

THE APPLICATION OF ‘SWALES’ MODEL’ IN THE M.A. THESES OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS IN KRG UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract:

This research investigates the extent to which M.A. thesis introductions in Applied Linguistics written by postgraduate students in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRG) adhere to Swales's (1990) CARS (Create a Research Space) model for conventionalizing research introductions. The CARS model is well-known and often cited in research on academic writing. However, its application in the Kurdish context has remained under-researched in the context of individual language-based rhetorical practices, which are a combination of local academic practice and international practices.

The study employed a mixed-methods design in analyzing the introductory chapters of 15 M.A. theses from three universities in the KRG —Sulaimani, Salahaddin, and Duhok. The thesis introductions were analyzed using Swales' three moves—Establishing a Territory, Establishing a Niche, and Occupying the Niche—and their respective steps.

The data indicate that students used all three moves, but they did so inconsistently. In Move 1, students accomplished the establishment of their topic's importance reasonably well. However, often with limited or uneven reviews of prior research. The most common strategy in Move 2 was to identify the gap in the literature for their study; however, very few adopted higher order strategies like counter-claiming arguments or continuing a tradition. Move 3 was the most consistently accomplished move, with students explicitly stating the purpose of the study, research questions, and named the structure of the thesis.

In conclusion, the study shows that Kurdish postgraduate students predominantly operate in line with the CARS model in composing introductions to theses. However, their use of some steps clearly denotes vestiges of local scholarly practice with regard to aspects of research writing conventions that differ internationally, and differences related to their degree of awareness of international research writing importance.

Keywords: Swales, CARS model 1990, Introduction Chapters, M.A. thesis, Kurdish researchers, KRG

الملخص:

يستقصي هذا البحث مدى التزام مقدمات رسائل الماجستير في اللعويات التطبيقية، التي كتبها طلاب الدراسات العليا في إقليم كردستان العراق (KRG) ، بنموذج سوبيلز (1990) المعروف باسم إنشاء مساحة بحثية (CARS - Create a Research Space) ، وهو إطار تحليلي يهدف إلى تنظيم البنية الخطابية لمقدمات الأبحاث الأكاديمية. ويُعد نموذج CARS أحد أكثر النماذج استخداماً في تحليل الكتابة الأكاديمية، إلا أن تطبيقه في السياق الكردي ما زال محدود الدراسة، خصوصاً في ظل تداخل الممارسات البلاغية المحلية مع الأعراف الأكاديمية الدولية. اعتمدت الدراسة منهجاً مختلطًا لتحليل مقدمات خمس عشرة رسالة ماجستير من ثلاث جامعات في الإقليم هي: السليمانية، صلاح الدين، ودهوك، وذلك وفق الحركات الثلاث التي يتضمنها النموذج وهي: تحديد المجال، وتحديد المتخصصة، واحتلال المتخصصة، مع دراسة الخطوات الفرعية المرافقة لكل حركة. أظهرت النتائج أن جميع الطلاب استخدموا هذه الحركات بدرجات متفاوتة من الاتساق؛ إذ نجح معظمهم في الحركة الأولى في بيان أهمية موضوع الدراسة، رغم محدودية مراجعاتهم للدراسات السابقة، بينما كانت أكثر الاستراتيجيات شيوعاً في الحركة الثانية هي تحديد الفجوة البحثية، في حين قلل استخدام استراتيجيات أكثر تقدماً مثل تحضير الدراسات السابقة أو متابعة تقاليد بحثية قائمة. أما الحركة الثالثة فقد كانت الأكثروضوحاً، حيث عرض الطلاب أهداف الدراسة وأسئلتها وبنية الرسالة بدقة. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن طلاب الدراسات العليا الأكراد يلتزمون عموماً بنموذج CARS ، مع استمرار تأثر بعض خطواتهم بالمارسات الأكاديمية المحلية ومستوى الوعي المتفاوت بمتطلبات الكتابة البحثية في السياقات الأكاديمية الدولية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: سوبيلز، 1990 CARS model، مقدمات البحث، بحث الماجستير، الباحث الكردي، إقليم كوردستان

پوخته

ئەم توپزىنەمە ھەولەدەت لە ىرادەي شۇينىپەمەلگەرنى و پابەندبۇون بە بەكارھىنانى مۆدىلى) سازکەرنى كەلىنى توپزىنەمە - Create a Research Space (1990 لە دايرىشتن و رىيختى بەشى پىشەكىي ماستەرنامە لە بوارى زمانھوانىي كارمكى وەك نوسىنى زانستى، كە لە لايەن خوينىدارانى كورد لە خوينىدىنى بالا لە زانكۆكانى ھەرىمى كوردىستاندا نوسراون، بىكۆلەتتەوە. سەرەراي ئەمە بەكارھىنان و كارپىنگەرنى مۆدىلىمەكە لە توپزىنەمە زانستىيەكەن لە ناوکۆ كوردىيەكەدا لە چوار چىوهى نوسىنى توپزىنەمە زانستى لە پەيرەو كەنارى پەيتۈرىكىيە تاكەكەمىسىيەكەن و لە ناوکۆ تاكەزمانى، كە لە سەر بنەماي پەكتىزەكەنارى رىتۈرىكى دامەزراوە، پەيرەو كەنارى پىورە نىيۇدەلەتتىيەكەن و پىورە ناوخۇبىيەكەنلىپەتكەمەگەرىداوە.

