

VERB TENSE ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH ARTICLE ABSTRACTS IN ASIAN EFL JOURNAL

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Abstract: Salager-Meyer's (1992) study has constructed how medical abstracts are analyzed in terms of verb tense. The goal of the study is to analyze the verb tense of each move. 50 (fifty) research article abstracts of Asian EFL journal published between 2005-2006 were used as the corpus of the study. The writer listed the frequency of move structure based on Hyland's theory; Introduction (Move 1), Purpose (Move 2), Method (Move 3), Results (Move 4) and Conclusion (Move 5). Then, she focused on analyzing the verb tense of each move. This research found that the present simple was frequently used in Move 1, Move 2, Move 4 and Move 5 and the past tense was prominent in Move 3. The present perfect and the future tense were other verb tenses employed in Move 1, Move 4 and Move 5. Interestingly, the use of double tenses was applied such as present simple+present perfect in Move 1; present+past simple in Move 2, 3 and 4; present+future simple in move 1. The active voice was the most dominant in all moves findings. The result of the research may serve as a complementary guideline for novice writers of similar studies.

Keywords: Research article abstracts, Move Structure, Verb Tense, Hyland's, Journal.

I. INTRODUCTION

In academic writing, abstracts have become an substantial part of research articles. Almost every literate journal, written either in English or in other languages, would require an abstract to be submitted along with the original research article (Martín, 2003). For example, abstracts not only serve as a key to understanding fully the arguments of the original articles (Swales, 1990), but also provide readers with some language preparation for the full texts (Cross & Oppenheim, 2006). The research article (RA) is produced to communicate new knowledge to members of the academic community and persuade them to accept the claims (Hyland, 2001).

Previous studies of research article abstracts have covered several different disciplines, such as medicine, psychology, and applied linguistics, and have mainly focused on two dimensions of abstracts: the rhetorical organization or the move structure (e.g., Cross & Oppenheim, 2006; Lau, 2004; Santos, 1996) and the linguistic realizations of the moves (e.g., Busch-Lauer, 1995; Pho, 2008). Although quite a few studies have analyzed research article abstracts, only three studies focused on abstracts in applied linguistics (i.e., Lorés, 2004; Pho, 2008; Santos, 1996). Santos (1996) was probably the first endeavor in

trying to establish the textual organization of applied linguistics abstracts. Lorés (2004) and Pho (2008) were two small-scale studies, focusing on the thematic organization and authorial stance of abstracts respectively.

Salager-Meyer's (1992) study exemplifies how medical abstracts can be constructed in terms of verb tense. In fact, the tense usage in abstracts is quite complicated as acknowledged by Swales and Feak (2004: 283), who mentioned that although the opening statements and conclusions are often in the present tense, there appears to be considerable disciplinary and individual tense variation with sentences dealing with results'. Due to the fact that different disciplines may have different conventions to write abstracts and in order to present a more detailed feature of abstracts in applied linguistics, the present study examined 50 applied linguistics abstracts from the verb tense of the move structures.

1. Research Article

A research article (RA) is taken to be written text usually limited to a few thousand words, that reports on some investigation carried out by its author or authors. In addition, the RA will usually relate the findings within it to those of others, and may also examine issues of theory and/or methodology. The fact that the research article usually appears within the covers of a particular journal means. Journals declare policies and requirements in which are

the obvious need to maintain an acceptable level of consistency among articles with regard to sectioning, style or referencing and so on. (Swales, 1990 : 93)

Swales (1990:177) states the research article (RA) is the key genre both quantitatively and qualitatively. The RA has a dynamic relationship with all other public research-process genres.

2. Move Structure

In 1990, Swales revised the structure to a three-move pattern, called the create-a-research-space model (CARS model). Swales (1993:127) in his textual overview of the research article, proposes that the macro-structure of the research article typically consists of an Introduction, a Methods section, Results, Discussion and Conclusion.

A move in genre analysis is defined as a 'discoursal or rhetorical unit that performs a coherent communicative function in a written or spoken discourse' (Swales, 2004:228-229). Pho (2009:17) indicated, 'each move has its own communicative purpose, which, together with other moves, contributes to the general communicative purpose of the text'. The distinctive organization of the moves in texts belonging to one genre is "what provides its identity and distinguishes it from other genres" (Parodi, 2014: 67).

The identification of moves is a crucial step in a rhetorical structure analysis. Swales indicated that the identification of moves, and consequently the setting of move boundaries, is established by 'a mixed bag of criteria' (2004: 229).

Ngowu (1997:120) explains that move means a text segment made up of a bundle of linguistic features which give the segment a uniform orientation and signal the content of discourse in it. It is determined by reference to linguistic clues in the discourse, such as : statement which signal information from content occurring later in the text; lexical items which signal the information contained in each move; conjuncts which signal discourse relations in the text; statements which signal the end of a move. Hyland (2000) proposed a five-move structure to analyze academic abstracts : Introduction, Purpose, Method, Product, and Conclusion. The following is the description of the move structure.

