

ENGLISH
FOR
SPECIFIC
PURPOSES

ESP

in **LATIN
AMERICA**

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CODEPRE

INTERACTION THROUGH ABSTRACTS IN ESP

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WHY ABSTRACTS?

I started the study of abstracts as a result of my interest in the discourse used by academics and researchers in the area of linguistics. I see written text in general as a mode of interaction (Bolívar, 1986, 1994, 1996) so I have focused on conference abstracts as an instance of interaction through written text. My aim is to learn more about the structure and function of these texts, and also to find out how academics in Latin America use these texts for the purpose of interacting with their peers.

The importance of abstracts for promoting communication and scientific research has already been recognized by many applied linguists in the field of ESP (Hartley, 1987, Cremmings, 1982; Gopnik, 1972, Harvey, 1986, Harvey and Horsella, 1988, Salager-Meyer 1990a, 1990b, Swales, 1990), but most of the studies have dealt primarily with abstracts that precede research articles and very little attention has been paid to conference abstracts, except for a few that aim more at practical applications of various types of text analyses (Kaplan et al., 1994) than at the description of text types.

It seems to me that conference abstracts deserve particular attention because they have a fundamental social function in allowing researchers access to interaction with their peers in particular discourse communities. Having an abstract accepted for a conference actually means the possibility of forming part of a group that shares similar problems and interests. Since I believe that Latin American language researchers need to communicate more in as many national and international events as possible, I have chosen as my object of this study the abstracts sent to conferences in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics. In fact, the corpus of this study consists of all the abstracts published in the Book of Abstracts of the IV Latin American ESP Colloquium, which took place in Recife, Brazil, two years ago.

WHY INTERACTION?

I use the term interaction to refer to social interaction and to the interaction that we can detect in the text itself. Written text as a mode of interaction is subject to interactional analysis. In order to understand this, we need to be aware of the fact that the initial categories of discourse are: social interaction, two participants, and the text (Bolívar, 1986, 1994). We need social interaction because it is only in society that meanings are created and interpreted; we need two participants because only two are needed to create text, in this case the writer and the reader, and we need the text because it is the verbal result of the interaction. The social interaction that we have to describe when concerned with abstracts on ESP in Latin America has to do with the way in which we, as researchers, deal with the subject matter and with how we communicate our findings. In general, this will give us the picture of the state of the art, what we are interested in, how we do research, what type of research we favour, how rigorous we are. The interaction in the text will give us indication of the type of writers we are and who our real or imagined readers are. Above all, we shall be able to see how we negotiate information and evaluation as the text unfolds in orthographic sentences and *turns*. In order to describe this, we need to make use of the smallest unit of interaction in written text, which I call *triad* because it consists of three elements of structure, as we shall explain below in section 4.2 (see also appendix B).

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT CONFERENCE ABSTRACTS SO FAR?

There is very little work on this type of abstracts. The only study that I have heard of lately has been reported by Kaplan et al. (1994) in connection with a teaching experience with graduate students taking a course on discourse analysis. Kaplan and a group of five students analyzed a corpus of 294 abstracts sent in response to the "call for papers" of the Annual Conference of the American Association of Applied Linguistics between 1992 and 1993. They did it from five different dimensions with attention to thematic structure, clause structure, pragmatic moves, propositional organization and lexical cohesion. These aspects were chosen on the assumption that text is multidimensional and, therefore, must be examined from as many angles as possible. Unfortunately, the results cannot be generalized because they apply only to sub-samples of the whole corpus and have a pedagogical bias. In spite of this, there are some things that are worth paying attention to.

