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## Rhetorical Structure Variations in Abstracts and Introductions of Applied Linguistics Master's Theses by Iraqi and International Students

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### ABSTRACT

Writing a Master of Arts (MA) thesis is a challenging task for postgraduate students. This complexity is of great significance when one is writing in his/her second language. From this perspective, genre-centered approaches help non-natives enhance their understanding of academic and scientific texts. This study is intended to comparatively investigate the rhetorical differences/similarities existing in the abstracts and introduction sections of MA theses produced by Iraqi and international students in the field of Applied Linguistics (AL). To achieve this goal, two groups of MA theses (30 theses each) were randomly selected. Hyland's (2000) proposed model and Chen and Kuo's (2012) framework were utilized in order to categorize the rhetorical structures in abstract and introduction sections, respectively. The findings showed that Iraqi university students included the steps of (a) *Research hypotheses* and (b) *Outlining thesis structures* in their abstracts while these rhetorical features were absent in their international counterparts. Iraqi students also discussed results in the abstracts more frequently than international MA students. Furthermore, although both Iraqi and international MA students utilized the moves with similar frequencies in their introduction chapters, international students utilized various steps for the realization of Move 1 and Move 3. The findings call for a genre-based approach in teaching academic writing to raise the students' awareness of these schematic organizations in MA thesis writing classes in EFL contexts.

**Keywords:** genre analysis; moves/steps; Iraqi MA theses; abstracts; introduction; applied linguistics

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## Introduction

It is generally accepted that it is through a specific genre's structures that the members of a specific academic discourse community could make successful communications. Genre-based approach intensively investigates the rhetorical structures of a genre and its key linguistic features (Bhatia, 2014; Swales, 1990; 2004). This well-established line of inquiry has motivated the English for Specific Purposes researchers to examine move-step organizations of different academic genres.

Bhatia (2014) considers genre as the use of the language in a conventionalized communicative context. He believes that it is through genre that one could give his/her own expressions to the specific sets of recognized communicative purposes of a disciplinary or social institution. Bhatia argues that each genre imposes its own constraints on the use of lexico-grammatical and discoursal resources, and it is due to these constraints that variations are realized in disciplinary practices.

MA thesis is an important academic genre that MA students are required to submit for their graduation. A well-crafted MA thesis could persuade the supervisors and examining committees to accept the students' knowledge claims of the genre. More specifically, a well-organized MA thesis might indicate to authorities that the graduate student is sufficiently qualified in applying the rhetorical conventions of their discourse community (Hüttner, Smit, & Mehlmauer-Larcher, 2009). To have adequate knowledge of this specific academic genre is significant since acquiring this valuable ability could encourage MA students to pursue their academic goals in higher levels of education. In other words, this rhetorical knowledge will make these future researchers function appropriately in their scientific careers which subsequently provide them with opportunities to receive research grants and professional advancement (Swales, 2004). Therefore, conducting a study of the rhetorical structures of MA theses which are conventional to the discourse community of a certain academic discipline could be considered as an important academic achievement for non-expert master's students in general, and those in Iraqi universities in particular.

Previous studies on the organizational patterns of abstracts and introductory sections/chapters of MA and doctoral theses in AL have provided insightful understanding of these genres. Bunton (2002) and Samraj (2008) revealed the overall organizations of abstracts and introductions of these long academic genres. Other studies comparatively showed the realization of rhetorical structures in the abstracts (Ren & Li, 2011; Zand-Moghadam & Meihami, 2016) and introduction sections (Cheung, 2012; Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2014b) of MA/doctoral theses authored by native and/or non-native English writers. Some investigations examined the whole structures of a master's thesis in AL (Chen & Kuo, 2012; Dudley-Evans, 1986). Generally, these studies support the suggestion that writing a thesis in AL is a challenging task both for native and non-native students, particularly those developed by master's writers (Paltridge, 2002; Shaw, 1991; Thompson, 2013).

In Iraq, there have been limited investigations on the realization of move-step structures of Iraqi MA and doctoral theses in AL, and to the authors' best knowledge, very few studies analyzed the similarities and differences of these invisible structures in the opening sections of these long genres in AL written by Iraqi students. Al-Zubaidi (2013), for example, examined the informational units in fifty MA and doctoral abstracts authored by Iraqi AL graduates. The results showed that the moves of *Purpose*, *Methodology*, and *Product (Results)* were obligatory whereas the moves of *Introduction* and *Conclusion* were optional in the reviewed abstracts. In another investigation, Jawad and Abid Saleh (2018) analyzed the rhetorical moves in the abstracts of MA theses written in two languages, American English and Iraqi Arabic. The study revealed that Iraqi

Arabic writers overused the general ideas about the topic in the abstracts. It seems that research on Iraqi MA theses is quite in infancy and requires further due attention. This study intended to investigate the rhetorical differences/similarities existing in the abstracts and introduction chapters of MA theses generated by Iraqi and international MA students in the field of applied linguistics. Therefore, the following research questions guide the study:

1. What are the move and step structures of abstract and introduction sections of MA theses written by Iraqi AL students?
2. What are the similarities and differences of moves and steps in thesis abstracts and introductions written by Iraqi and international MA students?

