Analysis of Move Structure and Verb Tense of MA Theses Abstracts

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Abstract

Abstracts have been described to be very important parts of a research paper because of increasing competition to be published (Swales and Feak, 2004). This study aims to examine the abstracts from two dimensions, move structure features and verb tense of each move in the abstracts. 25 abstracts of MA theses (English Specialization) from Mandalay University were collected and analyzed based on Swales and Feak's (2004) five-move model. The result showed that the abstracts analyzed in this study preferred to take a four-move structure (A,M,R,C) with 36%. 28% of the abstracts followed a five-move model which was the model discussed in this study. It was also found that only 64% of the abstracts included M 5(C). Most abstracts began with Move 1(B) or Move 2 (A), and ended with Move 5 (C) or Move 4 (R). To regard with the verb tense, many researchers preferred using the present tense more in M 1,2 and 5(B, A and C) and the past tense in M 3 and 4(M and R). On the whole, regarding move structure, more than half of the abstracts and concerning the verb tense, most abstracts are in keeping with Swales and Feak's (2004) five-move model and Weissberg and Bucker's (1997) model.
Keywords :   move structure, hedges

Introduction

In the academic world, research paper abstract has been considered as an important section for knowledge communicating device in recent years. According to Lores (2004), RA abstract is considered as the door that convinces the readers in a specific discourse community to choose a paper or a specific journal. Accepting or rejecting the submitted papers depends only on the abstracts at the seminars and conferences. Therefore, the ability to invent effective abstracts is important in academic fields and the academic writers' interest in studying the language of abstracts becomes considerable (Seden et al ., 2016).

According to American Psychological Association (2001), a good abstract basically should be precise, self-reliant, brief and definite, non-evaluative and logical and comprehensible.

Weissberg and Burker (1990) offered a five-move model of an abstract in their textbook which is a prescribed textbook for fourth year and second year honours students of English Specialization. The five moves included in their suggested model are Background, Purpose, Method, Results and Conclusion. In this model, among the five moves, Move 1 (B) is not obligatory. Likewise, Hyland (2000) suggested a five-move structure to be precise: Introduction, Purpose, Method, Product and Conclusion to examine academic abstracts. Furthermore, Swales and Feak (2004), in their handbook which is also a textbook for first year MA students of English Specialization, recommended that structured abstracts should contain five elements namely Background, Aim, Method, Results, and Conclusion. According to these guidelines, therefore, a five- move model is an appropriately useful structure of an abstract although the moves are termed in a different way in different books.

Santos,1996 (adapted from Tseng,2011) analyzed 94 abstracts and his study showed that almost all the abstracts included Aim and Method, about 80% of the abstracts contained Result, about 53% had Conclusion, and only 43% included

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Background. Therefore the result may suggest that A, M and R are compulsory moves in AL abstracts. By the use of Santos's (1996) model, Pho (2008) investigated the move structure of 30 abstracts, 20 (AL), and 10 (ET). The findings also showed that all 20 AL abstracts contained M 2, 3, and 4(A, M and R), 80% of the abstracts included M 5 (C), and only 45% had M 1 (B).The remain 10 ET abstracts also showed a similar pattern with M 2, 3, and 4 are conventional moves. Therefore Pho's (2008) results and Santos' (1996) results were generally identical. Nevertheless, as Pho's (2008) study examined only a small size of data, a study with a large amount of samples is desired to have an advanced picture of the overall move structure of AL abstracts.

Tseng (2011) also examined 90 AL abstracts from three different journals: 30 TQ, 30 AL and 30 LL. The researcher examined the abstracts from two perspectives: the move structure features and the verb tense of each move by the use of Santo's (1996) five-move pattern and Swales and Feak's model. In his study, the findings showed that the abstracts examined preferred taking a four-move structure instead of a five-move one. Regarding the verb tense in each move, the present tense was usually in M 1, 2 and 5 whereas the past tense was often in M 3 and 4.

The verb usage in the abstracts is fairly complex (Swales and Feak, 2004). They also claimed that though the present tense is often used in the opening and closing statements, there seems to be substantial discipline and each tense variant with sentences depending on the findings (p.283). For that reason the verb tense is also considered to explore in the moves of the abstracts.

In recent years, a number of studies have analyzed the abstracts of research articles and applied linguistics journals (Tseng, 2011). However, MA theses written by MA Candidates of English specialization from Mandalay University have not been explored yet. Therefore, this present study attempts to carry out an investigation into the move structure and verb tense of each move in the abstracts of MA theses.

For the purpose of representing a proper picture of the features of MA theses abstracts, the present study has the following two questions;

1.   What are the features of move structure in terms of abstract length, move frequency, move pattern the writers preferred to use in the abstracts?
2.   What is the verb tense the writers preferred to use in each move of MA theses abstracts?

Method

In the analysis of data on move structure, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used.
Data Collection
For the purpose of analysis, 25 abstracts were selected from MA theses of English Specialization (2019 October), Mandalay University. The purpose of choosing for the theses from 2019 October was to reflect on current writing practices. For the text analysis, only abstracts of the research papers were selected, not including the title, information about writers and keywords of the abstract.

