

Telling ELT Tales out of School

“*In this paper I will discuss...*”: Current trends in academic writing

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Abstract

Corpus-based genre analysis studies not only describe the lexico-grammatical, discoursal and rhetorical features of academic writing in various disciplines but also reveal how these features change over time. In this respect, findings obtained through academic genre research potentially generate new pedagogical proposals or at least lead to a critical review of current practices in EAP writing programs. However, guidelines presented in academic writing manuals rarely respond to disciplinary variations revealed by research studies and are rarely based on analysis of authentic texts, actual practice and scientific evidence. A review of corpus-based genre analysis studies suggests that rhetorical aspects of academic writing such as authorial identity markers, citations and rhetorical moves have received considerable attention recently. This paper presents an overview of the findings in current research focusing on rhetorical aspects of academic writing and discusses the implications of these findings for EAP writing pedagogies.

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Keywords: Academic writing; rhetorical features; authorial identity; citations; rhetorical moves.

1. Introduction

Academic writing is not merely as a linguistic process. It is also a “socio-political process” (Casanave, 2003, 87) in which writers claim power in discourse communities. Authors seek acknowledgement and recognition in the social community they write for. To this end, they employ different strategies to manifest their authorial identity. As pointed out by Casanave (2003, 90), compared to the previous years, in recent years, research in writing has become more focused on how the cognitive, expressive and linguistic aspects of writing processes are embedded in social and political contexts of writing, and how all these aspects of writing interact to get writing accomplished.

Contrastive genre analysis studies reveal extensive variations across texts written by expert and novice writers especially in rhetorical aspects of academic writing such as author presence markers, citations and rhetorical moves. Findings in these studies might generate new pedagogical proposals or at least lead to a critical review of content in academic writing manuals presented to novice writers. This paper presents an overview of such trends in current

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academic writing research and discusses the impact that findings of such studies might have on EAP writing pedagogies.

2. Current definitions of academic writing

Academic texts, like other forms of writing, are no longer defined as static or monolithic artifacts. Lexicogrammatical, rhetorical and discoursal features of academic writing change in time. Moreover, genres form intertextual relationships with each other. Swales (2004) emphasizes the shift in the definition of genre from a static entity towards a dynamic entity by introducing the concept of “genre networks”. Describing genres with the metaphor of a network, Swales (2004) reflects his observation that genres in the research world are frequently transformed into other genres. He points out that published articles can both precede and follow theses, and further, articles can be combined into theses (2004, 22).

Current definitions of competency in academic writing are not solely based on linguistic ability but also on awareness of rhetorical features of writing accepted by the discourse community. Tardy (2005, 325) defines academic writing as “transformation of knowledge”, which involves persuading readers of the work’s value, significance and credibility. Hyland (2005, 1092) calls the academic writing process “an act of identity” since it not only conveys disciplinary content but also carries a representation of the writer. (Casanave, 2003, 88) on the other hand, defines academic writing as a “socio-political process” that takes place in a social context where writers and their writings are compared to other writers and their writings, and where institutional norms, instructor and gatekeeper criteria, feedback and decisions of powerful evaluators help determine what “success” means.

3. Authorial identity in academic writing

Authorial identity might be manifested through various linguistic markers in academic writing such as use of first person pronouns and metadiscourse. First person pronouns play a crucial role through which writers communicate with their audiences and construct their authorial identity. In this respect, Hyland (2001) comments that the decision to adopt an impersonal rhetorical style or to represent oneself explicitly might influence the impression writers make on readers and might have significant consequences for how their message is received. However, findings in studies contrasting novice and expert writers’ use of first person pronouns indicate that expert writers commonly use first person pronouns for promoting their work. Novice writers, on the other hand, either under-use these pronouns or they use them for functions rarely preferred by expert writers.

Hyland (2002) compared a corpus of L2 undergraduate reports in different disciplines with a corpus of research articles. He observed that his L2 informants mainly used first person pronouns in non-controversial contributions, such as referring to methodological approaches, but avoided using them in the expression of arguments or opinions.

Harwood (2005) conducted a qualitative corpus-based study to investigate how academic writers used the personal pronouns *I* and *we* to help create a self-promotional tenor in their texts. He analyzed articles from the fields of physics, economics, computing science and business and management. The study showed that even supposedly “author-evacuated” articles in the hard sciences employ self-promotional strategies through the use of personal pronouns

According to Harwood (2005, 1209) the common belief that academic writers protect themselves against falsification by distancing themselves from their findings and avoiding personal pronouns is losing ground these days. This is partly because more research is being conducted now than at any time previously and it is harder to get people’s attention in this crowded environment. Thus, the use of personal pronouns in academic writing as most explicit markers of author identity has increased in years.

