

## MACRO-LEVEL “MOVES” OF ABSTRACTS IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS THESES

**Fathi Omar Maeza**

*English Department, Faculty of Human sciences*

*Alasmarya Islamic University*

*Zilten, Libya*

[f-amaizah@asmarya.edu.ly](mailto:f-amaizah@asmarya.edu.ly)

### **Abstract**

The study investigated the “move” structure of abstracts in applied linguistics theses written by Master of Arts in English Language Studies at UKM at the macro-level. The corpus used in the study consisted of 22 abstracts: 11 abstracts written by Arab postgraduates, and 11 abstracts by Malaysian postgraduates. Following Santos’s (1996) model, the abstracts were annotated for macro-level structure by using Markin 3.1 software, a semi-automated program. These five “moves” are situating the research (SR), presenting the research (PR), describing the methodology (DM), summarizing the results (SZ), and discussing the research (DR). The results show that these five “moves” are available in all abstracts. However, the total instances of these “moves” differ between the two groups. The overall instances of PR were similar in the abstracts of both groups. SR was used by Malaysian postgraduates more frequently than the Arab postgraduates whereas DM, SZ and DR were used by Arab postgraduates more frequently than Malaysian postgraduates. It is evident that the applicability of this model to the abstracts of the two groups is acceptable because all the “moves” are found in these abstracts with some differences represented by the different instances of occurrence of these “moves” in these abstracts.

**Keywords:** *abstracts, genre, postgraduate, Arab, Malaysia*

### **Introduction**

Theoretically tracing the origins of genre analysis, Chan and and Foo (2001) declare that the genre theory as emphasized by Swales (1990) is one of the most important theories which provide explanation of the academic literacy practices in the area of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP). The theory is based on the assumption that researchers or research writers as members of such discourse community are explicitly knowledgeable about the specific form of writing as they follow specific linguistic and ideational structures which are consistent with the language rules being applied in respective written literacy practices. “Genre analysis, a recent development of discourse analysis, has concerned itself with describing the higher level organization and structure of written or spoken texts. It aims to study communicative purposes and strategies in using the language” (Linli 2005:22).

For the last few decades, there has been an interest in using a genre-based analytical approach based on Swales’ (1990) theory to investigate various genres in academic discourse community. The focus was made on the linguistic patterns and structural features which characterize a given genre in its discourse community (Pezzini 2003). The growing interest of researchers in genre analysis stems from the systemic analysis. This interest is offered by this approach because researchers can observe the repeated communicative functions presented in

genres and the linguistic characteristics of available functions, thus, making it one of the main influences on the recent practices in language learning and teaching in general and in ESP and EAP. Thus, conventional rules that researchers adhere to characterize one specific genre such as an abstract or journal article clearly distinguishes itself from other genres. Acquiring knowledge of conventions of the genres is usually based on immersing in the particular discourse community related to that particular genre, and it may be developed and enhanced through formal instruction provided by experts in a given discourse community.

Pezzini (2003) states that an abstract, which is a brief summary of research, is recognized to be of great importance since it gives a general, but brief overview of the work. It also outlines the most important aspects in guiding the reader through the text. Any research abstract (RA) has a macro structure which is defined by Weissberg and Buker (2005) as the informational or ideational parts such as background information of the study, the purpose and the scope of the study, the methodology being used, the most important or significant results obtained in the study and the statement of conclusion or recommendation.