## Review of Literature

### *Genre*

This study follows an English for Specific Purposes/English for Academic Purposes (ESP/EAP) approach to genre analysis. In fact, the main concentration of this study is to analyze the move-step structures of two sub-genres (Abstracts and Introductions) of MA theses in the field of AL employing ESP/EAP approach. Move is “a discoursal or rhetorical unit that performs a coherent communicative function in a written or spoken discourse” (Swales, 2004, p. 228), and it could be specified by a smaller unit identified as Step. Furthermore, “a Move, at one extreme, can be realized by a clause; at the other by several sentences. It is a functional not a formal unit” (Swales, 2004, p. 228).

### *Move Analysis in Thesis/ Dissertation Abstracts*

Abstract is known as a standard gateway into the research literature for the scientific community (Hyland, 2000; Lorés, 2004). This function of abstract is important owing to the fact that science is rapidly growing and the readers are not able to read the literature easily (Salager-Meyer, 1990). In the words of Cross and Oppenheim (2006), abstract allows the reader to access the central themes of the full document since this sub-genre in academic papers is the concise and accurate representations of the content of the whole document. It enables the academic writers to work hard to present how the research was carried out or what was the background of their research (Hyland, 2000). Hyland maintains that abstract in soft sciences provides concise elaboration on key information imbedded in the main sections of a thesis.

It is indicated in the literature that since its introduction in the 1990s, Swalesian framework has been considered as a solid foundation for the analysis of move – step structures in the abstract of RAs in AL (Can, Karabacak, & Qin, 2016; Martin, 2003; Pho, 2008; Santos, 1996; Tseng, 2011). A majority of these analyses systematically examined the organizational units (Can, Karabacak, & Qin, 2016), and still some others analyzed not only these rhetorical options, but also the distribution of their lexico-grammatical features in the abstract of AL research articles (Santos, 1996; Tseng, 2011). Few studies contrastively investigated these invisible preferences in the abstracts developed in two languages (Martin, 2003). These empirical works confirm the hypothesis that the expert members of this scientific discourse community prefer largely persuasive abstracts in their academic life (Ren & Li, 2011) since a majority of these studies indicate that there is a tendency among AL researchers to provide the readers with a glimpse at the major sections of the study, not to go into details (Pho, 2008; Ren & Li, 2011). This rhetorical behavior is attested by the frequent occurrences of three organizational units, namely Purpose,

Method, and Result, and low frequency of Conclusion in abstracts (e.g. Martin, 2003). In brief, it seems that the researchers in the AL abstract comply with the word limits of their scientific community to maximize the attention of the reader into the content of the paper.

Previous studies also show an emerging flow of research describing the move – step organization in the abstract of MA thesis in AL (Chen & Kuo, 2012; Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2014c; Ren & Li, 2011; Zand-Moghadam & Meihami, 2016). With the exclusion of Chen and Kuo's (2012) analysis, almost all these studies examined the rhetorical behaviors of non-native English students in the abstract. Ren and Li (2011) compared the essentiality of rhetorical moves in abstracts of journal articles and Chinese Master of Arts (MA) students in AL. They found that whereas Chinese students included all moves in their abstracts, experts often included only three of them, namely *purpose*, *method*, and *results*, ignoring the *introduction* and *discussion* moves. According to Ren and Li, the experts paid more attention to the persuasive role rather than the informative role of research article abstracts, while MA writers tended to pay due attention to the informative role rather than the persuasive role of thesis abstracts. In simple words, MA students provided a small scale of the whole theses in the abstract sections. Nguyen and Pramoolsook (2014c) found that *Introduction* and *Method* moves were obligatory while *Results* and *Conclusions* moves were conventional in the abstract of TESOL theses written by Vietnamese MA students. Zand-Moghadam and Meihami (2016) further investigated the rhetorical structures of 300 thesis abstracts written by TEFL MA students at an Iranian top university. The results showed that a majority of abstracts included *Purpose*, *Method*, and *Product* moves whereas *Introduction* and *Conclusion* occurred with lower frequencies. Chen and Kuo (2012) analyzed abstracts in 15 MA theses organized by native English AL students. Their study showed that the moves of (a) *Introduction*, (b) *Method*, and (c) *Result* were conventional in all abstracts. *Conclusions* (53.3%) move was optional. It was also found that all abstracts had a linear structure of *Introduction – Method – Result*. According to their study, there was not adequate elaboration on methodology, probably due to lack of space. Generally, these studies show that abstracts produced by the new members of AL discourse community, particularly those produced by non-native English writers, are informative rather than persuasive since the abstract generated by these non-expert students is a small scale of the whole MA thesis. In other words, the produced abstracts are considerably long including information on major sections of an MA thesis, such as *Introduction*, *Method*, *Results*, and *Discussion* chapters.

