

## Reflections on the genre-based approach to the teaching of thesis writing

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### Abstract

This paper discusses how the genre-based approach can be employed in the teaching thesis writing in the universities. An analysis of six theses drawn from public universities in Kenya revealed that generic features fulfil particular communicative purposes in different rhetorical moves of the thesis. To produce texts that meet their intended purposes, the genre-based approach should be adopted where teaching and learning includes conscious-raising activities and comparisons of students' own writing with that by 'experts' in their disciplinary cultures.

### Key words

Genre, disciplinary culture, hedges, rhetorical move, communicative purpose, writer stance.

### Introduction

The general practice in the universities is that master's level students are expected to produce a thesis or a dissertation as part of the requirements for their degree. As Swales (1990, p. 187) points out, a thesis or dissertation provides an opportunity for students to demonstrate some originality in identifying a topic and following-up their insight with a more systematic piece of research work. The line of research the students adopt initiates the process of establishing them as members of their preferred areas of specialisation in academia. In this way, the thesis becomes a *rite de passage* into the targeted discourse community.

The emphasis laid on the thesis demonstrates that advanced academic writing is integral to the academic profession. Accordingly, research into aspects of advanced writing is underscored by Kaplan (2001). He argues that academic writers need to know what may be discussed; who has the authority to write, to whom, and under what circumstances; what forms writing may take; what constitutes evidence; and what arrangement of evidence is likely to appeal to the targeted audience.

Some approaches to academic writing have been advanced. For instance, on literacy research and primary education in Australia, Freedman & Medway (1994) and Wyatt-Smith (1997) note that children tend to do a lot of personal and narrative but little factual and expository writing. It was observed that a prevailing emphasis on personal 'creativity', 'originality' and 'authorship' in the teaching of writing tended to privilege narrative genres at the expense of other forms of writing. Genre programmes set out to remedy this imbalance in repertoire in order to empower access to a wider functional range of texts. Accordingly, teaching methods that favoured explicit presentation of text models and a highly visible interventionist role of the teacher were proposed. In essence, the teacher is expected to guide access to clearly distinguished linguistic structures.

However, this explicit and direct approach to genre is somewhat formalist and oriented toward transmission of preconceived structures. As Rosen (1992) and Stratta & Dixon (1994) argue, the approach subordinates individual voices to predetermined notions of genre, promoting an artificial, formulaic, even impersonal image of writing and language.

Another approach to the teaching of academic writing regards literacy projects in the United Kingdom. Increasingly, therefore, complex ideas of how genre might play a role in literacy learning without reliance on text models to impart genre knowledge are emerging from work of learners of different ages in different contexts. For instance, the Exeter Extending Literacy (EXEL) project in the UK has shown how scaffolding devices like writing frames can be used to help young writers to develop a sense of genre while drafting texts (Wray and Lewis, 1997). Such frames can be used as flexible and provisional forms of scaffolding. They need not impose a rigid, unchanging view of genre. They can be jointly constructed and revised by groups of learners to suit specific learning occasions.

Developments in genre studies have also been noted in the teaching of academic literacy. For instance, Johns (1997) has developed an exploratory, student centred and 'socioliterate' approach to teaching genre as part of the courses in academic literacy. In her approach, students are asked to be researchers on genres as literary practices, rather than apprentices to genres as received rhetorical forms. This method involves students in reading everyday texts in terms of genre, interviewing people who regularly use a particular genre and collecting their genre samples, as well as researching the genres required in their own academic writing. Thus, learning to write involves developing broader 'socioliterate' awareness alongside specific skills and achievements.

Genre studies also emerge in the teaching of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). In the field of teaching ESP, John Swales (1991) has a detailed approach to teaching one genre – the research article – as a 'communicative event'. His model of genre is based on a series of communicative actions or 'moves'. Genres are seen as dynamic, as things that people do with language, as ways in which communication between readers and writers is set up in particular communities and situations. For Swales, the study of genres must explore the rationale behind discourse conventions, not just to present them as desirable 'skills'. Learning genres requires not only competence with the product but also a raised rhetorical consciousness (Swales 1991, p. 234).

