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Genre approaches to theses and dissertations

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PART VI

Research genres
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29

GENRE APPROACHES TO THESES AND DISSERTATIONS

Paul Thompson

Introduction

Writing a doctoral thesis or a master’s dissertation is probably the greatest writing challenge a graduate student will face in the course of completing an academic programme, both because of the length of the text that has to be produced and also because of the complexity of the rhetorical task. At a fundamental level, the student writer has to demonstrate a command of subject knowledge allied with an ability to undertake independent research of a requisite standard, but the writer also has to display a degree of affiliation to a disciplinary community, by adhering, to some degree, to accepted conventions of communication within the community, and also has to establish an individual, coherent voice through the text. These requirements are not always made explicit, either, and often the writer has to work out what the expectations are.

In this chapter, I will argue that the main value of a genre approach to PhD theses and MA dissertations lies in the heuristic potential of such an approach, rather than as a set of prescriptions for how texts should be structured and expressed. This is not a novel argument; John Swales (2004:240) makes a similar point in relation to research articles (RAs). With reference to doctoral work, it is highly unlikely, for example, that a thesis on the history of alehouses in seventeenth-century Britain will be organised and written in the same way as a thesis on the molecular detection and characterisation of free radicals. The history thesis is likely to be organised into chapters by topic, progressing chronologically, while the chemistry thesis will report a set of experiments. It will be argued in this chapter that in diverse disciplinary and cultural contexts there are different degrees of rigidity of conventions surrounding the structure and style of theses, and that the task of the English for academic purposes (EAP) teacher is to sensitise students to the expectations of supervisors, and advisers and examiners in their field, or to make them aware of the need to find out what those expectations are. The writer then has to work within the constraints that conventions place upon organisation, style and presentation, and decide to what extent to adhere to those conventions. Furthermore, an important challenge facing the thesis writer is the need to develop a clear voice of authority (cf. Andrews 2007; Thompson 2012a). While conventions can facilitate communication and help readers to predict the development of a text, it should
also be recognised that in some circumstances a text can read as overly formulaic and that this can work against the writer’s attempts to construct a voice of authority.

This chapter approaches the thesis (or dissertation) as genre, and surveys the findings of a range of studies of texts within this category: studies of rhetorical organisation, of moves, of metadiscourse features, of patterns and types of citation. Rhetorical organisation is dealt with first, in order to illustrate what has been observed about the typical structures for dissertations and theses, and to relate these to what has been written so far about the generic features of different sections of research articles. One point that is worth stressing here is that theses are not necessarily similar in structure, nor in communicative purpose, to research articles. We then move on to look at the genre studies that have investigated the moves and the typical features of different sections of theses, such as introductions, literature reviews, discussions and conclusions.

Consideration is then given to the notion of voice, and of how writers position themselves within their texts, and in relation to other texts: through the use of metadiscourse and of citations.

Rhetorical organisation

The prototypical form for the organisation of an experimental research article is the IMRD (or IMRAD) model: ‘introduction, methods, results and discussion’. Typically, there will be a literature review component which may feature as part of the introduction or it may be a separate section, following the introduction. This model is also used as the structure for a thesis or dissertation but it is by no means the only one. Thompson (2001) found that writers in agricultural botany followed either a simple IMRD model or they produced a series of chapters, each of which followed the IMRD model, and placed a general introduction at the beginning and a conclusion at the end, while doctoral students in agricultural economics were more varied in their organisation of theses, and used what can be called a ‘topic-based’ model. In one agricultural economics thesis, for example, the chapter headings introduce the topic of each chapter as follows: ‘The Classification of Marketing Systems’, ‘Theoretical Considerations’, ‘Practical Applications’, ‘A Modular Approach’ (in which the framework developed in the thesis is explained), ‘Data Collection Methods’, and ‘Applying the Modular System to the Egyptian Potato Sector’. There is some predictability in the order of the chapters, from theory to framework, then to data and testing of the framework, but each chapter is less conventionalised than the chapters in an IMRD thesis.

