RESEARCH ARTICLE

APPROACHES TO STUDENT ACADEMIC WRITING ANALYSIS

SHEN Li-fen

China West Normal University, Nanchong, 637000, China

SHEN Li-fen

ABSTRACT

There has been a recent increase in interest in the research of student academic writing. This article reviews the studies concerning student academic writing both broad and at home. The author describes: the previous studies with restricted research designs do not provide an adequate foundation for global conclusions concerning student academic writing; the new approach-MD analysis can combine a much broader perspective with an adequate empirical analysis of the linguistic measures involved. The article has shown more studies in English major student thesis writing need to be conducted to enrich the research of student academic writing.

Key words: student academic writing; MD analysis; register variation; Biber; academic prose

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is a highly specialized genre of writing that requires students to become aware of and understand its processes and requirements (Scarcella, 2003). A considerable body of research has done to study the linguistic characterization of student academic writing. Student academic writing research alludes to patterns of language-use that may be unique to college students. Hyland (2004) points out that academic writing holds a paramount importance for students in higher education due to the role that this high specialized writing system has at the university level. And it is natural that many studies, adopted a variety of approaches, have been conducted to describe the linguistic characterization distinct from other genres and help college students learn how to write academically in English. This paper reviews the past studies in student academic writing and proposes the research direction in this area in the future.

Previous studies

Much research in linguistics has dealt with student academic writing in recent years at home. However, much of the previous work falls into the category of microscopic analysis, that is, previous research focuses on the investigation on specific linguistic features, for instance, vocabulary, tense, voice, and cohesive device, etc.(Ji Rongqin 2007; Nie Baoyu 2012; Liu Jingwei & Feng Zongxiang 2010; Xiao Hui

2013). Relatively, variation in student academic writing has received very little empirical attention.

Few studies concerned with register variation in student academic writing (Cobb 2003; Wen Qiufang et al. 2003; Wen Qiufang 2009) offer overall linguistic characterizations of learners. In general, learner's writing is claimed to be featured with "oral style" with comparison with native speakers writing. This characterization does not adequately describe the details of the learner's writing. Relations among learner's writing and other genres are complex, and no single dimension adequately captures the similarities and differences among them; rather, a multi-dimensional model is required.

A new approach: multi-feature/multi-dimensional analysis

The multidimensional methodology (MF/MD for short) was developed by Biber (1988). He selected fifteen written genres from the LOB corpus, six spoken genres from the LLC corpus, plus the two types of letters to compare written and spoken registers in English. A total of 481 texts were analyzed by computer to compute the frequencies of salient lexical and syntactic features. Specifically, 67 linguistic features are identified as the salient and syntactic features. The co-occurrence patterns among these features are analyzed through multivariate statistical techniques to identify the functional dimensions of linguistic variation among texts and to provide an overall description of relations among genres with respect to these dimensions. Based on these features, seven underlying functional dimensions are determined. They are labelled ' Informational versus Involved Production', ' Narrative versus Non-Narrtive Concerns', ' Explicit versus Situation- Dependent Reference', ' Overt Expression of Persuasion', ' Abstract Non-Abstract Information', ' On-line Informational Elaboration', 'On-line Informational Elaboration', 'Academic Hedging'. Each dimension has a group of features that co-occur frequently in texts (Linguistic features co-occurr frequently in texts because they are used for a shared set of communicative functions in those texts). Thus, the goal of an overall description of the textual relations among genres with respect to these dimensions can be achieved.

MD approach is undoubtedly a powerful tool in genre analysis and it has been widely applied in linguistics in western for it takes advantages of macroscopic analyses using quantitative statistical techniques. But applying the approach to study student's linguistic characterization is limited in little research. Among these studies, Reppen (1994) used MF/MD approach to examine relations among spoken and written texts of American pupils; Connor (1995) analyzed the syntactic variation in middle school students' compositions across three English speaking nationalities; Van Rooy (2008) and Van Rooy & Terblanche (2009) compared Black South African English student academic writing to standard English by applying the MF/MD approach. The multidimensional model has even been seldom applied to learners' linguistic characterization at home. Lei Xiuyun & Yang Huizhong (2001) and Gui Shichun (2010) used the MF/MD approach partly for reference to study academic prose; Ma Guanghui (2002) and Wen Qiufang (2009), with reference to the conclusions of Biber's multidimensional model, compared Chinese student academic writing to American student academic writing to investigate specific linguistic features. All these studies have failed to apply the MF/MD approach systematically.

