

## Accessing the vocational college from an ESL perspective: A system of genres analysis

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### ABSTRACT

Previous research has focused on systems of genres in mainly academic, professional and electronic settings. However, few studies consider systems of genres in post-compulsory education, nor are these genres considered from an English as a second language (ESL) perspective. This paper presents a study which examines the importance of ESL students gaining access to an Australian Vocational Educational College (VEC). The system of genres (Bazerman, 1994) involved in the course application process is identified, and the difficulties which ESL students had with these genres, together with the language and cultural issues which arose during the application process, are explored. The participants in the study comprised eight ESL students and two VEC customer service officers. Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, and relevant institutional documents. Analysis revealed that the system of genres involved in the application process for vocational courses is both complicated and multifarious, with five distinct application methods identified. The complexity of the system of genres was surprising for a relatively common process. While not every student encounters each individual genre, the potential for difficulty is enormous. Compounded by additional language and cultural

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factors, it is suggested that the ESL students' negotiation of the system of genres and thus their access to vocational courses, is more challenging than for English as first language students.

## INTRODUCTION

For ESL students to be able to access Australian vocational colleges, they must successfully participate in the application process. This means they must interpret and respond to certain information without being intimidated by it (Bazerman, 1989). However, while participating in this application process, ESL students are also likely to be affected by language and cultural factors, and thus may be disadvantaged in their applications. Access to vocational colleges should be equitable for all students, regardless of their cultural and language background, residency status or the complexity of the application process. An examination of the college application process, and the difficulties which ESL students may have, could contribute towards an understanding of what needs to be done to improve equity and access.

By identifying the application process as a system of genres within this everyday context, the series of written and spoken genres which impact upon one another (Bazerman, 1989, 1994) and in which students participate to gain a place on a vocational course, can be examined. This study took place in an Australian-based institution, referred to as the Vocational Education College (VEC). VEC is a pseudonym to protect the identity of the institute. Substantial discussion has taken place on the notion of genre in the area of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and its value to teachers and learners. Devitt (2004) asserts, albeit in an English as first language context, that genre contributes to an understanding of how people "operate ... within their societies and cultures" (p.2). Similarly, Martin (1984) believes that genre helps us understand the activities in which people engage as members of a culture. Consideration of the difficulties faced by ESL students within the system of genres can lead to the development of strategies

to assist learners with their participation in, and manipulation of, genres to their advantage.

## BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

### The concept of genre

While the concept of genre has been discussed in the field of applied linguistics and TESOL since the 1980s, that of systems of genres is more recent. Tarone, Dwyer, Gillette and Icke (1981) introduced the notion of genre in the English for specific purposes (ESP) literature, in their discussion of astrophysics papers as a genre. Subsequently, in this field, Swales's (1990) pioneering text, *Genre Analysis*, was described by the series editors as "a benchmark" (Long & Richards, 2004: ix). Integral to the work of the 'Sydney genre school' (Hyon, 1996), were Halliday's (1994) systemic functional linguistics model of language, in which language systems relate to social interactions and hence cultural contexts, and Martin's definition of genre as "a staged, goal-oriented purposeful activity in which speakers engage as members of our culture" (1984: 25). However, it was the North American new rhetoric school of genre, which originated separately from the Sydney School and the ESP work on genre (Freedman & Medway, 1994), to which Bazerman (1994) belonged. Proponents of the rhetorical school of genre study, including Miller (1984) and Bazerman (1994), believe that genres are typical actions or responses to socially constructed situations which recur (Freedman, 1999). These scholars also express views on the dynamic nature of genres. Miller (1984) and Bazerman (1988) emphasise the evolution of specific genres, while Devitt (1993) refers to the fluidity of genres and their ability to affect a context.

### The concept of systems of genres and closely-related notions

Bazerman (1994) termed the concept a 'system of genres' when he described it in relation to the genres involved in the patent application process. He introduced the more complete notion as:

*Interrelated genres that interact with each other in specific settings. Only a limited range of genres may appropriately follow upon another in particular settings, because the success conditions of the actions of each require various states of affairs to exist (pp.97-98).*

Swales (2004) further develops the idea that more attention should be paid to the genre systems of academic and administrative processes rather than to the individual genres which make up these processes. This is because of the multiple documents which are usually involved and the increasing generification of these processes. Flowerdew (2004), similarly, acknowledges a shift in focus from individual genre types to the way in which genres interact with each other, noting the "intertextuality between members of a genre system" (p.583). He analyses the promotion of Hong Kong by its government through a variety of genres, all of which were produced in a particular sequence.