Swales (2004:110) summarises the findings of four studies with regard to instances of structures, where distinctions are made between a simple style (i.e. IMRD), a complex style (he refers to this as ‘article compilation’, although that was not what Thompson (2001) had originally intended by the term ‘complex’) and a topic-based model (Table 29.1). This

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<td>Paltridge 2002</td>
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<td>Thompson 2001</td>
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<td>Bunton 1998, 1999</td>
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indicates the range of structures employed by thesis writers. This three-way model has been adopted broadly in the literature; Paltridge and Starfield (2007), for example, use this in their guide for PhD supervisors.

The article-compilation thesis is known also as a ‘thesis by publication’ or a ‘compilation thesis’, and typically is made up of chapters that have been published in international journals as stand-alone pieces, as well as an introduction and a conclusion that aim to give coherence to the compilation. Samraj (this volume) discusses genre approaches to research articles and no further treatment will be given here of the compilation thesis.

Because not all theses and dissertations are the same, the distinction between the three types of thesis structure is to some extent simply a convenience that allows for generalisations along the lines of ‘How are methods sections written in complex theses in the area of agricultural botany?’ However, the tripartite distinction does also allow researchers (and students) to explore texts that at first sight do not fit the models. Paltridge et al. (2012) investigated practice-based doctoral dissertations in the visual and creative arts within Australian Higher Education and found that there was a gradient of textual practices, ranging from those writers who follow traditional patterns of organisation and those who are establishing innovative practices. Some of the dissertation writers adhered quite closely to a traditional IMRD structure, while others adapted the framework for their own purposes or used a loose topic-based model. Rather than form being simply a mould for content to be poured into, the writers appear to exploit forms to convey their messages (cf. Coe, 1987). As Paltridge et al. (2012:333) point out, citing Miller (1994), ‘Clearly, a genre is more than its form’.

**Looking at the sections**

**Introductions**

In the same way that genre analysis has been applied to the constituent parts of research articles, with most attention being given to the traditional IMRD model, researchers looking at theses and dissertations have investigated the typical moves and linguistic features of the introductions, the literature review sections, results and discussions, and conclusions, in theses and dissertations.

Bunton (2002) developed a model of generic moves in PhD thesis introductions, using a set of theses written by Chinese L1 writers. He observed that thesis introductions tend to be longer than research article introductions (typically a full chapter rather than a section), and therefore contain more moves than are detailed in the create a research space (CARS) model. His data consisted of 45 theses, drawn from a range of faculties: science, engineering, arts, education and social sciences. He found differences between (broadly speaking) the science and technology writers and the arts/social sciences writers. For example, in social science theses, research questions and hypotheses were far more likely to be stated explicitly in the introduction than in the science and technology disciplines. Bunton’s model retains the shape of the CARS model (there are three moves, here called ‘establishing a territory’, ‘establishing a niche’ and ‘announcing the present research’), with the greater change from the RA CARS model appearing under the third move which is shown to contain the following possible steps:

1. Purposes, aims or objectives
2. Work carried out
3. Method
Genres, according to Miller (1994), are social actions, and they develop out of the repeated performance of similar communicative events which in turn leads to conventionalisation. If this is the case, it is to be expected that they will differ between language and/or cultural groups. Soler-Monreal et al. (2011) conducted a contrastive study of the rhetorical organisation of English and Spanish PhD thesis introductions in the field of computing. They found that the three moves (‘establishing a territory’, ‘establishing a niche’ and ‘announcing the present research’) were all present in the English theses but in the Spanish theses the second move was optional. They also found that the English theses featured more cyclicity of the moves (for example, M1–M3–M1–M2–M3–M1–M2–M3–M1–M2–M3) than the Spanish. Additionally, the English theses contained more assertions regarding the originality of the work, and its contribution to the field, which may indicate a more self-promotional quality to writing in English.

