

Rhetorical Move Analysis of Abstracts in Costa Rican TEFL Undergraduate Theses: A Comparative Study of Public and Private Universities¹

Análisis de Movimientos Retóricos en Resúmenes de Tesis de Licenciatura en la Enseñanza del Inglés en Costa Rica: Un Estudio Comparativo entre Universidades Públicas y Privadas

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Abstract

Abstracts are an important part of an academic document, but traditionally have been neglected in undergraduate theses in the English teaching major. This investigation aimed to explore the following interrogatives in the Costa Rican higher education context: (1) Which are the rhetorical moves present in the abstracts contained in the undergraduate theses presented as a partial requirement for obtaining a Licenciatura degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language?, and (2) Is there a substantial difference between the public and the private higher education institutions in the expectations of abstract narrative? Hyland's (2000) model was used to conduct a genre analysis on one hundred and ninety-four abstracts from undergraduate students' theses in two private and two public universities ranging from 2018 to 2024, including the prevalence of key words. The results showed lack of standardization in the structure of the abstracts frequently missing one or more moves and the key words, especially in the private universities. The predominant moves include M2 (indicating the purpose), M3 (methodology), and M4 (findings). M1 (introduction) and M5 (conclusion) were the least present. Not always the recommended sequence was followed. This study provides insight for instructors and students who are engaged in academic writing, as well as suggestions to higher education institutions to look into this genre.

Key words: abstracts, genre analysis, moves, undergraduate students, EFL

Resumen

Los abstracts o resúmenes de trabajos finales de graduación constituyen un elemento importante del documento académico. Sin embargo, los estudiantes de licenciatura suelen no prestarles la debida atención. Esta investigación se centró en el análisis de ciento noventa y cuatro resúmenes correspondientes a las tesis de licenciatura de la carrera de enseñanza del inglés de dos universidades privadas y dos públicas de Costa Rica. Las preguntas de investigación fueron: 1) ¿Cuáles movimientos retóricos estaban presentes en los resúmenes? y 2) ¿existe alguna diferencia sustancial entre las universidades públicas y privadas? El modelo de Hyland (2000) de cinco movimientos fue utilizado para el análisis de las tesis que se defendieron entre 2018 y 2024. Se encontró una falta de estándares en la estructura de los resúmenes; muy pocos cumplían en su totalidad con el modelo. En la mayoría de los casos uno o más movimientos hacían falta. Los movimientos predominantes fueron el segundo (propósito), el tercero (metodología) y el cuarto (resultados). La introducción y conclusión fueron las más ausentes. La secuencia sugerida no se siguió en todos los

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casos. El estudio aporta insumos para docentes y estudiantes participantes en la escritura académica, así como sugerencias para las instituciones de educación superior.

Palabras clave: resúmenes de tesis; análisis de género; movimientos; estudiantes pregrado; enseñanza del inglés

Introduction

The completion of an undergraduate thesis represents a critical academic milestone for most university students. Costa Rica is a Spanish speaking country where English is studied as a foreign language. For non-native English language learners this academic undertaking presents significant linguistic and communicative challenges particularly in terms of lexical proficiency, grammatical sophistication, and pragmatic competence in discourse marker (DM) utilization (Haninda & Bram, 2022; Lestari, 2020). These linguistic constraints and lack of expertise limit the students' ability to produce academically rigorous and linguistically complex texts, thereby rendering the thesis composition process particularly arduous and intellectually demanding.

A well-written abstract can provide a clear, objective, accurate and self-explanatory overview of an entire research study (Yadav & Piyush, 2024). Frequently, it is the last section to be written and its purpose is to entice the reader to continue exploring the text (Liumbruno et al., 2013 cited in Khatri, 2022). However, the development of abstract discourse patterns is rarely known (Assyita, et al., 2023).

The present analysis aims to explore the structure followed by the abstracts of undergraduate theses in the English Teaching major through a genre analysis which typically concerns studying the structure (moves) and lexicon-grammatical features of texts (Bonsu & Afful, 2022).

It has been found that there is a huge gap in the information regarding the suitability of abstracts in undergraduate students' theses. Some instances have been found in the literature but very few. Specifically in Costa Rica, no research was found concerning moves analysis in final graduation projects. Exploring this topic might provide insights into the needs for improvement and the potential remedial actions to be considered in the future by instructors and thesis advisors.

The present study focuses on responding the following research questions:

1. What is the move-structure of abstracts contained in the undergraduate theses presented as a partial requirement for obtaining a Licenciatura [Licentiate] degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language?
2. Is there a substantial difference between

public and private higher education institutions in the expectations of abstract narrative?

