A genre analysis of master dissertation abstracts written by English native speakers and Tunisian EFL learners: Pedagogical considerations

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Article Info

Abstract

Despite the growing interest in genre analysis, on the one hand, and the continuous concern with academic writing, on the other, very little has been done on the move structure of abstracts in Linguistics Master dissertations written by native speakers and non-native speakers of English (Al-Khasawneh, 2017). In the same vein, no single cross-linguistic study has investigated variations in the move structure of abstracts in dissertations written by English native speakers and Tunisian EFL learners. This paper is a response to this need. It purports to analyze the move structure of abstracts in Linguistics MA dissertations written by English native speakers and Tunisian EFL learners, within the theoretical framework of Hyland's five-move model (2000). Twelve abstracts were selected for this study: Six abstracts were written by Tunisian EFL MA students at the Institut Supérieur des Langues à Tunis (ISLT, Tunisia) and six abstracts were written by English native speakers. The native speakers' abstracts were randomly chosen from the Brigham Young University website for Linguistics Theses and Dissertations. The EFL learners' abstracts were randomly chosen from the ISLT library. The findings suggest that the Purpose move, the Method use and the Product move are frequent in both corpora. However, only one English abstract in 6 contains the Conclusion move, whereas 4 EFL abstracts in 6 contain the Conclusion move. Both corpora contain the Introduction move, with equal frequency (4 in 6 for both corpora). Pedagogical considerations are highlighted for EFL teachers in order to ensure an efficient abstract teaching. It is argued that this study represents a contribution to the field of academic writing and genre analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the publication of J. M. Swales's book (1990) on genres in academic discourse, there has been an upsurge of scholarly studies on the functions and move structure of abstracts (Hyland, 2000; Lores, 2004; Benhnam & Golpour, 2014; Can *et al.*, 2016; Kai, 2008) as well as their cross-linguistic differences (Ji, 2015; Fan & Song, 2017; Al-harbi, 2011). Also, much research has been done on the different sections of research articles (Amirian *et al.*, 2008; Dobakhti, 2016; Safnil, 2013). However, very little attention has been assigned to the move structure of abstracts in Linguistics Master dissertations written by native speakers and non-native speakers of English (Al-Khasawneh, 2017). In the same vein, to the best of our knowledge, no single study has examined cross-linguistic variations in the move structure of abstracts in dissertations written by English native speakers and Tunisian EFL learners.

This paper will try to fill this gap, at least partially, by analyzing the move structure of abstracts in Linguistics MA dissertations written by native speakers and Tunisian EFL learners. To this end, Hyland's five-move model will be used for data analysis.

This paper comprises five main sections. The first will provide the study's theoretical framework. The second will summarize a few studies conducted on abstract analyses. The third will describe the methodology used for data collection and for data analysis. The fourth will present the study's results and discussions. The last section will shed light on important pedagogical considerations that EFL teachers should take into account when teaching abstract writing.

Since this paper is on abstract moves, this section will first present the key concepts related to the analysis of move structure of abstracts, such as the concepts of genre and discourse community. Then, Hyland's five-move model (i.e., the study's theoretical framework) will be defined.

The concept of genre

Genre analysis first emerged in ESP in 1980s (Al-Khasawneh, 2017). Originally, as argued by Allison (1999), the term 'genre' referred to artistic and literary products. Linguists have broadened its use to encompass classes of language use and communication. Swales (1990) defines 'genre' as "a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes" (p. 58).

According to Swales, abstracts constitute a genre with communicative purposes that are recognized by the discourse community. An abstract is defined as "an abbreviated, accurate representation of the contents of a document, preferably prepared by its authors for publication with it" (Lores, 2004, p. 281). In the same vein, Huckin (2001) states that abstracts serve many functions in academic communication. They are "mini-texts" summarizing the research topic, methodology and main results. They are also "screening" tools that help readers decide whether to read all the article or not. Hyland (2000) asserts that "To gain readers' attention and persuade them to read on, writers need to demonstrate that they not only have something new and worthwhile to say, but that they also have the professional credibility to address their topic as an insider" (p. 63). As such, abstracts have both informative and persuasive functions (Zanina, 2017).