Closely aligned to systems of genres are the differently-named but closely-related notions of 'genre sets', 'genre chains', 'repertoire of genres', 'event sequences', and 'genre colonies' (Bhatia, 2004; Devitt, 2004; Swales, 2004). However, the term system of genres was chosen for this study for the following reasons. Firstly, it implies a broader stance than a genre set as highlighted by Bhatia (2004). Devitt (1991, 2004) describes the co-operation and relationship of genres to one another within the writing texts of tax accountants as a genre set, but Bhatia regards genre set as representing the interactions of only one party. However, Devitt's (2004) belief that a system of genres describes "the context of genres", and implies "a tighter, more static structure" (p.54) than a genre set or the more flexible repertoire of genres, provides a further rationale for using the term. A system can be restricted in certain contexts (Crystal, 1992), but in this study it provides a type of framework on which the series of genres can be laid. Devitt (2004: 57) also subsequently qualifies her opinion on the tighter nature of genre systems when stating that:

*A genre system is still flexible, for not all genres in the system must be used for the purpose to be achieved and there are alternate genres for achieving the same ends.*

According to Swales (2004), the chronology of genres can be identified in genre chains and this enables people to anticipate what will happen so that they can plan ahead. This notion together with Swales's (2004) recognition of the hierarchy of genres, which he noted in his study of academic research genres, is relevant to this study.

Additional studies of relevance to systems of genres include the following. The sequences of events involved in going to the doctor, and paying for a telephone account as discussed by Burns, Joyce and Gollin (1996). Burns and Joyce (1997) also describe the sequence of spoken and written genres encountered in opening a bank account. Paltridge's (1998: 13) discussion of letters to the editor provides "a clear example of systems of genre in that they often refer to and assume a certain knowledge of a preceding event or events", and illustrates a system of genres in which one genre relies on related genres. Paltridge (2000) also proposes that the system of genres surrounding the production of an academic essay should be considered in English for academic purposes (EAP) classrooms, since related genres are as important for ESL learners to understand as the essay itself. Tardy (2003) describes the genre system involved in applying for research grants, while Artemeva (2008) studies the genre-learning process of novice engineers and the re-enactment of the genres in their company's communication genre system.

A number of genre system studies focus on electronic and computer-based communication. Examples include: an examination of the genre system used in digital media (Yates, Orlikowski & Rennecker, 1997); the design of an electronic meetings system (Costa & Antunes, 2001); the genre systems involved in self-published resumés (Killoran, 2006); and Yates and Orlikowski's (2002) work on electronic forms of communications and interactions within organisations.

### **ESL learners and vocational college education**

While Australia is considered to have an established tradition of managing cultural diversity (Hearns, Devine & Baum, 2007), few studies deal specifically with ESL students applying to study on Australian post-secondary vocational courses. A recent study on the inclusiveness policies of a major Australian vocational institution does, however, consider people from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE) among those who face barriers to accessing training (Volkoff, Clarke & Walstab, 2008). In a different post-compulsory educational context, an Australian university-based study acknowledges the unique challenges which ESL international students face with regard to local knowledge and language. Of interest to the present study is the finding that categorising international students as a separate group can be counter-productive (Asmar, Inge, Singh & Ginns, 2003). Of similar significance, Harklau (2000) reveals that, within secondary and post-secondary education in the United States, ESL international students are considered to constitute a group with different needs, whereas migrant ESL adolescents are not. She further comments on the general lack of research which has taken place on ESL adolescents, even though they have to remake their identity when transferring from one educational institution to the next (Harklau, 2000).

### **The present study**

This study was informed by the theoretical concepts outlined above and situated within the literature. A gap was found for an exploratory study to identify the system of genres involved in applying for vocational courses and to examine its negotiation from the perspective of a culturally diverse ESL migrant and international group of students. This research study adopted a qualitative methodology which allowed some fluidity in the study (Dörnyei, 2007), and enabled the system of genres, language and other difficulties to be identified. There was no attempt to control the research setting, but to gain what Miles and Huberman refer to as a

“‘holistic’ overview of the context under study: its explicit and implicit rules” (1994: 6).

The study was thus conducted in an everyday setting. Most of the ESL students had initially been outside the institution and were attempting to gain access to it. A particularly important component of the analysis was the identification of “the networks of texts that surround the genre” (Paltridge, 2006: 98), to discover how each genre interlinks with related genres to form the system under examination. Through an understanding of this system of genres, and factors affecting the ESL students’ negotiation of it, it is intended that ESL students can be empowered to participate more fully and successfully in the process of applying for vocational courses.

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the written and spoken genres which ESL students need to negotiate when they are applying for VEC courses?
2. What difficulties do ESL students have in relation to the VEC application process genres?

## METHOD

### Setting

Application and enrolment processes for any person can present problems. For people from an ESL background, the difficulty of negotiating this process to gain access to an English-speaking institution is sometimes increased, since oral and academic proficiency in English takes several years to achieve (Hakuta, Butler & Witt, 2000). Additionally, it is likely that within such a process, ESL students, through having grown up in non-Australian environments or having been brought up by migrant ESL parents, may have reduced awareness of cultural factors and local knowledge (Asmar *et al.*, 2003). Lack of familiarity with the specifics of the Australian vocational education system, for example, could be confusing.

