

Rhetorical structure in Problem Statement Section of Foreign Languages Undergraduate students' Monographs

Wilmar Salazar Obeso*

Foreign Languages Program, Faculty of Education, Universidad Del Atlántico (Colombia)

Corresponding Author: Wilmar Salazar Obeso, E-mail: tobei75@hotmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The Problem Statement (PS) section communicates the issue that targets a study. Having a clear understanding of its rhetorical moves facilitates its communication. However, undergraduate students are not generally worried about this important writing aspect. The purpose of this descriptive study intended to explore the rhetorical moves in Colombian FL undergraduate monographs. 20 samples of PS written in English by Foreign Languages (FL) Undergraduate students were analyzed following Swales' (1990) Create-a-research-space (CARS) model. Findings revealed that the lack of knowledge about rhetorical aspects on the part of the students affects negatively the writing of the PS. The analysis also showed that some students did not communicate the problem due to an unbalanced frequency of moves and steps. Students' awareness of the genre, its formal instruction, and frequent training might contribute to improve their academic writing.

INTRODUCTION

Writing a monograph in English language is a demanding academic endeavor for FL undergraduate students. A monograph is a paper on a single topic that can have different level of research (Monje, 2011). Studies related to this genre are limited (Oliveira, 2017). This tends to be a neglected genre in Colombian academic context, too. Researches of this type are required to understand the contextualized use of the English language by FL undergraduate students to carry out very specific academic writing tasks. Related to research papers sections, some genre-based analysis on PS section has been conducted in different disciplines and education level, among others: (Hernon & Metoyer-Duran, 1993; Metoyer-Duran, C., & Hernon, P., 1994; Jalilifar, Firuzman, and Roshani, 2011; Nimehchisalem et al., 2016; Parsa and Hasan, 2017). They have explored not only the schematic structure and communicative functions of the PS, but also its organizational variability within a single field of study. These studies highlighted that the PS is one of the most fundamental sections within research papers.

A PS "embodies the purpose of the study and, usually, researchers prepare research questions or hypotheses based on the perceived research problem" (Jalilifar et al., 2011, p. 55).

Besides, the PS contains the essential elements that defines the study and characterizes as a credible research problem (Gomez et al., 2014). Hence, a PS communicates the problem that has been identified through the application of specific data collection instruments. It reveals the issue intended to be solved or approached. According to Creswell (2014):

The problem comes from a void in the literature, and conflict in research results in the literature, topics that have been neglected in the literature; a need to lift up the voice of marginalized participants; and "real-life" problems found in the workplace, the home, the community, and so forth (page 50).

Something that characterizes any PS section is the fact that it has to be ingrained. The discourse community must share its rhetorical structure to consolidate this genre. This aspect is crucial within institutional contexts since undergraduate students, following a similar rhetorical organization that characterizes the genre, are generally asked to write PS sections through which they communicate the issue.

It is important to mention that the PS triggers not only the choice of the research paradigm but also the methodology of the study (Buendia, Colás y Hernandez, 1998). In addition, the PS follows an argumentative logic derived from the knowledge gap that the problem indicates (Gómez et al., 2014)

which is close related to the way it is linguistically structured. In fact, writing the PS should be understandable and clear (Nimehchisalem et al., 2016). FL undergraduate students should pay attention to the rhetorical implications that the PS requires as a crucial subsection within their research papers, including monographs.

The aim of the present study is to explore the way Colombian FL undergraduate students build the rhetorical structure of the PS section in the monographs, taken Swales' (1990) CARS model as an analytical tool. The study posed the following question:

1. What is the rhetorical structure of the PS section in Colombian FL Undergraduate students?
2. What are the rhetorical strategies employed in order to achieve the communicative intention of each move?

Relevant Theories

Genre

In the last three decades, genre has been the object of many researches in different fields of study (Swales, 1981). A genre is characterized because it is the goal of communicative purpose derived from conventionalized knowledge supported by discourse resources (Bathia, 1996). Thus, genres tend to be stable in form (Rozimela, 2014). This particular nature of genres allows users the realization of their communicative intention targeted by them. On the other hand, genre theory offers explicit and systematic explanation to students in order to understand how language works in social context (Hyland, 2003).