The corpus studies on the use of personal pronouns in academic writing have identified a number of functions that *I* and *we* can play. (e.g., Isik Tas, 2008; Martinez, 2005; Hyland, 2001). Harwood lists (2005, 1210) these functions as follows:

- (1) to help the writer organize the text and guide the reader through the argument (e.g. First I will discuss x and then y),
- (2) state personal opinions and knowledge claims (On the basis of my data, I would claim),
- (3) recount experimental procedure and methodology (We interviewed 60 subjects over the space of several months), and

- (4) acknowledge funding bodies, institutions, and individuals that contributed to the study in some way (I thank Professor X for his help with the calculations.)

Harwood (2005) points out that the pronouns of *I* and *we* are linked with the authorial presence and the visibility of the writer in the text. Harwood (2005, 1211) identified three distinct ways that authors use self-promotional *I* and *we*.

- (1) Personalizing claims: the writer as authority and originator
- (2) Procedural soundness and uniqueness
- (3) Self-Citation

Hyland and Tse (2005) investigated the frequencies, forms and functions of evaluative *that* in research articles, masters and doctoral dissertations written by L2 students. Comparing student and expert writers' use of the structure across six disciplines, they found that evaluative *that* was widely employed in the abstracts and was an important means of marking authorial stance. However, they also found that L2 students were less reluctant to use evaluative *that* compared to expert writers.

Martinez (2005) compared the use of first person in a corpus of biology articles produced by non-native English-speaking (NNES) writers and a corpus of research article manuscripts produced by native English-speaking writers, focusing on first person distribution and function in the different sections. The results revealed under-use, over-use and phraseological problems in the NNES corpus. The first person occurred in all sections of both corpora, with significant differences of use across sections. The most notable differences occurred in the Results section, where NES used first person mainly to show that they assumed responsibility for the methodological decisions that led to the results obtained.

Isik Tas (2008) analyzed a corpus of PhD theses and research articles to find out how first person pronouns were used by expert and novice authors. In contrast to the authors of the RA introductions, who used self-mentions frequently, the authors of the PhD thesis introductions rarely marked their presence in their writing. Also, in few instances where PhD thesis authors marked their presence, they referred to themselves as “the/this researcher” or “this author” instead of the personal pronouns *I* and *we*. In contrast, in all of the self-mentions in the RA introductions, the authors used the personal pronouns *I* and *we*. Another variation between the two corpora concerned the rhetorical function of the self-mentions. All of the self-mentions in the RA introductions either expressed the soundness and uniqueness of the research or personalized the claims of the author, which are regarded as self-promotional strategies by Harwood (2005). However, none of the self-mentions in the PhD thesis introductions fulfilled these functions. The authors marked their presence in their writing as a tool to guide the readers through their writing or to recount their experimental procedure and methodology. Martinez (2005) also found that the nonnative English-speaking novice authors in her study had more tendency to use the first person pronouns in non-risk functions such as stating a goal, rather than in high-risk functions such as presenting their work and announcing principle outcomes.

PhD students in Hyland's (2005) study were also found to be more comfortable in using self-mentions than the MA students in the same study. However, as a general tendency, many of the students who were interviewed saw self-mentions as inappropriate for novices, believing that it conflicted with the requirement of objectivity and academic writing.

Swales (2004, 117) comments that unlike the research articles in more competitive arenas, the PhD thesis introductions may also lack certain explicitness with regard to the role and innovative character of the writer's own research. However, according to Swales (ibid.), this criticism may not necessarily reflect rhetorical weakness per se but rather an unassuming objectivity. “After all, not all doctoral students believe in their hearts that their theses are really making a substantial and original contribution to the field” (Swales, ibid.).

4. Citations in academic writing

Contrastive studies indicate extensive variations in the amount and type of citations used by expert and novice writers. Pecorari (2006) argues that citations are occluded features of writing because the writer makes a promise that the relationship of the citing and the cited text is appropriate to the discourse community.

Whether this promise is kept depends on the writer's skill (i.e., the ability to carry out rhetorical task of reporting sources transparently), on the writer's integrity, and on the writer's expertise as a judge of what is acceptable within the discourse community. In the case of postgraduates, however, expertise cannot be taken for granted.

Pecorari (2006, 6)

Pecorari (2006) investigated the visible and occluded features of postgraduate second-language writing in a PhD and Master's theses written by NNSEs in the fields of biology, civil engineering, linguistics and education. The writers in this study were found to respond to their disciplines' expectations in terms of the visible aspects of source use, but with regard to the occluded features such as citations, their writing diverged considerably from disciplinary norms.