Approval to conduct this research was received from the University Human Research Ethics Committee and the Institute Director. The study was then conducted in one of the city colleges of a VEC Institute in New South Wales, Australia. A VEC Institute comprises two or more colleges. The chosen College offers vocational courses in a wide range of areas, such as, business, design, hairdressing, building, hospitality, information technology and engineering. It also provides English classes for ESL migrants and international students.

### **Participants**

The participants in the study were eight ESL students and two customer service officers. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity. Questionnaires were completed and interviews conducted between June and October 2008 on site at the College. Since the study took place on a VEC campus, data could be collected from within the natural setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). All except one of the ESL students were enrolled and studying on vocational courses at the time of the study. The students were aged between 19 and 30 years old, and their Australian visa status ranged from citizen or permanent resident to international student. The students were chosen from across a range of vocational subjects, course levels, language backgrounds, and length of time spent in Australia. Details of the student participants can be seen in Table 1.



**TABLE 1**  
**Participants' details: English as second language (ESL) students**

ESL student (gender)	First language (country)	Status in Australia	Length of time in Australia	Vocational course/s applied for	Level of course/s applied for
Naadiya (female)	Bangla (Bangladesh)	Permanent resident	5 years	Children's services/ Library & information services	Certificate/ Diploma
Zarina (female)	Urdu (Pakistan)	Permanent resident (former international student)	2 years (+4 years in London)	Business marketing	Diploma
David (male)	Cantonese (China)	Permanent resident (former international student)	3 years	Interpreting course	Diploma
Joo-Eun (female)	Korean (Korea)	Permanent resident	2 years	Mechanical engineering	Advanced Diploma
Akiko (female)	Japanese (Japan)	International student	10 months	Hairdressing & management	Diploma
Yong (male)	Korean (Korea)	International student	4 years 6 months	Electrical technology/ Hairdressing	Advanced Diploma/ Certificate
Timon (male)	Greek (Greece)	Australian citizen	Born here, parents migrated in late 60s	Electro-technology Electrician	Certificate/ Apprenticeship scheme
Husna (female)	Urdu (Pakistan)	Permanent resident (former spouse visa)	2 years 6 months	Fashion design/ Accounting/ Applied fashion & design technology	Diploma/ Advanced Diploma

The two customer service officers were recruited to provide input on behalf of the College. Their details appear in Table 2. One of the customer service officers, Carla, speaks English as a second language.

**TABLE 2**  
**Participants' details: Customer service officers**

Customer service officer pseudonym	First language	Length of time employed in VEC student administration
Carla	Mandarin	2 years
Sandra	English	18 years

#### **Data collection methods and instrumentation**

In order to identify the system of genres in the vocational course application process and the difficulties encountered by ESL students, data were collected from questionnaires completed by the students, interviews conducted with the students and the customer service officers, and confirmed with reference to a collection of web-based and printed texts.

The student questionnaire took up to 10 minutes to complete before the interview. The primary aim of the questionnaire was to allow the students time to focus their thoughts on the process they had gone through when applying for their VEC course. The questionnaire reflected the research questions and was structured accordingly (see Appendix A). It included questions on the information sources students had used for course details, how they found out about the application method, and difficulties they had encountered with the application process, English language, Australian cultural or other problems. The questionnaire data was enriched with interviews in which participants expanded on their questionnaire answers (Dörnyei, 2003).

Semi-structured interviews of up to 20 minutes took place immediately after the students had completed the questionnaire. The interview questions were arranged in a similar order to the questionnaire (see Appendix B). Additional questions were asked to prompt the respondent if a relevant but unexpected topic arose (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Two VEC customer service officers were each interviewed for 30 minutes. The semi-structured interview

questions (see Appendix C) probed the officers on the ESL students' usual modes of enquiry, what the enquiries were typically about, the types of information which caused students most difficulty, and why they thought this information was difficult for ESL students. Sample course information sheets and an application form were used to prompt participants to explain their answers. All interviews were recorded onto a digital audio recorder with the consent of the participants.

### **Data analysis**

The interview data was prepared for analysis by transcribing it. The transcriptions were coded using content analysis (Weber, 1990), which entailed reading the data several times to identify and reduce them into categories and themes. Content analysis was also carried out on the open-ended questionnaire answers, as suggested by Dörnyei (2003). A 'custom-made' colour-coding system was used to identify themes related to the research questions and new observations which emerged from the data (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The themes were coded directly onto the data as follows:

- yellow identified genres relating to enquiries about courses;
- orange highlighted the genres involved in the actual course application;
- green located English language difficulties; and
- blue was used for cultural and other problematic issues.