Using a corpus of literature PhD theses written by native speakers of English (48) or Japanese (51), Ono (2012) performed a move analysis of the introductory chapters of the theses. She found that these chapters all contained the following moves: ‘statement of aims’, ‘stating the writer’s approach’, ‘presenting the fictional work and/or its author’, ‘review of previous research’, ‘writer-centred statement’ (Ono’s term for statements expressing the writer’s cultural, social or educational experience) and ‘outlining the chapters’, but, interestingly, they seldom added to previous knowledge nor did they explicitly justify their own research, method, approach, theoretical position, claim or thesis structure. In terms of cross-cultural differences, Ono observed that the Japanese writers put more emphasis on indicating gaps, and specifically they pointed to ‘lacks’ in the previous literature. In this case, the variations are ascribed to differences in educational traditions and cultural norms rather than due to differences in disciplinary practices.

It is important to note that the Soler-Monreal et al. study was conducted on a corpus of twenty theses which is a reasonable size for a close genre analysis but, as a result, the results can only be generalised with much caution. Even Ono’s corpus of 99 theses is small in comparison to the number of dissertations and theses produced annually worldwide. This is true of all of the genre studies discussed in this chapter – they have been conducted on small samples. From an EAP practitioner’s point of view, therefore, it would be inadvisable to conclude, for example, that all computing doctoral students in an English-medium environment are expected to promote themselves openly in the introduction section. Rather, this suggests a hypothesis for the teacher and students to test, a prompt for an investigation of whether or not supervisors and departments encourage students to state the value of their thesis explicitly.

So far, we have looked at studies which take a broadly functional approach to text analysis, with the emphasis on the sequencing of ‘moves’ and ‘steps’. Lim et al. (2014) argue that EAP writers may lack the linguistic skills needed in order to perform or introduce the steps, and so it is important not only to identify the steps and moves but also to describe the language patterns typically used to perform a step. They focus on how thesis writers in a particular discipline typically perform a single step: the expression of hypotheses in the introductions.
Genre approaches to theses and dissertations

of experimental applied linguistics PhD theses. They find that half of the theses that they sample contain explicit statements of hypotheses, and that these statements tend to be in the present sample in an anticipatory it-clause, indicating a prediction (for example, ‘it is hypothesised’ or ‘it is expected’), followed by a that-clause.

Variation between disciplines is examined in finer detail by Samraj (2008) who looks at master’s theses from three disciplines: biology, philosophy and linguistics. Her study combines discourse analysis with interviews with subject specialists. In line with Bunton, she establishes that dissertation introductions contain discourse features that distinguish them from research article introductions as a genre. Her comparison of the three disciplines also reveals a cline between biology students who tend to remove themselves from the text in contrast with philosophy students who assert a stronger authorial presence through the use of first person pronoun and the ways that they cite other work. Linguistics students are in the middle of this cline.

**Literature reviews**

Bunton (2002) found that introductions varied in length, and part of the reason for this was that some thesis introductions included substantial reviews of literature, others included some review of literature while the rest left the literature review to other chapters. Kwan (2006) investigated similarities and differences between thesis introduction chapters and literature review chapters in terms of moves. In a corpus of 20 doctoral theses written by native English-speaking students of applied linguistics, Kwan found that the discussion of the literature was divided into thematic sections, each of which featured recursive move structures that resemble those which Bunton had found in thesis introductions. She observed that they used many of the same steps that Bunton identified in the introduction moves, and some additional strategies were observed: strength-claiming, relevancy-claiming and the synthesising of the theoretical framework. However, she noted that a major difference between the introduction and the literature review is that the introduction also has a macro function of creating the research space for the thesis in more general terms.

Gil-Salom and Soler-Monreal (2014) extend their contrastive analysis of English and Spanish computing theses (see above) to the literature reviews of the same 20 theses. They use Kwan’s framework for analysis of moves and strategies and find, *inter alia*, that the two sets of writers use Move 2, ‘create a niche in research’, but the English writers use a wider range of strategies.

