

A Comparison Study on the Rhetorical Moves of Abstracts in Published Research Articles and Master's Foreign-language Theses

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Abstract

The abstract of research papers is one of the first things that a reader will read to determine the value of the research. A well-written abstract will surely promote the text attached to it more effectively. By examining the rhetorical moves in the abstracts of Chinese Master's English theses and published research articles in applied linguistics, this study compares the practices of student writers and expert writers in fulfilling the rhetorical goal of abstracts to shed light on the degree to which students appropriate to the practices of their own discipline and to provide relevant ESP materials for both teachers and student writers of applied linguistics, especially those who write in English as a foreign language.

Keywords: Abstract, Rhetorical moves, Research articles, Master theses

1. Introduction

Writing, as an important academic activity, imposes great challenge for writers, especially for novice student writers. The challenge is even enhanced when students write in English as a foreign language, as they not only have to appropriate themselves to the disciplinary discourse but also to do it in a language whose rhetorical convention is quite often different from that of their mother tongue. An effective way to help students cope with the challenges in academic writing might be to make the knowledge of writing explicit to students through genre analysis. This has actually been a major concern of the research in English for specific purposes (ESP) (Hammond & Derewianka, 2001).

An increasingly important area in such research is the study of thesis writing at the postgraduate level, with much attention paid to theses written in English as a second or foreign language. Many of them either focus on certain rhetorical features (eg. Charles, 2003; Pecorari, 2006) or explore the rhetorical structures of certain sections, such as introductions (eg. Bunton, 2002; Samraj, 2008), literature review (eg. Kwan, 2006) and conclusions (eg. Bunton, 2005). Among all the literature on thesis writing at postgraduate level, study on abstract writing seems to be neglected, in contrast to the flourishing study on abstracts of published research articles (eg. Hyland, 2000; Lores, 2004). This might be due to the fact that abstracts of theses do not usually play the role of helping people process the ever growing information in this information age (Ventola, 1994, cited in Lorés, 2004) or winning a wider readership as those of published research articles (RA) do since theses are mainly read by examiners. However, the writing of theses abstracts should not be ignored, since the postgraduate thesis abstract is still one of the first things that the examiner sees and is thus instrumental in constructing an impression of a writer who has a legitimate place in the discourse community.

One important resource for novice writers to learn to write in acceptable ways in their discipline is published texts in that domain (Pecorari, 2006), and this might be actually the best resource for novice writers to learn to write abstracts since research (eg. Hyland, 2000; Santos, 1996) has shown that the actual practice of abstract writing of expert writers is not in accordance with guidance given in abstract-writing manuals. Though the larger context of abstracts of theses and published RA (such as the length of the papers they appoint to and different readership they have) differs in some way, their similar rhetorical goals to inform or/and to persuade readers determine their similar choices for effective rhetorical moves within the same discipline. Therefore, by comparing the rhetorical moves in the abstracts of Chinese Master's English theses and published RAs in applied linguistics, this research aims to deepen our understanding of "the mechanisms which underlie these multifunctional texts" (Lorés, 2004) and to provide relevant ESP materials for Chinese master's students of applied linguistics and others under similar condition facing similar problems.

2. Literature Review

As a growing research interest, the study of abstracts abounds in linguistic literature. With a major focus on the abstracts of RA, research presents a wide coverage of topic from the general organization of abstracts (eg. Bhatia, 1993; Hyland, 2000; Lorés, 2004; Santos, 1996) to specific rhetorical features in abstracts, such as evaluation (eg. Hyland & Tse, 2005; Stotesbury, 2003), the distribution of verb tense (eg. Salager-Meyer, 1991; Swales & Feak, 1994), the distribution of modality (eg. Salager-Meyer, 1991) and feature of academic criticism (eg. Martín-Martín & Burgess, 2004). Study of abstract in relation to introduction of the research article as a genre set also provides a new way of looking at abstracts (Samraj, 2005). These studies either seek the typical practices within a discipline (eg. Santos, 1996) or demonstrate variations across disciplines (eg. Hyland, 2000) or languages (eg. Martín-Martín & Burgess, 2004).