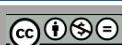
توپزىنەمە كە لە بەكارھىنانى مېتۇدى تىكەللاوى چەندىتى و چۈنىتەتى لە شىكەرنەمە بەشى پىشەكىيەكەن (15) ماستەرنامە كەللىكىوەرگەرنى تووە، كە لە سى زانكۆ ھەرىمى كوردىستان: (زانكۆ سەلەمانى، زانكۆ سەلاھدىن و زانكۆ دەھۆك)، بە شىوهى ھەرەمەكى كۆكراونەتتەوە. پىشەكىي ماستەرنامەكەن شىكراونەتتەوە بە بەكارھىنانى مۆدىلىمەكە سوپىلز، كە لە سى جوولە پىكەھاتتۇن و بىرىتىن لە: سازکەرنى رووبەرى توپزىنەمە، سازکەرنى كەلىنى توپزىنەمە و پەركەرنەمە كەلىنى توپزىنەمە لەگەل ھەنگاوه تايىتەكەنارى ھەر جوولەيەك.

داتاكان ئەمەيان دەرخستۇوە، خوينىداران ھەر سى جوولەكەيان پەيرەو كەدۇوە، بەلام بە شىۋەيەكى ناھاوسەنگ. لە جوولەمە يەكەمدا، خوينىداران بە شىۋەيەكى تەھاوا گونجاو گەنگىي باتەكەيان خستۇوەتپەررو. سەرەراي ئەمە زور جار بە شىۋەيە سۇنوردار، يان ناھاوسەنگ پەيرەو بىيان لە ھەنگاۋى پېداچوونەمە بۇ توپزىنەمە بىشتر كەدۇوە. بلاوترىن ھەنگاۋىك لە جوولەمە دووەمدا پەيرەو كەرەپەتتەن، خستەرروى كەلىنى توپزىنەمە كە بۇوە لە بەشى وېزەمى توپزىنەمە كەنارىدا، بەلام زەمارەيەكى زور كەم ھەنگاۋە بالاڭانى وەك ھەنگاۋە دىزەلگەكەن، يان بەرەدەمابۇون لە پەيرەو كەنارى تىرادسىۇنەكەنارىان پەيرەو كەدۇوە. جوولەمە سېيىم ئەمە جوولەمە، كە زۇرتىر پەيرەو كەراوە، بە جۇرىك خوينىداران بە راشكەوارى ئاماز مەيان بە مەبەستى توپزىنەمە كە، پەرسىيارەكەنارى توپزىنەمە كە و پىكەھاتەي توپزىنەمە داواه.

بە كورتى: توپزىنەمە دەرىدەخات، كە خوينىدارانى دەرچووى كورد بە شىۋەيەكى سەرەمە كە گۆيەرەي مۆدىلى (CARS) لە رىيختى پىشەكىي ماستەرنامەكەندا كاردەكەن، بەلام بەكارھىنانىان بۇ ھەنگاۋە بە چۈنۈن ئاماز مە بۇ پەيرەو كەنارى شىۋا زەتكەنەمەيى ناوخۇيى سەبارەت بە لايەنەكەنارى رىيکەمۇتتەكەنارى نوسىنى توپزىنەمە، كە لە سەر ئاستى نىيۇدەلەتتى جىاوازىن و جىاوازىيەكەن بە ئاستى ئاگادار بىيان سەبارەت بە گەنگىي نوسىنى توپزىنەمە نىيۇدەلەتتىمە پەيۇھەتن.

كىلىمۇشە: سوپىلز، 1990 CARS model، بەشى پىشەكىي، ماستەرنامە، توپزەرى كورد، ھەرىمى كوردىستان

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1. Introduction

The introductory chapter of an M.A. thesis is essential in establishing the significance of the study. It also connects the study to the literature that precedes the study and indicating the aims and potential contributions of the research study. As the first opportunity a reader has to engage with a scholarly work, the introduction must make several rhetorical moves that provide a rationale for the research and demonstrate the author's familiarity with the conventions of the academic enterprise. Novice writers, especially second-language writers in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, often experience difficulty organizing introductions in line with the conventions of their academic fields. This difficulty is a formal concern that merits investigation. As Swales (2004) notes, introductions have to perform a few major communicative functions, using a series of rhetorical moves. Indeed, a review of recent literature suggests that many student writers do not successfully adhere to discipline-specific research writing conventions (Bitchener & Knoch, 2009).

Numerous of previous researcher studies confirm that the rhetorical move structure (RMS) of an introduction chapter differs according to genre, discipline and field of study, and academic settings (Samraj, 2008; Cheung, 2012; Ebadi et al., 2019), while the RMS of the introduction chapter can also be the starting point of major variations in academic writing quality and clarity.

The Create a Research Space (CARS) model presented by Swales (1990) is among the most important frameworks for discussing thesis introductions. The model argues that introductions consist of three rhetorical moves, each expressed in a series of steps. Within the framework, Move 1: Establishing a Territory outlines the general topic by claiming centrality and introducing background in the form of the recent literature review. Move 2: Establishing a Niche identifies a gap in the literature or suggests a counter-claim, states a limitation of a prior study or raises an unanswered question. Move 3: Occupying the Niche displays the purpose of the study by establishing the research questions, significance of the study and the Thesis overview.

According to Swales and Feak (2012), it is important to remember that the CARS model does not present 'moves' and 'steps' that must be followed strictly. Researchers must make adaptations according to their disciplinary conventions as well as to the specific rhetorical situation. In Move 1, the researcher generally presents generalizations, review of previous texts, and citations; in Move 2, researchers often use contrastive markers and hedging; and in Move 3, explicit purpose statements and signposting are common. This suggests, then, that the CARS model provides not only a useful framework for thinking about organizing an introduction into. It also introduces the communicative purpose and linguistic features typically associated with each move.

Khamaiseh (2023) observed that Arab postgraduate students who concentrated on the reasons for and importance of research and seldom critically engaged with prior research, followed the same pattern. Ebadi et al. (2019) noted that Iraqi postgraduate students often used a descriptive strategy and rarely followed gap-indicating strategies. In the context of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRG), thesis introductions appear to reflect the expectations of the research methodology textbooks used in local universities. These textbooks emphasized problem statements and research aims, while offering little consideration of critical engagement with the literature. Taken together, the studies demonstrate both the usefulness of Swales' model and the struggles of EFL postgraduate writers.

