

AN ANALYTIC STUDY OF THE POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN WRITING ABSTRACTS IN ENGLISH

By

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the Egyptian postgraduate students' difficulties in writing abstracts in English. In order to achieve the objectives of this study, a list of criteria for writing a good and effective abstract has been developed in the light of the review of literature. Besides, a content analysis of 35 abstracts written in English and published in Egyptian education journals, theses and dissertations (16 Master degree and Ph.D. theses and 19 journal articles) was carried out to identify the difficulties encountered by the postgraduate students. The analysis revealed that the grammatical difficulties (f=402) were the highest, followed by the educational terminology and technical writing difficulties (f=274) and finally the lexical difficulties (f=256). Finally, recommendations for overcoming these difficulties were suggested.

- INTROUCTION:

The abstract of an article, a paper or a thesis is a very important part for the researcher as well as the reader. With the phenomenon of information overload, many readers, clarified *Tippett* (2005), will read it only and separately from the rest of the paper. Therefore, writing an excellent abstract is vital to encourage readers to obtain the full paper, read it, and cite it.

Writing a good and effective abstract for an article or a thesis is a sub-skill of the writing skill in the filed of TEFL. Like a paragraph writing for example, it should meet some criteria. The essential components of an abstract are the background, the problem, the methods, the results, and the implications. According to APA Style, the length of the abstract should be limited to 120 words (*Wagner* 2004), should be interesting and should contain all the key words and avoids complex sentences.

Goldbort (2002), *Wang* (2002), *Widerquist* (2002), *December and Katz* (2005) and *Tippett* (2005) discussed the purposes of writing an abstract. Many abstracts are published without the complete paper itself in abstract journals or in online databases. Thus, an abstract might serve as the only means by which a researcher determines what information a paper contains. Moreover, a researcher might make a decision whether to read the paper or not based on the abstract alone. That is why an abstract must convey the essential results of a paper.

- STUDY PROBLEM:

In the light of the previous presentation, the importance and advantages of writing abstracts in education, the present study focuses on the Egyptian postgraduate students' difficulties in writing abstracts in English. There are some reasons for choosing this research area. The present study author's long personal experience in guiding and advising postgraduate students in writing abstracts in English for journals and conferences ensures that there is a problem. This problem is certainly caused by the English language barrier and the postgraduate students' low proficiency. Another reason is their little knowledge on the techniques and structure of writing effective and good abstracts because they usually do not systematically practice this skill during their undergraduate and postgraduate study. What is surprising is that most Egyptian post-doctorate researchers do not submit an English language abstract although the regulations of Egyptian education journals, published in Arabic, need ones. When necessary, they usually have to write the abstract in Arabic and ask an English language teacher to translate it into English, a traditional solution that may result in many errors and confusions in educational terminology. All these scenarios are very common and familiar among the Egyptian postgraduate students which really crystallize the research problem.

The present study problem can be tackled through answering the following three questions:

- 1) What are the criteria of writing good abstract?**
- 2) What are the postgraduate students' difficulties in writing abstracts in English ?**

3) What are the educational implications and recommendations for overcoming these difficulties ?

- DEFINITION OF STUDY TERMS:

▪ **ABSTRACT:**

According to *Tippett* (2005), an abstract is a complete but concise and informative account of a work, i.e., a condensation that makes sense without reference to the full document. An abstract is not a summary. A summary appears at the end of a piece of work, and is a restatement of the important findings and conclusions. Unlike the abstract, the summary does not include condensations of any other portions including the background, purpose, or methods of the study. In the present study, the term "abstract" is not a synonym of "summary" although the Arabic translation may indicate that.

▪ **Summary:**

A summary appears at the end of a piece of work, and is a restatement of the important findings and conclusions. Unlike the abstract, the summary does not include condensations of any other portions including the background, purpose, or methods of the study (*Tippett* 2005). Since the Egyptian postgraduate students usually confuse the two terms, the term "summary" was considered in the present study if it was written in English.

▪ **Postgraduate students:**

This term usually refers to the students who are enrolled for courses and degrees after the first university degree (Bachelor) such as the General Diploma, Professional Diploma, Special Diploma, Master and Doctorate in the Faculties of Education in Egypt. Since this study focuses on the abstract writing skill, it is mainly limited to the Master, Doctorate and Post-Doctorate students because they are usually asked to write abstracts when submitting their theses, dissertations, papers and articles.

