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A Genre-based Investigation of the Discussion & Conclusion Sections of L2 Chinese Social Science Doctoral Theses

中國二語社科博士論文討論與結語章節之語體研究

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Abstract

Writing the Discussion & Conclusion section is assumed to one of the most difficult parts in doctoral students' thesis writing not just for non-native English speakers (NNES) but for native English speakers (NES) as well. There has been an increasing interest in studying this specific part-genre in the research writing in the past two decades (e.g., Belanger, 1982; Dudley-Evans ,1986, 1994; Hopkins and Dudley-Evans 1988; Peng, 1987; Weissberg and Buker, 1990; Holmes, 1997; Nwogu, 1997; Posteguillo, 1999; Letwin et al, 2001; Peacock, 2002; Yang and Allison, 2003; Swales and Feak, 2004; Bunton, 2005; Kanoskilapatham, 2005; Bitchener and Basturkmen, 2006). Nevertheless, an overwhelming majority of the research focuses on the overall rhetorical structure and patterns of this particular part-genre in RAs and predominantly deals with the texts produced in natural sciences. Studies on the nature of the difficulties in writing the Discussion & Conclusion section of thesis writing genre are severely limited and even scarce in the case of social sciences. So far none of the previous research has ever investigated this particular part-genre from the social constructivist perspective. This study attempts to fill this research void through exploring the nature of the difficulties of the particular Discussion & Conclusion section writing by L2 Chinese social science doctoral students on the one hand, and on the other, examining the ways in which this particular group of doctoral students construct the specific thesis part-genre as well as the ways these students construct their writer identities in writing this part-genre. To address the research objectives, two main research methods were adopted in the study: textual analysis and case study. Data were collected through texts produced by the students and interviews. Texts of the Discussion & Conclusion section including original drafts, revised versions, and the final products were solicited from six mainland Chinese doctoral students of social sciences who were pursuing their PhD studies in Hong Kong. They were collected at different stages of this specific part-genre writing. Two-rounds of in-depth interviews were conducted with the six doctoral students to explore the major events and stories occurring in the process of their Discussion & Conclusion section writing. One-round of in-depth interviews was carried out with their students' supervisors to obtain more information regarding their students' thesis writing in general and the Discussion & Conclusion section writing, in particular. Textual analysis was done basically by drawing on part of Swalesian CARS model (Swales, 1990) and the move-scheme for the Discussion & Conclusion section proposed by Swales & Feak (2004). Interview data was analyzed in line with the research objectives to seek the common themes

surfacing in various events and stories. It was explained and interpreted by drawing on such theories as cognitive writing process theory, sociocultural theory, and theories on the construction of social identity and writer identity. It was found through the detailed textual analysis that such a significant problem as rhetorical mismatch between what is ‘promised’ in Introduction and what is ‘delivered’ in the Discussion and Conclusion section exists not merely in the student informants’ earlier drafts, but also in their revised versions and even in some of the final versions. This suggests that this particular group of doctoral students in general had much difficulty in employing the generic convention of forging a proper link between the closing and opening sections when they wrote the specific Discussion & Conclusion part-genre. The in-depth analysis of interview data indicated that the students were faced with such major problems in dealing with this specific section: they lacked a full understanding of the communicative functions of the particular part-genre, they were unaware of the rhetorical consistency between the opening and closing sections, they were short of systematic training for thesis writing, their thesis writing process was long, and their cognitive load involved in the specific section writing was heavy. The causes related to these problems were discussed as well. It was also revealed in this study that this particular group of doctoral students negotiated the specific generic conventions mainly through negotiating with their supervisors, mediating with other academics, dialoguing with multiple audiences, and interacting with published works and theses. Various ways of negotiation as such not only helped the students conform to the specific academic conventions, increased their conventional knowledge, but also made them better able to manipulate the particular part-genre writing. Moreover, the in-depth analysis unfolded that it is simply through the whole process of such discursive practices as drafting, revising, and shaping this particular section and various social interactions in the form of negotiating with their supervisors, mediating with other academics, dialoguing with multiple audiences, and interacting with published works and theses that these students constructed and reconstructed their writer identities incrementally from an initial novice student writer to a more skilled academic writer to becoming a member of their particular discourse community, moving towards a full member of the community. The findings generated from this study offer significant implications for EAP/ ESP pedagogy and instructions both in China and elsewhere.