Although Swales's CARS model has been a popular framework for investigating introductions, no research has investigated how the Kurdish postgraduate students of the discipline of Applied Linguistics organize their thesis introductions. This gap is significant because it calls into question the claims of whether the Kurdish M.A. students are making purposeful use of international rhetorical constructions, or whether their writerly identity is determined mostly by the local institutional traditions. To address the gap in the literature, the study will focus on the introduction chapters of 15 M.A. theses in Applied Linguistics, written by post-graduate students at Sulaimani, Salahaddin and Duhok universities. More specifically, the current study will attempt to address the following two research questions:

RQ1- To what extent do Applied Linguistics M.A. thesis introductions in Kurdish universities adhere to Swales's (1990) CARS model?

RQ2- Which rhetorical moves and steps of the CARS model are most and least frequently applied?

The paper is structured as follows: the final section is the conclusion, which summarizes the most important results, and identifies implications and suggestions for future research. The previous section is the discussion, which interprets the key results based on the literature and the research questions. Preceding that, the results section presents the data from the analysis. The methods section outlines the research design, instruments employed, and procedures for data collection, and prior to that, the literature review establishes the conceptual framework and situates the present study within the existing body of research; and finally, the introduction opens the paper by delineating the background, aims, and significance of the study.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Introduction

Swales (1990) observes that, in academic writing, beginning to write is more challenging for researchers than continuing once the process has started. The introduction chapter in an M.A. thesis provides crucial background, context, and rationale. It allows readers to understand and evaluate the research without needing to read previous publications (Gastel & Day, 2022). According to Swales and Feak (2012), the introduction should clearly state the goal of the study, identify the research problem being investigated, and summarize the current state of knowledge- usually expressed in the present tense.

The introduction fulfills a significant rhetorical function in establishing a link between antecedent scholarship and the author's academic contribution. It typically provides contextual information — such as the scope and magnitude of the issue— and emphasizes its significance. Subsequently, a concise overview of the literature, usually used to highlight current gaps in research which the current study is intended to fill, is presented. Then, the author outlines either the research aim, hypotheses or research questions. The introduction additionally delineates the methodological framework and provides a justification for the selected research design, thereby facilitating the reader's comprehension of how the study was conducted. In certain academic domains, it is common practice to utilize the introduction to succinctly preview the principal findings or conclusions, thereby

orienting the reader. An effective introduction in M.A. thesis documents partly shows that a student can acquire competency in academic discourse (Jamalzadeh Jahromi, Hadipour, & Akbarpour, 2024).

Based on this established foundation, this section conceptually delineates both the contribution of the first chapter. It also considers the rhetorical function of the introduction in M.A. theses. In doing so, it shows how it operates as a point of contact between the researcher's objectives and the disciplinary discourse community. The introductions of M.A. theses in the KRG's higher education institutions have evolved over time to become more descriptive in nature and methodologically elaborated. These M.A. theses produced and submitted between 2007 and 2014 were generally structured as organized case studies comprising six or seven prototypical sections (i.e., problem statement, research aim, methodological procedures, controlled variables, and scope of the study). In contrast, M.A. theses completed between 2019 and 2024 tended to incorporate eight to ten structural components (i.e., research questions, hypotheses, statement of significance, definition of key terms). The observed diversity of the structures in these theses reflects institutional requirements, researcher judgments, and changes in conventions of academic discourse in this particular context.

Thus, the present study attempts to investigate the organizational structures and rhetorical conventions of M.A. thesis introductions in Applied Linguistics authored by researchers from the Kurdish community during the period 2007–2024. It also aims to identify patterns, similarities, and potential developments in their academic writing practices. This provides a justification for the following sections, where more detail is provided regarding the analytical framework and methodological orientation of the study.

2.2 Swales CARS Model

Rhetorical Move Structures (RMS) have been investigated in a wide range of academic contexts to identify discourse segments that fulfill specific communicative purposes. These investigations have considerable pedagogical implications for non-native English researchers, who often face difficulties in recognizing and applying appropriate rhetorical moves (Swales, 1990). Swales introduced the Create-a-Research-Space (CARS) model in *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings* (1990), having developed it from his earlier 1981 publication. The model transformed how researchers and instructor conceptualized and sometimes even instructed research paper introductions across disciplines, with Swales reconstructing four earlier moves into three.

Indrian and Ardi (2019) later extended the CARS model, reinforcing its position as one of the most effective frameworks used by scholars to analyze academic writing. In the present study, the CARS model functions as the primary analytic and interpretive framework for examining rhetorical move structures within M.A. thesis introductions in Applied Linguistics. (See Figure 1).

Move 1: Establishing a Territory

Step 1: Claiming Centrality

Step 2: Making Topic Generalizations

Step 3: Reviewing Items of Previous Research

Move 2: Establishing a Niche

Step 1A: Counter-claiming

Step 1B: Indicating a Gap

Step 1C: Question-raising

Step 1D: Continuing a Tradition

Move 3: Occupying the Niche

Step 1A: Outlining Purposes

Step 1B: Announcing Present Research

Step 2: Announcing Principal Findings

Step 3: Indicating RA Structure

Figure 1 Swales' CARS model 1990

Swales (2004) identifies a “move” as a discoursal or rhetorical unit that has a clear communicative aim in a written or spoken exchange, however he does not give a clear definition of “steps” anywhere in his writing. According to Bhatia (2001), moves can be considered as rhetorical units that have a clear communicative function within the genre. The move is most easily interpreted and understood with reference to the communicative purpose of the genre as a whole.