In spite of these developments in academic literacy, Swales (2004) and Dudley-Evans (1999) note the inadequate attention given to research writing. They observe that thesis and/or dissertation writing is an area that discourse analysts have largely avoided, partly because of the daunting size of the typical text. Swales (2004, p. 102) for instance observes that the genre remains little discussed in major monographs or collections devoted to English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Being a recurrent and high stakes text, how can we reformulate the genre approach in order to not only facilitate the analysis of the thesis but also help the academic writing teacher and learners to understand its goals and particularities?

In the following section, I summarise a study I recently undertook before proposing genre-based approach to thesis writing.

### **The study**

This was a study in which six theses drawn from the then six public universities in Kenya were analysed as cases. I sought to investigate the following objectives:

1. uncover communicative purposes in the MSc and MA theses,
2. explore and describe how such generic features as rhetorical moves, tense, writer stance, citation, and hedging realise the communicative purposes,
3. specify the similarities and differences between the MSc and MA theses in the use of the features and,
4. describe the linguistic rationale for the nature of MA and MSc theses in terms of the generic features noted above.

***Selection of the theses***

Becher’s (1989) taxonomy of the disciplines was used to categorise theses produced in the 2003/2004 academic year. Becher divides disciplines into hard and soft with the hard disciplines referring to the sciences and the soft referring to the humanities and social sciences. In fact Becher (1989, 1994) only subdivides his two categories into pure and applied, in either, arguing that taxonomies such as these simplify what are in fact innumerable disciplinary differences and that such schemes need to be illustrative rather than watertight. However, for a fairly representative sample, I further sub-divided the two broad categories into three groupings each and compiled an inventory of theses as summarised in Tables 1.0 and 2.0

**Table 1. Inventory of MA theses at Kenyatta, Nairobi, and Maseno Universities**

<b>The Soft Disciplines</b>		
<b>The Arts Kenyatta University</b>	<b>Social Sciences Nairobi University</b>	<b>Languages Maseno Univeristy</b>
Fine Art (0)		
Music (2)	Economics (1)	Foreign languages (0)
Literature (1)	Sociology (2)	African languages (0)
Geography (1)	Political Science (4)	English (2)
History (2)		
Religion (0)		
Philosophy (1)		

**Table 2. Inventory of theses of Moi, Egerton, and Jomo Kenyatta universities**

<b>The Hard Disciplines</b>		
<b>Physical sciences Moi Univeristy</b>	<b>Biological Sciences Egerton University</b>	<b>Applied Sciences Jomo Kenyatta University</b>
Mathematics (2)	Botanical Sciences (2)	Technology (3)
Physics (1)	Zoological Sciences (1)	Agricultural Eng. (1)
Chemistry (2)		Metereology (1)
Geology (0)		Hydrology (0)

The theses from each university were numbered and a table of random numbers used to select one, making six in all. The selected theses were coded as follows: SCH (MSc in Chemistry), SAE (MSc in Agricultural Engineering), SBT (MSc in Botany), AEN (MA in English), AHT (MA in History), ASC (MA in Sociology).

***The quantitative and qualitative analysis procedures***

The analysis of rhetorical moves, tense usage, writer stance, citation practices and hedging, followed the steps outlined below: The first step involved a quantitative

analysis of the distributions of each type of feature per thesis. In this analysis, I was able to show the frequency of each form expressed in percentages. For instance, I was able to identify how frequently each of the stance types, that is first person singular pronoun (I), first person plural pronoun (We), third person with human agent (The researcher), the personified point of view (The study), and the agentless passive (It-constructions), occurred per thesis. Thus, it was clear how frequently a feature of marking stance occurred in the *introduction*, *literature review*, *methodology*, *results* and *discussion*, and *conclusions and recommendations* moves of a thesis.

The next step in the analysis involved an intra-disciplinary comparison of the distributions of the various features of the thesis. The first level of this comparison was based on the whole thesis. The number of occurrences were determined and expressed as percentages. This was to determine the distributions of a generic feature per thesis in the same disciplinary culture. This was in a bid to look at the variability of a feature within a disciplinary culture.