Table of Contents

Abstract …… i

Acknowledgements…… iii

Table of Contents…… v

List of Abbreviations…….. x

List of Tables…… xi

Chapter 1 Introduction…… 1

1.1 Research background…….. 1

1.2 Research objectives……. 4

1.3 Significance of the study……. 5

1.4 Demarcation of the Discussion & Conclusion sections……. 5

1.5 The relationship between Introduction and Discussion & Conclusion sections……. 6

1.6 Structure of the thesis……. 8

Chapter 2 Review of Relevant Literature…… 12

2.1 L2 students' difficulties in thesis writing……... 12

2.2 Thesis writing process……. 14

2.3 Rhetorical structure of the Discussion & Conclusion section …….. 15

2.4 The notion of genre…….. 19

2.4.1 ESP-oriented view of genre……. 19

2.4.2 New rhetoric view of genre…….. 21

2.5 The nature of writing…….. 23

2.6 Main approaches to writing……... 24

2.6.1 The classical rhetorical approach……. 24

2.6.2 The expressive approach…….. 24

2.6.3 The cognitive approach……. 26

2.6.4 The social constructionist approach……. 29

2.7 Relevant theories……. 31

2.7.1 Cognitive writing process theory…….. 31

2.7.2 Sociocultural theory…….. 33

2.7.2.1 Situated learning…… 33

2.7.2.1.1 Guided participation……... 33

2.7.2.1.2 Legitimate periphery participation……. 35

2.7.2.2 Zone of proximal development & scaffolding……... 36

2.7.2.3 Activity theory…….. 37

2.7.3 Theory of identity construction…… 39

2.7.3.1 Social identity construction……... 39

2.7.3.2 Writer identity construction……... 40

2.8 Summary…….. 41

Chapter 3 Methodology…….. 43

3.1 Text-analytical approach……. 43

3.1.1 The assumption of textual analysis……... 43

3.1.2 Data collection…….. 44

3.1.3 Frameworks for textual analysis…….. 44

3.1.4 Procedure for textual analysis…….. 45

3.2 Case-study approach……... 46

3.2.1 Data collection…… 47

3.2.1.1 Choice of the cases…… 48

3.2.1.2 Profiles of the cases……... 50

3.2.1.3 Interview design……. 54

3.2.1.4 Interview procedure……... 55

3.2.2 Treatment of data…….. 57

3.2.2.1 Transcription of interview data…….. 57

3.2.2.2 Coding interview data…… 58

3.3 Summary…….. 59

Chapter 4 Textual Analysis…….. 61

4.1 Cong's texts…….. 61

4.1.1 Original draft…… 61

4.1.2 Revised version……. 65

4.1.3 Final version……. 69

4.2 Mei's texts……. 73

4.2.1 Original draft…… 73

4.2.2 Revised version……. 75

4.2.3 Final version……. 77

4.3 Ping's texts…… 82

4.3.1 Original draft…… 82

4.3.2 Revised version……. 84

4.3.3 Final version……. 87

4.4 Tao's texts……. 90

4.4.1 Original draft…… 90

4.4.2 Revised version……. 92

4.4.3 Final version……. 95

4.5 Yan's texts……. 98

4.5.1 Original draft…… 98

4.5.2 Revised version……. 101

4.5.3 Final version……. 107

4.6 Su's text……. 112

4.6.1 Original draft…… 113

4.6.2 Revised version……. 117

4.6.3 Final version……. 121

4.7 Summary……. 125

Chapter 5 Interview Data Analysis…… 127

5.1 Exploring major problems involved in the Discussion & Conclusion Section writing and the related causes…….. 127

5.1.1 Limited knowledge of the communicative functions of the part-genre……. 127

5.1.2 Lack of awareness of rhetoric consistency……... 131

5.1.3 Lack of systematic training…….. 134

5.1.4 Excessive length of the writing process…… 136

5.1.5 Heavy cognitive load…… 139

5.2 Negotiating generic conventions……. 142

5.2.1 Negotiating with supervisors…….. 143

5.2.2 Mediating with other academics……. 150

5.2.3 Dialoguing with multiple audiences……... 158

5.2.4 Interacting with the published works and theses…… 166

5.3 Constructing writer identities……. 171

5.3.1 A novice student writer……..... 172

5.3.2 A more skilled academic writer…….. 177

5.3.3 Moving towards a full member of the community……. 183

5.4 Summary…….. 189

Chapter 6 Conclusion……. 190

6.1 Summary of the main findings……... 190

6.2 Pedagogical implications of the study…… 197

6.3 Directions for further research…….. 203

References……... 209

Appendices…….. 232

Appendix I First-round Interview Guide for Student Informants…….. 232

Appendix II Second-round Interview Guide for Student Informants…….. 235

Appendix III Interview Guide for Supervisor Informants……... 237

List of Abbreviations

L2	English as a second language
NNES	non-native English speakers
NES	native English speakers
RAs	Research articles
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
GP	Guided participation
LPP	Legitimate peripheral participation
ZPD	Zone of proximal development
EAP	English for academic purposes
ESP	English for specific purposes