A research article generally begins with an abstract, which is a brief synopsis of the information contained within the article and the research that the writer performed. Then it will include a description of the research performed, an explanation of the results of that research and an idea about the importance of those results. A research article is found in a journal.

Table 1. A Framework for Abstract Analysis

Moves	Function
1. Introduction	Establishes context of the paper and motivates the research or discussion.
2. Purpose	Indicates purpose, thesis or hypothesis, outlines the intention behind the paper.
3. Method	Provides information on design, procedures, assumptions, approach, data, etc.
4. Product	States main findings or results, the argument, or what was accomplished.
5. Conclusion	Interprets or extends results beyond scope of paper, draws inferences, points to applications or wider implications.

Source: Hyland, K. (2000). *Disciplinary Discourses: Social interactions in academic writing*. London: Longman.

3. Abstract

Bhatia (2014:42) in John Flowerdew states that abstracts provide a summary of the research article and uses the overall organisation of the research article to arrive at the rhetorical moves found in abstracts : introduction (purpose), method, result, and conclusion.

Lopes (2004 :281) has stated that RA abstracts are different from RAs in the following three aspects : function, rhetorical structure and linguistic realizations. Because of the increasing interest in abstracts, quite a few analyses on the part-genre have been conducted. Santos (1996) in Yun Li (2011:7) chose to explore the textual organization of RA abstracts at two levels :

1. The features that constitute abstracts at macro-level of textual organization.

2. The sentence level features at the micro-level of textual analysis.

According to Bazerman (1984), 'The article's abstract serves as one further step in turning the article in an object, for the abstract considers the articles as a whole and then makes a representation of it.' (Swales, 1993: 179)

4. Verb Tense of Abstract

Another focus of the analysis of abstracts is the linguistic realizations of the moves. However, most of these studies appeared to analyze the *lexis* of the moves (e.g. Anderson & Maclean, 1997; Lau, 2004; Santos, 1996), and little research, except for Salager-Meyer (1992), has paid attention to the *verb tense* of the moves in its own right. Salager-Meyer (1992) found when examining 84 medical abstracts in research papers, case reports, and review articles that different verb tenses perform different functions. For example, the past tense is concerned with the history type of discourse, so it is widely used in the moves of *Purpose, Methods, Results, and Case presentation*. The present tense serves the purpose of enhancing and emphasizing the generalizability of specific findings, and is thus prevalent in the moves of *Conclusion, Recommendation, and Data synthesis*.

Salager-Meyer's (1992) study exemplifies how medical abstracts can be constructed in terms of verb tense. In fact, the tense usage in abstracts is quite complicated as acknowledged by Swales and Feak (2004: 283), who mentioned that although the opening statements and conclusions are often in the present tense, there appears to be considerable disciplinary and individual tense variation with sentences dealing with results'. Given the fact that little research has examined the usage of verb tense per sentence, it is deemed appropriate to investigate the verb tense of moves as a linguistic realization element in applied linguistic abstracts.

Graetz (1985:125) said, "The abstract is characterized by the use of past tense, third person, passive, and non-use of negatives. It avoids subordinate clauses, uses phrases instead of clauses, words instead of phrases. It avoids abbreviation, jargon, symbols and other language shortcuts which might lead to confusion. It is written in tightly worded

sentences, which avoid repetition, meaningless expressions, superlatives, adjectives, illustrations, preliminaries, descriptive details, examples, footnotes."

Abstracts are not only characterized by the use of Past Tense, the Present tense has been considerably popular as well. Malcolm (1987) says the Present is likely to occur in the frequent references to what may be found in the full text. By starting from a generalist perspective, she puts forward three hypotheses:

1. Generalizations will tend to be in the Present tense.
2. References to specific experiments will tend to be in the Past.
3. References to areas of inquiry will tend to be in the Present Perfect tense.

The use of Present Tense is used because it intimates that the research is alive. On the other hand the Past tense needs emphasizing or whenever a cautious approach to applications and extensions seem warranted (James, 1984b).

The latter observed a preference for the use of past tense, third person, passive voice, non – use of negatives, the avoidance of subordinate clauses, abbreviation, jargon, symbols, repetition, superlatives, adjectives, examples and redundancy. In some case, active verbs also occur, and present tends to occur in commentary rather than in narrative of what was done.

