



A genre analysis of students' essay introductions

Hilda Hidalgo Avilés
Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo

Abstract

This is a qualitative study which focuses on essays at graduate level written in Spanish by MA students. Interviews were conducted with MA students and their lecturers to gain an insight into the expectations and beliefs of both parties regarding the students' essay introductions. Five students and three lecturers from two different Mexican institutions were interviewed. Students' essays awarded a Distinction grade were analysed. Taking a rhetorical approach based on Kusel's (1992) model, a study was made of the structure of essay introductions.

The rhetorical structure of the introductions shows that the students organize things in different ways. Most of them start by claiming centrality, but some others start by outlining the purpose or aims. This study concludes by suggesting genre analysis as a teaching approach, designed to create students' awareness of the organization of texts. It contributes to the view that students can improve their essay writing if they become aware of the rhetorical effects of their own prose.

1. Introduction

This research report is part of a wider investigation mainly concerned with academic literacy, genre and genre analysis. The focus in this presentation is on genre analysis in order to report on the moves identified in students' essay introductions. According to Paltridge (2001), the term genre was first introduced in the area of ESP in 1981, in an *ESP Journal* article by Elaine Tarone and her colleagues on the language of scientific reports and in Swales' (1981) study of introductions to scientific reports" (p.2). Swales's model has been used with great success in the analysis of research introductions in various academic disciplines in English and across disciplines as well as in other languages (Crookes, 1986; Swales and Najjar, 1987; Brett, 1994; Posteguillo, 1999; Samraj, 2002, Fakhri, 2004).



Regarding students' writing, Bunton (2002) analyses PhD thesis introductions. Samraj, (2004) analyses the student research paper across two disciplines. However, in spite of the relevance of the academic essay as a genre, it has generally received little attention and has been analysed predominantly at the undergraduate level. Hyland (1990) looks at the overall organization of the argumentative essay. Kusel (1992), for example, analyses introductions and endings of students' essays. Henry and Roseberry (1997,1999) adopt a different approach to what they identify as "essay" and analyse the introductions and endings of different text types they group under the umbrella concept of 'essay'.

2. Genre

Paltridge (2001,6) argues that genres need to be considered not as patterns of texts in isolation but in relation to the context of production and interpretation and to the aims and assumptions of particular discourse communities. Swales (1990) provides a definition of genre in terms of communicative purpose as he states that:

A genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style (p.58)

An important concept of genre is that of genre knowledge which involves a social and cultural understanding of language in use and the context in which genres occur. Genre knowledge therefore involves knowledge of the writers, readers and texts as we will see in the next section.

2.1. Genre Knowledge

Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) point out that genre knowledge rather than being explicitly taught, is transmitted through enculturation as apprentices become socialized to the ways of speaking in particular disciplinary communities (p.7). If we think of genre knowledge as the knowledge that professionals need in order to communicate in disciplinary communities, then we agree that genre knowledge



involves form and content, including a sense of what content is appropriate to a particular purpose in a particular situation at a particular point in time (p.13). Similar to Berkenkotter and Huckin's definition, appropriacy underpins Hyland's (2004) conception of genre knowledge as he states that, genre knowledge implies that a writing or reading task will evoke not only expectations for particular text features but also assumptions about how a genre is used, the context it occurs in, and the roles and values associated with it... (pp.55-6).

Genre knowledge is not grammatical knowledge per se but involves the ability to participate in communicative events. However, genre knowledge is often regarded by teachers as knowledge of text structure. This aspect of genre knowledge refers to a shared sense of the conventions of grammar, vocabulary, content, organization, and so on, which allow us to write and read texts with ease and confidence (Hyland, 2004:63).

3. Genre Analysis

Genre analysis is an approach in which texts are distinguished according to their goal orientations and examined to determine how they are structured to achieve specific ends. As Paltridge (1997) makes clear, Genre analysis examines the ways in which language varies according to particular contexts of use in particular cultures, as well as the skill-specific strategies required to function with language in these particular contexts (p.26).

From this perspective the structuring of texts is often described as being made up of a series of moves, each of which may contain one or more steps. This involves revealing how writers typically sequence information in the context of a particular genre. Thus, the concept of move is a key term in genre analysis and is explained below.

3.1. Move

Holmes (1997) defines a move as a segment of text that is shaped and constrained by a specific communicative function (p.325). A more rigorous definition of move is found in Nwogu (1991) who characterizes a move as a text



segment made up of a bundle of linguistic features (lexical meanings; prepositional meanings, illocutionary forces, etc.) which give[s] the segment a uniform orientation and signal[s] the content of discourse in it (p.122). Each move is made up of a set of steps that contain the rhetorical choices available to writers to realize the moves. Of those who have conducted move analysis on academic prose, Swales' work is by far the best known, and it is with his work that the following discussion of examples of move analysis begins.

