



**Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development**

**A GENRE ANALYSIS OF ABSTRACTS BY NON-NATIVE ENGLISH  
SPEAKING (NNES) SCHOLARS IN MALAYSIAN JOURNALS**

**EDWARD NGUI HOW LAI**

**Bachelor of Education with Honours  
(Teaching English as Second Language)  
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**Universiti Malaysia Sarawak**

**A GENRE ANALYSIS OF ABSTRACTS BY NON-NATIVE ENGLISH  
SPEAKING (NNES) SCHOLARS IN MALAYSIAN JOURNALS**

by

**EDWARD NGUI HOW LAI  
(13972)**

This project is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Education with Honours  
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The project entitled **A Genre Analysis of Abstracts by Non-native English Speaking (NNES) Scholars in Malaysian Journals** was prepared by **Edward Ngui How Lai (13972)** and submitted to the Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Education with Honours (Teaching English as a Second Language).

It is hereby confirmed that the student has done all necessary amendments of the project for acceptance:

---

Dr. Ting Su Hie

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Statement of Originality**

The work described in this Final Year Project, entitled  
**“A Genre Analysis of Abstracts by Non-native English Speaking (NNES) Scholars  
in Malaysian Journals”**  
is to the best of the author’s knowledge that of the author except  
where due reference is made.

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(Date submitted)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Student’s signature)

EDWARD NGUI HOW LAI  
13972

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## ABSTRACT

### A GENRE ANALYSIS OF ABSTRACTS BY NON-NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKING (NNES) SCHOLARS IN MALAYSIAN JOURNALS

Edward Ngui How Lai

The emerging abstract genre in scholarly publication has led to the growing concern towards abstracts written by novice writers, in particular non-native English speakers (NNES). This study investigates the rhetorical structures and language features of NNES writers of English abstracts published in Malaysian journals. The text analysis on 50 abstracts in 7 local journals from the field of applied linguistics has found a considerable match with Santos' (1996) five-move pattern and Weissberg and Buker's (1990) verb tenses specifications despite the variations and problems identified in the corpus. The results showed that 28 out of the 50 abstracts (56.0%) included the 3 fundamental moves (i.e. purpose, methodology and results) in a logical order. Of particular variations were the two unspecified forms for the background (*i.e. practical problem to lead to purpose*) and purpose statements (*i.e. presenting outcome/findings*) and the preponderant use of present tense in presenting purpose, methodology and results instead of the past tense. The four main flaws were the omission of moves (especially the fundamental ones), loss of move status (in particular the methods, results and discussions), confusion in the order of moves and unsound evaluative claim in the present without modulations. In addition, the infrequency of extending previous research (in situating research), reporting the scope of research (in describing methodology), suggesting solutions to problems (in summarising results) and the lower tendency to draw conclusion than to give recommendations (in discussing research) were observed. This study concludes that NNES should assimilate prescribed conventions so that their writings conform to the expectation of the discourse community they are writing to and simultaneously, fulfill their different writing needs. The incorporation of findings into instructional materials should emphasise the specific writing skills and problems identified to enhance NNES' writing of more effective abstracts.

## ABSTRAK

### **ANALISIS GENRE ABSTRAK OLEH PARA ILMIAH BUKAN PENUTUR ASLI BAHASA INGGERIS DALAM JURNAL-JURNAL MALAYSIA**

Edward Ngui How Lai

Kemunculan genre abstrak dalam penerbitan ilmiah telah mendorong peningkatan kebimbangan terhadap abstrak yang ditulis oleh penulis baru, terutamanya di kalangan penulis bukan penutur asli bahasa Inggeris. Kajian ini mengkaji struktur-struktur retorik dan ciri-ciri bahasa abstrak dalam bahasa Inggeris oleh penulis bukan penutur asli bahasa Inggeris yang diterbitkan dalam jurnal-jurnal Malaysia. Analisis teks untuk 50 abstrak daripada 7 jurnal tempatan dalam bidang linguistik gunaan bertepatan dengan Lima Langkah Santos (1996) dan Kata Kerja Penentu Weissberg dan Buker (1990) walaupun terdapat variasi dan masalah yang telah dikenal pasti dalam korpus. Kajian menunjukkan 28 daripada 50 abstrak (56.0%) mengandungi 3 langkah asas (iaitu tujuan, metodologi dan keputusan) dalam susunan berturutan. Variasi tertentu terdapat dalam dua bentuk langkah yang tidak mempunyai spesifikasi bagi maklumat latar belakang (iaitu masalah praktikal yang mendorong kepada tujuan) dan pernyataan tujuan (iaitu membentangkan hasil penemuan kajian), serta banyak penggunaan kata kini untuk membentangkan tujuan, metodologi dan keputusan daripada penggunaan kala lampau. Empat masalah utama adalah ketiadaan langkah-langkah (terutamanya langkah asas), status langkah tidak lengkap (khususnya metodologi, keputusan dan perbincangan), kekeliruan dalam susunan langkah-langkah dan penilaian tuntutan yang belum dibukti kesahihannya dalam kata kini tanpa sebarang modulasi. Selain daripada itu, ketidakkerapan dalam meneruskan kajian sebelumnya (dalam situasi penyelidikan), melaporkan skop penyelidikan (menerangkan metodologi), mencadangkan penyelesaian terhadap masalah (merumuskan keputusan kajian) dan kecenderungan yang lebih rendah untuk membuat kesimpulan daripada memberikan cadangan (membincangkan penyelidikan) telah dipantau. Kajian ini menyimpulkan bahawa penulis bukan penutur asli bahasa Inggeris harus mengasimilasikan preskripsi-preskripsi supaya penulisan mereka memenuhi jangkaan masyarakat berilmiah dan pada masa yang sama dapat memenuhi keperluan penulisan mereka yang berbeza. Penyatuan hasil penemuan kepada bahan-bahan pengajaran seharusnya menumpukan kemahiran-kemahiran menulis khusus dan masalah-masalah yang dikenal pasti untuk meningkatkan penulisan abstrak yang lebih efektif di kalangan penulis bukan penutur asli bahasa Inggeris.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