- STUDY LIMITATIONS:

The present study limited itself to the following:

- 1- The abstracts written only in English language. Abstracts written in other languages such as Arabic, French and German are excluded.
- 2- The abstracts written by postgraduate students majored in different disciplines other than the English language.
- 3- The abstracts written by Egyptian postgraduate students. Other Arab nationalities are not included.
- 4- The abstracts of master degree theses, Ph.d. dissertations and journal articles. Abstracts of conference papers, research projects and other documents are excluded.
- 5- The abstracts written in the field of education in general and curricula and teaching methods in particular.

- REVIEW OF RELATED STUDIES:

There are several studies related to abstract writing and postgraduate students. Some sub-topics of abstract writing have been tackled as follows: assignments in abstract writing to polish students'

writing skills (*Davis* 1991), difficulties in abstract writing (*Padgett and Begun* 1996), guidelines of writing abstracts for online databases (*Armstrong and Wheatley* 1998), strategies for writing a competitive research abstract (*Beyea and Nicoll* 1998), training of undergraduate students on the writing of 250-350 word abstracts (*Miller* 1999), analysis of the abstract writing process (*Althaus, Edy and Phalen* 2002), abstract art as an obligatory aspect of postgraduate supervision (*Kamler and Thomson* 2002), the principles in writing abstracts for scientific articles (*Goldbort* 2002), abstract writing assignment (*Cox, Bobrowski and Maher* 2003), the importance of abstracts in the screening of research papers (*Groves and Abbasi* 2004), the poor quality of abstracts (*Montesi and Urdiciain* 2005), a genre analysis of scientific abstracts (*Cross and Oppenheim* 2006). Studies dealt with postgraduate students are: writing problems of doctoral students in English (*Casanave and Hubbard* 1992), the language activities of some Chinese postgraduate students and visiting scholars in Britain (*Weidong* 1996), the nature of ‘interest’ reported by a group of postgraduate students in an MA in English language teacher education programme (*Tin* 2006), and the schematic structure of literature reviews in doctoral theses of applied linguistics (*Kwan* 2006)

Some of the previous studies are presented and discussed in details in the following section.

Keogh (1995) identified and accounted for the structural and stylistic features of 48 abstracts written by scientists and engineers. All of the abstracts were published in industry journals and conference papers during 1990 and 1991. The features identified in the abstracts are

compared to the suggestions for structure and style found in fifteen textbooks frequently used in university technical writing courses. Features found in the 48 abstracts differed markedly from the textbook suggestions. The major findings are: a statement of scope is found in 96% of the abstracts, while suggested by only 12% of the textbooks; and agentless passive construction is the most prominent stylistic feature of the abstracts, while textbooks suggest avoiding passives.

Weiss, Arkebauer, Watts and Martin (1997) identified 11 types of graduate student difficulties and suggests methods to help alleviate them. Difficulties include language barriers, cultural barriers, emotional barriers, lack of commitment, and lack of ability.

Kamler and Thomson (2002, 2004) examined 70 abstracts which came from the following journals: Journal of Contemporary Psychology (8 articles), Journal of Art and Design (11 articles), Journal of Early Childhood Literacy (4 articles), Journal of Education and Work (7 articles), Journal of Curriculum Studies (6 articles), Journal of Philosophy of Education (11 articles), Journal of Moral Education (5 articles), Journal of Education Policy (5 articles), Journal of Youth Studies (6 articles), Journal of Phonetics (4 articles), and Harvard Educational Review (3 articles). They initiated their first pass through the abstract data by looking at the instructions given as advice to authors. Then, they looked to see if there was any connection between the type of research and format and the epistemological tradition. Additionally, they looked more closely at the language used and the strategies for locating the research and asserting authority. At a linguistic level, they were interested in verbs, in the use of active versus passive voice, and the occurrence or absence of the verb argue or its equivalent. Based on the results, they

offered one strategy for assisting doctoral students to master the art of the abstract.

Montesi and Urdiciain (2005) examined the poor quality of abstracts. Sixty-two interviews were held with researchers from six European universities. These participants commented on a set of database abstracts in the areas of Education and Agriculture. The participants pointed out different types of problem which were classified under the following headings: terminology, over-condensation, lack and excess of information, expectations and coherence, structure, register and layout.

