
The Discourse Of Argumentation In The Malaysian Commercial Work Context

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Introduction

This paper seeks to impart observations on how personnel at the Malaysian workplace utilised discourse strategies and gave opinions, agreed, disagreed, proposed, reached outcomes and performed other speech functions associated with argumentation and negotiation.¹ The study draws on explicit knowledge of how people use discourse strategies for argumentation and negotiation in that domain so that we can bring this knowledge back to the classroom to help prepare tertiary students. This is to help empower students in order that they can participate effectively in work exchanges on entering the workforce.

1 This paper is extracted from a study within a main doctoral study on discourse strategies of Malay and Australian business/economics students.

The question of what occurs in authentic spoken discourse in the domain of work is hence of interest. For this purpose four meetings/discussions were observed at various organisations in Kuala Lumpur/ Petaling Jaya, the hub of urban Malaysia.

This study adopts Liddicoat's (1995) definition of an argument: "*Argument is an interactive process in which two, or possibly more, participants seek to express their orientation to a particular point of view and at the same time persuade their co-participants of the validity of their opinion.*" Negotiation involves the application of logic and rational argument to induce the other party to work towards an agreement (Holmes and Glaser 1991). At its core, negotiation implies conflict, co-operation and talk (Bell 1995). In this study, negotiation is subsumed under the speech event of argumentation as negotiating forms part of the activity rather than the whole activity

The next section reviews some background information on the meetings in order that a context can be set up for this study.

Background To The Workplace Meetings

The meetings that were selected for the study were meetings in commercial organisations, three of which were multinational corporations. These organisations were situated in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia, and an adjoining town, commonly associated as its satellite, Petaling Jaya in the state of Selangor. The organisations and its meetings/discussions have been arbitrarily named A, B, C, and D. The interactants at the meetings were Malaysians from the three main ethnic groups, Malays, Chinese and Indians.

In organisation A, a newspaper organisation with the largest English daily (in terms of circulation) in the country, a regular meeting between management and production staff was observed. The meeting, attended by 13 personnel, was chaired by the Senior Human Resources Manager. There were four other managers, six production staff members and two administrative/human resource staff members.

An inter-department meeting was observed at Organisation B, a multinational corporation dealing with insurance. Chaired by the Assistant General Manager of the Life Administration Division, the meeting comprised six members including two managers and two assistant managers of different departments.

The meeting/discussion in Organisation C, a multinational oil corporation, was between three senior trainers. This meeting was held to discuss a training programme one of the trainers had to introduce and coordinate for technicians at a refinery process plant.

The final meeting observed was between the general manager of a large insurance broker company (Organisation D) and the head of the international section of a large bank in Malaysia. The general manager's purpose was to interest the bank in buying a series of insurance products. The meeting was also attended by the Accounts Manager of the insurance broker company and another officer of the bank. This meeting is labelled D

Meetings A and B were regular meetings in their respective organisations and hence were typical in nature; meeting C was a discussion also typical of work in training management and in fact typical of other discussions involving management programmes; meeting D was representative of meetings personnel in the service industry such as sales and promotions have to undertake on the one hand, and potential customers on the other, have to attend. Further, in these meetings, interactants presented views and outcomes were negotiated. The last two meetings also indicate other specific contexts for discussions that may aid in widening the understanding that ESL students should develop about discourse processes.

The next section discusses the procedures for the observation and analysis of the meetings.

Procedures For Observation And Data Analysis

The procedures to observe the meetings were straightforward. I sat as unobtrusively as possible in the meetings and followed the discussions at hand. The first three meetings were audio-recorded. Permission to record the last meeting was not granted in adherence to banking laws. Field notes were also taken and the analysis was based on the tapes and notes; for meeting D, the analysis was based solely on the notes. Names of all personnel referred to have been changed to protect their identities.