Since the current study is concerned with the genre analysis of abstracts of M.A theses at the macro-level, it is important to point out that writing research abstracts is characterized by a multi-sided-problem and complexity which is encountered by English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners joining higher education at universities. The first side of the problem is that most of the postgraduates joining English Language Studies Program in Malaysia come from EFL and ESL learning environments where they do not seem to have sufficient knowledge of the conventions of writing research abstracts particularly, the necessary conventional “sub-moves” which make up the “moves” of research abstracts. It is pointed out by Tshotsho (2006) that students get confused and disoriented by the nature of the academic literacy especially since they come with a set of conventional knowledge which turns out to be different from the convention of the academic context where they join as students. Another side of the problem is the complex nature of writing abstracts in English. It is stated by Oneplee (2008) that the process of writing abstract is a complex and daunting task in its nature because writers of abstracts are demanded to prove that they are knowledgeable and well-experienced at the principles of briefly summarizing the whole article or thesis into a short paragraph. So it is a challenging task for EFL learners to write effective abstracts. However, Malaysian postgraduates come from an ESL learning environment where they have been more exposed to such academic writing. Although it is possible that they have several challenges or problems in this area, the situation for them is not worse than the Arab postgraduates. thus, the purpose of this study was to analyze the “move” structure of abstracts of theses in applied linguistics written by postgraduates at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, UKM, at the macro level. Thus, it aims at answering this research question: What are the “move” structures in abstracts of theses of Arab and Malaysian postgraduates at the macro-level?

### Model of Macro-level “moves” Analysis

Genre analysis model is based on the theoretical assumptions offered by schemata theory by Bartlett (1932) in cognitive psychology. According to this theory, it is assumed that readers of any text have the prior knowledge structure in their mind about a particular text (Bartlett, 1932, cited in Chen, 2009). Chen (2009) indicates that the schemata assist readers to interpret, comprehend, produce and interact actively with the writer to process the text further and efficiently. Thus, such theoretical notions have contributed to the genre concept of the abstract and Swales (1990) stresses that RA should consist

of the macro – structure; an Introduction, a Methods section, Results, Discussion and Conclusion (Swales, 1990). The rhetorical structure at the macro level analysis, as stated by Pezzini (2003: 79), is ordered in this way: Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion and Conclusion (IMRD). Applying the model by Swales (1990) in the field of applied linguistics, Santos (1996) further investigated the “moves” structure in RA. Santos (1996) closely looked at the characteristics which make up 94 published RA abstracts from these journals; Language Learning, Applied Linguistics, and TESOL Quarterly at the macro level of textual organization and content. Santos (1996) related each of the sentences to one of the four sections namely; Introduction, Method, Results, and Discussion of the research articles. In other words, each sentence was connected to its appropriate section of these four sections. After this extensive investigation, a five-“move” pattern was proposed by Santos (1996) as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Macro-level “moves” for RA in applied linguistics

“Move” No.	“Moves”	Abbreviations
“Move” 1	Situating the research	SR
“Move” 2	Presenting the research	PR
“Move” 3	Describing the methodology	DM
“Move” 4	Summarizing the results	SZ
“Move” 5	Discussing the research	DR

### Methodology

The data utilized for this study were obtained from 22 abstracts: 11 abstracts were written by 11 Arab postgraduate students and 11 abstracts were written by 11 Malaysian postgraduate students while reading for their Masters at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, UKM, Malaysia.

The abstracts were typed using Microsoft Word and later converted to text files. These text files were used in Markin 3.1 to identify the “moves” at the macro-level following the

model proposed by Santos (1996) as shown in Table 1. The interface of Markin 3.1 is shown in Figure 1. The reason for choosing this particular software is that this software has the functions required for the task of identifying the “moves”. It is a software program which assists users such as teachers in various electronic marking applications. By using this software, users can mark and annotate students’ texts and return them back to their students quickly. Once marking is over, the texts can be saved in Markin software as XHTML documents.

