

On the macrostructure of abstracts in medical and economics journals and its LSP implications

Abstract:

Scientific publications are meant to keep professionals up to date with the latest research and information in their field. The most renowned scientific publications are written in English, which has become the language of communication in sciences. All papers submitted for publication in a scientific journal need to be accompanied by an abstract written according to the guidelines for authors, which are specific to each journal. Moreover, submission of abstracts is a requirement and a means of selecting the most interesting pieces of research to be presented at conferences and congresses. That is why, we believe that abstract writing in English needs to be part of the training of all undergraduate students in various fields of science.

The aim of our study was to observe how the theory of abstract writing is put into practice in genuine research papers, in order to identify the best way of teaching students how to write abstracts of scientific articles. Also, we aimed to find out whether there are differences between abstract writing in economics and in medical journals, or whether there is a common way of writing abstracts of scientific articles which could be taught in ESP classes.

For this purpose, we analysed a total of 40 recent abstracts from widely read journals with an impact factor of above 2, as follows: 20 abstracts from medical journals included in PubMed, and 20 abstracts from economics journals included in the Philadelphia List. We formulated ten research questions concerning the macrostructure of the abstracts, which referred to their structure, headings, length, keywords, references and related information. We also studied the guidelines for authors in each of the chosen journals, in order to have a clearer view of the requirements for writing abstracts in these publications, and to compare the analysed abstracts with the instructions for authors.

We compared the results of our analyses and found significant differences between abstracts in medical and in economics journals. Some of these differences are in line with the literature and others come to complete the information available on abstracts in scientific journals. For example, we found that while most abstracts in medical journals were structured (75%), the majority of abstracts in economics journals were unstructured (95%). Also, abstracts of medical articles were significantly longer (270-530 words) than abstracts of articles in economics (65-178 words). A surprising finding was that most abstracts of medical articles were not accompanied by keywords (75%), whereas in the case of economics journals, key words were provided in all the analysed publications.

Our conclusion was that while abstracts in economics and medicine differ significantly in terms of macrostructure, there are certain common elements which support the idea that abstracts of scientific articles have a common ground, based on a shared general structure: introduction (background/objectives), methods, results and conclusions. Finally, based on the results of our research, we designed several activities to be used in the LSP class, which would enable students to learn about writing abstracts of scientific articles and about the particularities of such abstracts in the field of their study – medicine and economics respectively.

Keywords: LSP; Abstract; Macrostructure; Medicine; Economics; Journal.