Iranian Journal of Applied Linguistics (*IJAL*)

Vol. 20, No. 2, September 2017, 195-228

Move Structures in "Statement-of-the-Problem" Sections of M.A. Theses: The Case of Native and Nonnative Speakers of English

Soheila Parsa*, **Mohammad Hasan Tahririan**

Sheikhbahaee University, Isfahan, Iran

Abstract

Understanding how to structure the "Statement-of-the-Problem" (SP) section of a thesis is necessary for EFL students to develop a logical argumentation for a problem statement. This study intended to compare *Move* structures of SP sections of theses written by native speakers of Persian (NSPs) and English (NSEs). To this end, 100 SP sections (50 SP sections written by NSEs and 50 written by NSPs) of theses in the field of English language teaching (ELT) were selected and analyzed by the researchers based on Swales' (1990, 2004) CARS models. The analysis of the data revealed that *Move* structures of SP sections of the two corpora were similar. In both corpora, the three *Moves* of "Establishing a territory", "Establishing a niche", and "Presenting the present work" were considered obligatory. There were some differences in the *Steps* and many Move pattern variations in the two corpora. The results can broaden the understanding of the nature and function of this genre and can have important implications for EFL instructors.

Keywords: Genre analysis; Move structure; Statement-of-the-Problem sections; Cultural variations

Article Information:

Received: 26 January 2017 Revised: 11 July 2017 Accepted: 28 July 2017

Corresponding author: English Language Department, Sheikhbahaee University, Isfahan, Iran Email address: soheilaparsa116@gmail.com

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

1. Introduction

Since writing a thesis is a challenging task, considerable research interests have been drawn to theses written by students learning English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) in recent decades. Focusing on students' thesis writing challenges, researchers believe that they might encounter difficulties at the sentence and paragraph levels, such as organizing ideas and arguments, using the appropriate style of writing, expressing their thoughts clearly in English (Cooley & Lewkovicz, 1995), choosing vocabulary, sequencing propositions, making transitions, and achieving overall unity (Dong, 1998). In addition to these difficulties at the sentence and paragraph levels, Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006) referred to studies finding other problems related specifically to understanding the requirements of the thesis genre. Difficulties in structuring an argument over an extended stretch of discourse with consistency and balance were noted in a number of studies (e.g. Cooley & Lewkowicz, 1995, 1997; Dong, 1998; Jenkins, Jordan, &Weiland 1993; Thompson, 1999, as cited in Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006). According to these studies, students have difficulty with understanding what content is appropriate for individual chapters and sections of a chapter as well as uncertainties about how it should be organized.

In fact, as Bitchener, Basturkmen, and East (2010) assert, there are two main reasons for such difficulties. These two reasons are a limited understanding of the characteristics of the thesis genre and its component parts (for example, part-genres like the introduction and discussion sections/chapters) and uncertainty about the expectations and requirements of their discipline-specific communities of practice. In order to decrease such problems, the amount of research into various aspects of the postgraduate theses has been increasing. Some of these studies explored the

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

rhetorical structures of certain sections, such as Introductions (Bunton, 2002; Dudley-Evans, 1986; Samraj, 2008), Literature Reviews (Kwan, 2006), Discussions (Dudley-Evans, 1986), Conclusions (Bunton, 2005 & Hewings, 1993), acknowledgments (Hyland, 2004), and Statement of the Problem sections (Jalilifar, Firuzmand, & Roshani, 2011).

Moreover, some researchers claim that there are variations in academic writing styles across languages and cultures (e.g. Carrió-Pastor, 2009, 2013; Duszak, 1994, 1997a, 1997b; Mauanen, 2012, 2013a; Samraj & Monk, 2008). Therefore, due to such variations, one's first language can influence their performance in a second language, especially in academic discourse patterns (Duszak, 1994). Swales (1990) believes that fluidity and communicativeness of written texts are influenced not only by different linguistic parameters, but also by different social, cultural, and disciplinary conventions. Moreno (1997) believes that although research articles are based on the requirements of the genre, there are significant cultural differences of the rhetorical preferences of national cultures. Such a claim results from the existence of different thought patterns of different languages/cultures (Kaplan, 1966), which shares a similar assumption with the Sapir-Whorf's hypothesis on the relationship between language and culture. In other words, genres change in response to users' needs and change in the situations in which they occur (Paltridge, 2004). The notion of appropriateness in languages differs from culture to culture because different cultures are dominated by different values and norms, which are reflected by different choices of language patterns in communication (Koutlaki, 2002).