Underlying the literature, there seems to be different understanding about the communicative purpose of RA abstracts among researchers. Some emphasize the informative function of abstracts. For example, Bhatia (1993) believes that the communicative purpose of the abstract is to present “a faithful and accurate summary, which is representative of the whole article” (p. 82). This is in line with the definition of abstracts put forward by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI), which says “[a]n abstract is an abbreviated, accurate representation of the contents of a document” (as cited in Huckin, 2006, p. 94). Based on such understanding, Bhatia exemplifies a four-move structure of abstracts, which broadly mirrors the rhetorical structure of the whole paper, namely introduction, method, results and discussion or alternatively called conclusion, as also noted by Hyland (2000) and Lorés (2004). This echoes Salager-Mayer’s (1990, cited in Hyland, 2000) proposal for the reproduction of the structure of the whole paper in the abstracts. Such emphasis on the informative function of abstracts may be well supported by the need for scholars or specialists to face the information explosion in this Information Age and keep up with the most recent development in their own fields through concise but informative abstracts.

Interestingly, on exactly the same ground of massive research production but for different purposes, Hyland (2000) argues for the importance of the persuasive function of the abstract. With the fast growing knowledge production in this Information Age, scholars and specialists have to be selective in their consumption of the research output even just in their own fields. The decision as to whether an article is worth reading or not is often made by readers through reading the abstracts (Hyland, 2000). Abstracts can actually be the “screening devices” (Huckin, 2006) for readers. Therefore, it is important for academic writers to persuade their readers to read the whole article with effective rhetorical choices in their abstracts, in addition to inform them about their articles.

Awareness of the persuasive communicative purpose of abstracts and linguistic manipulation to fulfill such a purpose is reflected in expert writers’ actual writing practices, which has been reported in a number of studies. For example, Hyland (2000) identified various traits for claiming significance or insider credibility in abstracts, such as employing discursive markings and indicating a gap in the literature, as means of promoting the full articles. In another study, he (2005) found that the evaluative “that” construction was widely used in abstracts to foreground writers’ attitudinal meanings which were complemented with explicit evaluation. This strategic use of evaluative “that” allows writers to promote their argument and findings in a convincing way and therefore encourages further reading of the appointed article. In Martín-Martín and Burgess’ (2004) comparison study of the use of academic criticism in abstracts, critical speech acts, often with mitigation, were found to be employed with a higher frequency in abstracts written in English than those in Spanish as a means to persuade the reader about the contribution of the research. The authors attribute this difference to the different levels of competition to publish in these two languages.

Besides these specific rhetorical features, the “cognitive structuring of abstracts” realized through different rhetorical moves is also an important way to fulfill the purpose of persuasion (Hyland, 2000). Based on his comprehensive study of 800 abstracts across 8 disciplines with his five-move classification of rhetorical moves in abstracts (namely introduction, purpose, method, product, and conclusion), Hyland (2000) convincingly concludes that writers’ selective representation of their articles in the abstracts through various patterns of rhetorical moves is determined by how they think they can best convince others, especially members in their discipline, of their work, and the general patterns of writers’ choices often vary across disciplines. Such variations can also be seen from other studies on the move structure of abstracts (eg. Huckin, 2006; Melander et al., 1997, cited in Samraj, 2005; Santos, 1996). These variations are due to different knowledge structure of different disciplines and reveal what is regarded as import information in persuading other members within the same disciplinary community (Hyland, 2000; Hucking, 2006). While these studies on the general patterns of abstracts do not say much about each specific move, Lorés (2004) set a good example for studying the development of each move in detail by examining the thematic progression of different moves of abstracts from 4 linguistic journals. However, the importance which writers attach to different moves in the abstracts has not been given enough attention and such information can be very helpful for

novice writers and therefore will be examined in this study.

In contrast to these abundant studies on published RA abstracts, little has been done on the abstracts of postgraduate theses. As abstracts “are significant carriers of a discipline’s epistemological and social assumptions” (Hyland, 2000, p.63), a comparison study on abstracts of postgraduate theses and published RAs within the same discipline can shed light on the degree to which students appropriate to the practices of their own discipline and reveal the aspects that they need to work on. The necessity of such research can be justified since previous research has shown deviation of student-produced texts from disciplinary practices (eg. Samraj, 2008; Pecorari, 2006). One important aspect to study is the rhetorical moves of abstracts since the successful fulfillment of the rhetorical goal is directly related to the effective use of rhetorical moves. Therefore, this study examines the rhetorical moves in the abstracts of Chinese Master’s English theses and published RAs in applied linguistics to compare the practices of student writers and expert writers and explore how students can improve their practice in fulfilling the rhetorical goal of their abstracts persuasively.