In the Iraqi context, Al-Zubaidi (2013) examined the rhetorical units in the AL abstracts of Iraqi MA and doctoral dissertations. The analysis showed that the moves of *Announcing present research*, *Stating hypotheses*, *Summarizing results*, and *Describing methodology* were obligatory and *Claiming centrality*, *Making topic generalizations*, *Referring to previous research*, *Indicating gap* and *Outlining the structure of research* were optional. Moves of *Purpose*, *Methodology*, and *Result* were obligatory. Employing Swales' (1990) Create a Research Space (CARS) model on the abstract sections, Jawad and Abid Saleh (2018) also compared the similarities and differences of moves and steps in 30 abstracts of MA theses written in two languages, American English and Iraqi Arabic (15 each). The results showed that *Establishing the territory* move was conventional both in Arabic (80%) and English (73.3%) abstract section while *Establishing the Territory* move was obligatory in both types of abstracts. Steps of *Making Topic Generalization* and *Announcing Present Research* were conventional in Arabic and English abstracts. Iraqi Arabic abstracts included *Outlining the Purposes Step* far more frequently than American English counterparts (66.6% and 20%, respectively). *Indicating the thesis structure* was absent in English abstracts despite the presence of this rhetorical option in half of Iraqi Arabic abstracts. From the reviewed literature, it is likely that there is no study systematically investigating the possible similarities and differences in the abstract sections of both Iraqi and international MA theses, and this study will fill in this research gap.

*Move Analysis in MA Thesis Introduction*

Introduction has received a great deal of attention by genre analysts because of its function to attract readers (Ozturk, 2007; Rahman, Darus, & Amir, 2017; Samraj, 2002). In fact, a branch of research analyzes the configuration of moves in the introduction of MA theses in AL (Cheung, 2012; Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2014b; Samraj, 2008). In a preliminary work, Samraj (2008) investigated the variation of introduction rhetorical structures across three disciplines of biology, philosophy, and linguistics. Her text analysis revealed that Move 1 was obligatory and it was frequently realized by the step of *Centrality of the topic* (6 out of 8 theses) either in terms of the research activity or the world, although the second strategy was more common. While Move 3 was obligatory, Move 2 was conventional and it was usually asserted by *Gap indication* step. This rhetorical unit mainly contained the steps of *Goal statement* (obligatory) and *Previewing the thesis structure* (conventional). *Stating the hypothesis* was rare, and *Reporting finding* step was absent. Cheung (2012) analyzed the discourse of introduction chapters in 43 theses authored by Singaporean MA students in soft sciences, including AL. In AL introduction chapters, Cheung found that *Establishing the territory of research* (Move 1) was not frequently preferred by Singaporean students despite their frequent preferences for Move 2. Unlike native English writers in Samraj's (2008) analysis, the majority of Singaporean students used the steps of *Reviewing the literature* and *Claiming centrality* in low frequencies. However, similar to Samraj, step of *Giving positive justification* was observed in Move 2. Move 3 was asserted by various steps, including *Stating goal of the thesis*, *Presenting the background of the study*, and *Outlining the organizational structure of thesis*. Chen and Kuo (2012) analyzed the introductions of 20 MA theses in AL. This set of introductions was written by international students. Their analysis showed that the steps of *Providing topic generalization* (91%) and *Reviewing previous research* (73%) were conventional in these introductions. It was further found that the steps of *Stating research questions/hypotheses*, *Providing justifications for Study*, and *Indicating a problem/need* occurred in large percentages. Nguyen and Pramoolsook (2014b) analyzed the preferred rhetorical options in the introduction chapters of MA TESOL theses generated by Vietnamese students. The results showed that Vietnamese students frequently used step of *Indicating a problem/need* to indicate possible gaps in previous works. Nguyen and Pramoolsook maintained that this step was probably the easiest way for Vietnamese students to argue for the relevance of their current study. Generally, these studies attest the suggestion that organizing a well-structured introduction is a challenging task both for native and non-native English writers (Swales, 1990; Swales & Feak, 1994). The frequent occurrences of macro-structures in these analyses indicate that these novice researchers were aware of the main communicative function of AL introductions. However, it is evident that these novice researchers are not following the same pattern in their rhetorical preferences for crafting this opening chapter. This is probably due to the hypothesis that graduate students are probably limited to be compliant with formal guidelines of their academic situations (Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2014b). In general, although previous studies on the rhetorical structures in the introduction and abstract sections/chapters of MA theses have provided insightful understanding of how these two sections were composed by both native and non-native English writers, little is known about how Iraqi MA students write these two texts. This study thus plans first to explore how this group of writers in Iraq compose these sections/chapters of their MA theses, and then comparison will be made with those written by international counterparts with the hope to shed some light on possible gaps in MA theses written by Iraqi MA thesis writers. The findings of this study could therefore be utilized in EAP courses in order to facilitate the production of AM thesis in the AL discourse community in Iraq.