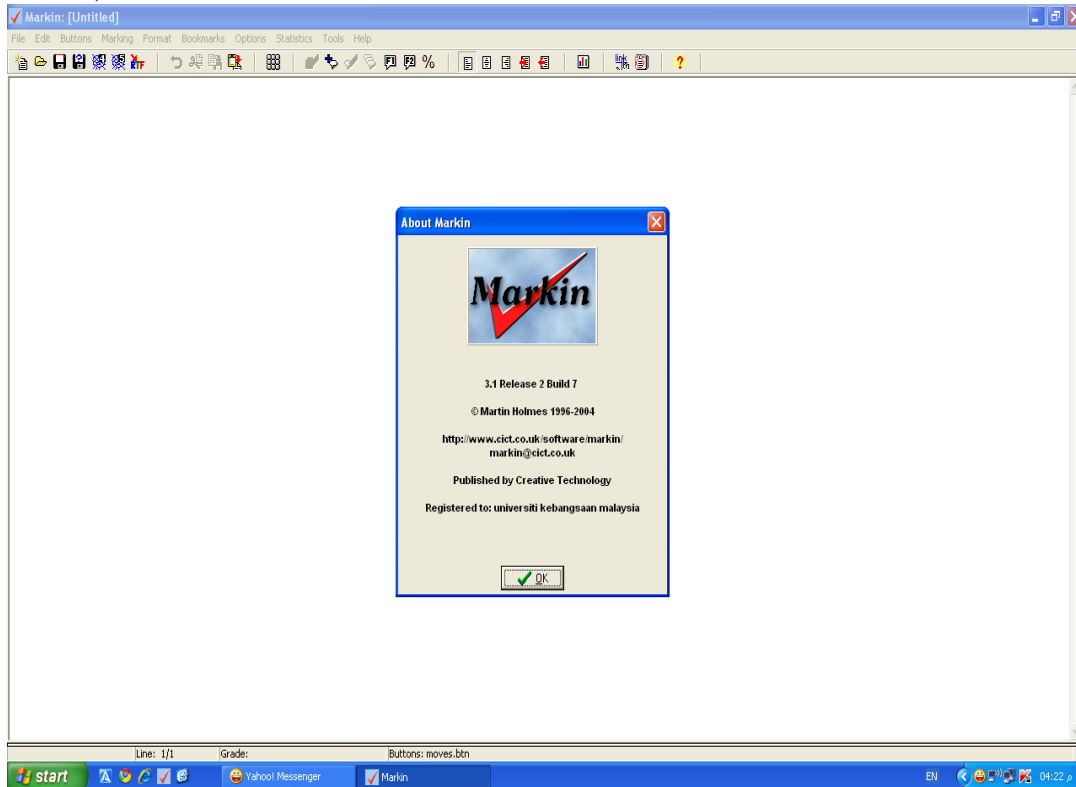


Figure 1: Markin 3.1 Software Program

In order to carry out the analysis, the researchers constructed the buttons for the “moves” in Markin3.1. The corresponding “moves” available in the abstracts are annotated by using the buttons as shown in Figure 2.

