

The Effectiveness of Genre-Based instruction on Abstract Writing for Japanese Graduate Students of EST

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Abstract

EST (English for Science and Technology) students writing a scientific abstract for the first time face a number of challenges. The abstract's language and format are different from more familiar types of general academic writing genres which tend to be more subjective and personal. In addition, EST students have to learn new registers and syntax which come much more easily to their English speaking counterparts. The rather structured and impersonal writing of research abstract and article pose tremendous difficulties to EST students in EFL context. Can a genre-based approach help Japanese graduate students in EST overcome these challenges and write better research abstracts? Over the course of a 15-week course, Japanese students in the first year of their master program are introduced to a number of different written genres and given a detailed explanation of the five-move (Background-Purpose-Method-Results-Discussion/Conclusion) scientific abstract as the main written aspect of the course. In this component, each student writes an abstract based on a capstone research project from their final year of the undergraduate graduation research. Seventy students' first drafts and final drafts are collected and compared to see the effect of genre-based teaching on their writing in both understanding of the move-based structure and language. The results of this research show that most students have incorporated the five moves, have increased their use of scientific registers and syntax and have improved objective style. The adoption of the genre-based approach appears to be effective in teaching scientific/research abstracts to Japanese EST students at graduate level.

Key words: genre-based teaching, ESP, EST, abstract writing

Writing an abstract is a significant challenge for anyone who is unfamiliar with this genre, but it is an even greater challenge for students whose first language is not English. These students are not only learning how to write in an unfamiliar register and syntax and but they may also face L1 interference (Yang 2009). One promising strategy for dealing with these difficulties is a genre based approach. As Swami suggests, gradually introducing students to aspects of a genre such as its rhetorical move structure, register and syntax can improve both students' writing and their confidence in their own abilities to communicate in a second language (2008). As Sunstrom suggests a genre based approach allows students to negotiate their changing role as they move from being students to being researchers (2016).

The class in this study was made up of first year graduate students at a Japanese science and technology university who were asked to write a 200 to 300 word abstract of a capstone research project that they completed during their senior year of college. Learning how to write an abstract is vital for these students since it can determine their ability to present their research at conferences, publish their work and apply for research grants. In the first two weeks of class students were introduced to a variety of genres including a love letter, an online news article and a scientific paper. Students were asked to discuss each genre in terms of its register, language and rhetorical structure to develop greater genre sensitivity. Through a series of

exercises and class discussions students were asked to identify different aspects of each genre such as whether its language was personal or impersonal, how often authors used personal pronouns such as “I” or “you” and the author’s use of vocabulary and syntax. During the discussion students were able to correctly identify the different aspects of each genre and were introduced to the differences between genres to prepare for writing the abstract.

After developing an initial genre sensitivity, students were introduced to the target genre: the five move abstract based on a model used in Swales and Feak (2009, 2012). This abstract uses the following structure:

- Background
- Purpose
- Method
- Results
- Discussion/Conclusion

Students were introduced to abstracts using a sequence that was similar to the one used to introduce the earlier genres. We started with the five move rhetorical structure and discussed its similarities with the IMRAD format of an RA. Students were already familiar with this genre from previous writing assignments and the earlier discussions of genres. Students were then asked to analyze and discuss the language, syntax and register of some example abstracts and to identify the five moves on a sample abstract. Although they had little trouble identifying the language of the abstracts; identifying the five moves was often challenging for them. Finally, students were given a sample abstract which had been cut into individual sentences and they were asked to reassemble it. This exercise allowed them to put their knowledge of the five move abstract into practice before writing their first draft.

During the writing stage, students wrote a rough draft of the abstract and brought it to class for a peer review. Their rough drafts were critiqued in two ways. First they were given a questionnaire which focused primarily on genre specific aspects of the draft and they were asked to critique another student’s abstract (Table 1). Students were also given a self-review which required them to ask almost the same questions about their own text (Table 2). Both of these exercises were designed to help students to develop greater genre sensitivity by focusing on the genre specific aspects of their own abstract and another student’s abstract. They then used these critiques to revise their rough drafts.