Genre analysis

Genre analysis is conceived as the study of "situated linguistic behavior in institutionalized academic or professional settings" (Bhatia, 1996, p.40). Analysis of genres, according to Rozimela (2014), has been carried out in different disciplines (see for example Swales, 1981, 1990; Hopkins and Dudley-Evans, 1988; Salager-Meyer, 1990; Christie and Martin, 1997; Brett, 2004; Hyland, 2008; Johns, 2008, among others).

Since the results of the analysis of genre can be translatable into the classroom practice of writing, a leading notion that can contribute to the development of writing in a second language, especially English, is genre awareness. Also known as consciousness-raising (Millar, 2011), the approach, according to John (2008), can assist learners to cultivate the adaptation of socio-cognitive genre knowledge to contexts that are changeable. That is to say, genre awareness allows students to adapt their understanding of rhetorical features of specific genres to respond to the variability the situations bring to genres. It is this dynamism what, according to Devitt (2004), promotes the individual's creativity and expression in genre construction. To some extent, the approach makes learners think in terms of discourse rather than in content (Hyland, 2003).

Both genre and genre analysis have brought greatly attention in the field of applied linguistics and language teaching. Genre theory offers explicit and systematic explanation to students in order to understand how language

works in social context (Hyland, 2003). As "a staged, goal-oriented, purposeful social process" (Martin, 1992, in Samraj, 2002), genres have similar textual features which tended to be shared by members of the same discourse community. Quoting Rozimela (2014), "mostly genres are highly structure and conventionalized; they are relatively stable in form" (p. 461). This particular nature of genres allows users to realize the communicative intention of the genre.

Swales' (1990) CARS Model

Swales' (1990) CARS model (Figure 1) was proposed to analyze research article introductions. This model was an influential work that triggered the tradition of genre analysis. Moves and steps constitute this revised model. Moves involves macro-structures, which convey specific communicative functions, whereas steps are microstructures that contain linguistic features (Jalilifar et al., 2011). According to Bathia (1993), the rhetorical moves are discriminative elements and the steps are non-discriminative options. Thus, moves give uniformity to the constructions of genres while steps open the door to linguistic innovation. For Swales (1981), the model represents the most typical cognitive structure of the genre denominated introduction.

Martin and Leon (2009) point out that the structure within moves is sequenced and the steps realize them. That is to say, moves are "functional text elements, as viewed in relation to the rhetorical goals of a text" and steps are "specific rhetorical choices available to authors to realize the function of moves" (Martin and Leon, 2009, p. 76). In Move 1, establishing a territory is constituted by S1: making a centrality claim, S2: making topic generalization, and S3: reviewing items of previous research. In Move 2, establishing a niche is organized in S1A: counter-claiming, S1B: indicating a gap, S1C: raising a question, and S1D: continuing a tradition. Move three, occupying the niche, be structured in S1A: outlining purposes, S1B: announcing present research, S2: announcing main findings, S3: indicating structure of the paper, and S4: evaluation of findings.

Though it was initially applied for the analysis of introductions, according to Samraj (2002), the model has

Move 1	
Step 1	Making a centrality claim and /or
Step 2	Making topic generalization (s) and/or
Step 3	Reviewing items of previous research
Move 2	
Step 1A	Counter-claiming or
Step 1B	Indicating a gap or
Step 1C	Raising-question or
Step 1D	Continuing a tradition
Move 3	
Step 1A	Outlining purposes or
Step 1B	Announcing present research
Step 1	Announcing principal findings
Step 1	Indicating Research Article structure

Figure 1. Swales' (1990) CARS model

been used for the analysis of other genres: result sections, discussions, and abstracts. Thus, the model has turned out to be "an influential means in order to explore a discourse internal organization" (Mahjoobeh, 2015, p. 141). To some extent, the model has revealed stances of generic structure (moves and steps) of varied genres within research field. The approach has also been used to identify and compare problem statement sections in master degree and dissertations.

