



Thesis and Dissertation Writing: Preparing ESL Students for Research

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Abstract—Large numbers of ESL students are undertaking degrees throughout the world where they are required to write a thesis or dissertation in English. These students often have difficulty in meeting the demands of the kind of writing required of them at this particular level. They are often unaware of the level of preparation writing a thesis or dissertation requires of them. This article describes a program which aims to help ESL students prepare for thesis and dissertation writing by focusing on the thesis proposal as an important part of that process. © 1997 The American University

Introduction

Recent years have seen increased attention being given to thesis and dissertation writing in the ESP literature. James (1984), Dudley-Evans (1986, 1988, 1989, 1994), Hopkins and Dudley-Evans (1988), Ramani (1988), Richards (1988), Swales (1990), Shaw (1991), Jenkins, Jordan and O'Weiland (1993) and Belcher (1994), for example, have discussed the analysis and teaching of various aspects of theses and dissertations across a number of different disciplines. Davis and Parker (1979), Mauch and Birch (1989), Madsen (1992) and Preece (1994), in books on thesis and dissertation writing aimed at native speakers of English, also discuss the design and development of thesis proposals. Whilst the information contained in these books is clearly important for ESL students, they do not always examine texts—such as research proposals—in a way which might be most useful for the ESP classroom. Other books discuss writing research proposals to gain funding and to win contracts (see Helgeson 1985; Huckin & Olsen 1991; Stewart & Stewart 1992). These books are also often not adequate for ESP thesis proposal writing courses due to the differences between writing a proposal for funding and contract purposes, and the specific task of writing a proposal for a thesis or dissertation.

There do not, equally, appear to be any teaching programs for ESL students (in the published literature, at least) which focus on writing thesis and dissertation proposals. This is a significant gap, given the large number of ESL students enrolled in degrees throughout the world where they are required to write a thesis or dissertation in English. For example, in 1990, almost half of the nearly 400,000 international students attending American institutes of higher education were enrolled in degrees which required them to write a thesis or dissertation (Institute of International Education 1990). Similarly, many of the 63,000 international students attending Australian institutes of higher education in 1993 were engaged in a similar level of study (Illing 1994). There is also a very large number of such students in British and Canadian universities. These students often have difficulty in meeting the demands of the kind of writing required of them at this particular level (Samuelowicz 1987; Casaneave & Hubbard 1992). Many of them are also unaware of the importance of the thesis proposal in the overall thesis and dissertation writing process. As Madsen (1992) in *Successful Dissertations and Theses* writes, the thesis proposal is often an important element in successful thesis and dissertation writing and, as such, a key first step in the research process. Clearly, the research itself may develop and change from this beginning stage of the research, but time spent in the preparation at this stage usually helps students gain an important initial focus, and to determine the parameters of their research, from which they can then proceed.

This article describes a program which provides ESL graduate students with guided instruction in this stage of the thesis and dissertation writing process, the preparation of a thesis proposal. The program was developed to proceed over a series of 3 sessions. The content and focus of these sessions is shown in Table 1.

Theoretical Framework for the Program

The theoretical framework for the development of the program aims to integrate goal-oriented and process-oriented approaches (Widdowson 1981; White 1988) to program development. This integration of approaches is supported by Raimes (1991, 1993) [and others] who proposes a "balanced

TABLE 1
Course Content: Writing a Thesis Proposal

<i>Writing a Thesis Proposal</i>
Developing a thesis proposal
Choosing and focusing a thesis topic
The structure of a thesis proposal
Areas to cover in a thesis proposal
Details to cover in a thesis proposal
Reviewing the literature
Thesis expectations
Further reading

process approach” to language program development which pays attention to form, content and reader expectations along with a focus on the individual learner. The program, thus, aims at the production of thesis proposals which meet the expectations of the particular discourse community at which they are directed (Swales 1990), as well as providing students with tasks and strategies which will enable them to learn, for themselves, how such a text might be developed.

The procedure for progression through the program is broadly based on an instructional framework presented by Grever, Moston and Sexton (1981) and further developed by Slade and Norris (1986) which moves from activities which concentrate on organising and analysing information through to developing and using the information for the creation of new texts. Activities, thus, move in a top-down fashion from analysis and identification of macro-level features of the text (in this case, the structure, purpose and content of the texts) through to the creation of new texts by a process of “gradual approximation” (Widdowson 1978: 91–93).

Preparing to Write a Proposal

The first section of the program is devoted to preparing for writing their thesis and dissertation proposals. Areas focused on here include drawing up a shortlist of topics, selecting a topic for investigation, formulating a general question and focusing a research question. The importance of spending as much time as necessary to get the question right is highlighted here as this often causes new researchers considerable difficulty (Nunan 1992). It is also pointed out that the research question needs to be both “worth asking” and “capable of being answered”, that is, the study needs to be both significant and feasible. Students are encouraged to strike a balance between the value of their question and their ability to develop a thesis proposal which, in realistic terms, they are capable of carrying out. Students are also encouraged to look at journal articles, and at completed theses and dissertations in their own area for research that may be suitable for replication in a different context (depending on the level of degree they are undertaking) or taking one, or several, steps further.