## Research Method

### *Corpus*

Sixty MA theses in the field of applied linguistics written in English – 30 Iraqi and 30 international MA theses - were randomly selected for the data of this study. The Iraqi MA theses were produced by postgraduate students in three Iraqi top universities. The international MA theses were downloaded and excerpted from ProQuest data base site. The selected MA theses were restricted to a period of five years (2012-2017). The Iraqi MA theses were randomly obtained with the writers' consent from the libraries of all three universities providing this MA program in the South of Iraq. After permissions were obtained from the heads of the English Departments, the researchers gained access to Iraqi electronic theses. The international MA theses were retrieved from the ProQuest data base. First, we collected a pool of 100 MA theses in applied linguistics; this was due to the reason that ProQuest data base disseminates not only MA and MSc theses but also doctoral dissertations in various disciplines. We utilized simple random sampling to select 30 required MA theses out of 100 instances in order to answer the posed research questions mentioned in the earlier section of this paper. In line with Soler-Monreal, Carbonell-Olivares and Gil-Salom (2011) argument on nativity of international authors, we maintain that international writers "are assumed to have produced texts of the same standard as those of native English writers since their theses were supervised and/or assessed by English-speaking academics" (p. 6).

### *Procedures*

The main purpose of this study was to analyze the rhetorical structures of both abstract and introduction sections of MA theses in order to comparatively describe the rhetorical structures utilized by both Iraqi and international MA students. Available literature maintains that move could be varied in length ranging from several paragraphs to at least one proposition (Swales, 2004). We considered the semantic function of propositions as the main unit for move identification, particularly due to the reason that each proposition could have an independent communicative purpose (Swales, 1990). We utilized Hyland's (2000) proposed framework for analyzing the abstracts in the field of applied linguistics (Appendix A). This framework was chosen because it enabled us to properly distinguish the theses territory of the research (introduction) from the purposes of the study. Given the introduction chapters, we employed Chen and Kuo's (2012) revised framework in order to classify the rhetorical structures utilized in the MA theses authored by Iraqi and International MA students (Appendix B). Chen and Kuo's framework was chosen due to the valuable revisions practiced on it. Indeed, this model is the modified version of Bunton's (2002) CARS model used for the analysis of rhetorical structures in the introduction chapters of doctoral dissertations. According to Nguyen and Pramoolsook (2014b), this model provides us with specific characteristics of master theses in applied linguistics. Therefore, it seems that this framework could be considered as a comprehensive scheme for describing and analyzing the structure of MA thesis Introduction chapters in the field of applied linguistics. In order to classify moves and steps, we utilized an approach similar to Nguyen and Pramoolsook (2016) practiced in discovering the rhetorical structures of the conclusion chapters in Vietnamese TESOL theses. We employed the criteria suggested by Kanoksilapatham (2005). According to Kanoksilapatham, the obligatory move occurs in 100%, and the conventional move occurs between 60 - 99%. If the frequency of a move falls below 60%, the move is considered as optional.

Two inter-raters checked the reliability of the move-step identification in order to avoid the subjectivity in the move-step identification procedure. The first rater was one of the same researchers currently as a PhD candidate in TEFL and the other rater was a university professor holding PhD in TEFL and specialized in corpus-based analysis. We held two discussion sessions

in order to make an agreement on how to effectively identify the Moves and Steps in abstracts and introductions. During our long move identification procedures performed separately, we regularly held several discussion sessions to solve any possible problems in Move and Step categorization. Finally, we checked the results against each other yielding a rather high inter-rater reliability rate (88%).

