

Intertextuality in business emails: An ESP Practitioner's commentary on Warren's research on intertextuality

Aiden Yeh

Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages, Taiwan



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Article history:

This paper is a commentary on the research conducted by [Warren \(2013, 2016\)](#) on intertextuality. In [Warren \(2013\)](#), the concept of intertextuality was illustrated with examples taken from professional emails. From a practitioner's point of view, I found that [Warren \(2016\)](#), which provides additional information that can be applied to teaching, should be viewed together with [Warren \(2013\)](#).

1. Significance for practice

The context for Warren's original research ([Warren, 2013](#)) was situated in Hong Kong, thus, the contextual background is highly relatable to other Asian countries such as Taiwan. In [Warren \(2016\)](#), he provides additional information that can be applied to teaching. This follow up study on signalling, types, and directionality of intertextuality in business emails would be particularly helpful when teaching business English. He provided an interesting visual representation of discourse flow of intertextuality in email business correspondence showing different kinds of texts (prior and predicted) ([Figure 1](#), cf. [Warren, 2016](#), p. 27). This would enhance students' language skills and teach them how to recycle, reframe, and refer to specific texts in the email that they need to address or respond to.

2. Practical applications

The presentation of email excerpts used in [Warren's \(2016\)](#) paper followed a clear transcription format. If presented to learners, they should be able to locate specific words or phrases from the text as each line was numbered. The underlined *prior and predicted* texts found in the examples showed how they were used in sentences (see [Figure 2](#), [Warren, 2016](#), p. 30, Example 1). The example sentences could help them write their own emails.

One thing to note when using transcripts such as the one in [Figure 2](#), however, is that simply presenting these transcripts and examples to learners without foregrounding and scaffolding the lessons on email intertextuality could be confusing (see [Chan \(2017\)](#) for problems with presenting transcripts directly to learners without adaptations).

The term 'intertextuality' could also be difficult to grasp for students at lower levels of proficiency. This is where the teacher could include a mini-lecture or class discussion on Writing Emails, the what and how of email writing, and the flow of email discourse, and of course, the tone of voice in writing intentions and interpretation of meaning behind the messages. The tasks could be divided into several lessons, so there is continuity and build-up of writing skills.

For more advanced students, I found [Warren's \(2016\)](#) use of corpus in presenting collocations and concordances of commonly paired words and phrases practical and effective. If possible, the teacher could incorporate data-driven learning

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E-mail address: aidenyeh@gmail.com.

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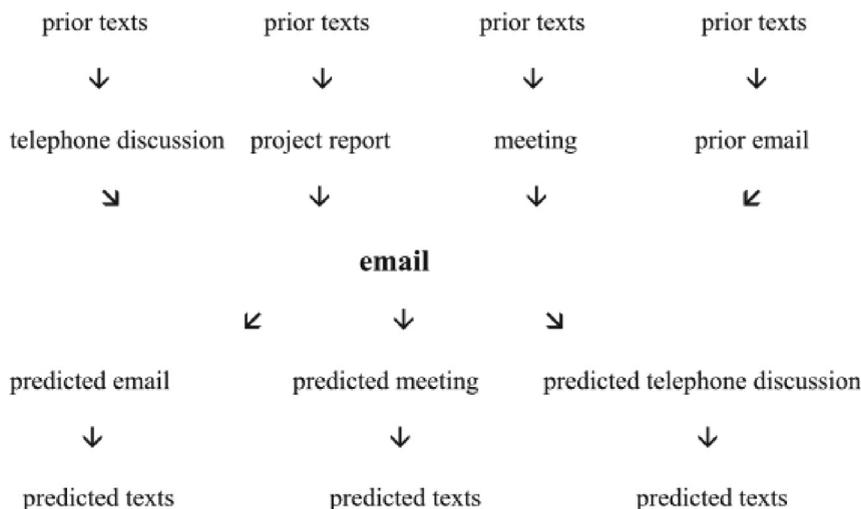


Figure 1. Visual representation of discourse flow of intertextuality in email business correspondence. Adapted from Warren (2016, p. 27).

Example 1 Email depicting intertextuality (internal + email)
 (prior texts underlined, *predicted texts in italics*)

1. From: CXXXX
2. Sent: 17 June 2008 09:26
3. To: SXXXX
4. Subject: RE: XXX Risk Entity Status - CCRA
5. SXXXX,
6. As confirmed with AXXXX, our previous suggested solution will be used to get
7. approved risk entity from ACA:
8. We rely on CA associated Risk entity table and CA life cycle state to
9. determine whether there is on-going approval for concerned Risk entity.
10. There should be no impact to conversion as all converted data from XXXX
11. are all "APPROVED". In XXXX current design, it rely on the XXXX (Life
12. cycle state) of the RE and the program do the following checking:
13. If IC_XXXX_T.XXXX of the today batch = "Approved", it means that the
14. latest approved entry for that particular risk entity is in IC_REX_T. XXXX
15. program can retrieve risk entity information from IC_REX_T
16. If IC_XXXX_T.XXXX <> "Approved". XXXX program should retrieve risk
17. entity information from credit datamart for the latest approved record. (latest
18. record with IC_XXXX_T.XXXX = "Approved").
19. Hence, changes need to make is to check the CA life cycle state for those RE
20. exist in CA associated RE table instead of IC_XXXX_T.XXXX.
21. *Regards,*
22. *CXXXX*

Figure 2. Adapted from Warren (2016, p. 30).

