Research and Suggestions on Academic Abstracts Writing for English Major Graduate Students

Maoyan Cao

Southwest Petroleum University, Chengdu, China

Abstract

Abstracts are a key component of academic writing and a window to potential readers. Standard abstracts of English academic papers can not only give readers a clear introduction to the academic papers but also the key to entering the domestic and international retrieval system. While in the process of academic papers writing, not all students completely comprehend the content of abstracts and can produce a well academic paper abstract, as a result, most schools will provide academic writing courses for students. In order to help English graduate students to have a better experience in academic writing courses, this paper tries to investigate the problems that students face by interviewing. By analyzing the conversation of interviews, three problems are found. That are fear of difficulty, lack of knowledge, and generalization techniques. Based on the findings, some pedagogical suggestions are proposed.

Keywords

Academic writing, Abstracts, English graduates, Problems.

1. Introduction

Academic writing is one of the necessary abilities of every graduate student, and it is also one of the important indicators to measure the quality of graduate training [5]. With the rapid development of Chinese postgraduate education, the number of postgraduate students is increasing. Now China has formed a relatively complete postgraduate education system of all disciplines [3]. It has been regulated that one of the main tasks of postgraduate education is to train the students' innovative ability and scientific research abilities. Graduate students can do research in a certain field or on certain subjects, and obtain certain results. The main form of research results is in academic papers. In addition, in order to improve the training quality of graduate students, many universities have clearly stipulated in the graduate training program that graduates students must publish a certain number of papers related to the content of the dissertation in the core journal or publicly issued journal before the graduation thesis defense. Some scholars have studied the framework of academic papers which provides some guidance for graduate students to write English academic papers (e,g, Zhang Xuezhu & Liu Wan Qiang, 2022). There are also studies on the problems and dilemmas of postgraduate in academic writing, and they are discussed from different majors (Li Zhong, 2022; Zhu Haiqing, 2020).

Abstracts are the essence of an academic paper, which is the concentration of most of the content of the paper, including the research content, research methods, research results, and research conclusions [2]. Standard abstracts of English academic papers can not only give readers a clear introduction to the academic papers but also is the key to entering the domestic and international retrieval system. There is a situation in that in the process of proofreading academic papers, it is found that some papers are innovative in content and the research subjects are good, while the abstract writing is not in line with the standard, so the reading is seriously affected (Xu Min,2015). As the importance of abstracts in academic papers, research on academic papers abstract has grown over the years. The research of abstracts is not limited

to one major but involves lots of majors, such as medical science, literature, geology, and so on. Among these research areas, relatively fewer studies investigate academic abstracts on English majors. As the research subjects of academic abstracts, the move of academic abstracts is a hot point. Studies have found the moves and their structural characteristics and regularities in abstracts (e.g., Han Yin, 2019; Wang Lifei & Liu Xia, 2017). Han Yin (2019) analyzed the constituent of every move with reference to the Swales' IMRD model by analyzing 40 abstracts in academic papers of the English major. For example, move 1, introducing purposes, contains the background, the deficiency of prior studies, and the purpose and content of the present study. Wang Lifei and Liu Xia constructed a model which can auto-recognize the move structure of academic abstracts by building a corpus. Besides there are abundant studies on the discourse structure and language characteristics of academic abstracts (e.g., Ni Xiaofen & Li Lihua, 2020; Yue Lei & Zhang Yi, 2018). Ni Xiaofen and Li Lihua (2020) analyzed the discourse structure and summarized the language feature, like past tense is regularly used, by studying 30 political academic papers. Yue Lei and Zhang Yi (2018) conducted research to study the nominalization phenomenon in order to summarize the features of different types of nominalization in academic abstracts.