METHOD

Design

The present study was a descriptive qualitative research (Creswell, 2014). It explored the rhetorical structure of PS section written by FL undergraduate students from a public university in Colombia.

Data Collection

The corpus for the study consisted of 20 samples of PS section of monographs presented by Colombian FL undergraduate students between 2015 and 2018 as final requirement for the Foreign Languages degree at the Faculty Education of a state university in the Colombian North Coastal Region. The principal selection criterion was the accessibility of the monographs from the university library: free access since they are not only research results but also didactic tools for Colombian FL undergraduate students as well. On the other hand, rhetorical moves and rhetorical strategies (steps) were identified and their frequency and percentage of occurrence were also established.

FINDINGS

Rhetorical Moves

As shown in the Table 1, the communicative purpose of the PS section is achieved through four rhetorical moves. First, there is a generalization of the research topic. Then, findings are shown. After that, an interpretation of the cause of the problem is indicated. Finally, a question is posed. Every move encompasses a communicative intention achieved with a number of rhetorical strategies (steps) around two and four. The most frequent rhetorical move was posing a question (20/100%). The second frequent rhetorical move was showing specific findings (15/75%). Less frequent rhetorical moves were interpreting the cause of the problem (6/12%) and generalizing research topic (5/ 25%).

One aspect that it is important to be mentioned in this analysis of the rhetorical moves in PS section is that the cognitive structure shows four main themes: research topic,

findings, interpretation, and question. This is how the FL undergraduate students demonstrate the epistemological existence of a real problem. Within this demonstration, M4 and M2 depict crucial factors in supporting the existence of the problem.

On the other hand, M2 contains more rhetorical strategies (4). M1 contains 2 rhetorical strategies. M3 is covered by 2 rhetorical strategies. M4 encompasses just 2 rhetorical strategies. This showed that FL undergraduate students were worried about highlighting the findings that were used to state the problem of the study.

Rhetorical Strategies

The communicative intention of M1 (Table 2) makes an assumption on the communicative skill. Target school students have major difficulties and require a pedagogical intervention in this communicative skill. As the table illustrates, the most frequent rhetorical strategy was Making a communicative skill assumption (10/50%), followed by Recognizing importance of the communicative skill (6/30%). According to the information presented in this table, step 1 is obligatory since it indicates FL undergraduate students' conception on the communicative skill in which target students have more difficulties. On the contrary, step 2 appears in less frequency. However, this step establishes to what extend the skill is recognized as an important aspect within educational context. Both steps reveal FL undergraduate students' understanding of what communicative skills represent for communication.

The communicative intention of M2 (Table 3) shows specific findings derived from data collection analysis. In this rhetorical move, the components of the communicative skill construct are described in order to indicate the reader the aspects of the problem. Table 3 indicates that four rhetorical strategies are used to contribute to the communicative intention of the move. Out of the 4 steps, the first step, Describing finding, is the most frequent (15/75%). The second frequent step is combing tools and findings (9/45%). A third frequent step is specifying tools (6/30%). In addition, the least frequent is step 4, expanding findings (5/25%).

The analysis shows that rhetorical strategy 1 and 3 are obligatory steps when creating the PS. Making a description of the findings tends to be crucial to argue the existence of the problem. Besides, indicating the way (techniques and instruments) the data was collected represents one of the main support for rhetorical strategy 1. Findings and tools are used as argumentative resources that validate the difficulties within the communicative skill. On the other hand, steps 2 and 4 play the role of secondary support.

Table 1. Frequency, percentage of occurrence and amount of rhetorical strategies of Moves in the samples

Moves	Frequency	Percentage %	Rhetorical strategy
M1 Generalizing research topic	5	25	2
M2 Showing specific findings	15	75	4
M3 Interpreting the cause of the problem	6	30	2
M4 Posing a question	20	100	2

Table 2. Frequency and percentage of occurrence of rhetorical strategies in M1

Rhetorical strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Making a communicative skill assumption	10	50%
Recognizing importance of the communicative skill	6	30%

Table 3. Frequency and percentage of occurrence of rhetorical strategies in M2

Rhetorical strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Describing findings	15	75%
Specifying tools	6	30%
Combining tools and findings	9	45%
Expanding findings	5	25%

The communicative intention of M3 (Table 4) is the interpretation of the cause of the problem. Here findings are used to assume a possible relationship between the communicative skill and the factors that can affect its development. As it is shown in Table 4, the most frequent step is establishing causes and consequences (11/55%) based on initial data interpretation, followed by Assuming a position derived from data interpretation (7/35%).