- COMMENT ON THE PREVIOUS STUDIES:

In the light of the review of literature and the previously presented related studies, the following points are extracted and concluded:

- 1- Writing abstracts is an important skill for postgraduate students that always need practice in English language writing classes. (*Davis* 1991, *Armstrong and Wheatley* 1998, *Beyea and Nicoll* 1998, *Miller* 1999, *Goldbort* 2002, and *Cox, Bobrowski and Maher* 2003)
- 2- There are criteria for writing an abstract. (*Wagner* 2004 and *December and Katz* 2005)
- 3- The postgraduate students encounter difficulties in writing in general and abstract writing in particular because of the low language proficiency. (*Casanave and Hubbard* 1992, *Weidong* 1996, *Weiss, Arkebauer, Watts and Martin* 1997, and *Montesi and Urdiciain* 2005)
- 4- In order to identify the postgraduate students' difficulties in writing abstract, sample of the published abstracts should be examined *Keogh* (1995) and *Kamler and Thomson* (2002, 2004). This procedure is used in the present study.

- RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES:

In order to achieve the objectives of the present study, a list of criteria for writing a good and effective abstract has been developed in the light of the review of literature (see Appendix 1). It consisted of 20 items. Besides, a content analysis of 35 abstracts (16 Master degree and Ph.D. theses and 19 journal articles), in the light of the list of criteria for writing a good and effective abstract, was carried out to identify the difficulties encountered by the postgraduate students. The journals were selected from different universities: Assuit University, Al-Minia University and Ain Shams University. (See Appendix 2 for the list of journals used in the present study)

The sixteen theses were selected to represent 8 faculties of education as follows: (See Appendix 3 for list of theses used in the present study)

Table (1): Faculties of Education from where Theses Abstracts were selected

Serial No.	University	Type of thesis	No. of thesis
1	- Faculty of Education, Zagazig University	Master	5
2	- Faculty of Education, Damietta, Mansoura Un.	Master	1
3	- Faculty of Education, Tanta University	Master	2
4	- Faculty of Education, Helwan University	Master	1
5	- Faculty of Education for Boys, Al-Azhar Un.	Master	1
6	- Faculty of Education, Benha University	Ph. D.	2
7	- Faculty of Education, Ain Shams University	Master	1
8	- Institute of Educational Researches, Cairo Un.	Master	3
	Sum		16

- DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS:

To answer the first research question: " **What are the criteria of writing good abstract?**", a list was developed based on some sources: *Koopman 1997, Buck 2001, Galbraith 2001, Wowra 2002, Mahmoud 2003, Purdue University 2004 A+B, Roane State Community College 2005, Degelman and Harris 2006, Kies 2006, New Jersey City University 2006, University of Wisconsin 2006, and Wagner (2006).* (for more details on the list of writing good abstract see Appendix 1). It was used in the content analysis of 35 abstracts written in English and published in Egyptian education journals, theses and dissertations.

To answer the second research question: " **What are the postgraduate students' difficulties in writing abstracts in English?**", the contents of 35 abstracts were analyzed and the following table present the findings. The analysis focused on three dimensions: grammatical difficulties, lexical difficulties and educational terminology and Technical Writing difficulties.

Table (2): **Postgraduate Students' Difficulties in Writing Abstracts in English**

		Frequency in Articles Abstracts (n=19)	Frequency in Theses Abstracts (n=16)	Sum
1	Grammatical Difficulties	67	335	402
2	Lexical Difficulties	25	225	256
3	Ed. terminology Difficulties	31	269	274
	Sum	123	829	932

This table shows clearly that the grammatical difficulties (f=402) are the highest, followed by the educational terminology difficulties (f=274) and finally the lexical difficulties (f=256). It also shows that the frequency of difficulties in theses abstracts (f= 829) exceeded those in articles abstracts (f= 123). The reason of this finding was that the postgraduate students confused writing an "abstract" with writing a "summary". Most of them (15 out of 16) wrote a summary in English in 3-11 pages although an abstract was needed. Since the summary was longer in length, more difficulties were encountered. In the following section, examples of these difficulties are presented:

1. Grammatical difficulties:

- The problem of the present study is identified in the low level of the elementary stage pupils in critical thinking skills.
(✓ was)
- Instruction technology plays an important role in improving learning and ... (✓ instructional)
- There were statistical significant differences among the students of the three groups on the achievement test.
(✓ statistically)
- ... the individual's conduct and the nature of his relations numerous including the origin of his behaviour.
(✓ numerous relations)
- Most of these teachers were chosen to work at that school on the basis of their performance annual reports. (✓ annual performance reports)
- This is for the sake of experimental group which studied by using the learning cycle model. (✓ in favour of – in the favour of)

- The effectiveness of the learning cycle model on developing reasoning thinking ... (✓ in)
- The research's results. (✓ the research results)
- One of Piaget theory applies is learning cycle model. (✓ applications)
- ... skills of reasoning think. (✓ thinking)
- To teach the unit for both groups (the experimental group and the controllable group) ... (✓ control)
- This research aims at producing a video-learning programme to develop creative in ... (✓ creativity)
- Professor assistant ... (✓ assistant professor)
- What is the effect of the suggest strategy on ... (✓ suggested)
- To getting the Master Degree in education. (✓ get)

2. Lexical Difficulties:

- This model should mainly be built on the main principal that learning mathematics is a group of cycles ... (✓ principle)
- The two units were presented to a group of specialists to judge their validity. (✓ submitted)
- This research represents a new remedy to some concepts which are ... (✓ presents)
- In the light of the problem of the actual study and its ... (✓ present)
- Examining the effect of using different modes of mathematical problems on developing mathematical communication skills. (✓ types – kinds)
- The fault is not in Arabian grammar. (✓ Arabic)

- Chapter two shows ex. Arabic and forging studies.
(✓ previous)

3. Educational Terminology and Technical Writing Difficulties:

- Writing abstracts in 3-11 pages.
- Using the term "summary" where "abstract was needed.
- Use of the first person pronouns: I and We.
- Using contradictions, such as "it can't, isn't, can't, ..."
- This group consisted of forty-one first year secondary students. (✓ 41)
- Selecting the population of the study. (✓ sample – subjects)
- Results of the study (in the light of the hypotheses).
(✓ findings)
- Students of specialized diploma in education are in need of acquiring the skill to use statistical techniques. (✓ special)
- ... achievement in the electrical chemistry unit included in the physics syllabus. (✓ course – textbook)
- The approach of the study + The curriculum of the study
(✓ method)
- The study determined the test verity and stability. (✓ validity and reliability)
- This new kind of education should give the pupil a chance to participate in learning operation. (✓ learning process)
- Video learning programs are considered one of the most effective learning sources. (✓ learning recourses)
- This research tries to test the validity of the following assumptions. (✓ hypotheses)

- Moreover, the following statistical styles are used to reach the study findings. (✓ statistical techniques)
- Observation cards are used for the skills of producing instructional models. (✓ observation checklist)
- Experimenting the video program on an exploratory sample to ... (✓ pilot sample)
- Preparing acquisitive test to measure the knowledge ... (✓ achievement test)
- Showing the programme to the arbitrators to make sure of its truth. (✓ jury of experts - ✓ validity)
- This paper attempts to promote the curriculum of the Arabic language ... (✓ thesis - study)
- Making scan study for related references ... (✓ survey)
- The students' attitude towards studying grammar is defined through the students' answers on tendency measure. (✓ interest scale)
- A study of the effect of using advanced organizers to develop thought skills into students of secondary schools. (✓ thinking skills)

- STUDY CONCLUSION:

The difficulties encountered by the postgraduate students in faculties of education in Egypt were different and various in type. Although they study English starting from the preparatory stage (and now from the primary), they suffered from many simple grammatical difficulties such as the use of the past tense, the use of apostrophe s and the subject-verb concord. This finding is more surprising because the postgraduate students usually take English language courses in their

undergraduate and graduate university study. They have to take TOEFL Examination as a prerequisite before or after submitting the proposals for the master and the doctorate degrees. The difficulties in the use of educational terminology reflects the need of more interest of introducing them to the students at the undergraduate level in the education courses such as the Curriculum Course and the Instructional Media Course.

