A Genre Analysis Study of Iranian EFL Learners' Master Theses with a Focus on the Introduction Section

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Abstract—**Genre analysis, which is defined as the study of how language is used in a particular context, is considered as a crucial factor in all types of communication especially in writing academic texts. This study aimed at analyzing the rhetorical structure of the introduction section of master theses, to see to what extent they follow the standard frameworks. To fulfill the objectives of the study, 40 master(M.A.) theses written by Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) at Islamic Azad University (IAU), Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch were collected and analyzed. The descriptive analysis of the data including frequency and percentage, indicated that most of the rhetorical structures (moves) that are approved by the field professionals were followed with a high degree of occurrence in Iranian EFL learners' M.A. theses. The results of the study may pave the way for improving the students' writing and also the teaching process for academic practitioners.**

Index Terms—**genre analysis, rhetorical structures, moves, master's theses, academic writing, Iranian EFL learners**

I. INTRODUCTION

According to Bhatia (1993), genre analysis is the study of situated linguistic behavior in institutionalized academic or professional setting. On the other hand, writing in academic settings can be definitely difficult and inconvenient for native and especially nonnative speakers. Furthermore, academic writing has always been as the most significant focus of formal education, because at the end of passing different courses, for example in master degree, everyone should submit a piece of academic writing which is known as the master thesis to the university scientific committee. Therefore, the study and analysis of academic genre seems to be noteworthy.

It has always been an actual concern for university students (especially graduate students) to produce an academic writing which would be acceptable nationally and internationally. In another hand, master's thesis is the first experience of students in thesis writing, and students find it rather difficult and confusing on how to organize their writings and what type of rhetorical and structural patterns to follow. Next, it is really desirable to know whether students follow the same patterns of writing or there are differences among them in contrast to what has been published as the conventions for rhetorical structures of academic writing.

The purpose of this study was to investigate master (M.A.) theses written by Iranian English as a Foreign Language(EFL) students majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) at Islamic Azad University (IAU), Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch to see to what extent they observe the rhetorical structures of introduction section that are approved by the field experts. In another word, how much the introduction sections that were written by the students are in line with what has been approved as the standard and acceptable frameworks.

Furthermore, by gaining some information about the features of the introduction section of master's theses being written by Iranian graduate students, and also by pinpointing their drawbacks, that is their deviation from standard and scientific conventions approved by the field professionals, valuable outcome may result. For example, in academic writing courses, the professors may highlight those features that most of the students have much difficulty with. Students also may become more conscious and autonomous in writing the introduction section of their theses and try to get advantages from the previous works done by their classmates and correct themselves and attempt to avoid the same pitfalls.

Accordingly, this study may help to enhance the effectiveness of academic writing courses that are presented in every semester at universities, to see to what extent there is a need for any other modifications in teaching and what kind of information the students need to receive in order to have a more scientific approach in their academic writing experience. So, this study by gathering authentic data that are collected through the students' real theses may provide valuable information both for students and for professors.

Actually, the rational for conducting this study was to look for the rhetorical structures (Moves) of the introduction section of theses. In order to familiarize with the characteristics of different moves applied in the first chapter of theses and the degree of their distribution and occurrence, the present study was carried out.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The structure and organization of academic writings has been the focus of different researchers ever since Swales' (1990) definition of communicative moves in research articles. So, a great number of studies have been done in the field of genre analysis especially in academic writings. Holmes (1997) states that

interest, in genre analysis, in teaching ESP and EAP, has been motivated by pedagogical concern, and in particular by the need to provide satisfactory models and descriptions of academic and scientific texts and to enhance the ability of non-native students to understand and, where it is appropriate, to produce them. (p. 321)

After Swales' publication of genre analysis, many researchers have proposed precise descriptions of rhetorical features of different sections of academic written texts, and a considerable literature in English on various academic genres such as RAs, theses, and dissertations has been provided. As Swales (2004) noted, academic writing is a highly complex process in which the product obtains from primary notes to an exactly modified final draft.

According to Dudley-Evans and John (1998), the knowledge of genre is a crucial factor in all types of communication especially in writing academic texts. They believe that knowledge of genre entails an understanding of the expectations of the discourse community that reads the text and the conventions that have generated over time about the structure, the language, and the rhetoric of genre.

Henry and Roseberry (2001) defines genre as a series of moves. They state that "a move can be thought of as part of a text, written or spoken, which achieves a particular purpose within the text. The move contributes in some way to fulfilling the overall purpose of the genre" (p. 154).

