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Identifying problems in writing thesis introductions in research methodology class

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Abstract

Introduction, as a genre, has conventionally been understood as a piece of discourse which introduces other forms of lengthy discourse, be it a research article, a project report, a laboratory report or even a student essay. In writing introductions to dissertations, Dudley-Evans (1989) discovered a six-move structures. This move structure provides a step-by-step instruction for students to use and is a user-friendly guide in writing their thesis introductions. These moves are designed in a very simple manner that is understood by students at the undergraduate level. This paper which is based on a research that analysed undergraduate research proposals written by students majoring in English Language studies. The aim is to identify if the introduction section adheres to the moves suggested by Evans (1989). Based on the findings the researchers will to introduce a genre-based approach to guide students in writing their thesis introductions.

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1. Introduction

The primary function of written language is to get things done, to convey information and to get information – the transactional function (Brown & Yule, 1983). When you write, it is most often for a purpose (Hashim, 2005). On branch of writing, academic writing consists of research papers, theses, assignments and reports. As the term paper would denote, these documents all serve a particular purpose and is for the purview of a particular group of readers. More specifically, research articles and theses have as their main purpose, the communication of research findings
and have as their target audience, the academic discourse community of the field or area of research being reported. Due to the transactional nature and message-orientedness of the written language, there is a tendency to use more specific words. In the context of academic writing, researchers want their target audience to understand and accept their findings and arguments. Therefore, it is crucial as well that when writing for academic purposes, certain conventions and techniques are used. It is of utmost importance that what is written will reach the targeted readers – fellow researchers, to construct the intended meaning when reading the research articles or theses. In other words, academics attempting to write theses must know "how to write well in order to deliver the research findings effectively". And in order to achieve this, one must know the conventions of academic writing. This is especially so if one is a novice or a new member of the academic discourse as in the case of the students attending the Research Methodology course.

The ability to communicate with clarity and conforming to the conventions of the genre would take time to acquire or learn. However, with the help of a branch of research known as Genre Analysis, researchers have been able to identify certain prototypes of the different documents of academic writing such as theses and research articles. More specifically, genre analysis has been able to unearth the formal structures of the subsections of the theses such as Abstract, Introduction, Method, Results and Discussion.

Bhatia (1993) defines genre as an event of communication that is recognizable, which is identified by a set of communicative purposes which members of the professional or academic community mutually understand and recognize, and it happens regularly. He further listed 7 criteria of genre as below:

a. Genres are reflections of disciplinary cultures and those of the realities of the world of discourse, in general.

b. Genres focus on conventionalized communicative events embedded within the discipline of professional practices.

c. All disciplinary or professional genres have integrity of their own, identified with reference to textual and discursive (text –internal) factors, or contextual and disciplinary (text-external) factors. It is not always fixed but frequently contested.

d. Genres are recognizable communicative events, characterized by a set of communicative purposes identified and mutually understood by members of the professional or academic community in which they regularly occur.

e. Genres are highly structured and conventionalized constructs, with constraints on allowable contributions in terms of the intentions one can give expression to, the shape they can take, and also in terms of the co-grammatical resources one can employ to give discoursal values to such formal features.

f. Established members of a particular professional community will have a much greater knowledge and understanding of generic practices than those who are apprentices, new members, or outsiders.

g. Although genres are viewed as conventionalized constructs, expert members of the disciplinary and professional communities are often in a position to exploit such conventions to express 'private intentions' within the structures of socially acceptable communicative norms.

(Bhatia, 2002:23).

Genre analysis is able to provide useful information for novice writers who are not experienced users of a genre, by exposing them to the conventions of a particular genre and also the reasons assumed to underlie such conventions in the social practices of a community (Bhatia, 1997). With this awareness of genre practices, novice writers should be able to explore and produce more complex genres independently and creatively. Another advantage of genre analysis is that it is not prescriptive. Once novice writers have mastered using the conventions of a particular genre, they can produce their own representations of the genre based on genre exemplars. As Bhatia (1993:40) points out:

> [e]xploiting rules and conventions for the sake of creativity and innovation is good but it is much better to do so after one has developed at least a good awareness of, if not a good mastery over, such conventions. Moreover, analysis of generic conventions need not always be used prescriptively.

Furthermore, the fact that explicit knowledge of genre conventions is used in practice, has the potential to provide long term benefits and aid students in retaining genre knowledge over an extended period of time (Hyon, 2001). Introduction, as a genre, has conventionally been understood as a piece of discourse which introduces other forms of lengthy discourse, be it a research article, a project report, a laboratory report or even a student essay. In writing introductions to dissertations, Dudley-Evans (1989) discovered a six-move structure:

1. Move 1: Introducing the field
2. Move 2: Introducing the general topic (within the field)
3. Move 3: Introducing the particular topic (within the general topic)
4. Move 4: Defining the scope of the particular topic by:
   i.   Introducing research parameters
   ii. Summarizing previous research
5. Move 5: Preparing for present research by:
   i.   Indicating a gap in previous research
   ii. Indicating a possible extension of previous research
6. Move 6: introducing present research by:
   i.   Stating the aim of the research or
   ii.   Describing briefly the work carried out
   iii. Justifing the research

Based on the preliminary analysis of the undergraduate theses majoring in English Language studies, the researchers discovered that majority of the students were unable to write their introduction section adequately based on Dudley-Evans' (1989) proposed 6-move structures.