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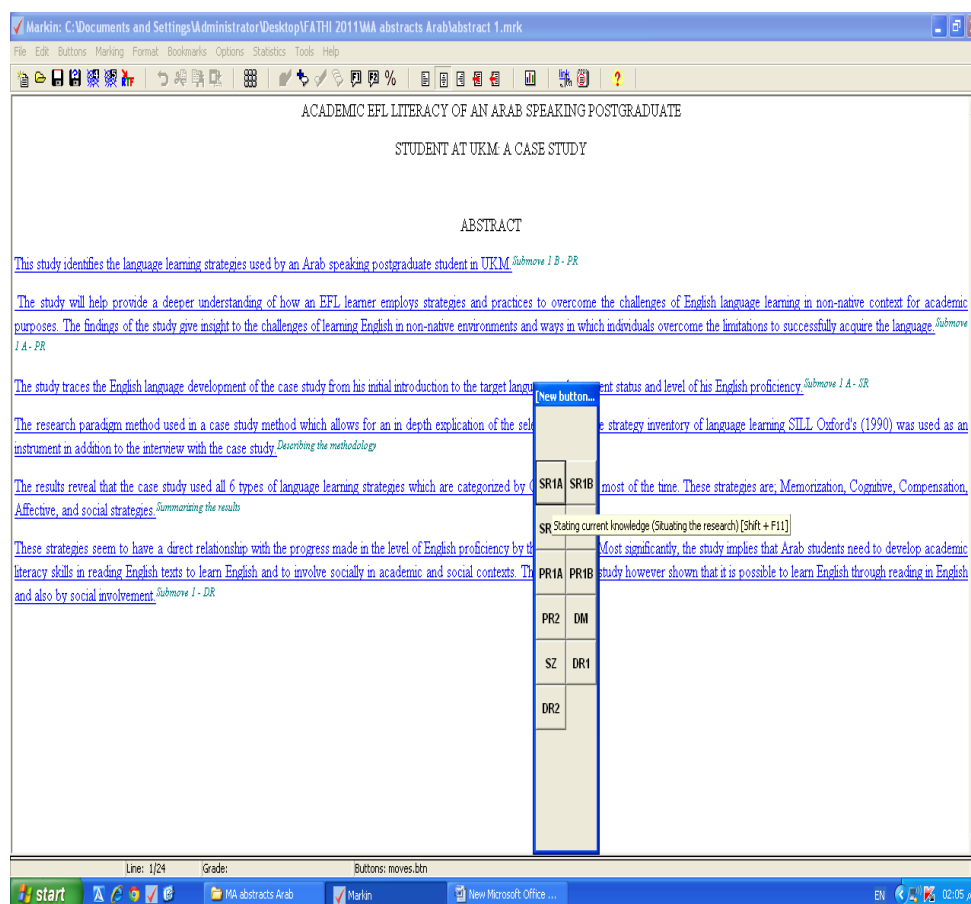


Figure 2: Annotated buttons of Markin 3.1

For the second stage, researchers inserted the other abstracts as text files one by one into Markin 3.1. Analysis was carried out for each of the abstracts. The software then generates a frequency count for the “moves” automatically. An example of frequency count for a sample abstract is shown in Figure 3.