Then, a cross-disciplinary comparison of the distributions of each feature was done. In order to determine variability across the corpus, frequencies of a feature were calculated and averaged over the six theses. Similar comparison was extended to the individual moves across the six theses in the study. The three levels of quantitative analysis reported here sought to establish: (a) if disciplines in one disciplinary culture employ generic features in different or shared ways, (b) if disciplines in contrasting disciplinary cultures employ the features in different or shared ways.

In addition, an intra- and cross-disciplinary comparison of communicative purposes was undertaken and how they were signalled. The comparisons were based on rhetorical purposes uncovered from the actual use of individual features, review of previous literature, and views from thesis supervisors.

### ***The findings***

#### ***(a) Rhetorical moves***

According to Nwogu (1997, p. 122), the term move means,

a text segment made up of a bundle of linguistic features (lexical meaning, propositional meanings, illocutionary forces etc.) which give the segment a uniform orientation and signal the constituent elements or slots which combine in identifiable ways to constitute information in the move.

The present study identified moves as an integral feature in thesis writing based on an argument by Swales (1990) which was later developed by Kwan (2006) that a crucial starting point in understanding a genre is to consider the communicative purposes and the moves which realise them.

It therefore emerged that five out of the six theses analysed adopted the Standard/Traditional format characterised by *introduction*, *literature review*, *materials and methods/-methodology*, *results and discussion*, and *conclusions and recommendations* elements, occurring in that order. Only thesis AHT adopted the Topic-based format which according to Swales (2004) and Bunton (2002) represents analyses in multiple chapters ranging from three to seven.

It was also noted that each discrete part of the thesis included elements which had unique communicative purposes. For instance, the *introduction* move foregrounded the study. It included a background of the study, the research problem, objectives of the study, research questions, significance of the study, and scope & limitations. Other discrete parts included the *literature review*, *theoretical framework*, *results and discussion* *conclusions and recommendations* and *back matter*.

Variations in the type and order of occurrence of the moves and associated elements between the disciplines were also noted. It also emerged in the study that some disciplines allow their students to modify existing formats to suit their communicative purposes. The following comments by two thesis supervisors attest to this:

- (i) The writer can modify the existing format. For instance, Chapter One can comprise the Introduction, Literature review, and Methodology, if the sections are not too long.
- (ii) We can allow the students to present the Theoretical Framework and Literature review in separate chapters instead of merging them.

One can therefore conclude that the structural pattern adopted will depend on the disciplinary constraints that exist in the discourse community in which the text is produced.

(b) *Tense usage*

While tense locates a situation in time relative to a reference point (temporal aspect of tense), aspect deals with the internal temporal constituency of the situation (Comrie, 1976, p. 5). Thus, the present study used tense as an overriding term to refer to tense-aspect combinations. The categories for the count included the simple present, simple past, present perfect, past perfect, simple future, past progressive, present progressive because they are generally significant in academic texts (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

Thus, the study showed that each thesis had one predominant tense. Accordingly, the simple present was predominant in theses SCH, SAE, and AEN, while the simple past was predominant in theses SBT, ASC, and AHT. This trend could be linked to the correlation between the content area each discipline dealt with and the two primary tenses. For instance, thesis AEN focused on a literary text which will typically prefer the simple present that presupposes timelessness, while thesis SBT adopted the simple past to depict an experiment that is over and done with.

Regarding the incidence of verb tenses in respective moves, *results and discussion* recorded the highest frequency at 4254 occurrences followed by the *literature review* which recorded 2637 occurrences. The *introduction* move had the third highest frequency at 1180 occurrences, with *materials and methods/methodology, conclusions and recommendations*, and the *abstract* element of the *front matter* move following each other in that order at a combined frequency of 1821 occurrences. The variation in number of occurrences could be explained by the rhetorical purposes served by the moves and, of course, the length of each.

