Undergraduate ESL Students' Difficulties in Writing the Introduction for Research Reports

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Abstract

This study was conducted to investigate the difficulties encountered by undergraduate ESL students in writing the introduction section of their project reports. Five introduction sections of bachelor of arts students, majoring in English language, were analyzed and a lecturer was interviewed regarding the areas of the students' weaknesses. Swales' create-a-research-space (cars) model was used as the analytical framework of the study. The results revealed that students confronted problems in writing their introduction for each move especially for move 2, which consists of counter claiming, indicating research gap, raising questions from previous research and continuing tradition. It was also found that the students had difficulty in writing the background of the study, theoretical framework, and statement of the problem which indicated their unawareness of the appropriate rhetorical structure of the introduction section.

Keywords: research report, introduction, undergraduate students, moves, academic writing

1. Introduction

Writing academic research papers is expected to be structured in a manner that is defined by particular norms, standards, conventions and rhetorical moves that make it different from writing for other purposes (Cargill & O'Connor, 2009). A rhetorical move refers to each specific section of a text that performs a particular communicative function (Swales, 1990). The structure of the undergraduate project report consists of an abstract and five sections which are Introduction, Literature review, Method, Results and discussion, and Conclusion. The role of the Introduction in general is to convey the topic or argument that authors highlight in their manuscripts. It functions as an opening, and captures the reader's attention while introducing the significance of the study (Cheung, 2012; Hashim, 2005; Samraj, 2002 & 2005; Stapa, Tengku Mohd Maasum, & Abd Aziz, 2014).

Introduction section embodies the background of the study, the statement of the problem, objective, significance of the study, limitations or delimitations and operational definitions (Moten, 2009; Simon, 2011). A number of studies (Fudhla, Rozimiela & Ningsih, 2014; Loan & Pramoolsook, 2014; Shehzad, 2008) have been conducted on the structures of research report/article's introduction based on the Create-A-Research-Space (CARS) model proposed by Swales (1990). Apart from Swales' CARS Model, the most widely used move models for the investigation of Introduction and other genres in academic writing are six moves-structure by Dudley-Evans (1997). Bunton (2002) revised CARS model and Bhatia's (1993) genre analysis model and created a new model which consists of seven steps. Studies (e.g. Gecikli, 2013; Hirano, 2009; Khan & Mehmood, 2014; Stapa, Tengku Mohd Maasum & Abd Aziz, 2014) have adopted moves from one of the aforementioned move models to study the non-native speakers of English language that came from various fields and contexts.

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) plays a crucial role in the academic success of learners at tertiary level. The most widely used definition of EAP was proposed by Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) who defined it as a concept that is related to a study purpose which refers to any teaching in the English language area. EAP courses prepare students with all skills needed within the area of English language studies ranging from teaching, researching, and examinations (Huttner, 2007).

Various types of academic writing are referred to as genres which serve different purposes, forms and structures. They consist of essay, critique/review, report, research proposal, lab report, reflective account, project and case study (Gillet,

Hammond, & Martala, 2009). The current study investigated one of the academic writing genres which is the project report of ESL undergraduate students.

Problems and difficulties in writing the Introduction section of research papers in various areas such as social sciences, scientific and technical fields has attracted the attention of researchers (Cheung, 2012; Fudhla, Rozimiela, & Ningsih, 2014; Samraj, 2002, 2005; Shehzad, 2008). However, there are very few papers (Fudhla, Rozimiela, & Ningsih, 2014; Stapa, Tengku Mohd Maasum, & Abd Aziz, 2014) that highlight the difficulties faced by undergraduate students in writing the Introduction section of their research reports. Most of the previous studies investigated the Masters and PhD theses, instead.

Previous research (Abdulkareem, 2013; Al Badi, 2015; Al Khasawneh, 2010; Giridharan, 2012; Pineteh, 2014; Yuen & Mussa, 2015) highlighted the problems and difficulties encountered by undergraduate and postgraduate students in writing academic research reports. The outcome revealed that students made grammatical mistakes, had insufficient amount of vocabularies and faced problems in structuring and organizing sentences, ideas and paragraphs.