Although considerable research has been done on academic writing at present, there is not enough research on abstracts in the academic writing of English major graduate students in China. Some of these researches are mainly based on academic papers' abstracts written by graduate students, and discuss the stylistic characteristics of abstracts (Ju Yumei, 2004), the quality of academic abstracts (Chen Xiujuan, Du Guimin, 2020), the contrast and difference of abstract structure between Chinese and English academic papers (Fan Chunxiang,2013; Liu Yonghou,2016) and the problems of abstract writing and how to cultivate abstract writing ability (Song Yanlin, Xie Qun,2021). However, relatively few articles discuss the problems in the process of academic writing from the perspective of graduate students, so the problems that graduate students face still need further investigation. Therefore, this paper adopts the research method combining interview and literature research to conduct semi-structured interviews with four graduate students majoring in English with the aim to explore their problems in the writing of abstracts of academic papers, hoping to give some pedagogical suggestions for academic writing courses. Specifically, the study addresses the following questions:

1. What are the problems that graduate students face in the process of writing academic abstracts?

2. How to address these problems in future academic writing courses?

2. Method

The study was conducted at Southwest Petroleum University in Chengdu, Sichuan province, a double first-class university in China. Four graduate students majoring in English took part in the study. They are three girls and a boy aged from 22 to 24. All the participants are first-year students of graduate education. They haven't had the academic writing course during the first year but will have it in the second year. As a result, they don't have a systematic knowledge of how to write the abstract of academic papers.

Before data collection, we obtain participants' permission to video-record the interview. Subsequently, we have a semi-structured interview with the 4 participants one by one. Given that although all of them are English major graduate students in their first year, they may have a different acknowledgment of academic abstracts. As a result, the way, semi-structured view, is adopted. The question what do you think of writing an academic abstract, is used to start the interview. As the four participants are Chinese, so Chinese is used during the interviews. After

finishing all the interviews, the video will be organized and transcribed verbatim. Then data is analyzed and some problems are found.

3. Results and Discussion

To investigate the problems that students face during the process of writing academic abstracts, the qualitative method, semi-structured interview, is used. And through transcribing the dialogue from the interview, the interview conversation is analyzed. From the perspective of graduate students, some problems that they face when writing English academic paper abstracts are summarized.

3.1. The problems

First of all, most interviewees are afraid of writing abstracts of academic papers and think that writing abstracts is a difficult thing. When it comes to the question that what you think of writing academic abstracts, all of them express that it's not an easy thing to do, and some even said that he/she is resisting to start writing. While if I begin to do it, it makes me feel that it's not so difficult, so students have a feeling that writing academic abstracts is difficult and don't want to do it. That is to say, students have the ability to do it. Interviewees also said that they had less time to write papers in their undergraduate years. Most of the course assessment is in the form of an examination. Besides they wrote the graduation thesis with the help of the tutor. In most cases, tutors would tell them where should modify and how to modify, but as for the reason of such modification they are not very clear. In the graduate stage, they begin to read more articles and more and more excellent articles, from which they begin to learn something about abstract writing. They also try to imitate the way to write academic abstracts. There still is a problem that they do not have a systematic and comprehensive knowledge of abstract writing. As shown in Excerpts 1 and 2 from the interview.

Excerpt 1:

R: Do you find abstract writing difficult?

S1: Yes. It's hard to write a paper, and it's hard to write abstracts too. There is no systematic knowledge of how to write an abstract, and no course on how to write a good abstract. At present all the abstracts of course papers that I write are based on my own cognition and learning. I do not know whether it is good or not.

Excerpt 2:

R: What do you think of writing paper abstracts?

S3: Eh, in my opinion, it is a thing that may make me sad and anxious when I think about writing a paper and the paper abstract. I think I am not good at doing academic research, so I don't like writing it.

The second is about the content of the abstract. Some interviewees expressed that they knew what the academic abstract should include, while some interviewees were not clear. Guo Wen (2018) also found this problem by investigating academic papers. Often the elements of academic abstracts are not involved completely. In the interview, two interviewees said that they generally knew that the abstract should include the research background, research methods, and research conclusions, but the other two were relatively vague on it. They showed that abstracts probably need to include the main content of the paper, such as the research conclusion, but they were not clear about the specific element. They also expressed that generally, they would look at a modal paper when they wrote an academic abstract. That is to say, although they can't tell the elements of an abstract clearly, they can imitate when they write. As shown in Excerpts 3 and 4.

Excerpt 3:

R: How many words do you usually write in an abstract?

S3: Maybe 200 words or so, not too many and not too few words. As I think if the words are only two or three lines, the abstract may look unprofessional and give readers a feeling that the writer is a layman like me. If the abstracts are too many words, they would not be concise and convenient for potential readers to read.