The simple present was mainly used to state the objectives and hypotheses of the study to present the study as an up-to-date undertaking. It was also used to locate the diagram(s), table(s), or figure(s) where the results could be found. Further, the simple present was also employed when the information being cited appeared generally accepted as scientific fact while the present perfect was used where the focus was on the research area of several authors, though it was also used with individual authors. When making author-prominent citations to report the findings of individual studies closely related to one's study, the simple past tense was used. In such citations, the author's name was integral to the reporting clause. When making statements that present the most important findings, the simple present, the present perfect, and simple past tense forms were generally preferred.

To provide possible explanations for the findings, the simple present and simple past were preferred while the present perfect and simple present were adopted when indicating the limitations of the study that restricted the extent the findings could be generalised. Giving the conclusions of a study more contemporary appeal found the simple present and present perfect tense forms more appropriate. Finally, it emerged that the simple present and simple future were mainly employed when making recommendations for practical applications and future research.

It can be noted that the two disciplinary cultures in this study display variations in the choice and incidence of tenses in respective rhetorical moves. This observation is in tandem with Malcolm's (1987) view that tense usage is not merely a given grammatical structure to be taught in a decontextualised, discrete point-forum, but it is often context dependent.

The analysis has also shown that the frequency of tense forms is variable between the disciplinary cultures and even across the six disciplines. This may be due to lack of proper guidance on tense usage as was noted by two supervisors:

- (i) We use class lectures and discussions to inform our students about tense but this does not seem to be taking off well.
- (ii) There is no forum or avenue for us to let our students know about tense. The supervisor guides the student as he supervises.

#### (C) *Writer stance*

There were four points of view adopted in the study data. Out of these, the agentless passive was the most frequently employed form with an incidence of 938 occurrences followed by the personified point of view with a frequency of 184 occurrences. The first person singular pronoun (I) was the third most frequently employed with 146 occurrences. The first person plural pronoun (We) was the second least frequently used form with 74 occurrences while the least frequently employed form, the third person with a human agent, recorded only 57 occurrences.

Although the agentless passive was the most prevalent form in both disciplinary cultures, MSc theses recorded a higher incidence than MA theses. However, MA theses recorded higher frequencies than MSc theses in all the other forms of expressing writer stance. It is therefore evident that both disciplinary cultures adopt an objective tone in their thesis texts, though the degree of objectivity is higher in MSc theses than MA theses.

The agentless passive point of view recorded the highest frequencies in all moves in MSc theses while in MA theses, only the *literature review*, *results and discussion*, and *conclusions and recommendations* moves had higher densities of the agentless passive than other forms. It also emerged that the first person singular (I) was preponderant in the *abstract* element of the *front matter* move and *materials and methods/methodology* moves while the personified point of view had the highest incidence in the *introduction* move among MA theses. One can therefore conclude that expressing writer stance is a versatile undertaking in MA theses while MSc theses display a high degree of rigidity towards objectivity. It is argued in the literature that the stance a writer assumes reflects the ideology and epistemology of a discipline the writer comes from (Tang & John 1999, p. 24; Stapleton 2002, p. 185; Ivanic, 2001, p. 4).

The following is a summary of the communicative purposes intended by the respective options of expressing writer stance in the present study. The first person singular pronoun (*I*) was particularly employed in writing the *declaration* and

*acknowledgements* in order to present writers and their views unreservedly, given that these elements of the *front matter* are forms of personal interaction. The use of the first person plural pronoun (*We*) in MA theses served to describe the practices or beliefs of the discourse community as a whole, especially those involving propositions and hypotheses the writer would expect the community to endorse. Thus, to identify oneself as a member or potential member of the discourse community, the inclusive *We* was employed.

The personified and agentless passive points of view were employed in writing the *literature review* move possibly to confirm that the thesis author belongs to a discourse community where knowledge construction follows agreed upon conventions. Finally, the agentless passive was used in propositions that criticised the work of previous researchers perhaps to indicate a research gap or to generate knowledge claims especially in the *literature review* and *results and discussion* moves.

(d) *Citation practices*

The citation feature is included in this study because it plays a key role in academic writing. It contributes to the social context of persuasion as it can both provide justification for arguments and demonstrate the novelty of one's position (Berkenkotter & Huckin 1995; Hyland 1999).

