WCES 2012

Understanding the writing of thesis introductions: An exploratory study

Yin Ling Cheung

English Language and Literature Academic Group, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, 1 Nanyang Walk, Singapore 637616, Singapore

Abstract

The purpose of the study is to examine how Swales’ (1990) Create-a-research-space model can be used to explain the structure of an introductory chapter of a Master’s thesis in soft sciences disciplines. The most important finding is that applied linguistics and instructional design and technology student writers show both low authorial presence and low frequency of using non-integral citation. Implications of the research findings and practice in second language writing education will be discussed.

Keywords: Thesis introduction; Authorial presence; Non-integral citation

1. Introduction

It is interesting to examine how we can use Swales’ CARS model to explain the structure of an introductory chapter in a dissertation in soft sciences such as physical education, instructional design and technology, education management, and applied psychology, in which these disciplines are under-explored in discourse analysis research. Inspired by Samraj’s (2008) study which dealt with an in-depth analysis of Master’s theses in North America, the present study was undertaken in Singapore to fill the research gaps identified and to answer the following research questions: (1) In what ways can Swales’ (1990) CARS model be used to analyze moves and steps in Master’s theses published in Singapore? (2) What are the patterns of citations in these thesis introductions? (3) How often and in what ways the first person pronouns are used in thesis introductions? (4) How are the links between student authorial voice and frequency of references in thesis introductions?

2. The context of the study

Singapore, officially called the Republic of Singapore, is a country in Southeast Asia. The population mainly consists of the Malaysian Chinese, the Chinese from China, Indians, Bangladeshis, and Indonesians.

3. Methodology

The data of this study comprise 43 theses produced at a large public university in Singapore from the period of 1989 to 2009, of which 11 from applied linguistics, 2 from instructional design and technology, 10 each from physical education, applied psychology, and education management were identified. I chose the five disciplines as they are the core disciplines offered by the National Institute of Education. I first analyzed the introductory sections using Swales’ (1990) Create-a-Research-Space (CARS) model, taking into account the rhetorical moves and steps.
Next, I examined the introductions in terms of the nature and the number of the citations used. With regard to the nature of the citations, I investigated whether integral or non-integral citation was used.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 Structure of introductions across disciplines

Following Swales CARS model, introduction starts with Move 1 which presents topic generalizations and highlights the importance of one’s topic in real world or in research. Next, writers proceed to Move 2 to indicate the research gap and to provide positive justifications for conducting a research to fill the research gap. Then, in Move 3, writers present the thesis, background, hypothesis (if any), results, and the organizational structure of the thesis. I used Swales’ CARS model because it has been widely used in analyzing discourse such as introductions in doctoral dissertations (Bunton, 2002) and research papers (Samraj, 2002, 2008). As seen in Table 1, I added a number of steps to analyze the introductions in various disciplines such as instructional design and technology, physical education, applied psychology, and education management. The steps that I identified in this study are not mentioned in Swales’ CARS model: presentation of ‘data collection and methods of analysis,’ ‘delimitations of the study,’ ‘limitations of the study,’ ‘implication of the study,’ ‘assumption,’ ‘definitions’, and ‘chapter summary.’

| Move 1 | Applied Linguistics (11) | Instructional Design and Technology (2) | Physical Education (10) | Applied Psychology (10) | Education Management (10) |
|--------|--------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| Claim centrality: importance in real world | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Claim centrality: importance in research | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Review literature | 3 | 0 | 5 | 2 | 1 |
| Total | 3 | 1 | 5 | 2 | 1 |

| Move 2 | Applied Linguistics (11) | Instructional Design and Technology (2) | Physical Education (10) | Applied Psychology (10) | Education Management (10) |
|--------|--------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| Indicate a gap or research questions | 9 | 2 | 3 | 5 | 7 |
| Indicate problem in the real world | 8 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 6 |
| Give positive justification | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Total | 9 | 2 | 3 | 5 | 7 |

| Move 3 | Applied Linguistics (11) | Instructional Design and Technology (2) | Physical Education (10) | Applied Psychology (10) | Education Management (10) |
|--------|--------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| State goals or argument of thesis | 8 | 2 | 9 | 5 | 5 |
| Present background of the study | 10 | 2 | 7 | 10 | 10 |
| Present hypotheses | 1 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 3 |
| Preview organization of thesis | 6 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| Present data collection and methods of analysis | 3 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Present delimitations | 0 | 1 | 5 | 0 | 1 |
4.1.1 Analysis of Move 1 in Swales’ model

In Table 1, only one out of 11 applied linguistics theses began with the move ‘claim centrality: importance in real world (see Excerpt 1)’ and three out of 11 applied linguistics theses ‘review previous research (see Excerpt 2).’