There is consensus in previous studies that writing a research report in English is a challenging and a difficult task, particularly for English as a second or foreign language students. This difficulty may only partially be the result of inadequate English proficiency levels but it may lie in "incomplete understanding of the conventions governing written academic discourse and the thinking processes involved in realising these conventions" (Chandrasegaran, 2012, p. 10). In addition to the rationale explained above, the study also rests on the premise put forth by Cooley and Lewkowicz (1997) that for most students writing a thesis is a unique experience more demanding linguistically and structurally than any other writing that they were previously encountered.

Accordingly, the main objective of this study is to identify the difficulties faced by undergraduate ESL students when writing the Introduction section of their project reports based on Swale's 3 move-structure of CARS model.

This study addresses the following research questions:

What are the difficulties faced by undergraduate ESL students when it comes to writing the Introduction section of a project report?

What do the students' lecturers perceive as their main areas of difficulty in writing the Introduction section of their project reports?

2. Method

This case study followed qualitative methods for collecting and analyzing the students' Introduction sections. It is assumed that the results of the present case can provide useful information for similar situations and cases.

2.1 Sample

The sample for this study is the Introduction section of undergraduates' project report that was chosen by purposive sampling technique. As Kumar (2011) mentioned, purposive sampling is also known as judgemental sampling in which the samples are chosen based on the quality and amount of information that can be provided by the samples in order to achieve the study's main objective. The selected samples were from the third year semester 2014/2015 students (n = 5) majoring in Bachelor of Arts (English Language) in a public university in Malaysia. The project report's Introduction section was written by the students in pairs or individually when they were attending the Research Methodology course. Writing the research report was one of the compulsory assignments to be completed and submitted by the students.

Additionally, the participant in the interview was a lecturer with 15 years of experience. She held a master's degree and was about to complete her PhD studies in English Language. She had been teaching the course of Report Writing in the department for several semesters and was therefore a reliable source of information on what is generally expected from the students to present in their research reports. The results of this interview would provide an additional source of useful information from a lecturer's perspective.

Two analysts from Bachelor of Arts (English Language) program were invited to analyze the samples of the students. Inter-coder agreement between the analysts' results was measured using Kappa (Viera & Garret, 2005). Kappa statistic was used because the data collected in this research had a nominal scale of measurement. The degree of agreement was measured based on the difference between the degree of agreement that was actually present (observed agreement) with the degree of agreement that would be present by chance (expected agreement). Based on Kappa interpretation guideline (Figure 1), the perfect agreement between the analysts would be equal to 1, while the chance agreement would be equal to 0 (Viera & Garret, 2005):
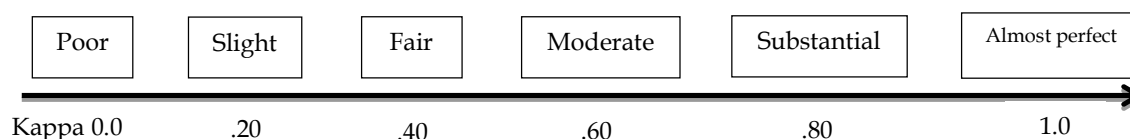

Figure 1. Kappa Interpretation Values Scale

Table 1 shows the results of inter-coder agreement. As these results indicate, the Kappa value for the inter-coder agreement is .773:

Table 1. Results of Inter-coder Agreement

Symmetric Measures

		Value	Asymp. Std. Error[a]	Approx. T[b]	Approx. Sig.
Measure of Agreement	Kappa	.773	.139	5.380	.000
N of Valid Cases		11			

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.

b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.

The degree of the analysts' agreement was between moderate and substantial. Thus, it could be concluded that the results had acceptable level of reliability.

2.2 Analytical framework

The difficulties encountered by the students in their writings were investigated by analyzing their Introduction sections with the 3 move-structure of Swale's (1990) CARS model. The model was employed in different fields of study and contexts. A number of studies (e.g. Fudhla, Rozimiela, Ningsih, 2014; Khan, Mehmood, 2014; Samraj, 2002, 2005; Yazdanimoghadam & Rajaee, 2010) proved the reliability of this model when studying the difficulties encountered by students in writing the Introduction section. Three moves structure of the CARS model proposed by Swales (1990) consists of:

Move 1: Establishing a territory

       Step 1: Centrality Claim or

       Step 2: Generalization of topic or

       Step 3: Reviewing items of previous research

Move 2: Establishing a niche

       Step 1A: Making counter-claim or

       Step 1B: Indication of gap or

    Step 1C: Question-raising

       Step 1D: Continuing of tradition

Move 3: Occupying the niche

       Step 1A: Purposes outline or

       Step 1B: Announcement of present research

Step 2: Announcement of principal findings

2.3 Procedure

First, the 5 selected Introduction sections were analyzed based on Swales' (1990) CARS Model to answer the first research question. Later, for the interview session, a lecturer specialized in academic writing was requested to participate in the study. For this purpose, an interview protocol was developed and the content of the inquiries was presented to the lecturer beforehand to help her be prepared. The collected data from the interview were then arranged and analyzed. In order to analyze the data, two analysts, majoring in Bachelor of Arts (English Language), and the first author analyzed the rhetorical moves in the Introduction sections based on the CARS model to identify the missing moves.

Finally, the data gathered from the interview was analyzed by the researchers using thematic analysis. The content of the interview was categorized so that only the prominent part which answered the second research question would be extracted from the content.

3. Result And Discussion

This section presents the results of data analysis which are then discussed.

3.1 Students' difficulties in writing introductions

The first research question dealt with the students' difficulties in writing the introduction sections in their project reports. To address this research question, the students' written works were analyzed for the moves and steps present in the Introduction section of their project reports. Table 2 shows the results of this analysis. Every tick (/) represents one occurrence of steps. The Introductions are represented with S1-S5.

Table 2. Moves and steps in the Introduction section

Move	S 1	S2	S3	S4	S5
Move 1 Establishing Territory					
Step 1: Centrality Claim		/	/	/	
Step 2: Topic generalizations	/	/	/	/	/
Step 3: Reviewing items of previous research	/				
Move 2 Establishing A Niche					
Step 1A: Counter claiming			/		
Step 1B: Indicating gap	/				
Step 1C: Raising question					
Step 1D: Continuing tradition					
Move 3 Occupying The Niche					
Step 1A: Outlining purposes	/	/	/	/	/
Step 1B: Announcing present research	/	/	/		
Step 2: Announcing main findings					/

Based on Table 2, the selected five research reports included at least two steps in Move 1 for their Introduction. In Move 2, only 2 samples were found to include at least one step in the Introduction. For Move 3, five samples included a minimum of two steps in their Introduction. Basically, it could be concluded that the students were not aware of the moves in the Introduction section. What follows is a detailed account of some examples for each move from the analyzed samples.

3.1.1 Move 1

Based on the Swales' CARS model, Introduction consists of Moves 1, 2 and 3. In this part, Move 1; Establishing a territory is presented. As in the CARS model, Move 1 consists of centrality claim, topic realizations and reviewing of the past researches. Centrality claim often functions as the topic sentence of the study. In the present study, centrality claim was present in three out of five Introductions. Below is one sample that presents a study on the "Teachers' Perceptions on Students Learning English as a Second Language for Study Purpose in Primary Schools in Malaysia" which claims centrality in their writing:

"The exploration of teachers' perceptions and beliefs is important because teachers are in the front line of education, heavily involved in various teaching and learning processes." (sample 4)

The next step in Move 1 is topic generalization. Topic generalization is where the writer generalizes his/her topic of study. Five samples included the topic generalization in their Introductions. Below is one of the samples, a study on "The Effect of Vocabulary Knowledge on Reading Performance of English as Second Language among Malay Students Taking English Linguistics in UPM":

"According to Laufer (1992), second language readers of English need to have a vocabulary of at least 3000 word families in order to have some knowledge of more than 90 percent of the running words in a text. Vocabulary knowledge is one essential role in reading performance." (sample 5)

Then, the final step in Move 1 is reviewing the past researches, where the writers stated previous researches of the same field that they were investigating. Three out of five Introductions have included this step. Below is one of the samples that presents a study on "Motivation and Attitudes of Malaysian Undergraduate ESL Students towards Learning English":

"It was shown from the previous studies that Malaysian students acknowledge the importance of English for the future (Thang,2004 ; Ainol Madziah & Isarji, 2009)." (sample 1)

3.1.2 Move 2

Move 2 which is establishing niche consists of four steps which are counter claiming, indicating gap, raising question and continuing tradition. Only one of the five samples included counter claiming in the Introduction. Counter claiming serves as the point which introduces the opposing statement of the past research mentioned in the Introduction. Below, the sample of Introduction with counter claim is presented. The sample was entitled "Teachers' Perceptions on Students Learning English as a Second Language for Study Purpose in Primary Schools in Malaysia":

