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Citation behaviors of graduate students in grant proposal writing

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ABSTRACT

Although expert and student citation behaviors have been explored in different genres, doctoral students' citation behaviors in grant proposal writing have so far not been subject to investigation. This paper reports on an exploratory study involving six doctoral students in education at a research-intensive Canadian university. The participants commented on the citations they used in their grant proposals submitted to a federal funding agency. The qualitative data analysis yielded five citation functions (*to claim knowledge, to seek support, to claim importance, to establish a territory*, and *to claim competence*), which are akin to the rhetorical moves identified in previous research on scholars' grant writing. These five citation functions are predominantly accompanied with three strategies (*to emulate other writers, to follow professors' suggestions,* and *to mask unfamiliarity* with the topic), which are indices of a student identity underlying the above five rhetorical acts. We discuss how the doctoral students in the study deployed these rhetorical functions and strategies as gambits to project a scholarly identity in their grant proposal writing, and conclude with implications for teaching and further research.

1. Introduction

Many research universities encourage faculty members and graduate students to obtain grants or scholarships for their research. A successful grant proposal can potentially lead to journal publications. In writing research grant proposals, writers need to sound “competently scientific” (Connor & Mauranen, 1999, p. 49) and to “persuade without seeming to persuade” (Myers, 1990, p. 42). With such unique rhetorical skills required, grant proposal writing has attracted attention from researchers. Apart from studies that have examined the generic or move structures of grant proposals (Feng & Shi, 2004; Connor, 2000; Connor & Mauranen, 1999; Connor & Upton, 2004; Feng, 2008), a small number of studies have explored the social dimension of grant writing and/or the use of citations in relation to the moves (e.g., Cheng, 2014; Connor & Wagner, 1998; Ding, 2008; Feng, 2011; Mehlenbacher, 1994; Myers, 1990; Tardy, 2009; Tseng, 2011). Following previous research suggesting that citation practices are stamped with certain rhetorical purposes, the present study aims to explore how doctoral students use citations, either rhetorical or strategic, in grant writing.

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2. Relevant previous studies

2.1. Move structure in grant proposals

Moves or rhetorical units perform "a coherent communicative function" in written discourse (Swales, 2004, p. 228). Connor and Mauranen (1999) were the first to explore the move system in research grant proposals. Based on analyses of 34 European Union research grant applications written by researchers in Finland, they found that the proposals not only shared some of the moves identified in research papers (*establishing a territory*, *indicating a gap*, *stating the goal*, *explaining the means or methods*, *reporting previous research*) but also had genre-specific moves such as presenting anticipated *achievements*, describing the *benefits*, and making *competence, importance* and *compliance claims* in relation to the directives of the grant provider. The study suggests that grant proposals constitute a unique genre that merits investigation in its own right.

The move system identified in Connor and Mauranen (1999) was then verified in two subsequent studies. One study examined 14 research grant proposals (in both humanities and sciences) submitted to the US government and private agencies (Connor, 2000), and the other analyzed 68 grant proposals for fund raising written by non-profit organizations (Connor & Upton, 2004). In contrast to the academic research proposals in Connor (2000) that had about one fifth of the overall text featuring the move *reporting previous research* (19.58%), the non-profit grant proposals in Connor and Upton (2004) contained no such a move. This difference highlights the importance of situating the proposed study in the existing literature on research grant proposals.

Following the same move-analytic approach, Feng & Shi (2004) examined nine Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) research grant proposals written by faculty members at a Canadian university. Two new moves were found in addition to those identified previously: *communication of results* and *meta-discourse*. While the former denotes a specific expectation of the funding agency, the latter suggests a need to introduce the structure of a long proposal (6 pages, single-spaced). The moves in these Canadian proposals were then compared by Feng (2008) with nine Chinese grant proposals submitted to the National Planning Office of Philosophy and Social Sciences (NPOPSS) of China to examine grant proposals in different cultural contexts. She found that the move *research difficulties* was unique to the Chinese proposals, demonstrating the writer's "deep consideration" of the challenges of the proposed study (p. 69). In addition, compared with the Canadian scholars who presented a well-designed study in the *means* move by describing data collection and analyses, the Chinese writers laid out their plans for collecting references, networking and organizing teamwork when making the same move. Also, differing from the Canadians who referred to their previous work in making a *competence claim*, the Chinese grant writers mentioned their professional status and the references or resources they already possessed. These differences allude to the social dimension of grant proposal writing including contextual factors, institutional conventions, and different expectations of the reviewers.

2.2. Social dimension of grant proposal writing

Of the small number of studies that explored the social dimension of grant writing, two focused on how graduate students write grant proposals in US universities (Cheng, 2014; Ding, 2008). Compared with Cheng who conducted interviews with two students (one in musicology and the other in biophysics) and analyzed their PhD dissertation grant proposals, Ding analyzed interviews, questionnaires, drafts of grant proposals, observation notes, and teaching materials to examine how 35 s-year graduate students in life sciences were enculturated into the activity system of the National Institute of Health (NIH) grant writing. The two studies depict grant writing as a situated social practice, whereby students learn to follow various rules by imitating experts and learning the procedural and rhetorical knowledge of the genre. One student, for example, decided to cite a researcher that her supervisor had cited in her published articles (Cheng, 2014).

Compared with the above studies that focused on students' learning processes, studies on professional or faculty grant writing explored how and why writers make certain rhetorical moves. For example, Connor and Wagner (1998) studied seven grant proposals written by Latino personnel and submitted to US non-profit organizations, and found that these grant writers were concerned about the representation of their Latino identity in making rhetorical moves. To establish a good standing in the eyes of the native English-speaking readers, they chose not to emphasize or show much of their Latino identity so as not to run the risk of not getting funded. Also exploring the writers' purposes for various rhetorical moves, Myers (1990) explored major drafts of grant proposals written by two biologists, and noted that citations were used strategically to temper one's claim and to ensure the proposed study was original yet entirely in accordance with the existing literature.

Unlike Myers (1990) who focused mainly on the revision process, other researchers (Mehlenbacher, 1994; Tardy, 2003; Tseng, 2011) explored how seeking grants is a social practice requiring researchers to interact with the genre system of grant writing. For example, Mehlenbacher interviewed 15 academic research scientists and engineers and reported how proposals were submitted as part of a complex social process of communications between researchers and the funding agency personnel to negotiate money, technology and organizational resources. Complementing Mehlenbacher's study that explored the perspectives of grant writers, Tseng examined the perspectives of grant reviewers for a funding agency in Taiwan. By comparing the advice of the reviewers with the rhetorical moves in grant writing, Tseng highlighted the needs of grant writers to promote themselves, persuade reviewers, and promise achievements and benefits.

In the same vein, Tardy (2003) analyzed seven successful grant proposals written by two participants. Some strategies used by the participants were reading previous successful proposals, consulting colleagues, and attending university