Oster (1981: 77) proposed the following principal hypotheses about the use of tense:

1. The Present Perfect is used to claim *generality* about past literature. The Past tense is used to claim *non generality* about past literature.
2. The Past tense is used when it refers to *quantitative* results of past literature that are *non supportive* of some aspects of the work described in the technical article. The Present tense is used when it refers to quantitative results of past literature that are *supportive* or *non relevant*.
3. The Present Perfect tense is used to indicate the *continued discussion* of some of the information in the sentence in which Present Perfect tense occurs,

II. METHODOLOGY

The corpus of the study consisted of 50 research article abstracts taken from Asian EFL Journals which were randomly selected from 2005-2008 publications.

The study focused on two verb tenses of the moves, namely, *the present tense* (including the present perfect) and *the past tense*. The purpose of the analysis was to figure out the preferred verb tense used in each move of an abstract.

The analysis procedure was as follows. First, if a move was represented by a sentence, the verb tense of that sentence was the verb tense of the move (example 3). Second, if a move was realized in a clause or a phrase, then the verb tense of that move was not included in the data analysis procedure (example 4). Third, if a move was represented by several sentences which had both present tense and past tense, then both tenses were included in the data bank (example 5).

1. This paper *reports* on a descriptive study of a summer English language camp held in China.(M2) → *present tense* [2005-5]
2. [...] *typified* in its centre-periphery framework and its geo-historic bases. (M3) → verb tense not included [2005-6]
3. The study *follows* the college impact approach [...].An open questionarre *was used* to collect [...](M3) → *present tense and past tense* [2006-12]

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Firstly, the writer analyzed move frequency of each move in of 50 Asean EFL Abstracts to be later used to easily analyze the linguistic realizations of each move. This analysis applied Hyland's (2000) model. The findings of frequency of the move occurrence in the abstracts are showed on chart 1.

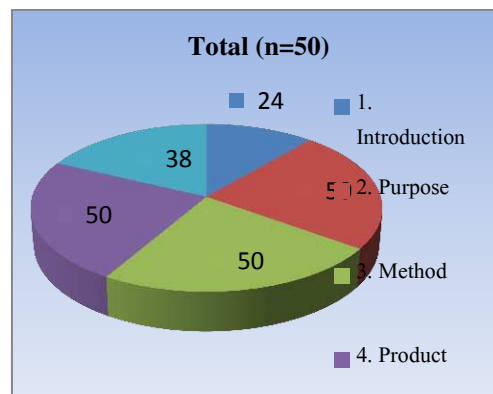


Figure1 : Frequency of the Move Occurrence of Asian EFL Abstracts

After analyzing the frequency of move structure, the writer focused on the main analysis of the verb tense (e.g. Salager-Meyer,1992) in each move of the research article abstracts. The below table resumes the verb tense applied in each move.

Table 2. Frequency of Verb Tense and Voice of Each Move

M ov e (M)	Tenses							T ot al
	P re - se nt	P as t	Pre ent Per ect	Pre sen t + Pre sen t Per fect	P re - se nt + P as t	F u - tu re	Pre - sen t + Fut ure	
M 1	1 4	3	4	2	-	-	1	24
M 2	3 4	1 5	-	-	1	-	-	50
M 3	2 2	2 4	-	-	4	-	-	50
M 4	2 5	2 0	-	-	4	1	-	50
M 5	2 7	9	-	-	-	1	1	38

Table 3. Frequency of Verb Tense and Voice of Each Move

Move (M)	Voices			Total
	Active	Passive	Active + Passive	
M 1	-	-	-	-
M 2	50	-	-	50
M 3	22	29	9	50
M 4	42	3	5	50
M 5	28	7	1	38

1. Move 1 : Introduction

The use of tense in Move 1 was also interesting because the distribution of verb tense as aspect was varied. The most frequent tenses and aspects used in the abstracts were Present simple. Others are Present Perfect, Present+Present Perfect, Present+Future. The Present simple tended to occur with a general topic in the field and referred to the previous research as well, whereas the Present Perfect referred to previous research in general. The past tense tended to be used for a specific research object in previous research and past information which would be used for the research. The future tense was used for an expectation or a prediction. The following excerpts illustrated the distribution of verb tenses found.

- (1) [...]. However, though the advantages of all these corpora to language teaching and learning *are* well acknowledged, they *haven't produced* tangible pedagogical results' in an EFL classroom context. (2008-38)
- (2) Technology *is not currently used* in EFL classroom at King Saud University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Therefore, an online course *was used* in teaching of English Grammar from home. (2005-9)
- (3) A large proportion of the direct vocabulary instruction an adult learner *will receive* in the EFL classroom *will be unplanned*. Although unplanned vocabulary instruction can provide many condition learning the theorists recognise as being necessary for learning to take place, [...] (2008-5)

2. Move 2 : Purpose

For the tense choice, the occurrences of Present tense of Purpose move were 34, while those of past tense were 15. It showed that Present tense was the most high occurrence of the reporting verbs in Purpose move. There was one abstract used Present+Past. Thus, the writers of the abstracts preferred using the present tense to using the Past tense for the Purpose move.