The data was analysed according to the overall framework devised to analyse the student interactions in my main study in order that the same parameters could be observed. Hence, the meetings were observed in terms of their overall structure and the structure provides the framing for the examination. The speech functions related to argumentation and negotiation

were examined in the context of the framing stages. Other discourse strategies and features of discourse present in the data were also investigated in that context.

The next section reviews briefly the stages observed for the meetings/discussions in the study

Framing Stages of Meetings

The term "framing stage" in this study refers to a loosely structured step in the development of a discussion and hence encapsulates the dynamic nature of sequences in a meeting or discussion.²

The task at hand determined the structure of the meetings/discussion in this study. As the meetings in organisations A and B were regular organisational or department meetings, there were minutes of the previous meeting and an agenda. The items on the agenda formed the basis of the discussion. Thus, meetings A and B had similar framing stages. Attention in Meetings C and D was each focused around one issue, and the structure reflected this focus. Although the basic framing stages for meetings C and D were similar to A and B, the meetings in C and D shared a common factor, in that the meeting was ordered around one issue. The structure of the discussion at Organisation C was organised around a proposed training programme for technicians at a refinery. The meeting organised by Organisation D was set up to promote an insurance package to the bank for an overseas branch. The entire meeting, held on the bank's premises, was therefore focused on selling this series of insurance products to the bank.

Basically, the meetings at the Malaysian workplaces had the following framing stages with sub-frames for argumentation:

2 A more complete definition and justification for labelling a framing stage thus is discussed in Kaur 1997:144. Further, the discussion on framing stages of workplace meetings can be found in Kaur 1997:327-339

1.	STARTING
2.	PRESENTING ITEMS/ PROPOSAL
3.	DEBATING/ DISCUSSING
3a.	Negotiating
4.	ACTIONS/ RESOLUTIONS
5.	CLOSING

Figure 1 Framing Stages For WorkPlace Meetings

Stages two, three and four were recurrent in meetings A and B as the issues discussed were resolved or action proposed and agreed upon item by item. In meetings C and D, the stages were not recurrent as the issue was centred around one topic. The differences in the stages between A and B on the one hand and C and D on the other were that items were presented in the former while proposals were presented in the latter. The third stage was framed as *debating* in the former and *discussing* in the latter to reflect the tone of the talk in each.

For the purposes of this paper, a brief review of the framing stage *debating* and *discussing* is given in order to draw attention to the discourse of argumentation. It was predominantly *debating* in A and B and predominantly *discussing* in C and D. The two frames of *debate* and *discuss* were not exclusive; they were linked in that both conveyed similar functions of advancing propositions and weighing options. From the data, however, it was discerned that in meetings A and B, the predominant functions were arguing for or against, agreeing, disagreeing, justifying, and proposing alternatives. In meetings C and D there was a more objective exchange of views; the members mostly elaborated or explained further, there was query from one side and clarification by the other side. However, there was still agreement and disagreement and some rationalisation of suggestions. Hence, the decision to frame the stages differently was based on how the talk or argument was organised in the meetings. In both frames, overall, the discussion was developed further

In meeting A, while there were 13 members attending, only a few members played an active role in the discussions. A production staff member who was active in the union, Ravi, played a prominent role in the discussion, being the member who challenged management, asked for further clarification and so on. Basically, there were two sides in the discussion - management and

staff. Ravi appeared to challenge management on the issue of where the random checks had been done by internal audit staff. When he questioned: "Is it done here or done at the" he was interrupted at that point by one of the managers, Raj: "Actually you're going into detailslah Ravi which we don't really require to report back" Ravi disagreed and there was a short debate on the issue.