Discourse community

Genre analysts contend that 'community' is a key element in the definition of genre. Swales (1990) fleshes out the six main features shared by the members of discourse community. These are: having a set of common public goals, having mechanisms of intercommunication among members, using these mechanisms for feedback and information, using and then owning one or more genres in the communicative "furtherance" of its goals, having acquired a particular vocabulary, and having a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discourse knowledge. Johns (1997) lists particular types of genre knowledge shared by a discourse community: a common name, common communicative goals, shared knowledge of roles, common knowledge of context, common register, etc.

This paper aims at comparing and contrasting the move structure of abstracts in the Master dissertations of English native speakers and Tunisian EFL learners. To this end, Hyland's five-move model (2000) is used. Hyland's model was chosen for data analysis because it is a "detailed" and "elaborate" model that is "favored by genre analysts" (Zanina, 2017, p. 67). Hyland's five-move model is presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Hyland's five-move model

Move	Function
Introduction	It situates the paper within a context. It states what has motivated the research or discussion.
Purpose	It outlines the purpose of the paper.
Method	It provides information about the methodology used to reach the paper's objectives (design, data, procedures, etc)
Product	It states the main results, what the paper has accomplished
Conclusion	It interprets the study's results. It goes beyond the paper's scope (inferences and implications).

This paper analyzes the move structure of the abstracts at hand by following Hyland's model. The study aims at (1) highlighting cross-linguistic similarities and differences in MA dissertation abstracts written by native speakers and Tunisian EFL learners; and (2) shedding light on pedagogical aspects that EFL teachers should consider in the process of abstract teaching.

It is worth-noting that after the publication of Swales' book (1990) on academic genres, many studies have been done on the move structure of abstracts. This section summarizes selected studies conducted on abstract analysis, such as the work of Zanina (2017), Fan and Song (2007), Al-harbi and Swales (2011), Al-Khasawneh (2017), and Jeon and Eun (2007).

Zanina's study (2017) used Hyland's model to compare and contrast the move structure of abstracts in English and Russian. The results suggest that the Russian abstracts opt for a three-move structure (Purpose, Method, and Product), whereas the English abstracts follow the five moves as in Hyland's model. Also, the English abstracts are found to be more "precise" or "detailed" in providing research methods and results than the Russian abstracts.

Another comparative study by Fan and Song (2007), aimed at comparing the schematic structure of English research article abstracts written by native English speakers and Chinese writers in the domain of agricultural sciences and technology. The results reveal that English writers opt for an interactive style by using background information, whereas Chinese writers consider this move "optional."

Al-harbi and Swales (2011) examined 28 Arabic and English paired abstracts on language sciences taken from three journals. They found that move structures are simple in both corpora. However, some English abstracts give more importance to background information than do the Arabic abstracts. These differences, according to the authors, may be attributed to certain "scholastic traditions in the Arab world."

Al-Khasawneh (2017) studied twenty abstracts written by native and non-native speakers of English in Applied Linguistics. The abstracts were analyzed on the basis of Hyland's model (2000). The results suggest that both native and non-native writers followed a three-move structure (Purpose, Method, and Conclusion). A difference in the Conclusion and Introduction moves between the two groups was observed.

Jeon and Eun (2007) analyzed 10 doctoral dissertations abstracts written by Korean and American writers. Using Swales' IMRD model, the authors found no significant differences in the macro-structure of abstracts written by the Korean and the American writers.

The aforementioned comparative studies gave insights into cross-linguistic similarities and differences in the move structure of abstracts by using different move models. However, very little has been done on Master dissertation abstracts in the field of Linguistics. This study addresses this gap. It purports to analyze Linguistics MA dissertation abstracts written by English native speakers and Tunisian EFL learners.