(DDL) using existing business emails corpus/corpora. *Key word in context (KWIC)* search could be used for specific genres of email writing e.g., requests, acceptance/refusal, etc. (see Chan (2014) for an example of tasks for learning from a corpus of business letters). In addition, DDL could bring in the authenticity of language use into ESP classrooms if corpora of authentic emails are used e.g., the Enron corpus, which is publicly available.

Warren's (2016) research questions are highly useful when assessing students' work on this task (see below). Hence, they could be adapted and added to a list of benchmarks that students could refer to for self-assessment prior to submission of their work. The teacher could also use the adapted benchmarks to justify the score/grade to be given.

Warren's questions:

- Are there recurrent words and phrases associated with instances of intertextuality?
- If so, are they aligned with the directionality of the instances of intertextuality?

- Do the power relationships between the participants influence the choice of words and phrases used?

Adapted version for learners:

- Are there recurrent words and phrases associated with/to the previous email correspondence?
- Are there prior or predictive texts used? What are the formulaic words/phrases that were used?
- Name the roles or positions of the email sender/sendee. What are the politeness registers used?

Example assessment benchmarks based on the above task questions:

- identify recurrent words and phrases associated with/to the previous email correspondence
- recognize predictive texts and formulaic expressions used in the emails
- demonstrate understanding of corporate references to professional roles or job positions
- identify politeness registers in the text

One aspect in [Warren's \(2016\)](#) study that would be challenging to implement or replicate is having access to the same kind of original, authentic business emails that he used. The emails that most teachers could collect and use are the students' own emails for providing 1) evidence of learning, 2) language use and application and 3) task-based or project-based performance assessment. However, if the students are at lower levels of proficiency, then there could be plenty of lexical or syntax errors. Nonetheless, this could still be used as data if the teacher/researcher is looking at L2 errors.

For practitioners that are interested in working on intertextuality with their students, the 2018 study by Bremner and Costley ([Bremner & Costley, 2018](#)) also provides a set of email tasks that are designed to help students deal with “the intertextual nature of workplace writing” (2018; p. 1). The students in their study were asked to complete three email tasks within a five-week period, that involved the sorts of tasks that are often needed in a workplace context, such as asking for information, or delivering bad news. These could be easily adapted for different teaching contexts with a longer teaching period or larger class sizes than those described in the study. For example, although the Bremner and Costley tasks were designed for individual students to complete, working on them in pairs or small groups would also be possible, and the activity could be extended by sharing them among teammates using Google docs for peer review and feedback from the teacher. A schedule or a to-do-list could also be shared using Google Calendar as an additional example of how intertextuality is used in the workplace.

3. Future directions

In studying signalling and intertextuality in business discourse, it would be invaluable to have access to open resources to Business English corpus and Corpus of emails categorized into different genres of various business contexts. A compilation of these resources plus other materials to be used e.g. telephone messages, sample memos, etc. can also be compiled for corpus-based business discourse analysis.

It would also be helpful to have a book of case studies based on real scenarios. The case studies should be designed for collaborative tasks where students work in small groups. Each group represents a company and members are given roles to play. Each case study would reflect real business situations where students build their company business. Emails and business interactions (like Zoom meetings) are recorded which can easily be shared and forwarded to others.

Examples of business companies that the groups could choose from are:

- A company with products or services to offer or sell (ABC Company)
- Advertising Agency (DEF Ad Agency)
- TV, Newspaper/Magazines, Social Media Network outlets
- 3rd party suppliers

Simulated business situations could range from:

- ABC company is looking for an advertising agency to help them create their ad campaign which consists of a series of ad layouts and a TV commercial.
- DEF Ad agency was asked to bid for the job.
- DEF Ad agency needs third party suppliers like production companies to produce the commercials.
- DEF Ad agency contacts various media outlets to inquire and negotiate ad placement costs for the whole duration of the campaign.
- DEF Ad agency submits their ad campaign studies together with ad placements costs to ABC company

- They establish negotiation parameters and seal the deal.

Each situation is a task that requires email correspondence and business meetings.

Each business transaction in the students' role play builds up and progresses to the next level, which is another business situation.

The progression of events leads to the final culmination of presenting the ad campaign or other outcomes.

The example above is based on Advertising and Marketing and there would be a different series of case studies for different professions, such as Banking and Finance, or Accounting etc.

The tasks could be given continuously throughout the semester and the roles could be given right at the beginning of the semester. The students would be asked to maintain these business roles until the end of the semester, which would be similar to running a real business. In other words, they would need to overcome the challenges of keeping their business afloat, which could be a good learning opportunity for students.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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Dr. Aiden Yeh is an Associate Professor at Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages, Taiwan where she teaches Linguistics and Discourse Analysis. She also serves as a thesis advisor for MA students doing research on corpus-based critical discourse analysis, migration and political discourse, and (socio)linguistics. She received her PhD in Applied Linguistics from the University of Birmingham, UK, and her MSc in ELT Management from the University of Surrey, UK.