3. Methodology

Two sets of data were compiled for this comparison study. One set is composed of 25 expert-written abstracts collected randomly from 5 leading journals in applied linguistics published in 2007, with 5 abstracts from each journal. The other set is composed of 25 abstracts of Chinese master’s theses in applied linguistics written in English in 2007 available from the Master theses database randomly chosen from five different Chinese universities.

Hyland’s (2000) classification of rhetorical moves (introduction, purpose, method, product, and conclusion) was applied to the analysis of the move structure of the data, rather than the four-move classification of introduction, method, result, conclusion/ discussion used in some other studies (eg. Samraj, 2005). It is mainly because the finer distinction between introduction and purpose in Hyland’s classification can present a clearer picture of the structure of the rhetorical moves of the abstracts collected. Other moves emerged from the data were also added to the classification. For inter-rater reliability, another researcher was asked to identify the moves as well. Then the results were compared. There were four discrepancies in our analysis and after discussion we reached an agreement. A word count of each move was conducted with the help of computer. The importance that writers attach to different moves was inferred from the length of them. Since abstracts are presented in such confined rhetorical space, it is reasonable to assume that the importance that writers attach to each move is in relation to the length of it.

4. Findings and Discussion

Though the five rhetorical moves identified by Hyland (2000) are commonly used in the abstracts of both published research articles and Master theses, differences in the way of employing the moves are revealed in the data. As illustrated in Table 1, the percentages of RA abstracts containing the five rhetorical moves (introduction, purpose, method, product, and conclusion) are respectively 60%, 96%, 60%, 100%, and 52%; while the percentage of the thesis abstracts containing the five moves are 100%, 100%, 100%, 90%, and 80% respectively. The most commonly found move structures in RAs are purpose-method-product (-conclusion), introduction-purpose-method-product (-conclusion), and introduction-purpose-product (-conclusion) and the percentages of the RA abstracts that take these move structures are respectively 32%, 28% and 28%. Whether these structures are followed by the “conclusion” move or not is not distinguished here. On the other hand, most thesis abstracts follow a six-move structure, which is introduction-purpose-method-product-conclusion-structure. Though the move “product” and “conclusion” are missing in a few theses abstracts, they are actually included in the “structure move”. The different percentages of RA abstracts and theses abstracts containing different rhetorical moves and the different move structures show that RA abstracts tend to be selective in the use of the 5 basic moves, which echoes the findings of Hyland (2000), while student-written thesis abstracts tend to include them all by following the structure of their theses. Though the fact that thesis abstracts are often allowed more space than RA abstracts might contribute to the difference in a sense, such difference may still indicate that while experts confidently make choices to best serve their purpose, students usually tend to play safe by including every move. Therefore, the experts seem to pay more attention to the persuasive role rather than the informative role of RA abstracts, while student writers tend to pay more attention to the informative role rather than the persuasive role of thesis abstracts.

It is also interesting to note that 52% of RAs contain the move of “conclusion”. However, in Hyland’s study (2000) this move is only employed in 21% of the abstracts investigated and mainly in the discipline of biology and marketing. As “[c]onclusions...explicitly emphasize the value of the paper, either to the discipline or to the wider community”, the higher percentage of the RAs containing this move may suggest that more and more scholars are making greater effort to promote their papers, which is probably due to the severe competition in publishing. However, due to the limited data of this study, this finding needs to be tested in larger scale studies.

