

# The perks of genre analysis in ESP.

## An investigation of bachelor paper abstracts in midwifery

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- An overview of the research design and results of a genre analysis in which bachelor paper abstracts written by Austrian midwifery students were investigated
- Potential contributions of genre analytical methods and results to ESP teaching

### 1. Rationale

According to del Pilar (2000), English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is an increasingly important field of English Language Teaching (ELT) (p. 21). One cause contributing to the growing significance of ESP teaching in Austria is the fact that numerous professions, e.g. midwifery (Hiegelsberger, 2016), have entered the realm of academic education and research. In addition, midwifery professionals increasingly face the challenge to participate in international discourse and cooperation. Midwives' proficiency in English – the major lingua franca in professional as well as academic contexts (Seidlhofer, 2011) – is therefore essential for the development of their profession. The growing necessity of mastering academic as well as professional genres renders ESP teaching an important part of midwifery education. The timeframe dedicated to ESP teaching in midwifery programs is, however, limited. This highlights the need for efficient and targeted teaching, which is facilitated by in-depth information on field-specific genres. As a consequence, discipline-specific research in the field of ESP is a valuable source for ESP teachers since...

- ESP is designed to meet the specific needs of the learner;
- ESP makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the disciplines it serves;
- ESP is centered on the language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genres appropriate to these activities (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998, p. 4).

These characteristics illustrate the breadth of discipline-related expertise required from ESP teachers, including knowledge about their students' background as well as the requirements they have to meet in their educational, academic and professional careers. ESP teachers need to be familiar with discipline-specific processes, e.g. research methods, and the linguistic resources essential for the kind of communicative actions their students need to be able to produce and comprehend. Due to the heterogeneity of contexts in which ESP teaching takes

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place, hardly any easily applicable textbooks are available and ESP teachers mostly have to create teaching material themselves or adapt existing materials according to the specific needs of their learner group (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998, pp. 14-15). In this endeavor, ESP teachers benefit from knowing how to access and utilize methods and resources that allow them to gain detailed information about context-specific language use. Frequently, this will include conducting research themselves (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998, p. 15). One field of linguistic research which offers accessible methods and provides potentially relevant results for ESP teachers is Genre Analysis.

Genre Analysis can be defined as “the study of situated linguistic behaviour in institutionalized academic or professional settings” (Bhatia, 2012, p. 241). This definition illustrates that genre analysis focuses on the interaction of linguistic behavior and contextual conditions. For the field of ESP, the genre-analytical work of Vijay K. Bhatia (e.g. 1993, 2008, 2012), John Swales (e.g. 1990, 2004) and Ken Hyland (e.g. 1998, 2004) has been paramount. Swales (1990, p. 58) introduced a definition of genre which summarizes the central characteristics of the concept well, even though some of its claims were altered in later publications. Genre, as understood by the ‘ESP branch’ of genre analysis, is primarily a “frame for social action” (Swales, 2004, p. 61) which is firmly situated (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995, p. 7) in a certain discourse community (Swales, 1990, p. 46). Genres are shaped by their underlying communicative purposes (Swales, 1990, p. 46), which can be realized efficiently by adhering to genre conventions. Nevertheless, genres are also open to modification and innovation, especially for expert members of the community. This is significant, as genres are not only shaped by the community but they also yield a constitutive force and may, themselves, exert influence on processes and participant positions in the community (Hyland, 2004, p. 3). For novices in a discourse community, it is therefore essential to acquire the necessary genre knowledge in order to be able to communicate effectively and to be accepted as valid members of the discourse community. This basic understanding allows them to adapt genres creatively later on without rendering them inefficient or causing misunderstandings.

Providing students with information about the relevant genres in their field and enabling them to successfully produce samples of those genres are therefore key tasks of an ESP teacher. In order to achieve this goal, teachers need information about the genres they teach. The following presentation of a genre analysis conducted by Hiegelsberger (2016), focusing on the genre ‘bachelor paper abstract in the field of Austrian midwifery education’, should illustrate how genre analytical methods can be applied for ESP purposes. The research questions, design and outcome of the analyses are described in the paragraphs below.

## 2. Research questions

The main research question sought to explore the genre conventions of bachelor paper abstracts produced by Austrian midwifery students as illustrated by a corpus of samples. It primarily focused on structural, grammatical and terminological aspects of the genre.

A second research question addressed potential benefits of genre analytical methods and results for ESP teaching, covering some advantages as well as potential limitations of a genre approach in this context. In addition, conditions of effective and beneficial usage in the classroom were discussed.

