A genre-inspired and lexico-grammatical approach for helping postgraduate students craft research grant proposals

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ABSTRACT

Nowadays, there is increasing pressure on academic staff and their postgraduate students to publish in prestigious high-impact journals. It is therefore not surprising to find that academic writing programs are increasingly targeting English for Research Publication Processes (ERPP), in particular the research article (RA) genre. Grant proposal writing is another important high-stakes genre as getting a research article published is often dependent on being awarded a grant to undertake the research project in the first place. However, this "behind-the-scenes" genre has not received much attention in the ESP literature, either from a research or pedagogic perspective. This article describes the design and implementation of a research grant proposal writing module offered to postgraduate students of science and engineering. The materials are very much influenced by the research findings on grant proposal writing and adopt a Swalesian genre-based approach to the pedagogy. Tasks in which students match lexico-grammatical patterning to specific move structures are also outlined. At the same time, I also briefly raise two issues related to lexico-grammar, i.e. the question of novice writers' language re-use from corpus resources and the identification of ELF-type language in academic writing, important aspects which merit more attention and reflection for ESP courses targeted at scholarly writing.

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1. Introduction

The ESP literature on academic writing has witnessed an increasing number of accounts on the issue of 'writing for publication', specifically the scientific research article (RA), following the trend of the internationalisation of universities (see Englander, 2014; Hyland, 2009, 2015; Lillis & Curry, 2010). Nowadays, there is increasing pressure on academic staff and their postgraduate students to publish in prestigious high-impact journals, for which, by necessity, English is the language of dissemination of research findings to an international readership. And 95% of all publications in the *Science Citation Index* are in English (Hyland, 2013). In the US, Australia and many parts of Asia the 'article compilation' thesis is gaining currency with the publication of articles in indexed journals a Ph.D. graduation requirement (Dong, 1998; Huang, 2014; Kwan, 2010; Li, 2012). It is thus not difficult to see why the RA is a high-stakes genre. However, writing a research article may pose challenges not only to doctoral students and junior researchers (Kwan, 2010), but also to those scholars who use English as a second language (Hanauer & Englander, 2013). In view of this situation, academic writing programs are increasingly targeting English for Research Publication Purposes (ERPP) (see Burgess & Cargill, 2013; Cargill & O'Connor, 2009 for pedagogic accounts).

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However, Englander (2014) makes the point that the RA is but one of many different kinds of documents written by scientists. She outlines a chain of interrelated documents, either preceding, accompanying or following the RA, one of which is the research grant proposal. Like the RA, the research grant proposal is also a high stakes genre as it 'can affect the researcher's work for a long time' (Englander, 2014: 25) and may also have a bearing on a research group's competitiveness (Li, 2012). As Swales (1990: 178) aptly puts it: 'Published RAs increase the chances of follow-up grants and research grants increase the chances of publishable RAs'. Moreover, what Englander (2014) also notes is that the research grant proposal is an 'occluded' genre (Swales, 2004) as it is usually only the writers and evaluators who are privy to the document, stating that 'The fact that occluded documents are not easily accessible can make it difficult to properly anticipate and produce them, especially for junior researchers and graduate students' (p. 26). This 'occluded' nature of the research grant proposal may, in part, explain why there are relatively few accounts of this genre in the ESP literature, as reviewed below.

In brief, grant proposals are promissory, i.e. anticipating promising results arising from the proposed research project (Swales & Feak, 2009), promotional (Bhatia, 1993, 2008) problem-oriented (Connor & Mauranen, 1999) and persuasive (Myers, 1990). One of the first studies on grant writing was by Myers (1990), who focused on two biologists' revising processes and final products, examining how the writers calibrated the use of modality features depending on the context. As summarised in Connor and Upton (2004: 235) and Myers (1990), based on the drafts, final products and results of interviews with the two biologists, concluded that two primary elements accounted for a great deal of the persuasive appeal: how well the researchers situated their research within previous research in the field, and secondly, how they positioned themselves in relation to the academic community, as defined by their academic standing, previous funding, publications record, etc.