In line with such claims, Cmejrkova (1996), who studied RA (research article) introductions written in English by Czech scholars in the fields of linguistics, literary theory, and aesthetics, and contrasted them with those of English RA introductions established by Swales (1990), found that Czech

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

writers employed different language signals and different strategies from those described by Swales in English RA introductions.

Ahmad (1997) examined the structure of RA introductions in hard science journals in Malay based on Swales' (1990) model. Based on her findings, Move 2 of the CARS model (establishing the niche) was absent in more than half of the Malay articles.

Arvay and Tanko (2004) explored the structure of Hungarian RA introductions compared to their English counterparts. As for the specific similarities and differences in the results of the move-step analyses, the two languages used the three moves of the CARS model. However, the frequency and the manner of use varied. The English RAs followed the CARS model more closely.

Hirano (2009) explored the rhetorical organization of research article Introductions in Brazilian Portuguese and English within a subfield of Applied Linguistics. The findings indicated that the most striking difference between them lies in the pervasive absence of Move 2 in Brazilian research articles. In general, it seems that Brazilian scholars tend to favor solidarity to avoid conflict with the local discourse community. An explicit gap statement is often not found in their research articles.

In contrast, there are some other studies which reported no generic differences in Introduction sections of research articles across languages (e.g. Najjar, 1989; Taylor & Tingguang, 1991). Looking through these studies makes it apparent that there are still some areas in need of more investigation.

In the present study, the Statement-of-the-Problem (SP) sections in theses were selected as the genre for investigation. The SP section is one of the specific sub-genres of theses, which is included under Introduction sections (Ibrahim & Nambiar, 2011). This section is the place which illustrates the merits of a thesis, and its main purpose is to recapitulate the

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

whole research process (Jalilifar et al. 2011). In other words, a research problem connects the distinct elements in a research (Ellis & Levy, 2008) and embodies the purpose of the study. Usually, researchers prepare research questions and/or hypotheses based on the perceived research problem (Jalilifar et al., 2011). As Swales (1990) writes, Introductions are known to be troublesome, and nearly all academic writers have more difficulty with getting started. Ellis and Levy (2008) believe that a well-developed research problem establishes the potential for producing meaningful results. Therefore, they believe that researchers should learn the ways to properly construct and develop a research problem.

Despite the existence of such claims regarding the vital role of SP sections, studies on this kind of text type are still scarce. The studies on SP sections have mainly focused on the generic structure of them to make EFL learners familiar with their structures. For instance, Jalilifar et al. (2011) aimed to investigate the generic organization of SP sections in theses and proposals in Applied Linguistics written by the Iranian EFL learners. Also, Coker and Coker (2012) examined the schematic structure and communicative purpose of SP sections of Master of Philosophy in English Language theses at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. They showed that even advanced EFL learners have problems with writing academic discourse at the level of text organization (Swales, 1990; Dudley-Evans, 1995).

There are no studies focusing on the generic differences that might exist between the SP sections, as a separate subgenre, of ELT theses across different languages. This study, accordingly, can play an important role in increasing the non-native English postgraduate students' awareness of the generic differences that might exist between the SP sections across languages, thereby decreasing their challenges when writing the research problem. The current study, nevertheless, aimed to compare and contrast the SP sections of theses written by native speakers of English (NSEs) and

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

native speakers of Persian (NSPs) in ELT studies cross-culturally to see how these SP sections follow the generic patterns in terms of Move structures.

2. Method

2.1. Design

The present study was designed as a descriptive project employing a quantitative approach to identify and describe Moves and Steps in SP sections of theses written by native and nonnative speakers of English.

2.2. Data collection

The data of the current study consisted of 100 (50 written by NSEs and 50 by NSPs) SP sections of ELT theses. Since the researchers had decided to control variations in the organizational structure, only those theses that included SP sections under a separate heading in their Introduction chapters were selected.

The theses written by NSEs were selected from online databases. Those written by NSPs were selected from the University of Isfahan and Sheikhbahaee University libraries, and the rest were selected from http://thesis.irandoc.ac.ir, which contains theses from almost every university in Iran. The NSEs theses had been written between 1998 and 2013 and the NSP ones had been written between 1993 and 2014.