In the first place, they offer criteria for a provisional typology of abstracts. These are based on *length*, *purpose* and *audience*. As for length, the conference abstract is supposed to be written in around 250 words, which is longer than the abstract of a research article. The purpose is defined as to be accepted as a participant in the conference and, mainly, to convince a screening committee of the relevance of the paper to be presented. The audience is restricted to a small number of readers, those who integrate the screening committee. These criteria are useful in that we can at least make a first distinction between, for example, abstracts that precede research articles, and conference abstracts. Second, some of the results reported make us wonder about the nature and structure of conference abstracts in general and, in particular in Latin America. For example, Kaplan et al. (1994) report that in Applied Linguistics these abstracts follow the structure *Introduction*, *Methods*, *Results* and *Conclusion*, which seems to be typical of fully elaborated scientific articles but, at the same time, one of the authors dealing with a subsample indicates that "roughly half of the abstracts contained four such identifiable segments, though of necessity the segments were quite brief. Roughly 40 percent of the subsample omitted the methods section, and roughly 35 percent omitted the results section." (Kaplan et al. 1994: 409, 410). This obviously makes us wonder why this is so. Although there is evidence from other fields such as medicine that abstracts do not always follow the IMRC pattern (Salager-Meyer 1990a, 1990b), particularly when they are "poorly structured" and when they belong to case studies, I believe that there is also the possibility that abstracts may follow other structures depending on factors such as the state of the research or the type of research. Kaplan et al. (1994) also report that conference abstracts seem to be "promissory" texts, probably because when they are sent to the screening committees the research has not been completed. And, apparently, these texts are not detached but involved, which is understandable given the fact that their aim is identified as to convince an audience.

In general, then we are faced with a type of text that may well have its own linguistic and discourse features. And this is worth finding out, for the benefit of our researchers who, at the moment, have no clear guidelines to follow. Said in Gibson's words (Gibson 1993:61) "the procedures documented in the literature do not actually inform abstractors to write a successful abstract; they merely instruct them to do so. A typical instruction is: 'write concisely, write clearly and understandably'. However, this is a less than useful piece of advice because it refers to concepts which are not sufficiently well spelt out to be directly actionable".

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

My questions then have to do first with our research activity ; how is our activity as a research community reflected in the texts that we produce? How do we structure the texts? How do we interact?

Then, we can ask ourselves, if applied linguists are not following the recommended or conventionally agreed pattern? IMRC, for structuring the texts, what are we actually doing? Are we structure badly? or are we structuring differently because there are other factors that intervene? What are these factors? Are there any differences between the abstracts produced by native and non-native speakers? If we are producing sub-types of conference abstracts, what are these?

Although not all the questions can be answered in this study, I shall try to make an attempt on the basis of the following assumptions:

Text structure cannot be imposed from outside because it depends on the purposes of the interaction and on how people interact in a given discourse community.

Two of the factors that may affect the structure of the conference abstract in applied linguistics are the type of research (TR) and the state of the research (SR), whether finished or unfinished.

The structure of the text is negotiated by the members of the discourse community who, in the final analysis? will decide on the requirements according to their research interests and cultural characteristics

METHOD

The corpus of the study consisted of all the abstracts (42) published in the Book of Abstracts of the IV ESP Latin American Conference of 1994, 37 belonging to non-native speakers of English (NN) from six Latin-American countries, and 5 to native speakers (N) from the U.K. and the USA, as shown below:

The Corpus

NN:			
Argentina		6	
Brazil	18		
Colombia		2	
Chile	8		
Mexico	1		
Venezuela		2	
Total	NN	37	(88%)

N:			
U.K.		4	
U.S.A.	1		
Total	N	5	(12%)
	NN + N	42	(110%)

The small number of native speakers is explained because most of them attended the Colloquium either as plenary speakers or by special invitation

The procedures

All the texts were coded according to the following indicators:

number: They were numbered from 1 to 42, leaving the last five for native speaker;
country (C): Argentina (A), Brazil (B), Colombia (C), Chile (CH), Mexico (M), and
Venezuela (V);

number of words per text (Ws);

number of orthographic sentences (S);

number of paragraphs (Par);

the type of research (TR). After a general reading of all the abstracts, it was agreed that most of the texts would fit in one of the following types:

research report (RR);

theoretical discussion or proposal (TD);

teaching experience (TE);

- project report (PR);
- g) the rhetorical pattern or macrostructure: Introduction, method. results and conclusions (IMRC);
- h) the "flaws" in the patterns (FIs), and
- i) the interaction in the text (IT) as seen through the analysis of the sequence of triads and their internal structure in terms of types of turns. The triad is the minimal unit of interaction in written text, it is a coherent segment of text by means of which the writer negotiates information and evaluation in turns that initiate (I), follow (F) close and evaluate (V). Each triad is about something and has a function in the text (see Bolívar, 1986, 1994, 1996). See appendix A for the summary of the data base and Appendix B for an example of the analysis in triads and turns.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The length of the abstracts

