

# MOVES IN THE INTRODUCTIONS OF PROBLEM-SOLUTION ESSAYS

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MONTA FARNESTE

University of Latvia, Latvia

**Abstract.** Structuring of texts is one of the major problems in essay writing for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). However, there is little research on the distinction between the moves of a genre and the elements of the rhetorical pattern in essay introductions. The goal of this article is to investigate the use of moves and the elements of the problem-solution pattern in the essay introductions written by 35 undergraduate students majoring in English at a university of Latvia. The analysis of the problem-solution essays revealed that the students mainly used a one- or two-move sequence in the essay introductions, and more than half of the students did not provide the thesis statement. The analysis of the elements of the rhetorical pattern demonstrated that the essay introductions contained information about the problem, situation and/or solutions. It has been concluded that the students using the problem-solution rhetorical pattern neglect the moves typical of essay introduction. Thus, an analysis of the rhetorical pattern and generic features of essay introduction may help to determine the text correspondence to the expectancies of academic community.

**Key words:** academic essay introductions, move analysis, the problem-solution pattern, undergraduate students majoring in English

## INTRODUCTION

In the last decades, several studies have focused on developing written communication skills at tertiary level, as it is an important stage in mastering written communication with academic community. Since Swales (1990) published his monograph on the application of moves to research paper analysis, a remarkable interest has been taken in the investigation of the generic features of different parts of research paper (e.g. Halleck and Connor, 2006; Karapetjana, 2009). Not only moves, but also rhetorical patterns in different academic genres have been analysed. Flowerdew, e.g. describes how different moves and the elements of the problem-solution pattern are used in academic reports (Flowerdew, L., 2000). Paltridge (2002), in his turn, provides an analysis of the abstracts of research papers. Paltridge points out that generic structure and text structure can be analysed alongside (Paltridge, 2002: 75).

The research on essay structure has mainly dealt with the move analysis of some parts of an essay: essay introductions and conclusions (Kusel, 1992 cited in Avilés, 2007) or only essay introductions (Aful, 2006; Avilés, 2007). However, these studies do not provide information about the rhetorical patterns used in the essays.

Thus, the *goal of the present study* was to investigate the use of moves and the elements of the problem-solution pattern in the essay introductions written by undergraduate students majoring in English.

To reach the goal, the following *research questions* were posed:

1. Which moves are used in the introductory paragraphs of the problem-solution essays?
2. How many moves are chosen?
3. What is the sequence of moves and how are they linked with the elements of the problem-solution pattern?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Swales defines *genre* as ‘a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes’ (Swales, 1990: 58). Bhatia (2002) distinguishes two levels of genre theory application: (1) rhetorical or genre values (e.g. narration, description, etc.), which is school level of application, and (2) genre colony (e.g. promotional genres) and genres (e.g. book blurbs, book reviews, etc.), which is English for Specific Purposes (ESP) level of application. The essay introduction belongs to *academic genre colony* (Bhatia, 2005: 67).

Bhatia (2002) explains that at school level the tasks are more general because students have ‘limited experience of the world and limited awareness of the contexts’, while at the ESP level students can use disciplinary knowledge to write in a particular context (Bhatia, 2002: 281-283). However, essay writing is taught not only at school, but it is also offered at colleges and universities in many countries such as the USA, the UK, Spain, Latvia and others. Thus, Jordan suggests using the term *English for Specific Academic Purposes* (ESAP) because students are studying texts used in ‘specific academic subjects’, not texts in general. This also refers to a tertiary level essay writing course because it is essential for students to discuss ‘subject-specific essays’ (Jordan, 1997: 249-250).

On the basis of a corpus analysis of 23 genres, Biber (1988) has concluded that texts can be viewed from different perspectives, i.e. a genre or text-external features and a text type or text-internal features. The features of a genre refer to a particular purpose of communication, readership and context, while the features of a text type refer to rhetorical patterns used in a text (Biber, 1988 cited in Paltridge, 2002).

Genre characteristics in academic and professional context are studied with the help of move analysis (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993, Halleck and Connor, 2006). According to Swales and Feak (2000), ‘[m]ove is a functional term that refers to a defined and bounded communicative act that is designed to achieve one main communicative objective. [...] [T]he length of a move can range from a single finite clause to several paragraphs’ (Swales and Feak, 2000: 35). Moves are commonly located by searching for appropriate signals (Swales, 1990). As move

analysis is still a recent approach to genre studies, there is not enough research on its application to different genres, academic essays including.

