Exploratory rhetorical analysis of TESOL conference abstracts

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Abstract

Discourse analysis research has previously investigated the rhetorical structure of abstracts found within empirical texts. This has been used to inform academic writing practices and instruction of English for Academic Purposes courses. More recently, this research has analysed abstracts submitted to conferences in the area of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Research on the rhetorical structure of abstracts has utilized Swalesian rhetorical move-step analysis to figure out if they follow the models *Create a Research Space* (CARS; Swales, 1990) or *Introduction-Methods-Results-Discussion* (IMRD; Lores, 2004), finding mixed results (Kessler et al., 2014; Yoon & Casal, 2020). The current study investigated abstracts successfully accepted into a TESOL conference proceeding (KOTESOL, 2023) to continue this research using similar methods, finding that they tended to follow the IMRD format. Previous research analysing the rhetorical structure of abstracts from international TESOL conferences has found similar results (Trang, 2024). This prompts the question of if TESOL conference abstracts by non-native English speakers tend to follow IMRD overall and why.

Introduction

Research in the empirical field of discourse analysis has historically examined the rhetorical structure of various written academic texts as genres. A rhetorical genre consists of a single group of spoken or written texts with a shared set of communicative purposes that is socially recognized by members of the community where the genre occurs (Cameron & Panovic, 2014; Swales, 1990). Examples of written texts include almost

anything that has writing on it, and when they recur, they are recognized as concrete genres. Some examples of written genres include books, posters, or maps. Rhetorical structure refers to how parts within a text are organized to communicate meaning and create coherence.

More recently, research has investigated the rhetorical structures of empirical abstracts through methods used to systematically analyse written discourse. Specifically, research has analysed the rhetorical structure of abstracts from conference proceedings using Swalesian rhetorical move-step analysis (Swales, 1990). This has informed English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instruction and academic practice involving abstract writing. Abstracts found in academic conference proceedings are a concrete rhetorical genre important to scholars. To write a conference abstract accepted by reviewers, knowing how to address the rhetorical needs of the particular genre and reviewers' expectations is important.

Swalesian rhetorical move-step analysis is an approach to systematically analysing text used to identify the rhetorical structures of genres (Swales, 1990). A move is a meaningful, functional segment of a text that has a coherent communicative function for a text. Moves both have a local role within a text and contribute to the overall recurring purpose of the genre they act in. They can be found in texts as paragraphs, sentences, or phrases. Steps are functional parts of text which act as sub-units that build moves (Swales, 2004, pp. 228–229).

Research has systematically analysed abstracts of conference proceedings in the field of applied linguistics using move-step analysis to see if they followed the rhetorical structures of *Create a Research Space* (CARS; Swales, 1990) or *Introduction-Methods-Results-Discussion* (IMRD; Lores, 2004), finding mixed results. For example, Kessler et al. (2014) found that abstracts in the field of applied linguistics which were successfully accepted into conference proceedings followed the IMRD format. These results suggest that the IMRD model should be used to write successful conference abstracts. Kessler and colleagues (2014) encourage future researchers to replicate their results by analyzing other conference abstracts in the field of applied linguistics to expand the generalizability of the findings and improve EAP instruction. Other research on the rhetorical structure of applied linguistics conference abstracts contrasts as it found that they tended to follow CARS models (Yoon & Casal, 2020).

It is unclear which rhetorical structure applied linguistics conference abstracts follow, including TESOL conference abstracts, since research has found varied results on the topic. Additionally, previous research in the area has primarily focused on moves playing a key role in the genre, so there is a lack of previous research examining the rhetorical features of conference abstracts at step levels. The current study will help clear up the research debate of which rhetorical structures applied linguistics conference abstracts follow

and add more findings about steps contained in the abstracts. It specifically looks at TESOL conference abstracts, as past research on this topic has focused on these (Stein, 1997; Trang, 2024).