METHODS

This section describes the methodology used for data analysis in terms of data collection and research instrument. This qualitative study is based on the analysis of abstracts written by English native speakers and Tunisian EFL learners.

Data collection

Twelve abstracts were selected for this study: Six abstracts were written by Tunisian EFL MA students at the Institut Supérieur des Langues à Tunis (ISLT, Tunisia) and six abstracts were written by English native speakers. The native speakers' abstracts were randomly chosen from the Brigham Young University website for Linguistics Theses and Dissertations. The EFL learners' abstracts were randomly chosen from the ISLT library. The abstracts were written on various topics in Theoretical Linguistics and Applied Linguistics. We have opted for twelve abstracts because we believe that the analysis of this number of abstracts can give us a clear idea about the moves that constitute the abstracts written by native speakers and EFL learners. To protect the confidentiality of participants in this study, abstracts were presented anonymously. The participants' names were hidden, and the abstracts were assigned numbers (eg. Abstract 1, abstract 2, etc).

Research instrument

To identify the move structure of the abstracts at hand, this study used Hyland's five-move model (2000). As shown above, this model consists of five moves: Introduction, Purpose, Method, Product and Conclusion. Each move serves "a communicative purpose." The choice of Hyland's model is motivated by its efficiency in identifying different moves in abstracts, as reflected by several studies conducted within the theoretical framework of Hyland's Model. Also, as stated by Zanina (2017), Hyland's model is "detailed" and "elaborate." It is "favored by genre analysts" (p. 67).

After data collection, the analysis was conducted. The following example illustrates the way in which the analysis was carried out:

> **[**Adult Japanese learners of English (JLEs) are often stereotyped as being unable to produce or perceive the English phonemes /l/ and /r/.**] (INTRODUCTION) [**This study analyzed acoustic examples of /l/ and /r/ obtained from intermediate-level Japanese speakers in two variable contexts: word position (initial/final) and task type (controlled/free).**] (PURPOSE) [**These tokens were subjected to acoustic analysis which is one way of comparing oral productions of native and non-native English speakers. Previous research has identified a lowered third formant (F3) as the hallmark of an American English /r/ as produced by a native speaker, independent of word position or task type.**] (METHOD) [**The results indicate that participants can produce appropriate and statistically significant differences between these two phonemes across word position and task type. Other findings indicate that neither task type nor word position had a significant effect on F3 values. These results indicate that Japanese speakers of English may have the ability to distinguish /l/ and /r/ without specialized pronunciation training, but these differences are less dramatic as identified by F3 frequency values than those produced by native English speakers when producing these contrasting phonemes. In most tokens, however, large effect sizes remained between JLE productions and NES standards**] (PRODUCT)** (Native speaker, Abstract 5).

Abstract 5 above is composed of four moves: Introduction, Purpose, Method, and Product. Each move is put between two brackets for the sake of clarity. The Introduction move outlines what motivates the study (eg. a stereotype about adult Japanese learners of English). In the Purpose move, the study's objective is presented. The study aims at analyzing acoustic examples of /l/ and /r/ pronounced by adult Japanese learners of English. The Method move describes the methodology used to reach the study's objective. In the Product move, the results of the comparative analysis are described.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the data analysis. The frequency of moves in the abstracts in both corpora is illustrated in Table 2 below:

Table 2. Frequency of moves in both corpora

Move	Native Speakers	Tunisian EFL learners
Introduction	4	4
Purpose	6	6
Method	5	6

Product	5	6
Conclusion	1	4

Table 2 above shows that the Purpose move, the Method move and the Product move are those most frequently used by native speakers and Tunisian EFL learners. In what follows, a detailed description of each move will be presented.

Introduction move
According to Hyland's model, in the Introduction move, the study is situated within its context. Native speakers and EFL learners use the Introduction move. Examples (1) and (2) below are Introduction moves in both corpora:

(1) *'Error correction for English language learner's (ELL) writing has long been debated in the field of teaching English to learners of other languages (TESOL). Some researchers say that written corrective feedback (WCF) is beneficial, while others... context'* (English speaker, Abstract 4).