The studies of tertiary level essays have mainly focused on the analysis of some parts of the essay. The analysis reveals that the types of moves differ depending on their communicative purpose and context. Kusel has done move analysis of fifty essay introductions and also conclusions across five departments such as Teacher Education, English Literature, History, Geography, and Language Teaching written by native speakers (Kusel 1992 cited in Avilés, 2007: 153). On the basis of the Swalesian theory of moves in research paper introductions, Kusel has suggested seven moves for essay introductions:

1. claiming centrality
2. providing the topic background
3. outlining previous research, i.e. providing general or specific account of it
4. indicating the gap
5. outlining the purpose or aims
6. indicating the route (Kusel, 1992 cited in Avilés, 2007: 153-154).

However, this move division cannot be applied to the essays which are not based on research.

When studying examination essays that have another purpose of communication than research reporting, Afful has chosen only three moves for the analysis of the introductions:

1. backgrounding issues raised in the examination prompt
2. narrowing the field or issue/s of concern
3. previewing the structure of the essay (Afful, 2006).

After the investigation of the examination essays written by second-year undergraduate students at the Departments of English Studies, Afful (2006) has concluded that almost half of the English students in a course of literature had applied only two moves, omitting the third move. Moreover, the students had expanded on Move 2 to demonstrate their knowledge of the theme, commonly expected at the examination (Afful, 2006). Avilés' (2007) research of the essays written in Spanish by five graduate students majoring in Politics has revealed that students used different move sequences and number of moves in their essay introductions. It has been concluded that it is necessary to pay more attention to moves when teaching essay writing.

As stated above, another approach to the analysis of a text is focusing on its internal features. Lee (2001), who has worked at the classification of texts in the British National Corpus, suggests using the term *text type* loosely in terms of the four basic rhetorical patterns: narrative, description, exposition and argumentation. Moreover, several text types can be integrated in a piece of academic writing (Strevens, 1987 cited in Paltridge, 2002: 88). The problem-solution pattern, commonly mentioned as another text type or rhetorical pattern,

can be used in several genres, e.g. academic reports (Flowerdew, L., 2000), letters and the abstracts of a research paper (Paltridge, 2002).

Swales and Feak (1994) distinguish four main 'parts' of a problem-solution text: Situation, Problem, Solution and Evaluation. Hoey (2001), when describing the 'the most common pattern', uses the term 'elements' instead of the *parts*. Similar to Swales and Feak, Hoey also distinguishes four elements in the pattern: Situation, Problem, Response, Positive/Negative Evaluation. Hoey demonstrates that the problem-solution pattern may have different rhetorical sequences and that some of its elements may be optional. The elements of a rhetorical pattern are located on the basis of the signals used in a text, as it is done in move analysis (e.g. Hoey, 2001).

Thus, an essay introduction can be analysed from two different perspectives by focusing on its external and internal features, complementing each other. Moves are used to discuss external features of a text or a genre, while elements are used to discuss a rhetorical pattern or a text type. An analysis of both the types of features is based on the search for appropriate signals in a text.

## METHODS

In order to examine the use of moves and the elements of a rhetorical pattern, the corpus of 35 essays (E) written by second-year undergraduate students majoring in English was chosen for the analysis. The students had had academic writing for four semesters. They had studied the communicative function and the structure of an introductory paragraph of an essay and had written several essays, such as comparison/contrast, cause-effect, definition and argumentative essays, prior to the problem-solution essay that was written at the beginning of the fourth term.

The essays under analysis were written at home and peer reviewed in the following class. The students could choose a theme from the list of the topics studied in Spoken Communication. The average length of the essays was 630-1011 words, except for two essays, which were only 277 and 469 words long. All the essays contained the basic elements of the problem-solution pattern: Situation, Problem, Solutions and Evaluation. The samples mentioned below have not been edited. The analysis of the essay introductions was done in three stages: (1) the analysis of the types of moves; (2) the analysis of the frequency of the moves; (3) the analysis of the sequence of moves and the corresponding elements of the rhetorical pattern. The elements of the rhetorical pattern and moves were located on the basis of the analysis of relevant signals.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first research question was to find out which moves were used in the introductory paragraphs of problem-solution essay. On the basis of Kusel's (1992)

and Afful's (2006) classification of moves in student essays, five moves were traced in the first paragraph of problem-solution essays by the undergraduate students:

Move 1: Claiming centrality of the theme

Move 2: Providing the topic background

Move 3: Narrowing the topic

Move 4: Stating the thesis or the main idea of the essay

Move 5: Previewing the structure of the essay

The quantitative analysis of the moves showed that Move 3 was most frequently used, while Move 5 was not used at all (Table 1). Afful, on the contrary, states that narrowing the topic (Move 2) and providing the structure of an essay (Move 5) were the most frequently used moves in examination essays written by English students. This could be explained by the fact that students had only followed the problem-solution pattern, but neglected the generic structure of an academic essay.