Students next decide on the aims and objectives of the study, formulate their research question(s) or hypothesis, and think about the data that need to be collected in order to answer their question(s). They then draw up an initial research plan, after which they continue reading to ensure they are on the right track, as well as to determine how their proposed research fits in with research already carried out in their area.

Establishing the Structure of a Thesis Proposal

The next section of the program is devoted to drawing students’ attention to the overall structure of thesis proposals. The first activity students carry out employs a thesis proposal written by a previous student in the depart-

ment. The text is copied and cut up into sections, parallel to each of the main sections of the texts. The headings for each section are separated from the body of the text and the students' first task is to match these headings to the relevant sections of the text. Students then sequence the sections of the text according to its logical development. From this activity, a sequence of stages is established on which to base a description of the structure of the text.

From here, attention moves to two further thesis proposals in the same general area. Students, first of all, examine these proposals to identify the structure of each of the texts. Once this is established, students draw up a statement which accounts for the structure of all three thesis proposals. This statement accounts for the sequence of the stages of the texts, obligatory and optional stages, stages that may recur, and stages which occur separately, or conflate into one single stage, or both.

Details to Include in a Thesis Proposal

The program now moves to details that need to be included in a thesis proposal. Students are directed to one of the sample proposals and a list of points that are often covered in thesis proposals. Students then examine the proposal to see how well each of these points has been covered. This list of points is presented in Table 2.

The Purpose of a Thesis Proposal

Now that students have examined the thesis proposals in detail, they then proceed to identify the purpose of the text as a whole, as well as the purpose of each of the stages of the texts. A sample answer to this task is presented in Table 3. The aim of this task is to highlight the overall rationale for the proposal—to provide students with a well thought through, and defensible, work plan for the preparation and carrying out of their research—as well as to clarify the purpose of each of its stages.

This task also aims to provide students with a framework they can refer to for the development of their own topic-specific proposals. The framework they develop includes stages which were identified in the analysis to be “optional”, as well as those that were seen to be obligatory. Students are encouraged to see these “optional” stages as ones which they could include to make for a stronger and more substantive proposal, rather than ones they can simply choose to “leave out”.

Reviewing Relevant Background Literature

The next section of the program focuses on the main points to consider in writing the literature review section of a thesis proposal. It is pointed out

TABLE 2
Details to Include in a Thesis Proposal

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- (1) A clear statement of the overall purpose of the proposed research.
 - (2) A clearly focused research question/hypothesis that is worth asking and capable of being answered.
 - (3) Precise definitions of the key terms in the research question(s) or hypothesis that will allow them to be clearly observed, measured and identified throughout the study.
 - (4) An awareness of key research which has already been carried out in the particular area including:
 - (i) what conclusions were reached in this previous research, by whom and when;
 - (ii) whether these conclusions are in agreement or conflict with each other;
 - (iii) the main issues or controversies which surround the problem;
 - (iv) significant gaps in previous research in this particular area.
 - (5) An appropriate choice of research approach for the particular question or problem including a well defined list of procedures to be followed in carrying out the research. This should include the method of data collection and analysis. The proposal should also include, if appropriate:
 - (i) a broad description of any particular theoretical framework to be used in this analysis and the reason(s) for its use in the study;
 - (ii) a brief statement describing how the sample population will be selected for the study and the reason for the approach to selection;
 - (iii) a pilot study in which the research instruments are trialed and evaluated, and an analysis is carried out of the trial data.
 - (6) A section which highlights any anticipated problems and limitations in the proposed study including threats to reliability and validity, and how these will be countered.
 - (7) A statement which illustrates why the study is significant; that is, why the research question/hypothesis is worth investigating.
 - (8) Consideration of ethical issues involved in carrying out the research such as whether informed consent needs to be obtained, and if so, how this will be done.
 - (9) A proposed table of contents for the thesis or dissertation as a guide to the possible scale and shape of the final piece of written work.
 - (10) A list of references which relate to the proposal. These should reflect the detail and organisation of the referencing system required by the particular institution where the proposal is being presented.
 - (11) Appendices (if appropriate) which contain any material that will be used or adapted for the study, including any permission that might need to be obtained to use it.
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that this section of the proposal need not be as extensive as what might be written for a final thesis or dissertation. It does, however, still need to highlight the main issues raised in previous relevant research as well as lead to the reason for the particular study being proposed. That is, it should lead the reader to the gap in the research that needs to be explored (Swales 1990). The literature review, thus, should provide the reader with an overview of the state of knowledge in the particular area of investigation and of major questions in the particular area. Reports on studies directly related to the proposed research need to be discussed in more detail, including information about the methodological approach used, data collected and analysis of the data. Students are also reminded of the need to critically evaluate these studies, rather than just presenting factual information about them. The review of relevant background literature, thus, needs to describe the previous research, and the results of that research, in such a way as to indicate where the present proposal is “situated”.

