

In the Name of God

A Comparative Study of Proximity in Applied Linguistics and Biology Research Articles

A Thesis Proposal

Supervisor:

By:

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1. **Introduction**
   1. **Preliminaries**

Researchers and scholars in different disciplines and branches of science carry out their field-specific researches. The findings and results of these conducted research projects are presented in the form of research articles. As a matter of fact these academic texts are used by their researchers or writers to interact with their intended readers and also to transfer their knowledge and findings of the valuable studies.

It is important to point out that research articles, as all other genres, have their own discourses and there are certain building blocks which constitute their language: technical terminologies, organization of different sections, involvement of the readers, expression of attitudes toward the topic, and presentation of findings. These elements can affect not only the writers’ way of communication with the readers but also the degree of the readers’ understanding of the texts. This is in line with Hyland (2010) who maintained that research articles are sites where academics and writers in addition to offering the worldviews a considerable account of themselves and their works are negotiated by appraising ideas, claiming solidarity with readers and acknowledging alternative viewpoints.

According to Hyland (2010) inter-personality concerns the writers’ choice of ways to use language in order to negotiate the social relationship by informing their readers what they see as noticeable and important, how they believe should choose and present material for them and how they feel about what they write about. The writers, therefore, are the most driving force in the genre of research articles, “who should consider the reader; the effect they want to achieve (informing, instructing, persuading); the relationship they want to establish with the readers; the ‘creation of meaning’; and the use of language and the correctness of grammar” (Chastain, 1988, p. 244).

It is crystal clear that using writing skill to communicate is possible and effective only if the writers have a sufficient control of the writing system and the grammar of the language in order to make themselves understood (Chastain, 1988, p. 244). It is here that the concept of proximity should be introduced and explained. Hyland (2010), in his model, named the proximity model defined this concept as:

A writer’s control of rhetorical features which display both the authority as an expert and a personal position toward issues in an unfolding text. It involves responding to the context, textually constructing both the writer and the reader as people with similar understandings and goals.

Proximity involves the notion of inter-personality but, at the same time this notion is a slightly wider idea because it concerns not only how writers manage themselves and their interactions with others but also what the text is about, that is the ways ideational materials are presented for the intended audience (Hyland, 2010). Consequently the proximity model includes two key aspects. The first one is called the proximity of membership, that is the academic writers’ ability to prove their authority to their colleagues through using conventions of their disciplines. Proximity of commitment is the latter aspect which means the writers’ stance and personal position towards the issues in the text (Hyland, 2010). Organization, argument structure, credibility, stance and engagement are the facets of the proximity model upon which this research project will be based (Hyland, 2010).

As previously mentioned all fields and disciplines have the languages of their own. All of us have frequently heard about the language of art, the language of poem, the language of music, etc. Research articles in different disciplines such as Applied Linguistics and Biology also have their own well-structured and specific languages to interact with the members within their discourse communities. In spite of the importance of learning how to communicate with readers as an academic writer and how to demonstrate position towards the topic, less attention and importance is attached to the how of the achievement of the proximity by academic writers in these two dissimilar disciplines.

To meet this need the researcher will investigate the research articles of Biology and Applied Linguistics by taking the aforementioned elements of Hyland’s (2010) proximity model into account. This study will make it clear that how proximity can be achieved by academic writers in these different disciplines, along with it their similarities and dissimilarities with regard to these elements will be discovered.

**1.2 Literature Review**

As the title of this section implies, some studies which are related to the topic of this proposed study are reviewed.

A research was carried out by Hyland (2004) on disciplinary interactions; he investigated meta-discourse in L2 postgraduate writing. This research examined how writers project themselves in academic contexts by using their discourse in order to signal their commitments. A model of meta-discourse was proposed to present in different generic contexts. The results of this study showed how academic writers use meta-discourse markers and language in their specific fields of study to present themselves and how meta-discourse is used as a means to fill the gap between the writers and the readers.

Constructing proximity: relating to readers in popular and professional science, is the title of another article wrote by Hyland (2010) in which he maintained that interactions and relationships between academic writers and readers as a rhetorical activity is central to most perspectives on English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and that in different generic contexts and disciplinary discourses these interactions are conducted differently. Trying to find more accurate information as to these differences, he investigated a corpus of texts in two different genres, which are popular science articles and research papers. This study was an attempt to highlight some of the ways through which writers manage their interactions with readers and display the expertise using rhetorical choices which textually make both readers and writers as people with similar goals and understandings.