To address the issue above, the researchers would like to introduce a genre-based approach to guide students in writing their thesis introductions. This move structure provides a step-by-step instruction for students to adopt a user-friendly guide in writing their thesis introductions. These moves are designed in a very simple manner that is understood by students at the undergraduate level.

At present, the researchers are involved in teaching a Research Methodology course to second year students. This approach will be used as an intervention plan to facilitate the writing of the introduction section of the research proposal which will eventually be used in the thesis writing during the final year.

2. Methodology

The study employs a qualitative research design using action research. The sample of the study is a group of 22 second year students majoring in English language Studies at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. They are currently attending a course on Research Methodology whereby they are required to write a research proposal at the end of the course.

The instruments for the study are:
1. A collection of 22 research proposal introductions
2. Genre-based materials for the intervention
3. A collection of 22 research proposal introductions after the intervention

The research procedure began with the collection of 22 research proposal introductions from the students. The students were required to write a research proposal as part of the assessment for the Research Methodology course. These proposal introductions were analysed to identify the problems. Next, an intervention in the form of instructional materials is implemented. The materials are based on the six-move structure in writing thesis introduction proposed by Dudley-Evans (1989). During this intervention, students will be guided step-by-step to write the introduction section using the genre-based approach. At the end of the intervention the introductions written by the students were collected. They were analysed to evaluate the effects of genre-based approach in writing introductions. Based on the findings, this approach will be refined in order to implement the genre-based approach in the Research Metodology course offered by the program.

Findings

The analysis of the introductions written by the students indicate that before the intervention, 50% of the students have included all the 6 moves suggested by Dudley-Evans. However, for moves 4,5 and six most of the students did not employ all the sub-moves. For example Sample 1 did not include sub-move for number 4 (introducing the research parameters) and sub-move number 5 (Indicating a possible extension in previous research). After the intervention, the same number of students (11 -50%) have employed all the moves.

When we compared between the pre and post-intervention, a total number of 9 students (40.9%) showed improvements in writing their introductions of the research proposal. In other words, they have employed more moves after the intervention. 5 students (22.7%) did not show any improvement by employing the same number of moves. 8 students (36.4%) were found to employ less moves after the intervention.

Comparing all the moves employed by the students, it is found that all 22 students (100%) have employed move 1 (Introducing the field), move 2 (Introducing the general topic) and move 3 (Introducing the particular topic) before the intervention. Similar findings were found for moves 1 and 2 after the intervention. However, one student did not employ move 3 after the intervention.

For move 4, only 1 student employed move 4 number 1 (Introducing the research parameter) before the intervention. While after the intervention, 3 students have employed this move. For move 4 number 2 (Summarizing previous research), 12 students (54.5%) were indentified to have employed the move. However, after the intervention the students who have used this move have increased to 17 (77.3%). From this finding we can say that the genre-based intervention has an impact on the writing of this particular move.

For move 5 number 1 (Indicating gap in previous research) for the pre-intervention, only 6 (27.2%).students have employed this move. However, the number has doubled after the intervention to 12 (54.5%). For move 5 number 2 (Indicating a possible extension in previous research) none of the students have employed this move for both the pre and post-intervention.

Looking at move 6 numbers 1 and 2 it is surprising fact that the students have employed more moves when they were writing during the pre-intervention compared to the post-intervention. For move 6 number 1 (State the aim of the research or Describe briefly work carried out), 18 (81.8%) were found to employ this move compared to only 13 (59.1%) have included this move after the intervention.   For move 6 number 2 (Justify the research – significance of the study), 13 students (59.1%) were identified to have included this move during the pre-intervention. The number has decreased to 10 (45.4%) after the intervention.

Table 1. Frequency of occurrences of the moves

Move	Pre-intervention		Post-intervention	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
1	22	100%	22	100%
2	22	100%	22	100%
3	22	100%	21	95.4
4 (1)	1	4.5%	3	13.6%
4 (2)	12	54.5	17	77.3%
5 (1)	6	27.2%	12	54.5%
5 (2)	0	0%	0	0%
6 (1)	18	81.8%	13	59.1%
6 (2)	13	59.1%	10	45.4%

3. Conclusion
This study aims to identify the problems in writing research proposal introductions by novice ESL academic writers in a local university in Malaysia.   After identifying the problems, the students were introduced to an approach in academic writing namely the genre approach. Using this approach it is found that the problems in writing research proposals' introductions were minimised. And by using this approach the students were able to write more clear and effective introductions.   This approach will later be implemented in the teaching of Research Methodology course offered at the school of Language Studies and Linguistics.

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