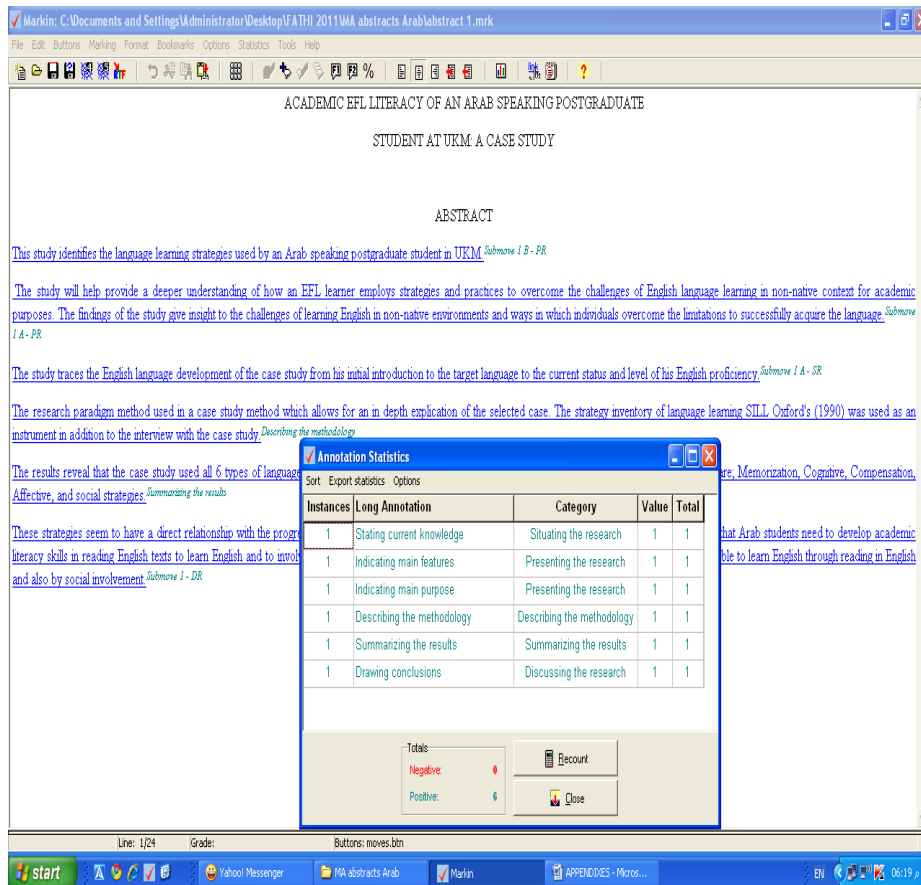


Figure 3: Interface of a Sample of the Abstract in Markin 3.1

The last stage of the corpus analysis involved calculating the overall frequency of occurrence of the main or major “moves” at the macro-level for all abstracts.

## Results and discussion

In analyzing the 22 abstracts for the macro-level structure, the instance of occurrence of each “move” in each abstract was noted. The total occurrence of each “move” was also calculated in the 11 abstracts of each group.

### Arab postgraduates’ abstracts

The first part of this section presents the number of occurrence of each “move” in the 11 abstracts written by Arab postgraduates. Table 3 shows the instances of occurrence of the five “moves” in the abstracts.

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Table 3: Occurrence of the “moves” in Arab postgraduates’ abstracts at the macro-level

<b>“Moves”</b>						
<b>Abstract</b>	<b>SR</b>	<b>PR</b>	<b>DM</b>	<b>SZ</b>	<b>DR</b>	
Abstract 1	1	2	1	1	1	
Abstract 2	2	1	1	1	0	
Abstract 3	1	1	1	1	1	
Abstract 4	2	0	1	1	2	
Abstract 5	2	2	0	0	0	
Abstract 6	0	1	1	1	1	
Abstract 7	1	1	1	1	0	
Abstract 8	1	1	1	1	0	
Abstract 9	0	2	3	3	1	
Abstract 10	0	2	1	1	1	
Abstract 11	1	1	1	1	1	
Total	11	14	12	12	8	

In analyzing the instances of the occurrence of SR (the first “move”) in the 11 abstracts, it was found that the number of the occurrence of this “move” is 11. However, the distribution of the instances of occurrence of this “move” shows that this “move” is only found in 8 abstracts while it was not found in 3 other abstracts. It is obvious that the occurrence of this “move” is two times in abstracts 2, 4 and 5 respectively. The three Arab postgraduates did not situate the research in their abstracts. A possible reason why this “move” is not available in their abstracts is because they may looked at this particular “move” as not essential or as a “move” which does not necessarily make up an important element of RA.

The total number of occurrence of PR (the second “move”) as displayed in Table 3 was 14 times. The instances are distributed in 10 abstracts. This “move” does not occur in the fourth abstract. In comparison to the previous SR “move”, it is evident that the occurrence of PR outnumbered the occurrence of SR. Moreover, it is clear that PR was used in 10 abstracts, which means that 10 out of the 11 postgraduate Arabs were aware of the importance of presenting the area of their research in the abstracts so that it can be clear for any reader to make a mental picture of what the research area is, what the purpose of each study or what is hypothesized and is proposed to be tested in that particular study.

In finding out the frequency of occurrence of DM (the third “move”) in the 11 abstracts written by the postgraduate Arab students, as displayed in Table 3, this “move” occurred 12 times in

11 abstracts. This “move” is used three times in the ninth abstract. This is because this abstract explained the methodology in 3 separate sentences where three types of tests were used as methodological tools. In comparison to the first two “moves”, this “move” is essential to be included in all the 11 abstracts except the fifth abstract. This is because it is essential to state the kind of methodology used in the study. Based on the results obtained from the occurrences of this “move” in these abstracts, the postgraduate Arabs realized the fact that it is essential for a researcher to state the kind of methodological tools they had to use for collecting and analyzing the data in their studies. However, for the unavailability of this “move” in the fifth abstract, it could be attributed to the nature of the study carried out in that thesis.