EAP	English for Academic Purposes
EFL	English as Foreign Language
ESP	English for Specific Purposes
NES	Native English speakers/speaking
NGO	Non-government organisation
NNES	Non-native English speakers/speaking
RA	Research article

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The introductory chapter of this study includes the background of genre analysis studies in academic and research setting in particular the abstract genre and the problem statement in which criticism towards the abstracts written by the non-native English speakers (NNES) is discussed. After setting the scene for the present study, the purpose and objectives, significance, operational definition of terms and scope of study are clearly presented.

#### **1.1 Background of the Study**

In general, journal articles are known to be written more as “experts writing for experts” than novices “writing for admission to the academy” (Paltridge, 2002, p. 132). It is the intent of all true academics to have their papers accepted and published in professional journals. Nevertheless, writing for scholarly publications is a demanding task for researchers, especially novice writers for the complexity of writing skills and the research process itself involved. Taking account of English language as the medium of research and research reporting, the difficulty level is often doubly posed for non-native English speaking (NNES) researchers (Paltridge, 2002). Reviewing the literature in research writing among the non-native graduate students, Yu (1998) found that the deprivation of the knowledge of discipline, genre and audience contributed to their writing difficulties. This has thus made a case for genre analysis in academic and research setting in which Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993) proposed the use of genre analysis approach in teaching research writing systematically to non-native writers. Sharing the same view, Santos (1996) asserted the potential



pedagogical benefits of the genre analysis approach among novice or English as Foreign Language (EFL) researchers by providing them the proposed schematic patterns or frameworks in organising and presenting their study. Bhatia (1993) viewed the approach as “an insightful and thick description of academic and professional texts” (p. 11). It caters to the substantial lack of “textual knowledge, genre knowledge and social knowledge” required of the NNES researchers to succeed in academic writing (Bhatia, 1999 cited in Paltridge, 2002, p. 137).

Recognising the emergent role of genre analysis approach in the teaching of research writing to the novice or NNES writers, genre-related studies that have pedagogical implications in academic writing, particularly English for Specific Purposes (ESP) are Swales’ (1990) Introduction section, Hopkins and Dudley-Evans’ (1988) Discussion section and Hartley’s (1997) Abstract section. It can be seen that much research is based on analysing the research article (RA) or separate sections of it (Chan & Foo, 2001; Paltridge, 2002). Most of these studies have replicated Swales’ (1990) genre approach in which the RA text is divided into the Introduction-Method-Results-Discussion (IMRD) pattern. Hopkins and Dudley-Evans (1988) extended his seminal work on RA Introductions to the Discussion section while others adopted and adapted it to the Abstract section (Chan & Foo, 2001; Hartley, 1997; Santos, 1996). The findings from these studies have influenced and shaped the real world practice of academic writing to a certain extent (Chan & Foo, 2001).

According to Swales (1990), “the more established the conventions, the more articulated the genre” (p. 175). The discrepancy between the published advice and specification in research writing literature and actual practice has become an issue of genre analysis itself (Chan & Foo, 2001; Paltridge, 2002; Santos, 1996). It is stated that “very little analysis (has) been carried out of actual texts” (Mauch & Birch, 1998 cited in Paltridge, 2002, p. 125) and this explains why novice writers do not follow the prescriptions in the publications. Hence, it is crucial to promote more genre analysis studies and incorporate the findings into instructional materials (Santos, 1996). Besides, the under-researched of RA

abstract has been due to its *ex post facto* nature in the research writing process (Swales, 1990, p. 181). It is commonly treated as a short text, within the limit of a paragraph in a page or less, being the last to be written after the completion of the whole paper as a mere summarising task (Chan & Foo, 2004). Hence, it has been neglected and devalued.