Excerpt 1

It is timely that we examine the approach that teachers use to help students develop their writing ability as they move through secondary school. I have observed that many young students who enjoy writing personal recounts and narratives do not necessarily transfer this writing ability to a skill in argumentative writing because the text structure and linguistic features of narratives are different from those of argumentative texts. By teaching explicitly the argumentative text structure and its linguistic features in this context, learning and writing the argumentative text type can become more meaningful for the students. (Applied Linguistics)

Excerpt 2

There are limitations in designing and evaluating the effectiveness of a mental skill training programme (Grove, Northon, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 1999)... Ravizza (2002) has found the need to make all the concepts, theories, and techniques of mental skills relevant and meaningful to the individual athletes. (Physical Education)

In contrast to Samraj’s (2008) study, three out six applied linguistics theses showed a review of previous research. A possible reason to account for the less frequent use of literature in the introduction could be because Singaporean students think that review of literature should be presented as a separate chapter in chapter two. Another reason might be attributed to the fact that students in Singapore are not aware of the need to include relevant literature in the introduction to contextualize the study. The second interesting finding is that the introductions in applied linguistics, instructional design and technology, physical education, applied psychology, and education management do not begin with a claim about centrality of importance of research, unlike the first move identified in many research article introductions (see Samraj, 2008).

4.1.2 Analysis of Move 2 in Swales’ model

Nine out of 11 applied linguistics theses and seven out of 10 education management theses indicate a gap in research. By doing so, writers establish a niche for themselves. In Excerpt 3, the student first indicated a gap which was about the shortage of research in the impact of explicit teaching in text structure in argumentative texts at the lower secondary schools in Singapore. Then, the writer moved on to establish his niche, which was about the types of linguistic features of arguments produced by student writers.

Excerpt 3

‘This study was carried out because there have been relatively few research studies conducted in Singapore on the impact of explicit teaching in text structure in argumentative texts on lower secondary school students. Much less work, if any, has been done on research into the types of linguistic features of arguments produced by student writers.’ (Applied linguistics)
In Excerpt 4, the student shows a research gap about the divergent opinions on the specific enumeration of competencies that are considered essential for the successful implementation of the role as the head of the department. The student established a niche for his research focusing on the differences in the perceptions of department heads and their role competences.

Excerpt 4

‘...There are formal job descriptions for the department head. However, no consensus has been reached on a specific enumeration of competencies considered essential for the successful implementation of the role. Also, few studies have considered the extent of differences of perceptions of department heads and their principals/vice principals as to the importance of role competences.’ (Education Management)

In addition to showing a research gap in Move 2, theses across different disciplines indicated that giving positive justification (Excerpt 5).

Excerpt 5

This dissertation identifies two problem areas: traditional Chinese language learning in the classroom of Singapore emphasizes on knowledge transmission and vocabulary memorization which is not effective in improving students’ language ability, and students deemed writing the most difficult among the four communicative skills, compared with listening, speaking, and reading. (Applied Linguistics)

4.1.3 Analysis of Move 3 in Swales’ model

Most of the theses analyzed in this study take the following steps in the third move of Swales’ CARS model, in particular, stating goal of the thesis, presenting the background of the study, and outlining the organizational structure of the thesis. One point is worth mentioning that the step “defining the key terms,” which has not been mentioned in Swales’ CARS model, appears across disciplines. The reason could be attributed to the fact that all students, who completed their bachelor’s study in the National Institute of Education, have taken a course called Academic Discourse Skills, learned the importance to define the key terms in the introductory section of their research papers. These student writers were likely to transfer this skill to their graduate thesis writing.