The number of occurrences of SZ (the fourth “move”) is 12. Like DM, SZ occurred 12 times in all 11 abstracts except the fifth abstract. It implies that it is essential for the students to summarize the results obtained in their theses. The reason for the absence of this “move” in the fifth abstract is possible to the use of the DR instead of SZ. The distribution of the instances of occurrence of SZ is also similar to that of DM since it was found that SZ occurred three times in the ninth abstract in which DM occurs with the same number. This suggests that the results in this abstract were summarized in three separate sections or sentences according to the three tests used as tools for data collection by the student. Thus, similar results are reflected by the same occurrences and distribution of these two “moves” found in the Arab postgraduate abstracts imply that the participants’ perception of the importance of summarizing the main results of these studies is almost equal to their perception of the importance of stating the type of methodology used in their research. In addition, it can be implied that to some extent, using SZ “move” corresponds to using the DM “move” as indicated by the same number of occurrence of the SZ and DM “moves” in the ninth abstract.

The frequency of DR (the last “move”) in the Arab postgraduates’ abstracts was 8 times in 10 out of 11 abstracts. This indicates that discussing the main results or findings in these abstracts was perceived by the Arab postgraduates to be less important than the SZ “move” or some of them found it sufficient to summarize the results as an alternative way of discussing them in their abstracts.

In summary, Arab postgraduates use all of the 5 “moves” in their theses abstracts. The most frequently used “move” among these “moves” was PR occupying the highest frequency of the “moves” as it was used 14 times. It was followed by DM and SZ, (equal number of occurrences), and then by SR and DR respectively. However, based on the distribution of these “moves” in the abstracts written by 11 Arab postgraduates, PR, DM and SZ “moves” are found to have the first rank among all these five “moves” since they were distributed in 10 abstracts out of the total 11 abstracts. They are followed by the SR and DR “moves” as these two “moves” were distributed in 8 abstracts out of 11 abstracts.

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### Malaysian postgraduates’ abstracts

In analyzing the 11 abstracts written by Malaysian postgraduates at the macro-level, the same analysis for each “move” in each abstract was conducted for all abstracts. The results of the analysis are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Occurrence of the “move” structure in Malaysian students’ abstracts at the macro-level

“Moves”						
Abstract	SR	PR	DM	SZ	DR	
Abstract 1	0	2	1	0	0	
Abstract 2	0	2	1	1	1	
Abstract 3	2	1	1	1	1	
Abstract 4	2	2	1	0	1	
Abstract 5	2	1	1	1	1	
Abstract 6	1	1	1	1	1	
Abstract 7	1	1	1	1	0	
Abstract 8	1	1	0	1	0	
Abstract 9	0	1	1	1	0	
Abstract 10	0	1	1	1	0	
Abstract 11	2	1	1	1	0	
Total	12	14	10	9	5	

Based on the quantitative results displayed in Table 4, the number of the occurrence of SR (the first “move”) in the 11 abstracts written by Malaysian postgraduates is 12. Tracing the abstracts in which SR occurs, it was found that this “move” was used in 7 abstracts while it was not found in 4 abstracts. It is possible that this “move” was not that important to be involved in these four abstracts. It is evident that the importance of the existence of this “move” in the Malaysian postgraduates’ abstracts as perceived by them is less than the Arab postgraduates.

