

Rhetorical Moves Used in Thesis Proposal Writing: A Reflective Study of ELT Students

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to analyze and investigate the rhetorical patterns used by undergraduate ELT students in writing the introductory section of thesis proposals. This study focuses on the rhetorical structures (rhetorical moves) used by the students, in particular how the argumentation and rhetorical patterns of thesis proposal writing are adopted by the students. This study uses a mixed sequential explanatory method, which investigates the rhetorical patterns used by students quantitatively through text analysis and continues with descriptive analysis using the Project Justifying Model (PJM) adapted from Swales' CARS. From the investigation and discussion, it was found the tendencies (general patterns) used by students in the introduction to confirm the previous studies to set the niche of their thesis proposals. The results corroborate the lack of rationale to argumentation, e.g. urgency and rationale upon the research proposal. The findings are expected to become the basis for the supervisory approach to ELT students in writing research proposal.

Keywords: Thesis proposal, Rhetorical move, niche, Swales' CARS, Reflective study.

1. INTRODUCTION

This research aims at understanding the rhetorical moves structure of the most important part in writing a research article, namely the introduction section because it is the first part that the readers must read after the abstract. If the readers are not impressed by this section, they are more likely to not continue reading the article [1]. In other words, the introductory part of a research has an essential role to motivate the readers to read the whole part of the research, and therefore, this part should be well-written, interesting, and convincing at the same time.

Belcher [3] emphasizes that the main purpose of the introduction in the research is to provide sufficient information for the audience to understand the author's argument and its justification and rationale. It is also emphasized that there are two main objectives of the introduction to scientific research: to provide a logical rationale for the research and to provoke the readers to read it (to the end). In order to achieve this goal, it is necessary to know how to present the arguments in the introduction rhetorically. This organizational and

rhetorical structure will determine whether the reader is impressed and convinced to continue reading the research to the end.

Writing an introduction of a research article in a foreign language (L2) is not easy, even for the native speakers of that language (Adnan, 2005). Similarly, Swales (1990) argues that for most authors, writing an introduction to a research and/or a research proposal is considered more difficult and problematic than writing other parts of the research. Swales adds, in the introduction, the authors must provide the right amount of information needed for a particular reader or group of readers to understand the research topic and research projection. In addition, the research introduction, as an introduction to other types of academic discourse, must be argumentative and persuasive, convincing and informative [3] [4] [5]. Current attention, however, is dominantly given to the introduction section of the research article as it is considered as an essential part used by the authors to attract the readers [6] [7] and to grasp their interests toward the research topic being discussed in the research article [8].

Rhetorical structure in an academic writing, however, is only discussed especially in terms of macro structure, starting from the abstract, introduction, method, and discussion sections. Understanding of the rhetorical patterns has an impact on the foreign language teaching, especially on writing skills, which is often becoming an obstacle for teachers and students. Given that the introduction is considered very important to direct the readers and present the problems being discussed, this study specifically intends to explore the rhetorical pattern in the introduction section of a research proposal written by Indonesian students, in particular students from English language teaching (ELT) major.

Research on scientific discourse focuses on how the authors organize their ideas in an introduction section of a research [5] [6] [9] [10] [11]. In the context of authors from Indonesia, there is a tendency to have their own style in writing research introductions due to some factors from linguistic to sociocultural aspects, including students majoring on English language teaching (ELT) [6]. In his study of the idea organization in 30 introduction sections of research article introductions written by Indonesian writers reported a different way of Indonesian writers use in organizing their ideas as those in the Swales' CARS model (1990), while the Swales' CARS model is identical with the western academic discourse.

In more specific, it is asserted that Indonesian writers employ more Moves in their introduction section than the English writers [1] [6]; in Move 1 of establishing the territory, the Indonesian authors tend to talk about the current government policy in order to show the urgency

Based on the description, this research specifically aims to find out the rhetorical structures used by Indonesian students majoring in English language education in writing the introduction section of a research proposal. This study specifically discusses the rhetorical patterns that are standard and commonly used by students. In addition, there are factors that have the potential to influence the use of certain structures or patterns will also be discussed through learning reflections involving students and supporting lecturers.

2. METHODS

2.1 Research Design

This research is a mixed research (mixed sequential explanatory) which investigates the rhetorical patterns used by students in writing the introduction section to the thesis proposal. This mixed research provides an opportunity to comprehensively discuss student's writing, both quantitatively through expressions and linguistic features that indicate the rhetorical structure, as well as the tendency of the patterns or structures used by the students in writing thesis proposals. To find out the tendencies and the possible factors that influence the pattern, it can be known by means of comparing quantitative and qualitative data in mixed studies [12].