Rahman (2017), again, views a rhetorical move as a smaller linguistic unit that has a clear communicative function that connects with the discourse surrounding it within its context. Similarly, Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) explain this distinction between moves and steps. The authors clarify that a move is connected with the purpose of the writer and what the writer wants to convey to the reader. A step, on the other hand, is a smaller unit within the move which provides a more detailed strategy for the realization of the move. Swales (2004) emphasizes that, while moves can often align with sentences or paragraphs, it is important to remain flexible in conceptualizing them. A move can be situated in a single clause, but it can also extend over multiple sentences. This is because moves are defined by their communicative function rather than by grammatical form.

2.3 Analyzing Moves and Steps by Swales

This paper seeks to examine the moves and steps in research writing, focusing on both their structure and linguistic realization, as described by Swales (1990) in his previous book *Genre Analysis* and by Swales and Feak (2012) in *Academic Writing for Graduate Students*. Samraj (2002) observed that Swales (1990) identified three moves within the introductions to research articles. In these introductions, the first move is that the introduction will usually begin by explaining the general subject area (Establishing a territory). The second move is that the researcher will then indicate the gap in research or a niche for their study (Establishing a niche). The third move is that the introduction will then conclude with the indication of the actual focus of the research (Occupying the niche). As noted by Abbas (2022) this model allows strategies and steps for well-structured writing, where each move is made up of sub-moves or steps.

2.3.1 Move 1: Establishing a Territory

In Swales' (1990) CARS model, the introduction of a research article usually begins with an initial move to establish a research territory, which involves introducing the general area of the research and establishing its centrality or importance (Samraj, 2008; Swales & Feak, 2012). This first move comprises three steps: claiming centrality, generalizing about the topic, and reviewing previous research (Swales, 2004). Claiming centrality serves to establish the significance of the research area that is being claimed and often involves social, academic, or technical importance (Swales & Feak, 2012). As Khamaiseh (2024) observes, such claims are frequently used to establish the significance of a study. Within the context of M.A. thesis introductions, establishing research centrality defines the research territory. It also demonstrates the relevance of the study to the wider field of Applied Linguistics. In some cases, this step merges with the problem statement and the study's justification.

The second step, which is making generalizations about the topic involves broad statements about what is known and the current practice that slowly brings the reader in-focus to the research problem (Swales, 1990; Rahman, 2017; Indrian & Ardi, 2019). The third step, reviewing previous research highlights the study in a body of literature, articulates the contributions made to this literature. It indicates the author's stance (Swales, 1990). This step employs both integral and non-integral citations. It has various linguistic features, such as appropriate verb tense to demonstrate coherence and where the study falls in a conversation. Overall these steps allow researchers to build a strong contextual foundation and credibility to support the academic value of the research study.

2.3.2 Move 2: Establishing a Niche

Establishing a niche delineates research domains and substantiates the argument for further scholarly inquiry. Swales (1990) explains that this move positions the research as a "valuable contribution" to academic discourse, enabling the author to identify existing gaps, pose unresolved questions, challenge preceding claims, or extend prior scholarship. In M.A. thesis introductions, the establishment of a niche follows Move 1 by linking the general research territory to the author's specific research focus and may be structurally associated with the problem statement or justification of the study (Swales & Feak, 2004; Pandey, 2022).

Counter-claiming and gap indication are two of the principal strategies. Counter-claiming interrupts the trajectory of the research domain in some way in order to create conceptual space for the current investigation to be conducted (Swales, 1990). Gap indication highlights under-explored or insufficiently examined areas. Gap indication can employ constructions that appear quasi-negative (e.g., little, few, no, none) or adjectives and verbs to delimit the scope of prior literature. Both counter-claiming and gap indication establish the research problem, situate the study within the academic field, and provide the rationale for why conducting the study is warranted (Swales & Feak, 2012).

Question-raising and continuing a tradition are less frequently observed, but are still pertinent to employing the third strategy. Question-raising partly refutes a finding and gains more ground in demonstrating contested knowledge, sometimes using gap indication in conjunction, and reinforcing the study's significance and relevance (Swales, 1990). Conversely, continuing a tradition provides a framework for demonstrating that the study is a fortuitous incremental extension of earlier work. It positions the study so that it builds upon existing bodies of knowledge without explicitly identifying a gap. Additionally, it situates the study within the established scholarly framework.

2.3.3 Occupying the Niche

In Move 3 of Swales' (1990) CARS model, the researcher provides justification for the investigation by addressing the gap or issue established in Move 2, situating the study discussion substantially within the domain of research. With M.A. thesis introductions, Move 3 may address a gap, extend prior scholarship, or present a counter-argument to continue a research tradition. Move 3 consists of three steps; Step 1A from the researcher, the articulation of the objective sometimes including Step 1B for introducing the current inquiry, Step 2 for presenting principal outcomes, and Step 3 for outlining the structure of the scholarly article. Collectively, these steps advance the research to contextualized relevance, scholarly impact, and structural coherence stating to the reader the research problem, objective, methodology, and findings and demonstrating the significance of the study in relation to the academic field (Swales & Feak, 2012).

In Move 3, Step 1 transitions from reviewing prior scholarship to presenting the current inquiry (Swales, 1990). Step 1, which occurs in one of two forms, explicitly articulates the research aims. In addition, Step 1B exposes the significance of the present investigation. Steps 1A and 1B inform readers of what the researchers are endeavoring to achieve in their research. They provide readers with an understanding of where the inquiry is situated within the academic discourse. They also highlight the relevance of the study to extant literature. Common expressions that authors employ in Step 1A and 1B are: "This paper reports...", "The aim of the present paper is...".

Step 2, announcing principal findings, is optional. It enables researchers to highlight the main outcomes of the study early on, emphasizing its significance (Swales, 1990). While common in disciplines, such as physics, it is rarely used in M.A. thesis introductions in Applied Linguistics in the KRG. Kurdish researchers often address these findings in the abstract or within Step 1A/1B. The linguistic features of both of these steps realize the step through reporting verbs such as "we found...", "this paper shows...", or "our results indicate...", linking the researcher directly to the findings.