It was during the 80s that the research interest into abstract genre was shown with the writing conventions established for novice writers and this had extended to real world practices in the 90s (Bazerman, 1984b; Graetz, 1985; Huckin, 1987, 1991 cited in Chan & Foo, 2004, p. 5). Since then, abstracts have been recognized as an academic genre that is “highly common and almost obligatory” in communicating research findings (Santos, 1996, p. 482). Its increasingly importance is due to the communicative purpose that it has to offer, that is to communicate exact and concise content of the full article to its readers. It is to convey “the maximum of useful information in the minimum of words” (Cilveti & Perez, 2006, pp. 62 – 63). This has led to the need of the study to examine the abstract genre for its acquired value and significance in the present academic research world (Bhatia, 1993; Chan & Foo, 2001, 2004; Guardiola & Banos, 1993; Santos, 1996).

## **1.2 Statement of Problem**

Despite its growing significance due to the current myriad entry of RAs, especially in electronic databases, it is criticised that the many English abstracts written by both native and particularly the non-native English speakers are “uninformative, misleading and poorly structured” that hinder accurate searching and retrieval of information (Salager-Meyer, 1990, p. 368). It is noted that the research into the emerging abstract genre is still considerably scarce in terms of its “actual textual properties... and specific help for the non-native scholar” compared to the more established genres (Santos, 1996, p. 483). According to Anderson and Maclean (1997), there is not any published course materials specifically for non-native writers of medical abstracts. Besides, it is the perceived experience of ESP practitioners in the tertiary institutions that non native scholars

have difficulty developing the academic competencies in English (Santos, 1996). It has been argued that the technical writing literature of abstract is at “a level of generality that makes it pointless rather than helpful for the prospective author” (Santos, 1995 cited in Santos, 1996, p. 484). This has accounted for the mismatch between the published advice and actual practice (Chan & Foo, 2001; Paltridge, 2002; Santos, 1996). Thus, more research into the abstract genre that specifically addresses the writing of NNES scholars is needed to fill in, if not, minimize the gap. This has led to the present study on the abstracts accompanying journal articles published by NNES scholars in Malaysian journals.

### **1.3 Purpose and Objectives of Study**

The study examined the Abstract section of journal articles written by NNES scholars which were empirical in nature. Specifically, it answered the following questions:

1. How do NNES scholars structure the Abstract section in their journals with reference to the checklist adapted from the five-move pattern by Santos (1996)?
2. What are the language features found in the abstracts written with reference to the checklist adopted from the verb tenses specifications by Weissberg and Buker (1990)?

### **1.4 Significance of Study**

The primary significance of the study was due to its potential pedagogical implication and application to improve the academic writing of RA abstracts. Of particular merit was to provide a clear pattern for novice writers to organise and present their study in a more concise and prescriptive manner. A badly written or structured abstract is a barrier to publication itself and to thus justify the need to write effective abstracts. Taking on the view of student academic writing as the “centre of teaching and learning in higher education”, the assumption that students will ‘pick up’ the ‘common sense’ knowledge of academic writing conventions is no longer warranted (Coffin, Curry, Goodman, Hewings, Lillis & Swann, 2003, p. 3). Hence, the incorporation of the findings into instructional materials enhanced

with the integration of explicit instruction into academic writing courses, specifically, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) would not only engage them in their writing skills, but more importantly, to produce an acceptable writing that fulfils its communicative purpose with the generic structure and language features expected from the particular discourse community that they are writing to. The aforementioned practice would determine the approach materials writers and instructors of academic writing should take as well.

Besides, it is noted that linguistic proficiency on its own is insufficient in writing a good text; it should be complemented with the genre knowledge of the text itself (Hajibah, 2004). Thus, it is also the significance of the study to provide insights to find if the writing of abstracts among NNES scholars is due to cultural variation or merely novice not knowing the conventions. The intercultural variation in the rhetorical preferences in academic writing can be accounted for the “sociopragmatic context of publication, that is the relationship between the writers and the discourse community they are addressing, which is different both in terms of size and pressure” (Martin-Martin & Burgess, 2004, p. 171). It can be explained that the pressure to compete for a research space and the need to justify their works in an international discourse community increase significantly compared to those writing in a smaller community. In addition, the differences can be due to other socio-cultural variables such as national intellectual styles, development factors and school systems.

## **1.5 Operational Definition of Terms**

The important terms and their concepts are defined according to the purpose and objectives of the study.