(2) *'Critical thinking (CL) has been regarded as an essential attribute for writing well-reasoned essays at a MA level. Yet, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, no previous studies have been conducted to examine EFL MA student's critical thinking abilities within the Tunisian context'* (Tunisian EFL learner, Abstract 5).

Purpose move
The Purpose move outlines the objective of the study. According to genre analysts, there are two ways of presenting a study's objective: descriptive and purposive. In the descriptive way, the author describes the features of the study. In the purposive way, the author uses explicit expressions encoding purpose, such as the nouns 'aim' and 'objective,' and the verb 'to purport,' etc. The difference between a 'purposive' purpose and a 'descriptive' purpose is reflected in examples (3) and (4) below:

(3) *'This study **aims to** address this lack of research by examining how the AVL words vary in cumulative frequency bands and also in separate frequency bands with regard to level and topic'* (English speaker, Abstract 2).

(4) *'The work provides a framework for evaluating recommender systems and is flexible enough for use with either website'* (English speaker, Abstract 3).

Example (3) above explicitly uses the verb "aim" in order to define the purpose of the paper. Example (4) above does not use any explicit term to outline the purpose; it simply describes aspects related to the study.

On the basis of the data, it can be noted that all abstracts contain a Purpose move. The presence of the Purpose move in both native and non-native abstracts indicates its importance in Linguistics. A piece of linguistics research should have a specific objective, highlighting the gap that the study aims at filling. Below are other examples of the Purpose move in both corpora:

(5) *'This study analyzed acoustic samples /l/ and /r/ obtained from intermediate-level Japanese speakers in two variable contexts'* (English speaker, Abstract 5).

(6) *'This study analyzes the problems of intermediate Tunisian learners' Communicative Competency imbalance. It investigates the causes behind the gap in students' oral English proficiency'* (EFL learner, Abstract 6).

Method move
All Tunisian abstracts contain a Method move in which the study's methodology is displayed in terms of participants, instruments, data collection, etc. In the English speakers' abstracts, only one abstract has no Method move. Examples (7) and (8) below are Method moves from the corpus:

(7) *'A qualitative analysis of the manageability of DWCF was done via interviews of experienced teachers that have used DWCF and the author's experience and reflections using the strategy'* (Native speaker, Abstract 5).

(8) *'Two instruments were used for data collection. A Likert format questionnaire was conducted on 110 students from the preparatory school in Boumerdes (Al-Mahdia). Descriptive statistics are used in data analysis'* (EFL learner, Abstract 2).

Product move

Both corpora contain the Product move in which the author summarizes the study's main results. Examples (9) and (10) below are Product moves from the corpus:

(9) *'The results indicate that this strategy can be manageable with some possible adaptions and while avoiding some common pitfalls'* (English speaker, Abstract 4).

(10) *'Findings revealed that students have positive attitudes towards the integration of technology in EFL classes. Classroom observations indicated that through participation in computer-based presentations, students' motivation in oral communication skills increased. Results from the observation sheet indicated that while on task and when authentic materials were used, motivation increased significantly'* (EFL learner, Abstract 2).

Conclusion move

The Conclusion move is not frequent in the English speakers' abstracts; only one English abstract in 6 has a Conclusion move. However, 4 EFL abstracts in 6 contain a Conclusion move. Examples (11) and (12) below are Conclusion moves from the corpus:

(11) *'Implications for researchers, administrators, and teachers are discussed, including the role of silence as an important self-regulated learning practice for language learners'* (English speaker, Abstract 1).

(12) *'This study concluded that Tunisian EFL Master students encountered some challenges in argument evaluation, particularly in terms of detecting some logical fallacies. To alleviate these difficulties, the present study recommended that the explicit teaching of CT and the introduction of logical fallacies would foster Master students' critical writing abilities'* (EFL learner, Abstract 5).