The introduction covering the first chapter of all theses, according to Jalilifar (2009), introduces a research by presenting research questions, stating why and how the problem will be solved. He suggests that by reading this chapter, the reader can easily get more detailed information about the research coming in later sections. The importance of the introduction section causes the researcher to put an emphasis on this section and provide a large body of research in this area.

In this regard, Swales's (1990) pioneering model to account for establishing the rhetorical move structure in article introductions called *Create A Research Space* (CARS) is the main framework for researcher to analyze introduction section of RAs or theses. According to Swales' (1990) CARS model, RA introductions contain three obligatory moves: (1) establishing a territory, (2) establishing a niche, and (3) occupying the niche, each of which is comprised of a number of obligatory and optional steps. Figure 1.illustrates these moves and steps in detail.

In a study, Ozturk (2007) examined the degree of variability in the structure of research article introductions within the discipline of applied linguistics. He analyzed 20 research articles from *Studies in Second Language Acquisition (SSLA)* and the *Journal of Second Language Writing (*JSLW) and explored the differences in terms of Swales's (1990) CARS model. The results regarding the SSLA corpus pointed out five different patterns in move structure. But the dominant pattern was M1-M2-M3 proposed by Swales (1990). On the basis of the results, Ozturk (2007) found a great deviation from the move structure in the corpus of JSLW. In the analysis, a five-move pattern of move structure was identified. The results revealed that only one out of 10 RA introductions in the corpus fitted the CARS model. Forty percent of the introductions in the JSLW corpus had the move structure M1-M2-M1-M3 while the other 30 percent of the RA introductions in the JSLW corpus was not in line with the CARS model, in a way that they did not contain move 2. Ozturk recommended that "in the JSLW corpus there is no generally agreed pattern in the organization of RA introductions. It seems that the move structures M1-M2-M1-M3 (40%) and M1-M3 (30%) have gained prominence" (p. 31).

Samarj (2008) examined masters' theses from three disciplines with a focus on the structure of introductions. The data consisted of 24 theses written at a large public university in the U.S, eight from each discipline of philosophy, biology, and linguistics. In the analysis of the corpus, she employed both discourse analysis and interviews with subject specialists. An analysis of the overall organization of the thesis introductions showed discourse features that distinguish this genre from research articles and also pointed to disciplinary variation within this genre.

Studying the introduction sections of research articles, Keshavarz, Atai, and Barzegar (2007) investigated research article introductions written by Iranian and non-Iranian applied linguists. They randomly selected a representative sample of 60 Introductions (30 from international and 30 from Iranian English RAs) and contrastively analyzed their schematic structure based on Swales' (1990) CARS model. The results of this analysis revealed no significant difference between the frequency of Move 1 and Move 2 in both categories of introductions. Nevertheless, they found a significant difference between the frequency of Move 3 in RAs written by both Iranian and non-Iranian English writers. Move 3 was not used by many of Iranian writers. The researcher explained this diversity on terms of low knowledge regarding the rhetorical structure of Move 3 among Iranian RAs writers.

The abovementioned discussion boils down to the following research questions:

1. What rhetorical structures (moves) are characterized in the introduction section of Iranian EFL learners' M.A. theses?

2. To what extent different rhetorical structures (moves) are in line with established frameworks?

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants and Setting

The data of this study were M.A. theses written by Iranian EFL learners majoring in TEFL at IAU, Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch, from which a convenient sample of 40 theses were selected randomly. The decision about the number of selected articles was made on the assumption that the corpus was large enough to reveal major changes and allow the researcher for valid generalizations. In order to homogenize the sample, a few restrictions were imposed; all of the theses were experimental research studies produced by students graduating from TEFL.

The name of the students, supervisors, and the title of theses were kept confidential and anonymous, that is the ethical issue was observed. The reason for selecting this sample was their accessibility, because the researchers were from the same university.

Because the researchers were from IAU, Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch, the selected samples of M.A. theses were from the same university in order to satisfy the need of availability and accessibility. This university is regarded as a comprehensive university, and it can be representative of Iranian Azad universities that offer MA and PhD programs in applied linguistics. Additionally, the time duration for conducting the research was from November 2015 to January 2016. For minimizing the effect of time both on data collection and data analysis procedures, determining a specific date would be a suitable solution. Also, the corpus of theses was collected from particular time duration of submitting to make the analysis more accurate and reliable and avoid the intervening variable of time.

B. Instrument

Because this study was concerned with genre analysis, and the method used was mainly in descriptive and quantitative form, the researcher employed a conceptual framework to analyze the data.

The conceptual framework employed for analyzing the introduction sections of theses was drawn from Swales' (1990) CARS model. In this regard, Swales's (1990) pioneering model to account for establishing the rhetorical move structure in article introductions called *Create A Research Space* (CARS) was the main framework to analyze the introduction section of theses.