2.3. Instrument

The instrument in this study was a combination of refined *Create-A-Research-Space* (CARS) model (Swales, 2004) proposed by Sheldon (2012) and a modified version of Swales' (1990) (CARS) model proposed by Jalilifar et al. (2011) for the analysis and comparison of SP sections. Based on this combination, SP sections can consist of three Moves: establishing a territory (Move 1), establishing a niche (Move 2), and presenting the present work (Move 3). The Steps of each Move are presented in Figure 1.

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

Move 1: Establishing a territory
Step 1: Topic generalization of increasing specificity
(1a) Reporting the conclusions of previous studies
(1b) Narrowing the field
(1c) Writer's evaluation of existing research
(1d) Time-frame of relevance
(1e) Research objectives/processes of previous studies
(1f) Terminologies/definitions
(1g) Generalizing
(1h) Furthering or advancing knowledge
Move 2: Establishing a niche
Step 1A: Limitations of previous studies
Step 1B: Stating the problem/need
Step 1C: Indicating a gap
Step 2: Presenting positive justifications
Move 3: Presenting the present work
Step 1: Announcing present work descriptively and/or purposively
Step 2: Presenting research questions or hypotheses

Figure 1. The generic structure of SP sections (Sheldon, 2012 ; Jalilifar et al., 2011)

Move 1 is narrowed down to reach partial goals through "Topic generalizations of increasing specificity" (Swales, 2004), which is subdivided into eight categories, based on the findings of Sheldon's (2013) study, such as *Step 1a: Reporting conclusions of previous studies*, which functions as a preface to the writer's own work and reflects the richness of the current literature regarding the main topic of the study; *Step 1b: Narrowing the field*, which narrows the focus of research and helps the

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

reader to identify the topic of research quickly; *Step 1c*: *Writer's evaluation of existing research*, which shows how researchers in the two corpora evaluate the work of others; *Step 1d*: *Time-frame of relevance*, which enables writers to construct a disciplinary community with a long tradition and to prove that the area of research is very important; *Step 1e*: *Research objectives/processes of previous studies* is used as a strategy to describe aims by referring to some other previous studies; *Step 1f*: *Terminologies/definitions*, where key words, specific discipline lexis, and concepts are elaborated; *Step 1g*: *Generalizing*, by which the researcher presents the general knowledge around the topic of the study; and *Step 1h*: *Furthering or advancing knowledge*, which is used to offer suggestions to solve existing research problems.

Move 2 consists of four steps, including *Step 1A: Limitations of previous research*, which argues the misguiding of the previous studies; in fact, a researcher can clarify limitations of previous findings in this Step (Dudley-Evans, 1994); *Step 1B: Stating the problem/need*, which introduces an unsolved research problem; and *Step 1C: Indicating a gap*, which indicates the insufficiency of previous studies (Sheldon, 2013). Then, through *Step 2: Presenting positive justification*, the researcher claims that more research is needed for the problem under investigation.

Finally, Move 3 concludes SP sections by *Step 1: Announcing present work descriptively and/or purposively*, that describes the research through which the identified problem is going to be solved, and *Step 2: Presenting research questions or hypotheses*.

2.4. Data analysis

At first, in order to consider reliability, a portion of the data (about 10%) was analyzed by one of the researchers twice, with an interval of more than 1 month. The intra-rater reliability index was 0.93. After the assurance of

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

the reliability of the data analysis, each section was analyzed and Moves, Steps, and their orders were identified. As Sayfouri (2010) asserts, to identify Moves and Steps, propositions should be considered to be the unit of analysis because each proposition can generally have an independent communicative purpose although sometimes a Move or a Step can be as long as one or more paragraphs. Thus, each Move/Step was realized by one or several sentences. The criterion to count a Move/Step was using/not using that Move/Step, because some Moves/ Steps were employed more than once in SP sections.

After identifying the Moves and Steps, their frequencies in each corpus were calculated to find which one is obligatory and Chi-square tests were run to see whether the differences were statistically significant. Then, the Move patterns were identified and their frequencies were calculated.