This taking of sides was not apparent in meeting B as the participants, except for one (an administrative assistant), held managerial positions (either managers or assistant managers). Again, some members played a more active role, querying, disagreeing and suggesting alternatives. The Manager of Human Resources and Administration (HRA), Loh, especially, played a prominent role in the discussion. There was debate on who carried the responsibility to liaise with *Bank Negara* (Central Bank) for approval of branch applications as well as reports of expenses by branch offices. The following extract formed part of the debate where the interactants appeared to be explicit in articulating their views. The debate was mostly between Loh and Bing with occasional remarks by others, and in the exchange below, Karen, the assistant manager for branch operations tried to interject at one point:

Bing: *Loh, frankly er this implementation planning work er on paper yes it should be done like that but in practical I think it's not going to be done like that. Because most of these things are all done on a rush type of things, [right? /You have to/ firm up*

Karen: *[Yeah*

Bing: *OK the last minute. They just want all these things done... and branch office*

frankly....we won't even know about it until the things have been set up

Loh: *But perhaps this will be a as good a time as any to put this in place.*

The debate continued with neither side letting up.

In meeting C, one of the participants, Sri Ram, had given a hand-out of the proposed course structure to his colleagues. Here they discussed it to question or to seek clarification of the points made earlier by Sri Ram. Suggestions were made and alternatives were discussed in an apparent low-key manner. There was a suggestion made to observe similar courses of this nature conducted by their corporation in the neighbouring countries of Singapore and Thailand. In response to Naren's suggestion that they should find out about similar courses in Thailand, Sri Ram replied: "I don't know what Thailand has got. Maybe we can check with Thailand what they have..."

going on to promote the Singaporean system and ending with: *"I'm not I'm not giving you my views y'know"* (meaning that others had praised that system)

In raising her objections to the suggestions above, Salmah appeared to reject the proposals indirectly. The following exchange formed part of the discussion:

- Salmah: *Level of understanding is a bit different in Thailand*
 Naren: *It will have to be in Thai*
 Salmah: *Then Singapore—English competency is a bit different from Malaysia and y'know you're assuming a number of things. You're assuming that... Understanding is one. The other one is whether they're comfortable using PC to interact.*
 Sri Ram: *OK it's easier for those guys [to learn PC than someone like me*
 Naren: *[Yeah most of the guys nowadays*
 Sri Ram: *And I know that OTIM is so user-friendly. Even an old man like me also can have access to it, know how to use it.*
 Salmah: *So the other thing is that you're assuming that people work individually*
 Sri Ram: *They have to...because they have to go and sit in front of it, use it, learn it.*

The functions of justifying, supporting, agreeing and disagreeing were highlighted. The team also tried to work out specific details like training period and skills development.

In meeting D, Wan Hussein played an active part in explaining the bank's needs and Bakar asked questions directed to elicit information which he then appeared to use to convince Wan Hussein that the bank should seriously consider the insurance package. For instance, when talking about the bank's leases on branch premises as well as assets of property abroad, Bakar argued in a bid to convince Wan about the suitability of buying the insurance package: *"So if anything happens, cash will be frozen"* (if the government of that country acted against the bank). Sally supported her senior colleague by adding that cash in the bank would be frozen. In response, Wan Hussein joked: *"Macam (like) London, don't think the government will act against us."*

Negotiating is listed as a sub-framing stage in the study as it was part of discussing/debating. In the large meetings (A and B), it was carried out

among a few individuals. In meeting A, on the staff/union side, only Ravi was actively involved in debating and negotiating and the management side led by Bala mostly tried to concede or compromise or at other times avoided commitment.

In meeting B, negotiating primarily involved working out what needed to be done with reference to certain issues, for example, applications for new branches. In one instance in the debate, the following attempt at negotiation ensued:

- Loh: *OK, what what can we conclude from this? (p). Are we basically in agreement or do we basically agree that OK if it is a branch application, branch operations will do it=*
- Bing: *=But there won't be any more branch applications the way I see it*
- Loh: *Ah, OK, that that is a different if there's a branch, branch operations will do it. If there is an authorised office, it....*

It can be discerned that Loh tried to spell out who should be responsible for different aspects but this attempt still met with some resistance from Bing.