The reason for selecting Swales' (1990) CARS model was that, it has been the most comprehensive framework for analyzing the introduction and many other researchers have applied it successfully and extensively. Moreover, according to Swales (2004), his CARS model is simple, practical, and corpus-based for describing the introduction section and provides a tripartite schema that is employed in many academic disciplines.

According to this model, the introduction section contains three moves which perform a communicative function, and is realized formally or linguistically in one or more steps. These moves and steps have been explained in the following figure.
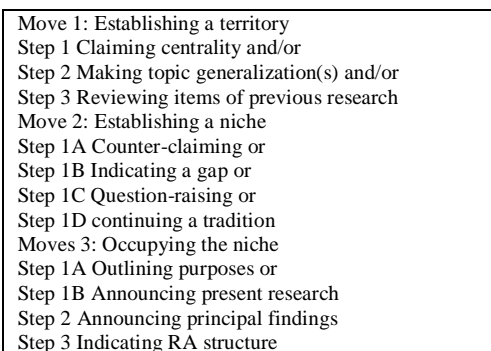
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Move 1: Establishing a territory
Step 1 Claiming centrality and/or
Step 2 Making topic generalization(s) and/or
Step 3 Reviewing items of previous research
Move 2: Establishing a niche
Step 1A Counter-claiming or
Step 1B Indicating a gap or
Step 1C Question-raising or
Step 1D continuing a tradition
Moves 3: Occupying the niche
Step 1A Outlining purposes or
Step 1B Announcing present research
Step 2 Announcing principal findings
Step 3 Indicating RA structure
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Figure 1. Swales' creat a research space (cars) model (Swales, 1990, p. 141).

C. Data Collection Procedure

The data employed in this study were mainly collected from 40 M.A. theses written by Iranian EFL learners. All of these theses were experimental research studies written in TEFL. To ensure the reliability and validity of data, only theses submitted in 2010 onward were collected.

M.A. theses are considered as reference sources, therefore it is not allowed to bring them out of library; therefore if one want to borrow a thesis, s/he should stay in the place and use it and return it back to the library at the same time. But there is an advantage for IAU, Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch students that they have an online access to all of theses written at this university.

By either referring to library or searching through digital library of the university, the researchers had access to theses. Data were collected from the introduction sections of theses and analyzed according to the conceptual framework presented in the previous section.

D. Data Analysis Procedure

Analyzing the collected data entails examining the data in ways that shows the relationship, patterns, etc. that can be found within it. It means that by using statistical operations the relationship or pattern of the introduction sections of M.A. theses would be revealed and also the answers to research questions obtained through data analysis would be trustworthy. This process of data analysis may compare the present study information to that of standard framework and draw some valuable conclusion from data. In the present study, quantitative data was crucial for rhetorical features of the introduction section, therefore the coded data from this section was quantified.

The present study pursued an analysis of moves used in the introduction sections of M.A. theses. The statistical analysis involved two types of analysis, frequency analysis and percentages. By measuring the frequency of occurrence, the researcher intended to indicate how often each type of rhetorical structures such as moves and steps occurred. Generally speaking, frequency provides a summary of the basic characteristics of the data.

So, in this study, the frequency and percentage of moves for the introduction section were calculated to detect the possible differences among them and to see whether the differences were significant. Sometimes, a particular move spreads across two or more disparate paragraphs; that is, if a move was repeated in two or more separate paragraph, they were counted as repeating one occurrence of a move. In other word, the moves were treated in terms of being present or absent. The analysis was carried out mainly by the researchers; however, in order to improve and ensure the intra-rater reliability of the analyses, the data was also analyzed for the second time by the researchers after a month interval. In addition, having analyzed the data twice, the identification of certain ambiguous moves and the data was rechecked by another researcher.

After analysis of the corpus, the frequency and the percentages of moves in the introduction section were calculated.

IV. RESULTS

As it was discussed more in detail in previous chapters, the introduction section of theses should have three Moves. According to Swales (1990), these three moves are: (*a) Establishing a territory, (b) Establishing a niche, (c) Occupying the niche.* All of these moves were looked for in 40 M.A. theses.

Table 1.illustrates the distribution of Move 1, that is establishing a territory, of the introduction section of theses. It shows that among 40 theses, 28 of them employed this move as an introductory subsection while in the remaining 12 ones, the mentioned Move was not present and the students did not make use of it. These percentages indicate that students were conscious in providing some information about the area of their research and they tried to familiarize the reader with the subject of their study. Seemingly, this move is considered to be an obligatory move in writing the introduction section for master students.

