

“OVIDIUS” UNIVERSITY OF CONSTANȚA

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**SUMMARY IN ENGLISH OF
THE DOCTORAL THESIS**

Genre-based Approaches to the Analysis of Academic Essays

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Cuvinte cheie / Key words:

genre, moves, steps, academic essay, argumentative essay, macro-level analysis, micro-level analysis, ESP, EAP

Rezumatul în limba engleză al tezei de doctorat

Summary in English of the Doctoral Thesis

Introduction and context

In academic settings, writing is one of the key skills that students have to develop and to constantly improve. According to Klimova (2012), writing fosters communication as it makes the students express their personalities by thinking of arguments, which can be logical and persuasive, thus developing cognitive skills. Furthermore, writing is necessary when learning a second language, especially at higher levels, when preparing for admission to university programmes and throughout higher education studies.

Since the mid-1980s there has been an increased interest in analysing language in academic and professional settings taking a *genre-based* approach (Swales, 1981, 1990, 2004; Halliday, 1975; Bhatia, 1991, 1993).

Research Objectives

Building on the existing literature in the field, this research will aim to explore the generic features of academic essays from several perspectives. The main research aims include

- (1) exploring the specific features of academic argumentative essays, with a view to understanding the requirements and reader expectations in an Anglophone academic context,
- (2) identifying salient features of comparable academic essays produced by learners in a Romanian setting,
- (3) identifying similarities and differences across essay sets, and, finally,
- (4) exploring the views of experienced trainers, with relevant expertise in the domain under focus in the current study.

More specific objectives of this study include exploring similarities and differences at various levels, at the cognitive level, morpho-syntactic and stylistic level, as well as the differences regarding the communicative purpose, the macro-structure of the essays and the selection of the linguistic structures used in the essays in order to identify a main framework on which students can build their own essays.

Methodological Approach and Corpus

Genre analysis has been combined with a corpus-based approach and complemented by the views of experienced language practitioners, elicited through interviews and a questionnaire with open-ended questions.

To this end, two corpora of argumentative essays have been compiled:

- A. Corpus A, consisting of essay samples provided as models corresponding to IELTS exam task 2 requirements for band 7, selected from the *IELTS examination Blogspot*¹ and from the *IELTS Trainer*², *IELTS Academic volume 13*³ and *14*⁴.
- B. Corpus B, consisting of authentic student essays, written by candidates who are preparing for the IELTS examination.

The features of the argumentative essay are, thus, analyzed by relating them to a specific genre, in order to identify the similarities and differences in terms of the essays' structure and the selected linguistic means.

The analysis of the essays was carried out on different levels:

- Macro-level analysis to identify the basic structural components ("moves" based on Swales, 1990) of content organization.
- Micro-level analysis to identify the linguistic realization of the macro-structural components.
- Manual parsing analysis to observe in detail some of the rhetorical, stylistic and morpho-syntactic means used in correlating the macro-structure with the micro-structure.

The methodological approach, thus, integrates genre analysis, especially at macro-level, with micro-level analysis, closely observing the lexical and grammatical elements, to comprehend the linguistic realization of certain macro-components. Corpus concordancing helps identify the frequency of occurrence and the distribution of various linguistic characteristics, within a

¹ <http://ieltsexamination.blogspot.com/> Last accessed on 14.06.2022

² <https://bayanebartar.org/file-dl/library/IELTS2/IELTS-Trainer/IELTS-Trainer.pdf> Last accessed on 04.08.2022

³ <https://ielts.oxinchannel.app/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/IELTS-Cambridge-13.pdf> Last accessed on 04.08.2022

⁴ <http://ielts-house.net/Cambridge-IELTS-14/Cambridge-IELTS-14-General.pdf> Last accessed on 04.08.2022

given discourse and across essay types, for comparative purposes. However, this analysis goes beyond the linguistic features, it aims to identify how specific academic writing requirements are reflected at the level of macro-structuring and signalled at micro-level, how functional elements are correlated with linguistic features ensuring coherence and consistency across moves and steps, throughout the entire academic essay.

Chapter overview

This study consists of five chapters. The first chapter, “Introduction”, sets the scene, by contextualising this research endeavour and also explaining the rationale for embarking on this research.

Chapter 2, “Theoretical framework, literature review and methodological approach” is subdivided into 7 sub-chapters. The first sub-chapter starts with the etymology of the word *genre*, and how its definitions and use changed over time. The focus is on conceptual and terminological clarifications, with special emphasis on the relevance of *genre* in Applied Linguistics. Related concepts and phrases, such as *discourse*, *register*, *discourse community*, *English for Academic Purposes (EAP)*, are also briefly introduced.