Step 3, outlining the structural framework of the research article, is also regarded as discretionary. It is typically included toward the conclusion of the introduction (Swales, 1990) and fulfills the function

of informing readers about the subsequent organization of the manuscript, thereby enhancing coherence and comprehensibility. In scholarly publications, Step 3 is commonly manifested through a statement such as "The structure of the paper is as follows," or a similar formulation, or indicated via a section or subsection heading (e.g., "Section II elaborates..."). While step 3 is largely absent in M.A. theses in the KRG, its omission reflects a significant instructional opportunity to assist students in articulating intended meaning and orienting readers within their introductory sections.

2.4 Previous Studies on Swales CARS Model

Swales (1990) initially proposed and subsequently reconceptualized the CARS model in 2004, which has informed an extensive body of scholarship on academic discourse analysis. The CARS model, occasionally operating from the premise that the introduction constitutes the sole move of relevance. It was originally employed to examine variations in research article (RA) introductions. It has also been applied to analyze RA abstracts (Darabad, 2016; Rashidi & Meihami, 2018), literature review sections (Khoo et al., 2011; Rabie & Boraie, 2021), methodology sections (Lim, 2006; Zhang & Wannaruk, 2016), discussions (Amirian et al., 2008; Peacock, 2002), and conclusions (Amnuai & Wannaruk, 2013; Loi et al., 2016).

Investigations into Ph.D. dissertation introductions (Bunton, 2002; Dong, 1998; Ridley, 2000; Swales, 2004; Thompson, 1999, 2001, 2005) demonstrated that rhetorical move structures (RMS) vary significantly across academic disciplines, genres, and institutional contexts (Chen & Kuo, 2012; Ebadi et al., 2019; Pujiyanti et al., 2018; Choe & Hwang, 2014; Cheung, 2012; Samraj, 2008). Bunton's (2002) framework was adapted for Ph.D. dissertation analysis and subsequently reformulated into a comparable structural model by Samraj (2008) as she applied the CARS model to examine M.A. thesis introductions in three related disciplines, promoting patterns in how introductions are constructed in discipline- and genre-specific contexts. The extensive range of studies presents an opportunity to explore the rhetorical move structures of diverse introductions that share an academic function and link these across variations in genre, disciplinary orientation, or institutional setting.

While there is a substantial body of research that has employed the CARS model across various disciplines, studies specifically focusing on M.A. theses, particularly those composed by non-native English writers, remain relatively limited. The M.A. thesis represents a significant milestone in the postgraduate academic development, yet composing texts in English may pose additional challenges for non-native writers (Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2015). Most previous investigations into disciplinary enculturation and academic writing development have largely concentrated on doctoral dissertations (Belcher, 1994; Casanave, 1995; Prior, 1998; Bunton, 2002, 2005; Dong, 1998; Swales, 2004), whereas the M.A. level has received comparatively less scholarly attention. Moreover, studies that have examined the M.A. thesis have predominantly addressed structural conventions (Dudley-Evans, 1986; Hewings, 1993; Paltridge, 2002), and have seldom investigated the rhetorical functions or discourse strategies specific to M.A. thesis introductions (Hyland, 2000; Prior, 1998; Samraj, 2000, 2002b).

Although the studies mentioned above have illuminated the rhetorical organization of academic texts, the majority of research has been conducted in Western or Asian contexts, whereas rhetorical moves in other cultural and regional settings have received insufficient scholarly attention. Research within academic contexts of the Middle East, and particularly the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRG), remains limited in scope. As a result, there is a lack of comparative insight into how local academic conventions, linguistic backgrounds, and institutional norms may influence the deployment and sequencing of rhetorical moves in thesis introductions. Addressing this gap is essential, as it would promote a more contextually nuanced understanding of academic writing practices across global regions.

This study highlights the research gap that this study seeks to address by analyzing M.A. thesis introductions through the lens of Swales' CARS model, as produced by students of Applied Linguistics in the Kurdistan Region.

3. Methodology

The present study adopted a mixed-methods design, combining qualitative rhetorical move analysis with quantitative frequency analysis. The qualitative, or 'rhetorical move analysis', phase was framed by Swales's (1990; 2004) CARS Model, which provided a framework to identify rhetorical moves and steps in the introductions of academic articles, as well as a method of categorizing and describing these rhetorical moves. The quantitative, or 'frequency analysis', phase followed by calculating the frequency and distribution of each of the rhetorical moves analysed, following similar analytical approaches in genre-based studies (Kanoksilapatham, 2005; Samraj, 2008). Taken together, this mixed-methods approach allows for both contextual interpretation and empirical accuracy in the analysis of rhetorical structure.

The data comprised of 15 M.A. theses in Applied Linguistics, taken from the University of Sulaimani, University of Salahaddin and University of Duhok. These three universities were chosen because they represent the main postgraduate institutions involved in conducting research in the field of Applied Linguistics in the KRG. The theses were chosen at random to allow for impartial representation from each institution.

The analysis was limited to the introduction chapters, which represent the key rhetorical features specified by the CARS model: introducing the topic, establishing a niche, and occupying that niche. Each introduction was manually coded regarding Swales's (1990) three-move framework, and the total number of each move and step was calculated to identify the most often and least often employed individual rhetorical strategies.

4. Results

The analysis examined compliance in the introductions of Applied Linguistics M.A. theses in Kurdish universities with Swales's (1990) CARS (Creating a Research Space) model. The findings correspond to the two primary research questions that explored the overall compliance with the theoretical framework as well as the types of rhetorical move and step patterns.

The analysis was based on a dataset of 15 M.A. thesis introduction chapters from universities situated in the KRG, spanning the period from 2007 to 2024. Each introduction was accurately analyzed for the existence and realization of the three moves and their steps as specified by Swales's (1990) CARS model: Move 1 (Establishing a Territory), Move 2 (Establishing a Niche), and Move 3 (Occupying the Niche).