- RECOMMENDATIONS:

To answer the third question: " **What are the educational implications and recommendations for overcoming these difficulties ?**", the following recommendations were suggested:

- 1- The skill of writing abstracts for articles or theses should be given more interest in the English language academic writing classes in the undergraduate and postgraduate levels.
- 2- The English language classes for postgraduate students should be introduced frequently and seriously as refreshment courses.
- 3- The educational terminology should be introduced to, practiced and used accurately in the English classes by the postgraduate students in faculties of education in Egypt.
- 4- The educational terminology should be introduced in the education courses at the undergraduate level.
- 5- Because APA style is the most widely preferred style by the majority of professional journals in education and psychology, the Egyptian postgraduate students should be trained to gain mastery of it through their writing assignments.

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APPENDIX (1):

LIST OF ABSTRACT WRITING CRITERIA

(linguistic elements, educational terminology, organization and structure)
(for journal articles, theses and dissertations)

No.	Item
1	- No grammatical mistakes.
2	- No lexical mistakes.
3	- using pronouns in the third person.
4	- using the past tense to describe variables and texts applied.
5	- remaining in the active voice whenever possible. (APA)
6	- correct use of number writing rules. (All numbers in the abstract (except those beginning a sentence) should be typed as digits rather than words. (APA)
	- Avoiding contradictions, such as "it can't, isn't, can't, wouldn't ..." (APA)
7	- clear
8	- No mistakes in educational terms.
9	- in one page. (APA)
10	- in one paragraph (APA)
11	- double-spaced. (APA)
12	- appears immediately after the title page.
13	- not exceed 350 words. (theses and dissertations)
14	- not exceed 250 words. (articles)
15	- The sequence in describing how/what was done is logical
16	- avoiding reference to other literatures in the abstract.
17	- The essential elements of the structure of an abstract are included.
18	- The word ABSTRACT is centered at the top of the page
19	- avoiding terms such as "most" or "some" if you have the specific numbers.
20	- avoiding use of the words "proof" or "proves" (APA)

APPENDIX (2)

LIST OF JOURNALS USED IN THE PRESENT STUDY

Journal	volume	Issue	Page(s)	Year
- Journal of the Faculty of Education, Assuit University.	18	1	250	2002
- Journal of the Faculty of Education, Assuit University.	16	2	160	2000
- Journal of Research in Education and Psychology, Faculty of Education, Al-Minia University	16	3	56	2003
- Journal of Research in Education and Psychology, Faculty of Education, Al-Minia University	16	3	82	2003
- Journal of Research in Education and Psychology, Faculty of Education, Al-Minia University	16	3	127	2003
- Journal of Research in Education and Psychology, Faculty of Education, Al-Minia University	16	3	150	2003
- Journal of Research in Education and Psychology, Faculty of Education, Al-Minia University	16	3	175	2003
- Journal of Research in Education and Psychology, Faculty of Education, Al-Minia University	16	3	290	2003
- Journal of the Faculty of Education, Al-Minia University	16	4	107	2003
- Journal of Research in Education and Psychology, Faculty of Education, Al-Minia University	16	4	199	2003
- Journal of Research in Education and Psychology, Faculty of Education, Al-Minia University	16	4	241	2003
- Journal of Research in Education and Psychology, Faculty of Education, Al-Minia University	16	4	274	2003
- Journal of Research in Education and Psychology, Faculty of Education, Al-Minia University	16	4	320	2003

- Journal of Research in Education and Psychology, Faculty of Education, Al-Minia University	16	4	371	2003
- Studies in Curriculum & Instruction, Egyptian Council for Curriculum & Instruction, Faculty of Education, Ain Shams University	-	108	216	2005
- Reading and Literacy Journal, Issued by EARL, Faculty of Education, Ain Shams University	-	54	68	2006
- Reading and Literacy Journal, Issued by EARL, Faculty of Education, Ain Shams University	-	54	131-132	2006
- Reading and Literacy Journal, Issued by EARL, Faculty of Education, Ain Shams University	-	56	104	2006
- Reading and Literacy Journal, Issued by EARL, Faculty of Education, Ain Shams University	-	57	120	2006
Sum = 19 Abstracts				

APPENDIX (3)

LIST OF THESES USED IN THE PRESENT STUDY

(N=16)

- (1) إبراهيم عبد العزيز محمد البعلى (2001): فعالية تنظيم محتوى منهج العلوم وفق نظريتي رايجلوث التوسعية وجانييه الهرمية على التفكير الناقد والتحصيل لدى تلاميذ المرحلة الابتدائية. رسالة دكتوراة غير منشورة ، كلية التربية ، بنها.
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