Literary review

The word 'genre' is referred to by Suwarni, et. al., (2021) as events pertaining a communication class having a common goal. Collin (2012) proposes an interesting perspective:

Thus, from one perspective, Discourses are "stored" in genres and situations. Viewed from another angle, the conventions (i.e., ways of patterning language) that are offered by and that instantiate a genre also instantiate a Discourse (or Discourses); the conventions that are offered by and that instantiate a Discourse also instantiate a genre (p.89).

Genre analysis provides a framework useful in educational contexts to aid learners understand and improve writing of genre-specific texts (Bonsu & Afful, 2022). Afful and Kyei (2020) indicate that genre analysis "offers a unique understanding into the nature of writing in both academic and professional contexts" (p. 1).

In the last part of the twentieth century, abstracts emerged as a core part of research articles (Agbaglo & Fiadzomor, 2021) and consequently, they have been introduced as a component of academic research, specifically in theses and capstone projects. For college students, the writing of an abstract can be demanding due to lack of knowledge and experience (Male, 2018).

Abstracts ideally follow a certain rhetorical structure or moves (Male, 2018). According to Afful (2012) as cited in Bonsu and Afful (2022) 'moves' are specific rhetorical units of a genre. Swales (1990) describes 'moves' as a purposeful section of a text that contributes to achieve the overall communicative act (Bonsu & Afful, 2022). 'Moves', therefore, correspond to a communicative purpose, linked to semantic related boundary, or to the structure of the text (Agbaglo & Fiadzomor, 2021). These moves organize the contents of the abstract in a way which ensures that the readers can understand the synopsis of a research, giving a background of the study, highlighting the object of study and explaining how and why the problem was solved. There are various possibilities to choose from, but there must be a sequence of elements that are necessary to completely understand the scopes of the investigations and its results.

Sükan and Mohammadzadeh (2022) describe how, through genre analysis applied to the thesis abstracts, scholars are able to discover distinctive strategies and linguistic elements typically enclosed in this specific genre. This exercise provides important insights into expectations associated to writing thesis abstracts which allows students to better comprehend the academic discourse conventions (Tardy et al., 2022).

John Swales proposed a model called The Creating a Research Space [C.A.R.S.] when he identified patterns in different journal articles. His model consisting on three moves, although originally focused on the introduction of articles, is one of several that has been adapted to explain the organizational pattern of a research abstract (Belbouah & Bouguerba, 2025).

Bhatia (1993, as cited in Bonsu & Afful, 2022) tendered a four-move structure: indicating purpose (Move 1); explaining the methodology used (Move 2); sharing results (Move 3) and presenting conclusions (Move 4). Later, this evolved to the IMRD model that is currently very popular i.e., Introduction, Method, Results, and Discussion (Ventola, 2004 as cited in Bonsu & Afful, 2022).

Later, Hyland (2000, cited in Sukhapabsuk, 2021) proposed a five-move model for abstracts which has been regarded as leader in analyzing research articles abstracts (Agbaglo & Fiadzomor, 2021; Lee, 2017; Saidi & Talebi, 2021; Sukhapabsuk, 2021), represented in figure 1.

Table 1

Moves	Functions
#1 Introduction	Presents the context of the paper and justifies the research or discussion.
#2 Purpose	Indicates the aim of the paper, its objectives, hypothesis, or research questions (why)
#3 Method	Explains the research design, describes procedures, data collection and data analysis, and others.
#4 Product	State the main findings or results, the argument or what was accomplished
#5 Conclusion	Interprets results beyond the scope of the paper; draws inferences, points to applications or wider implications.

Adapted from: Sukhapabsuk (2021).

Methodology

Type of research

This descriptive study was based on a corpus of 194 undergraduate theses abstracts written by last year students of the licentiate program of the Teaching English as a Foreign Language major at two private universities (160) and two public ones (34) in San Jose, Costa Rica dating from 2018 until 2024.

The selection of the sample was by convenience. Two private universities where the researcher has taught were selected because of the accessibility of information. Two of the biggest public universities in the country were selected for comparison. The limitation was that only those theses that were placed in the public reservoirs

found on the internet could be accessed. Given the reduced number found for public institutions, the researcher acknowledges that this is probably a restricted sample, but which nevertheless rendered enough information for the intended purpose.

Materials and procedures

To obtain an undergraduate degree of licentiate, (a two-year specialization program following the Bachelor's degree in Costa Rica), students must complete an academic investigation on a topic related to English teaching. This usually consists of a six-chapter document that includes an introduction (statement of the problem, aims, hypothesis, and objectives), a theoretical framework dedicated to a literary review of the subject of study, a section on methodology, a chapter on findings and discussion, and one devoted to conclusions and recommendations.