The study showed that MSc theses had a much lower frequency of in-text citations than MA theses. Thus, MSc theses recorded an incidence of 268 occurrences which was about half of the 544 cases detected in MA theses. Regarding the distribution of in-text citations per rhetorical move, *results and discussion* recorded the highest incidence at 332 occurrences followed by *literature review* which included 293 occurrences. The *introduction* had the third highest frequency at 124 citations. The other moves namely *materials and methods/methodology*, *conclusions and recommendations*, and the *abstract* element of the *front matter* recorded declining densities of in-text citations with their combined frequency being 83 occurrences. There could be a link between the communicative purpose of each rhetorical move and the amount of citation. For instance, given that *results and discussion* involves presenting the findings, and comparing these with those by previous researchers, it is expected that the incidence of citation would be high.

The MSc disciplinary culture had more citations than MA theses in the *literature review*, and the *materials and methods/methodology* moves while MA theses recorded a higher frequency of in-text citations in the *abstract* element of the *front matter*, *introduction*, *results and discussion*, and *conclusions and recommendations* moves than MSc theses.

The present study also revealed that the frequency of non-integral citations was quite high compared to the integral type in both disciplinary cultures. However, MA theses recorded higher occurrences of both forms than MSc theses. The integral type of citations could be more problematic to the thesis writers than the non-integral type probably because it involves careful selection of reporting verbs that reflect the nature of engagement the writer is subjecting to the cited work. Evidently, there is a connection between the choice of a citation feature and the discipline. According to Charles (2006b, p. 311), citation shows how a piece of research arises out of, and is grounded in the current state of disciplinary knowledge and thus constitutes an overt manifestation of ongoing 'conversation of the discipline'.

The citation feature was found to express a number of communicative purposes. First, citations in the *introduction* and *literature review* moves helped to delimit and to contextualise the study. The *materials and methods/methodology* moves employed

citations based on documented research procedures adopted by previous researchers in order perhaps to demonstrate that the study being reported was conducted following established materials, procedures and tools. Citations also gave insight and credibility to the discussions that featured in the *results and discussion* move given that the move involved comparing and contrasting findings with previous work while, in the *conclusions and recommendations* move, the citations helped construct the ‘implications’ element in which applications of findings were compared to those by previous researchers.

*Integral* citations were employed where prominence was placed on the author rather than the proposition while *non-integral* citations were used to indicate that prominence is on the proposition and not the author. On the other hand, *source* citations worked where they attributed a proposition to a text they were taken from, indicating that responsibility for a proposition rests on the citee and not the citer. *Identification* citations, that enclosed the author’s surname and year of publication in parentheses, named the author of the proposition referred to. *Reference* citations, that comprised such directives as ‘see’, were used to refer the reader to another text for more information. *Origin* citations indicated the originator of a concept or product used in a study. *verb-controlling, naming, and non-citation* types of integral citations enabled the writer to position their work in relation to that of other members of the discipline.

(e) *Hedging strategies*

The notion of hedges in this study follows Crompton (1997, p. 281) definition of a hedge as an item of language which a speaker/writer uses to explicitly qualify his/her lack of commitment to the truth of a proposition he/she utters/writes.’ Hedges are also integral to the study of and production of academic discourse. As Hyland (2000, p. 193) comments, ‘a clear awareness of the pragmatic impact of hedges and an ability to recognise them in texts is crucial to the acquisition of a rhetorical competence in any discipline.’

The general incidence of the feature in MA theses was markedly higher than in MSc theses at 61.9% against 38.1% respectively. This represents a significant difference of 23.8%. Disciplines within the same culture displayed some noticeable interdisciplinary differences in terms of frequency of hedges. In MSc theses, for instance, SCH and SAE had significantly high distributions compared to thesis SBT at 41.8%, 39.7%, and 18.5% respectively. It can be concluded that items constituting new knowledge in MA theses lean towards tentativeness while in MSc theses such items tend towards absoluteness.

