

# Evaluating Conference Abstracts in Applied Linguistics and L2 Learning and Teaching

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**Abstract** This chapter presents a case study in which the author focuses on her role as an evaluator of the abstracts to be selected for presentation at an international conference. This chapter mainly aims at a re-evaluation of the negatively assessed abstracts in applied linguistics and second/foreign language learning and teaching in order to discover reasons for their negative evaluation and finding the minimum criteria of acceptability. They are as follows: an adequate level of proficiency in English, a clearly formulated purpose of the presentation and a relevant choice of the research area, taking into account the conference audience. The model of more or less *legitimate peripheral participation* in discourse community (Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998) is used to account for the applied evaluative approach.

## 1 Introduction

This chapter presents a case study in which the author focuses on her role as an evaluator of the abstracts to be selected for presentation at an international conference. The analyzed abstracts (176) have been sent by their authors in answer to a call for papers to be presented at a conference in English Studies in Poland. Senior academic staff members of the Conference Organizing Committee have acted as evaluators of the abstracts according to their specialization in English Studies: older British literature, 20th and 21st century British literature, American literature, culture studies, linguistics, applied linguistics, second/foreign language learning and teaching and translation studies. This author evaluated 52 abstracts in applied linguistics and second/foreign language learning and teaching.

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In the literature and culture sections the assessors accepted 58 % of the papers, whereas in linguistics, applied linguistics, second/foreign language learning and teaching and translation studies 50 % of the papers were approved. Respectively, 13 and 19 % of the papers were rejected and 28 and 31 % were placed on a “waiting list”, consequently, most of them were not accepted, since the conference schedule did not allow for more than about 90 papers to be presented (amounting to about 50 % of all the received abstracts).

This chapter mainly aims at a re-evaluation of the negatively assessed abstracts in applied linguistics and second/foreign language learning and teaching in order to discover this author’s subjective reasons for their negative evaluation and finding the minimum criteria of acceptability. The model of more or less *legitimate peripheral participation* in discourse community (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) is used to account for the applied evaluative approach.

## 2 Challenges in Writing Conference Abstracts in Humanities Faced by Non-native Authors

More than twenty years ago John Swales expressed the opinion that “abstracts continue to remain a neglected field among discourse analysts” (Swales 1990: 181). In his analysis of characteristic features of an abstract in English based on Graetz’s corpus of 87 abstracts from a variety of fields, Swales claims that the most characteristic feature of the genre of abstracts is one of *distillation* or *condensation* of what is to be included in the research paper or presentation itself, so as to communicate to expert members in a particular field of knowledge what the prospective research article or conference presentation will contain (ibid: 179).

As far as content is concerned, the majority of abstracts are supposed to contain four standard moves to be found in research articles: Problem-Method-Results-Conclusion. However, Graetz discovered that nearly 50 % of the analyzed abstracts instead of formulating the problem in the first move, rather “established a territory”, and about 25 % of the abstracts opened with the purpose of the study or with a restriction in the study. According to Swales, other authors’ recommendations as regards the structure of abstracts, referred to placing findings at the beginning of an abstract (in the topic sentence), for which there is little evidence, and to placing general statements at the end, which was more strongly supported by evidence.

In abstracts in humanities, the above four standard moves are very rarely found. What is evident considering constantly repeated recommendations given by conference organizers to prospective non-native presenters in humanities on how to write abstracts in English, as well as the analyses of submitted abstracts including the present sample, is that the content, structure and style of abstracts fall short of rigorous recommendations. Consequently, the evaluators’ task becomes more challenging since they have to pass subjective judgment having a direct impact on the authors’ professional future without clear criteria what is required of the model abstract to be accepted.

It should be admitted that the authors of abstracts in humanities face a number of challenges. One of them is their incomplete knowledge at the time of abstract writing on what their final articles will contain. In order to condense their papers, the authors must know precisely what is included in them. However, complete research papers are infrequently ready at the time of abstract submission. In particular, a detailed knowledge on the content of conference presentations may not be available yet at the time of conference abstract writing since conference presentations in humanities are frequently individual small scale projects their authors are able to prepare some time before the announced conferences with an expectation that if their abstracts are accepted, they will have time to complete full presentations.<sup>1</sup>

Other reasons for the deviations from the recommendations given by academic conference organizers on how to write standard conference abstracts in English are different academic traditions in humanities in different national academic cultures, for instance, in East-European or Asian traditions, as well as different abstract writing traditions in particular fields of studies, e.g. literary studies versus applied linguistics. Finally, and most conspicuously, non-native authors' English language writing skills are sometimes inadequate even if they are professionals in English Studies in their academic institutions.