Besides the five basic moves that are commonly found in RA abstracts, three extra moves are identified in

student-written abstracts, namely: structure, promotion, and limitation. “Structure” describes the structure of the theses and is commonly found in theses abstracts, which might be partly due to the fact that theses abstracts are usually longer than RA abstracts, with an average of 434 words for a thesis abstract and 199 words for a RA abstract in the sample. However, 24% of the students repeated what they had written in previous moves in the “structure” move, which shows their unawareness of the value of space in academic writing. “Promotion” overly states the strength of the paper, such as “[t]he innovations of this thesis may be found in two aspects...” This is not common and is always balanced with a statement of the limitation of the paper in the “limitation” move, such as “owing to limitations in the available references and the author’s academic faculty...” As all the cases with the move of “promotion” come from the same university, it shows institutional variation, which might not be desirable in academic writing. The higher percentage of “limitation” than “promotion” means some thesis abstracts include the move of “limitation” without mentioning the strength. This might show student writers’ self image as novice writers who lack confidence in their work. The fact that no RA includes this move in the abstract though every paper has its own limitation may suggest that it might not be a good idea to eagerly admit the limitation of the paper in the abstract before the actual presentation of the paper. This might not do much to convince the reader of the value of the paper, if not undermine it.

Move choices do not only refer to which move to choose, but also how much of it, which has not been dealt with in previous research. The length of each move can indicate the importance that writers attach to it, since abstracts are presented in such confined rhetorical space. Table 2 shows the average length of each move in the data. One thing important to note is that the largest portion in the student-written abstract is devoted to the “introduction” move (46.4%). This shows students’ effort in constructing the significance of their papers which is often regarded as important in soft disciplines such as applied linguistics for the absence of well-defined problems as pointed out by Hyland (2000). Nevertheless, the very brief “product” move (only 7.6%) seems to indicate the lack of substance of the paper. Such difference actually indicates students’ insecurity about their topic and their findings. In contrast, 24.5% of the RA abstract is devoted to the “introduction” move and 30.6% to the “product” move. The lower percentage of space for introduction shows the writer’s confidence in claiming the importance of their topic and the higher percentage for product indicates rich substance of the paper. Necessary construction of the significance of the topic in the “introduction” move prepares for establishing the significance of the findings in the “product” move; and sufficient explanation of the findings in the “product” move would in turn prove the significance of the topic in the “introduction” move. In other words, the expert writers demonstrate a much more balanced use of these two moves to back up each other and thus increase the persuasiveness of the abstract in promoting the text attached to it. Such difference shows students’ incomplete appropriation to disciplinary practices in accordance with the findings of previous research (eg. Samraj, 2008; Pecorari, 2006).

5. Conclusion

By comparing the rhetorical moves in the abstracts of Chinese Master’s English theses and published RAs in applied linguistics, this study examines the different practices of student writers and expert writers in fulfilling the rhetorical goal of their abstracts in this discipline. Though all the five basic rhetorical moves in developing abstracts are commonly found in the abstracts written by both experts and student writers, experts tend to be more selective in their use of the moves to best promote their papers, while student writers tend to include all the moves to be more informative of the content and structure of their theses. Some student writers even include “limitation” in their abstracts without mentioning the strength, which might undermine the value of their work. This is in contrast to expert writers’ effort in promoting their paper in their abstract by including the “conclusion” move more often. Students’ lengthy “introduction” move and over brief “product” move, in contrast to expert writers’ balanced use of these two moves, reveals their insecurity as novice writers. Students’ repetition in their abstracts indicates their unawareness of the value of space in academic writing. Though these differences might be partly due to the genre difference between RA abstracts and thesis abstracts, they can still reflect students’ incomplete appropriation to disciplinary practices. This has important pedagogical implications. In order to help students construct an impression of a writer who has a legitimate place in the discourse community, teachers might need to raise students’ awareness of the different practices between student writers and expert writers and guide them to select the most appropriate rhetorical moves to fulfill their rhetorical goals. Due to the limited data of this study, the findings in the study need to be tested in larger scale studies.

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Table1. Percentage of RA abstracts and theses abstracts containing different rhetorical moves

Moves	Introduction	Purpose	Method	Product	Conclusion	Structure	Promotion	Limitation
RAs	60%	96%	60%	100%	52%	0	0	0
Theses	100%	100%	100%	90%	80%	70%	20%	40%

Table2. Average length of each move in RA abstracts (RA) and theses abstracts (Theses)

Moves	Introduction	Purpose	Method	Product	Conclusion	Structure	Promotion	Limitation
RA	24.5%	14.1%	18.9%	30.6%	9.4%	0	0	0
Theses	46.4%	12.1%	10.3%	7.6%	7.0%	9.7%	1.9%	4.9%