The incidence of hedging in the *abstract* element was the lowest in both disciplinary cultures with combined occurrences of 2.49% of all types of hedges. Hedging was highest in the *results and discussion* move in MA theses at 21.37% but in the *literature review* move in MSc theses at 15.43%. It was also observed that MA theses generally had a higher incidence of the hedging feature in all rhetorical moves than MSc theses. The high incidence of hedges in the *results and conclusions* and the *literature review* moves leads to the speculation that the high engagement expected in the two moves requires modest language that can be expressed by hedging devices.

Epistemic lexical verbs recorded the highest incidence of all types of hedges at 701 occurrences. Categories of these include *non-factive reporting verbs, tentative cognition verbs, and tentative linking verbs*. Epistemic modal auxiliary verbs were the second most commonly employed at 596 occurrences. The auxiliaries in frequent hedging use were *may, might, could, can, would, and should*. The third most



frequently employed hedges were epistemic adverbs at 477 occurrences. The types of epistemic adverbs in frequent use in the study corpora were *probability adverbs*, *adverbs of indefinite frequency*, *adverbs of indefinite degree* and *approximative adverbs*. The fourth most frequently employed type of hedges was epistemic adjectives at 415 items in the entire study corpora. Categories of epistemic adjectives evident in the study corpora were *probability adjectives*, *adjectives of indefinite frequency*, *adjectives of indefinite degree*, and *approximative adjectives*. Approximators were the second least frequently used type of hedges in the study corpora with 384 items followed by epistemic nouns at 240 occurrences. Its categories were *non-factive assertive nouns*, *tentative cognition nouns*, and *nouns of tentative likelihood*.

The patterns of use of the types of hedges can reveal that thesis writers are more conversant with such types of hedging devices as *epistemic lexical verbs* and *epistemic modal verbs* and less conversant with such types as *approximators* and *epistemic nouns*. It is also notable that MA theses hedge their propositions more than MSc theses. This indicates that MA theses are expected to be more persuasive while MSc theses need to be factual.

Hedging was found to express the following communicative purposes in the MA and MSc theses. First, hedges permitted thesis writers to say something and to comment on what others had said in ways that are acceptable to readers in the discourse community. Hedges also presented the writers as cautious and modest members of their discipline, and to diplomatically negotiate their claims when referring to the work of colleagues and competitors. Hedges also reduced the risk of opposition to writers' propositions. By using hedges, writers made an admission that the propositions they were constructing could have some degree of inaccuracy and hence the need to cover themselves against the embarrassment of categorical commitment to such statements. The selected hedging types also performed the interpersonal function by helping writers to develop a relationship with the reader to gain acceptance of claims. This function was helpful particularly in propositions which involved interpretation of findings, and making recommendations.

### ***General conclusions***

From the findings of this study, the following conclusions can be made. First, theses are socially constructed texts. The influence of discourse community or disciplinary culture in which the writing takes place is evident. Thus, thesis writing is ideologically-driven and therefore tied to the values and beliefs of those involved in producing and processing them.

Thesis organisation, including use of other generic features are not only influenced by the conventions of the genre and the immediate disciplinary culture in which the thesis is being written, but are also creations of the writer. Thus, the generic features of the thesis serve writer purposes within the thesis genre.

The thesis as a genre is a highly versatile text. Several levels can be established that give the thesis its character. For instance, at the disciplinary cultural level, there seems to be a number of shared communicative purposes and associated generic features. Narrowing the focus, a thesis produced in a particular discipline such as English reveals further unique communicative purposes and exploitation of generic features. This means that to understand the text, the various levels involved in its development must be considered during research and thesis writing.

Writer intentions are diverse in each rhetorical move of the thesis. As such, although certain types of a generic feature are expected to record higher densities in

particular moves, writers have other options of the same feature to choose from to express their diverse intentions. Thus, it is improper to prescribe such rules as: use the simple past in the *materials and methods/methodology* move.

This section has reported on the trends in the manifestation of various generic features in theses drawn from six disciplines. The question that arises is: How can we use this information to proffer pedagogical solutions to thesis writing instruction? In the following section, I propose a genre-based approach that, in part, assigns the graduate student the role of researcher of existing successful academic texts.