**Discussion of results**

Dudley-Evans (1986) proposed a nine-move model for discussion sections of master’s dissertations. In a writing guide directed at writers of empirically-based doctoral theses, Bitchener (2010:180) provides a revised model that is composed of three moves:

1. Provide background information
   (a) restatement of aims, research questions, hypotheses
   (b) restatement of key published research
   (c) restatement of research/methodological approach
2. Present a statement of result (SOR)
   (a) restatement of a key result
   (b) expanded statement about a key result
3 Evaluate/comment on results or findings
   (a) explanation of result – suggest reasons for result
   (b) (un)expected result – comment on whether it was an expected or unexpected result
   (c) reference to previous research – compare result with previously published research
   (d) exemplification – provide examples of result
   (e) deduction or claim – make a more general claim arising from the result, e.g., drawing a conclusion or stating a hypothesis
   (f) support from previous research – quote previous research to support the claim being made
   (g) recommendation – make suggestion for future research
   (h) justification for further research – explain why further research is recommended.

In this framework, Bitchener explains, the writer is likely to repeat a cycle of 2 followed by 3, so that the pattern may be: 1–2–3–2–3… (where the ellipsis indicates that the sequence 2–3 can be repeated several times).

Basturkmen (2009) compared how research article writers comment on their own results in the ‘results’ section with how master’s dissertation writers do the same. She found that the sequencing of moves was the same between both groups but that the student writers tended to provide more detail about their results, as though they were still unsure about the interpretation, and the RA writers were more likely to provide alternative explanations.

**Conclusions**

Bunton (2005) notes that the generic structure of a conclusions chapter is not the same as that of a discussion chapter, and proposes a five-move model for a conclusions chapter, given here with a small change made to Move 4 based on Thompson (2005a):

- Move 1: restatement of aims and research questions
- Move 2: consolidation of present research (findings, limitations)
- Move 3: practical and theoretical implications
- Move 4: recommendations for further research
- Move 5: concluding restatement.

Bunton also stresses that there is variation in practice and that the moves are not obligatory. This is reiterated by Lewkowicz (2009) in her close analysis of 15 theses from the field of English applied linguistics, written by Polish students. In four of these theses, the authors did not include the ‘Consolidation of present research’ move, but instead summarised the findings of each chapter in turn. Lewkowicz also makes use of a distinction that Bunton drew, between conclusions that are predominantly thesis-oriented (consolidating the research space) and those that are field-oriented (addressing field-central issues with mentions of how the thesis contributes to the field). One of her conclusions is that there is no single pattern, and that success is not a question of following a formulaic approach. It is worth noting, however, that Lewkowicz does not provide any information about the grades that each thesis received. Were the writers who included ‘Consolidation of present research’ moves more highly rated, or *vice versa*? This is not to take away from the point that Lewkowicz makes about the danger of taking a formulaic approach but it is important also to question what level of success may be achieved by following a particular strategy.
The author’s presence in the text

Elsewhere (Thompson, 2012a) I have discussed the importance of voice in the PhD thesis. A doctoral student is typically in the position of having to demonstrate authority in a particular field of study. The text that is produced will be examined by a set of examiners, and the student is required to ‘defend’ the thesis (Mežek and Swales, this volume), and so in the text the writer has the opportunity to anticipate and mitigate any possible challenge to that authority from the examiners. Two means for developing a strong voice of authority within a thesis are the uses of metadiscourse and of intertextual reference, or citation.

Metadiscourse has been theorised and discussed in depth by several researchers, perhaps most notably Hyland (2005) and Ādel (2006). For Hyland (2005:37), metadiscourse is ‘the cover term for the self-reflective expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text, assisting the writer (or speaker) to express a viewpoint and engage with readers as members of a particular community’. When Swales (1990) made the observation that, because theses and dissertations are long texts, there will consequently be a need for more metadiscourse, he was presumably thinking mainly of the pieces of text that are added in to guide a reader through a text and through an argument (such as ‘This chapter consists of four sections’ or ‘This will be explored in greater in detail in the next chapter’). Bunton (1999) tested this suggestion in his examination of 13 PhD theses. He found considerable variation in the amount of metatext (as he terms it) in the theses, with a range between 2 per cent and 16.5 per cent for the proportion of text taken up by higher-level metatext. The study confirms that metadiscourse can play a major role in a thesis, and Bunton also argues that the low incidence of metatext in some of the texts may suggest a need for writing guidance on the importance of including metatext (on the premise that the theses with 2–5 per cent needed more metatext). In addition, there are clear differences between the science and technology and the humanities/social sciences (HSS) in the uses and quantity of higher level and lower level metatext, with much higher incidence of lower level metatext in the HSS texts.