In meeting C, participants also tried to work on resolving certain issues except that here, negotiation was centred around one issue, the proposed course. One instance of negotiating was demonstrated when Sri Ram suggested that Salmah take the lead in handling the course. Salmah rejected that proposal but instead negotiated that she and Naren would help Sri Ram organise the course and prepare a draft plan for Sri Ram to take back to his superiors.

There was little negotiating in meeting D, because firstly, it was a shorter meeting than the others and secondly, some time was taken in talking on topics unrelated to the matter at hand. This would probably have been done to create rapport between the parties. More importantly, this meeting was held to establish whether the bank would be interested in the deal the insurance broker company was offering.

Negotiating then led naturally to the next stage of reaching decisions or outcomes. In the stage of Actions/Resolutions, decisions were reached on the issues being discussed.

In concluding this section, I would like to point out that the broader framing stages identified in the workplace meetings and discussions were similar to those identified in my main study of students' interactions. However, it is acknowledged that fewer framing stages have been identified for the workplace meetings. (See Kaur 1997 for further information) In the workplace meetings, the framing stage of debating or discussing was broad as the participants communicated most of the speech acts of argument within this stage, which for instance included checking, negotiating and conceding.

The structuring of the argumentation into framing stages allowed for an easier examination of the speech acts related to argumentation and negotiation in these meetings.

Speech Acts Of Argumentation And Negotiation

In expressing views, we can be emphatic, neutral or tentative. Similarly, there is a continuum along which we can express total support or total opposition to an argument or proposal. Here then, this study investigated the extent of explicitness manifested in the discourse of the participants when presenting arguments.

Generally, the participants at all the meetings tended to be explicit in expressing their views and ideas. Participants who articulated their ideas or views in meeting A tended to be the most explicit when compared with other participants in the other groups. For instance, on the topic of checks by internal audit, Ravi disputed the management's statement in the minutes and got into an exchange with Raj, the senior manager for circulation about where checks were conducted.

The following extract demonstrates the explicitness expressed in the speech acts of giving opinion, disagreeing and justifying in meeting A.

- Ravi. *Random checks is done by internal audit staff. It's not very clear where. Is it done here or done at the=*
- Raj: *= Actually you're going into detailslah Ravi which we don't really require to report [back*
- Ravi. *[We need it*
- Raj: *I don't think [so...yeah*
- Ravi. *[No we need it. Because why we requested the company to check, right? Now you'll come back....*

When Raj tried to justify their actions further, Ravi asserted: "No, you don't understand. What I'm trying to say, what I'm trying to say is your statement here" and it continued in this vein.

- Raj: *No in the past when the lorry=*
 Ravi: *=I'm not talking about the past. I'm talking about the present*
 Bala: *OK anyway Ravi I think this one=*
 Ravi: *=So the minutes must be clear [What I'm trying to say*
 Bala: *[Maybe put a clarification for the minutes. What Raj says is also correct. What you've highlighted is also correct*

Bala mediated between the two parties and negotiated so that they would be satisfied: "OK we'll put a specific there... that internal audit will carry out the check in the areas as it seems fitlah or deems fitlah." But Raj still did not concede: "Whether they're carrying it out or not carrying it out is not our job y'know is not my job or not Choy's (technical services manager) job." Another production staff member supported Ravi when Ravi further argued the point. Finally, this staff member suggested (as did Bala earlier) that "just put in the weighing centrelah wherever" Raj appeared to concede: "OK, OK" and Bala confirmed that with "OK?" It was then decided how that would be worded in the minutes and Bala made a succinct suggestion that it was noted that Ravi sought clarification on that matter

In meeting B, there were two main topics for discussion. One topic was regarding the centralising of different reports submitted to *Bank Negara* (Central Bank). The other was dealings with *Bank Negara* on approval of new branch applications. Loh, the HRA manager, wanted to get some agreement and resolution on personnel carrying out the processing work at the company's or agency's end. In the discussion, while he was explicit about what he would like done, it was an indirect speech act of proposing:

- Loh. *I think what we need to come to an agreement here is basically the future. Out of that y' know who's going to handle it y'know*
 Bing: *It may not be just out of that listlah y'see because that list is compiled up to maybe October last year*

While it can be seen that Bing appeared to be modifying Loh's suggestion, he was also questioning it. The justification for this observation was because he further queried Loh on the follow-up work done on correspondence with Bank Negara. This was then clarified by both Loh and the administrative assistant (property) Bing came up with a counter-suggestion which Loh rejected with a direct: "I do not think so." Loh gave the reason for his rejection. There was further discussion mostly between the two men with Bing

raising objections and Loh disagreeing and justifying his opinions. The two assistant managers supported Bing while the other manager came out in support of Loh. In the end, Bing worked out an apparent compromise. This reflected that by virtue of his position (Assistant General Manager of Life Administration, a big division), he tried to exercise his authority to have the final say in the decision taken.

However, Loh did not accept this resolution as he disagreed. (He had been indirectly directed to handle the initial stage of the application.) He added later: *"OK I think er my thoughts, we'll never reach a decision here right. I'm very strong on not handling this part of it"* then going on to state part of his objections again. He asserted that the best way to resolve the issue was to look at the property itself and then made his counter-suggestion. The two men continued to negotiate the handling of the responsibility and they agreed on a time-frame for confirmation of the resolution, after Bing had taken it further with FSO (which appeared to be another department).

There was more co-operation and collaboration in the discussion in Organisation C. There was therefore little argumentation. The discussion tended to be straightforward. For instance, when Salmah made the point of the trainees probably facing problems in comprehension. *"So it could be er some problem in terms of understanding the text"*, Sri Ram interrupted: *OK you've hit the point. OK this is what we're trying to see what we can do to overcome this block that we're having"* Perhaps this was due to the setting and the nature of the task. Instead all three participants tried to build on and accommodate each other's ideas thus negotiating each other's viewpoints and suggestions. In a few instances the participants had to reach agreement on a few points. In one instance, Sri Ram suggested, towards the end of the discussion, that Salmah take the lead role in the tabling of the proposal of the course. Salmah disagreed and counter-suggested that she would help Sri Ram draft the letter to his superiors at his work-site. Hence, she and her other colleague Naren agreed to help Sri Ram with the course on the condition that Sri Ram co-ordinated matters.

In meeting D, there was little argument in the usual sense i.e. opinions that were disputed or other acts such as disagreement. Instead, both sides gave their side of the story and Bakar tried to build on whatever Wan Hussein had indicated as the bank's needs to fit in with what his company could offer. At one point Bakar said quite explicitly: *But won't you be stuck?"* in pointing out that the bank would face a problem if it had investments in a country where the government turned hostile (especially if the government of that country was overthrown). He added: *"So if anything happens, cash will*

be frozen” Finally, the resolution reached was that Bakar should present a paper to the Human Resource Development Section for further consideration. This apparently meant that the international banking section was supportive, in principle, of the proposal.

Overall, the participants in the meetings tended to be explicit in expressing their views but tried to negotiate agreement in decisions taken. While the chairpersons in A and B exerted influence in the meetings by virtue of their positions, the other participants appeared to be free to express their views openly and debate them in an explicit manner. The speech acts of participants in C reflected their cooperation and collaboration in developing the discussion. In D, the position appeared to be such that little convincing appeared to be necessary and hence the speech acts demonstrated tended to be mildly expressed.