The texts of the corpus were found to contain in general more words than the number suggested for international standards (Kaplan et al., 1994), but the texts produced by the native writers were shorter than the non-native ones, not only in words but also in number of sentences and paragraphs per text as can be seen below

1. Number of words per abstract

	NN	N
maximum	757	350
minimum	190	190
average	358.8	251.6

2. Number of sentences per abstract

	NN	N
maximum	31	15
minimum	4	4
average	12.6	9.2

3. Number of paragraphs per abstract

	NN	N
maximum	12	5
minimum	1	2
average	5.2	3.6

These results may be evidence of several things: applied linguists in the field of ESP in Latin America are not following international standards as far as length of text because a) they are not informed about them; b) ignore them, or c) do not receive explicit instructions about this point. Whatever the reasons, it is important to agree on a suitable number of words because this has the advantage of forcing participants to summarize the essentials of their research and so make communication easier.

Type of research and state of the research

It was found that the conference abstracts of the corpus fell into the following sub-types of text as shown below in descending order:

Research report (RR)	24	57.1 %
Teaching experience (TE)	10	23.8 %
Theoretical discussion (TD)	4	9.5 %
<u>Project report (PR)</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>9.5 %</u>

47 100 %

It was also found that 31 of the writers reported finished research and only 6 admitted not to have finished it yet. However this is not exactly true since half of those who said were reporting a finished investigation did not present either results or conclusions as seen through the description of the IMRC structure and the interaction itself. In general, then, most of the research announced at the moment of sending the abstract was still in progress, which confirms the "promissory" feature of conference abstracts detected by Kaplan et al. (1994)

The results of the analysis call attention on the type of research activity carried out in ESP in Latin America. Apparently, the major interest is on research related to reading and discourse or text types, but there is also a genuine interest in reporting classroom experiences. Theoretical discussions are favoured in a few cases equally by native and non-native participants, but project reports seem to be a growing concern among nonnative researchers. It is interesting to note that none of the native speakers wrote abstracts of the research report type, which can be explained because they were mainly invited speakers and were not committed to reporting an investigation.

These findings point to the need to make room in future ESP Colloquia for either round table discussions or papers on how we see research in ESP in Latin America and define major lines of research and projects.

The IMRC structure

It was found that only 9 out of the 42 texts of the corpus were structured following the IMRC pattern (21.42%) and these belonged to non-native speakers. This obviously calls our attention because it might be interpreted as evidence that our researchers are not writing properly or, another possibility, that we are writing differently, and this is a challenge for researchers interested in text typologies or genre analysis.

When I looked at why this structure was not being followed, I discovered that all the texts that contained the four parts in the right sequence and all those that lacked one part (L1) with two exceptions, fell in the category of RR and were finished research (FR). Those that lacked two parts (L2) belonged to either RR, TE, TD or PR. Those that lacked 3 (L3) were PR and quite a few (9) presented a discontinuous pattern (DP), such as text 3 (IMRM) or text 10 (IMRMCM). It is important to notice that non-native writers tended to follow the IMRC pattern in the right order, and discontinuously, in a similar proportion (24% each). This may be indicating that, although about half of the researchers are aware of the research process, when it comes to reporting we adopt various styles, and this is also worth investigating.

The interaction in the text

The analysis of the abstracts in terms of triads and turns showed that conference abstracts are constructed interactively and that there is a main interest in presenting evaluations in all the sections of the texts: in the introduction to convince the audience of the relevance of the research and the importance of the position adopted by the researcher; in the methods section, to show that the method chosen was the most suitable; in the results, to convince the audience of the implications for teaching and learning; and in the conclusions, to express the importance of the research activity and of the personal satisfaction obtained. The example that follows is taken from the Results

section of a text with a triad that consists of the sequence LFLFV, where the V turns evaluates the results with a warning about the conclusions reached

- L The results of both groups were compared and they revealed a fairly significant difference within the groups.
- F The students from the GD group as a whole scored a higher number of correct answers than the CP group.
- L There were also a few discrepancies (about five) when both groups ticked more or less consistently the same wrong answers.
- F Our initial finding was that the GD students activated their metacognitive knowledge better than the CP ones.
- V These results should not be taken as conclusive, for the study is based on a small sample. (Text 15).