Lee and Casal (2014) conducted a cross-linguistic study of the use of metadiscourse by English and Spanish thesis writers. They examined the results and discussion chapters in 100 English and 100 Spanish Engineering theses, and found that interpersonal features of writing are strongly linked to the linguistic and cultural contexts in which the texts are produced. For example, the Spanish texts contained a higher number of engagement markers, particularly in the use of first person plural pronoun, which Lee and Casal attribute to a need for projecting an impression of inclusiveness in Spanish, while hedges and boosters are more common in English, where the tendency is to mitigate one’s claims, as opposed to a proclivity for bald statement in Spanish.

In relation to hedges, Koutsantoni (2006) compared levels of hedging in research articles and theses in the fields of electrical and chemical engineering. Her analysis of a corpus of 17 research articles and nine master’s and PhD theses revealed that the students hedged more than the ‘expert’ writers, and they almost exclusively avoided taking personal responsibility for their claims; that is, where expert writers may say ‘We make no claims for our particular version other than it is fairly standard’, the thesis writer tends to write ‘The results of X are preliminary only and there is considerable scope for further work’. It should be observed, however, that the number of theses in this study was small, and that it was a mixture of master’s and PhD texts – one would expect that the PhD writers would be closer to experts than the master’s students.

Hyland (2004) investigated metadiscourse in a substantial corpus of 240 theses and dissertations written by Hong Kong Chinese students. In line with Lee and Casal, he
Paul Thompson

found that the most frequently used devices for these English language writers were hedges and transitions. Between the two types of texts, Hyland found that the doctoral theses used proportionately more metadiscourse than the dissertations, and also that they used more interactional metadiscourse (hedges, boosters, attitude markers, \textit{inter alia}) than the master’s dissertations. This can partly be attributed to the greater length of the texts but also to a developed recognition by the doctoral students of the social interactional nature of academic text.

Using a large corpus such as Hyland’s makes it possible to make relatively robust generalisations about the occurrences of features in a given genre, but using a small corpus allows the analyst to delve deeper into the complexities of certain linguistic features. In a smaller corpus, for example, the researcher can code the data comprehensively in order to identify features that cannot all be identified by surface formal features alone. This is true of the studies of citation practices in theses and dissertations where analysts have worked with smaller collections of texts. Thompson (2005a) looked at both functions and forms of in-text references to other texts within a set of eight agricultural botany theses, which follow either a simple or complex model of overall organisation. The use of citations is most common in introduction/literature review and discussion sections, with relatively little positioning of the writer in relation to other texts in the methods and results sections. Weissberg and Buker (1990) distinguish between integral and non-integral citations (the former is placed within the sentence and plays an explicit role within the syntax of the sentence, while the latter is typically placed outside the sentence in brackets), and postulate that integral citations put focus on the cited author(s) while non-integral citations make the information contained in the sentence prominent. Drawing on this, Thompson observes that in agricultural botany thesis introduction and discussion sections, the tendency is to use non-integral citation types and focus on information rather than the researchers. The choice of citation type appears to be influenced by this and other rhetorical considerations, including the preferred theme–rheme relations in a series of sentences.

Petrić (2007) examined citation functions in eight high- and eight low-graded master’s theses in the field of gender studies, written in English as a second language. The rhetorical functions of citations studied were: attribution, exemplification, further reference, statement of use, application, evaluation, establishing links between sources, and comparison of one’s own work with that of other authors. Both high- and low-rated writers used citations predominantly for attribution, but the use of citation for non-attribution functions was found to be much lower in the low-rated theses than in the high-rated theses, both in the whole theses and in individual chapters.