Consequently, the prospective non-native authors of conference papers in English face at least three challenges: (1) The above described gap in their knowledge on what to include in an abstract at the time of abstract writing, (2) Inadequate English language proficiency resulting in the use of inter language forms which may be unintelligible to the evaluators, (3) Differences between their national academic cultures and the mainstream English language academic culture, including different abstract writing traditions in particular fields of studies in national academic cultures and in standard English language academic culture.

While the first two challenges are of a practical nature and can be met if the abstracts are written and carefully proofread after the full texts of the presentations have been completed, the third challenge creates numerous problems for the evaluators, who have to decide themselves to what extent deviations from the genre standard norms are acceptable in the structure, content and style of non-standard abstracts in English.

I have argued recently (Nizegorodcew 2011) that non-native academics try to uncritically emulate the genre of native writers in their conference presentations. However, this may be true in the case of only some of them, while others may unintentionally adhere to their national genre norms, where more elaborate and flowery style is advocated and where the prospective audience is not taken into account. Still others may take a more confrontational attitude towards native

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<sup>1</sup> In some academic contexts, e.g. in Ukrainian academic institutions, submitting an abstract for a book of abstracts, without having to present a full paper at the following conference, counts as the author's academic achievement. In consequence, the abstracts included in the books of abstracts greatly outnumber the papers actually presented at conferences.

English norms and intentionally contest standard forms of academic practices.<sup>2</sup> These three postures can be also seen in the condensed stylistic and structural variations in the received abstracts. The question arises how an evaluator can assess abstracts on the grounds of their content merits, notwithstanding their different styles of academic writing. My attempt in the following part of this article is to analyze my own process of abstract assessment in view of finding consistent criteria of evaluation.

### **3 A Retrospective Analysis of Abstract Evaluation in Applied Linguistics and Second/Foreign Language Learning and Teaching**

The first question this author asked herself referred to the communicative purpose of the evaluated abstracts. In the evaluator's opinion, following Swales's definition of a genre (Swales 1990: 58), the abstracts were supposed to clearly state the purpose of the proposed research papers and to refer to them either at the beginning or at the end. Those which did not make any reference to the research and to its purpose, as well as very general and vague abstracts were negatively assessed, in particular those in which errors in the use of the English language merged with their indefinite purpose.

E.g. The expertise of English as a universal language is essential for human life. In this globalization era people must be able to realize that language which is spoken by many people around the globe is one element that cannot be separated in order to communicate internationally. There are many obstacles that people deal with the ability in English. Speaking is one factor that mostly becomes one of the most difficult parts of learning English. The best treatment to encourage students to speak is needed. [The name of a teaching technique developing speaking skills] is one way to realize the dream to give a mutual understanding for students in reaching the goal of being fluent in speaking it. [The author mentions some ways in which speaking skills could be developed].<sup>3</sup>

The second question concerned the content, that is, the authors' focus in the proposed presentations. In other words, I tried to find whether their research area could be of interest to the audience at the English Studies conference they were meant for and if their research was up-to-date and linked with the contemporary publications in applied linguistics and second/foreign language learning and teaching. The conclusion I arrived at was very positive since no abstract was

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<sup>2</sup> An extreme rebuttal of native English norms in a conference presentation I witnessed was a non-native speaker's code-switching to his native language and giving the whole presentation in it, in spite of the fact that the conference language was English and the speaker had prepared his presentation in English. As he explained to the bewildered audience, he did it in protest against the arrogant behaviour of native speakers.

<sup>3</sup> In the examples of negatively assessed abstracts, the fragments that could identify their authors were deleted.

rejected only on the grounds of representing an obsolete area of knowledge. Thus, it seems that the international authors, probably due to the Internet sources, are knowledgeable about the contemporary state of affairs in the field of applied linguistics and second/foreign language learning and teaching.

Finally, the authors' written English was considered. Minor English language errors and non-native structures and style were disregarded unless they seriously interfered with abstract comprehensibility. However, if the deficiencies in the English language affected comprehensibility, the abstracts were negatively assessed. Some of those typical negative features are more difficult to assess than others.

