

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF ABSTRACTS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING?

Gertrud Friedrich FRAHM - Universidade Federal do Paraná

RESUMO

O artigo discute a importância de se incluir "resumos de artigos científicos como parte de um curso de leitura em inglês para fins específicos. Isso se justifica tanto do ponto de vista de se satisfazer as necessidades de determinados grupos de alunos como também do ponto de vista de desenvolver estratégias de leitura. Fazem-se referências a um trabalho específico com alunos de pós-graduação na Universidade Federal do Paraná.

The Modern Language Department of Universidade Federal do Paraná was requested to teach English to post graduate students of different areas of studies all over the University. There were created specific groups for each area of studies, an analysis of their needs was made, and the courses were designed within an attempt to fulfil these needs. Findings showed that there was a widespread interest in reading of specific material. After working with three specific groups from the Biology and Science areas (Botany, Zoology and Biochemistry) it was felt that more attention should be given to abstracts. It is an interpreted fact that from the very beginning of their post-graduate courses stu-

dents have to handle with abstracts written in English. Thus, English teachers are faced with a new reality which includes the habit (which later becomes essential necessity) of reading abstracts, which is not common in the humanities area. A piece of research developed by Naomi Graetz from Ben Gurion University of Negev, Israel, states the following:

I questioned the lectures on their reading habits ... whether their journals include abstracts; if so, are they dependent on abstract in their reading of journals. They were also asked if they felt students should be encouraged to read abstracts and if students should be taught how to read and use them. 24 out of 28 responded: The *humanities lecturers* responded that most to all of their journals did not include abstracts and some indicated that none of their journals had abstracts; they did not personally use them and didn't feel students should be taught how to read them. The *social scientists* responded that most to all of their journals included abstracts — five of them were dependent on abstracts and ranged from positive to neutral in their attitude about students' use. The *scientists and health scientists* responded that most to all of their journals included abstracts; all of them used abstracts and were extremely positive in their attitude about teaching students how to use them.¹

This is, of course, just a small sample but it, at least, gives an idea and comes face to face to our reality when teaching English to other areas, precisely, in the areas which have different study *schemata* than we are used to, one is forced into considering abs-

tracts as a relevant independent element in the language teaching process for such specific groups.

The fact that the humanities do not usually consider abstracts as part of study habit brings up, as a consequence, this lack of interest of language teachers in the question of abstracts. One has to keep in mind that abstracts, besides indicating and predicting the structure and the content of the article which follows, them, may also function as an independent type of discourse.²

The foreign language teacher who wants to submit his/her student to decode the superstructure or identify the macrostructure of the abstract, recognize its parts and be aware of the signals³ (if the teacher achieves this), is likely to make students face the abstract not as a boring reading activity, but rather as a very useful aid to start with in deciding if the student needs/wants or not to read the article. It will incidentally help him to decode the original article because it might call his attention to relevant information that had escaped him when reading the article. The abstract might also benefit the student who wants to know in a fairly rapid manner about the findings of any particular research simply by reading the concluding section of the abstract. According to my experience, I am forced to agree with Graetz's statement:

... abstract is a time saving device that can be used to find a particular part of the article without reading it all, that knowing the structure in advance will help the reader to get into the article and finally that as a summary of the article it can serve as a review or as a clue to the contents. Ultimately, if comprehensive enough, it might replace reading the article.⁴

There is no doubt that abstracts are important for these students in helping them search among available articles (sometimes a large amount), which they need or consider relevant for their specific studies (seminar, literature revision, thesis, etc.) and besides being a means of identifying, in a fairly rapid way, which articles are of value to their needs, very often the student has to be satisfied with the abstract only because of problems involved in the acquisition of the material. It would also be considered relevant to mention here that in some specific matters the literature is so vast that it is quite impossible for the student to read the entire load of relevant available reading material. Thus, one way to cope with this load of material is to consider more carefully only the abstract of some of the available material, if it is true that an ideal abstract can give the reader a quite exact and concise understanding of the whole content of the work (the lengthy original). An attempt could even be made to state empirically that a student, when a fair abstract reader, will probably read quite a small percentage of the original complete work.

I will try to present here a draft piece of information describing one of the activities with abstracts developed with specific post-graduate groups of Biology area, which turned out into a very successful involving activity. To start with the students were asked to outline a series of abstracts in their subject area without the lengthy originals, the size of the abstracts ranging from a very few number to a great amount of lines to give the students a broader view of the structure matter of abstracts. The result showed that the students were able to identify for themselves the distinct parts within an abstract and even further on classify the abstracts into types according to the pattern choice and organization, although some parts might be found present in any abstract. The students also came to the conclusion that an abstract, by defi-

niton, needs a limited number of lines, although variations ranging from few lines to a great number of lines should be acceptable because of the length and type of the different works. Comments were made about the very short abstracts as being quite inadequate in terms of the information presented and the very lengthy ones as presenting too much information which turns out to be unnecessary for its purpose. It seems relevant to let the students come to their own conclusions and discuss the results with them because, in this way I suppose, there will be more motivation and a better result in the process of learning.

As far as the role/importance of the scientific abstract is concerned, a great deal is still to be done, a large number of questions still remain unanswered. However, an attempt has been made here, to a certain extent, to call language teachers' attention to the matter of abstracts. This paper is aimed precisely at decoding, although, it is also necessary to give more attention towards the production of more coherent and cohesive abstracts because the success of decoding depends on the quality of production. Thus, we might be working towards a faster and more qualified access to the already overloading of materials available in our area of study which lacks abstracts and it may also prove relevant in other areas of study.

AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank Dr Urquhart and Christine Urquhart for their support in my developing the work with abstracts in the specific ESP groups, and also her colleague David Shepherd for language revision.

NOTES

- 1 - GRAETZ, Naomi. *Teaching EFL students to Extract structural information from abstracts*. Ben Gurion University of Negev, Israel (International symposium on LSP-Eindhoven, The Netherlands, August 2-4, 1982). p.6
- 2 - VAN DIJK, Teun. *Macrostructures*. Hillsdale, New Jersey, 1980.
- 3 - HALLIDAY, M.A.K. & HASSAN, R. *Cohesion in English*. London, 1976.
- 4 - GRAETZ, p.8.

REFERENCES

- ARNS, Otilia et alii. *A LINGUA estrangeira instrumental: perfil das necessidades e do interesse na Universidade Federal do Paraná*. Curitiba, Universidade Federal do Paraná - Departamento de Letras Estrangeiras Modernas, 1979-80.
- GRAETZ, Naomi. *Teaching EFL students to Extract structural information from abstracts*. Ben Gurion University of Negev, Israel (International symposium on LSP-Eindhoven, The Netherlands, August 2-4, 1982).
- HALLIDAY, M.A.K. & HASSAN, R. *Cohesion in English*. London, 1976.
- VAN DIJK, Teun. *Macrostructures*. Hillsdale, New Jersey, 1980.