The findings show distinct patterns associated with the students of Kurdish researchers' academic writing to thesis introductions. These patterns demonstrate both adherence to international academic conventions and divergences from them. The students' practices provide a snapshot of current academic writing practices in Applied Linguistics programs in the KRG. They also indicate areas for possible pedagogical intervention, which may address factors contributing to the lack of research writing competencies.

According to the results, the introductions of Applied Linguistics M.A. theses in Kurdish universities show an understanding of Swales's (1990) CARS model, if only partial. In the whole corpus of this research, all three moves were found, but behavioral implementations varied in how well they executed different steps within moves.

3.1 Move 1: Establishing a Territory

In Move 1, for the three steps of Move 1, it could be seen that the pattern of compliance is mixed. All researchers met for Move 1 Step 2 (making topic generalizations) with 100% compliance. This indicates that all researchers effectively contextualized their topics with generalizations to the ongoing academic conversations. For Move 1 Step 1 (claiming centrality), researchers achieved 87% compliance. This means that most researchers clearly defined the importance of their research topic by employing evaluative language and present-tense constructions used for the problematic research topics. Move 1 Step 3 (reviewing previous research) was the part of Move 1 with least compliance, with introduction sections only achieving 67% compliance. This represents a broad realization that while researchers can claim topic importance and relevance quite well, many researchers assume a connection between their work and previous research without using citations and literature reviews, unfortunately representing a significant standard in academic writing practices (See Table 1).

Table 1 Analysis of Move 1: Establishing a Territory in MA Thesis Introductions

No.	Thesis Title	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
1	Errors Made by College Students in Using Time and Place Prepositions (2007)	Yes	Yes	Yes
2	Assessing The Suitability of “SUNRISE” Programme to the Kurdish Learners of the Seventh Basic Grade (2009)	Yes	Yes	No
3	An Assessment of Students’ Performance in Translation (2013)	Yes	Yes	No
4	An Analysis of EFL Students’ Errors in Using Phrasal Verbs (2013)	Yes	Yes	No
5	A Task-based Approach to Teaching Writing to Kurdish EFL Learners (2014)	No	Yes	No
6	An Investigation of Grice’s Maxims in Kurdish EFL High School Teachers’ Oral Performance (2014)	Yes	Yes	Yes
7	Evaluating Grammatical Competence in Kurdish EFL Junior Students’ Writings (2019)	Yes	Yes	Yes
8	Investigating Teachers’ Use of ICT in EFL Classes at Universities in Duhok City (2019)	Yes	Yes	Yes
9	Investigating Assessment Tools Used for Learning in Sunrise Textbook (2020)	Yes	Yes	No
10	Investigating the Impact of Multimedia-Aided Coherence Teaching on EFL Writing Quality (2020)	Yes	Yes	Yes
11	Difficulties Encountered by Kurdish EFL University Students in Using Generic Reference (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes
12	Promoting Kurdish EFL Learners’ Autonomy through Self- and Peer-Assessment Tools (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes
13	An Investigation of Teachers and Students’ Awareness of Oral Error Correction (2023)	Yes	Yes	Yes
14	Investigating Reading Strategies Used by EFL Teachers and Students (2023)	Yes	Yes	Yes
15	A Critical Discourse Analysis of Teacher-Student Interaction in EFL Classroom (2024)	No	Yes	Yes

As illustrated in Table 1, almost all theses consistently focus on Steps 1 and 2, whereas some do not engage with Step 3 at all. This disparate pattern indicates that although Kurdish M.A. students are able to adequately establish the general research field, they seem to have difficulty substantiating this field with extensive consideration of previous work, which is important to the concept of a credible research territory.

3.2 Move 2: Establishing a Niche

Move 2 shows a pronounced preference for gap identification over other rhetorical purpose. Step 1B (Indicating a gap) was universally used at 100%, with every researcher using negative or quasi-negative language to create reason for research usefully flagged terms, including "lack," "problem," "has not been addressed," and "little is known." Step 1C (Question-raising) was found in 47% of introductions to identify the research focus with questions or objectives, and typically appeared after gap identification. Step 1A (Counter-claiming) was very rarely observed (7%) with only one thesis including its use and Step 1D (Continuing a tradition) occurred in 13% of introductions. There was a clear pattern that Kurdish researchers overwhelmingly preferred to identify gaps in knowledge rather than to overtly challenge prior work, or to situate their research in the context of established academic traditions, indicating a preference for less confrontational rhetorical approaches (See Table 2).

Table 2 Analysis of Move 2: Establishing a Niche in MA Thesis Introductions

No.	Thesis Title	Step 1A	Step 1B	Step 1C	Step 1D
1	Errors Made by College Students in Using Time and Place Prepositions (2007)	No	Yes	No	Yes
2	Assessing The Suitability of “SUNRISE” Programme to the Kurdish Learners of the Seventh Basic Grade (2009)	No	Yes	No	No
3	An Assessment of Students’ Performance in Translation (2013)	No	Yes	Yes	No
4	An Analysis of EFL Students’ Errors in Using Phrasal Verbs (2013)	No	Yes	No	No
5	A Task-based Approach to Teaching Writing to Kurdish EFL Learners (2014)	No	Yes	Yes	No
6	An Investigation of Grice’s Maxims in Kurdish EFL High School Teachers’ Oral Performance (2014)	No	Yes	Yes	No
7	Evaluating Grammatical Competence in Kurdish EFL Junior Students’ Writings (2019)	No	Yes	Yes	No
8	Investigating Teachers’ Use of ICT in EFL Classes at Universities in Duhok City (2019)	No	Yes	No	No