3. Results

3.1. Comparative distribution

In this part, the frequency and percentage of each Move in both corpora is presented (Table 1). Then, the results of Chi-square tests, which were used to see if there were any statistically significant differences between the two corpora, are also presented.

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

Table 1

The frequencies, percentages, and chi-square analysis of occurrences of the three moves

Moves	**NSEs**	**NSPs**	***Asymp.Sig***
	No. (%)	***No. (%)***	
Move 1	39 (78)	42 (84)	.444
Move 2	44 (88)	45 (90)	.749
Move 3	37 (74)	32 (64)	.280

As Table 1 illustrates, the three Moves were present in more than half of the data in each corpus. Move 2 with the frequency of 44 and percentage of 88% used by NSEs and the frequency of 45 and percentage of 90% used by NSPs was the most frequent Move among the others. Move 3 was the least frequent one. Moreover, the *p* values in move 1, 2, and 3 were *p*= .444, *p*= .749, and *p*= .280, respectively. As a result, there were not any statistically significant differences in the use of three Moves in both corpora.

3.2. Move 1: "Establishing a territory"

The function of Move 1 "Establishing a territory" in Introduction sections in general and SP sections in particular is to set the scene and establish the significance of the research field. This Move is narrowed down to reach partial goals through "Topic generalizations of increasing specificity" (Swales, 2004), which is subdivided into eight categories based on the findings of Sheldon's (2013) study. Table 2 presents the frequencies and percentages of Sub-Steps of Move1. To see if the frequency differences in using Sub-Steps of Step 1 between NSEs and NSPs were statistically significant, the Chi-square statistical tests were used.

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

Table 2

The frequencies, percentages, and chi-square analysis of move 1(step 1) and embedded sub-steps

Structure of Move 1	**NSEs**	**NSPs**	***df***	***Asymp.Sig***
	No.(%)	**No.(%)**		
Step 1: Topic generalization of increasing specificity	39(78)	42(84)		
(1a) Reporting conclusions of previous studies	21(42)	11(22)	1	.032
(1b) Narrowing the field	3(6)	7(14)	1	.182
(1c) Writer's evaluation of existing research	3(6)	1(2)	1	.307
(1d) Time-frame of relevance	13(26)	14(28)	1	.822
(1e) Research objectives/processes of previous studies	11(22)	7(14)	1	.298
(1f) Terminologies/definitions	11(22)	18(36)	1	.123
(1g) Generalizing	24(48)	25(50)	1	.841
(1h) Furthering or Advancing knowledge	4(8)	6(12)	1	.505

The descriptive statistics in Table 2 show that in SP sections written by NSEs, generalizing (Step 1g) was the highest frequent Sub-Step among eight sub-categories of Step 1 (Topic generalization of increasing specificity). The second most frequent Sub-Step observed in the corpus was

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

reporting conclusions of previous studies (Step 1a). Finally, time-frame of relevance (Step 1d) was considered the third frequent Sub-Step. In addition, research objectives/processes of previous studies (Step 1e), terminologies/definitions (Step 1f), furthering or advancing knowledge (Step 1h), narrowing the field (Step 1b), and writer's evaluation of existing research (Step 1c) were considered as the least frequent Sub-Steps , respectively.

Regarding SP sections written by NSPs, the highest frequent Sub-Step was generalizing (Step 1g), the same as their NSE counterparts. The second most frequent Sub-Step was terminologies/definitions (Step 1f). Time-frame of relevance (Step 1d) was the third frequent Sub-Step. Furthermore, the least frequent Sub-Steps were reporting conclusions of previous studies (Step 1a), narrowing the field (Step 1b), research objectives/processes of previous studies (Step 1e), furthering or advancing knowledge (Step 1h), and writer's evaluation of existing research (Step 1c).

As Table 2 indicates, the result of Chi-square test (.032) revealed that the difference between NSEs and NSPs in using Step (1a) was statistically significant ($p< 0.05$). This means that the proportion of NSEs that used Step (1a) was significantly different from the proportion of the NSPs. There were not any statistically significant differences in using other steps. Here are some examples of each step in Move 1 throughout SP sections, which this study focused on.

- ***Move 1 Step 1a: Reporting conclusions of previous studies***

Ex.1. NSE [M1/S1a]: Current research in NNS writing suggests that feedback using direct speech may be clearer and more indirect speech may be more polite.