2.2 Research Subjects

This research involved 3rd year students of the Department of English, who were programming Thesis Proposal Writing course. This course has 2 credits with

Table 1. The Swales' CARS model

Moves	Steps	Move-step coding
Move 1: Establishing a territory	Claiming centrality	M1-1
	Making generalization of a topic	M1-2
	Reviewing items of the previous research	M1-3
Move 2: Establishing a niche	Counter-claiming of previous research	M2-1
	Indicating a research gap	M2-2
	Raising questions	M2-3
	Continuing tradition	M2-4
Move 3: Occupying the niche	Outlining research purposes	M3-1
	Announcing present research	M3-2
	Announcing general findings and implication	M3-3
	Outlining structure of the research	M3-4

of the research. In Move 2 of establishing a niche, the Indonesian authors are likely to mention that the research is important without further logic justification to convince the readers as mostly found in the ones written by the English writers [9].

the learning activities include the process of writing, consulting, and presenting proposals in front of the class to obtain various inputs from fellow students and lecturers as prospective supervisors. This course is a compulsory subject as a mandatory requirement (with a minimum score of achievement) to be able to continue

the final project in the form of a thesis. To be able to take the Thesis Proposal Writing course, students are considered to have passed with a minimum score for the prerequisite courses of scientific writing, which include language skills (skills), research methodologies, as well as courses that discuss issues in the teaching of English.

From a number of students who were programming in one academic semester, 10 students were selected through purposive random sampling from the English Language Education study program (ELT), taking into account the quality of writing, research topics, supporting lecturers or prospective supervisors, as well as gender equality. This determination based on research needs and in consultation with the lecturers in charge of the Thesis Proposal Writing course concerned.

2.3 Research Procedures

This research was initiated with a literature study and an initial study (field study) by conducting general interviews related to mapping the background information of each student, involving students and the lecturers. In addition, the general topic determination was also conveyed to the lecturers and students that several issues related to the background writing strategy or the introduction of a thesis proposal were urgent. However, the research team did not provide treatment or in the classroom so that they positioned themselves as observers and researchers only, by placing their respective tutors as the holders of the learning process authority in each class.

2.4 Data Collection

The primary data of this research were the thesis proposals written by the selected students which have been selected in a structured manner according to the research needs. The data analysis of the thesis proposal was only focused on the introductory section and possible the introductory sub-chapter, using the CARS model proposed by Swales. In this model, the data were analyzed by identifying the use of phrases, clauses, sentences or paragraphs that represent the rhetorical moves structures as proposed by the Swales' CARS model (see Table 1). Knowing the proposed structure and meaning of phrases, clauses, sentences or paragraphs in the introduction to a thesis proposal is considered important for assessing the quality of writing and the communicative purpose of the thesis proposals.

Furthermore, as an effort to enrich the data relevant with the text analysis, researchers also held an in-depth reflection on behaviors and perceptions of the selected undergraduate students, especially the factors related to the flow of their thesis proposal writing. The instrument used is a semi-structured reflective interview guide. Justification for collecting qualitative data is that the main purpose of the research is to find out what happens

in all aspects of social behavior [13]. This statement supports the setting of this research later where the research activities were not only related to text analysis, but other aspects that might contribute to certain people who were used as the data.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the rhetorical moves structure found in the introduction section of the thesis proposal. In addition, reflection was conducted by involving the ELT students to confirm the issues on writing the introductory section, especially issues on difficulty in indicating the research gap and possible recommendation for thesis writing supervisory.

3.1. Rhetorical Moves Structure of Introductory Section of Thesis Proposal

The results of the analysis on rhetorical moves based on Swales' Create a Research Space (CARS) model in the article journal introduction section of thesis proposal written by ELT students are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that all moves as proposed by Swales (Moves 1, 2 and 3) are employed in the structure of the ten introduction section of thesis proposals written by ELT students as analyzed in this research. In general, while more than half of the students (60%) employed generalization of a topic as their opening moves, the students experienced difficulties in establishing niche (20%) and occupying the niche (40%).

To open the introductory section, the ELT students prefer to claim centrality as to lead the readers, e.g. glorifying current condition of the global pandemic of covid-19 and the impacts to learning activities including the teaching of English, the issuance of government's policies, and 4 of the students wrote the position of English and globalization.