A recent exception to these types of studies is Pan Fan's (2012) "MF/MD analysis of written texts produced by Chinese non-English major undergraduates and graduates", but this systematic understanding of variation in student academic writing remains limited in the design of corpora:

1. Some are timed essays in LONCESS while untimed in the learner corpus.

2. The topic is various in LONCESS but is vague in the learner corpus.

3. Essays are 1995 in LONCESS while are after 2010 at least in the learner corpus.

4. Essays words and text numbers in two corpora are not equal.

5. LONCESS essays are collected from several universities in America but essays in the learner corpus are limited in one university.

In short, Corpora in Pan Fan's study are not comparable in the genre, subject matter, global superstructure (e.g. Introduction-Procedure-Discussion), "that might affect the expression of the textual concept(s) under comparison." (Connor, Ulla M. & Moreno, Ana I, 2005).

CONCLUSION

This review of past studies in student academic writing reveals a focus on non-English major student writing, with the overwhelming majority of the research on short essays. Past work has neglected the more specific genre important for students--thesis writing. In sum, the discipline of applied linguistics needs a fuller linguistic description as the basis for student thesis writing materials that represent the full extent of English major students' future university tasks.

REFERENCES

Biber, Douglas. 1988. Variation across Speech and Writing. [M]. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Cobb, T. 2003. Analyzing late inerlanguage with learner corpora: Quebec replications of three European studies [J]. Canadian Modern Language Review 59: 393-423.

Connor, U. 1995. Examining syntactic variation across three English speaking nationalities through a multifeature/multidimensional approach [A]. In D. Rubin (ed.). Composing Social Identity in Written Language [C]. Hillsdale, N. J.: Lawrence Erlbaum. 75-87.

Connor, Ulla M. & Moreno, Ana I. 2005. Tertium Comparationis: A vital component in contrastive research methodology. In P. Bruthiaux, D. Atkinson, W. G. Eggington, W. Grabe, & V. Ramanathan (eds), Directions in Applied Linguistics: Essays in Honor of Robert B. Kaplan. Clevedon, pp. 153-164. England: Multilingual Matters.

Gui Shichun. 2010. A Corpus-Based Analysis of the Register of English Linguistics [M]. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

Hyland, K. (2004). Genre and second language writing. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.

Ji Rongqin. 2007. An Analysis of Metadiscourse Function of Anticipatory It-Clause in English Major Student Thesis Writing [J]. Crazy English(Teachers), 54-57.

Liu Jingwei & Feng Zongxiang. 2010. An Analysis of the using passive voice in English Major Student Thesis Writing [J]. Journal of Shenyang Agricultural University. 12 (3) : 327-329

Lei Xiuyun & Yang Huizhong. 2001. Corpus-based Methodology, MD/MF Analysis and Academic Genre Analysis. [J]. Modern Linguistics (2):143-151.

Ma Guanghui. 2002. Contrastive analysis of linguistic features between EFL and ENL essays. [J]. Foreign Language Teaching and Research. (5): 345-349.

Nie Baoyu. 2012. An Analysis of the using modal verbs in English Major Student Thesis Writing: Case Study of Guangxi Normal University. [J]. Northern literature, No.9.

Pan Fan. 2012. MF and MD analysis of written texts produced by Chinese non-English major undergraduates and graduates. Foreign Language Teaching and Research. [J]. Vol. 44 No.2

Reppen, Randi. 1994. Variation in Elementary Student Writing. Ph.D. diss., Northern Arizona University.

Scarcella, R. (2003). Academic English: A Conceptual Framework. Linguistic Minority Research Institute. University of California, Irvine (pp.1-44).

Van Rooy, B. 2008. A multi-dimensional analysis of student academic writing in Black South

African English [J]. English Worldwide 29: 268-305.

Van Rooy, B. & L. Terblanche. 2009. A multi-dimensional analysis of a learner corpus [A]. In A. Renouf & A. Kehoe (eds.). Corpus Linguistics: Refinements and Reassessments [C]. Amsterdam: Rodolpi. 239-254.

Wen Qiufang, Ding Yanren & Wang Wenyu. 2003. Features of oral style in English compositions of advanced Chinese EFL learners: An exploratory study by contrastive learner corpus analysis. [J]. Foreign Language Teaching and Research. Vol.35, No.4

Wen Qiufang. .2009.A Study on Changes of Register Features in Learner English [J]. Journal of Foreign Languages. (4) :2-10.

Xiao Hui. 2013. Cohesion and Coherence in English Abstracts of English Majors' BA Theses in China. [J].Crazy English(Teachers),136-141.

SHEN Li-fen