List of Tables

Table 4-1	**Part of move analysis of the Introduction of Cong's original draft and the status of research objectives fulfillment in the Discussion & Conclusion section…….....**	62
Table 4-2	**Move analysis of the Discussion & Conclusion of Cong's original draft…….....**	63
Table 4-3	**Part of move analysis of the Introduction of Cong's revised version and the status of research objectives fulfillment in the Discussion & Conclusion section……..**	66
Table 4-4	**Move analysis of the Discussion & Conclusion section of Cong's revised version……**	67
Table 4-5	**Part of move analysis of the Introduction of Cong's final version and the status of research objectives fulfillment in the Discussion & Conclusion section…….....**	70
Table 4-6	**Move analysis of the Conclusion & Discussion of Cong's final version……..**	71
Table 4-7	**Part of move analysis of the Introduction of Mei's original draft and the status of research objectives fulfillment in the Discussion & Conclusion section…….....**	74
Table 4-8	**Move analysis of the Discussion & Conclusion of Mei's original draft…….**	74
Table 4-9	**Part of move analysis of the Introduction of Mei's revised version and the status of research objectives fulfillment in the Discussion & Conclusion section……..**	75
Table 4-10	**Move analysis of the Discussion & Conclusion of Mei's revised version…….....**	76
Table 4-11	**Part of move analysis of the Introduction of Mei's final version and the status of research objectives fulfillment in the Discussion & Conclusion section……..**	78

Table 4-12 **Move analysis of the Discussion & Conclusion of Mei's final version…….. 78**

Table 4-13 **Part of move analysis of the Introduction of Ping's original draft and the status of research objectives fulfillment in the Discussion & Conclusion section……..... 82**

Table 4-14 **Move analysis of the Discussion & Conclusion of Ping's original draft……. 83**

Table 4-15 **Part of move analysis of the Introduction of Ping's revised version and the status of research objectives fulfillment in the Discussion & Conclusion section…….. 84**

Table 4-16 **Move analysis of the Discussion & Conclusion of Ping's revised version……..... 85**

Table 4-17 **Part of move analysis of the Introduction of Ping's final version and the status of research objectives fulfillment in the Discussion & Conclusion section…….. 87**

Table 4-18 **Move analysis of the Discussion & Conclusion of Ping's final version…….. 87**

Table 4-19 **Part of move analysis of the Introduction of Tao's original draft and the status of research objectives fulfillment in the Discussion & Conclusion section…….. 90**

Table 4-20 **Move analysis of the Discussion & Conclusion of Tao's original draft……. 91**

Table 4-21 **Part of move analysis of the Introduction of Tao's revised version and the status of research objectives fulfillment in the Discussion & Conclusion section…….. 92**

Table 4-22 **Move analysis of the Discussion & Conclusion of Tao's revised version……..... 93**

Table 4-23 **Part of move analysis of the Introduction of Tao's final version and the status of research objectives fulfillment in the Discussion & Conclusion section…….. 95**

Table 4-24 **Move analysis of the Discussion & Conclusion of Tao's final version…….. 96**

Table 4-25 **Part of move analysis of the Introduction of Yan's original draft and the status of research objectives fulfillment in the Discussion & Conclusion section……..** 99

Table 4-26 **Move analysis of the Discussion & Conclusion of Yan's original draft…….** 99

Table 4-27 **Part of move analysis of the Introduction of Yan's revised version and the status of research objectives fulfillment in the Discussion & Conclusion section…….** 102

Table 4-28 **Move analysis of the Discussion & Conclusion of Yan's revised version…….** 103

Table 4-29 **Part of move analysis of the Introduction of Yan's final version and the status of research objectives fulfillment in the Discussion & Conclusion section……..** 108

Table 4-30 **Move analysis of the Discussion & Conclusion of Yan's final version……..** 109

Table 4-31 **Part of move analysis of the Introduction of Su's original draft and the status o of research objectives fulfillment in the Discussion & Conclusion section……..** 113

Table 4-32 **Move analysis of the Discussion & Conclusion of Su's original draft…….** 114

Table 4-33 **Part of move analysis of the Introduction of Su's revised version and the status of research objectives fulfillment in the Discussion & Conclusion section…….** 117

Table 4-34 **Move analysis of the Discussion & Conclusion of Su's revised version…….** 118

Table 4-35 **Part of move analysis of the Introduction of Su's final version and the status of research objectives fulfillment in the Discussion & Conclusion section…….** 122

Table 4-36 **Move analysis of the Discussion & Conclusion of Su's final version…….** 123