The second sub-chapter starts with a brief presentation of approaches in the field of discourse and genre analysis. This is followed by a presentation of studying English for Academic Purposes (EAP), its applied nature and how this method is academically perceived. Therefore, several approaches to genre pedagogy are presented, among which the English for Specific Purposes School (ESP School), the Sydney School and the School of Rhetorical Genre Studies (the RGS School).

The beginning of such genre-based pedagogies is discussed in the next sub-chapter, where English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) are further presented. In addition to definitions, purposes, similarities and differences between the two approaches, there is an introduction to argumentation, the argumentative essay, how it is constructed and its importance. The connections between genre and corpus leading to the analysis of academic writing are also discussed in the next sub-chapter. Brief presentations of register, corpus and discourse analysis are followed by a discussion of their benefits and shortcomings.

In the sub-chapter “Methodological approaches and corpus selection in the current study”, more details on the research methods used are provided, as well as on the corpora selected for

the genre and corpus-based analysis (a corpus of academic essays produced in the Anglophone context, examples of guidelines on essay writing, examples of learner essays produced in the Romanian context, and other relevant texts).

The third chapter, “Macro-level and micro-level analysis of the essays in Corpus A. Findings and discussion”, consists of five main sub-chapters, each dedicated to the analysis of a set of data and the use of specific methodological approaches. These sub-chapters refer to the macro-analysis of the essays in the five sub-corpora obtained by classifying them according to the essay type based on their task requirements, the discussion of findings at macro-level of the academic argumentative essay, the micro-level analysis of the five essay types and the manual parsing of three micro-features specific to all the essays and their correlation with the moves obtained in the first analysis. The purpose of this macro-level analysis is to identify common features within a genre and to compare them with those identified in the other corpus.

The first sub-chapter focuses on the macro-level analysis of the text structure, which allowed for the identification of certain move patterns, some of which are different or similar to those in the other sub-corpora. This analysis grants some conclusions, which are drawn regarding the move patterns and their communicative roles or functions.

The next sub-chapter presents the discussion of findings regarding the basic macro-structure of the argumentative essay. This structure was established by combining all the macro-structures of the five types of essays found in corpus A.

Then based on the results of the macro-level analysis, a micro-level analysis is conducted with a special focus on comparisons and triangulation based on the use of complementary research methods. The purpose of this analysis is to highlight the essential features of the linguistic realization corresponding to the moves, such as the communicative purpose for expressing the authors' own choice for certain linguistic or rhetorical means, etc. This analysis was correlated with all the moves in an attempt to find the linguistic devices used to express those move patterns.

Sub-chapter 3.4 focuses on the micro-level analysis of a selection of three moves and steps, considered important for this specific genre. The steps and moves analysed were "expressing own view", "exemplifying" and "expressing cause, reason and effect". This analysis was done by combining manual parsing with the concordancing analysis, in order to be able to recognize the features at micro-level.

The fourth chapter, "Macro-level and micro-level analysis of the essays in Corpus B. Findings, comparisons, discussion", focuses on authentic student essays (Corpus B) and consists of a replica of the analyses conducted on the essays in Corpus A. This chapter also includes information on the guided, semi-structured interviews carried out with experienced language practitioners, the number of respondents and their profile.

Chapter 4 consists of eight main sub-chapters. The first sub-chapter presents the macro-level analysis of the essays in corpus B, drawing parallels between corpus B and corpus A findings. Therefore, if in corpus A the macro-structure contains fewer steps, in corpus B there is a greater variety and abundance of steps.

Chapter 4.2 presents the discussion of findings regarding the macro-structure established for the argumentative essay. If in corpus A this was achieved by combining all the macro-structures featured by the five essay types, in corpus B there were only four sub-corpora of essays. The next sub-chapter presents the micro-level analysis of the essays in corpus B. This analysis is rendered in antithesis, in comparison to corpus A, and presents a similar analysis to the one carried out in chapter 3.

In the next sub-chapter, the micro-level analysis of the steps and moves for "expressing own view", "exemplifying" and "expressing cause, reason and effect" is presented. These components were similar to those chosen for analysis in corpus A, in order to be able to analyze and compare the results obtained.

Sub-chapter 4.5 synthesises and discusses the findings of the micro-level analysis of corpus B. This analysis was also correlated with all the macro-structures found.