Table 5 illustrates that the communicative intention of M4 is posing a research question (20/100%). There is a single rhetorical strategy in order to pose a question in this rhetorical move; the research problem is formulated as main leading question to be answer in the study. It appears two variables, the population and the research site. It also appears the purpose of the study. On the other hand, the research questions formulated by Colombian FL undergraduate students tend to be qualitative ones. This indicates that the frequent techniques are observations, interviews, and surveys, which shows that these students answer such questions based on target students' experiences, feelings, etc. Something related to this is that generally the most common epistemological underpinning is interpretivist. That is why questions start with what or which.

DISCUSSION

The PS section was developed in four rhetorical moves that covered the communicative skills, the findings derived from the data collection analysis, the interpretation of findings, and the formulation of a research question. Moves, according to Martin and Leon (2009), depicted the main goal of the section.

Related to the communicative purpose, the rhetorical structure of the PS entailed four themes: research topic, findings, interpretation, and question. To some extent, this cognitive structure (Swales, 1981) encompassed a set of beliefs shared by teachers and FL undergraduate students: interpretivist. The point of departure for the answer to the question that appeared in M4 begins in M2 and M3. This incipient

Table 4. Frequency and percentage of occurrence of rhetorical strategies in M3

Rhetorical strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Assuming a position derived from data interpretation	7	35%
Establishing causes and consequences based on initial data interpretation	11	55%

Table 5. Frequency and percentage of occurrence of rhetorical strategies in M4.

Rhetorical strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Specifying research questions	20	100%

interpretation was widened in the interpretation process presented in the analysis and result sections of the monograph.

The results also showed that M1 with its steps occurred in some examples (5 times). M2 and its steps have been found many examples (15 times). Even though, M2 tends to be the most frequent in research articles since it provides reasons for conducting the study (Jalilifar, Firuzmand & Roshani, 2011), the results indicated that M2 was used to only present tools and findings of the research. The support for the study is located in the justification section. On the other hands, M3 with its steps appeared in some (6 times) examples, too. Finally, M4 and its steps occurred in all the examples. Contrary to previous studies (Nimehchisalem et al., 2016); the purpose of the study is not observable in M3. Instead, this is presented in the introduction section of the monographs. These students focused on indicating the findings and posing the research question. However, the students in the PS section missed aspects such as previous studies and knowledge gap. These aspects are crucial in order to state the research problem.

CONCLUSIONS

The study explored the way Colombian FL undergraduate students organize the PS section in the monographs presented as requirement to graduate. 20 samples of PS section written by these students were analyzed following Swales' (1990) CARS model. The main conclusion derived from the analysis is that the irregular frequency of the Moves and steps reveal a precarious rhetorical structure of the PS. The lack of knowledge on rhetorical aspects related to PS section on the part of the students contributes negatively to the appropriate structure of the genre. The rhetorical strategies presented in each move are related to the disciplinary aspects of the research topic: Language Teaching. Undergraduate students lacked genre awareness when writing the PS section of their monographs.

On the other hand, the limitation of the study resides on the amount of samples used in the analysis. In addition, samples from other university FL undergraduate students' monographs should be kept in mind to increase the scope of the analysis, too.

Pedagogical Implications

This study is the point of departure for further rhetorical analysis of the PS section in FL undergraduates' monographs in Colombia. It might also bring uniformity when communicating the problem in FL undergraduate contexts. The rhetorical structure of the PS section should be formally taught to FL Undergraduate students to make the construction of the PS genre explicit for these students. Being aware of PS as a genre can guide these students to worry about structural aspects of the section and make appropriate linguistic choices. This might provide learners with an 'access route' to facilitate the writing (Ibrahim and Nambiar, 2011).

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