The interactional analysis shows that conference abstracts are not detached or objective texts. Rather, they are full of evaluations in order to convince the screening committee and their peers that the research is worth reporting in the form of a paper.

While 16 of the 42 abstracts of the corpus close with a final V turn that evaluates, this does not make conference abstracts opinion articles such as editorials. In fact, there is a tendency for the abstracts of the corpus to close with either one or two turns (L or LF) focusing on the paper, the research or the presentation, as seen in the examples that follow:

(1)

Turn - Sentence

- L 14 The paper ends by pointing how feedback components may contribute to the evaluation of the entire ESP operation and by suggesting some overall principles and guidelines for testing and evaluation. (text 17)

(2)

Turn-Sentence

- L 5 The report will discuss details relating to the instrument and to the procedures used for analysis and will concentrate on results concerning general characteristics of the sample (size, location, language use for communication and type of organization) as well as on the relations between different blocks of data.
- F 6 Initial considerations on the implications of the results for research into communication needs in a business context will also be part of the presentation (Text 1)

With the above we can be led to think that there seems to be more interest in announcing what will be done during the presentation rather than in actually presenting research findings. This is an important point because, for the purposes of producing instructions for those who want to participate in international conferences, it is important to differentiate between the act of writing an abstract and the performance expected during the oral presentation at the event itself.

CONCLUSIONS

Conference abstracts in ESP in Latin America seem to be amenable to classification in subtypes that reflect the research activity of this community.

Although conference abstracts in Applied Linguistics are not always structured in the IMRC pattern, they are not necessarily badly structured, but rather written differently due to factors

such as the type of research, the state of the research at the moment of writing the abstract, the researcher's experience, stylistic features and cultural differences.

Based on this initial findings presented here, we ought to produce sets of instructions for writing abstracts that take into account international conventions, text types, the research process and the research activity of the community. While conference abstract writers may be forced to follow a structure it is worth taking into account that this may be possible in some cases, with research reports, project reports, and teaching experiences, and only if finished research, but not necessarily with theoretical discussions, where a Problem-Solution pattern might be more suitable and desirable.

As members of the ESP discourse community in Latin America, it is in our hands and minds to prepare better instructions in order to interact better, to promote the spread of knowledge, scientific findings, and understanding.

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Appendix A: Conference abstracts in ESP: data base