Firstly, deficiencies of style and language in some of the abstracts blur the content of the described research. The grammatical structures are convoluted and the lexical items are inappropriately used to the extent that the meaning is nearly incomprehensible. Additionally, some abstracts have not been edited properly since they contain misspellings. Those negative features are unquestionable and easy to assess. Interestingly, however, very few abstracts belong only to this category since language errors are usually coupled with other negative features, such as lack of research purpose and general vagueness.

The second type of negatively assessed abstracts is less obvious, it refers to the above mentioned indirectness, vagueness and lack of research details. The authors of the abstracts of this type may have lacked the detailed knowledge on the content of their proposed presentations at the time of conference abstract writing. Instead they have given only background information about their study field without referring to their own research. The indirectness and lack of specificity may have also stemmed from the authors' native language writing conventions. In the case of such abstracts evaluators cannot be certain if they have not misjudged the actual value of the proposed presentations. However, in the case of conference abstracts, their authors cannot be given the benefit of the evaluator's doubt.

E.g. If educational [theories] and teaching styles are related, and they have been proven so, whether totally matching each other or not, there is a possibility for an educator to exactly implement their personal educational [theories] within their own behaviors in the teaching-learning exchange process. However, the elements interfering with the [compatibility] between one's educational [theory] and teaching style are numerous. [In the remaining part of the abstract, the author enumerates the interfering elements.]

The next category is made up of a few abstracts in which the authors focus on their proposed suggestions concerning changes in the English language spelling, grammar and lexicon to make it easier to learn and more "neutral" ideologically to use in Asian and African countries. Their authors take a contestatory posture towards the object of their studies and professional work, that is, the English language itself and the implications of its teaching and use. The ideas expressed by them seemed to me too bizarre to be included in the conference program.

They also seemed to misunderstand the nature of language. Additionally, the abstracts have other deficiencies of language and style. I must admit, however, that the negative evaluation of such abstracts without detailed justification may have

been interpreted as discrimination of the authors who expressed unorthodox views on the English language. Regretfully, refusals to accept abstracts are not accompanied by their reasons.

E.g. The present article aims at rationalizing the crucial need for making need-based changes in the grammatical and orthographic systems of the English language, i.e. the language which is widely acknowledged as a world lingua franca. The changes will aim at simplifying the rules and conventions for the said aspects, hence formulating a type of English that would be easy to learn and use across the globe. [In the remaining part of the abstract, the author further develops his main idea.]

Finally, there are some abstracts where the authors are entirely focused on the research methodology without providing background justification for engaging in the described research studies. Additionally, the quantitative nature of the research coupled with its inadequate description and interpretation and language deficiencies result in a pseudo-scientific jargon. All in all, that type of abstract makes the impression of awkward calques of the genre of scientific English.

E.g. The present study is conducted to investigate how appliance of [...] which has been merged by [...] will influence on the level of [students'] proficiency. [...] The required data was supplied from a corpus of [...] through [...] questionnaires and language scores. [...] Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and regression analysis were used to analyze the data. The results and statistical calculations represented that there is a significant relationship between [...] strategies [...] with the level of [...] students' English proficiency. The conclusions and implications of the research were discussed with reference to the earlier findings.

## 4 Discussion

According to Lave and Wenger's model (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998), while striving for full participation in the practices of expert target language community, non-native English language users engage in *legitimate peripheral participation*. The term focuses on the right of non-native speakers of English to participate in discourse practices of expert English language native speakers, identifying them, however, as less valuable participants of the community of practice. Characteristically, non-native speakers also position themselves according to their ability to use the English language. They realize that in international conferences where English is the conference language its use in presentations and abstracts is an indispensable requirement to participate in professional communities.

It should be observed, however, that the concept of *legitimate peripheral participation* may not refer *per se* to non-native speakers' less valuable position but to the less valuable position of less privileged and knowledgeable participants of the global academic community of practice, whose national academic practices place them at a disadvantage in comparison with the so-called *core* participants, belonging to more privileged and knowledgeable national academic communities (Canagarajah 2002).

The *core* communities are identified with English language native speakers but they may also include non-native academic speakers using English and keeping high standards in their academic practices. The concept of *periphery* in academic practices involves degrees of peripherality. Within the broadly understood *periphery*, some countries and educational institutions are more peripheral than others. Bennett (2011) uses the term *semi-periphery* to refer to Portugal as a country between the *core* and the *periphery* in terms of having characteristic features of both. Although her reasoning is not fully consistent, the idea that non-native academics in some national communities may play the role of *mediators* between native English language academic standards and less privileged non-native academic communities can be plausible.