4. The functions of RA introductions

According to Swales (1990) introductions are known to be troublesome, and nearly all academic writers admit to having more difficulty with getting started on a piece of academic writing than they have with its continuation (p.137). Swales posits this assertion based on the multiple decisions writers have to make regarding the amount of background knowledge to be included, the authoritative versus sincere stance, the directness of the approach, the winsomeness of the appeal to the readership.

The introduction of the RA constitutes a vital part of the packaging, designed to alert potential users, to persuade them that this is a valuable product, one which they cannot do without (Law and Williams, 1982, 539, cited in Harwood, 2005,1210). The way introductions are developed may have different effects on the readers because they can provide them with an idea of what the work will look like; they also may influence the readers' decision as to whether to continue reading the text or not, and they may also determine the comprehensibility and coherence of the text itself.

5. Swales's (1990) CARS model

In 1990 Swales developed his three-move, Create a Research Space (CARS) model for investigating the rhetorical structure of Research Article (RA) introductions as seen in figure1 below:



5. A question remains whether ... (p.156)
6. The application presents a problem ... (p.156)
- The third move, occupying the niche, indicates the specific purpose of the conducted research, announces the main findings, or indicates the structure of the research article, as can be seen from examples 7-9.
7. The purpose of this investigation is to... (p.160)
8. This paper reports on the results obtained ... (p.160)
9. The paper is structured as follows ... (p.161)

5. Genre Analysis of Student Writing

The research into RA writing has found that there is a considerable amount of disciplinary variation in RA introductions, and also apparently a number of choices RA writers can make, so introductions are not rigid in their structure. However, I now focus on studies of student introductions.

5.1. Kusel

Kusel (1992) studies essays at the undergraduate level, focusing on the structure of the essay introductions and conclusions. Using Swales's model, 50 student essays drawn from five subject departments (Teacher education, English Literature, History, Geography, and Language Teaching) are analysed in order to compare the conventions adopted by different academic communities. However, given that Swales's framework is designed to interpret research articles specifically and that some adaptation may be necessary in its application to related genres, such as the essay (p. 462), Kusel therefore proposes the following categories (figure 2.):

1. Claiming centrality

- claims that the essay topic has a central importance

2. Providing topic background

- either short or extensive informative text, intended to provide the necessary backdrop against which the topic themes are set

3. Outlining previous research



- a general or specific account of research activity bearing directly on the topic

4. Indicating a gap

- an element which can raise questions or make statements about a gap in the field of knowledge: it can be used covertly to claim centrality or to declare the aims of the essay

5. Outlining the purpose or aims

-usually a short and explicit declaration of intentions

6. Revealing outcome or result

-an early indication of what the essay achieves, or its outcome

7. Indicating the route

-statements showing how the essay will develop, often section by section

Figure2. Categories to analyse students' essays introductions
Source: Kusel 1992,462-463

The following table shows the number of students who chose each element:

Table 1. Kusel's results

| | Teacher Education | English Literature | History | Geography | TEFL | Total |
|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------|---------|-----------|------|-------|
| Sample size | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 50 |
| Claiming Centrality | 6 | 6 | 6 | 4 | 9 | 31 |
| Topic background | 7 | 10 | 10 | 6 | 8 | 41 |
| Previous research | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3 |
| Indicating a gap | 7 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 14 |
| Purpose or aims | 5 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 7 | 32 |
| Revealing outcomes | 0 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 5 |
| Indicating a route | 3 | 7 | 4 | 7 | 5 | 26 |

Source: Kusel 1992:463

The results reveal variation among the choices students made since some of Kusel's categories are more heavily used than others as we can observe from the table above. For example, claiming centrality and providing topic background are conventionally (i.e. heavily) used in a similar way to RA introductions. Outlining previous research, on the other hand, was rarely used. Indicating a gap, on the other hand, was common in Teacher Education texts but not in the other



disciplines. Indicating the purpose or aims of the topic was used but revealing the outcome was not popular. Finally, Kusel argues that indicating the route was more an option of personal choice rather than a disciplinary-bound feature, and when used it was combined with more detailed statements of aims.

Based on these studies reviewed here, the following research question was set:

What are the moves present in students' essay introductions?

6. Method

This is a qualitative study based on Ivanič's (1998) and Lillis's (2001) methodology in which students' writing is discussed with them in order to analyse the way they understand their own writing and how they approach it. The participants are described below.