## **The Proposed genre approach to the teaching of thesis writing**

### ***Syllabus design***

Knowledge of general tendencies and the relative importance of the various generic features in the six disciplines, in the present study, can help teachers or textbook developers to design syllabi that have the potential to address writer needs in their disciplines. The syllabi can incorporate knowledge of correspondences between a generic feature and communicative purpose(s). Integrating both the process- and product-oriented approaches (Nunan, 1988; Willis, 1990), the syllabus can be divided into rhetorical teaching units with each unit focussing on a generic feature such as tense and its categories. The unit can include corresponding communicative purposes for each tense category per rhetorical move of the thesis. In this approach, generic features are not treated as ends in themselves but as consequences of rhetorical choices. Such syllabi should include carefully designed tasks that specify the competencies expected of the students, what they will do to generate the required product and the resources available to the student to generate the product.

### ***Selection and adaptation of materials***

The findings that were arrived at from the examination of theses have helped identify some of the elements that are important for the teaching and learning of the generic features of moves, tense, writer's point of view, citation, and hedging in academic discourse which include:

- (a) Awareness of variations and general tendencies in the use of generic features.
- (b) Knowledge of the rhetorical purposes unique to a discipline or disciplinary culture and the range of choices of generic features available for each function
- (c) Some views about why theses in each discipline appear in the way they do.

Being aware of variations characterising thesis writing in the disciplines can lead to more accurate selection of materials to help in the instruction of thesis writing. As such, advanced academic writing teachers and writers will be able to evaluate textbook advice such as the following, found in a text intended to prepare advanced ESL students for academic writing: 'To minimise verb tense errors...try to write as often as possible in the simple past tense' (Reid 1987, p. 195).

While there are signs that corpus-based English for Academic purposes materials are beginning to appear (for example Harwood and Hadley 2004; Swales and Feak 2000), much of the material seems to fail to represent the generic features that academic writers use. I therefore suggest that the most effective way of raising students' awareness of the key generic features and the role they play in thesis writing in their disciplines, is for the academic writing teacher and thesis supervisors to select their own authentic corpus-based materials such as theses and research articles in their disciplines. The use of such materials is one of the best ways of developing students'

academic meaning potential. Holmes (1988, p. 40) for instance, points out that English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching needs revised material based on authentic texts, because ‘information yielded by authentic data gives learners some awareness of the relative frequency of different devices in different contexts so that they can accurately gauge the stylistic effect of using one form rather than another.’

### ***Thesis writing pedagogy***

Various pedagogical solutions for raising learners’ awareness of conventions for academic writing have been presented in previous work (e.g. Salager-Meyer 1994, Hyland 1998, Skelton, 1988). Skelton (1988) for instance, suggests three broad types of exercise useful in the teaching of hedging techniques, namely sensitisation exercises, rewriting exercises, and sets of hedging phenomena that may be employed as a starting point in elementary courses. In what follows, I offer a fairly broad approach to the teaching of the salient generic features of the thesis that pays attention to broad questions. This means that I will leave open the more precise pedagogical solutions that might be useful in developing learners’ thesis writing skills.

As the first step, the framework proposed in the present analysis for the identification of generic features of theses and associated communicative purposes can be used by teachers and writers to inform themselves of requirements specific to any thesis writing situations. It could be useful, particularly in a multidisciplinary writing class, to raise learners’ awareness of the existence of different rhetorical moves, tenses, forms of expressing writer stance, types of citation, and hedges. For instance, on rhetorical moves, the teaching should focus on: sensitising learners on the move structures adopted in theses from various disciplines, the inherent elements and communicative purposes; comparing several examples to determine the variation in move structure; identifying the type and ordering of information within each move-element composition, and understanding how that relates to information in previous move-element units; using flowcharts and gap-filling exercises to represent the organisational pattern of the thesis; creating discussion topics related to the analysis, and giving language focus exercises that can provide clues for decoding the moves and elements.