T	C	Ws	S	Par	TR	RP	Fls	IT
1	B	236	6	4	RR	IM	L2	LFLFLF ----- NN
2	B	234	4	2	RR	IRC	L1	LFLF
3	Ch	315	12	6	RR	IMRM	DP	LFLFLFLFLF
4	B	442	19	9	RR	IM	L2	LFVLFVLFVLFV
5	B	312	6	6	RR	IMRMC	DP	LFLFLFLFV
6	B	636	16	6	RR	IMRC	RP	LFVLFVLFVLFV
7	A	310	12	1	RR	IMRC	RP	LFLFLFLFLFV
8	A	400	10	6	RR	IMRC	RP	LFVLFVLFVLFV
9	A	402	13	7	PR	IM	L2	LFLFVLFV
10	A	424	18	1	RR	IMRMCM	DP	LFVLFVLFVLFV
11	B	325	10	4	TD	IM	L2	LFVLFVLFV
12	B	264	6	3	RR	IMIC	DP	LFLFV
13	B	343	13	7	RR	IMRC	RP	LFLFLFLFV
14	B	383	15	1	TD	IM	L2	LFVLFVLFVLFV
15	B	331	16	4	RR	IMRC	RP	LFVLFVLFVLFV
16	B	442	24	8	TE	IMC	L1	LFVLFVLFV
17	Ch	238	4	5	TD	IM	L2	LFVLFVLFVLFV
18	A	349	11	5	RR	IMR	L1	LFVLFVLFV
19	Ch	183	7	6	TE	IMI	DP	LFLFLF
20	V	331	8	4	RR	IMRC	RP	LFVLFVLFV
21	B	455	16	5	RR	IMI	DP	LFLFLFLFLFLFLF
22	B	199	8	2	TE	IM	L2	LFVLFVLFV
23	B	367	17	9	TE	IMC	L1	LFVLFVLFVLFVLFV
24	Ch	374	8	3	RR	IMRC	RP	LFLFLFV
25	B	296	12	6	RR	IMC	L1	LFLFLFVLF
26	V	383	16	1	TE	IMRC	RP	LFLFLFLFLFLFFV
27	B	333	10	1	TE	I	L3	LFVLFVLFV
28	Ch	757	31	1	TE	IMCMC	DP	LFVLFVLFVLFVLFVLFVLFVLFVLFVLFV
29	B	548	18	5	TE	IM	L2	LFVLFVLFVLFVLFVLFV
30	C	354	13	5	TE	IRM	DP	LFVLFVLFVLFV
31	Ch	196	5	5	RR	IMR	L1	LFLFL
32	Ch	331	12	4	RR	IMR	L1	LFVLFVLFVLFV
33	B	408	17	6	RR	IMR	L1	LFLFLFLFLFLFL
34	A	394	16	6	RR	IMRIC	DP	LFVLFVLFVLFVLFV
35	M	268	13	4	RR	IMRC	RP	LFVLFVLFVLFV
36	Ch	190	7	4	RR	IM	L2	LFLFLF
37	C	301	9	4	RR	IM	L2	LFLFLFVLF
38	UK	309	11	4	TE	IM	L2	LFLFVLFVLFV-----N
39	USA		350	15	5	PR IMI	DP	LFLFLFLFLFLFLFLV
40	UK	190	8	2	TD	I	L3	LFVLF
41	UK	241	8	4	PR	IM	L2	LFLFLFLF
42	UK	168	4	3	PR	Y	L3	LFLF

T: text number; C: country; Ws: number of words; S: number of sentence; Par: number of paragraphs; TR: type of research; RP: recommended pattern; Fls: pattern; IT: interaction in the text; RR: research report; TE: teaching experience; TD: Theoretical discussion/proposal; PR project report; I : Introduction; M: method; R: results; C: conclusion; L1/L2/L3/: lacks elements; RP: recommended pattern; DP: discontinuous pattern; L: lead; F: follow; V: valuate.

Appendix B: The initial and final triad of an abstract analyzed in their constituting turns.

Initial triad (text 23: English for tourism purposes)

Tn S

L 1 Curriculum development in English has not taken into consideration the present needs of the Brazilian labour market, which tends to lead to general dissatisfaction of both employers and job applicants.

F 2 The Brazilian English Language student constantly feels that his course is not meeting the objectives.

V 3 what is worse, it does not prepare him to carry the daily activities he is supposed to do in his professional life.

This whole triad, consisting of three turns (LFV), has the function of presenting the situation and the problem. The L turn introduces the problematic situation in general terms; the F turn focuses on reporting the more specific, and the V turns closes with a negative evaluation that reinforces the negative evaluation of the preceding L and F. The topic is maintained through the signals "curriculum" (L), "course" (F) and "it" (V), and the changes are mainly seen through "...has not taken into consideration", "...constantly feels that" and "What is worse. it does not prepare him to.."

Final triad (text 23)

Tn S

L 13 Conscientização (Scott, 1986) and Evaluation were also focused in our course.

F 14 We think it is essential for the teacher to be aware of those aspects.

L 15 As Prodromou (1992:10) points out, "one way of building teacher's awareness and self-assurance is to encourage them to relate theory to practice and practice to theory.

F 16 In real terms, this means widening their knowledge of the options available to them and sharpening their analysis of the principles underlying their teaching strategies.

V 17 By these means. teachers will feel even feel equipped to devise solutions behind a successful activity to new situations, confident in their ability to recreate the initial success!"

This triad closes the abstract with description and justification. The first L turn describes and the F justifies with an opinion. The next sequence LFV reinforces the opinion in F appealing to the voice of authority in the field. Although the complete quoted text could be taken as one V turn because its function is to close with a comment, it has been described as three separate turns on the basis of the changes between the sentences.