6.1. Participants

The participants in this study were five MA Politics students and three lecturers. Three of the students were enrolled in a two-year program at the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (BUAP) and two at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). The decision behind which discipline was chosen to be studied was principally based on the availability of students to participate in the research. Two of the lecturers work for the UNAM and one for the BUAP. The three lecturers hold a PhD degree as is required for anyone teaching at the postgraduate level.

6.2. Unpublished Essays

The essays were all coursework assignments written in Spanish from the first year of the students' university programme of study. The essays were written in a natural setting in the sense that students did not know that they would be used for research purposes.



7. Instruments

Students discussed their essay introductions with me and they were asked about their lecturers' expectations regarding their essay introductions, the process they followed to write the essay and the guidelines, if any, lecturers provided them with to write the assignment. They were also asked about other topics that arose during the interview and that were relevant to the research. The interviews lasted between 40 minutes and an hour each and were audio-recorded. The interviews were conducted in the students' native language and then were transcribed verbatim and returned to the students via email so the informants could check for accuracy (i.e. the extent to which the comments reported were theirs), and to answer additional questions asking them to clarify or elaborate on the topic discussed during the interviews. The students turned in written responses to these questions with the transcripts. The same procedure was followed with the lecturers.

8. Results and discussion

The structure of the introductions was analyzed according to Kusel's (1992) suggested set of moves in an attempt to compare and contrast the move structures of the various texts. Therefore, the structure of the introductions will be discussed first in terms of the moves typically found in the introductions. Table 2 presents the results of the analysis of the introductions and their moves.

Table 2. Results of the move analysis

| Categories | Text 1 | Text 2 | Text 3 | Text 4 | Text 5 | Total |
|----------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| 1. Claiming centrality | X | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | 4 |
| 2. Providing topic background | ✓ | ✓ | X | X | ✓ | 3 |
| 3. Outlining previous research | X | X | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | 3 |
| 4. Indicating a gap | X | ✓ | X | X | X | 1 |
| 5. Outlining the purpose or aims | ✓ | X | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | 4 |
| 6. Revealing outcome or result | X | ✓ | X | X | X | 1 |
| 7. Indicating the route | ✓ | X | ✓ | X | ✓ | 3 |



8.1. Centrality claims

A number of introductions contain what has been labelled *centrality claims* in article introductions and are found in the first move, establishing the territory. The following extract from one of the introductions begins with a centrality claim:

1. The political culture of a country is, without doubt, the result of several factors that are difficult to determine: national history, education, the influence of the means of communication, cultural diversity, etc. [Essay 2]

The first sentence asserts that the general topic of political culture is one of current importance; the author points out “the political culture of a country is, without doubt” “difficult to determine”, indicating the interest and importance of the central topic.

8.2. Providing Topic Background

The second type of move in essay introductions, *providing topic background*, is realized by either short or extensive informative text, intended to provide the necessary backdrop against which the topic themes are set (Kusel, 1992,462). There are two instances of this category in the essays. One of them is stated right after the first category *claiming centrality*.

2. But for a country which has not been able to or which has not known how to incorporate all these elements into its general culture and into its political activities, education, means and the cultural diversity can represent an obstacle to the development of its society.

These elements must be permanent of the political culture but it should be kept in mind that they can be changeable and be influenced and they can change and influence us. [Essay 2]

8.3. Outlining Previous Research

The third type of move, *outlining previous research*, which refers to “a general or specific account of research activity bearing directly on the topic” (Kusel,



1992:463), is included in three of the introductions and appears after the claiming centrality move:

3. Through the work of several authors—Cándido Monzón, John R. Zaller and Richar E. Pety and Joseph R. Priester—we analyzed the importance of attitudes in relation to public opinion. [Essay 4]

Example 3 mentions the authors who were analyzed in relation to the central topic. However the writer does not specify that these researchers have studied the topic.

These results are different to Kusel's in which the move of outlining previous research was relatively rare, with just five instances of this category in his corpus. The most frequent moves found by Kusel were providing topic background (41 instances), followed by outlining purpose or aims (32 instances), and claiming centrality (31 instances).

8.4. Indicating a gap

The fourth type of move, *indicating a gap*, was found just once in the entire corpus of introductions. Example 4 indicates a gap by stating that “more projects” “are needed”. Thus indicating a gap is expressed in terms of a need.

4. In this essay, I propose to show that more projects to educate people civically are needed and some examples of what has been done are presented as well. [Essay 2]

Kusel (1992) found that indicating a gap was relatively common in Teacher Education compared to the other disciplines he studied, occurring in seven instances in this field and in 14 cases in all the essays in total. Kusel argues that the relatively low occurrence in these other fields can perhaps be explained because of the difficulty for an undergraduate to perceive the gap in widely researched subjects with no local reference (p.463). The same can be argued regarding these graduate students who do not indicate a gap in their introductions.