9	Investigating Assessment Tools Used for Learning in Sunrise Textbook (2020)	No	Yes	No	No
10	Investigating the Impact of Multimedia-Aided Coherence Teaching on EFL Writing Quality (2020)	Yes	Yes	No	No
11	Difficulties Encountered by Kurdish EFL University Students in Using Generic Reference (2022)	No	Yes	No	Yes
12	Promoting Kurdish EFL Learners' Autonomy through Self- and Peer-Assessment Tools (2022)	No	Yes	No	No
13	An Investigation of Teachers and Students' Awareness of Oral Error Correction (2023)	No	Yes	Yes	No
14	Investigating Reading Strategies Used by EFL Teachers and Students (2023)	No	Yes	No	No
15	A Critical Discourse Analysis of Teacher-Student Interaction in EFL Classroom (2024)	No	Yes	Yes	No

As shown in Table 2, Step 1B (identification of gaps) is prevalent across all theses, while Steps 1A, 1C, and 1D occur irregularly. This indicates that Kurdish M.A. students might be emphasizing the identification of research gaps rather than counter-claims or positioning their work within previous research traditions, and thus showing a less confrontational approach to academic argumentation. While all authors reported gaps, depth and specificity in the gaps varied. Many of the gaps were identified in broader terms and without context or tying back to earlier literature, pointing to a lack of complete understanding of the rhetorical function Move 2.

3.3 Move 3: Occupying the Niche

Move 3 has the highest average adherence of the three moves and demonstrates the clearest understanding of articulating research purpose. Step 1A (Outlining purposes) and Step 1B (Announcing present research) showed full adherence at 100%, where researchers adhered to formal purpose statements (centrally using examples such as "the study aims at...") and present research announcements ("the present study examines...") and nearly always used constructions with the present simple tense. Step 3 (Indicating structure) was present in 73% of introductions, usually outlining planned procedures in the future passive or describing chapter organization using present tense. It is relevant to note that Step 2 (Announcing principal findings) was completely absent from all introductions at 0%. This demonstrates that researchers understood that findings should not be shown early in introductions. Overall, the patterns indicate a strong competency in articulating research purpose and providing structure, along with great discretion specific to results expose (See Table 3).

Table 3 Analysis of Move 3: Occupying the Niche in MA Thesis Introductions

No.	Thesis Title	Step 1A	Step 1B	Step 2	Step 3
1	Errors Made by College Students in Using Time and Place Prepositions (2007)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
2	Assessing the Suitability of “Sunrise” Programme to the Kurdish Learners of Seventh Grade (2009)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
3	An Assessment of Students’ Performance in Translation (2013)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
4	An Analysis of EFL Students’ Errors in Using Phrasal Verbs (2013)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
5	A Task-based Approach to Teaching Writing to Kurdish EFL Learners (2014)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
6	An Investigation of Grice’s Maxims in Kurdish EFL High School Teachers’ Oral Performance (2014)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
7	Evaluating Grammatical Competence in Kurdish EFL Junior Students' Writings (2019)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
8	Investigating Teachers’ Use of ICT in EFL Classes at Universities in Duhok City (2019)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
9	Investigating Assessment Tools Used for Learning in Sunrise Textbook (2020)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
10	Investigating the Impact of Multimedia-Aided Coherence Teaching on EFL Writing Quality (2020)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
11	Difficulties Encountered by Kurdish EFL University Students in Using Generic Reference (2022)	Yes	Yes	No	No
12	Promoting Kurdish EFL Learners’ Autonomy through Self- and Peer-Assessment Tools (2022)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
13	An Investigation of Teachers and Students’ Awareness of Oral Error Correction (2023)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
14	Investigating Reading Strategies Used by EFL Teachers and Students (2023)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
15	A Critical Discourse Analysis of Teacher-Student Interaction in EFL Classroom (2024)	Yes	Yes	No	No

As shown in Table 3, Steps 1A and 1B were consistently utilized across all theses which indicates that Kurdish M.A. students reliably describe research purpose and announce the current study. Step 3 (Indicating structure) was less consistently used which indicates that Kurdish M.A. students understand they may announce procedures or the organization of chapters, some introductions provided little structural guidance. Step 2 (Announcing principal findings) was entirely absent, which aligns with the conventions of introductory writing, where findings are rarely presented. The general patterns suggest that the overall students are generally competent in defining research purpose and managing the organization of the introduction. However, for the introductions of some theses there was space to be more clear with the broader structure.

5. Discussion

5.1 RQ1: Extent of Adherence to CARS Moves

The findings reveal that Applied Linguistics M.A. thesis introductions in KRG universities follow Swales's (1990) CARS model in substantial ways. However, this adherence is shaped by local academic conventions, institutional practices, and pedagogical guidance. All three rhetorical moves in the CARS framework are consistently employed by Kurdish researchers; however, the move configurations exhibit preferences that embody regional rhetorical conventions, which emphasize distinct priorities compared to those typically observed in international scholarly contexts. These configurations are noticeable not only as manifestations of the compositional process, but also as outcomes shaped by the intended audience within Kurdish academic discourse. Writers make rhetorical choices as learners within instructional settings, influenced by multiple variables including pedagogical prompts, canonical course materials, and the hierarchical emphasis placed on rhetorical moves and steps during thesis development.

As observed in Move 1, there is strong adherence to academic and cultural norms, particularly those established through coursebook -based instruction. Researchers continue to engage with general background information to establish their research territory and generalize, and they quote from the literature only minimally, if at all. This practice parallels Samraj's (2002; 2008) findings about generality and problematizing. For example, in linguistics, introductions focus more heavily on contextualizing the dissertation than on actually referencing previous scholarship. Researchers tend to prioritize Steps 1 and 2 over Step 3. Thus, within these academic contexts, researchers appear to follow academic expectations around writing introductions that situate their research regionally, which resembles an academic standard. The findings of this study align with Ebadi et al. (2019), who noted similar rhetorical variation in the Iraqi context related to the educative structuring of theses. Again, this aligns with Swales's (1990) conclusions that introductions prioritize building territory and communicating a niche through generality rather than through heavy citation or critique of the field.