Thus the diverse responses were reduced to the key and relevant issues of the study (Dörnyei, 2003), and as part of the analysis (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The genres could then be isolated and displayed on a system of genres flowchart, while the difficulties encountered by participants could be quantified and tabulated. The material was organised in this way, firstly, to add validity to the data, and, secondly, to make the data more accessible to allow interpretation of the results and conclusions to be drawn (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

A system of genres analysis was thus achieved through coding the interview data and identifying the order in which genres preceded, followed and interacted with one another to form the system (Bazerman, 1994; Paltridge, 2006). The input of the customer service officers with their 'inside' knowledge of the VEC processes was integral to this analysis as well as the students' own experiences. Further confirmation of the system of genres was enabled by reference to the institutional texts which were collected or viewed on the VEC website. Triangulation thus took place through the variety of data sources collected - the ESL student questionnaires and interviews, the customer service officer interviews, and the collection of institutional documents. It was also intended that another researcher, who follows similar procedures for data collection and analysis in this or other contexts, would similarly be able to identify a system of genres, and potential difficulties, thus providing some reliability to this research project.

## **RESULTS**

### **The system of genres involved in the VEC application process**

Data analysis revealed that the system of genres, which students participate in when applying for vocational courses, is extensive. Figure 1 is a graphical representation of the key stages of the genre system involved in the application process<sup>1</sup>. It is acknowledged that not every student encounters each genre. On the other hand, some genres comprise more than one genre. For example, a visit to the College Information Centre could involve a student encountering concurrent genres - the spoken interaction between the student and a customer service officer, and the written genres of the printed materials. Some of the genres encapsulated within the key stages of Figure 1 are, therefore, multipliable and the system could be

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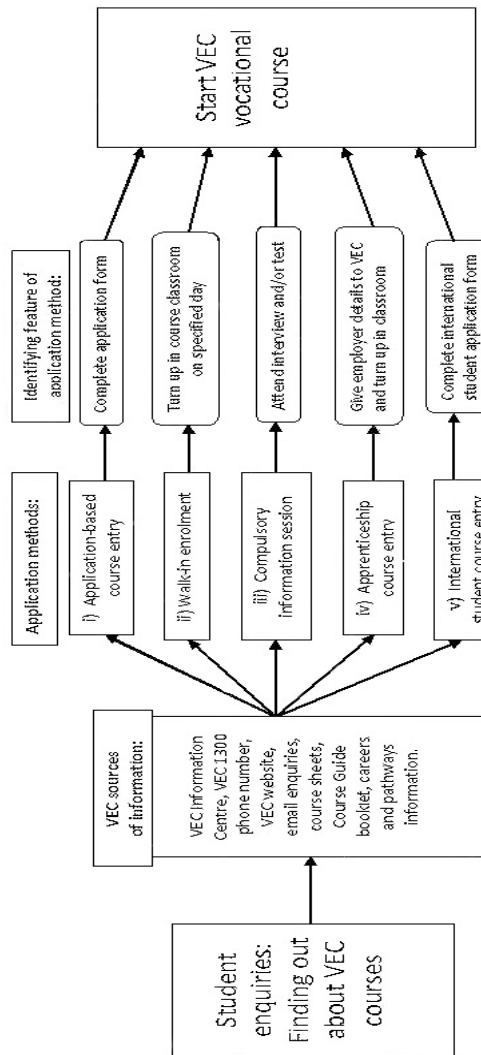
<sup>1</sup> Due to a space limitation, the genre system presented in this article is a simplified version of that reported in Cope (2008).

extended even further. In its graphical representation, the system of genres appears to be a continuous and chronologically linear process. In practice, this is not the case. The first part of the flowchart in Figure 1 illustrates some of the genres involved in the initial stages of making enquiries about courses and finding out how to apply for them. These then flow into the genres involved in actually applying for the courses.

### **Course information-seeking genres**

Interestingly, while searching for course information, seven of the eight ESL students participated in genres with people external to VEC, before making contact with the College. Advisers included family members (Zarina, Husna and Naadiya), a university classmate (David), an immigration agent (Yong), an employer (Timon) and a VEC graduate Internet friend (Akiko). In the next stage, some students participated in more than one genre to obtain information about VEC courses. All eight students visited at least one of the College's Information Centres; four accessed the Institute website from their home (David, Zarina, Akiko and Joo-Eun); four telephoned the Institute to make enquiries (David, Akiko, Husna and Naadiya); and two went to the teaching section (Joo-Eun and Yong). In the College Information Centre, students usually participated in at least two genres, that of the spoken interaction with a customer service officer, followed by receiving a range of printed information in the form of online or ready-printed course information sheets. Within spoken genres, Carla, a customer service officer, reported that ESL students tend to enquire about qualifications or exemptions for subjects they have studied previously. Job prospects also guide them in their choice of course. Further sources of written generic information, available to students, include the Course Guide, and careers and pathways information sheets.