4.2 Citation practices

The student writers across disciplines make references to previous research studies, as evident in the introductory chapters of their theses. According to Samraj (2002, 2008), citing previous research to contextualize the study is a common feature in the introduction of a dissertation. Table 2 showed the number and the percentage of citations found in the 43 theses across five disciplines. Table 2 exhibited a similar pattern in the use of non-integral and integral citations among the theses in applied linguistics, education management, physical education and applied psychology, with an exception in instructional design and technology. For example, for every three citations, student writers in applied linguistics, physical education, applied psychology, and education management employed approximately two non-integral citations and one integral citation. The theses in instructional design and technology made even more use of non-integral citations (86%). The reason could be due to the small sample collected for this study, i.e. two theses. If more theses can be gathered and analyzed, a different picture or generalization may result.

|                        | Applied Linguistics | Instructional Design and Technology | Physical Education | Applied Psychology | Education Management |
|------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| Non-integral           | 154 (64%)          | 25 (86%)                             | 176 (65%)         | 140 (66%)         | 53 (58%)             |
| Integral               | 88 (36%)           | 4 (14%)                              | 96 (35%)          | 71 (34%)          | 39 (42%)             |
| Total                  | 242                | 29                                   | 272               | 211               | 92                   |
4.2.1 Analysis of first person pronouns

Table 3 shows that the use of the first person pronouns is quite different across five disciplines. The use of first person pronouns is most common in applied linguistics and education management while they are less commonly used in instructional design and technology and physical education. It is worth pointing out that the first person pronouns were absent in applied psychology as the students might not aware of the fact that they can incorporate their voice and establish authorial presence in their writing.

|                  | Applied Linguistics | Instructional Design and Technology | Physical Education | Applied Psychology | Education Management |
|------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| Move 1           | 10                  | 1                                   | 1                  | 0                  | 0                    |
| Move 2           | 10                  | 2                                   | 0                  | 0                  | 3                    |
| Move 3           | 9                   | 5                                   | 0                  | 0                  | 59                   |
| Total            | 29                  | 8                                   | 1                  | 0                  | 62                   |

4.2.2 Student writers’ voice and intertextual links

When it came to the relationship between student authorial voice and frequency of references used in thesis introduction, as shown in Table 4, applied linguistics and education management theses seem to indicate a positive correlation between students’ authorial presence and the number of times of using non-integral citation. On the contrary, instructional design and technology student writers show both a low authorial presence and a low frequency of using non-integral citation. In order to create stronger intertextual links, it appears that student writers in physical education and applied psychology make less use of first person pronouns in the introduction and more use of non-integral citations. In contrast to Samraj’s (2008) study, applied linguistics students in the current study tend to background other researchers and foreground the object of inquiry.

|                  | Applied Linguistics | Instructional Design and Technology | Physical Education | Applied Psychology | Education Management |
|------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| Student’s presence | Quite high          | Quite low                           | Low                | Low                | High                 |
| Other researchers | Tendency to background | Backgrounded                        | Tendency to background | Tendency to background | Tendency to background |
| Frequency of references | High | Low                                   | High               | High               | Quite high           |
| Object of inquiry       | Foregrounded          | Backgrounded                        | Foregrounded       | Foregrounded       | Foregrounded         |

5. Conclusion

The results of this study add valuable knowledge to genre analysis and new directions in international writing research. To create stronger intertextual links, student writers in physical education and applied psychology deliberately make less use of first person pronouns in the introduction and more use of non-integral citations.

References and further readings

Belcher, D (1994). The apprentice approach to advanced academic literacy: Graduate students and their mentors. *English for Specific Purposes, 13*, 23-34.
Berkenkotter, C., Huckin, T., and Ackerman, J. (1991). Social context and socially constructed texts: The initiation of a graduate student into a writing research community. In: C. Bazerman and J. Paradis, Editors, *Textual dynamics and the professions* (pp. 191-215). Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
Bunton, D. (2002). Generic moves in PhD thesis introductions. In: J. Flowerdew, Editor, *Academic discourse* (pp. 57-75). Harlow: Pearson.
Bunton, D. (2005). The structure of PhD conclusion chapters. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 4*, 207-224.
Casanave, C. P. (1995). Local interactions: Constructing contexts for composing in a graduate sociology program. In: D. Belcher and G. Braine, Editors, *Academic writing in a second language: Essays on research and pedagogy* (pp. 83-110). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
Hyland, K. (2000). *Disciplinary discourse: Social interactions in academic writing*. Essex: Pearson Education.
Prior, P. (1998). *Writing disciplinary: A sociohistoric account of literate activity in the academy*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
Ridley, D. (2000). Discursive practices in graduate-level context courses: The case of environment science. *Text, 20*, 347-371.
Samraj, B. (2002). Introductions in research articles: Variations across disciplines. *English for Specific Purposes, 21*, 1-17.
Samraj, B. (2008). A discourse analysis of master’s theses across disciplines with a focus on introductions. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 7*, 55-67.
Swales, J. M. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Swales, J. M. (2004). *Research genres: Explorations and applications*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.