TABLE 1.
DISTRIBUTION OF MOVE 1 OF THE INTRODUCTION SECTION

	Frequency	Percent
Present	28	70.0
Absent	12	30.0
Total	40	100.0

The degree of distribution of Move 2 of the introduction section, that is establishing a niche, is shown in table 2. This table indicates that out of 40 theses, 26 ones established a niche or gap in their study while the other 14 ones did not refer to the related gaps in the area of their study. According to the calculated percentages, the number of students observed this move was higher than those who did not. But there are still rooms to emphasize more on this move, in order to magnify the importance of conducting the related research.

TABLE 2.
DISTRIBUTION OF MOVE 2 OF THE INTRODUCTION SECTION

	Frequency	Percent
Present	26	65.0
Absent	14	35.0
Total	40	100.0

The last Move of the introduction section is occupying the niche. Table 3 presents the distribution of this move in theses. This table reflects that, this move was followed in most of the theses, showing that students regarded this move as an emphatic point in writing the introduction section. The percentages of the present item (Move 3) were fulfilling, because it reveals that the students made an effort to provide an answer for the research and to fill the mentioned gap in the area of the related study.

TABLE 3.
DISTRIBUTION OF MOVE 3 OF THE INTRODUCTION SECTION

	Frequency	Percent
Present	33	82.5
Absent	7	17.5
Total	40	100.0

V. CONCLUSION

According to Jalilifar (2009), the introduction which comes at the beginning of any piece of academic writing, provides some important and detailed information about the research that comes in later section. To accomplish its crucial role, introduction should contain three Moves that are *(a) Establishing a territory, (b) Establishing a niche, (c) Occupying the niche* (Swales, 1990).

The results of genre analysis of the introduction showed a higher proportion of present items to the absent ones in observing Move 1 of the introduction section. Therefore it can be concluded that establishing a territory for beginning a research study is a crucial factor and students were careful about following this move and considered it as an obligatory move. On the other hand, Move 2 of the introduction section that is, establishing the niche, was present in a large number of theses (65%). But, it seems that it would be more satisfactory if the students become more conscious about writing this move, because Move 2 provides the justification for conducting the related study. Moreover, the last Move of the introduction that is, occupying the niche was present in most of theses, indicating that this move was again regarded as an obligatory move for the introduction section.

With having all of these in mind, it can be concluded that three Moves of the introduction section were followed exactly in Iranian EFL learners' M.A. theses with a high degree of distribution. Accordingly, students' performance in writing the first chapter of their theses seems fulfilling, but there are still some points to be emphasized more for a better consequence.

There are a number of limitations which might have influenced the findings of this study. Some of these limitations are as follow. First of all the number of the collected corpus in this study was limited. Then, the choice of a larger sample for genre analysis would increase the reliability of the study so the outcome of this investigation would be more generalizable.

Secondly, in this study, only moves as the only rhetorical structure were examined. In this regard, steps could be considered as another rhetorical structure for investigation. Therefore, the results achieved in this way would be more comprehensive and detailed for discussion and conclusion.

There is still a room for conducting the same study with a larger sample and a larger corpus for collecting and analyzing the data. Furthermore, the theses that were collected were from the same discipline of TEFL, in another study, one may use other majors such as Translation Studies or English Literature, to see whether there exist any differences or not.

Samraj (2008) had a series of semi-structured interviews with two or three academic professors from each discipline regarding their beliefs about the structure and function of master's theses produced in their departments. She reported that each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and was tape-recorded and transcribed. Most of the interviews were dedicated to the issues raised by the interviewees. The questions were mostly general ones such as what makes a good writer in their discipline and the characteristics of a desired theses structure. It would be beneficial to have such interviews with professors in order to have a better understanding of both the discipline and the students to conduct a more thorough research concerning academic writing. These interviews might help the researcher take more details into his/ her own account and start the research with a better awareness of the participants.

This study had both micro-implication and macro-implication. First of all, the findings of this study are advantageous for students because they provide good opportunities for students to improve the writing of the introduction section of their theses. Actually, it is really necessary and useful for M.A. students to be helped to write better theses with less problems, the present study may have some contributions in this regard; in a way that students would be familiarized with other students' styles of writing and try to avoid the same problems, and become more conscious in their writings.

As far as this study concerns, the practitioners may also benefit; in a way that, they would familiarize with students' main areas of problems and difficulty and try to work and focus on those areas more in academic writing classes.

The results of this study can also be associated to those of policy makers or syllabus designers too. For example, syllabus designers may get advantages from the present study by generalizing its results to other students and situations and modify the syllabus in a way that the specified features are highlighted in the course books. When the modified and applicable items for a more scientific writing are available in the market, both policy makers and students would gain advantages.

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