8.5. Indicating the purpose or aims

Indicating the purpose or aims of the topic was found in four introductions. Similarly it was relatively common throughout Kusel's essays.

5. This theory has been able to put into practice the process of two moments of the Mexican political system during the government of Ernesto Zedillo and the present of Vicente Fox. [Essay 1]

In example 5, the author states the purpose of the essay by mentioning the theory that will be applied “to know the process of two moments” and by using the word “intends” in the second paragraph.

8.6. Revealing outcomes or results

Revealing outcomes or results is found in only one of the essay introductions:

6. The fact is that there exists little interest of the citizens in these affairs, named by themselves as political in Mexico, and the insane relationships among the actors of these political issues can be an obstacle for the citizens to participate in them. [Essay 2]

The author expresses the results of the essay as a way of conclusion which incorporates the main elements of the topic.

8.7. Indicating the route

This move was found in four introductions and it appears at the end of the introductions:

7. Therefore and first of all, in this essay, each section of the Political Analysis Scheme of David Easton will be described, that is to say, the present system will be defined briefly ...[Essay 1]

The essay writer indicates the route by using the words “first of all, in this essay, each section of the Political Analysis Scheme of David Easton will be



described,” to indicate the information that the reader will find in the body of the essay.

Conclusions

We learn from this study that disciplinary variation exists in a number of ways. In this particular case it has been analysed with regard to the rhetorical structure of essay introductions written by students and experts. As far as students are concerned, once again we find that they are expected to write differently according to the subject they are writing for (and indeed may also be required to write differently for different courses in the same subject). As Elbow (1991) says, “Biologists don’t write like Historians” (p.138) and although Elbow was referring to expert writers writing RAs, the same also seems to apply to student writers and to their introductions. Hence, the question remains: Are our students aware of these variations? Have they been taught to write according to the different text conventions and expectations?

However, while raising students’ awareness of these rhetorical features of texts is important, it may also be argued that lecturers need to do more than provide explicit guidelines on how to approach preparing an assignment



References

- Brett, P. (1994) A Genre Analysis of the Results Section of Sociology Articles. *English for Specific Purposes* 13(1), 47-59
- Bunton, D. (2002) Generic Moves in PhD thesis introductions. In J. Flowerdew (ed.) *Academic Discourse*. Harlow: Longman
- Crookes, G. (1986) Towards a validated analysis of scientific text structure. *Applied Linguistics* 7, 57-70
- Fakhri, A. (2004) Rhetorical properties of Arabic research article introductions. *Journal of Pragmatics* 36, 1119-1138.
- Harwood, N. (2005) 'Nowhere has anyone attempted ... In this article I aim to do just that' A corpus-based study of self-promotional I and we in academic writing across four disciplines. *Journal of Pragmatics* 37 1207-1231
- Henry, A. and Roseberry, R. L. (1997) An investigation of the functions, strategies and linguistic features of the introductions and conclusions of essays. *System* 25, 479-495.
- Holmes, R. (1997) Genre Analysis, and the Social Sciences: An Investigation of the Structure of Research Article Discussion Sections in Three Disciplines. *English for Specific Purposes* 16(4), 321-337
- Hyland, K. (1990) A genre description of the argumentative essay. *RELC Journal* 21(1),66-78
- Ivanič, R. (1998) *Writing and Identity: The Discoursal Construction of Identity in Academic Writing*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Kusel, P. (1992) Rhetorical approaches to the study and composition of academic essays. *System* 20, 457-469
- Lillis, T. (2001) *Student Writing: access, regulation and desire*. London:Routledge
- Nwogu, K. (1991) The structure of science popularizations: A genre analysis approach to the schema of popularized medical texts. *English for Specific Purposes* 10,111-123.
- Paltridge, B. (1997) *Genre, frames and writing in research settings*. Amsterdam:John Benjamins.
- Posteguillo, S. (1999) The schematic structure of computer science research



articles. *English for Specific Purposes* 18, 139-160.

Samraj, B. (2002) Introductions in research articles: variations across disciplines. *English for Specific Purposes* 21, 1-17

_____. (2004) Discourse features of the student-produced academic research paper: variation across disciplinary courses. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 3, 5-22

Biodata

Hilda Hidalgo Avilés (MPhil in Applied Linguistics, University of Essex, England; M. Ed. Universidad La Salle; BA in Lenguas Modernas from the Benemerita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla). She has been a full-time teacher at the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo since 2001 and recently was promoted as a researcher at the same institution. Her research interests include Academic literacy and Language Testing.
hildahgo@yahoo.com