Table 1

**Frequency of moves in problem-solution essays (number of cases)**

Move 1	Move 2	Move 3	Move 4	Move 5
10	13	20	13	0

As to the number of moves in one paragraph, only one move was used in 16 introductions: Move 1 (9 cases), Move 2 (4 cases) and Move 3 (3 cases). The essays, containing Move 1, focused on the explanation of the topicality of the Problem and/or its scope. As it can be seen in the example below, the paragraph states the centrality of the theme using several signals to state the Problem ('one of the most important problems', 'alarming scientists', 'seriously threatens' and others),

e.g. (1) *One of the most important problems alarming scientists* and eventually our society is pollution. (2) It *seriously threatens* the environment and *more is* that the pollution causes also climatic changes. (3) As there are *so many* polluters, such as cars, factories and their *number is increasing*, the danger to the environment is *becoming more serious*. (MOVE 1) (E 1; sentence numbers and italics added)

Two-move paragraphs were found in 11 cases: Move 2-Move 3 (5 cases), Move 3-Move 4 (4 cases) and Move 2-Move 4 (2 cases). As an example can serve an essay where Move 2 provides the topic background in S (Sentence) 1 (e.g. 'very important to transmit all the necessary information') and Move 3 introduces a particular problem-situation in S2-S6 (e.g. 'sometimes', 'very difficult'),

e.g. (1) In every public speech or presentation it is *very important* to *transmit all the necessary information* to audience. (MOVE 1)  
 (2) *Sometimes* it is *very difficult* to attract attention of a particular listener and to be confident that the message you wanted to send is understood in a proper way. (3) That is why it is *vitaly important*

to imply all the possible techniques of information delivery. (4) *The most important techniques* are gestures, facial expression, the tone of performer's voice, stance etc. (5) According to Wharton University studies, people perceive information *through five senses*, but two main are eyes 82% and ears 11%. (6) To become a persuasive speaker, the speech has to be *accompanied with body language* that is an *integral part of successful performance*. (MOVE 3) (E 35; sentence numbers and italics added)

The phrase 'accompanied with body language' in S6 signals that the topic is narrowed to 'body language'; however, the thesis statement, providing the controlling idea of the problem-solution essay, is stated only in the fourth paragraph after the explanation of the problem,

e.g. (6) [...] To reach the necessary level of information perception by a public, the experienced narrator should *adhere to some essential rules*. (E 35; italics added; sentence number added)

Eight introductions contained a three-move sequence: Move 2-Move 3-Move 4 (7 cases) and Move 2-Move 3-Move 1 (1 case). As it can be seen in the last example, the second move in S1 provides general information about the theme. The following S2-S7 gradually narrow the topic to the key idea 'climatic change' (Move 3), but Move 1 is used to claim the centrality of the theme (e.g. 'the most serious menace'),

e.g. (1) Nature is *very varied*. (MOVE 2) (2) There are many places that provide wild animals with home and food. (3) Nature provides people with *fresh air* and cure. (3) But people in the world are becoming more and more. (4) They are cutting the tress to build their houses, and for each house the need clean water and electricity. (5) To provide their house with water, [...]. (6) To provide electricity and heating at home, [...]. (7) And all these actions that people do lead to *the climatic change* – water temperature rises, air is polluted and it causes acid rain. (MOVE 3) (8) Climatic change is the *most serious menace* for animals and plants, because they cannot adapt to so rapid climatic change. (MOVE 1) (E 8; sentence numbers and italics added)

On the one hand, the first two sentences seem unrelated to the theme about human impact upon the environment; on the other hand, the writer asserts that people are responsible for nature, animals as well, which is stressed in the first sentence of the next paragraph,

e.g. What can people do to protect nature? (E 8; italics added)

This sentence provides the main idea or the thesis of the essay, which is followed by the discussion of three solutions. Thus, the student uses a topic sentence to provide the main idea for describing solutions in one paragraph.