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

Ex.2. NSP [M1/S1a]: However, previous studies on the effects of enhancement, both short term and long-term, produced mixed results. That is to say, some of these studies found input enhancement an effective type of instruction, while some others found it not really effective.

- ***Move 1 Step 1b: Narrowing the field***

Ex.1. NSE [M1/S1b]: In order to achieve mastery of a foreign language, learners must develop four principal language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. However, being able to interact orally with others is nowadays of the utmost importance.

Ex.2. NSP [M1/S1b]: Research in the field of FLA? has indicated that there is a moderate negative relationship between FLA and achievement. However, among different aspects of language achievement, FLA has been almost associated with the oral aspects of language achievement.

- ***Move 1 Step 1c: Writer's evaluation of existing research***

Ex.1. NSE [M1/S1c]: While Cummins' (1986) theoretical framework provides a starting point for studying a teacher's ideology and practice into empowering literacy teaching, several gaps in his framework need to be addressed to be able to apply it to a secondary analysis involving research of EAL classrooms and teachers.

Ex.2. NSP [M1/S1c]: According to previous studies, although linguistic proficiency of a teacher plays an important role in language classes, he/she must be able to manage classroom interaction in a way to increase students' participation in the lessons.

- ***Move 1 Step 1d: Time-frame of relevance***

Ex.1. NSE [M1/S1d]: Strategic learning and pronunciation learning are both areas of study that have recently received wide-spread attention in second language research (Brown, 2001; Bruen, 2001a; Celce-Murcia,

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996; Dornyei & Skehan, 2003; Fan, 2003; Norton & Toohey, 2001).

Ex.2. NSP [M1/S1d]: Over the past few decades, the increasing interest in teaching and learning reading and reading strategies in English as a second or foreign language contexts has become an international trend. Researchers are interested in understanding what skilled readers typically do while they read (Block, 1992; Brantmeier, 2000, 2002; Jimenez, Garcia, & Pearson, 1996; Kern, 1989; Lee, 2007; Wu, 2005; Zhang, 2001).

- ***Move 1 Step 1e: Research objectives/processes of previous studies***

Ex.1. NSE [M1/S1e]: Strategic learning research has sought to advance the understanding of how students tackle difficult language learning tasks using learning strategies. The field of pronunciation learning research also has attempted to discover which areas of pronunciation are most beneficial for instructors to teach (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin).

Ex.2. NSP [M1/S1e]: Recently, a number of studies have been carried out to test the efficiency of TBA on vocabulary learning (de la Feunte 2002, Hayaty and Mohammadi 2009).

- ***Move 1 Step 1f: Terminologies/definitions***

Ex.1. NSE [M1/S1f]: CEFR defines learning a language as the development of competences on the part of the learner. Competence includes not only knowledge, but also the ability to use that knowledge.

Ex.2. NSP [M1/S1f]: According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), ESP is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner' s reason for learning.

- ***Move 1 Step 1g: Generalizing***

Ex.1. NSE [M1/S1g]: Adult ESL instructors are a professionally diverse population. Some have many years of experience in adult ESL and very

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

little formal training in how to teach adults to acquire a second language. Others have extensive training and very little experience. Many have both training and experience, and still others have neither.

Ex.2. NSP [M1/S1g]: In Iran, cloze tests have widely been utilized as an integral part of English tests which are used in university entrance examinations, achievement tests, or as a part of course book exercises for different academic levels and their relative ease of scoring also adds to their popularity.

- ***Move 1 Step 1h: Furthering or advancing knowledge***

Ex.1. NSE [M1/S1h]: One way to investigate the effect of strategic learning on pronunciation learning is to examine the use of pronunciation learning strategies used intuitively by language learners.

Ex.2. NSP [M1/S1h]: Research suggests that teachers should provide learners with systematic vocabulary instruction and offer opportunities for them to learn vocabulary through context.

3.3. Move 2: "Establishing a niche"

After setting the scene, researchers generally tried to establish a niche (Move 2) by reporting limitations of previous studies (M2S1A), stating the problem/need (M2S1B), and indicating a gap (M2S1C), which respectively argues the misguiding of the previous studies, introducing an unsolved research problem, and indicating insufficiency of the previous studies. Then, through presenting positive justification (M2S2), researchers claimed that more research was needed for the research problem they have discovered. Table 3 presents the frequencies, percentages, and Chi-square values of Move 2 and its embedded steps.