For the occurrence of PR (the second “move”), it was revealed that it occurs 14 times, and it is used in all 11 abstracts. In comparison to the frequency of occurrence of SR, it is obvious that the instances of occurrence of PR outnumbered the occurrence of SR, and it occurred in all the abstracts. The specific result of the occurrence of this particular “move” suggests that the Malaysian postgraduates are highly aware and have high perception of the importance of presenting the research areas in their abstracts as to enable the reader to grasp knowledge of what the thesis is about, what are the most important features indicating or pointing to the principle area of research is, and what is the purpose of carrying out such study. Information about these aspects is very essential to be stated in research abstracts.

As far as the instances of occurrence of DM (the third “move”) in the 11 abstracts written by Malaysian postgraduates, this “move” occurred 10 times in the 11 abstracts as shown in Table 4. Since stating the methodology is assumed to be an essential part of abstracts, this move was found in all these abstracts except one abstract. Although DM should have been included in all abstracts, it was found only in 10 abstracts. The reason for the absence of this move in that abstract can be attributed to the nature of the study from which this abstract was taken. In other words, the thesis was conducted on investigating multicultural strategies in one novel. This can make it possible to state that the nature of the study area in which the thesis was conducted could be taken as an important factor which provides a reason for justifying the absence or the presence of this “move” in these abstracts.

The “move” SZ (the fourth “move”) occurred 9 times in 11 abstracts. It occurred in 9 abstracts while it is not used in the first and fourth abstracts respectively. The reason why this “move” was not used in these two abstracts reflect the fact that the “move” DR is perceived as an alternative “move” by the students to use in their abstracts. Another reason for the absence of this “move” in some abstracts can be that the postgraduates lack of the necessary skills in summarizing the major results or findings of these studies briefly in their abstracts.

For the last “move”, DR, the results revealed that the number of occurrences of this “move” were only 5 times in all 11 abstracts. In the abstracts where this “move” is not used, the “move, SZ is included. This may indicate that this “move” was not perceived by the Malaysian postgraduates as important as SZ “move.”

Thus, the most frequently used “move” among these “moves” in 11 abstracts written by Malaysian postgraduates is PR. This is followed by SR, DM, SZ and DR respectively. However, in terms of the distribution of these five “moves” in the abstracts, it is evident that PR is ranked as the first since this “move” was distributed in all the 11 abstracts written by the Malaysian postgraduates. It is followed by DM, SZ, SR and DR since these “moves” were used in 10, 9, 8 and 5 abstracts respectively.

Looking at the findings obtained from the analysis of the abstracts at the macro-level of these two groups of postgraduates, Arab and Malaysian, it is evident that the applicability of this model to the abstracts is acceptable because all the “moves” stated in this model are available in these abstracts with some degree of differences represented by the different instances of occurrence of these moves in these abstracts. The findings also support the theoretical perspectives regarding abstracts as a genre as stated by Swale (1990). Taking these abstracts into consideration as a genre which is distinguished from other genres in academic writing, the findings obtained in the present study do not only confirm the applicability of this model by Santos (1996), but they also make it clear that writing abstracts in the field of applied linguistics follows certain rules or conventions reflected by these “moves”.

In relating the findings of the current study to other findings obtained by other previous researchers who have investigated the structure of abstracts, the findings support these findings in some aspects and are not consistent with the previous findings in other aspects. The findings

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obtained by this study confirm the same findings of the study by Santos (1996) in analyzing the RA from journals of Language Learning and Applied Linguistics. Similarly, Pho (2008) analyzed the structure of 40 empirical RA abstracts randomly selected from four journals in the areas of applied linguistics and educational technology. It was revealed that the most common “moves” found in the corpus are PR, DM and SZ in both fields. They were followed by DR and SR. The findings of experimental study by Feltrim et al. (2003) in analyzing the rhetoric structure of the 52 Portuguese theses abstracts in terms of schematic structure also revealed that they followed the setting, purpose, methodology, result and conclusion. Zhen-ye (2008) found that the macro-level structure of the abstracts in financial economics was based on (P), (M), (R) and (C). In identifying the ideational parts of any abstract, Weissberg and Buker (2005) ordered them as (B), (P), (M), (R), and (C)

