-Evans, T. (2000). Genre analysis: A key to a theory of ESP? *Uberica: Revista de la Asociacion Europea de Lenguas para Fines Especificos (AELFE)*, 2, 3-11.
- Flowerdew, J. (2004). The argument for using English specialised corpora to understand academic and professional settings. In U. Connor & T. Upton (Eds.), *Discourse in the professions: Perspectives from Corpus Linguistics* (pp. 11-36). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Flowerdew, J., & Wan, A. (2006). Genre analysis of tax computation letters: How and why tax accountants write the way they do. *English for Specific Purposes*, 25, 133-153.
- Flowerdew, J., & Wan, A. (2010). The linguistic and the contextual in applied genre analysis: The case of the company audit report. *English for Specific Purposes*, 29, 78-93.
- Fries, C. (1940). *English word lists: A study of their adaptability for instruction*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.
- Ghadessy, M., Henry, A., & Roseberry, R. (Eds.) (2001). *Small corpus studies and ELT: Theory and practice*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Greaves, C. (2009). ConcGram 1.0. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Handford, M. (2010). What can a corpus tell us about specialist genres? In: A. O’Keeffe & M. McCarthy (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of corpus linguistics* (pp. 255-269). London: Routledge.
- Hunston, S. (2000). Evaluation and the planes of discourse: Status and value in persuasive texts. In S. Hunston & G. Thompson (Eds.), *Evaluation in text: Authorial stance and the construction of discourse* (pp. 176-207). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hyland, K. (1999). Exploring corporate rhetoric: Metadiscourse in the CEO’s letter. *Journal of Business Communication*, 35(2), 224-45.
- Hyland, K. (2000). *Disciplinary discourses: Social interactions in academic writing*. New York: Longman.
- Hyland, K. (2002). Activity and evaluation: Reporting practices in academic writing. In J. Flowerdew (Ed.), *Academic discourse* (pp.115-130). Harlow, England: Longman.
- Hyland, K. (2004). *Genre and second language writing*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Hyland, K. (2005). Stance and engagement: A model of interaction in academic discourse. *Discourse Studies*, 7, 173-292.
- Hyland, K. (2008). Make your academic writing assertive and certain. In J. Reid (Ed.), *Writing myths: Applying second language research to classroom writing* (pp. 70-89). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Kennedy, G. (1998). *An introduction to corpus linguistics*. London. New York: Longman.
- Koester, A. (2006). *Investigating workplace discourse*. London: Routledge.
- Lee, D. (2008). Corpora and discourse analysis: New ways of doing old things. In: V. Bhatia, J. Flowerdew & H. Jones (Eds.), *Advances in discourse studies* (pp. 84-109). London: Routledge.
- McCarthy, M. & Handford, M. (2004). Invisible to us: A preliminary corpus-based study of spoken business English. In U. Connor & T. Upton (Eds.), *Discourse in the professions: Perspectives from Corpus Linguistics* (pp. 167-201). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Miller, C. R. (1994). Rhetorical community: The cultural basis of genre. In A. Freedman & P. Medway (Eds.), *Genre and the New Rhetoric* (pp. 67-78). London: Taylor & Francis.

- Myers, G. (1992). Textbooks and the sociology of scientific knowledge. *English for Specific Purposes*, 11, 3-18.
- Nielson, R. (2010). Participation through letters to the editor: Circulation, consideration, and genres in the letters institution. *Journalism* 2010, 11-21.
- New Zealand Audit Circulation, 2011. Retrieved from <http://magazine.abc.org.nz/audit.html?&type=2&titleid=384&publisher=223&frequency=5&sort=t.name&display=history>
- O’Keeffe, A. (2006). Investigating media discourse. London: Routledge.
- O’Keeffe, A., McCarthy, M. & Carter, R. (2007). *From corpus to classroom: Language use and language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Paltridge, B. (2001). *Genre and the language learning classroom*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.
- Pounds, G. (2006). Democratic participation and letters to the editor in Britain and Italy. *Discourse and Society*, 17(1), 29-63.
- Rizomilioti, V. (2006). Exploring epistemic modality in academic writing using corpora. In E. Macia, A. Cervera, & C. Ramos (Eds.), *Information Technology in languages for specific purposes: Issues and prospects* (pp. 53-71). Springer. DOI: 10.1007/978-0-387-28624-2_4.
- Rutherford, B. (2005). Genre analysis of corporate annual report narratives: A corpus-based approach. *Journal of Business Communication*, 42(4), 349-378. DOI: 10.1177/0021943605279244.
- Scott, M. (2008). WordSmith Tools version 5. Liverpool: Lexical Analysis Software.
- Scott, M. 2010. What can corpus software do? In A. O’Keeffe & M. McCarthy (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Corpus Linguistics* (pp. 136-151). London: Routledge.
- Simmons, M. (2010). Encouraging civic engagement through extended community writing projects: Re-writing the curriculum. *The Writing Instructor*. Retrieved from <http://www.writinginstructor.com/simmons>
- Stotsky, S. (1996). Participatory writing: Literacy for civic purposes. In A. H. Dunn & C. J. Hansen (Eds.), *Nonacademic writing: Social theory and technology* (pp. 227-256). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Swales, J. (1998). *Other floors, other voices: A textography of a small university building*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Swales, J. (2004). *Research genres: Explorations and applications*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Swales, J. & Feak, C. (2000). *English in today’s research world: A writing guide*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Swales, J. & Feak, C. (2004). *Academic writing for graduate students*. Ann Arbor, NJ: The University of Michigan Press.
- Swales, J. & Lee, D. (2006). A corpus-based EAP course for NNS doctoral students: Moving from available specialised corpora to self-compiled corpora. *English for Specific Purposes* 25, 56-75.
- Tribble, C. (2002). Corpora and corpus analysis: New windows on academic writing. In J. Flowerdew (Ed.), *Academic discourse* (pp. 131-149). Harlow, England: Longman.