"Chomsky points out that a child could not possibly learn a language through imitation alone because the language spoken around them is highly irregular – adult's speech is often broken up and even sometimes ungrammatical.…However, all children, regardless of their intellectual ability, become fluent in their native language within five or six years." (Sample 4)

For step two in Move 2 which is indicating gap, it was identified that one sample included the gap of research in the Introduction. It was entitled "Motivation and Attitudes of Malaysian Undergraduate ESL Students towards Learning English" :

"According to Thang (2004), Malaysian students are motivated extrinsically to improve their English language. However there are no past studies which had specifically studied for English course students, in Malaysia yet." (Sample 1)

For the last two steps which are raising questions regarding previous researches and continuing tradition, it was found that none of the samples included raising questions of previous researches and continuing tradition.

3.1.3 Move 3

Move 3 is occupying the niche which consists of three steps; i.e. outlining purposes, announcing present research and announcing main findings.

For the first step which is outlining purposes, five samples have included this step in their Objective sections. Outlining purposes is when the writer states the objective or purpose of the research conducted. Below is an example of outlining purposes in the sample entitled "Motivation and Attitudes of Malaysian Undergraduate ESL Students towards Learning English":

"Objectives

To explore the motivation of Malaysian ESL students in learning English.

To investigate the attitudes of Malaysian ESL students towards learning English. (Sample 1)"

The Next step in Move 3 is including the point about the study conducted. One sample paper encompassed this step. The writer presented a picture of the setting of the research. Below is a sample that was entitled "The Perception of UPM Bachelor Students on the Use of English Language in Education and Employment Domains":

"Therefore, this study will be conducted to determine the importance of English in education domain for UPM students." (Sample 3)

The final step in move 3 is where the writer announces the main finding. One of the five Introduction samples announced the main finding of the research conducted. It was entitled "The Effect of Vocabulary Knowledge on Reading Performance of English as Second Language among Malay Students Taking English Linguistics in UPM":

"The reading performance is measured by reading section in Malaysian University English Test (MUET)." (Sample 5)

3.2 Lecturer's expectations

One of the lecturers with experience in teaching and guiding the students writing their project reports was interviewed. The interview session took about 14 minutes consisting of two sections; namely section A (Personal background and experience) and Section B (Interview questions). The lecturer had 30 years of experience in the education field. He has been teaching undergraduate proficiency courses; i.e. research writing, expository writing, writing for research reports, negotiation skills, grammar for communicative purposes, introduction to linguistics and creative thinking.

In response to the interview question "what are the most common mistakes in general that the students make when writing the Introduction section?", the lecturer explained that the students sometimes do not know how to differentiate between the Introduction from the other parts. They do not really dive into the specific questions or topic that they choose. Students should just gear into their topic and refer to the related previous studies but they fail to do so.

According to the lecturer, the students' weaknesses when writing the following sub-sections in the Introduction section; i.e. the background of study, statement of the problem, objective of the study, research question, theoretical perspective and significance of the study can be mentioned as follow:

Firstly; with regard to the background of the study, the students do have problems when stating their study background. They do not clearly state which aspect they are referring to; i.e. whether it is the general aspect or the smaller aspect in their study.

Secondly; with regard to the statement of the problem, the students do not actually know how to come up with the problem of their study and write it in sentences.

Thirdly; with regard to the objective of the study, the lecturer mentioned that this part is the guidance towards the research questions and data analysis. The students actually are not really aware of the action verbs appropriate for writing this part. For example; "to investigate".

Next is the research question. For this part, the students are all clear and they know that research questions must tally with the objective. Somehow, there is still problem because the students may be stuck with WH- questions. However, based on the lecturer's opinion, it can be concluded that students do not have major problems writing the research questions as they know what their study objectives are.

Then, the lecturer mentioned that the theoretical perspective/underpinnings section is a difficult part for students because they must know the difference between theoretical framework and conceptual framework. Furthermore, this part requires the students to adapt or adopt other people's work in their study. They need to base this part on experts or researchers in that area of study. The students cannot come up with their own framework.

The final part, the significance of the study, is not a major problem for the students because they know who will benefit from the research and they know what the importance of their research is for the future, or towards the society.

