

The Genre of the Referee Report

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Abstract

The referee report is a genre that the medical profession and other researchers need to master in order to take an active role professionally in the discourse community of which they are members. Limited access to and research on the genre have meant that instructional material available for novice writers of referee reports, for whom English is not their mother tongue, is limited. This paper investigates a corpus of referee reports in terms of structure, sentence patterns and lexis, and considers if there is a standard referee report format. Ways of integrating the skills required to write a referee report into the writing curriculum are considered.

Key words : referee reports, writing skills, English for Medical Purposes, genre

Introduction

The aim of English for Medical Purposes (EMP), English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is to provide instruction and practice in skills that mirror as closely as possible future tasks to be carried out as members of the discourse community students aspire to join. To this end, the teacher of EMP is required to investigate such tasks, often breaking them down into their component parts and simplifying them so that they can be taught and practiced in class. As investigation techniques have become more sophisticated, we have found out more about the skills needed to become fully-fledged members of the discourse community. It is now clear that a wide range of skills need to be mastered. For the medical profession and other researchers, target skills include some or all of the following : reading case reports and research articles, giving and comprehending oral and poster presentations, taking part in formal and informal discussions at international conferences, acting as a chairperson or moderator, writing papers, handling the submission process and associated correspondence involved, replies to the editor, acting as a referee and so on. Some of these skills have come under intense scrutiny by applied linguists, resulting in improved knowledge of the genre, creation of more relevant teaching materials that represent the task more accurately and which will help students to function more effectively. This is particularly true in terms of presentation skills and other tasks involving listening and speaking. Additionally, writing skills, particularly the research article, have received a considerable amount of attention. However, the writing skills required for people to take part in academic communications that support the

research process are more extensive than simply producing a research article or case study. Articles have to be submitted with covering letters. Submissions will naturally provoke referees' comments that have to be answered and this involves the sub-skills of negotiation, explanation and persuasion that are substantially different from the skills needed to write a research article.

One task that members of an academic community face at some stage in their careers is that of the referee report. For a number of reasons, this is a genre that has received little or no attention and is rarely included on standard writing syllabuses at undergraduate and graduate school level. Peer reviews are considered an occluded genre (Gosden 2003) that are under-researched because of lack of access and confidentiality. The referee report is a genre that a surprisingly large number of researchers need to master. Although there are no exact data on the number of referees, here in Japan, it seems to be a rite of passage that researchers are called upon to carry out at surprisingly early stages in their careers. Mungra and Webber (2010) report that there are one million scientific publications a year. Although not all of these will be refereed articles, this still means that a large number of referees are required to keep the scientific communication process going. With the increase in online journals, as well as the increase in the number of new journals coming out, the need for referees is ever increasing and editors have to cast their net widely to get reliable reviewers.

Another difficulty associated with investigation into the genre of the referee report and also the teaching of it, is the fact that there is disagreement about the standard format of a review, the information contained therein, as well as the balance and focus. Gosden (2003) states that there are common features, but that different disciplines, journals and publishers can all add to the diversity and, added to this, there may be problems caused by different linguistic backgrounds and cultural expectations. Fortanet (2008) maintains that referee reports represent a highly conventionalized genre that even experienced researchers may have trouble with, requiring manuals, guidelines for reviewers and an ever increasing number of how-to-review articles.

Being appointed as a reviewer and writing referee reports are steps along the line to becoming a fully-functioning member of the academy. The ability to write a report is something that is generally not taught and needs to be learned by members of a particular scientific community. Even experienced researchers may have problems with this genre and require guidelines of the type that will be useful for non-native speakers of English. As Gosden (2003) points out, the linguistic, functional and rhetorical skills needed to write a referee report are both complex and different from the skills required to write a research paper. Accordingly, the peer review process is of interest to teachers involved in supporting the writing activities of non-native speakers, who need to write referee reports. This would suggest that novices in the early stages of their professional lives should be exposed to as broad a range of skills as possible to equip them with the tools to take on academic communication in support of the

research process. This process is something that needs to be analyzed in its broadest terms, taught and integrated in the writing curriculum. Since researchers spend more time writing in the target language than they do in using it orally or aurally, and also because it means so much more to them in terms of their careers, it seems there is a very immediate need for teachers of EMP, ESP and EAP to familiarize themselves with the genre and make the teaching of it part of the writing curriculum.

