



Cultural differences in the organization of research article introductions from the field of educational psychology: English and Chinese

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the rhetorical organization of the introduction sections of English and Chinese research articles in the field of educational psychology. The study reported in this paper adopts Swales's (1990, 2004) framework of move analysis. In general, the findings of the present study reveal that there are similarities and differences between English and Chinese research article introductions in terms of the employment of moves and steps. It is suggested that the rhetorical differences reflect some of the distinctive characteristics of the two different cultures, English and Chinese. The findings of the present study have both theoretical and pedagogical implications.

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1. Introduction

Contrastive rhetorical studies confirm cultural preferences for certain rhetorical patterns and the use of first language rhetorical patterns by novice English second-language writers. Chinese speakers often include discourse features valued in Chinese culture in their writing, which differ from those used in English prose and include the use of a preponderance of proverbs, quotations, allusions and historical references to delay arguments (Tsao, 1980, 1983); the use of proverbs or formulaic expressions in conclusions (Chen, 1981); references to Confucian philosophy (Becker, 1995); and language (e.g. idioms, clichés and set phrases) used primarily as adornment (Matalene, 1985). The differences in preferred Chinese and English rhetorical patterns may cause problems for Chinese students writing academic English prose which tends to use logical reasoning and English rhetorical structure.

To illuminate possible difficulties faced by Chinese ESL students in producing acceptable academic English writing and to suggest ways in which they and their teachers might deal with these difficulties, the study reported in this paper applied a genre-based contrastive rhetorical examination of textual differences between English and Chinese research article introductions.

2. The rationale for a genre-based contrastive study

Genre analysis can be used to group texts based on significant similarities and differences in rhetorical purpose, form and audience (Dudley-Evans, 1989) and is attested in the literature as of pedagogical value for various reasons. Genre analysis pays close attention to distinguishing characteristics (Cheng, 2005), which include language features significant to the

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particular genre, rhetorical structures and style. It is useful for novice writers to identify these language features and the communicative purposes intended by the texts (Swales, 1990) and in turn to “gain insights into generic practices and disciplinary cultures embodied in the formal properties” (Cheng, 2005:22). Learners are able to exploit these features themselves (Brett, 1994). 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).

Explicit discussions of rhetorical structures and their use in different languages and cultures should facilitate students’ understanding of the “sociorhetorical parameters underlying the linguistic features in genre exemplars” (Cheng, 2005:22) and also of the communicative purposes of these texts which are produced within and according to the conventions of a particular discourse community (Swales, 1990). Genre analysis, with its focus on both the social context in which the text is created and the linguistic realizations of discourse, will thus provide learners with a thorough and complete understanding of specific texts. This in turn has the potential to assist learners in producing effective discourse. When the rules and conventions are made explicit through genre analysis as described above, contrastive rhetoric could then play its role by comparing and contrasting genres across two languages and attempting to link their similarities and differences to cultural patterns.

Contrastive rhetorical studies are able to provide teachers and students with knowledge about the preferred patterns of writing (Connor, 2003) by uncovering specific rhetorical patterns, which might be culturally and contextually specific (Shim, 2005). Such knowledge could provide the basis for explicit strategies which Chinese ESL students might use to comprehend and produce effective English academic writing.

The rationale for undertaking the genre-based contrastive rhetorical study described in this paper, is thus that it provides a wide range of insights from the fields of genre analysis and contrastive rhetoric, which form the basis for a comprehensive discussion of the distinctive rhetorical structures found in research article introductions written in the two different languages—English and Chinese.

3. Purpose and research questions of the study

As outlined in the above rationale, the purpose of the present study was to investigate the genre structure of English and Chinese research article introductions in terms of moves and steps and to explore the socio-cultural implications that emerged from the findings. The major research questions addressed in the present study were:

- i. What are the similarities and differences between English and Chinese research article introductions in terms of the genre structures of moves and steps?
- ii. What are the socio-cultural inferences that can be drawn from the different genre structures in English and Chinese introductions?

4. Data collection and procedure

The corpus for this study comprises 40 introductions of research articles – 20 Chinese and 20 English – in the field of educational psychology. The English research articles, written by first language speakers, were selected from *The Journal of Educational Psychology*, published by the American Psychological Association, Washington, DC. The Chinese research articles written by first-language Chinese speakers were selected from 心理發展與教育 (*Psychological Development and Education*), a leading academic journal published in Beijing, China by 北京師範大學兒童心理研究所 (Children’s Psychology Research Institute of Beijing Normal University), and 中國教育學會兒童教育心理學研究所 (Children’s Educational Psychology Research Institute of China Education Society). The journal has published research articles in educational psychology since 1985 with four issues yearly. The two journals were selected as being representative of prestigious refereed journals in the field of educational psychology in the respective countries.

Initially, 60 articles were selected from each journal based on judgment sampling. Later, 20 articles were extracted from the 60 articles for each language to form the actual corpus of the present study. To obtain a random-stratified sample, the total population of 60 articles was first stratified into five subgroups based on publication in the five years preceding the year in which the sampling was made (2003–2007), followed by a simple random sampling to select articles from each of the five subgroups in proportion to their representation in the total population. A simple random sampling was employed within each stratum to ensure an unbiased representative sample. The modest size of 40 research article introductions was

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