Table 1

1.	My draft falls within the required word limit
2.	My research is fairly typical of the subfield. .(If not go to #11)
3.	The number of sentences is appropriate.
4.	The draft has the expected number of moves.
5.	I have considered the pros and cons of the opening problematizing move.
6.	I have considered whether a purpose statement is necessary
7.	I have made sure that the methods move is not too long.
8.	I have reviewed the main tense options of present (for Moves 1, 2 and 5) and past (for Moves 3 and 4) is good/contains problems. (Explain why)
9.	The main findings are sufficiently highlighted
10.	As for the conclusion I have followed typical practice in my subfield
11.	Since my research is unusual, I have considered whether I need to justify the topic and/or approach in the opening two moves.
12.	Throughout I have checked whether my acronyms or abbreviations will be understood.

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Table 2

1.	Your draft falls within the required word limit. (If not go to #11)
2.	Your research is fairly typical of the subfield.
3.	The number of sentences is appropriate.
4.	The draft has the expected number of moves.
5.	The opening problematizing (Moves 1 and 2) of your abstract is <u>appropriate/not appropriate</u> (Explain why)
6.	Having a purpose statement is <u>necessary/not necessary</u> (Explain why)
7.	Your methods move is not too long.
8.	Your use of present tense (for Moves 1, 2, and 5) and the past tense (for Moves 3 and 4) is good/contains problems. (Explain why)
9.	The main findings are sufficiently highlighted
10.	Your conclusions followed typical practice in your subfield
11.	Since your research is unusual, you need to justify the topic and/or approach in the opening two moves.
12.	Your acronyms or abbreviations are understandable/not understandable

II. Analysis/Discussion:

Approximately 60 rough drafts and 60 final drafts of student's abstracts were collected. The abstracts were assessed according to the following criteria:

1. Use of Scientific Language and Syntax
2. Use of the Five Move Structure
3. Use of Standard English

Students' rough drafts and final drafts were evaluated using a Likert scale with the following values:

- 1—Outcome is absent with few elements present.
- 2—Outcome is absent, but some elements of competency are present. The result is clearly ineffective.
- 3—Outcome is present, but with several major flaws. The results fall short.
- 4—Outcome is mostly present. Minor flaws are evident but detract only minimally from the efficacy of the outcome.
- 5—Outcome is completely present. Relatively few flaws.

An analysis of the rough drafts produced the following averages for each criteria. By comparing the rough drafts to the final drafts to see how much students' work improved during the revision process we created the following table:

	Rough Draft	Final Draft	Change
Use of Scientific Language and Syntax	3.72	4.14	+ 0.42
Use of the Five Move Structure	3.86	4.31	+0.45
Use of Standard English	2.86	3.36	+0.50

Students consistently scored much higher on the genre specific aspects of the abstracts than on their use of standard English. This can in part be attributed to the fact that the use of standard English was de-emphasized during this exercise and students were asked to focus primarily on genre specific aspects of the text. However, when students rewrote their abstracts, their improvement was much greater on their use of

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standard English, than in other areas so they clearly knew that it was an important aspect of the assignment. In their final drafts they still performed much better on the genre specific aspects of the abstract than on the L2 aspects of the abstract which demonstrates how much they learned from the genre based teaching.

Generally, the types of errors that students made in the genre specific area fell in to two categories: writing moves that were too long and skipping moves. After a qualitative analysis of the drafts, very few cases in which students actually skipped a move were found. The most common genre specific error was spending too much time on one move and too little time on others. Many students wrote extremely long introduction/problem sections and very short discussion and result sections despite the fact that they were warned about this problem many times. This is definitely something that students need to continue to work on since it is the results and discussion sections which are most important in an abstract. Students' use of technical and scientific language was also very good showing that there was less of a problem with L1 interference for students who have received genre based instruction.

III. Conclusion

In a comparison of rough drafts and final drafts genre based teaching appears to help students revise their work but what is even more significant is the relatively high scores that students received in using scientific language and following the five move structure. Although students are still having difficulties using standard English. The genre based method has certainly helped them deal with the specialized difficulties of abstract writing. The majority of students successfully used the five move structure and scientific language and syntax in their writing.

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