R: Do you know what is the element of an abstract or what an abstract includes?

S3: Well, I don't know what to say, but it's probably the main content of the paper you're writing, such as the research background, the conclusion, that sort of thing.

Excerpt 4:

R: Do you know what an academic abstract should contain?

S2: Sorry, I have to say that I am not very clear. I can't clearly say the content of academic abstracts, but from my experience of writing class papers and imitating, I think abstracts may contain research background, research method, and research results.

Thirdly, they don't know how to refine the language when they write the abstract. The interviewees indicated that they know that there should not be too many words in the abstract, as too many words will be cumbersome, while too few will bring the feeling that the paper has no substantive content. Guo Wen (2018) mentioned that abstracts with few words are too simple which is also a question. The abstracts with few words may contain insufficient content. As a result, it is also important to control the number of words in abstracts, at the same time abstracts' content and elements are complete. Sometimes, there will be a situation where the abstract has already been written, but students need to revise it and hardly cut down the word number. It is the problem that the abstract is too many, so they have to streamline the content of the abstract. As shown in Excerpts 5 and 6.

Excerpt 5:

R: What do you find difficult about abstracts?

S2: Well, actually there is not a difficulty that we can't overcome in the process of writing abstracts. Oh, I don't know how to write, or refine a comprehensive academic abstract with a few words. This thing just takes time to finish.

Excerpt 6:

R: What do you find difficult about abstracts?

S4: It's hard, to sum up, your argument in one sentence. Teachers often ask students to use a single sentence to illustrate the main point. A sentence should be one or two rows at most, so it is difficult to some extent.

Finally, as for the knowledge they hope to learn in the course of academic writing, they mainly want to learn more general information about abstracts, like the total word number of an abstract, the composition of an abstract, the writing steps, and related expressions used in abstracts. This is also the weakness of their abstract writing. They said that if we want to do a thing well, we must know what it is clearly. They think in the class of academic writing they should figure out which elements compose abstracts firstly. Then they also want to know what the step of writing the abstract is. It is written before the paper is finished or after the paper or whenever. Besides, they want to learn common expressions and specific sentence patterns which may make the abstracts more native and professional. Another aspect is to learn to condense the language of the abstract, at the same time it can clearly explain the research ideas and key points of the paper. As they all know, the abstract should be concise, but it is the problem they mentioned that they do not know how to refine the language.

Excerpt 7:

R: What do you want to learn in the thesis writing course?

S1: I want to learn the composition of academic abstracts, and the expressions that may be used in the writing of academic abstracts. It will be better if teachers can tell us the paradigm of writing abstracts.

Excerpt 8:

R: What do you want to learn in the thesis writing course?

S2: As I mentioned that I can't refine language well, so I hope to learn some techniques to condense language and make the abstract more concise and comprehensive.

3.2. The suggestions

Based on the conversation analysis, the problems which English major postgraduates face in the process of academic abstracts writing are mainly caused by a lack of systematic knowledge of academic abstracts, which also indicates the necessity of the school to set up thesis writing courses for postgraduates. In order to better meet the English major postgraduates' thirst for knowledge, and on the basis of the problems summarized, some suggestions are put forward for the thesis writing course in school, especially the teaching section of abstract writing.

The first thing that teachers should do in the academic writing course is to encourage students to write paper abstracts, stimulate students' interest in academic writing, and eliminate their resistance. All the interviewees said that it is difficult for them to write abstracts, and they have resistance to academic paper writing, but as graduate students, they must do it. Therefore, teachers can give students more positive emotional encouragement before class, give students more confidence, and tell them that writing academic abstracts and academic papers is not an insurmountable thing after learning the corresponding knowledge. As the old saying goes, it starts with some practical problems.

Second, when teaching abstract writing, teachers should teach comprehensive and systematic knowledge of abstracts, such as what is abstracts, the total word number, the basic elements, which should be included, and the questions that abstracts should answer. It is proposed by Guo Wen (2018) that there are several reasons causing the elements of academic abstracts incomplete. The main reason is the word of the abstract is not enough or too much which may be caused by the insufficient description of each element of the abstract or too much description of the irrelevant content. As a result, teachers must introduce clearly the total word number and elements of academic abstracts and specifically common sentence patterns to introduce each part of abstracts. These are not all things that teachers should include in their teaching, but more should be contained. Students are afraid of abstract writing and lack confidence in abstract writing. The root cause is a lack of knowledge, so providing students with more basic knowledge can give them more confidence to start writing essays and abstracts.

