

A Study on Examining Nursing Journal Abstract

Eunpyo Lee

School of Medicine, Eulji University

elee@eulji.ac.kr

Abstract

This paper examines nursing professionals' English abstract to learn their preferences towards tense and voice choices. A total of 24 abstracts were analyzed. Each sentence in the four parts of the abstract (Purpose, Methods, Results, and Conclusion) was examined and classified for active/passive voice, and present/past/present perfect tenses. Verbs were then further identified to see which verbs were commonly used to state the objectives of the study, methods, and to draw conclusions. Hedging in Conclusion was also examined. The results are to be compared with those of the previous studies and implications of the study to be followed.

Keywords

Abstract/active & passive voice/present, past & present perfect tense/hedging

1 Introduction

The English abstract is an indispensable piece of writing for professionals in any academic field in Korea even though not entire journal is conducted in the language.

There have been some research studies, especially in the last couple of decades or so, on tense choices in academic written discourse in English for Specific Purposes(ESP) and applied linguistics by Malcolm (1987), Gunawardena (1989), Shaw (1992) and Taylor (2001) to name a few. However, Min (2010) pointed out that not many studies have dealt with tense choices in research abstract in humanities and social sciences as previous studies were limited to English research articles of Sciences and Technology. Min's study was done on tense choices in research abstracts comparing Humanities & Social Sciences with Natural Sciences & Technology.

Abstracts are emphasized for clear, accurate statements as they present the "gist of the article in a precise and maximally efficient way" as Ventola (1997) indicated. Hyland (2004) stated that the

abstract is regarded to be unique from other genres in its characteristics. Hyland further asserted that the way abstracts are written convinces the potential readers of the articles that the writers have the professional credibility to discuss their topic as an inside member, which ultimately could lead the readers to the associated articles.

This study is to

examine nursing professionals' abstract to see what preferences are made in terms of tense and voice choices by analyzing 24 abstracts that were completed reviews and approved for publication. It is also to see if the results are any different from those of the previous studies. The research questions are as follows:

- 1) What tense and voice choices are preferred in the nursing professionals' abstract?
- 2) How different are the results compared with those of the previous ones in terms of tense and voice choices?
- 3) Which verbs are commonly used to state the objectives, methods and draw conclusions?
- 4) What type of hedging is used for conclusion?
- 5) What implications can be obtained from the results regarding English teaching on abstract writing?

2 Literature Review

2.1 Tense Choices

There are numerous studies done with English of Sciences and Technology research articles, and they report that tense choice is governed by the demand of rhetoric functions of paragraphs (Heslot, 1980; Hanania & Akhtar, 1985; Gunawardena, 1989; Biber, Conrad, & Reppen, 1998). Gunawardena (1989) reported that Introduction and Discussion are mostly presented in the present tense, while Methods and Results are in the past tense.

Similarly, Swales (1990) and Shaw (1992) did

studies on the structural characteristics of sentences, and they observed that reporting verbs are likely to be expressed in the past tense whereas non-reporting verbs are likely to be expressed in the present tense.

The results of tense choices in research abstracts are featured by the past tense according to Graetz's (1985) study and the present tense in Kaplan et al., (1994) and Kim (2008). Salager-Meyer (1992) reported that the present tense is used, though the past tense is dominantly used, to enhance the generalizability of the specific results or to express universal truth or established knowledge, and the present perfect tense is used to show the gap or disagreement with the previous research.

2.2 Voice Choices

Voice has served as a powerful metaphor for addressing the complexity of how writers establish an authorial identity in their writing according to researchers like Elbow (1994), Yancey (1994), Clark & Ivanic (1997), and Ivanic (1998) to name some. In recent years, voice has been a research term in the journals of composition studies and applied linguistics.

2.3 Hedging

The notion of hedging in the research studies has also been a research term of English learning and teaching in Korea. The term, hedging, was explained by Lakoff in 1972 as making things fuzzier using epistemic modality, such as may, might, should, can, could, must, etc. Hyland (1994), Crompton (1997), and Hyland & Milton (1997) explained it as a suitable role to present statements in an appropriate level of caution or uncertainty. In Myers' (1989) study, hedging in scientific writing was explained as a politeness strategy.

Hyland's (1996) study explored the types and the amount of hedging expressions in cell and molecular biology research articles to nurture hedges in the ESL curriculum. Based on Hyland's study, Choi and Ko (2005) compared their study on hedging with academic writing of Korean postgraduates. Lee (2007) also did a study on hedging expressions of medical research abstracts revealing difficulties and limited usage of hedging in medical articles. These previous studies clearly

indicated difficulties and necessities of using hedging in research articles.

3 Method

A total of 24 (12 in May and another 12 in November 2010) abstracts that were preliminarily reviewed by the editorial board members of the Korea Industrial Nursing Association and approved to be published were emailed to the researchers for abstract reviews. These articles were written in Korean except for abstracts. They were thoroughly examined to see which tenses and voices were preferred for Purpose, Methods, Results, and Conclusion. Verbs were then further examined to see which ones were mostly preferred for each part of the abstract. Hedging in Conclusion was identified to learn of the types and frequency. The results were then compared with those of the previous studies.

4 Results

All 24 abstracts in this study stated their purpose in the first sentence to introduce why the particular study had been done. For this section of the abstract, twenty abstracts(83%) were written in one sentence, three(13%) in two sentences and only one(4%) in three sentences. Of the 24, 13(54%) were written in the active voice whereas 10(42%) in passive, and one(4%) abstract in both active and passive voices combined. In the Purpose, the majority of the abstracts predominantly preferred one sentence and slightly over half of them (54%) stated their purposes in the active voice.

Most common verbs used to state their Purpose were *analyze, describe, examine, explore, identify, investigate, and measure*.

For results, passive-only voice was not used at all. One half(12 out of 24) was written in active and the other half was mixed of active and passive tenses. Also the Results were not stated in the present tense except for the one abstract written in the mixed active and passive present tense. The majority of them (92%) were stated in the past tense of either active voice (12 out of 22) or passive voice (10 out of 22). For conclusion of the abstract, use of present/past/mixed tenses and active/passive/mixed voices was noted. Unlike other parts of the abstract, about half of them were stated in mixed tenses of present and past, and mixed voices of active and passive.

5 Conclusion

English abstract plays an important part in academic writing as it convinces the potential readers of the article that the writer has the professional credibility to discuss the topic as an inside member, which ultimately could lead the readers to the associated articles (Hyland, 2004). In this context, an examination of abstract may be of meaningful especially in terms of tense and voice preferences in social science journals.

Previous studies such as Gunawardena (1989) indicated that Introduction and Discussion are mostly presented in the present tense, while Methods and Results are in the past tense. Martin (2003) asserted that Methods and Results are mostly expressed in the past tense while Conclusion is mostly expressed in the present tense. Lee (2004) reported that Introduction and Conclusion are generally expressed in the present tense or the present perfect tense whereas Methods and Results are expressed in the past tense. These studies seemed to agree that Methods and Results are mostly expressed in the past tense; however, Introduction (or Purpose) and Conclusion show some discrepancy in terms of tense.

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