The study's results suggest that the Purpose move, the Method move, and the Product move are those most frequently used by native speakers and Tunisian EFL learners. These findings are different from those of Zanina's study (2017) in which the move structures of abstracts in English and Russian were compared. Zanina found that the Russian abstracts had a three-move structure (Purpose, Method, and Product), whereas the English abstracts followed the five moves as in Hyland's model. Interestingly, the present study's results are similar to those of Al-Khasawneh's study (2017) in which twenty abstracts written by native and non-native speakers of English in Applied Linguistics were examined. As with the present study, Al-Khasawneh's study suggests that both native and non-native writers follow a three-move structure (Purpose, Method, and Conclusion).

Data analysis shows that the abstracts at hand have different compositions. Some abstracts include five moves; others have one or two moves missing. This difference in abstract composition reflects the fact that students are not familiar with the standard composition of abstracts. This difference in abstract structure in the data also reflects the fact that an abstract is not an easy form of scholarly writing. However, we believe that through practice and exposure to good models of abstracts, students will be able to write a good five-move abstract. In this context, the teacher's role is important.

The teacher can play different roles to enhance the learners' learning process: the source of knowledge, facilitator, and guide for learners. The teacher can be the source of knowledge by informing learners and instructing them in the main structure of a well-written abstract. This knowledge can be delivered to learners through lectures and lessons on abstract structure. The teacher functions like a coach, accompanying students in the process of abstract writing. S/he should guide learners, give them advice, and provide feedback throughout the process of abstract writing.

Teachers may also identify the students' attitudes and motivation to learn the instructional content (Jing *et al.*, 2006). There are pedagogical considerations that EFL teachers, for instance, should bear in mind in abstract teaching. This point will be discussed in the next section.

Pedagogical considerations for teaching abstract writing in EFL context
This section will highlight a few pedagogical aspects related to abstract writing that EFL teachers should consider. It is important to teach abstracts in that they are an "initial stage of scholarly writing" and constitute "building blocks for more complex writing" (Harris, 2006, p. 137). EFL teachers should inform learners about "expectations" from abstract writing. Frocse *et al.* (1998, p. 103) assert that the gap between expectations and performance may emanate from "instructional deficiencies." For this reason, teachers should not limit abstract teaching to definitions and examples as these constitute insufficient instruction and might "fail both students and faculty" (p. 137).

Researchers contend that EFL learners should have a clear idea about the "desired outcomes" from abstract writing. Thus, it is important for teachers to specify the main objective of writing an abstract. Here, teachers might give a good definition of an abstract as "a summary written in a scholarly writing style that represents a thorough comprehension of the article" (p. 139). Previous research has shown, for instance, that graduate students achieve cognitive complexity in literature reviews when they clearly understand the desired outcomes (Frocse *et al.*, 1998).

Scaffolding can be an efficient technique that helps students move forward progressively in the learning process. Thus, teachers are encouraged to use different forms of instructional scaffolding in teaching of abstracts in order to bridge the gap between what students have acquired and what they are expected to learn. Teachers should focus on the five-move structure of abstracts: Introduction, Purpose, Method, Product and Conclusion. Thus, classroom exercises should shed light on the standard form and the objective of each move. A typical exercise would be to give learners two abstracts; one poorly written, and another one well structured, with five moves. Then, students might be asked to compare the two abstracts and discuss them with their peers. Discussions would enhance students' critical thinking. Students might learn better if exposed to good models of abstracts.

In the same vein, the abstracts' guidelines should be clearly presented, and the assignment objectives well explained. In this context, for instance, teachers might specify that the abstract text should be 100 to 150 words. Collaborative learning is a positive approach that teachers might encourage in teaching abstracts as it helps reduce the students' frustration felt in the learning process. Receiving feedback from teachers and peers is beneficial in that it enhances learning in an interactive manner. In other words, EFL teachers should perceive abstracts writing as a process rather than a product. In this process, students should be "supported, engaged, and challenged" (Harris, 2006, p. 137).