Methods

The purpose of this research project was to further investigate the rhetorical structure of abstracts from TESOL conference proceedings by analysing them in relation to the models *Introduction-Methods-Result-Discussion* (IMRD; Lores, 2004) and *Create A Research Space* (CARS; Swales, 1990). These models have been used in relevant past research in the area of applied linguistics (Kessler et al., 2024; Trang, 2024; Yoon & Casal, 2020). The research question examined by the current study was *Does the rhetorical structure of TESOL conference abstracts correspond to IMRD or CARS models?* To address this question, Swalesian rhetorical move-step analysis (Swales, 1990) was used to systematically analyse and compare the rhetorical structure of abstracts to the models by using moves and steps.

To find materials for the current study, one empirical conference proceeding in the field of applied linguistics was sourced from the internet of which abstracts would be collected from and analysed. A proceeding which was created within the past five years was used to ensure better relevance and application of study results. Abstracts were chosen from the proceeding of the KOTESOL conference that took place in 2023 (KOTESOL, 2023). Korea Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (KOTESOL) is a professional not-for-profit organization for teachers of English at any level in any organization. It is affiliated with the TESOL International Association (KOTESOL, n.d.). KOTESOL holds annual international conferences in South Korea focusing on research and literature in the area of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL).

Abstracts from this proceeding were chosen because TESOL conference abstracts are empirically relevant to the current research literature. Past research on abstracts from applied linguistics conference proceedings have examined the rhetorical structure of TESOL abstracts from conference proceedings (Payant & Hardy, 2016; Stein, 1997; Trang, 2024).

At first, eight abstracts were chosen and analysed, then two more since a clear pattern was quickly found in the first eight. Ten abstracts were analysed in total. Each text was analysed twice—once to see if they contained the IMRD model, and a second time separately from the IMRD analysis using the CARS model. Using each model, moves were first identified, then steps within the moves were identified. Moves and steps were marked by specific colours of ink and highlighting. Colours used for moves and steps were classified by a legend. The two additional texts analysed after the first eight were analysed only for moves to see if the pattern in the first eight continued, since the pattern was quickly found.

To analyse the data for moves and steps found in IMRD rhetorical structures, a coding scheme was created. Although the IMRD model found within the article Lores (2004, p. 283) contained only moves, the present research aimed to analyse the texts for both moves and steps. To ensure this analysis was possible, a final coding scheme was created from segments in the articles by Lores (2004, p. 283) and Cotos et al. (2015, p. 56). The 'moves' shown in the article were used as the steps, and the 'steps' of the 'moves' shown in the article were used as descriptive criteria to analyse for the steps.

The current research used both moves and steps to analyse the models. As addressed in the introduction of this paper, there has been a need introduced for research to look at applied linguistics conference abstracts at step levels, since it is lacking. Cotos et al. (2015, p. 56) provide criteria on moves and steps for articles that follow IMRD, as opposed to abstracts, but it was applied to analyse abstracts since IMRD steps were needed and steps for IMRD abstracts could not be found. Additionally, in move-step analysis, steps may be analysed for in terms of being obligatory or optional in a text or genre (Swales, 1990). In both IMRD and CARS analyses of the current study, all steps were analysed for in terms of frequency, rather than if they were obligatory or optional.

The moves used to analyse for the IMRD model were the categories *Introduction, Methodology, Results, and Discussion*. The move called *Introduction* referred to text where the authors gave empirical background to the research, introduced significance, or introduced a research gap. The move called *Methodology* referred to information provided about methodology, materials, and participants used in the study discussed in each abstract. The move *Results* defined the results the authors found within their study. The move called *Discussion* referred to the process of authors discussing their results in relation to relevant empirical literature, practical applications for their results, and/or future directions for their research study.

To analyse each text for the CARS model, the CARS move-step model from the article by Swales (1990, p. 141) was used to define moves and steps. The moves for CARS were *Establishing a Territory, Establishing a Niche*, and *Occupying a Niche*. The move *Establishing a Territory* referred to text where generalizations about their study topic were made, research relevant to their current study was introduced, or statements about the significance of their research were made. The move *Establishing a Niche* refers to when the author introduced a gap in research or knowledge relevant to the study, unrelated to possible future research directions. The move *Occupying a Niche* was where authors presented methodology, participants, materials, results of their study. It could have also been a presentation of practical applications for the research, and/or a discussion of how their results related to the current research.