Samraj (2013) explored the functions of source text use in the discussion sections of master’s theses and research articles from biology, using both Thompson’s (2005a) framework and a novel set of functional categories, along with a set of specialist informant interviews. Her study revealed that citations were used not only in order to compare present results to results from previous studies but also throughout the discussion section to contextualise the current study within previous studies, and to strengthen the writer’s argument. Looking at a small number (in Samraj’s case, 16 theses) has the benefit of revealing the complexity of citation use in thesis writing. In addition, her interviews with specialist informants indicated that, although the student writers had attempted to relate their individual studies to the ‘bigger picture’ by including citations to previous literature within the discussion, they were not always successful in making adequate connections between what the writers have done and what had already been done.
In terms of distribution of citations across the chapters of a thesis, Thompson (2005b) observed disciplinary differences with experimental science writers tending to use citations in the final chapter of the thesis, to compare their findings to those of previous researchers, while the economics writers used far fewer. The economics theses, Thompson explains, tend to concentrate on the development of a new model (or models) out of the discussion of previous ones, and the conclusion chapter functions mainly as an evaluation of the new model, rather than a recontextualisation within the field.

Charles (2006) examined citation behaviour in theses in a comparison of two disciplines: material science and politics/international relations. She looked at the phraseological patterns that were used in reporting clauses, more specifically, finite reporting clauses with that-clause complement. Both disciplines used significant numbers of the reporting clauses, usually as integral citations with a human subject. Both disciplines used argue type verbs (e.g., argue, note, suggest) but in materials science, there was also a predominance of use of the find/show verb group (e.g., show, find, observe) in past tense.

A recurrent theme of the studies is that citation is a complex matter and that authors have to make informed decisions about the verbs they choose to use, the type of citation (integral or non-integral) and so on. As Thompson (2005a:321) concludes:

… student writers should look not only at the formal features of citation types but should also consider the implications of different choices, both at a local level (the sentence and the paragraph) and also at a higher discoursal level (what to give prominence to, how to maintain the dominance of the authorial voice throughout the text, and how to position oneself in relation to the immediate audience and to the wider disciplinary community).

Situational perspectives and pedagogical issues

Thus far, the focus has been predominantly on textual products. Theses are not produced in a vacuum, though, and Swales (2004) makes a cogent case for viewing theses as part of a genre-chain. He provides as example a flow diagram going from ‘prospectus/proposal’ to ‘defence’ to ‘dissertation’, ‘defence’, ‘revisions’ and ‘award’ which describes the final stages of a US doctoral degree. In different educational systems the chain may be different. In addition to these elements will be the various genres that surround doing doctoral work such as conference and seminar oral or poster presentations, documents submitted for upgrade, progress review statements and so on. Comparatively little has been written in the EAP literature about these genres, although they are worthy of attention because the rhetorical context is so often different, and students may need to be made more aware of the factors that they should consider.

In addition to the complex of genres, these texts need to be seen in dynamic terms. As Paltridge (2012:1) writes:

There are many factors that influence the decisions a student makes while writing a thesis or dissertation in English. These include the orientation of the project they are describing, the student’s perceptions of the audience of their text, the discipline in which the student is writing, and the values and expectations of the academic community at which the text is aimed.
Thesis writing has been treated as a situationally mediated activity in studies that explore the academic interactions and relationships between student, other students and the supervisory team. These studies will not be discussed in detail here as the focus of the chapter is on genre approaches; more detail can be found in Thompson (2012b).