4.7 reports on the interviews conducted with experts in preparing and training candidates for the IELTS exam and the responses to a questionnaire with open-ended questions. Both the interviews and the questionnaire had a twofold aim, that of triangulating the findings of the text-based research and that of verifying the validity of the pedagogical implications of this research. The questionnaire consisted of five questions that referred to the degree of difficulty of each essay type and how these essays are perceived by the candidates, what challenges they face when writing an argumentative essay and how they can be helped to overcome these problems. Another question mentions the means trainers use to highlight linguistic and stylistic aspects specific to each essay type. The relevance of this research as well as its pedagogical implications provide a framework that candidates can use to organize their thoughts, to develop

their arguments and use adequate language for the academic field. A sub-chapter with partial conclusions concludes this chapter.

Chapter 5 contains the conclusions of this extensive research study.

Conclusions, Contributions, Implications

These essays selected for this research were divided into two corpora:

- A) Corpus A consists of 109 samples selected from training courses
- B) Corpus B consists of 35 authentic student essays written by candidates preparing for the IELTS examination

First of all, the 109 essays were classified into sub-corpora, *Discussion* (35 essays), *Opinion* (47 essays), *Advantages and disadvantages* (12 essays) and *Problem and solutions* (11 essays). There is also a category where the rubric is unconventional, and thus, it is a mixture of two types of essays, more specifically *Opinion-and-problem and solution* (4 essays).

Corpus B was grouped into four sub-corpora, according to the rubric: *Discussion* (5), *Opinion* (21), *Advantages and disadvantages* (5) and *Problem and solution* essays (4).

The macro-level analysis of the essays in the two corpora (Chapter 3 and Chapter 4) revealed clear and consistent organisational patterns in the texts belonging to a genre. These particularities are as follows:

- a) visible similarities in the structuring of the sample essays belonging to a sub-corpus, and therefore, this means that it was possible to identify preferred patterns of moves and steps in each sub-corpus;
- b) possible patterns of move structuring that could be identified in each of them;
- c) combinations of moves within the macro-framework serve specific communicative purposes.

Therefore, the macro-level analysis of the two corpora revealed a certain symmetry in the organisational structure of the texts belonging to a certain genre. Despite the general similarities found at the macro-level, there are variations at the level of moves and steps, as observed by Swales (1990). The comparative analysis of the sample essays in each sub-corpus revealed that some components are mandatory while others are optional. The same applies to the steps within an essay, which can also be necessary or optional. Furthermore, some moves

form certain combinations of specific move strings with a repetitive character within the structure of an essay.

The qualitative analysis of Corpus B also indicated that authors used fewer connectors and expressions to delineate the structure and progression of their arguments with the respective steps and moves, comparable to Corpus A. Although the linking devices in Corpus B were largely analogous to those found in Corpus A, there were minor variations in the frequency of some specific terms. Additionally, the authors in Corpus B were more inclined to use personal examples to substantiate their viewpoints, whereas Corpus A authors provided a more balanced range of examples, including relatively few personal ones. Moreover, Corpus B authors exhibited a tendency to present predominantly pro-arguments when composing *Advantage and Disadvantage essays*, in contrast to Corpus A, where a more balanced presentation of for and against arguments was observed.

The similarities, as well as the subtle variations, can be attributed to the specific content and the distinct lines of argumentation developed in each essay. These, in turn, were shaped by the requirements and prompts outlined in the corresponding rubrics and guiding questions.

All these analyses can be instrumental for further exploring language and, at the same time, diversifying EAP teaching. This research comes to improve the academic writing pedagogy as it fosters understanding of genre-specific features and conventions which students will have to master. Furthermore, students will also be able to better organize their ideas, understand and apply rhetorical strategies and linguistic choices of effective academic arguments.

The comparative studies discussed in this research pave the way for comparisons between different types of academic writing. An example of this can be regarding the occurrence of rhetorical questions in essays while in dissertations or articles rhetorical questions are often avoided.

The limitations of this study may reside in the small number of essays belonging to corpus B and which could have led to different results. Furthermore, if the number of essays of the two corpora had been similar, then the results observed might have been different.

Further studies can involve a cross-cultural analysis of genre features in argumentative essays. This research could investigate how cultural contexts influence the genre-specific features of argumentative essays at both the essays' overall structure and organization, and the micro levels, involving the authors' linguistic choices and rhetorical strategies. Furthermore, the

results obtained could contribute to the understanding of how cultural factors shape writing styles.

Another type of study could imply evolving genre features in argumentative essays in digital vs. print media as a way to explore the impact of digital media on writing practices, contributing to the fields of digital rhetoric, media studies, and genre theory. The objective of this research lies in examining how the transition from print to digital media affects the genre-specific features of argumentative essays at both macro and micro levels, in print (e.g., journals, newspapers) and those published online (e.g., blogs, online articles).

In a nutshell, this study could be taken further and it may prove relevant both in a research context and in EAP teaching and learning settings.

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