## Results and Discussion

### *Move and Step analysis in Abstract Sections*

In this section, the similarities as well as differences of rhetorical structures found in abstracts of both Iraqi and international MA theses in AL are reported and discussed. The analysis on these two sets of abstracts identified thirteen steps (Table 1). Two steps, including (a) *Stating the purpose directly* and (b) *Making topic generalization*, occurred with similar frequencies in both groups. The frequent use of purpose statement in the abstract of theses was observed in previous studies as well (Chen & Kuo, 2012; Jawad & Abid Saleh, 2018; Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2014c; Zand-Moghadam & Meihami, 2016). This rhetorical behavior was also frequently evident in the abstracts of research articles in AL (Can, Karabacak & Qin, 2016; Martin, 2003; Pho, 2008; Ren & Li, 2011). Unlike *Purpose statement*, the step of *Making topic generalization* was optional in the abstracts of international and Iraqi MA theses (Table 1)

Table 1

*Frequency and Percentage of Moves and Steps in Abstracts of Iraqi and International MA Theses*

Moves	Iraqi Theses		International Theses	
Introduction	16	53.3%	17	56.6%
Step1: Arguing for topic prominence	00	00%	3	10
Step 2: Making topic generalizations	15	50%	17	56.6%
Step3: Defining terms, objects	00	00%	1	3.3%
Step4: Identifying a gap	00	00%	7	23.3%
Purpose	30	100%	30	100%
Step1: Stating the purpose directly	30	100%	30	100%
Step2: Stating Research hypotheses	24	80%	00	00%
Method	30	100%	28	93.3%
Step1: Describing the participants	27	90%	14	46.6%
Step2: Describing the instruments	26	86.6%	9	30%
Step3: Describing the procedure and conditions	3	10%	12	40%
Product	4	13.3%	24	80%
Step of Describing the main results	4	13.3%	24	80%

Conclusion	24	80%	14	46.6%
Step1: Deducing conclusions from results	24	80%	14	46.6%
Step2: Evaluating value of the research	00	00%	00	00%
Step3: Presenting recommendations	00	00%	00	00%
Thesis structure	21	70%	00	00%
Step of Outlining the Structure of the thesis	21	70%	00	00%

This finding supports the contextualized studies on thesis abstracts (Chen & Kou, 2012; Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2014c; Zand-Moghadam & Meihami, 2016) in which specifying the territory of research or providing background information was not the favorite of novice writers. This is probably due to the short space of the abstract in which the novice writers are usually required to emphasize more on the description of procedures and finding reports rather than to specify their research domains. This hypothesis is further attested by the low preferences of expert writers in the abstracts of RAs in AL (Can, et al., 2016; Pho, 2008).

This result, however, is not in line with Al-Zubaidi's (2013) and Jawad and Abid Saleh's (2018) analyses, in which they found that topic generalization was a conventional rhetorical preference in the abstracts of Iraqi graduate students. These contradictory findings in Iraqi context show that there is not a possible unanimous guideline across Iraqi universities for abstract composition in the field of AL. In other words, different universities may propose different guidelines for the task of abstract writing in MA theses of AL in Iraqi academic contexts. Therefore, the students may be wrongly persuaded to consult with previous theses available in the library of the English departments to format the content and style of their theses. This study indicated that the configuration of Move 1 was complicated in international abstracts, and the international writers used various steps to assert this macro-rhetorical structure. These steps included (a) *Arguing for topic dominance* (10%), (b) *Defining terms* (3.3%), and (c) *Indicating a gap in knowledge* (23.3%). However, Iraqi students frequently resorted to *Topic generalization* step for Move 1 realization. It seems that international MA students specified the territory of their research domain qualitatively in a more elaborated manner than their Iraqi counterparts. The existing variation in Move 1 accomplishment indicates that international students have probably been adequately exposed to formal rhetorical training in the task of abstract writing.

The study further showed that Iraqi students conventionally utilized the steps of (a) *Describing participants* and (b) *Describing instrument*, whereas international writers frequently used the step of *Describing procedures and conditions* for the assertion of Method move in the abstracts of their MA theses in AL (Table 1). In other words, Iraqi students mainly provided full description of the participants and data collection tools while international writers largely elaborated on the research procedures. These findings show that these two groups of students have probably different concepts of the communicative functions of this move in mind. In details, international writers might have considered the communicative function of this rhetorical unit as an effective means to chiefly describe the main process of research conduction. This finding supports the previous studies (Can, et al., 2016; Chen & Kuo, 2012; Pho, 2008; Ren & Li, 2011) in which the justification of this specific rhetorical behavior was commonly attributed to the short length of abstract in the scientific publications in AL. The frequent use of this rhetorical option throughout the literature shows that Iraqi writers were not adequately aware of the communicative function of the Method move in the abstracts of academic genres in AL, probably due to lack of explicit instruction.



