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The process of building the abstract of a paper in the context of a writing workshop for PhDs

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Abstract

Current studies agree on the need of training university students in various competences. Among them, writing stands out as an essential competence. This study analyzes the abstract produced by Spanish PhD candidates in the context of an academic writing workshop. These abstracts were rewritten as a result of peers' and supervisors' reviews. The purpose is to analyze the construction of this type of text in relation to its content categories. The results attest a series of challenges faced by students and help teachers in the design of their teaching instruction.

1. Introduction

Attention given in Higher Education to linguistic-communicative competences has significantly increased in the last decades. Universities are now aware of the impact these competences have in students' integration into the scientific communities where experts and professionals share their knowledge (Álvarez, 2012; Ezeiza, 2008). Among these competences, writing competence seems to have a prominent place and it is starting to be present in undergraduate and postgraduate programs.

In response to this need, universities have begun to offer a wide range of courses and seminars focused on the

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development and strengthen of students' writing abilities. The aim is not only to improve their writing ability in general terms, but also to introduce students to the different academic genres they need to master so as to communicate in this community. Nevertheless, there is still little empirical research about the kind of challenges faced by college students and about the teaching experiences conducted in this area (Corcelles, Cano, Bañales, & Alicia, 2013).

Therefore, this paper aims to characterize the difficulties identified by PhD Candidates in the successive rewriting of an abstract for a "call for papers". The aims are the following:

- To identify the content categories selected by these students when building an abstract and their organization.
- To analyze peers' and supervisors' influence in the reformulation and organization of those categories.
- To assess the challenges faced by them in relation to the canonical content categories.

This work contains, first, the theoretical concepts underlying this research. Secondly, the methodology includes participants' profile, the corpus of analysis, and the analysis procedure. Finally, this will give way to the data analysis and a discussion of the main results.

2. The abstract for a call for papers

The abstract is a textual genre that encompasses several varieties of texts: oral summaries of literature, bibliographical abstracts, and abstracts for research articles or for a "call for papers" (Otañi, 2005). However, all of this varieties have in common some inherent and essential characteristics that allow us identify this genre. Their structure and style are easily recognizable, as well as their main goal: to summarize the most important aspects of a scientific work in a comprehensible manner.

When it comes to the abstract for a conference, it is necessary to remind that they are shaped so as to propose a research for a scientific event. As a result, some of its characteristics could be determined by the requirements of the call. Duo de Brottier (2005) stresses the fact that the reader/evaluator will access this text without the full access to the paper. Hence, the writer has only this opportunity to convince the scientific committee about the quality of his/her investigation. She notices various mandatory and non-mandatory categories linked to questions the research can ask to him/herself when building an abstract.

Table 1. Categories of a Paper Abstract

	Mandatory Categories	Non-mandatory Subcategories
Which problem is addressed in the communication?	Space indication	Theme generalizations Study contexts
Which objectives does the researcher propose?	Purposes	Justification Hypothesis
Which is theoretical framework that the author adopts?	Space occupation	Paper structure Previous studies
Which methodology was applied?	Methodology	Materials and methods
Which are the results obtained?	Results	
Which is the significance of the findings for the field of discipline?	Results evaluation	

Source: Translated from Duo de Brottier (2005).

3. Revision in the knowledge construction

Another backbone of this work is the importance of understanding revision as a key step into the process of writing. Studies have pointed out the relevance of this action in the development of academic writing as texts created in this area need a constant revision from the writer (Castelló, 2007; Vargas, 2005). As a consequence, the writer becomes his/her own reader and needs to adopt a critical attitude towards his/her work. An appropriate revision of the text will have direct consequences on its quality (Corcelles, Cano, Bañales, & Alicia, 2013; García & Arias-Gundín, 2004), and on how the text is planned and built up.

In addition to benefits assigned to individual revisions, studies have revealed that peer revisions have a positive impact on writing products at university level (Carlino, 2008; Castelló, 2008; 2009). These experiences provide students with a critical and external look of their work, which transcends the limitations that may exist in the review