### **1.5.1 Journal Article**

According to Gay (1996), journal article is a type of research report with its own distinctive features that make it different from thesis or dissertation. Though they are similar in the content and format, journal article is much shorter

than the lengthy thesis or dissertation and it is written to be published in journals. Journal article, like any other research report, includes empirical study, literature review, position papers, curriculum and materials development and resource (materials) evaluation. Each has its own specific research design and language requirement. Apart from achieving homogeneity in the sample texts, it was specifically for the purpose of study that empirical journal articles in the field of applied linguistics published by NNES scholars in Malaysian journals were selected and studied. These journal articles emphasised on reporting findings and solution in language education and language-related problems through techniques like experiments, interviews and case studies.

### **1.5.2 Abstract Section**

In general, the abstract section precedes the actual documentation of the study in the published journal article (Gay, 1996). In simple terms, it is the section before the introduction section of the journal article. A complete abstract contains the bibliographic *reference*, identifying the item abstracted, the *body* of the abstract (the text) and the *signature* (Lancaster, 1991, p. 101). Writers aim to provide a “succinct yet complete overview of the study sufficient to inform the busy reader of the nature and context of the study and its outcomes” in the abstracts (Clare & Hamilton, 2004, p. 6). For the length of abstracts, it varies from 100 to 250 words according to the requirements of different journals and other factors like the length of the original, its subject matter, its perceived importance and physical availability and accessibility (Clare & Hamilton, 2004; Gay, 1996; Lancaster, 1991).

### **1.5.3 Genre Analysis of Abstract Section**

In the context of the study, genre analysis was chosen as the approach to examine and evaluate abstracts. According to Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993), each genre has its own conventionalised schematic structure and language features to fulfill the communicative purpose of the genre. The schematic structure is termed as ‘moves’ (Bhatia, 1993; Santos, 1996; Swales, 1990) and the language features refer to the linguistic choices made to achieve the purpose of each move.

Thus, in the study, the move was chosen as the unit of analysis of the texts. For this purpose, the five-move pattern proposed by Santos (1996) in examining RA abstracts was employed. The five moves were (1) Situating the research, (2) Presenting the research, (3) Describing the methodology, (4) Summarising the results and (5) Discussing the research. Apart from rhetorical structure, the analysis of language features of abstracts was based on Weissberg and Buker's (1990) verb tenses specifications which corresponded to Santos' (1996) proposed moves: background (present tense), principal activity (past tense/ present perfect tense), methodology (past tense), results (past tense) and conclusions (present tense/ tentative verbs/ modal auxiliaries). Therefore, two separate checklists were designed based on the aforementioned published frameworks for the analysis of the generic structure and language features of abstracts.

### **1.6 Scope of the Study**

It was the main interest of the study to examine NNES' abstracts published in Malaysian journals. Therefore, English abstracts written by native English speaking (NES) authors from foreign institutional affiliations were screened out from the corpus of sample abstracts as it was not the intention of the study to make comparison between the two.

It was the position of the study that the abstracts accompanying the published journal articles were acceptably formed abstracts. Hence, the extrinsic and intrinsic factors in producing the abstracts were not looked into. This included the experience in the writing process, the linguistic competence in the target language, gender and bilingualism or multilingualism of the authors that might influence the writing of a good abstract in terms of achieving its communicative purpose with the generic structure and language features. The study sought to find out the way abstracts written by NNES scholars, who published in Malaysian journals, were structured and linguistically realised with the aim of identifying the relationship between the actual practice and the conventions.

This chapter has covered the overview of the study which includes the background, problem statement, purpose and objectives, significance, operational definition of terms and scope of the study. The following chapter will attempt to present the literature review on the subject of the study, which is abstract and the art of abstracting in academic research paper writing.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter presents the literature review on abstract and the art of abstracting in academic research paper writing. This includes a description on the purpose of research and research reporting, an account of what abstract is and the types of abstracts across disciplines and the writing of conventional abstract. In this chapter, the genre analysis as the theoretical framework for evaluating abstracts is discussed on its own as well as in relation to the issues involving novice writers in terms of the structure and language features in writing their abstracts. At the end of this chapter, a summary of the key information from the reviewed items above is presented.

#### **2.1 Research Paper Writing**

The chapter begins with an introduction to research paper writing by reviewing the purpose of research and research reporting. The types of research reports and their relationship with one another are looked into as well.

##### **2.1.1 The Purpose of Research**

According to Veit (1990), research is “at the very heart of education” in which it is viewed as a means to learn the essential skills in conducting research itself, contributing to scholarship and gaining personal knowledge (pp. 3 – 5). Research, implying technicality to an extent, is the “formal, systematic application of the scientific method to the study of problems” (Gay, 1996, p. 6). This definition is taken a step further by Sharp, Peters and Howard (2002) who described research as “seeking through methodological processes to add to one’s