## 3. Study description

For the following study a genre analysis was conducted of bachelor paper abstracts written by Austrian midwifery students.

### 3.1 Sampling

The sampling process produced 134 abstracts from the midwifery bachelor programs at the Universities of Applied Sciences in Graz and Innsbruck written between 2010 and 2013. No particular selection criteria were applied, which presumably means that the texts under analysis exemplify different levels of prototypicality and quality. Unfortunately, abstracts from the five other midwifery programs run in Austria could not be retrieved.

### 3.2 Methodology

Two major methodological approaches were used for the analysis. First, to investigate the structural components of the abstracts, a 'move analysis' in the tradition of Swales (1990) was conducted. This method allows the identification of a genre's typical 'moves', i.e. its "discoursal or rhetorical unit[s] that perform [...] a coherent communicative function" (Swales, 2004, p. 228), as well as their characteristic sequence.

The second method applied was corpus linguistics. With the help of the software programs *AntConc* (Anthony, 2014a) and *AntWordProfiler* (Anthony, 2014b), the corpus of abstracts was analysed with regard to lexico-grammatical characteristics of the genre. Major steps were the identification of the most frequent terms, as well as of keywords, i.e. words which are significantly more or less frequent in the corpus than would be expected on the basis of general corpora (cf. Cheng, 2012, p. 70; Bondi, 2001, p. 139). In addition, the concordances of six highly frequent keywords were investigated in order to reveal characteristic lexico-grammatical aspects of their usage as well as context-specific uses and restrictions. The analysis also included an examination of the quantity and quality of epistemic adjectives and adverbs in the corpus.

## 4. Findings

The analysis yielded numerous results with regard to the genre's structure and major lexico-grammatical conventions, some of which are outlined in the following paragraphs.

### 4.1 Structural analysis

The analysis showed that the average length of an abstract was about 250 words (mean: 248.54; median: 256), with the shortest featuring 26 words and the longest 434.

With regard to structure, three major types of layout could be identified, namely a run-on-text a) with or b) without sub-headings or c) a text which is subdivided into numerous paragraphs. The move analysis indicated that there are six core moves, i.e. moves realized in 50-90% of the texts under analysis (Hüttner, 2007, p. 130), namely *Title*, *Introduction*, *Purpose*, *Methods*, *Results* and *Conclusions*, which were mostly realized in this sequence. In addition, one optional move, a *Summary*, could be found in 36.57% of the abstracts. The fact that there was no obligatory move, i.e. a move present in more than 90% of the texts (Hüttner, 2007, p. 130), may be due to the developing nature of the genre and the varying degrees of prototypicality due to the non-selective approach adopted in data collection (see above). Focusing on the

communicative purpose of the moves revealed that this genre is used to display discipline-specific expertise and knowledge which is most certainly well-known to the primary reader, i.e. the grading professor. This communicative purpose distinguishes the thesis abstract clearly from the article abstract, rendering the use of article abstracts as guidelines for teaching thesis abstract writing partly insufficient.

## 4.2 Lexico-grammatical analysis

The corpus-linguistic investigation showed that 74.64% of the corpus consists of the 2000 most frequent words in the English language. On the one hand, this percentage is lower than the 80% suggested by Nation (2001, pp. 15-16) for general texts, which underlines the specificity of the genre. On the other hand, this percentage illustrates the great significance general vocabulary carries for writing proficiency even in very specific contexts. A detailed frequency analysis yielded that modal verbs as well as passive constructions are used quite often, which tends to be seen as characteristic of the academic register (Williams, 1997, p. 176). This finding therefore points towards the academic nature of the genre.

Positive keywords, i.e. words that “are either unique to, or are found more frequently in, a specialized corpus compared with a general reference corpus” (Cheng, 2012, p. 70), indicate the relevance of two major semantic fields of this genre, namely midwifery and academia. Among the most frequent positive keywords, words like *midwives*, *birth*, *delivery* and *pregnancy* point towards the relevant discourse community, while terms such as *databases*, *results* and *literature* relate the genre to the field of research. Negative keywords, i.e. words which are realized less frequently in the corpus under analysis than in a general corpus (Bondi, 2001, p. 139), featured words typical of spoken and informal language, mostly personal pronouns, e.g. *you*, *I*, *he*. This finding again indicates the formal and academic character of the genre.

Six terms were chosen for a closer analysis of their concordances, namely three terms from the field of midwifery (*midwives*, *labour/labor*, *birth/delivery*) and three words from the area of research (*Results*, *Research*, *Databases*). The analysis yielded a range of interesting aspects, for example insights into discipline-specific terminology. The discipline-specific use of *labour* became prevalent by the frequent use of clusters like *third stage of labour* or *labour arrest*, which signify concepts that are firmly located in the field of obstetrics and midwifery.