Unlike the international students (80%), this study illustrated that Iraqi students (13.3%) did not prefer to summarize the main findings in the abstracts of their MA theses. Instead, they frequently used the step of *Deducing conclusions from results* far more than their international counterparts (80% versus 46.6%, respectively). The established literature does not substantiate the inclusion of result discussion rhetoric in the abstracts of various scientific genres in AL (Can, et al., 2016; Chen & Kuo, 2012; Pho, 2008; Ren & Li, 2011; Zand-Moghadam & Meihami, 2016). Hence, it could be safe to conclude that whereas Iraqi MA writers were inclined to be subjective, international students tended to be objective in reporting the main findings in the abstracts of AL theses. The study further revealed that Iraqi abstracts included the steps of (a) *Stating research hypotheses* (80%) and (b) *Outlining thesis structures* (80%). These two steps were quite absent in international counterparts (Table 1). Previous investigations do not confirm the presence of research hypothesis in the abstracts of academic genres in AL disciplines despite some few investigations (Al-Zobeidi, 2013; Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2014c) in which the non-native English writers outlined the structures of their theses in the abstract sections. Surprisingly, Iraqi students presented these two steps in the introduction chapters as well (Table, 1). Generally, the inclusion of these rhetorical options is not supported by the available literature possibly due to the proposition that abstract is the concise and accurate representation of the content of the whole document (Salager-Meyer, 1990). Therefore, MA AL researchers should work hard to include key concepts in the content of the abstracts so that the reader could easily access and understand the main argument in the original document (Swales, 1990).

According to Table 1, *Purpose* and *Method* moves occurred with high frequencies in two sets of abstracts. These rhetorical behaviors are confirmed by the majority of previous investigations (Can, et al., 2016; Chen & Kuo, 2012; Martin, 2003; Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2014c; Pho, 2008; Ren & Li, 2011; Zand-Moghadam & Meihami, 2016). Generally, these findings indicated that Iraqi and international thesis writers attempted to describe the procedures of their research project thoroughly. The frequent use of Product move in international abstracts (80%) indicates that international writers preferred to summarize the main findings far more than their Iraqi counterparts (13.3%). Iraqi MA students, instead, highly preferred to discuss the findings in the abstracts of their theses. Table 1 also shows that these two groups of non-expert writers used *Introduction* move quite optionally. The low occurrence of this rhetorical interest is not supported by some previous investigations (Ren & Li, 2011), but confirmed by some few studies (Can, et al., 2016; Pho, 2008). Unlike international counterparts, it seems that Iraqi students may not be qualified as new members to the discourse community of AL since their rhetorical preferences in abstract sections are not satisfactory to the established generic norms.

#### *Move and Step Analysis in Introduction Chapters*

The findings showed that these two groups of students frequently used the step of *Topic generalization* to assert the territory of their research interests in introduction chapters rather than (a) *Claiming centrality* and (b) *Referring to literature* (Table 2). These findings are in line with some previous comparative investigations (Cheung, 2012), whose results showed that both native and non-native English writers preferably provided background information for specification of research territory (i.e., Move 3). However, these rhetorical options are in contrast with Samraj (2008), in which it was found that native English MA students preferred to establish the domain of their research largely by highlighting the importance of their topics and/or reviewing the previous citations. On the other hand, research on the introductions of RAs (Ozturk, 2007; Rahman, Darus, & Amir, 2017) shows that expert writers specify the topic of their interests by the massive use of *topic generalization* and *literature review* rather than *claiming centrality* of the topic. This phenomenon is in line with Hyland's (2000) argument that *claiming centrality* is not of interest in the opening sections of scientific publications in AL. Therefore, one may conclude that Iraqi and international writers have not been able to assert Move 1 in compliance to the cultural norms of

their discourse community, probably due to lack of awareness of the communication functions of this rhetorical unit in the AL introduction sections.