In identifying the rhetorical organization commonly followed in civil engineering abstracts, the findings of the experimental study by Kanoksilapatham (2009) revealed that the structure consists of a set of five “moves” present in the abstracts, interacting with each other forming a particular structural organization. They are B, P, M, R, and D. The findings of the current study do not support some aspects of the findings of previous studies. This is due to the fact that those researchers applied different models to investigate abstracts in various fields. Most of these abstracts examined by them were RA. This confirms the idea that abstracts is a distinguished genre depending on the field of studies.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the findings summarized previously have provided a reasonable answer to this research question and they have some implications. The findings of this study regarding the analysis of Arab and Malaysian postgraduates’ abstracts at the macro-level showed that all abstracts included all these five “moves” proposed by Santos (1996). This indicates that the view of abstract as a genre refers to the category or classification of discourse communities which share common patterns of mechanisms, conventions and similar aspects of communication among the members of that particular community. This implies that this model is more effectively applicable to analyze the abstract as a distinct genre in the area of academic research in Applied Linguistics. Although several approaches proposed by Swales (1990), Bhatia (1993), as stated by Cava (2007) have been applied by many researchers in analyzing the “move” structure of abstracts, this model seems to be more suitable and more effective in this area. As it is indicated by Beeson (2005) that the most significant activity in abstracting is the activity of deciding which part of information in an abstract is of great significance. Thus, it has pedagogical implications in teaching academic writing in ESL and EFL.

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### REFERENCE

References in the text should be indicated by Arabic numerals in square brackets that run consecutively through the paper. Authors should ensure that all references are cited in the text and vice versa. The reference list should contain only literature references.

## حركات" الملخصات على المستوى الكلي في أطروحات اللغويات التطبيقية"

فتحي عمر امعيزة

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية العلوم الإنسانية بالجامعة الاسمرية الإسلامية، زيتين، ليبيا

### الملخص

تناولت الدراسة دراسة بنية "الحركة" في الملخصات في أطروحات اللغويات التطبيقية التي كتبها طلاب الماجستير في دراسات اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعة ماليزيا الماليزية على المستوى الكلي. وتألفت المجموعة المستخدمة في الدراسة من 22 ملخصًا: 11 ملخصًا كتبها طلاب دراسات عليا عرب، و11 ملخصًا كتبها طلاب دراسات عليا ماليزيون. ووفقًا لنموذج سانتوس (1996)، تم شرح الملخصات من أجل هيكل على المستوى الكلي باستخدام برنامج ماركين 3.1، وهو برنامج شبه آلي. وهذه "الحركات" الخمس هي وضع البحث (SR)، وتقديم البحث (PR)، ووصف المنهجية (DM)، وتلخيص النتائج (SZ)، ومناقشة البحث (DR). وتُظهر النتائج أن هذه "الحركات" الخمس متوفرة في جميع الملخصات. ومع ذلك، فإن إجمالي حالات هذه "الحركات" تختلف بين المجموعتين. وكانت الحالات الإجمالية لـ PR متشابهة في ملخصات كلتا المجموعتين. وقد استخدم طلاب الدراسات العليا الماليزيون نموذج SR بشكل أكثر تكرارًا من طلاب الدراسات العليا العرب، في حين استخدم طلاب الدراسات العليا العرب نموذج DM و SZ و DR بشكل أكثر تكرارًا من طلاب الدراسات العليا الماليزيين. ومن الواضح أن قابلية تطبيق هذا النموذج على ملخصات المجموعتين مقبولة لأن جميع "الحركات" موجودة في هذه الملخصات مع بعض الاختلافات التي تمثلها الحالات المختلفة لحدوث هذه "الحركات" في هذه الملخصات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الملخصات، النوع، الدراسات العليا، العرب، ماليزيا