The final part of the analysis focused on the use of epistemic adjectives and adverbs as one strategy for hedging, i.e. the use of linguistic devices “to indicate either a) a lack of complete commitment to the truth value of an accompanying proposition, or b) a desire not to express that commitment categorically” (Hyland, 1998, p. 1). In comparison with the findings of Hyland (1998), who investigated epistemic devices in research articles, the results showed that *most* is used considerably more often in the corpus under analysis, while in total only 17 out of the 26 expressions identified by Hyland (1998) were realized.

## 5. Limitations of the study

The extent to which this genre analysis is representative is limited due to various circumstances. The sample of 134 abstracts was rather small and comprised abstracts from only two of the seven Universities of Applied Sciences offering midwifery education in Austria.

Nationally as well as internationally it seems to be difficult to retrieve genres set in an educational context, which hindered not only access to abstracts for the core corpus but also to potential material for comparison, e.g. bachelor thesis abstracts from other countries, master thesis abstracts in Austria or thesis abstracts from other professions in the medical field. Numerous responses indicated concerns of the universities about how making samples of these novice genres accessible would impact on their image. Even after the strictly descriptive, non-evaluative approach of the thesis was pointed out, no more material was made available.

Therefore, the results cannot be seen as being representative for all Austrian midwifery programs. In addition, the rather new, developing and dynamic nature of the genre renders the results firmly situated in the contemporary context and the results may be influenced by less prototypical and well-formed samples. Further research is therefore necessary to provide a follow-up on this analysis and to reveal in which ways the conventions keep developing and changing. Including abstracts from other Austrian programs, as mentioned, would be of great interest.

## 6. Implications for teaching ESP

This genre analysis illustrates the value of genre-analytical methods and results for teaching ESP. The methods of move analysis and corpus linguistic investigation are easily accessible and can be modified and adapted according to ESP teacher needs (cf. the “Model of Mediated Corpus-based Genre Analysis” (Hüttner, Smit, & Mehlmauer-Larcher, 2009)). There are two major areas where genre-analytical methods can enrich the work of ESP teachers: material development and teaching methodology.

Designing, adapting and evaluating teaching materials requires access to relevant information. An ESP teacher can analyze required genres him-/herself, in order to gain the necessary knowledge about discipline-specific genres, while additionally contributing to the knowledge base of the research field (Gavioli, 2005, p. 5). Based on these results, teaching materials can be developed which are tailored to the needs of specific learner groups. ESP teachers are enabled to decide whether or not components of teaching materials dedicated to the genre of interest are relevant and up-to-date, or if they have to be adapted, according to time, region or field of work.

Another potentially interesting implication of the accessibility of the methods is that genre-analytical research approaches could be implemented in the classroom, thereby expanding the range of teaching methods. Various researchers like Johns (1997), Hüttner (2007) or Mungra (2010) have already developed sample projects which feature students conducting (parts of) genre analyses themselves. Steps suggested include, for example, analyzing and improving preselected genre samples (Hüttner, 2007, p. 297) or identifying structural components using a checklist (Mungra, 2010, p. 156). Although these methods may be time consuming and challenging, they also provide an opportunity for the students to develop their writing proficiency, familiarize themselves with new genres and perform an active part in the production and acquisition of genre knowledge. In addition, students acquire not only knowledge but new competences which they might find useful in their professional lives, e.g. when they are confronted with unknown genres, which is not an unlikely scenario in a dynamic and fast developing professional context.

However, critical voices warn that teaching genres in a simplified and overgeneralized manner (Flowerdew, 2013, p. 149), e.g. as matrices or tables to fill in and copy, could lead to a neglect

of the dynamic nature of genres and restrict the creativity of the students. It is therefore essential to raise the students' awareness of a genre's complexity and flexibility (Swales, 2004, p. 251). This can be furthered, for instance, by choosing the examples used in teaching consciously, ensuring that they illustrate a variety of possible realizations.

In conclusion, the analysis above provides an example of a genre analysis and might convey the potential value of genre analytical methods and results for ESP teaching. Its limitations and the necessity to carefully plan the implementation of genre-analytical methods and results in class are important to keep in mind. This includes taking the dynamic nature of genres and pedagogical, situational and didactic conditions and requirements into consideration. Being aware of these preconditions for successful teaching, the ESP teacher may then find genre-analytical methods and results a helpful resource for material development and evaluation as well as for the enhancement of his/her methodological range.

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