Features of politeness were more apparent in meetings B, C and D as all parties tried to accommodate the others' views. Nonetheless, some of the participants in B, such as Bing and Loh, while being polite, were explicit in expressing their views and standpoints. For instance, at one point Bing asserted: *“Loh, frankly, er this implementation planning work er on paper yes, it should be done like that, but in practical I think it's not going to be done like that”* When Loh still stated his objections, Bing reasserted: *“You could be out of practical reasons. I frankly don't think it's practical to go through all this, ah you don't even have time to go through all these things before you can set it up”*

Sometimes, expressions of views were toned down by the use of modality and projected thoughts (e.g. “I think that”). A number of the participants in A appeared to be rather direct in their objections and the chairperson Bala, was assertive in controlling the meeting and very often used the discourse marker “OK” to indicate they were to move on to the next topic or subtopic of discussion. While this may not be considered rude following descriptions of politeness, it is argued that “face” considerations appeared to be of low priority. Top priority appeared to be containing the meeting within a certain time-frame and ‘getting the business completed’.

The next section reviews briefly the discourse strategies of argumentation that were predominantly applied by the interactants of the meetings observed.

Argumentation Strategies

The discourse of argument uses reason to prove or disprove a proposition. Deduction and induction, two major types of logic, are employed to convince co-interactants. As Scollon and Scollon (1995) point out, both the deductive (topic-first) and inductive (topic-delayed) patterns of discourse reduce the overall ambiguity of discourse.

Both inductive and deductive strategies of argumentation were employed at the meetings. It was observed that in the larger, more structured meetings of A and B, the interactants who were actively involved in speaking in A tended to use more deductive strategies while those in B tended to use more inductive strategies. This could be because of the personalities of the interactants themselves led by the chairperson Bala who was very straightforward and direct in his manner of speaking. However, the union representative Ravi tended to use more induction. The chairperson Bing in B tended to be more subtle. This could have arisen because Bala had a lot to accomplish in the meeting with little time to spare for a less direct approach. It was also probably a strategy that he used to exercise authority over the other participants.

In meeting A, the management was basically checking with the production staff members issues raised in the meeting and what had been carried out. The management wanted feedback on some of the issues raised and, in justifying some of their actions to production staff, Bala as their superior adopted a more authoritative position. For instance, Bala in raising an item in the agenda states: *"Circulation. We'll take it separately. This is matters arising. Next one, production, Penang. In the training Ricky, any latest developments?"*

However, Ravi, an active participant at the meeting, tended to question the management members of the meeting as a technique to raise issues. For instance, in raising the issue of random checks by the internal audit staff, he noted: *"It's not very clear where. Is it done here or done at the"* at which point he was interrupted by the chairperson Bala who expressed the opinion that Ravi was going into details.

In meeting B, Bing was dealing with another manager who although his subordinate, was still part of management. In these instances, the use of the strategy of induction could be linked to institutional display of power. For instance, Bing tried to lead to who had to handle the responsibility for branch applications. Loh in his turn while initially also applying induction

in his reasoning, later assumed more deductive strategies in rejecting the suggestions. He said at one point: "OK *my stand on this all right is basically er branch operations should take care of all matters related to the branch, all right?*"

In meeting C, the three interactants were peers and there did not appear to be predominance of either type of strategy. Instead it depended on the related points that were being made.

In meeting D, induction was predominantly used by Bakar who had to build a case for the bank's interest in his company's products.

The next section makes a brief review of other discourse strategies used for argumentation in the workplace interactions.

Use Of Metaphor, Sarcasm and Humour

There was some use of metaphor in some of the meetings. However, metaphors were not clearly discernible in the discourse processes. Hence, it can be argued that those interactants who were communicating their ideas or trying to convince others did not widely employ the powerful tool of metaphor. Humour displayed was of a direct, straightforward type, i.e. more literal, generally used to lighten the atmosphere. Jokes were apparent in meetings A and D and sometimes in meeting C. While jokes were not displayed in meeting B, humour was elicited from time to time. There was little use of irony or ironic humour. The only display of occasional sarcasm was present in meeting A. Some instances are cited from the data.