Analysis of Move Structure Features

Swales and Feak's (2004) model and Santo's (1996) five-move pattern (adapted from Tseng, 2011) was employed as the framework for move analysis of the abstracts in the present study. The framework for move analysis is shown in Table 1.
Table 1.Framework of Move Analysis, adapted from Tseng (2011)

Moves (Swales and Feak,2004)	Functions (Santos, 1996)
M 1: Background (B) M 2: Aim (A) M 3: Method (M) M 4: Results (R) M 5: Conclusion (C)	Situating the research Presenting the research Describing the methodology Summarizing the results Discussing the research

The length of each abstract was measured by machine word count whereas the total number of the sentences in the abstract was counted manually. The "sentence" was the fundamental unit for move analysis in this study. Nevertheless, as the abstracts are condensed texts and a proof of embedding move in the abstracts (Pho, 2008; Santos, 1996), "clause" or "phrase" was also employed as the analytic unit in some situations of this study.

e.g. So, for the purpose of examining the relationship between the ideology and news discourse (**P**), Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is applied in the present research (**M**). ⌐Ab 11⌐

After each abstract was coded into different moves and analyzed by using the above five-move model, other features like the opening and closing moves were also analyzed. A model of the abstract feature analysis is offered in Table 2.

Table 2.A Sample Analysis of the Move Structure of an Abstract in the Study

Sentence	Text (Ab15)	Move
1	This research explores the use of various kinds of discourse markers and the effect of the use of discourse markers in 20 essays by Matriculation Examination students.	A
2	For data collection and data analysis, seven categories of discourse markers suggested by *Fraser (1999)* and *Fung (2003)* are used.	**M**
3	It was found that the frequently used discourse marker was Elaborative Discourse Marker, followed by Inferential Discourse Marker, Temporal Discourse Marker and Contrastive Discourse Marker.	**R**
4	Spoken Discourse Marker was the least employed one and Topic Relating Discourse Marker was not totally found.	**R**
5	The findings reported that the scores of the students who used less amounts of discourse markers were higher than that of the students who employed more discourse markers.	**R**
6	It can be concluded that there is no direct correlation between the use of discourse markers and the scores they got because the students did not get high marks even though they used large amount of discourse markers.	**C**
7	This is because they did not use discourse markers correctly and appropriately in essays.	**C**
8	Therefore, the students still need to be taught the use of discourse markers in order to create more meaningful and comprehensible texts and to get high marks.	**C**

Features: A-M-R-R-R-C-C-C (**8** sentences, **196** words in length, **4** moves)

Analysis of the verb tense of Moves in the Abstracts

The present study only paid attention to two verb tenses which are the present tense and the past tense occurred in the moves of the abstracts. The purpose of the analysis was to find out the verb tense the writers preferred in each move of the abstract. If a move was illustrated by a sentence, the verb tense in that sentence was equivalent to the verb tense including in the move (adapted from Tseng, 2011).

e.g. Language *is* a powerful medium of communication in everyday life. (**B**)
   ⟶   *present tense* [Ab 12]

If a move was identified in a clause or a phrase, it was considered that in that move, the verb tense was not incorporated in the data analysis process.

e.g. So, for the purpose of examining the relationship between the ideology and news discourse (**P**), ⟶   verb tense not included [Ab 11]

Analysis of Abstract Features

While the qualitative method was used for the analysis of the move structure and the verb tense, quantitative procedures were also used to examine the abstract's other features, specifically, an abstract length, the frequencies of sentences in an abstract, and the move units in each abstract.

Findings and Discussion

Features of the Move Structure of Abstracts

The occurrence of moves, the move structure, and the occurrence of the opening and closing moves in the abstracts are presented in the following. The frequencies of the moves occurrence in the abstracts are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Frequencies of Moves Distribution in the Abstracts

(N= 25)	B	A	M	R	C
	15 (60%)	25 (100%)	25 (100%)	25 (100%)	16(64%)

As seen in Table 3, Move 2, 3 and 4(Aim, Method, and Results) seemed to be obligatory in these MA thesis abstracts as each of these three moves occurred 100% in the abstracts. Then, move 1(B) and move 5 (Conclusion) occurred only in 60% and 64% respectively. However if it was considered that if a move had in 60% of the abstracts or more, it was "conventional" and if it included in 59% or less, it was "optional"(adapted from Seden et al ., 2016), it can be assumed that all moves are conventional in the abstracts of this study.