Third, teachers should give students more practice opportunities during the class of thesis writing. After students are given systematic knowledge of abstracts and encouragement by teachers. They should be offered more opportunities to write academic abstracts. For example, teachers can provide a paper without the abstracts, then students write an abstract for the paper by reading the whole paper. As the old saying goes, practice makes perfect. By constantly practicing, students may overcome the fear of writing abstracts, and become proficient in writing abstracts gradually.

Fourthly, teachers should introduce some methods of summarizing content and refining language to students in the academic writing course. Most respondents said they lack the ability to summarize what they have written in one sentence, and they don't know how to refine the language, which seems to be a common problem. Teachers can teach some methods and provide some exercises to improve students' generalization ability through practice. This is in line with the suggestion proposed by Zhao Sha (2012).

4. Conclusion

From the perspective of writers of academic abstracts, that is graduate students, this study discusses their problems in the process of writing abstracts of English academic papers through interviews. It is found that in addition to their fear of difficulty, graduate students think that the fundamental reason for the difficulty of writing abstracts is a lack of knowledge. They lack a systematic and comprehensive understanding of abstract writing. Some interviewees said they were not even very clear about the elements that need to be included in the abstracts. In addition, they are also devoid of practice. As a result, it is difficult for them to summarize the content of an entire academic paper in concise language. For future academic writing courses, they hope to learn more comprehensive knowledge about abstracts in the course, including the total word number, elements, steps, and so on. Besides the techniques to summarize the content and some corresponding expressions are necessary. However, there are only four interviewees in this research, so the problems found may not be universal or comprehensive. In the future, more English graduate students and graduate students of other majors can be investigated to improve comprehensiveness and universality.

References

[1] ROBERT B. KAPLAN, SELENA CANTOR, CYNTHIA HAGSTROM, LIA D. KAMHI-STEIN, YUMIKO SHIOTANI, CHERYL BOYD ZIMMERMAN. On abstract writing[J]. Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of Discourse,2009,14(3).

[2] Xiaoying, Zhou,Hangjie Liao. A Comparison of Abstract Writing Style Between English and Chinese [J]. English Language Teaching,2018,11(3).

[3] Chen Fei, Yao Shufeng, Xu Min. Analysis of Common Problems in abstract writing [J]. Editor's Friend,2015(09):77-80.

[4] Fan Chunxiang. A Comparative Analysis of the Categories and Language Features of Chinese and English Literature Abstracts: A Study based on Self-built Corpus. Journal of Hebei Vocational College of Tourism,2013,18(02):72-76.

[5] Guo Wen. Common Problems and Solutions in Abstract Writing of Academic Papers [J]. Science and Technology Communication,2018,10(10):154-157.

[6] Han Ying. A Study on Walking for Graduate Students of English Majors [J]. Modern Communication, 2019, 499(05): 173-174.

[7] Liu Yonghou, Zhang Ying. A Comparative study on abstract writing of academic papers in international journals [J]. Foreign Language Circle,2016(05):20-27.

[8] Ni Xiaofang, Li Lihua. The Genre analysis of academic abstracts of Political Discourse Analysis [J]. Journal of East China University (Social Science Edition),2020,20(02):180-185.

[9] Song Yanling, Xie Qun. Research on the Cultivation Mode of English Abstract Writing Ability of graduate students. Finance Theory and Teaching,2021(06):105-107.

[10] Wang Lifei, Liu Xia. The construction of automatic recognition model for Step Structure [J]. Foreign Language E-Teaching,2017,174(02):45-50+64.

[11] Wang Zhende. Common Problems and Suggestions in abstract writing of academic papers [J]. Journalism Research Guide,2020,11(12):193-194.

[12] Yue Lei, Zhang Yi. Study on nominalization in Abstracts of Linguistic Academic Papers [J]. Journal of Henan Polytechnic University (Social Science Edition),2018,19(04):61-67.