Is there a standard for referee reports?

In many genres that researchers need to master, there is a fairly clear-cut standard format. This is particularly true of the research article, the poster session and, to a lesser extent, oral presentations. Although the referee report is an occluded genre, research on it has found various features in common. For example, Fortanet (2008) notes that although there is no format for referee reports, most reviewers' comment on a macro or overall analysis, as well as on a micro or specific level of detail. Analysis by Swales (1990) has revealed that many reports have four different moves, which are as follows : move 1. summarizing judgment regarding the suitability for publication, move 2. outline of the article, move 3. points of criticism, move 4. conclusion and recommendation. One of the major problems for novice reviewers is that they are usually thrown in at the deep end and told, here is a paper, review it. In many cases, they resort to copying chunks from reports that they or their colleagues have received.

Corpus of referee reports

For this study, I was kindly allowed access to referee reports in an international journal published 4 times a year. The journal receives about 425 submissions a year of which 30 percent are accepted. The journal has approximately 300 reviewers. Ten percent of the reviewers are native speakers of English and their reviews were excluded from this study. In all, 650 reviews were investigated. They varied in length from just 4 sentences to over 5 pages with the average being a single page of A4.

Do referee reports have standards?

Perhaps the easiest way of answering this question is by considering structure. Although there is some variation in the structure of the referee reports most of them have a standard pattern, which once mastered will make it possible to write a report with some confidence. My findings show that almost one hundred percent of referee reports that I screened consisted of three main parts. They started with a summary of the topic, which identified the main results and commented on how the paper fits in with the existing literature. The second paragraph looked at major issues in the paper and was presented in the form of numbered points. The third paragraph looked at minor issues and was also numbered. In general, reports were between one and two pages long. Most reviewers keep to this basic structure, although some writers make

more extensive opening paragraphs than others and in some cases writers omit them completely. In the following section, I will focus on the standard content of the opening paragraph, looking at common sentence patterns and lexis, giving common examples where necessary.

The opening paragraph usually consists of up to 7 sentences and is a brief summary of the paper that states the authors' aims, the methods used, the results they arrive at and how those results fit in with the literature. Functionally, the purpose of this part of the report is to provide a short overview of the paper and to convince the editor and authors that the paper in question has been carefully read and understood by the reviewer.

In general, the opening paragraph is divided into 8 specific linguistic moves that I describe below.

1. Introduce the general research topic

The authors investigated the incidence of dental caries in children.

2. Introduce more specifically the topic

They focused on the risk of developing dental caries in relation to smoking.

3. Introduce the main findings

They found that snacking can increase the risk of developing caries by 20 percent or more.

4. Introduce more detailed findings

They stated that risk is related to frequency and consistency of the snacks consumed.

5. Introduce further detailed findings

It was also reported that risk depends to a greater degree on consistency than amount consumed.

6. The study and methods are commented on

This study is well conducted and the methods used are appropriate.

7. The data is commented on

The data is clearly presented.

8. How the paper fits in with the reported data

These findings will be of interest to dental practitioners, as well as researchers in the field.

In terms of the lexis in the opening paragraph, a fairly fixed set of academic words are used. In part 1, general research topic, the following verbs were used: **analyze**, **describe**, **focus on**, **examine**, and **investigate**. The article under review was referred to in the following ways: **article**, **paper**, **manuscript** and **report**. In the majority of cases, the simple present tense was used. For example, 'This article analyzes', 'This paper describes', 'This paper focuses on', and so on. In part 2, phrases such as 'It specifically focuses on' and 'In particular, the paper focuses on' are used. In part 3, frequently used phrases are as follows, 'The authors show that', 'The authors demonstrated that', 'The authors found that', 'The authors reported that'. In parts 4 and 5, detailed findings are introduced with the following verbs: **they state that**, **they point out that**,

they maintain that, they report that, they suggest that. In parts 6 and 7, the simple present tense verb 'be' is used in the following way. 'The methods section is clear'. 'The data is clearly presented.' In terms of relevance to the community the verbs and phrases commonly used are as follows: **the conclusions contribute to, the article provides, the data will be of interest to, the information will be of use to.** Finally, it is worth noting that the opening paragraph is neutral in tone, does not include critical comments or detailed discussions and does not comment on the acceptability of the paper for publication. However, I have been informed that in certain fields, particularly physics, there is a trend towards reviewers commenting on the acceptability of the paper in the review itself. Personally, I feel that this can put the editor in a difficult position if reviewers have widely differing views on the quality or acceptability of the paper.