**FIGURE 1**  
Key stages of the system of genres identified in the VEC course application process



### Course application methods and genres

Significantly, data analysis revealed five distinct methods of applying for VEC courses. Each method necessitates a separate, although sometimes overlapping, series of genres. These application methods are itemised in Figure 1 and described below:

- (i) *Application form-based courses* (Zarina, Naadiya and Husna). Students participate in completing a fairly detailed written generic application form which is submitted two to three months before the start of a new semester. Students should then receive a generic letter of acknowledgement. After teachers assess applications, successful students should receive a generic second letter. Students then pay online or by telephone, which confirms their course acceptance. Application form-based courses were generally for “high-demand courses like I.T. or accounting or specialised courses such as human resources and design courses” (Sandra, customer service officer).
- (ii) *Walk-in enrolment courses* (Joo-Eun and Husna). Students turn up on specified days and times in the course classroom, where they participate in spoken and written genres, approximately one week before the beginning of the semester. They are offered course places on a first-come, first-served basis and they complete a green-coloured enrolment form. They then pay the cashier in person in the Information Centre. Successful waiting list applicants are subsequently telephoned.
- (iii) *Compulsory information session courses* (David). A few weeks before the semester begins, applicants receive an information package and attend a compulsory information session, sometimes followed by an interview or test. Application results are posted on a college noticeboard. This method again consists of a number of written and spoken genres.

- (iv) *Apprenticeship course entry* (Timon). This is similar to walk-in enrolment except that students are registered as apprentices by their employers. Students then enrol in the course classroom and pay the cashier, again involving participation in several genres.
- (v) *International student entry* (Akiko and Yong). Students complete a generic international student application form, usually submitted before the course starting date. A written English ability test assesses their need to study English at the College English Centre, or an IELTS 5.5 (General Training) score will gain them direct admission to the vocational course.

### **Difficulties with the application process**

Table 3 categorises the types of difficulty which arose during the ESL students' negotiation of the system of genres involved in the application process. The table categorises the difficulties into those arising from procedural aspects of the system of genres, including individual genres, English language problems, cultural differences, and difficulties leading to expressions of negativity towards VEC. Difficulties sometimes led to students not achieving the purpose of a genre, for example, finding out specific information they required, and thereby having to participate in several others to achieve a successful outcome. The number of participants who referred to each type of difficulty is also displayed.



**TABLE 3**  
**Application difficulties and number of participants who referred to them**

Types of difficulty	Number of participants who referred to them
<i>Difficulties related to the system of genres in the VEC application process</i>	
Confusion related to course entry methods	6
Lack of detailed information about courses, careers, or employment	6
Uncertainty between application and/or enrolment forms	5
Waiting for an application form	2
Waiting for an acknowledgement letter	2
Not receiving course acceptance information	2
Unclear enrolment process	1
<i>English language problems</i>	
Listening face-to-face/telephone with VEC officers	7
Speaking to Customer Service Officers/Teachers	6
Reading information related to courses and applying	4
Writing application/enrolment forms	2
Lack of information in languages other than English	3
<i>Cultural differences</i>	
Understanding the Australian education system	7
Comments on being nervous, shy, or undecided	3
Dealing with Australian visa class or permanent residency issues	2
Finding a sympathetic VEC officer in the Information Centre	2
Skills shortage course but no job for international student	1
<i>Negativity towards VEC and procedures</i>	
Expression of negative feelings by participants (anger, hopelessness, confusion, impatience, disappointment)	6
Lack of professionalism compared to universities	2

**Problems related to the system of genres involved in the application process**

Undoubtedly, the existence of five distinct application methods, each involving a different series of genres, has the potential to cause difficulties, especially for ESL students, and this was confirmed by the analysis. Six participants, including the two officers, commented on student confusion over which was the correct application method

to use, and therefore which genres to participate in, for individual courses. Carla, one of the officers, stated that ESL students “always ask us how to apply”, with many telephoning during the application and enrolment periods. To further demonstrate the complexity of the system of genres, it even took Sandra, the other officer familiar with VEC’s procedures, some time to locate the application method on the course brochure.

A further six participants referred to a lack of specific course details and thus did not achieve their purpose of participating in certain information-seeking genres. Zarina could not find out from the College if business courses would provide credit at university. David could not ascertain the interpreting course qualification he would receive, and officers could not help Joo-Eun find an engineering course which would lead directly to a job. Akiko, an international student, had problems finding out information specific to permanent residency visa requirements. In most cases, this led to students participating in several further genres to find out the information they wanted to know.

Some students sometimes expected to participate in certain genres and, when these did not occur, they were confused. Examples included Naadiya who did not receive a generic letter of acknowledgement after submitting an application form. Similarly, Zarina and David did not receive any notification about the outcome of their course applications and could not pursue it. Carla reported that students commonly but mistakenly completed application forms for walk-in enrolment courses, and thus participate in unnecessary genres.