The intention to claim centrality is to show the

Table 2. Rhetorical moves of introduction section of thesis proposal

Moves	Move-step	Percentage
Establishing a territory	M1	6 (60%)
Establishing a niche	M2	2 (20%)
Occupying the niche	M3	4 (40%)

significance of certain topic [14] instead of using previous studies to draw generalization to set the research territory (M1). Such claim might lead into broader context of research, in contrary with the funnel structure of academic writing. The students tend not to show the significance by making a topic generalization through previous studies [15] because this part lacks of literature review of previous research.

Failure to set the topic generalization as proven with low references in the opening (establishing a territory of the research) may lead into weak niche and unclear research gaps. Only 2 of the selected participants employed establishing a niche (M2) in the introduction section of the thesis proposals. The two niches chosen by the students are as follows:

- showing the absence and limited studies that the research in the chosen topic has never been conducted by other research. Such strategy seems subjective as the students do not provide rational justification on the limited studies without addressing more studies; and
- distinctness of research that such topic has never been done to Indonesian context, in particular one particular school. Such strategy may lead into minimum significance of the study as the discussion might be too localized on one particular school.

In terms of occupying the niche (M3), more students employed the move by raising questions (M2-4) and outlining the aims of the research (M3-1). Such structure is employed by the students is mainly due to the thesis writing format set by the university that requires research questions are stated in specific section. However, students perceived the inconsistent idea between research objectives and research questions.

In general, the rhetoric moves structures as analyzed from the introduction section of the thesis proposal written by the students indicate the unclear of research focus due to the failure of the students to establish the research gap. Such issue may affect to the next sections, including determining the research objectives and questions.

3.2. Reflection on Difficulty in Indicating Research Gap

The students from English Language Education program (N=10) were invited to reflect on the existing rhetorical structures that shows unclear research gap. The reflection was in the form unstructured consultation to observe students' beliefs and perception on the current writing strategy.

3.2.1. Tendency of Continuing Tradition instead of Counter-Claiming

The unclear research gap is when writers could not find the niche or the issue of the topic. One of the common strategies to indicate the research gap is by "however" statement, meaning the writers are encouraged to critically analyse the gaps between previous research and the emerging trend or current condition.

Half of the students perceived they are not confident to give counter-claiming to the previous studies. Instead of criticizing the findings of previous research, students tend to show affirmative stance and continue the tradition of the existing research trend.

S1: *"I'm not sure I'm good enough to point out the weakness of a research. It's not easy to counter. Maybe I myself that's wrong."*

The answer from one student (S1) corroborates the low mastery of the topic and research theory. It is indicated by the least number of references in the introduction section (less than 5 articles cited in this section) and student's mastery to the topic they are about to research. In this regards, students are likely to avoid the objection or counterargument upon the research to draw the research gap. As the result, the research proposal could not show the significance and urgency.

3.2.2. Critical Analyses and Exposure of Research Articles

When analyzing the thesis proposals written by the participants, all of the proposals include less than 20 references/sources (including introduction, literature review, and method), especially taken from journal articles. It seems that students are less exposed to research discourse and lack of readings. The exposure to research structure discourse may improve the quality of research writing.

Arsyad [1] [6] argued that the quality of research articles written by Indonesian writers tend to be similar with the English-speaking writers due to massive and intensive exposures of article writing such as training on skills in academic English writing for international journal publication. In contrary, some students admitted that they even do not have any idea how to select reliable research articles as the sources.

This issue could be accommodated by two strategies, namely better supervision on academic English writing especially focusing on the research structure discourse and strategy of academic and critical reading, especially sources from reputable research articles as to generate their own bibliography to provide more references from previous relevant studies in their thesis proposal.

4. CONCLUSION

Reflection on rhetoric moves structures of the thesis proposal shows that the ELT students tend to continue tradition instead of counter-claiming to establish research gaps or niche. This trend leads into unclear objectives of the research and lack of urgency. The issue is also proven by the structure analysis showing that only 20% of the students employed M2 (establishing a niche) in their introduction. Some factors include lack of reading and references from previous research and topic

generalization. It is advisable that students be supervised more intensively by providing more relevant references as research bibliography to increase students' mastery to the topic and exposure to research structure discourse.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

We conceived and designed this study and contributed to the process of revising the manuscript. The authors acted as teacher researchers at the Department of English relevant with the full access to the subjects. At the end, the authors have approved the final version of this manuscript.

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