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

Table 3

The frequencies, percentages, and chi-square analysis of move 2 and embedded steps in SP sections

Structure of Move 2		**NSEs**	**NSPs**	***df***	***Asymp.Sig***
		No.(%)	**No.(%)**		
Step 1A	Limitations of previous research	5 (10)	6 (12)	1	.749
Step 1B	Stating the problem/need	34 (68)	39 (78)	1	.260
Step 1C	Indicating a gap	19 (38)	21 (42)	1	.683
Step 2	Presenting positive justification	14 (28)	3 (6)	1	.003

As Table 3 demonstrates, in SP sections written by NSEs, stating the problem/need (Step 1B) was the highest frequent Step. The second most frequent Step observed in the corpus was indicating a gap (Step 1C). Finally, presenting positive justification (Step 2) was considered the third frequent Step. In addition, limitations of previous research (Step 1A) were considered as the least frequent one.

With regard to SP sections written by NSPs, the highest frequent Step was stating the problem/need (Step 1B). The second most frequent Step was related to indicating a gap (Step 1C). Finally, limitations of previous research (Step 1A) and presenting positive justification (Step 2) were the least frequent ones.

The value of .003 obtained from Chi-square test demonstrates that at $p<$ 0.05, there were statistically significant differences between NSEs and NSPs in using Step 2 (Table 3). In fact, the proportion of NSEs using Step 2 was significantly different from the proportion of NSPs. There were not any statistically significant differences in using other steps. Here are some

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

examples of each step in Move 2 throughout SP sections, which this study focused on.

- ***Move 2 Step 1A: Limitations of previous research***

Ex.1. NSE [M2/S1A]: Despite the recognized importance of interaction in second language acquisition, only two studies investigated the impact of IWBs on foreign language instruction note, particularly the issue of classroom interaction.

Ex.2. NSP [M2/S1A]: Despite of the informative results of previous studies, they did not specifically investigate the effect of L2 proficiency on language switching.

- ***Move 2 Step 1B: Stating the problem/need***

Ex.1. NSE [M2/S1B]: The grammar translation method, which is linked to preparation for the entrance examinations of Japanese universities, has demotivated students, and has not ld to significant proficiency gains.

Ex.2. NSP [M2/S1B]: Many researchers have claimed that English essays written by their participants do not match native speakers' expectations in terms of rhetorical elements. According to Kaplan (2005), even advanced students who have a good command of the syntactic structure and lexicon of English may still write papers that are considered ineffective and inadequate by native instructors.

- ***Move 2 Step 1C: Indicating a gap***

Ex.1. NSE [M2/S1C]:

There is no reported research that provides a correlation between successful teachers and training in adult ESL instruction.

Ex.2. NSP [M2/S1C]:

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

More importantly, no attempt has ever been made to investigate the possibility of variation in the generic structure of newspaper editorials across Persian and English.

- ***Move 2 Step 2: Presenting positive justifications***

Ex.1. NSE [M2/S2]: There was a great need to design an ESP curriculum that would help non-native English speaking UVRM housekeepers and others to gain proficiency in English in the area of nursing.

Ex.2. NSP [M2/S2]: In the current situation, in which the importance of academic reading proficiency is really critical for such students to achieve their academic success, it is necessary to do research about these students' use of reading strategies in reading academic research articles.

3.4. Move 3: "Presenting the present work"

The function of Move 3 "Presenting the present work" is to represent the research in question after the niche/problem has been established in Move 2. In other words, in Introduction sections, Move 3 fills the gap identified in Move 2 by explicitly outlining the research purpose, stating its structure and main features, and announcing the principal outcomes (Swales, 2004). In this study, based on the analysis, this Move was realized by announcing present work descriptively and/or purposively and presenting research questions or hypotheses. In fact, other Steps which are used in Introduction sections are not included in SP sections. Table 4 presents the frequencies, percentages, and Chi-square values of Move 3 and its embedded steps observed in SP sections.