Table 2

*Frequency and Percentage of Steps of Move 1 in Introductions of Iraqi and International MA Thesis*

Steps within Move 1	Iraqi Theses		International Theses	
Topic Generalization/Background	27	90%	28	93.3%
Indicating Centrality/Importance of Topic	5	16.6%	13	43.3%
Defining Terms	4	13.3%	6	20%
Reviewing Previous Research	00	00%	11	36.6%

This study found that Iraqi and international writers frequently used the steps of *Indicating gap in literature* to justify the significance of their research (Table 3). This finding supports Cheung (2012), and Samraj (2008) since the majority of students used this rhetorical unit to establish niche in previous investigations. Unlike some contextualized studies (Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2014b), Iraqi and international students did not use the step of *Indicating a problem/need* in the introductions of their MA theses. Nguyen and Pramoolsook (2014b) concluded that “this step is likely to be the easiest way for Vietnamese writers to argue for the relevance of their current study” (p. 68). However, it seems that Iraqi and international MA writers did not find it as a productive way to justify their thesis projects. *Counter-claiming* and *question-raising* were the least frequent steps in the analyzed introductions (Table, 3). These findings were also evident in the available literature (Cheung, 2012; Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2014b). Similar to Nguyen and Pramoolsook’s (2014b) argument, it might be concluded that these groups of novice writers (i.e., Iraqi and international MA students) are not probably adequately skillful to cast a critical approach to available literature in AL or any relevant issues in teaching English language profession.

Table 3

*Frequency and Percentage of Steps within Move 2 in Introductions of Iraqi and International MA Thesis*

Steps within Move 2	Iraqi Theses		International Theses	
Indicating Gap in Literature	13	43.3%	14	46.6%
Question – Raising	4	13.3%	2	6.6%
Counter-Claiming	00	00%	3	10%
Indicating a Problem/Need	15	50%	13	43.3%

As seen in Table 4, both Iraqi and international MA students showed a high preference to use (a) *Purpose statement*, (b) *Stating research questions/hypotheses*, (c) *significance of the study*, (d) *Indicating*

*limitation*, and (c) *Overview of thesis chapters* for Move 3 accomplishment. These findings are in line with Cheung (2012) since all the MA students frequently utilized these rhetorical preferences with similar frequencies. It is worth noting that one study reported the rare inclusion of hypothesis stating (Samarj, 2008), and another analysis reported the lack of Indicating the limitation of study step (Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2014b). Generally, the study showed that international MA theses were qualitatively more elaborate than Iraqi counterparts since the move of *Occupying the niche* was commonly realized by the use of various steps. This is probably due to this reason that international students are possibly in compliance with official word limits of their universities. These findings are supported by the relevant contextualized studies (Chen & Kuo, 2012; Cheung, 2011; Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2014b)

Table 4

*Frequency and Percentage of Steps within Move 3 of Introductions of Iraqi and International MA Thesis*

Steps within Move 3	Iraqi Theses		International theses	
Move	30	100%	30	100%
Step of Indicating Purpose	29	96.6%	28	93.3%
Step of Indicating Scope of Research	1	3.3%	5	16.6%
Step of Indicating Chapter section/structure	00	00%	1	3.3%
Step of Indicating Theoretical Positions	00	00%	4	13.3%
Step of Announcing Research/Work Carried	8	26.6%	6	20%
Step of Describing Parameters of Research	00	00%	2	6.6%
Step of Stating Research Questions/Hypotheses	30	100%	20	66%
Step of Defining Terms	00	00%	2	6.6%
Step of Indicating the Research Method	00	00%	11	36.6%
Step of Indicating Applications	00	00	00	00%
Step of Indicating Value/Significance	30	100%	18	60%
Step of Indicating Limitations	30	100%	6	20%
Step of Providing Justification	00	00%	2	6.6%
Step of Indicating Thesis Structure	1	1.3%	8	26.6%
Step of Providing Definition of Key Terms	4	13.3%	8	26.6%
Step of Outlining Thesis Structure	30	100%	00	00%

The findings show that Iraqi (96.6%) and International (93.3%) MA students considered *Move of Establishing Territory* as a conventional one. It means that both Iraqi and International students attempted to specify the territory of their research project. *Move of Establishing Niche* was also conventional in the introductions of these groups of MA students (Table 4). The finding also illustrated that *Move of Occupying Niche* was present in all introductions. The findings generally showed that Iraqi introduction chapters were not featured with complicated rhetorical units, and almost most of the students preferred the similar rhetorical structures in generating this opening section of their theses. These rhetorical behaviors create this temptation to conclude that Iraqi MA students might have followed the guidelines of their universities or they may have arranged the style and content of this chapter quite often based on theses written by previous students in their faculty libraries (Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2014b). Generally, it seems that Iraqi MA writers may not be able to impress and attract the reader in their introduction chapters, particularly, due

to the reason that these non-expert writers did not show preferences to make claims for the centrality or significance of their thesis projects.