Regarding the proximity model of Hyland to investigate the research articles another study was done. In this article (Taki & Jafarpour, 2012) the ways in which Persian and English academic writers express their positions were investigated, along with discovering the strategies they use to bring readers to their writings. To this end, about 120 English and Persian research articles in two different disciplines of Sociology and Chemistry were analyzed. This corpus was scrutinized by taking the stance and engagement elements of proximity model into account. The most striking results to emerge from this study were the greater attempt of Sociology articles to interact with readers and also more cases of readers’ involvement in Persian ones.

Such is not the case to claim that just written discourse, for example research articles were scrutinized drawing on the proximity model because very recently the TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) talks, a kind of spoken discourse and a new popularizing genre, were investigated by Di Carlo (2014). Turning now to the investigation of this genre, it should be mentioned that a corpus of 84 TED talks presented in English in 2012 were examined through a qualitative and quantitative analysis. Di Carlo came to the conclusion that using evaluative and emotive adjectives, linguistic techniques to increase comprehensibility and inclusive pronouns to involve audiences directly can help the speakers to remove the formidable hurdles of expert/audience and to ‘establish alignment’.

A perusal of related literature revealed that proximity model has served as a working framework in a number of studies in various disciplines. Applied Linguistics and Biology research articles, however, have not been studied from the perspective of proximity. This proposed study aims to address this gap by exploring the instances of writer-reader interactions within the discourses of Biology and Applied Linguistic research articles.

* 1. **Statement of the Problem**

Academic discourse owes much of its comprehensibility and usefulness to the ways in which academic writers interact with the audiences and present the findings of their studies. Obviously writers of diverse disciplines use different ways to communicate with readers and draw their attention to these results. Academic writers within the Applied Linguistics and Biology fields are not exceptions. Since the writers of these diverse disciplines may use different ways of interaction while writing to the members of their intended discourse community, the cause of this might be the discrepancies that exist between the genre of these fields and the nature of the topics. However, this does not imply that there is no similarity. This is why, the writers’ control of rhetorical features which demonstrate both the personal positions towards the academic topic and also the authority as an expert in their disciplines is of paramount importance. Now it should be asked that how this can be achieved? For a greater and deeper understanding of these issues, more and more studies are required to be done on the ways to obtain this ability.

The studies reviewed in the previous section have adopted the proximity model to compare and contrast research articles with popular science ones (Hyland, 2010), Persian research articles with the English articles (Taki & Jafarpour, 2012) and in another one, the role of proximity in TED talks was investigated (Di Carlo, 2014). None of these reviewed research projects, however, has examined research articles across diverse disciplines of Applied Linguistics and Biology from the proximity point of view, so regarding this need there is a lot to discover and the lines of investigation are still open.

* 1. **The Purpose and the Significance of the Study**

Research articles are influenced by different disciplines such as Biology, Economics, Computer sciences, Applied Linguistics, History and so on. Accordingly, the writers of these disciplines may come to contact with their readers in dissimilar ways in terms of organizing the topic, demonstrating their positions towards the topic, involving the readers and so on. It should be noted that these differences can lead to some changes in the communication between writers and readers and also the degree of the comprehensibility of the material.

Lack of attention and paucity of studies on the construction of proximity across different disciplines such as Applied Linguistics and Biology are the driving motivations for the researcher to do the proposed piece of research. Hyland’s (2010) model of proximity will be employed to conduct this study because this working framework emphasizes a reader-oriented view of writing and this is in close relation with Sacks, Schlegloff and Jefferson’s (1974, p. 272) concept of “recipient design” or how talk and text are shaped to make sense to the present recipient/audience. Based on Hyland, in writing and speaking, we show an orientation and sensitivity to the others who are our co-participants and this is done through topic selection, conventions of argument, lexical choices and so on (2010).

In line with this, therefore, the main purpose of this study will be to examine how academic writers in Applied Linguistics and Biology construct proximity and interact with their readers. With this end in view, the research articles of these two disciplines will be compared and contrasted. This study will be based upon the five elements of Hyland’s (2010) proximity model which are organization, argument structure, stance, engagement, and credibility.

To my little knowledge, it seems that no specific comparative study has been done on research articles across diverse disciplines of Biology and Applied Linguistics employing all five elements of the proximity model. Hence, the results will help us with knowledge construction on the ways in which the interpersonal meanings are posited, distributed and co-articulated across these two fields. The findings of this research will be beneficial to experts in these disciplines since they create conscious awareness as to how proximity is constructed and articulated in these research articles so they will be able to make the most suitable and helpful relationships with their readers.