The second activity might be to give students partial or complete authentic texts featuring the generic features (ideally from their own disciplines) and to get them to identify the categories of each, occurrences, and communicative purposes. A follow-up activity could involve the learners in comparing and contrasting their own writing with more expert texts such as theses and research articles in their areas of specialisation. The focus should be on the degree to which a particular generic feature is employed and why, as well as how manifestations in the learner’s text relates or differs from that by the ‘expert’.

The teachers of academic writing and their students could then compile mini-corpora of expert and successful students writing (e.g. assignments) in their own disciplines. The learners can then compare and contrast the use of the generic features in the corpora both quantitatively and qualitatively. The frequencies of each generic feature across student and expert genres can be compared and contrasted. The following questions would be particularly helpful to the teacher of academic writing:

- (a) What explanations do learners give for the similarities and differences in the use of generic features?
- (b) Why do they use the generic features in the way they do and how does this compare to expert corpus?

- (c) Are there instances where learners avoid a certain generic feature or its category in their corpus? If yes, why do they do so?
- (d) How does the students' writing address the expectations of the teachers, examiners and other potential readers?

In the third step, the teacher might ask the learners to try to compose guidelines for the use of generic features in their disciplines, based on the evidence from the student and expert corpora. And, finally, students could interview their subject lecturers to see whether these guidelines meet the expectations of those who will be making judgements about their writing. This will be in line with the suggestion that the student should take the role of researcher into the dominant norms of their fields (Ivanic 1998; Harwood and Hadley 2004; Harwood 2005, Johns 1997).

As a follow-up to such initial exercises, instruction could, for example, proceed to the kind of 'rewriting exercise' mentioned by Salager-Meyer (1994, p. 165). This exercise will assist students gain more control over those generic features that are considered socioculturally appropriate at a given level of formality. The writing teacher can ask learners to rewrite an article, term paper, or section of a thesis from another discipline so that it employs the generic features in the style of scholarly writing in their field of expertise.

The activities suggested above will be an effective consciousness-raising tool to ensure thesis writers understand the rhetorical options available to them and the effects of manipulating these options to meet the communicative purposes of the text in their disciplines. The hope is that these activities will enable learners to use these generic features to achieve greater delicacy of meaning.

### ***Assessment strategies***

A number of assessment strategies may be adopted in checking student progress. One of them is portfolio assessment. In general, a portfolio is a folder or box in which students store significant pieces of class work that mark their progress. Students are able to reflect on and track their progress if they kept successive pieces of a task in a folder. For instance, an initial exercise on writing a rhetorical section of the thesis can be followed up by write-ups of the same task after class revisions and discussions to help learners improve their performance. All such exercises can be filed in a portfolio as an accessible gauge of a student's progress.

Another form of assessment is teacher observations. When working on various learner tasks, the teacher needs to be a participant-observer. For instance, when creating and analysing mini-corpora involving students' and 'expert' writing, the teacher needs to informally participate and observe how the learners are going about the task. The teacher can also use this to respond to any queries the students might have. Besides, the teacher can document those areas where the learners are doing well and where they are going wrong. This documentation is helpful for lesson planning.

Conferencing with individual students is another form of learner-contextualised assessment. Formal conferences may be held after the thesis writing course to review how much students' writing goals have been achieved. Students can use this forum to present their findings on small-scale research focusing on the relationship between particular generic features and the rhetorical purposes they fulfil in respective moves of the thesis. A student for example can make a presentation on tense usage in the *discussion* move of theses drawn from various fields. Conferences are an ideal setting for mutual input: both teachers and students are expected to share what they think of learner progress. Student portfolios can also be discussed during such conferences.

Criterion-referenced assessment tests may also be used. The tests are designed to measure the progress of students against a pre-specified set of objectives and/or goals for a specified population of students. For each criterion being assessed, criterion-referenced tests will reveal what the students have learned, the degree to which they have learnt it, and how much more they need to work on this skill before they are said to have ‘mastered’ it. For instance, if students are expected to write a *statement of the problem* that meets the expectations of their discourse communities, criterion-based tests will require such students to formulate a research topic and follow-it up with a *statement of the problem* which will be assessed against the norm(s). Criterion-referenced tests will help teachers in planning their thesis writing instruction, revision, and remedial activities.

### **Bio data**

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