Written genres were also sometimes mis-identified. Five participants thought they had completed an ‘application form’, but from their descriptions, it was a green ‘enrolment form’ (Joo-Eun, Timon, Naadiya, Yong and Zarina). Timon described the enrolment form in detail, with no reference to the generic four-page application form:

*The green sheet...the carbon stuff where you write on it, then you rip it off. It's mainly just the payment form as well.*

### **English language problems affecting participation in genres**

Data analysis revealed that the majority of language difficulties, encountered by ESL students, occurred in spoken genres. These difficulties thus related to the macro-skills of speaking and listening and affected communication within genres. As can be seen in Table 3, seven participants specified difficulty with understanding in spoken interactions, while six participants mentioned problems expressing themselves in English. The problem of understanding, however, was not always attributed to the inability of ESL students to understand English. It was reported that, in some spoken genres, VEC staff spoke English with strong first language accents or lacked English proficiency themselves. David encountered this twice, once when he telephoned for some information:

*When I gave him my address he couldn't spell correctly ... Then, when I got my envelope he wrote something wrong.*

David experienced further communication problems with teachers when he attended the Compulsory Information Session for his interpreting course. It is interesting to note that David's comment also highlights his expectations that VEC staff should speak English proficiently, and accents should have minimal impact:

*Maybe they're from the Chinese background as well so they have very strong accents and their English is not good enough. It's not what I expected.*

David politely blamed his own lack of understanding of English in these spoken genres. It did appear, however, that the staff's English use could perhaps be more proficient. Yong felt uncomfortable speaking English with the Head Teacher of hairdressing, while Husna also had some difficulty understanding telephone conversations with the College staff. Similar to David, Husna blamed her own English skills, saying "I think they are fine, maybe my

English is not that good" but, unlike David, she does not seem to have an expectation of how VEC staff should speak English. Akiko commented that in telephone conversations the staff did not speak slowly for students from non-English speaking backgrounds.

### **Cultural differences and genre participation**

Categorised as a cultural difficulty in Table 3, most participants referred to ESL students' lack of familiarity with the Australian vocational educational system. This can affect their knowledge of, and participation in, some of the genres. Carla reported that ESL students often did not understand how their overseas qualifications equated with the College's qualifications because, as she said:

*The education system is quite different with the other countries, especially from Asia.*

Joo-Eun expressed a degree of frustration as she attempted to participate in genres to find out the level of course she needed to do:

*Diploma, advanced diploma hard to choose one of them ...  
Information sheet about which subject but not which one I want to do exactly, because of different education system.*

Akiko needed to participate in a variety of genres to achieve her goal of finding out what constituted a VEC semester, an important piece of information for her to fulfil permanent residency requirements. Timon, an apprentice electrician of Greek descent, had to explain to his parents the vocational aspects of VEC as an educational institution where he could get his electrician's licence.

Some more implicit cultural differences occurred when students participated in genres: Joo-Eun attributed the lack of help she received in the Information Centre to her cultural background, visiting the office three times before she was offered helpful advice. Sandra, an officer, verified this opinion to some extent by remarking that, in spoken interactions, ESL students' personalities could affect their ability to communicate in English:

*If they're really outgoing, they will, you know, pester until they get something, but if they're very shy, traditionally shy, it's very hard.*

### **Problems giving rise to negative expressions**

Some participants felt generally negative towards VEC and the application process, especially those ESL students who were unsuccessful in gaining places in their first-choice courses. This may in part be due to the high number of genres some students encountered as part of the application process. Naadiya, for, example, repeatedly took part in interactions at the Information Centre, and hence additional genres, before she received an application form. She first expressed annoyance followed by despair:

*Because I did it 3 times I get really angry why I didn't get...I go like 3 times but the first time they said, "No, there is no form and you have to come back later". Later, later and I go back and I go, go, go ... I just became hopeless and I thought "Oh my god, I think I'm not going to get this".*

When Joo-Eun was unpleasantly informed by a customer service person in a generic spoken enquiry interaction that the Head Teacher was too busy to see her, it made Joo-Eun feel "angry and impatient". Yong, an international student, was "really disappointed" about VEC because, after participating in the series of genres to enrol in his course, he then discovered that he had to pay for course materials in addition to his expensive international student fees.

Lack of professionalism at VEC was mentioned, especially in comparison to universities. As a result of David's participation in a variety of the information-seeking and application process genres, he perceived universities to be more professional and experienced in dealing with international ESL students, because "they will explain to you what you should do". In contrast, he discerned that VEC is more oriented towards English-speaking citizen and migrant students, giving documents to students without explaining them. Sandra confirmed David's impression to some degree by saying that in the Information Centre she dealt with a student as a "transaction":

*They ask you about the course, they just want to know the information. Just give them the information, straight to the point as possible.*

Zarina also felt that even though she was applying for VEC courses, she was better informed through her interactions with the university, than through her participation in VEC genres. She participated in website and telephone conversation genres with the university to achieve her information-seeking goals.

## DISCUSSION

### **The system of genres and the application process**

One aim of this study was to investigate if the series of interrelated genres involved in the VEC application process, an everyday context, could be considered to be a system of genres, similar to that identified by Bazerman (1994) and Tardy (2003) in their studies. The first research question (What are the written and spoken genres which ESL students need to negotiate when they are applying for VEC courses?) suggests that a system of genres, composed of spoken and written genres, may exist in the VEC application process, and this was confirmed by data analysis. However, what was not expected were the enormous range of genres identified by participants. Students participate in genres to achieve certain goals, such as finding out course details or enrolling on a vocational course, with the intention of successfully progressing through the system. To succeed in the genres within a community, students must, however, understand how to use its resources, for example, the VEC Information Centre, the call centre, the website, and written materials.