3.2.1 Possible solutions

In order to improve the students' writing, particularly for the Introduction section of the research report, the lecturer suggested that the students must first know about the area they are investigating in, the scholars involved and the experts in the field. The lecturer maintained that the supervisor also has to work a little bit more in discussing, guiding and opening up the students' interest into research work and try to emphasize the convention of a research report.

According to the lecturer, the factors or elements that signify the quality of a good Introduction section is that the Introduction must be able to appeal to the readers. As a reader, the lecturer will judge whether the information written tally with the topic or not, and whether there is something interesting in the students' writing. Thus, attracting the readers' attention is very important when writing the Introduction section for project report.

4. Discussion

The previous studies, e.g. Samraj (2002 & 2005) and Cheung (2012) investigating movement in CARS model on the introduction of master thesis differentiated from the present study in the manner that Master's theses Introduction is not divided into sections like the undergraduates' Introduction section.

Based on the result, the students were not clear about the structure and organization of the Introduction section. In Move 1, they were not aware of including the centrality claim which is in line with Cheung's (2012) study. He found that only one sample out of 11 samples from social science field included the centrality claim in the Introduction. Hence, it can be concluded that social science Introductions do not focus on the centrality claim in their Introduction section. Besides, Introduction section must cover the past researches done in the related area. In this study, not all Introductions encompassed this phase. The probable reason might be that in the field of social science the importance of reviewing past researches is more emphasized in the Literature Review than in the Introduction section. Next, Move 2 was the problematic part based on the Table. The students were not aware of indicating gap in the research, counter claiming, raising questions and continuing tradition. These items in Move 2 were important points which give insight and significance to the research. Comparing with study by Cheung (2012), nine from eleven samples presented the gap in their Introductions. Samraj (2002) also found that most of the samples presented the steps in Move 2 in their Introductions. Thus, based on previous studies, ESL undergraduate students have problems in writing the research gap, counter claiming, questions raising of previous research and continuing tradition in their Introduction section. In Move 3, not so much of problem occurred in the outlining of purposes and announcing the research. However, announcing the main finding is resulted as the least item stated in the students' Introductions.

Based on the interview session with one of the respected lecturers teaching at the Faculty of Modern Language and Communication, undergraduate ESL students encountered problems in specifying their introduction according to their selected topic. This was in line with Pineteh's (2014) study in that the students did not really get the skill or idea to conceptualize their topic and use information from different sources in their writing. Furthermore, the students did not have the appropriate skill in using the transition devices and their writing contained mechanical weaknesses in paragraphs and sentence construction. According to the interview, the students also did not properly cite when they borrow sentences from other authors which could lead in plagiarism. Accordingly, the feedback of the lecturers on students writing assessments is required.

5. Conclusion

The present study was conducted to investigate the difficulties encountered by undergraduate ESL Students when writing the Introduction section of their project reports based on the Swales' CARS model. The Swales' CARS model consists of 3 Moves; namely, Move 1 Establishing a territory, Move 2 Establishing a niche and Move 3 Occupying the niche. For the analysis, two analysts were invited to analyze five Introductions from the third year semester 5 2014/2015 students majoring in Bachelor of Arts (English Language). The result of the study revealed that, based on the Swales' CARS model, the students had problems in writing their Introduction for each Move especially for Move 2. Move 2 consists of four steps which are counter claiming, indicating research gap, raising questions from previous research and continuing tradition. Based on the findings, the least frequently occurring Move included in the

Introductions is Move 2. Only two papers included at least one step of Move 2 in the Introduction. Furthermore, according to the interview with one of the lecturers, the area which students encountered as the most problematic were writing the problem statement and theoretical framework.

Admittedly, the current study has the limitation of a small sample size. Only five Introduction sections were analyzed and only one lecturer was interviewed. Such limitations may undermine the generalizability of the findings. However, the result of this study can be used as a reference to improve the undergraduates' writing for the Introduction section. The students can also be exposed to the Swales' CARS model as a guide to produce a good, structured and organized Introduction section. Since Introduction is important in giving the first insight of the study, the students' exposure to this model will provide them with the knowledge of where to include information required in each section of an Introduction section. The findings of this study also can be a great help to the instructors in specifying the problematic areas for students when they write their project report particularly for the Introduction section.

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