In one essay, the controlling idea was brought out in two sentences,

e.g. (1) Teaching proper pronunciation of English to adults who learn it as their second language could be *quite a challenge*. (MOVE 2) (2) It is scientifically proven that a person's ability to acquire certain skills *decreases* with age. (3) This *may discourage* older learners; however, one must bear in mind that adults are superior in different learning fields, especially those where analytical thinking is needed. (MOVE 3) (4) *Acquisition of an accent is a younger learner's advantage*, but how could an adult learner advance towards more native-like pronunciation? (5) Certainly, *different approach of teaching* should be used. (MOVE 4) (E 15; sentence numbers and italics added)

In this example, the question-answer sequence (e.g. '...but how could...? Certainly, ...') is used in Move 4.

Although it is commonly expected that the first paragraph of an Anglo-American essay contains a thesis statement, developed by the body paragraphs (Kaplan, 1966: 15; Reid, 1992: 211-212), which states the controlling idea and the structure of the body paragraphs, the majority of the problem solution essays (22 out of 35 cases) commonly started with the description of the situation, which is followed by presenting a more detailed discussion of the problem and its solutions in the following paragraph(s),

e.g. (1) The levels of acid rain vary from region to region. (2) In countries without pollution restrictions, acid rain tends to be very high. (3) Because *acid rain can move about so easily*, the *problem* is definitely a *global one*. (E 1; sentence numbers and italics added)

In the example above, the topic is introduced (signal: 'acid rain') alongside with the threats to nearby countries (e.g. 'can move about so easily', 'a global one'); however, we cannot trace the controlling idea of the whole essay, as it is stated only in the third paragraph after the discussion of the causes and effects of acid rain,

e.g. (1) Modern science has verified that acid rain is a dangerous and highly destructive problem. (2) As a result, *various ways* have been invented *to control the level* of acid rain, and *some are now being used*. (E 2; sentence numbers and italics added)

The analysis of the essays revealed that the Moves in the introductory paragraph corresponded to the elements of the rhetorical pattern of the text (Table 2).

Move 1 claimed the centrality of the theme by introducing the problem, Move 2, in its turn, provided the topic background, which corresponded to the situation. Move 3 narrowed the topic by describing a situation, but Move 4 mentioned the solution of the problem, thus bringing out the controlling idea of the body paragraphs. Although Move 5 was not traced in the selected corpus, it should have provided the list of solutions, discussed in the essay.

Table 2

**Moves in the introductory paragraph of the problem-solution essay**

Moves	Elements of the rhetorical pattern
1 Claiming centrality of the theme	Problem
2 Providing the topic background	Situation
3 Narrowing the topic	Situation
4 Stating the thesis or the controlling idea of the essay	Solution
5 Previewing the structure of the essay	Solutions

We should also note that the essays, containing a thesis statement in the introductory paragraph, were easier to read, as they met the reader's expectations of the schematic structure. Although the essays under analysis had all the elements of the problem-solution pattern, namely Situation, Problem, Solution and Evaluation, almost one-third of them did not follow generic expectations of providing a thesis statement in the introductory paragraph of the essay and none of them explained the structure of the essay. Thus, EFL students focusing on the problem-solution pattern had not observed the generic features of academic essays.

## CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the problem-solution essays revealed that undergraduate students used four moves: claiming the centrality of the theme, providing the topic background, narrowing the topic and stating the thesis. Move 3, which narrows the topic, was the prevailing move in the selected corpus. The students had chosen either one or two moves for introductions.

It may be also stated that focusing on the rhetorical pattern had made several students neglect the generic expectations of an essay as a representative of an academic genre. The students had not used Move 5, which provides information about the structure of the essay. The students had introduced the topic, but had not stated the thesis, which is unusual in Anglo-American writing. Thus, it should be researched whether these students use the thesis statement in their L1 essays or whether there is another reason for the choice.

The analysis of the essays proved that the four moves correspond to different elements of the rhetorical pattern: Problem, Situation and Solutions, discussed in the body of the essay. However, these findings cannot be generalized across other disciplines.

Although the present research has raised new issues for further research, we can still conclude that the analysis of moves and the elements of rhetorical patterns should be used to discuss not only research papers, but also academic essays in the EFL classroom to determine whether the text corresponds to the expectancies of academic community.



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**Monta Farneste** (Dr. paed., Assoc. prof. in Applied Linguistics) is currently working at the University of Latvia. Her research interests include written communication and communicative grammar. Email: [mfarneste@lanet.lv](mailto:mfarneste@lanet.lv)