Shaw (1991), for example, found that science supervisors tended to exert a strong influence on several aspects of their doctoral students’ thesis, such as the research design and the writing of the literature review, while in an arts subject Turner (2003) reported that the supervisor wanted the students to be much more independent. Belcher (1994) observed that less successful students tended to have less complete understanding of the values of the community they worked in; and Duff (2010), conversely, found that the more successful supervisors were those who were able to articulate and communicate the values of the community more effectively. Cadman (1997) worked with a Thai doctoral student for a year helping the writer develop a more authoritative voice, and she observes how the student writer slowly moved away from attention to small details and achieved a view of the ‘bigger picture’. Le Ha (2009) recounts and reflects on the experience of helping her Indonesian student, Arianto, to overcome feelings of alienation and inferiority, and to establish a personal writing space in English. For a rich collection of papers that explore how graduate students learn how to participate in their research communities, how they learn to negotiate their relationships with supervisors and peers, and how they cope with the challenges to their sense of identity, readers are referred to Casanave and Li (2008).

In relation to how writing was perceived, Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006) explored the differences in perceptions of difficulties in writing the ‘discussion of results’ section of a thesis. Students tended to perceive their language problems at the sentence level while the supervisors viewed them in terms of creating clear meaning at the paragraph level, and of understanding the rhetorical and organisational requirements of the genre. Cooley and Lewkowicz (1995, 1997) also reported that supervisors at the University of Hong Kong identified difficulties affecting the development of coherent ideas and arguments as more important than surface-level errors.

There are countless handbooks on ‘How to write a PhD thesis’ (for a review, see Paltridge, 2002) but few of them are closely informed by the findings of genre analysis. Bitchener (2010) is a notable exception. The book has separate chapters for the abstract, the introduction, literature review, methodology, results, discussion and conclusion, and each chapter is then divided into sections that identify first the functions and then the forms of the particular rhetorical unit, before presenting exemplary move analyses of samples. Swales and Feak (third edition, 2012) is a classic genre-based textbook for use with graduate students, and is complemented by shorter books focusing on the abstract (Swales & Feak, 2009), the introduction (Feak & Swales, 2011) and the literature review (Feak & Swales, 2009).

Conclusion

The main argument of this chapter has been that genre approaches to the analysis of dissertations and theses have a powerful heuristic value. As seen in the work of Petrić (2007), for example, more successful writers exploit a wider repertoire in their texts, and genre approaches (and findings) can be used to make students aware of the range of options that is available to them.

First, genre analysis identifies the communicative functions that thesis writers typically need to express, in what sequences, and then relates these functions to overall purpose. This is usually related to broader macro-functions such as ‘literature review’, ‘methods’, results’
Genre approaches to theses and dissertations

and so on. Having identified the functions, the genre analyst can then determine which linguistic structures are typically used to perform the functions, relating these to community preferences and, therefore, also to potential effects, and, thus, help student writers to expand their range of options and their ability to make informed decisions about which option fits their purpose most closely.

Second, genre analysis can identify and classify the role that resources such as metadiscourse and intertextual reference play in the mediation of the relationship between author and reader and in positioning the author amongst other researchers in the field.

The genre research that has been conducted to date on theses and dissertations has established useful frameworks for describing the structures of such texts, and has identified some rhetorical features (such as additional move types and sequences) that distinguish these texts from research articles. However, it must be stressed that most of this work has been conducted on small samples of data, and with often quite particular disciplines, which means that EAP practitioners need to test these descriptions against representative (and local) samples of the texts that their students are aiming to produce.

The findings of genre studies are valuable to EAP teachers for the insights they provide into what are often complex and remote texts (unless the teacher has had experience of writing a thesis in the same field of research as the students that they are working with). With the growth of e-thesis repositories (Edminster and Moxley, 2002), teachers and students alike have better access to exemplars of theses and dissertations (with the proviso that there is often no grade attached and no assurance of high quality). Analyses of this textual evidence, along with investigations of the expectations and values of their disciplinary community, can be conducted by students, acting as as researchers into the practices of their communities (Johns, 1997; Paltridge & Woodrow, 2012).

Further reading

Bitchener (2010); Swales (2004)

Related chapters

16 Corpus studies in EAP
17 Ethnographic perspectives on English for academic purposes research
27 PhD adviser and student interactions as a spoken academic genre
28 PhD defences and vivas

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