We now turn to the generic features of the second paragraph of the referee report. Analysis of this section shows that the second paragraph focuses on major comments, taking a macro view of the paper and its findings. Most comments relate to the scientific and methodological content with about 60 percent or so of the comments in this category. Points are numbered, which assists both authors and editors in understanding, replying to and checking the points raised and the answers provided.

The second paragraph usually has a title such as major comments. Underneath that comes the main section, which is usually started in the following way: **I have the following concerns, The authors should address the following points, There are a number of issues that require attention.** It is more difficult to characterize the language used in the second paragraph because it is more loosely structured and has fewer clearly defined linguistic moves than paragraph 1. This is because the argument is more densely created. Here is an example of how reviewers build up their arguments and make up arguments. In this case, the reviewer builds up a comment in a four-step move. Reviewers comments are given in italics and my analysis and explanation in bold.

The authors concentrated on a single group of 14 patients.

The reviewer introduces a statement of fact.

I think that the authors need to look at two or three groups of 14 patients each.

The reviewer suggests further action on the part of the authors.

This would help to eliminate any bias in a particular class in terms of treatment.

The reviewer justifies the reason for the point made above.

At present the number of patients in the study is too small to make any really meaningful conclusions.

The reviewer restates the problem.

The third paragraph is made up of minor comments. Predominantly, they are language based, making up for approximately 40 percent of the total number of comments in this section. The

points covered are vocabulary, grammar, clarity of writing, typographical errors, references, length and minor changes to Figures and Tables. Here is an example of the type of comments that typically appear in the third paragraph. Reviewers comments are given in italics and my analysis in bold.

1. *The description of methods used on page 4 needs a reference.*

Here the reviewer asks for a reference.

2. *A table showing essential information such as number of patients, their ages, levels of pain and treatment history would be useful for readers.*

The reviewer asks for more information on a number of points.

3. *The references need considerable revision. At present they do not conform to the Journal Guidelines. There are several errors.*

The reviewer points out shortcomings in the references.

4. *I note that both American and English spelling are used. Please standardize all spelling and usage so it conforms to American English.*

The reviewer requests that the spelling is standardized.

The writing curriculum

I note that there are relatively few EMP programs here in Japan that focus either exclusively or predominantly on writing. Instead other skills such as oral and poster presentations receive more attention. This is because the teaching of writing is thought to be difficult, and requires considerable preparation and marking. Certainly, a class focusing on oral skills in the form of poster or oral presentations will seem to be more enticing for students and, for teachers, easier to organize and teach. Another reason for the lack of writing skills programs is that English classes at a lot of medical and dental universities in Japan focus on first and second-grade students, where a basic oral/aural approach based on general English is the norm. It is surely higher up the grades and particularly at graduate school and for post-doctoral students that classes in writing, particularly for those who need to write academic papers or case reports, are most needed. Some universities have set up writing centers in recent years where students are able to take work in progress to have it critiqued by qualified teachers. This is good news, but I feel that writing skills should be introduced lower down the curriculum and particularly in the first few years of undergraduate work. It is important that the teaching of writing skills be integrated with other skills that we are teaching, such as presentation or reading skills. Although I do not have any direct data on this subject, I think it is fair to say that researchers and those in the medical profession spend more time and expend more effort writing in English than they do in any other English skill. Even though many of them say that their writing ability is their best skill in English, levels seems to vary a lot and it is a sad fact of life that many

papers written by Japanese researchers have to go to rewriting companies before they can be submitted.

Conclusion

The ability to write a referee report is an important skill, which in recent years has received considerable attention. The results of this brief analysis show that there is a basic report structure consisting of three main parts, starting with a summary of the topic, moving on to major issues and finishing with minor issues. It also shows that a narrow set of academic vocabulary recurs with relative frequency. These facts make the genre of the referee report one that is teachable and, because of its significance to those in the medical profession and other research fields, one that should be included in the skills set that should be taught on EMP programs.

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