In order to ensure efficient teaching of abstracts, Harris (2006) proposes an instructional three-step model. It involves (1) "laying the foundation;" (2) "communicating expectations and evaluation criteria; and (3) "scaffolding for success." The first step, "laying the foundation," pushes students in the "right direction" by establishing a link between the students' prior knowledge and previous experiences in writing and the task of abstracts writing. It also helps students identify the learning objectives, which establishes "a concrete foundation for learning" (Harris, 2006, p. 138). As for the second step, "communicating expectations and evaluation criteria," it makes sure that students understand the assignment guidelines. In this step, the teacher clearly explains the assignment guidelines and the evaluation rubric. Step three, "scaffolding for success," involves peer feedback process and the teaching of APA referencing.

It can be argued that the three-step model proposed by Harris (2006) is an efficient tool for abstract teaching for several reasons. First, it is comprehensive in that the three steps are well explained and are realistic. Thus, they can be implemented in any context. Second, this model is based upon the perception of abstract writing as a process rather than a product. For this reason, it values feedback and review in the writing of abstracts. Third, this model is concerned with the different aspects of writing, such as accuracy, grammar, spelling, etc. It focuses on peer feedback and on teacher feedback in order to end with a well written final product. The objective of feedback is to ensure that the abstract is accurately written in terms of content, style, grammar, spelling, and vocabulary.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this paper was to analyze the move structure of abstracts in Linguistics MA dissertations written by English native speakers and Tunisian EFL learners. To this end, Hyland's five-move model was used for data analysis. The results suggest that the Purpose move, the Method move and the Product move are frequent in both corpora. However, only one English abstract in 6 contains the Conclusion move, whereas 4 EFL abstracts in 6 contain the Conclusion move. Both corpora contain the Introduction move, with an equal frequency (4 in 6 for both corpora).

This paper sheds light on important pedagogical aspects that EFL teachers should consider in the teaching of abstracts. Learners, for instance, should be aware of the "desired outcomes" and the teachers' "expectations." They should be familiar with the five-move structure of abstracts through practice and exposure. It has been noted that the teacher's role is important for the success of the writing process. Teachers can play different roles to accompany learners in this writing process as source of knowledge, guide, and facilitator. Teachers are encouraged to diversify their teaching techniques by using different forms of scaffolding. Feedback and practice would enhance students' learning of abstract writing. In this context, Harris (2006) proposes a comprehensive three-step model for abstracts teaching. This model comprises three main steps: "Laying the foundation;" (2) "communicating expectations and evaluation criteria;" and (3) "scaffolding for success." Each step has specific goals and objectives. It can be argued that the importance of this model lies in its perception of the writing of abstracts as a process rather than a product. Throughout this process, students should be "supported, engaged, and challenged" (Harris, 2006, p. 137).

This paper addresses a need in the ESP literature since very little has been done on the move structure of abstracts in Linguistics dissertations written by native speakers and EFL Tunisian learners. In addition, a cross-linguistic study allows us to identify what is common and what is different in academic writing, a result that cannot be obtained from monolingual studies. In the same vein, this paper sheds light on significant pedagogical considerations that EFL teachers should bear in mind for the successful teaching of the writing of abstracts.

This paper represents a contribution to the field of academic discourse. It helps both native and non-native writers improve their academic writing by enhancing their genre knowledge and by exposing them to abstract genre conventions. Indeed, as stated by many genre analysts, it is important for non-native academic writers to be aware of the role of moves in dissertation abstracts. This paper also fleshes out the importance of good pedagogy for the efficient teaching of abstracts writing. Scaffolding, for instance, is a good strategy to bridge the gap between what students have learned and what they are expected to learn. In the same vein, Harris's three-step model (2006) provides a comprehensive method for teaching abstracts. In this model, writing abstracts is perceived as a process involving different steps; each step has specific goals and objectives.

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