



Formulating research questions in experimental doctoral dissertations on Applied Linguistics



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ABSTRACT

Research questions have often been regarded as an indispensable part of experimental research dissertations, yet the ways in which the language varies in the formulation of these questions have thus far remained an unexplored domain. This genre-based investigation analysed the language used for formulating research questions in 32 doctoral dissertations submitted to universities in the United States between 2001 and 2009. It examines how candidates in experimental research actually use various communicative resources to formulate research questions in the introductory chapters that determine the directions in which their dissertations on Applied Linguistics will be developed. The aspects covered include (i) the frequency and positioning of the questions, and (ii) categories of these questions and their linguistic choices. The views of experienced supervisors in Applied Linguistics were elicited to provide supportive explanations concerning the context in which the research questions were formulated. Recommendations are given on how teaching materials can be prepared to demonstrate the ways in which research questions can be formulated using pertinent and authentic examples actually employed by doctoral dissertation writers.

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1. Introduction

The writing of research introductions has attracted the interest of numerous scholars in the field of genre studies (e.g., Anthony, 1999; Feak & Swales, 2011; Samraj, 2005, 2008; Shehzad, 2008; Swales, 1981, 1990, 2004; Swales & Najjar, 1987) in recent decades. Scholars' increasing fascination with the analyses of research introductions appears to be related to both the important theoretical implications and multifarious practical applications of the findings obtained from such genre-based investigations. Some of these studies have focused on the overall generic structures of research introductions within a single language and discipline (e.g., Ahmad, 1997; Fakhri, 2004; Jogthong, 2001; Najjar, 1990; Ozturk, 2007), across multiple disciplines (e.g., Crookes, 1986; Samraj, 2005, 2008; Swales, 1990, 2004; Swales & Najjar, 1987), and across different languages (e.g., Hirano, 2009; Loi & Evans, 2010; Sheldon, 2011; Soler-Monreal, Carbonell-Olivares, & Gil-Salom, 2011; Taylor & Chen, 1991). Other studies (e.g., Lim, 2012; Shehzad, 2008, 2010, 2011), however, have opted to focus on only selected communicative move(s) or step(s).

The aforementioned studies appear to have been largely grounded upon Swales' (1990, 2004) seminal genre-based analysis framework in which an introduction is considered as comprising three communicative moves. It is within this

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framework that theoretical statements have been made to predict how writers schematically organise their research introductions. Swales (2004, p. 230) proposed that in research introductions, writers generally use Move 1 (i.e., ‘establishing a territory’) to provide important background information about a topic by citing previous studies in an order of increasing specificity (i.e., providing and/or citing general information before proceeding to more specific information). Having furnished essential background information in the first move, writers may proceed to Move 2 (i.e., ‘establishing a niche’) by (i) indicating a gap in past research; (ii) highlighting a need to extend the present knowledge (following a tradition or research trend); or (iii) presenting positive justifications that foreground a need to solve an existing real-life problem via research. Based on the niche established, writers rhetorically shift to Move 3 (i.e., ‘presenting the present work’) in which they announce their research purpose, present research questions or hypotheses, provide definitional clarifications, or (briefly) summarise research methods.¹ Some of these rhetorical steps, namely research purpose (or objectives), research questions and research hypotheses, have been subsequently regarded as “directional determinants” (Feak & Swales, 2011, p. 112) that have a bearing on the way in which a research report or dissertation will proceed and develop. In particular, ‘research questions’ refer to interrogative sentences (and other closely related sentences) used by researchers to seek information about a specific topic area which (i) “has not, in fact, been addressed” in past studies, and/or (ii) is “worthy of investigation” in the discipline concerned (Sunderland, 2010, p. 11). According to Andrews (2003, p. 17), a dissertation needs to be “driven by research questions” which perform the function of tying existing research literature with the rest of the dissertation. Syntactically, these questions may appear in the form of *wh*-questions, which begin with a *wh*-word (e.g., ‘What’, ‘Why’, ‘Where’, ‘Who’, ‘To what extent’, etc.), as in “What pedagogical models do teachers use in the multimedia classroom?” (Harbon & Shen, 2010, p. 281). Alternatively, these questions may occur in the form of polar (‘yes/no’) questions, which start with a primary or modal auxiliary verb (e.g., ‘is’, ‘does’, ‘will’, etc.), as in “Does focused written corrective feedback have an effect on intermediate ESL learners’ acquisition of English articles?” (Sheen, 2007, p. 260).