Potential discrepancies and diversities between Biology and Applied Linguistics in terms of different elements of proximity will be uncovered through the analysis of their research articles which display their academic writers’ tendencies to use some elements more than others. The findings of this study will be used as guidelines to feed the courses of English for Academic/Specific Purposes in terms of syllabus and curriculum content and design. Moreover, the results will be used as a means to provide the writers and students of Applied Linguistics and Biology with an understanding of the rhetorical features that are required to write and read these academic texts. And last but not least, these findings will be equally an issue of concern to the stakeholders within these two different disciplines because their overall aim is to develop the most appropriate interactions with their readers and the best presentations of their knowledge to the audiences.

* 1. **Research Questions**

The general intention of the researcher to conduct this proposed study is summarized in the following research questions:

1. Which elements of the proximity model are used more in Applied Linguistic research articles?
2. Which elements of the proximity model are used more in Biology research articles?
3. Is there any significant difference between Applied Linguistic and Biology research articles in terms of the elements of proximity model?
4. **Methodology**

This section at first introduces the required data to do this study, second the framework used to analyze the data then it proceeds to explain the procedure to carry out the study.‌‌‌‌‌‌‌

* 1. **Data‌**

As the researcher’s purpose is to compare the research articles in Biology with those in Applied Linguistics employing the proximity model, a corpus of research articles in these two disciplines will be collected. The researcher it is expected to collect 100 research articles of Biology which comprise 50% of the data and 100 research articles of Applied Linguistics that constitute the next 50% as the required data to carry out this study. However, if necessary, more articles will be gathered to saturate the data.

**2.2 Framework**

In this subsection, it is helpful to restate the intended framework that inform the proposed study and also describe different elements it is made up of. The proximity model presented by Hyland (2010) is the working theory behind this research project.

The elements comprising this model are organization, argument structure, stance, engagement and credibility which are more elaborated respectively. According to Hyland (2010) organization means that a research presentation usually starts with a general introduction on how the research will contribute to the intended scientific community, then a brief summary of the prior works which addressed the topic and at last presentation of the obtained results towards the end of the research presentation.

The second element which is called argument structure is to use metaphorical languages, exemplification and explanatory strategies in lieu of acronyms, difficult structures and technical terminologies and also explaining the concepts and terms through paraphrases, reformulations and definitions by speaker or writer to increase comprehension among their audiences. In addition to these using such visuals as pictures, videos and diagrams may help audience in comprehension of the process in a meaningful sequential order (Hyland, 2010).

In order to write for a peer audience, the experts are required to handle their claims carefully in order to avoid overstating their case and risk inviting the rejection of their arguments (Hyland, 2004). Thus these kinds of texts should be crammed with hedges and other linguistic devices which let the writers comment on their findings with a certain degree of caution. Evaluating and boosting expressions are necessary in popularization because these allow using language flexibly to adapt positions, express viewpoints and also claim affinity (Hyland, 2010). Caliendo (2012) points out that speakers through using adjectives such as ‘great’ , ‘good’ ,‘better’ and ‘important’ demonstrate their affective responses to the topic and attempt to involve the public. This is what stance means.

Credibility as the fourth element of the proximity model is used by writers and speakers as a means by which they promote proximity with their audiences. In written and spoken discourses the credibility can be increased if writers and speakers use Im-personalization, that is to downplay their personal role and use inclusive linguistic elements such as personal pronouns of ‘we’ and ‘us’ (Hyland, 20‌‌‌10).

Engagement as the last element is the way to negotiate proximity through which the writers address their audiences explicitly. It is an alignment dimension of interaction where the writers recognize the presence of their readers, acknowledge others, pull the readers along with their arguments, acknowledge their uncertainties, attract their attention, include them as discourse participants and guide them to the interpretations (Hyland, 2005).

* 1. **Procedure**

Firstly the research articles of Biology discipline and Applied Linguistics will be collected. Clearly doing a pilot study is needed. In order to locate the possible errors, make sure that the proximity model of Hyland (2010) is feasible to conduct this research project, and ensure the reliability, the study will be piloted based on ten percent of the data. To meet this need, the researcher will analyze the selected data with the help of her supervisor. Then inter-rater reliability of the analysis will be calculated through Phi correlation. In case of feasibility of the study and inter-rater reliability the data will be scrutinized drawing upon all the elements of the proximity model and the main analysis will be done by the researcher.

* 1. **Data Analysis**

Since the principal aim of this research is to investigate the Biology research articles and their Applied Linguistic counterparts, the frequency and percentage of each element of the proximity model within these articles will be calculated to answer the first and second research questions. Addressing the last research question any significant differences in employing these elements across Applied Linguistics and Biology will be computed through Chi-square.

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