TABLE 3
Thesis Proposals: Structure and Purpose

<i>Stage</i>	<i>Purpose</i>
Title of the study	To synthesise in a few words what the research will focus on.
Summary of the research	To present a statement of the research which summarises what will be examined, how it will be examined and why it is worth examining.
Overall purpose of the research	To present a detailed statement of the aims and objectives of the research.
Relevant background literature	To demonstrate the relationship between the proposed research and what has already been done in the area.
Hypothesis to be tested or research questions	To provide a statement of exactly what the research will explore.
Operational definitions	To state exactly what is meant by the key terms and constructs employed in the proposal.
Research methodology	To give a detailed description of how the research question(s) will be answered and the steps the research will move through in order to do this.
Anticipated problems and limitations of the study	To show an awareness of the limitations of the study and what problems may be involved in carrying it out.
Significance of the research	To provide an argument for why the research is worth carrying out.
Resources required	To anticipate what resources will be required for the research and how these might be obtained and funded.
Proposed table of contents	To give an overview of the scale and possible organisation of the final research report.
Ethical considerations	To state how issues such as confidentiality and informed consent will be dealt with in the study.
Bibliography	To provide detailed references and bibliographic support for the proposal.
Appendix	To provide examples of materials that might be used or adapted for the study.

Thesis Expectations

A question which is commonly asked by students is what is expected of a piece of research at the particular level at which they are carrying it out; that is, in what way a Master's thesis is different, for example, from a doctoral thesis? This is not always an easy question to answer as this may vary from university to university, from department to department and from program to program. As an initial step in helping students find an answer to this question, they are, first of all, directed to the sections in Madsen (1992: 3–5) and Preece (1994: 189–193) where this question is discussed in detail. They are then directed to university and departmental guidelines and descriptions for the research component of the particular degree they are undertaking. Students bring these descriptions to class, and discuss and compare them in detail. Students look, in particular, for statements of minimum (and maximum) word length, level of originality and “contribution to knowledge” required of them for the particular piece of research they are undertaking. Each of these points is important for students to consider as they have a direct bearing upon the scope and focus of the research they

are preparing to undertake and, in turn, the proposal they are writing in preparation for that research.

Writing Individual Thesis Proposals

The final section of the program focuses on the planning and writing of individual thesis proposals. The teacher, first of all, provides students with the abstract, and key tables and figures from the methodology section of a piece of research relevant to the interests of the particular group of students. Students then, in pairs or groups, plan the writing of a proposal for the particular piece of research, referring as they go to the structure for thesis proposals they identified earlier in the program, and the summary of purpose and stages of the text (see Table 3). Once students have written a “gradual approximation” of the thesis proposal, attention then turns to their own work in progress. First, students brainstorm their proposal, focusing on the areas that need to be addressed in each section of the text. They then write a rough draft of the proposal based on these working notes. Students present these draft proposals to the rest of the class, and invite comments and suggestions on how they might develop their proposals further. Finally, students use this outline and the notes they have taken throughout the program, to develop proposals for their own individual theses. Students, at this point, are also directed to further reading on the particular approach, or approaches, to research they will employ in their study.

Evaluation of the Program

An important final stage of these sessions is the evaluation of the program. In their response to a recent delivery of the program, all students agreed that they found the program interesting and useful. They also stated that they were now better aware of what is involved in carrying out a research project and felt better prepared for writing their thesis proposal. These evaluations also highlighted the importance of placing the program within the context of particular faculties’ or departments’ research and supervision interests. That is, the program needs to not only provide students with direction in how to prepare for research, but also needs to inform them of the particular areas in which research support is available to them so they can match their research interests with the interests and supervision capacities of the particular department in which they are studying. Another point which has arisen from these evaluations is the importance of timing the delivery of the program in consideration of students’ other writing commitments. That is, as much as students may wish to attend the course, they may find themselves having to choose between this and meeting other more immediate and pressing academic deadlines. It is, therefore, important that the program be offered to students at a time when they are most able to attend, and profit, from it.

Conclusion

This article has described the development of a program which aims to help ESL students prepare for thesis and dissertation writing by focusing on the thesis proposal as an important part of that processes. The program focuses, in particular, on the structure, purpose and content of thesis proposals. As Godsen (1991) argues, in a discussion of questions of “cost and benefit” of preparing ESL students for research, writing activities such as thesis and dissertation writing can be a springboard for ESL students from being students-in-training to being student-researchers and beyond. The acquisition of a skill such as writing a thesis proposal, thus, can also be part of the acquisition of a more significant lifelong skill; that is, preparing to carry out research in the broader academic and/or scientific communities of which many of them might ultimately wish to become part.

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