Within the high demand vocational courses, the VEC application form is considered to be of greater significance than other genres, and thus reflects Swales's (2004) hierarchical notion of genres, or acts as an anchor as Tardy's (2003) written proposal in research grant applications does. The results provide further evidence that when

people draw on previously-known genres and use them in new situations (Devitt, 2004, 2007), there is the potential for mismatch with resultant confusion. Similarly, Bazerman's (1994) suggestion that people are surprised when a genre deviates from the expected form was re-inforced by the results of this study. Yates and Orlikowski (2002) argue that genre systems and their constituent genres provide expectations about the purpose and other dimensions of communicative interactions. This study has also highlighted the confusion that occurs when genre expectations are not fulfilled, such as a submitted application form does not result in a letter of acknowledgement.

Each individual application method, as identified in the study, could constitute a genre chain, in which people can anticipate the next stage of a process (Swales, 2004). The overall framework of the system of genres could thus incorporate a series of genre chains for the discrete application processes. These chains separate and come together again, and further demonstrate the complex web of Bazerman's (1994) interrelated genres.

In regard to the second research question (What difficulties do ESL students have in relation to the application process genres?), Miller's (1984) description of the evolving nature of genres, together with Devitt (1993) and Freedman's (1994) concurrence on the fluid and dynamic nature of genres can be seen in the results. However, the number of difficulties participants experienced during the VEC application process suggests that, in this system of genres, fluidity should be limited. Rapid and radical changes of genres could exacerbate the situation for ESL students and result in further negativity towards the vocational institution, previously acknowledged by Keating (2006). Not only do the ESL students have to contend with communicating for the majority of time in English during this process, but also have to operate within a context in which the system of genres is unfamiliar to them.

### Implications of the study for ESL students and VEC

This study has acknowledged some of the extensive difficulties which can occur when ESL students participate within a system of genres in their host and culturally different society, and recognises that they may be disadvantaged in their negotiation of the system of genres. The implications of this study's findings are, therefore, that the College should follow some recommendations to try and ensure that the application process is equitable for both ESL and English as first language students, (and) provision made for ESL students to learn (how to participate in the genres involved in the application processes).

Firstly, it is important for the College to ensure that the genres which are expected to precede and follow other genres should do so. Students need to be informed about the progress and outcome of their course applications, even if they are unsuccessful or waitlisted, as insufficient communication with students creates tension and negativity towards the institution. The College's perceived lack of professionalism compared to universities should be noted, especially as government-funded vocational institutions are being pressured to compete with private colleges (Noonan, 2008, October 29).

Genres constantly change (Devitt, 2007) and as such the participants need to keep renegotiating them (Freadman, 1994). The College should monitor the system of genres and try to predict consequences of changes it makes, so that students are not overwhelmed in their negotiation of the genres to access vocational courses. The College's use of the terms 'applying', or 'application' on certain courses, while merely 'enrolling' on others, is misleading. The use of these terms and the rationale for the multiple application processes should be reconsidered. If a range of application methods is maintained, a simplified system of genres flowchart, or genre chain, could be provided so individual students can track and anticipate the genres in which they will participate.



The College could establish web-based communication for potential applicants to contact current students, and subject consultants, as an additional service. This would make student services more accessible and benefit students as it has been found that web-based tools such as e-mail and threaded discussion "... enhance the interaction and sense of community" (Keim & von Destinon, 2008: 566).

Harklau (2000) finds that migrant ESL students are not acknowledged as a separate group, unlike international students. International students follow a separate process when applying for vocational courses at the College, and sentiments were expressed that migrant ESL students did not receive sufficient explanations. While separating student groups can sometimes be counter-productive (Asmar *et al.*, 2003), cultural sensitivity and diplomacy need to occur when dealing with all students, regardless of their residency and ESL status.

Artemeva (2008) shows that genre knowledge gained in the classroom can contribute towards learners being able to re-enact those genres in the workplace. In addition, communicative competence in social contexts requires explicit language teaching (Nelson, El Bakary & Al Batal, 1995). The system of genres could, therefore, be deconstructed and a series of TESOL lessons created to familiarise ESL learners with the genres of applying for a vocational course. To encourage participation in the genres, classroom lessons could incorporate the use of authentic texts and visits could be made to a College Information Centre. In this way, ESL students would learn how to participate in and manipulate the information-seeking and course application series of genres to their advantage. Students could build up their repertoire of genres (Devitt 2004), and deal with obstacles that may arise, thus levelling the playing field with their non-ESL counterparts.