### Conclusion, Implications and Suggestions for Further Research

This study compared and contrasted the possible rhetorical similarities and differences existing in the abstract and introduction sections of Iraqi and international MA theses in Applied Linguistics (AL). Hyland's (2000) proposed model and Chen and Kuo's (2012) framework were utilized in order to categorize the rhetorical structures in abstract and introduction sections, respectively. The analysis of abstract sections indicated that *Purpose* and *Method* moves were the most frequent rhetorical structures among Iraqi and international MA theses writers in AL. It was also observed that Iraqi MA students showed a high tendency to discuss the results whereas international MA students largely tended to summarize the results in the abstract.

The analysis of introduction chapters showed that *Topic generalization* was the most frequent step in Move 1 accomplishment. The step of *Indicating gap in literature* was the frequent rhetorical strategy for Move 2 realization among Iraqi and international MA students. These groups of students used the steps of (a) *Indicating statement of purpose*, (b) *Stating research questions/hypotheses*, and (c) *Significance of the study* with similar frequencies. Iraqi students frequently used steps of (a) *Indicating limitations* and (b) *Outlining thesis structures* in the introductions whereas these rhetorical features occurred in low frequencies in the introductions of international MA theses.

The findings of this study emphasize teaching academic writing based on genre approach rather than merely processing approach. Because process approach is not sufficient in helping students socially construct meaning in a specific genre. According to Hyland (2003), applying processing approach to academic writing fails to help students follow their purposes, establish relationships and shape their writing in a specific discourse community. He argues that teachers help students to learn the writing process rather than the writing skills. In fact, genre-based pedagogy to writing enables the teachers to explicitly introduce the external factors influencing and shaping the ultimate writing. Therefore, our rhetorical analysis suggests a direct and explicit teaching of the rhetorical structures in EFL academic writing classes. The findings of this study could be used to teach Iraqi EFL students how to write the abstract and introduction of an MA thesis in the field of AL. More specifically, Iraqi academic instructors should explicitly teach the functions of both abstracts and introductions, in general, and the conventional functions of each move and step realized within these two sections, in particular. Applying this genre-based approach to teaching academic writing could help Iraqi MA students know how to assert communicative purposes in the abstracts and introductions of scientific publications in the AL discipline.

The present study investigated only the rhetorical structures of abstract and introduction sections of Iraqi and international MA theses. Future studies could investigate these rhetorical organizations in other sections/chapters of this genre in AL, namely *Review of literature*, *Method*, *Result*, *Discussion* or *Conclusion* chapters. Caution should be exercised in generalizing the findings of this study since the proposed interpretations have not been discussed and validated with theses writers and their supervisors. Therefore, future investigations could replicate this study and discuss the interpretations with the informants in order to ensure the validity of their interpretations.

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## Appendix A

Table 5

*Hyland (2000) Proposed Model for Abstract Analysis*

Moves	Steps
Introduction	Step 1: Arguing for topic prominence, Step 2: Making topic generalizations, Step 3: Defining terms, objects, or processes, and Step 4: Identifying a gap in current knowledge
Purpose	Step 1: Stating the purpose directly
Method	Step 1: Describing the participants, Step 2: Describing the instruments or equipment, and Step 3: Describing the procedure and conditions
Product: states main findings or results, the argument, or what was accomplished.	Step 1: Describing the main features or properties of the solution or product
Conclusion: interprets or extends results beyond the scope of the paper, draws inferences, points to applications, or wider applications.	Step 1: Deducing conclusions from results, Step 2: Evaluating value of the research, and Step 3: Presenting recommendations

## Appendix B

Table 6

*Chen and Kuo's (2012) revised framework for MA Theses in Applied Linguistics*

Moves	Steps
Establishing the Territory	Topic Generalization/Background Indicating Centrality/Importance of Topic Defining Terms Reviewing Previous Research



Establishing Niche	Indicating Gap in Previous Research
	Question – Raising
	Counter-Claiming
	Indicating a Problem/Need
Occupying the Niche	Indicating Purposes/Objectives
	Indicating Scope of Research
	Indicating Chapter section/structure
	Indicating Theoretical Position
	Announcing Research/Work Carried
	Describing Parameter of Research
	Stating Research Questions/Hypotheses
	Defining Terms
	Indicating the Research Method
	Indicating Finding/Results
	Indicating Model Proposed
	Indicating applications
	Indicating Value/Significance
	Indicating Limitations
	Providing Justification
	Indicating thesis Structure
	Providing Definition of Key terms
Independent Move of Referring to other Studies	Providing Background Information
	Providing Definitions of Terms
	Providing Support or Justification

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