Genre analysis of the abstracts was conducted, which is a very valuable form of qualitative analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016 cited in Morgan, 2022) and the most appropriate for the purpose of this research. According to Bonsu and Afful (2022), "genre scholars (Afful, 2005, Fryer, 2012, Swales and Feak 2004) contend that genre analysis provides the basis for a descriptive framework in the educational context to help learners in producing, interpreting and understanding genre-specific texts" (p.18). Chi square was used to assert the statistical significance of the results. This test determines if the differences observed among variable categories are due to chance or if they are statistically significant (Gill, 2017).

The examined documents are in the public domain, as they correspond to research projects that have been already defended and are deposited in each of the University's virtual library repositories. The researcher identified the presence or lack of moves following Hyland's (2000) framework to determine the completeness and adequacy of the abstracts. The incidence of key words was also included, although this element is not part of the original model.

Findings

The first research question aimed to analyze if the structure of the abstract section of Costa Rican EFL undergraduate theses followed Hyland's five-move mode. Table 2 displays the results of the data, divided into public and private universities.

Table 2

Frequency of appearances of moves in theses abstracts

Moves	Frequency appearance private	Frequency appearance public

	<i>universities</i> (N=160)	<i>universities</i> (N=34)			
#1 Introduction	65 (40.6%)	16 (47%)	#3 Method	53 (33.2%)	28 (82.3%)
#2 Purpose	94 (58.8%)	27 (79.4%)	#4 Product	60 (37.5%)	27 (79.4%)
			#5 Conclusion	31 (19.4%)	12 (35.3%)
			Key words	41 (25.7%)	34 (100%)

It is pertinent to clarify that one of the private universities did not have information from the years before 2020, and the other one which did, presented the problem that only 30% of the theses included an abstract. Among the public universities' theses, only one in 35 did not have an abstract.

The second research question addresses the similarities or discrepancies found in the different contexts. As shown, in the private universities, the predominant move is purpose, where the objectives or the research questions are explained, while in the public ones, purpose, method and product show a very similar distribution. In both instances move number five, conclusion, has the lowest presence. The inclusion of key words also presents a contrasting behavior, being 100% in public context and only 26% in the private setting.

On table 3, the results for the chi square tests as well as the effect size value are included, permitting a clear comparison of the patters found.

Table 3

Statistically Significant Differences between moves (Chi-square Test)

Move:	Chi square result	Effect size	Interpretation (statistical significance)
#1 Introduction	$\chi^2 = 0.48, p > 0.05$	No effect	Not significant
#2 Purpose	$\chi^2 = 5.10, p < 0.01$	$\phi = 0.162$ (small-medium effect)	Highly significant
#3 Method	$\chi^2 = 27.94, p < 0.0001$	$\phi = 0.380$ (medium-large effect)	Extremely significant
#4 Product	$\chi^2 = 19.91, p < 0.0001$	$\phi = 0.320$ (medium effect)	Extremely significant
#5 Conclusion	$\chi^2 = 4.12, p < 0.05$	$\phi = 0.146$ (small effect)	significant
Keywords	$\chi^2 = 65.41, p < 0.0001$	$\phi = 0.581$ (large effect)	Extremely significant

Discussion

The current analysis examined the abstract sections of Costa Rican EFL students' undergraduate theses. In addition, it intended to investigate any significant differences between rhetorical moves from private and public universities. 194 theses were investigated to establish abstract rhetoric structure. The results revealed differences which can be attributed to different academic standards, contextualized values, and individual variations in writing styles.

Prior to 2020, as mentioned previously, the documentation of private universities is insufficient. One of the universities demonstrated a notable deficiency in

abstract implementation, suggesting potential inconsistencies in academic documentation standards.

A shift emerged after 2020. Private universities experienced a substantial increase in abstract inclusion, with 87% of theses subsequently featuring an abstract. This significant increment suggests the potential implementation of new academic guidelines or regulatory requirements. In contrast, public universities maintained 97% abstract inclusion rate throughout the examined period.

The empirical investigation revealed a notable disparity in keyword inclusion across institutions, contrasting 26% in private to 100% in public. In the present study, it was evident that this element was not considered as an integral part of the abstract in private colleges. Even though there is no universal rule to make key words mandatory, including them in academic thesis abstracts is highly recommended. Keywords serve several important functions such as helping researchers quickly understand the main topics and focus of a thesis; improve searchability in academic databases and search engines; assist in indexing and categorizing research work and providing a quick overview of the research's primary concepts and domains.

The comprehensive textual examination revealed a deficiency in abstract composition across both public and private higher education institutions, as measured against Holland's established framework. The findings demonstrate low compliance with comprehensive abstract structural requirements.