Isik Tas (2008) analyzed citations in the introduction sections of theses written in PhD programs in ELT offered by Turkish universities and in the introduction sections of published research articles in ELT written by expert authors of different nationalities. Substantial variations were found in the citation frequencies and citation types across the two corpora. First of all, the authors of the RA introductions tended to cite more frequently compared to the authors of the PhD thesis introductions. Secondly, unlike the authors of the RA introductions, who preferred non-integral citations, the authors of the PhD thesis introductions preferred integral citations. Thirdly, the authors of the PhD thesis introductions had more tendency to exercise secondary citation, compared to the authors of the RA introductions, who rarely made use of secondary citation.

5. Rhetorical moves in academic writing

Research writing and academic writing pedagogies have been deeply influenced by Swales' (1990) Create A Research Space Model (CARS Model). This model is originally based on analyses of research article introductions in various fields. However, it is widely used as a model for PhD theses and other academic writing genres. Although academic genres in the same genre set such as research articles and PhD theses might have similar move structures, they are not completely identical since they are intended for different audiences. In fact, corpus-based genre analysis studies reveal extensive variations across different disciplines and even across different genres within the same discipline.

Peacock (2002) analyzed the rhetorical moves in discussion sections across seven disciplines -physics, biology, environmental science, business, language and linguistics, public and social administration, and law. In this study, a number of marked interdisciplinary and NS/NNS differences were found in the type and number of moves and move cycles.

Brett (2002) analyzed research articles in the field of sociology to identify the moves found in the "results" sections. The analysis revealed that the moves identified in this study had certain similarities with the "discussion" sections of hard science research articles, and provided evidence of disciplinary variation.

Kwan (2006) examined doctoral theses produced by native English speaking students of Applied Linguistics. The aim of the study was to identify the rhetorical structure of the RL (Review of Literature) chapter and compare it with the revised CARS model (Bunton, 2002) that has been posited for thesis introductions. The analysis revealed that although most of the steps in Bunton's revised CARS model were present in the move structures, some new steps were also distinguishable. The findings suggest that LRs and introductions may not be the same in structure.

Ozturk (2007) explored the degree of variability in the structure of article introductions within a single discipline. The study analyzed a corpus of research articles to reveal the differences between two subdisciplines of applied linguistics, namely second language acquisition and second language writing research, within the framework of Swales' CARS model. The two disciplines seemed to employ different and almost unrelated move structures.

Isik Tas (2008) analyzed the genre-specific features of introductions in a corpus of theses written in PhD programs in ELT offered by Turkish universities and in a corpus of published research articles in ELT written by expert authors of different nationalities. The contrastive analysis aimed to specify the similarities and differences in the move structure of the two corpora. Although the CARS Model (Swales, 2004), to a large extent described the move-step structure of the RA introductions, it did not completely account for the move-step structure of the PhD theses introductions. First of all, the authors of the PHD theses introductions did not tend to indicate a gap in the previous research. Instead, they described their motive to conduct the study, which was in most cases a problem that

they observed in their immediate context. Moreover, they stated the assumptions, limitations, scope of their study and made lengthy definitional clarifications which were rarely found in RA introductions.

6. Discussion and implications for EAP pedagogy

Research findings presented in this paper suggest that there are extensive variations in the rhetorical conventions employed by novice and expert writers. Thus, EAP writing pedagogies should be shaped in a way that raises novice writers' awareness of the ways expert writers use first person pronouns, citations and rhetorical moves.

Research findings presented in this paper might have important implications for especially graduate level EAP writing pedagogies. Hyland (2008, 2) points out that gaining control of a new register requires sensitivity to expert writers' preferences and may offer insights into apprentice and expert performance and feed into classroom practices. Casanave (2003), in the same vein, stresses the need for future researchers to investigate to what extent a field constructed by scholarly people in public discourse accords with ways its practitioners construct and practice it, particularly in non-Western EFL settings.

Three main directions are proposed by researchers to raise graduate students' awareness of rhetorical features of the research article. The first is the apprenticeship approach (Pecorari, 2006) involving the co-authoring of a research article by the post-graduate student and the thesis supervisor. The second approach is the integration of the input or awareness raising tasks into the graduate programs or the supervision of the students by their thesis supervisor in the course of their research article writing process. The last proposal is a shift from the "traditional thesis" into the "article-compilation thesis" (Paltridge, 2000) which will familiarize the students with the rhetorical conventions employed by expert writers.

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