Compared to hypotheses, research questions are at times considered to have more utility in cases where little is known about a phenomenon. For instance, some phenomena in real life (such as those related to the use of technology) often enter the mainstream research community faster, and as a result, writers have too few studies on which to base their research hypotheses (Campbell, 2008). Under such circumstances, where there were fewer past studies upon which they can develop hypotheses, writers are more likely to present research questions (Keyton, 2011).

It is interesting that research questions (RQs) have now been specified as one of the rhetorical steps in Move 3 (i.e., ‘presenting the present work’) in Swales’ (2004) new theoretical model for predicting the organisation of a research introduction (even though they were not previously viewed as part of Move 3 in his 1990 model). The latest inclusion of research questions in Move 3 has some noteworthy implications. Although research questions are now perceived by genre analysts as a major rhetorical step in the introductory section that guides the development of a research report (Feak & Swales, 2011; Swales, 2004), no previous studies, to my knowledge, have focused exclusively on how research questions are framed in relation to other rhetorical moves and how they are realised linguistically in doctoral dissertations. Several studies (e.g., Ozturk, 2007; Shehzad, 2011; Sheldon, 2011; Soler-Monreal et al., 2011) have provided only limited clues with respect to research questions. In regard to frequencies of research questions, for instance, Sheldon’s (2011) study of Applied Linguistics research article introductions (RAIs) showed that 33.3% (6/18) of the English first language (L1) writers incorporated research questions or hypotheses while only 5.6% (1/18) of Spanish L1 writers included them. Likewise, Soler-Monreal et al.’s (2011) study of computing doctoral thesis introductions revealed that 50% of the English thesis introductions incorporated research questions or hypotheses (while merely 10% of the Spanish thesis introductions included them). In another recent study, Loi and Evans (2010, p. 2816) pointed out that writers used research questions to “offer the readers a yardstick by which to measure the success of the studies” in educational psychology. They found that research questions appeared in more than a third (35%) of the English RAs in educational psychology but only in 10% of the Chinese RAs in the same discipline, thus confirming the relative importance of RQs in English research reports. In contrast, Shehzad (2011) found that although 32.14% of the Computer Science RAs contained research questions or hypotheses, merely 7% of the RAs contained research questions (not hypotheses). Her study, however, did not provide any figure relating to research questions in quantitative experimental investigations.

In addition, Ozturk’s (2007) inquiry into Applied Linguistics RAs focused on move sequences (e.g., M1–M2–M3–M1–M3) and acknowledged that research questions could be used by writers in Move 3, but did not study the linguistic realisations and rhetorical shifts involving research questions. This means that studies have yet to analyse in greater detail how writers rhetorically shift from other moves to research questions and how these questions are realised linguistically. In this regard, our experience in teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and supervising postgraduate students has also revealed that although supervisors are often very much involved in shaping dissertation writers’ research questions, an additional challenge lies in crafting the text that immediately precedes or follows the research questions. This explains the value of conducting a thorough investigation into the rhetorical and linguistic mechanisms engaged in formulating RQs and their surrounding context in a specific discipline.

To further understand the significance and nature of research questions, we need to review some related explanations given by guidebooks on research methods and research writing in different disciplines. In education, for instance, Fraenkel

¹ Other short rhetorical steps (related to the principal outcomes, value and structure of the research report) are only considered as “probable in some fields” (Swales, 2004, p. 232).

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