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Identifying problems in writing thesis introductions in research methodology class

Siti Hamin Stapa [a,]*, Tengku Nor Rizan Tengku Mohd Maasum[a], Mohd Sallehhudin Abd Aziz [a]

[a]*School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Univeristi Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi Selangor, 43600 Malaysia.*

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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Keywords: writing introduction, genre analysis, move-structure, discourse community, research methodology

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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.

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