### **Limitations and further research**

There were some limitations of this study that are worth mentioning. Most student participants were studying on VEC courses when they participated in this study. Because some time had elapsed since they had applied for their courses, students completed questionnaires before their interviews to help them remember the process. Additionally, how students perceived the success of their course application, may have affected their responses to some questions.

The methodology employed in the study resulted in a substantial amount of rich and relevant interview and questionnaire data being collected, which reflects the complex nature of the subject matter (Dörnyei, 2007). This, however, limited the amount of genre analysis which could be undertaken on the various linked texts. Genre analysis of texts used in the application process could be the subject of further research. The analyses could aid in developing a series of lesson on applying for vocational courses. A subsequent study could investigate whether pre-teaching the system of genres improves students' access to vocational courses, and help to validate this method of teaching in the TESOL classroom.

The results of this small-scale qualitative research project could be extended to a quantitative study that compares the experiences of ESL students with a group of native English-speaking students. The application systems of other Australian higher education institutions, such as universities or privately-funded colleges, could be researched as well as overseas institutions which have a significant number of non-native speakers applying for courses. The resulting systems of genres, and students' ability to access the institutions could be compared, with positive features considered for implementation in vocational institutions.

### **CONCLUSION**

When people take part in a process, they encounter a system of genres which they are expected to understand and participate in.

Yet, knowing how to operate within any genre is acknowledged as a task usually acquired through belonging to a particular society (Miller, 1984). This study has identified several additional complexities for ESL students. The very existence of the system of genres means that ESL students have to negotiate a series of interrelated genres with which they may or may not be familiar. They can choose to participate in some of the information-seeking genres, but are obliged to participate in other application genres to be successful in accessing a vocational course. Furthermore, tensions exist between the natural evolution of genres (Miller, 1984), and generic changes which occur when a system or process responds to institutional, regulatory or technological demands. Institutions must, therefore, be mindful of the potential for further confusion when genre expectations are altered, and acknowledge the language and cultural issues which ESL learners sometimes also face. Recognition of these factors is a start to improving the access of ESL students to mainstream vocational courses.

Finally, the system of genres involved in the everyday context of an application process may have been considered as a relatively narrow and straightforward topic. However, the system of genres as identified in the study is very complex. A foundation has therefore been laid to explore additional everyday processes and scenarios as systems of genres, to examine the experiences of ESL participants and identify the difficulties inherent in those systems. Within these systems of genres, the implications can be considered in terms of ensuring equity and access for ESL populations.

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**APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR ESL STUDENTS**

1. How did you first find out about the course which you are currently studying?  
Please circle below:  
VEC website      VEC information office      Friend  
Family member      Telephone enquiry      Advertisement  
Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- 2a. What information did you read or who did you speak to in order to find out about the course you wanted to apply for?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 2b. What information did you find difficult to understand when you were finding out about the course you wanted to study?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 3a. What information did you read or who did you speak to when you actually applied to the College?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 3b. How did you know how to apply for your course?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 3c. Did you have to attend an information session or interview for your course?  
Which did you attend? Please circle:  
Information session      Interview      None  
Other \_\_\_\_\_
- 3d. Did you have to complete an application form for your course?  
Please circle: Yes      No
- 3e. Please write down any problems you had with written or spoken information during the application process?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 3f. How did you deal with the problems you mentioned above?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. What can you suggest to help other students understand the English that is used in the conversations, written or computer-based information when finding out about and applying for courses?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. What other English language or Australian cultural problems did you have when finding out about and applying for your course?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR ESL STUDENTS**

*Ref question 1:*

- How did you know to look at that source/speak to that person?
- Did someone suggest it to you or was it your idea?

*Ref question 2:*

- Who or what helped you to find out about the actual course or subject you wanted to study?
- What questions did you need to ask to get the answers you wanted?
- On a scale of 1-5 with 5 being most difficult, what level of difficulty did you have? What was difficult - knowing how to ask the question or understanding the answers?

*Ref question 3:*

- If you spoke to someone, what questions did you ask them?
- If you emailed someone, what questions did you ask them?
- Were all your questions answered?
- On a scale of 1-5 with 5 being most difficult, what level of difficulty did you have in following the application process?
- What caused the difficulties?

*Ref question 4:* For the suggestions made

- Please tell me about that suggestion in more detail.
- What problem or difficulty would it help with?

*Ref. question 5:* Probe the answers

- When did that problem arise?
- Why was it a problem for you?
- How did you solve the problem?

**APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR CUSTOMER SERVICE OFFICERS**

1. What are the most usual types of interaction with students from non-English speaking backgrounds when they are making enquiries about mainstream/ vocational courses (eg. telephone enquiries, email, face-to-face)?
2. What are student enquiries relating to courses or applications typically about?
3. What English language difficulties do ESL students have with course information or the application process?
4. Which type of information seems to cause students most difficulty - telephone information, web-based, printed information or other?
5. Why do you think these type(s) of information cause them difficulty?
6. What do you do to help ESL students understand the information?
7. What suggestions can you make that may help ESL students understand the College course information and application process more easily?