Prevailing moves were discovered to show discrepancies between public and private contexts. Yet, move number 2, purpose, stands out as an essential component, akin to results in Jahromi et al., (2023) and Mintah's (2024) studies. In abstracts written by students from public universities there is coincidence to reported outcomes in several empirical research where most notorious moves are 2, 3 and 4 (Arnaiz et al., 2021; Mustaqim & Zuhra, 2023; Wijaya et al., 2020; Zand-Moghadam & Meihami, 2016). In the case of the private context, moves 1, 2 and 4 scored highest followed closely by move 3 which resembles findings in Herlyna et al. (2024). The move corresponding to "introduction" has a similar moderate to high incidence in both settings, around 50% Move 2, purpose, stands out as a predominant move akin to Wijaya et al., (2020). Nugraha and Mbato (2022) also discovered that the moves pertaining the

contextualization of the research, the description of the methodology and disclosure of findings were recurrent, although these authors utilized a different framework (CARS model). This contrasts with Jahromi et al., (2023) who discovered that the major moves employed in all abstracts under study in Master's degree TEFL candidates were purpose, the procedures and the findings.

Move 5 referring to the conclusions has a low occurrence, compared to the other moves in both settings, aligned to results in Zand-Moghadam and Meihami (2016), suggesting that students preferred to emphasize on the main findings rather than on the conclusions.

The chi square results, visible in table 3, provide strong statistical evidence that public and private universities differ significantly in their abstract structures for 4 out of 6 elements (keywords, method, product and purpose). Therefore, it can be affirmed that the results are not a consequence of random deviations, but rather reflect institutional policies, or the lack thereof.

Regarding the sequencing of abstract moves, even in instances where most moves were present, they frequently deviated from the prescribed sequence of M1>M2>M3>M4>M5. This finding corroborates the research by Mustaqim and Zuhra (2023), which identified similar structural irregularities in comparable research corpora.

Conclusions

Abstracts are the short forms of academic texts that can persuade or prevent the reader from continuing reading a thesis. Thus, acquiring the conventions of the rhetorical structure of abstracts seems necessary in theses development.

Upon the analysis of the described corpora, it can be concluded that there is no generalized format for abstract thesis text in the studied population. While there are some differences, in general terms, the abstracts failed to follow Hyland's described model.

Research abstracts were diverse, both in length, organization and structure moves; however, public university abstracts appear more standardized and comprehensive, while private universities tend to be more flexible. In regards to the inclusion of key words, it appears that this is a mandatory requirement in the public universities, but not in the private sector.

Prior to 2020, there is a notorious absence of abstracts in the theses of undergraduate students in private universities which is later modified. This could be a direct consequence of the publication of APA's Manual 7th edition where the nature and characteristics of abstracts are explained in section 2.9. Since students are encouraged to use this format, it is only natural that abstracts gained relevance.

The incidence of complete moves proposed by Hyland (2000), i.e., introduction, purpose, methodology, findings and conclusion, is extremely low. Many abstracts are lacking one or more moves. Key words are also absent in 75% of theses in private university students while they are almost always included in theses from public universities.

In terms of Hyland's model, predominant moves were the explanation of the purpose (M2), the methodology utilized (M3), and the findings (M4); private university students' also focused on the introduction (M1) to some extent. The least prevalent move in both contexts was M5 which corresponds to the conclusion. The recommended sequence was not followed strictly.

Overall, the interpretation, concurring with Male (2018), is that there might be a tendency for undergraduate writers to neglect the development of abstracts and possibly there is some negligence in the guidance process by some lecturers, which would explain the lack of consistency found. Higher institutions probably do not establish an explicit guideline for the writing of abstracts in undergraduate programs in the universities that were selected.

The findings are expected to help nonnative speakers of English who must face the challenge of writing a thesis to become aware of academic discourse standards. Understanding the importance and the proper structure of an abstract would aid unexperienced writers to organize their work and communicate their results in a much more efficient manner.

According to Pho (2008, as cited in Jahromi, et al., 2023), "the rhetorical moves of abstracts can be taught" (p.353). Instructors should be encouraged to guide better their pupils, and perhaps higher education institutions should improve their guidelines to standardize the format of abstracts, maybe including thesis genre into the curriculum.

This research focused on the English Teaching major, exclusively, since the ultimate aim was to provide insights to improve the quality of final graduation projects that must be written in a foreign language. It could prove interesting to research moves in abstracts written in students' native language.

The present study was limited to the available information found in the public repositories, which also proved to be inconsistent. Higher education institutions should be more zealous in the safekeeping and accessibility of such reports.

Further studies could explore other genres, focus on discourse markers or other linguistic features in theses that might provide valuable information that could contribute to the understanding of challenges faced by non-native English speakers when writing academic documents.

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