3. Move 3 : Method Move

The tenses of Present, Past, Active and Passive voice were found in Method move. The tenses were distributed nearly equal where the Present tense was 22 and the Past tense was 24. A double tense of Present+Past was also used in 4 abstracts. The purpose of Method is to retell the story of the research methodology that had already been employed in the study, thus the Past tense was used in Method move. Furthermore, both Past tense and present tense were accompanied by switching into the passive voice. The reason for this could be explained in that the subjects took both an active role to participate in an experiment; and a passive role when they received the treatment. With a closer look at the use of voice, however the distribution of passive and active were nearly equal where the active verbs were 22 and the passive verbs were 19, there was also combination between active and passive verbs whose number were 9 abstracts. It meant that active verbs over passive verbs. The frequency of using passive verbs may be attributed to the fact that writers tried to stay as objective as possible when they presented the methods of their studies. The following excerpts illustrated the switching of active verbs to the passive verbs.

- (1) Chinese youth ages 8-18 *were taught* conversational English through a variety of classes and activities. Instructors *were visiting* teachers from the USA assisted by local Chinese teachers. Qualitative methods *were used to gather* data. (2005-5)
- (2) 85 Turkish prospective teachers (PTs) of English *participated* in this study. Data *were collected* by means of the SLWAI and (Cheng,

2004) and an open-ended questionnaire.

4. Move 4 : Product Move

Table 3. The use of Verb Tense in Move 4 in the abstracts of Asian EFL Journal.

No	Tenses	Total
1	Present simple	25
2	Past simple	20
3	Both Present Simple and Past Simple	4
4	Futuresimple	1
	Total	50

The preference of using present simple over the past simple was found in Method Move (Move 4) despite of the fact that the total of two tenses is almost equal. Furthermore, there were 4 (four) abstracts whose tense used both Present simple and Past simple and 1 (one) abstract whose tense was Future simple and here are the excerpts of the abstracts.

- (1) These signs *suggest* that personal authenticity emerged because they *were able* to negotiate many aspects of their learning. (2008- 40)
- (2) The findings *suggest* that L1 plays a supportive role in the language classroom, especially in the early stages, and more significantly in reading and writing. Koren students *agreed* with Korean teachers emphasized the importance of using L1 exclusively. L1 *was found* useful for explaining the meaning of the words and grammar explanation. (2009-45)
- (3) This finding of this research *will provide* Chinese EFL teachers with insightful information on learners' learning needs as an input to syllabus and material planning, to lesson and classroom instruction practice. (2006-11)

According to Pho (2008), the use of past tense to report of the study left the reader with the impression that the writer was being objective and was plainly reporting the findings of the research. The present tense gave the idea that the writer was generalizing beyond the results of the study, which left the impression that the results were widely accepted. For Santos (1996),

the using of past tense signified the narrower claim of the research results, while the using of present tense implied that the research results yielded indisputable and established knowledge. In the present study, the writers' preference of using simple present in Move 4 could be understood as an intention to generalize the results of their study to be widely accepted and to yield indisputable and to establish knowledge.

5. Move 5 : Conclusion Move

Another distinctive feature of the Conclusion move was the dominant use Present simple verbs whose total was 27 abstracts (71%) of 38 abstracts. The use of Past Simple was 9 abstracts (24%) and the others were Future simple and the combination of Present + Future in Move 5. It could be explained that Move 5, which is intended to discuss the meaning of the results or outcomes and make generalizations based on the findings in the previous move, will make greater use of simple present in order to make the statements in Move 5 sound more general and thus more applicable. Some instances were given as below.

- (1) *Practical suggestions* for implementing this in the Omani context are made including [...] (2005-1)
- (2) This study *brings* a discourse analysis focus to whole class discussion between teacher and international UNIPREP students [...] (2005-8)
- (3) The study *demonstrates* the importance of a good understanding [...] (2006-11)

IV. CONCLUSION

The essential results of this study are:

1. The Present simple was the most frequent tense used in Move 1 (Introduction), Move 2 (Purpose), Move 4 (Product) and Move 5 (Conclusion). It was in the line with Malcolm's (1987) suggestion.
2. The Past tense was frequently used in Move 3 which described the approach or steps of doing research. It was in line with James' (1984b) suggestion that the

Past tense needs emphasizing or whenever a cautious approach to applications and extensions seem warranted.

3. The Present Perfect was employed in Move 1 to show the running discussion.
4. The Future tense was found in Move 4 and Move 5 to indicate the outcome of the research.
5. There existed unsignificantly a double tense in any moves whose patterns; Present+Present Perfect, Present+Past, Present + Future.
6. Active voice was the most dominant in the all moves. Passive voice was used more in Move 3 (Method Move).

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