Move 2 realization clearly shows a tendency toward problem-based gap identification over more confrontational rhetorical strategies, which aligns with the cautious and polite academic culture embedded in the region. This is consistent with the findings of Samraj (2002;2005) and Cheung (2012), where students from similar backgrounds demonstrated similar tendencies toward gap indication rather than overly assertive moves. Ebadi et al. (2019) also found that Iraqi students in the KRG used relatively conservative strategies for niche construction, relying on gap indication, while

the international students tended to show more rhetorical flexibility by asking questions and using counter-claims. Gap indication is certainly very consistent, but the degree of depth and specific indication of gaps varied as some simply made general statements that did not provide sufficient connection to existing literature and demonstrated only partial mastery of Move 2's rhetorical function.

Move 3 demonstrates the fullest alignment with the CARS model. Kurdish researchers provided clear statements about the aim and significance of their research, which were often more explicit than Swales's (1990) original model suggested. However, these statements still aligned with local rhetorical conventions. Researchers did not announce findings in thesis introductions, aligning with Cheung (2012) observations related to Singapore-based researchers, Shirani and Chalak (2016) with Iranian students, and Khamaiseh (2023) with Eastern contexts. This finding contrasts with Ebadi et al. (2019), who found that international researchers included preview findings, while those situated in the region focused more on purposes and research questions rather than results.

Overall, these results suggest that KRG researchers articulate a hybrid academic writing style that combines awareness of international conventions with local institutional requirements and cultural expectations. This approach retains the rhetorical integrity of the CARS model while reflecting regionally-specific academic writing practices.

5.2 RQ 2: Frequency of CARS Moves and Steps

The most often followed steps were Move 1, Step 2 (making topic generalizations), Move 2, Step 1B (indicating a gap), and Move 3, Steps 1A and 1B (outlining purposes and announcing present research), all demonstrating 100% adherence. As shown in Tables 1–3, Move 2 Step 1B (indicating a gap) dominates across all theses, while Steps 1A, 1C, and 1D appear inconsistently. The favoured steps presumably reflect safe rhetorical strategies that are directly emphasized in the research methodology coursebook modules at Halabja and Sulaimani universities. These modules advise students to begin with a generalization, identify the research problem, and state their aims with clarity.

In the same vein, Cheung (2012) observed that student writers tend to begin with general statements. Samraj (2002) and Ebadi et al. (2019) similarly reported that novice researchers frequently rely on gap indicators as a straightforward strategy to delineate or establish a research niche. In this regard, Kurdish students' deployment of these rhetorical steps may reflect not only localized pedagogical conventions and instructional materials; however, also broader international influences from which emerging scholars may draw. While individual students engage with a diverse array of rhetorical choices, their instructional context, prescribed coursebooks, and thesis structuring practices collectively inform how they evaluate and prioritize various rhetorical moves and steps.

In contrast, Move 1, Step 3 (reviewing previous research) and Move 2, Step 1C (question-raising) were less consistently followed. Reviewing previous research was addressed by 67% of the students, which aligns with the Halabja and Sulaimani coursebooks that allocate the literature review to a separate chapter, thereby reducing the emphasis on citation use in introductions. Similarly, 67% of students employed question-raising, a move that requires critical engagement and a more flexible rhetorical stance. This pattern mirrors Samraj's (2002; 2008) findings of varying use of literature

across disciplines and institutions, whereas in international contexts, question-raising is an established means of signaling originality. Although gap identification was highly consistent, the depth and specificity of these gaps varied; some were generalized statements lacking sufficient linkage to prior literature, indicating only partial mastery of Move 2's rhetorical function. These observations correspond with the studies discussed in Section 2.4, reflecting similar trends among novice researchers in comparable academic and cultural contexts.

Ultimately, some steps were infrequently used or not adopted at all. Move 2 Step 1A (counter-claiming) and Move 2 Step 1D (continuing tradition) were almost never used, while Move 2 Step 2 (announcing findings) was completely absent. The lack of counter-claiming and continuing traditions indicates that explicitly positioning work against prior scholarship or situating it within long-standing academic traditions is uncommon in the academic culture of Kurdistan. Ebadi et al. (2019) similarly observed that Iraqi postgraduate students used descriptive approaches without confrontational strategies, unlike international students who showed greater rhetorical variability. The absence of announcing findings aligns with local coursebook guidance in Halabja and Sulaimani universities, which instruct students to delay results until later chapters, and with Eastern academic traditions noted by Cheung (2012), reflecting culturally cautious rhetorical practices. This example demonstrates how local institutional norms and pedagogical guidance shape students' selective use of Swales's (1990) CARS model.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how the introduction chapters of Applied Linguistics M.A. theses completed by students at universities in the KRG matched the CARS model developed by Swales's (1990), analyzing 15 theses from three universities. The analysis indicated that while most authors were successfully engaging with the rhetorical functions of the CARS model, they were putting this model into practice in a way that was sensitive to local academic traditions supported by local academic values. For example, Move 1 was generally successful, although students had difficulty framing Move 1 in each introductory chapter, as literature review material from the general introduction was positioned in separate sections, such as article reviews and dedicated literature review chapters. Move 2, engaging the gap move, was relatively frequent, indicating that authors preferred executing that function of the CARS model and the elements associated with it.

The general tendency of researchers to be non-confrontational was prevalent, with no counter-claims or references to the academic traditions in which claims had been made. Move 3 was relatively successful, with researchers identifying relevant research aims and sections of the thesis in the introduction without presenting findings. Finally, some of the researchers embedded contextual information around key points made throughout the thesis and also offered direction in the conclusion within some of the introductions. This examination explored tendencies among researchers and authors at KRG institutions to navigate the demands of academic discourse within broader global academic traditions, while simultaneously considering their commitments to regional academic ethics, politics, and authorship practices.

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