The move patterns of the abstracts found in the present study are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Frequencies of Move patterns in the Abstracts

	Five Moves (B,A,M,R,C)	Four Moves (A,M,R,C)	Four Moves (B,A,M,R)	Three Moves (A,M,R)
No=25	7 (28%)	9 (36%)	8 (32%)	1 (4%)

Table 4 highlights the patterns of move structures of abstracts analyzed in the present study. Four patterns of move structure of abstracts were found in the present study. They were five-move structure (B,A,M,R,C), two types of four-move structure (A,M,R,C) and (B,A,M,R) and three-move structure(A,M,R). 28% of the abstracts followed the five-move structure which was the model discussed in this study. The four-move structure (A,M,R,C) was preferred by the writers of the theses analyzed in this research with the highest percentage (36%) which was also in accord with Weissberg and Bucker's (1997) model in which M 1 (B) seems optional. The second most preferred pattern was another four move structure (B,A,M, R) with 32%. Surprisingly only one of the abstracts analyzed in this study included only 3 moves Move 2, 3 and 4 namely Aim, Method and Result. Two moves were missing in this abstract. Therefore, according to the findings, it can be concluded that more than half of the abstracts in this research followed the five-move model and four-move model which are in line with the results of many researchers' studies. However it was also noted that 36% of the abstracts did not include Move 5 (Conclusion) in their abstracts. The result of the opening and closing moves in the abstracts analyzed are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Frequencies of Opening and Closing Moves in the Abstracts

No = 25	B	A	M	R	C
(Opening)	14 (56%)	10 (40%)	1 (4%)	0	0
(Closing)	0	0	0	10 (40%)	15 (60%)

Table 5 shows that almost all the abstracts in the study preferred to begin with M 1 (Background) and M 2 (Aim) with 56% and 40%. It was also found that one of the abstracts in the study opened with Move 3 (Method). Although APA (2001) has also recommended that an abstract can start with

Move 2 (purpose), Move 4(R) or even Move 5 (C), none of the abstracts in this research started with result or conclusion. Concerning the closing moves, about 60% of the abstracts ended with M 5(C), and about 40% closed with M 4(R). None of the abstracts closed with Moves 1, 2 and 3 (Background, Aim and Method). The frequencies of the abstract length and the number of sentences in the abstract are shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Frequencies for abstracts, words, sentences and their average lengths

N= 25	Total No	Ave length	Min	Max
Abstract length	5882	235	127	345
No of sentences	251	10	4	16

Table 6 presents a picture of the constituents of the abstracts. First the length of the abstracts analyzed in the present study ranged from 127 to 345 words. The average length was 235 words. Second the number of sentences in the abstracts ranged from 4 to 16 sentences. Therefore the average number of the sentences in the abstracts is 10.

Table7. Frequencies of Verb Tense in Each Move

No=25	B	A	M	R	C
Present	26 (84%)	30 (64%)	25 (38%)	29 (37%)	32 (91%)
Past	5 (16%)	17 (36%)	41 (62%)	49 (63%)	3 (9%)
Total	31	47	66	78	35

Table 7 indicates the occurrence of the verb tense in each move of the abstracts in the study. According to the data, it was found that the present tense was the preferred verb used in M 1 (B), M 2(A) and M 5 (C) with 84%, 64% and 91% and the past tense was more frequently used in M 3 (M) and M 4 (R) with 62% and 63%. According to this finding, it can be concluded that most writers of the abstracts analyzed followed Swales and Feak (2004) who mentioned that RP abstracts often use the present tense or present perfect tense in their opening statements and the conclusions are nearly always in the present tense. In addition descriptions of methods and results are often expressed through the past tense.

Conclusion

In this study, 25 MA thesis abstracts were examined from two dimensions: the move structure features and the verb tense of each move in the abstracts. Although this study examined only 25 MA theses abstracts, the results of this study were consistent with some previous studies. First with regard to Move structures, although only 28% of the abstracts preferred a five-move model, as 36% of the abstracts followed a four-move structure it can be

concluded that more than half of the abstracts included four moves (A-M-R-C). 36% of the abstracts did not include Move 5 (Conclusion) and 40% did not include Move 1 (Background). Therefore these findings also show that the writers of the abstracts discuss purpose, results and methodology in their abstracts more than conclusion or background information. Most abstracts began with M 1(Background) or M 2(Aim) and closed with M 5(Conclusion) or M 4(Result). Generally the abstract had 235 words, 10 sentences and four- move units.

Second, concerning the verb tense of moves, the writers of the abstracts examined in this study preferred using the present tense more in M 1, 2 and 5(B, A and C), and the past tense in M 3 and 4 (M and R). On the whole, it is suggested that regarding move structure, more than half of the abstracts and concerning the verb tense, many abstracts are in keeping with Swales and Feak's (2004) five-move model and Weissberg and Bucker's (1997) model.

The present study both presented a comprehensive sketch of the abstract features and of the move structure and portrayed the preferred verb tense in each move. Therefore this study may have some guiding principles for novice writers to construct a proper MA theses abstract.

Although this study analyzed the features of the abstracts and verb tense in 25 abstracts from MA thesis (English Specialization), it has its limitation. There are still several elements worth investigating in the abstracts such as voice, hedges, etc. Therefore it is suggested that further studies need to be conducted for a larger sample of the abstracts across disciplines and compare their results so that there would be an advanced guideline for novice writers to build a proper abstract.

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