Building on the work of Myers (1990), later studies take a Swalesian genre-based approach to the analysis, such as the corpus-based research by Connor and Mauranen (1999) of 34 science-based proposals from the European Union (EU) written mainly by Finnish scientists (see Connor & Upton, 2004 for a corpus study of non-profit grant proposals). Another corpus-cum-genre study is that by Tardy (2011) who analysed a corpus of 40 abstracts for National Science Foundation (NSF) grants in applied mathematics and linguistics. Tardy takes a multi-method approach to genre analysis through analysis of the genre's intertextual links, the evaluation criteria and the socio-political context. Two investigations focus on grant proposals in the humanities and social science. Feng and Shi (2004) analysed both the summaries and full texts of nine successful SSHRC (The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada) research grants in Canada, combining a textual analysis with semi-structured interviews with the grant writers who 'were invited to talk about their rationales behind linguistic or rhetorical choices with reference to their previous experiences of grant proposal writing, their understandings of the writing conventions in question, and their views of the reader–writer relationship in writing the grant proposal' (p. 14). Like Tardy (2011), Feng and Shi (2004) also took the guidelines into account, citing Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman (2000: 7), to support their view of the importance of these as they have the "status of mandatory prescription". Feng (2008), meanwhile, in a follow-up cross-linguistic study, compared the nine SSHRC proposals with nine successfully funded Chinese research grant proposals written in Chinese by Chinese scholars.

There are many commonalities by way of the move structure patterning across the aforementioned genre-inspired studies of the research grant proposal. Feng (2008) notes the affinity in the nine proposals she analysed with Swales' (1990) Create-a-Research-Space (CARS) model for article introductions, made up of 3 moves: Move 1: Establishing a territory; Move 2: Establishing a niche; Move 3: Occupying the niche. These moves, not surprisingly, are also in evidence in the other analyses of grant proposals, although couched in slightly different metalanguage. Connor and Mauranen (1999) identified ten moves in their EU proposals, of which the first three, i.e. territory, gap and goal, replicate Swales' CARS model. The remaining seven moves, i.e., means, reporting previous research, anticipated results, benefits, competence claim, importance claim and compliance claim, clearly reflect the promotional nature of grant proposal writing. Building on Connor and Mauranen's (1999) framework, Feng and Shi (2004) also identify ten moves in their SSHRC grant proposals. However, they exclude 'reporting previous research' on the grounds that this is ideational rather than rhetorical and also the 'compliance claim' move as it does not apply to their SSHRC grants. Instead, they put forward two other moves: 'reporting anticipated audience and means of communication of results' and 'introducing content organisation using metadiscourse'. Feng and Shi (2004: 14-15) also analysed the summaries of their SSHRC proposals, identifying a three-move scheme (Move 1: Justifying a research **need**; Move 2: Describing **means** to meet the research need; Move 3: Claiming potential **contributions**), which they break down into smaller steps. For example, Move 1 consists of the following three steps: establishing a real-world/research territory; indicating a niche; reporting the proposers' own previous research. Tardy (2011: 159), meanwhile, identified six moves in her NSF award abstracts: Announcing project (announces topic area); Describing context (establishes the background, problem and or/motivation); Describing objectives (indicates the goals/purpose); Describing methods; Identifying outcomes of project (expected or intended results); and Identifying impacts of project (broader impacts, such as benefits to society at large), which could be seen to subsume both the benefits and importance claim move structures. A comparison of move taxonomies reported in the three key studies in the literature is provided in Table 1 below.

Using insights from the above research studies on grant proposal writing, especially the study by Feng and Shi (2004) relating to the proposal summaries, the purpose of this article is to describe the design and implementation of a grant proposal writing module for postgraduate students. Importantly, Feng and Shi (2004) explore the issue of move mixing and move recurrence, which will also be taken up later in this article.