In this respect, the identity of the evaluators must be taken into account. If an international conference takes place in a non-English language country, as was the case in Poland, where English is used as a conference language in international conferences, expert members of local academic communities act as evaluators of conference abstracts. In the conference in question, they are non-native academic speakers of English at a near-native level of English language proficiency. Their status of experts in their fields and their proficiency in English enable them to evaluate abstracts of other members of the global academic community of practice in their field of expertise. The question arises if they use the same criteria of evaluation as native English assessors and academics belonging to the *core* communities (Flowerdew 2001; Lillis and Curry 2010).

What follows from the above analysis of this author's criteria in the evaluation of conference abstracts in applied linguistics and second/foreign language learning and teaching is that rigid abstract genre norms were not of the utmost importance for her. She primarily took into consideration a clearly stated research purpose, the audience's expected interests and the authors' proficiency in English. It can be concluded that in that subjective evaluation she was guided by her own academic expertise in the field of applied linguistics and second/foreign language learning and teaching. Being aware of more rigid standards of *core* academic communities, as a legitimate member of a peripheral academic community, she *mediated* between high standards of the core community and the reality of the received abstracts, accepting those that seemed promising and refusing to accept only those that fell beneath the minimal standards described above.

Thus, the role of an abstract evaluator as a legitimate peripheral participant of the global community of academic practice seems to be more liberal than the analogous role of a non-peripheral participant. The latter has to follow strict rules imposed on him/her by the high standards of the world elite academics, whereas the former may keep the *back door* ajar for those more peripheral participants who are not able to enter through the *front door*. Their aim is to get inside, whichever *door* they use and a more tolerant evaluator is their first choice.

## 5 Conclusion

The above analysis focused on negatively assessed abstracts in order to clearly indicate what features were primarily responsible for the negative assessment. This author's criteria drew on the definition of the genre of abstracts in two respects: on the purpose of the proposed conference presentation and the relevance of the research area to the academic audience. It seems that the third feature, that is the authors' inadequate English language proficiency, mostly combined with the first two, made the evaluative process easier since poorly written abstracts were negatively assessed in the first place.

It could be claimed that another evaluator might have assessed the same abstracts in a different way. Such a claim is valid with regard to a number of doubtful cases but not in the case of those abstracts as to which the evaluator's opinion was immediate and definite. Consequently, this author set herself the task of identifying the minimum level of standards that should be kept in order to submit an abstract of a conference presentation to an academic committee for consideration. They are as follows: an adequate level of proficiency in English, a clearly formulated purpose of the presentation and a relevant choice of the research area, taking into account the conference audience.

Non-native academics writing in English may have a strong sense of peripherality and inferiority in comparison with native English language academics. However, in view of the implications of the model of legitimate peripheral participation, non-native authors become empowered in that participation as they move towards full participation as experts in a given area. Such general participation is achieved through specific participation in academic conferences, presenting papers and publishing them in academic journals. The first step in that process consists in submitting a conference abstract.

Non-native evaluators may also perceive themselves as more peripheral members of the global academic community in their fields. However, in the field of broadly understood applied linguistics and second/foreign language learning and teaching, they may be more suitable to mediate between very rigid native academic standards and different standards of some disadvantaged academic communities. Besides, in humanities, knowledge is more contextualized and more closely connected with local cultures, educational contexts and first languages. Local non-native evaluators may have a much better understanding of local contexts than global native evaluators.

In the case of conference abstracts in English submitted to a conference in non-English speaking country, which could be described as peripheral, the main task of an evaluator should be to establish minimum criteria and requirements of acceptability. Those minimum criteria do not have to be formal in terms of structure and style, rather they should refer to the content of the abstracts. As regards the English language, however, the abstracts should be easily comprehensible both for native and non-native speakers of English. Emulation of standard native norms should not be discouraged but more liberal English as a *lingua franca*

norms should be allowed. First and foremost, the authors should have clear ideas what their research papers consist of and how to present them in a condensed form. Consequently, prospective authors of conference abstracts should be given very clear guidelines on the criteria and requirements of the abstracts and, if possible, those who have been negatively assessed should be provided with reasons for the negative evaluation. The final conclusion is that abstract writing is a composing and writing skill that should be developed in its own right.

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