Text analysis: noticing

The idea of noticing is borrowed from the language acquisition research of Schmidt and Frota (1986), and Schmidt (1990, p.129), who concludes that 'noticing is the necessary and sufficient condition for converting input to intake'.

We believe that by raising our consciousness about how language is used in particular social contexts for particular purposes, we are then able to notice how language is used in text and then apply it to our own writing and speaking. This process is termed discourse analysis.

Of course, the action of noticing particular aspects of language is activated only when we are 'ready' to notice how, for example, text is structured at the level of genre, or at the micro-level of the sentence. Second language acquisition theorists Dulay and Burt and Larsen Freeman (1975) identified an order of acquisition for grammatical morphemes, suggesting that acquisition is developmental. We may 'learn' and produce linguistic items when given specific exercises, but this does not mean that we 'notice' them in more demanding contexts that may require us to focus, for example, on getting the gist or interpreting speaker or writer intention.

Notice what?

Discourse structure: thesis chapters, research articles, conference papers,

presentation posters, oral presentations, etc.

There are many ways of constructing a thesis, but the main moves answer the same questions:

• What am I doing?

• Why am I doing it?

• What do I already know about it?

• How am I doing it?

• What did I discover?

• What does it mean?

• What happens next?

Depending on your discipline and the influence of your supervisor, there can be many different ways of structuring your work. The way towards deciding on a structure and a writing voice is to notice how others do it, evaluate their success and measure the structural 'fit' with your own research.

One example is offered below. For further advice and guidelines, check out the Learning Lab online and the recommended references on Page 4.

Example

The example below refers to a more traditional thesis structure.

Abstract

'Communicative moves' from general context to specific gap to method to key findings, to contribution to the body of knowledge Note: Abstract structure differs depending on text purpose – e.g. thesis or conference paper – notice the differences

• Word count (approximate length)

• Key words

• Level of detail & jargon (readability for audience)

• Verb tense choices

• Noun clusters or verb heavy?

• Passive versus active.

Acknowledgements (Thanks to...)

• General length

• Style of writing (formal vs personal)

• Order of acknowledgements (who gets first thank you?).

Contents page • Structure

• Hierarchy

• Length of headings and subheadings

• Do the headings tell a clear story?

• Uniform grammatical structure (actions vs states of being e.g. Teaching Civil Engineering vs The teaching of Civil Engineering).

Introduction

Communicative moves from general background and context to specific research issue (key definitions established in brief), identification of gap, rationale for research (why is it important and what contributions can it make?), research aims and objectives, key research questions.

• Language style

• Verb tenses – past to build context; mainly present for what I intend to do

• Number of references and type (author- prominent or information-prominent?)

• Links between previous research and current research

• Number of aims and objectives; clear meaning parallel between objectives and research questions

• Pronouns and active voice (I intend to) vs impersonal voice (This research aims to...)

Literature review (may be a part of the introduction)

Referencing styles and types (Harvard, Chicago footnoting system, APA, IEEE); author prominent, info prominent, Moves from general to specific generalised (some research; a few studies) information, and discussion about previous research; Definitions justified; Theoretical framework for thesis explained and justified over others; Previous studies critically assessed; Gap in the research identified; Rationale for the work explained – what is its value to industry, society, the body of knowledge, future research? (Methods identified, explained and justified – see below)

• Links between studies and comments on studies.

• Writer's voice – how does the writer control the literature?

• Verb tense shifts from past (found...) to present perfect (has found... that) to present (suggests that...)

• Links between previous and current research: *While X explored Y, it did not take into account Z. This research intends to incorporate Z as a prime condition in order to...*

Methods

Explanation of methods and justification for choices; philosophical underpinnings transparent in method descriptions; Demonstration of quantitative and/or qualitative validity and reliability; Analysis of limitations and ways to address them if relevant.

• In science, adjectives and adverbs relating to attention to detail

• Reference to previous methods if replicated or modified

• Verb tenses – past tense for what I did; present tense for explanations and justifications of method choices

• Personal pronoun and active voice *(I injected X with Y under clinical conditions...)* vs impersonal passive voice *(X was injected with Y under clinical conditions...).*

Results

Results connected with objectives; Highlight of significant results; Description and of and likely explanation for unexpected results.

• What verb tenses are used?

• Comparison and contrast

• The language of describing trends; tendencies

• Past tense for what was found versus present tense for explanation of findings.

Discussion

This section often included with results (check for your discipline). What do the results mean? How do they serve to uphold, counter or shed light on your theoretical frames or hypotheses or questions?

• What citations are used to link back to the intro/literature review/method sections – how are they introduced?

• Writer's voice – how is it shown?

• When are present or past tenses used?

• What language helps to emphasise the links between methods/results and the broader discussion?

Conclusion

Summary of key chapters

• Pronouns vs impersonal voice identification of possible avenues for future research to build on this new body of knowledge.

• Links between past, present and future research

• Writer's voice.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

• With dot points

Reference list/Cited works

• Organisation and layout of the list as per selected referencing system.

Appendices

Ethics approval; details of methods used, research findings; extra images or designs to supplement key points or claims; art works on DVD etc.

• Order of items

• Numbering system

• Format/layout.

Further Reading

Discourse structure and language

Davies, M. (2011). *Study Skills for International Postgraduates*. Palgrave Study Skills Series. NY: Palgrave Macmillan

Glasman-Deal, H. (2010) *Science Research Writing For Non-native Speakers of English,* London: Imperial College Press

Kamler, B. and Thomson, P. (2006). *Helping Doctoral Students Write: Pedagogies for Supervision.* London: Routledge

Klauser, H.A. (1987) *Writing on Both Sides of the Brain: Breakthrough Techniques for People Who Write.* NY: Harper Collins

RMIT University Student Services Study and Learning Centre Learning Lab – Postgraduate and Research-Writing research: Citations; Linking ideas, Verbs, Nominalisation and word choice, Building the Literature Review: Critical reading, thinking, writing; Structure; Voice Presenting research: Oral presentations; Poster presentations

Swales, J.M., & Feak, C.B. (2004). *Academic writing for graduate students* (2nd Ed.). Michigan: University of Michigan Press.

Thompson, P. and Walker, M. (Eds.) (2010). *The Routledge Doctoral Student's Companion: Getting to Grips with Research in Education and the Social Sciences.* London: Routledge.

Noticing

Bailey, N., C. Madden and S. D. Krashen. 1974. Is there a "natural sequence" in adult second language learning? *Language Learning*, 24, 2, 235-243.

Dulay, H. C. and M. K. Burt. 1974. Natural sequences in child second language acquisition. *Language Learning*, 24, 1, 37-53.

Fotos, Sandra http://applij.oxfordjournals.org/content/14/4/385.full.pdf

Larsen Freeman, D.E. 1975. The Acquisition of Grammatical Morphemes by Adult ESL Students. *TESOL*

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Schmidt, R., & Frota, S. (1986). Developing basic conversational ability in a second language: A case study of an adult learner of Portuguese. In R. R. Day (Ed.), *Talking to learn: Conversation in second language acquisition.* Rowley, MA: Newbury House. pp. 237-326.

Schmidt, R. (1990). The Role of Consciousness in Second Language Learning, *Applied Linguistics*, 11.2, Retrieved from: http://applij.oxfordjournals.org/content/11/2/129.full.pdf

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