In meeting A, there was little use made of metaphor. In an isolated instance Ravi, the union representative, referred to a "healthy" discussion some of them had at a previous meeting on applications for jobs in the graphics department. One of the participants then cracked a joke on the use of the word "healthy." To emphasise a point Ravi used the structure "I am *dead* sure."

There was more use made of metaphor in meeting B. Karen, an assistant manager remarked that in fitting assets of branch operations: "*You have to fit in just like a jigsaw puzzle.*" Strictly speaking this was an analogy but one could also assume that the analogy used is a metaphor. In discussing the matter of responsibility further, Bing remarked: "I think we should *thrash* it out with FSO." In another instance, Loh brought in a term associated with

warfare or the game field when he articulated: "OK let's tackle the issues and then sort out those things." In yet another instance, Bing argued that the "grey margin" was the complication of the authorised office initiated from the FSO.

There was some use of metaphor in meeting C as well. For instance, Sri Ram talked of the trainees' competence in English "going down the drain". The metaphor of building was also applied several times. There was mention made of topics being "broken down" into modules, and later "broken down into sub-blocks". In another instance, Salmah observed that "someone has to structure a multiple test". In discussing referring to Thailand, Naren noted: "The other alternative is to rope in Thailand and do a joint one" (the planning of the programme for the course).

In meeting A, an attempt was made at humour when in response to the senior production manager's comment that workers wanted *ang pows* (gift packets of money) instead of certificates, Bala remarked: "Then you give them *ang pow certificateslah*"

Humour was elicited in meeting C when in response to a query by Salmah on where they were in the discussion: "Where are we now?" Sri Ram replied: "Nowhere." There were other jokes cracked to maintain the flow of the long discussion. In meeting A, there was also a joke about a date set for April 1 (April Fool's Day).

One instance of sarcasm in meeting A was when Ricky, the production manager, remarked sarcastically to Raj, the senior manager for circulation: "Never read minutes ah?" Sarcastic humour was elicited when there was a discussion on ear plugs and the union representative Ravi requested one set per person and that these ear plugs be disposable. Bala replied: "No, he (Ravi) wants it because go back home can use" which elicited laughter from the others.

The instances cited above are by no means comprehensive. They were cited to demonstrate that humour appeared to be a common strategy used in the meetings to maintain the discussions. The use of metaphor was more discernible in meetings A and B than in the other meetings. Sarcasm was applied in isolated instances and was more discernible in meeting A.

Conclusion

The study found it a useful exercise to frame the stages in the meetings as it allowed one to identify the stages involved, which in turn made it easier to identify the speech functions or acts that were contained within the stages. By framing the stages, specific discourse strategies employed by the participants were better observed. The workplace findings confirmed that the structuring of argumentation observed in the students' meetings in the main study was valid.

The use of implicitness and explicitness in the expression of speech acts depended on the circumstances, i.e. the participants, setting and topic of discussion, in all groups. For effective argumentation in terms of succeeding in achieving one's goals in communication, interactants can be made aware of the strategies they utilise. Findings from the workplace reinforce the notion that it is individuals who are effective communicators rather than communication per se at the workplace itself being a good role-model for students to adopt.

Workplace interactants appeared to use a combination of discourse strategies for reasoning. Induction and deduction were both applied in this context. Humour appeared to be the most prominent discourse strategy used to promote argumentation while metaphor was less commonly used. Humour also served to lighten the tone of the discussions so that less offence could be taken or assumed. There was some use of metaphor by some of the members of the meetings. Arguments usually follow patterns and metaphorical concepts allow us to conceptualise arguments in terms of battle and this can influence the shape an argument can take (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

The findings in this study assisted in providing insights into the structuring of argumentation and the use of discourse strategies related to argumentation in real work contexts. As pointed out by Liddicoat (1995) (among others) interactive forms of spontaneously occurring oral argumentation has attracted little systematic analytical attention. In including the workplace dimension in this study, this issue was addressed.

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