Findings and discussion

In the current study, abstracts from conference proceedings in the area of TESOL were analysed using Swalesian rhetorical move-step analysis (Swales, 1990) to see if their rhetorical structure followed either CARS or IMRD models. The study analysed for both moves and steps of each model to respond to the research question, *Does the rhetorical structure of TESOL conference abstracts correspond to IMRD or CARS models?*

When the data was analysed for the CARS model using moves and steps, not all the moves of the CARS model were found. Although the abstracts did not follow the CARS model, the most common move of CARS in the abstracts tended to be move three, *Occupying a Niche*. On the other hand, all the moves in the IMRD model were found, since each abstract had the obligatory moves *Introduction, Methods, Results,* and *Discussion*. Therefore, the findings of the study are that moves contained in the abstracts followed the IMRD model. When the data was analysed for steps, steps from both of the IMRD and CARS models were found. However, no steps analysed for using either model were more frequent than others, suggesting that there are no specific steps required.

Although the submission guidelines of the KOTESOL conference abstracts (KOTESOL, 2023) did not indicate that a particular format of abstract was required, findings suggest that the abstracts must follow an IMRD structure to be successfully accepted. This result also provides further support for an overall pattern where TESOL conference abstracts tend to follow an IMRD model. This is consistent with Wayne Stein's (1997) research where he found that successful TESOL abstracts followed an IMRD model.

Furthermore, the result of the current study is consistent with findings that non-native speakers of English used the IMRD format to write TESOL abstracts (Trang, 2024). Since the writers of the abstracts submitted to the international KOTESOL conference were likely to be non-native English speakers, it suggests that non-native speakers of English are more likely to use the IMRD format, possibly due to higher simplicity of use. Approximately 25% of KOTESOL members are Korean (KOTESOL, n.d.). The study raises a question for future research about how non-native speakers of English and native English speakers differ in how they write TESOL abstracts.

Conclusion

The current study used Swalesian rhetorical move-step analysis to begin to explore whether TESOL conference abstracts followed the models CARS or IMRD, finding that they followed the IMRD model. Findings also showed that there were no obligatory steps in the abstracts, suggesting that there are only optional steps within IMRD models.

Limitations faced by the project included project size, scope, and ethics. The number of conference abstracts analysed was small, which can affect the generalizability and results of the findings. A different pattern of results could be shown in a larger sample of abstracts. As for the scope, the study only focused on a single conference proceeding in the area of TESOL. This may mean that the findings may not apply to different areas within the field of applied linguistics, or other academic disciplines. The final limitation was that since the study did not get an ethics clearance, there was a lack of access to data such as rejected abstracts. Analyzing abstracts that were rejected could provide information about the acceptability of conference abstracts by reviewers, including abstract content and the rhetorical structure they were written in.

In terms of practical applications of the findings, the research provided more evidence that abstracts submitted to empirical international TESOL conferences which follow the IMRD format tend to be accepted. It also suggests that non-native English speakers tend to write abstracts that follow this format. Future research could compare abstracts written by native and non-native speakers of English to determine if they are more likely to use a certain rhetorical structure, especially since research has started going in this direction (Trang, 2024). Moreover, research could analyse abstracts in conference proceedings from different empirical TESOL or applied linguistics conference proceedings or from across multiple time periods to better generalize results. It could also examine the frequency of steps from the CARS and IMRD models to define if there are more common ones than others.

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Author Bios

Addison (BA, OCELT, ICTEAL) recently completed a BA honours degree focusing on Cognitive Psychology as well as the area of Applied Linguistics and Discourse Studies. Within the degree program, a concurrent Certificate in the Teaching of English as a Second Language was additionally completed. Addison has been gaining experience in the TESL field by volunteering regularly for the past few years, and also recently conducted a research experiment on second language vocabulary learning methods.

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