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

Table 4

The frequencies, percentages, and chi-square analysis of move 3 and embedded steps in SP sections

Structure of Move 3	**NSEs**	**NSPs**	***df***	***Asymp. Sig***
	No.(%)	**No.(%)**		
Step 1 Announcing present work descriptively and/or purposively	32(64)	28(56)	1	.414
Step 2 Presenting research questions or hypotheses	14(28)	9(18)	1	.235

As Table 4 illustrates, announcing present work descriptively and/or purposively (Step 1) was the frequent Step used by NSEs and NSPs. Regarding SP sections written by NSPs, the frequent Step was announcing present work descriptively and/or purposively (Step 1) and the second Step was presenting research questions or hypotheses (Step 2). In fact, NSEs and NSPs place greater emphasis on situating their research descriptively in Step 1 and seem resistant to outline the research question. The results of Chi-square test in Table 4 show that the differences between NSEs and NSPs in using Step 1 and 2 were not statistically significant at $p< 0.05$. Here are some examples of each step in Move 3 throughout SP sections, which this study focused on.

- ***Move 3 Step 1: Announcing present work descriptively and/or purposively***

Ex.1. NSE [M3/S1]: This thesis investigates how the listening comprehension of intermediate ESL learners can be influenced by the availability of annotations.

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

Ex.2. NSP [M3/S1]: This study investigates the nature of the interaction of the reader-based variable background knowledge, referred to as topic familiarity.

- ***Move 3 Step 2: Presenting research questions or hypotheses***

Ex.1. NSE [M3/S2]: To summarize, the question I wish to answer in this study is: 1. Are linking adverbials used differently by ENL, ESL, and EFL speakers in their academic writing?

Ex.2. NSP [M3/S2]: To what extent is correct lexical guessing dependent on topic familiarity?

3.5. The sequence patterns of moves in SP sections

As Sheldon (2013) states, in addition to the overall selection of Moves, it is also important to pay attention to the overall sequencing patterns of Moves. Five out of fifty SP sections in the corpus, written by NSEs, used the [M1-M2] pattern. So, it is the most common structure among different patterns. The second most frequent patterns were [M1-M3], [M2-M3], and [M1-M2-M1-M2-M3]. The last frequent patterns were [M1-M2-M3-M2], [M1-M2-M1-M2], [M2-M1-M3], and [M2-M1-M2]. In the remaining SP sections, there was a variety of different combinations, which made it hard to identify other frequent patterns. As far as the SP sections written by NSPs were concerned, [M1-M2-M3] pattern was the most frequent combination. The next most frequent pattern was [M1-M2]. Finally, the last common patterns were [M2], [M1-M2-M1-M2], and [M1-M2-M1-M2-M3]. The other identified patterns were different combinations, which did not have high frequencies.

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

4. Discussion

4.1. The comparison of moves between the two corpora

The results of the comparison between the two corpora of SP sections confirm that the most frequent Move is Move 2 (Establishing a niche). This supports the fact that Move 2 is often an obligatory component in research articles written in English (Samraj, 2002; Swales, 2004; Shehzad, 2008). As Sheldon (2013) states, the role of this Move is to criticize or refute previous claims of knowledge, allowing writers to create a niche for their contribution. Jalilifar et al. (2011) claim that writers tend to put more emphasis on Move 2, which is used repetitively to explain the reason for conducting research on the problem under investigation. In other words, Move 2 as the key Move in SP sections bridges the divide between Move 1 (what has been done) and Move 3 (what the present research is about) (Swales & Feak, 1994).

Moves 1 and 3 occurred in more than half of the SP sections of the two corpora, so they are considered as obligatory Moves. However, 18 of NSPs and 13 of NSEs did not employ Move 3, which may be due to the fact that most researchers stated the purpose of study at the beginning of Research Question sections which usually comes in a separate part after SP sections in theses.

Lack of significant differences among the frequencies of the three Moves of the SP sections used by the two groups of researchers indicates that as far as the application of the main types of information (Moves) are concerned, the SP sections written by NSEs and NSPs are similarly successful in providing major types of information. The results are the same as those of Jalilifar et al.'s (2011) study, where no significant differences in the distribution of the Moves (M1, M2, and M3) across the SP sections written by Iranian researchers were found. In other words, the two groups were

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

expected to use different percentages of Moves due to their cultural differences. This may be attributed to the fact that in scientific communities, NSEs are considered as authorities due to their publications and as a result, their writing style has been considered as a model for other writers who wish to publish their articles in international journals. This also may indicate that there are no cultural variations and discrepancies in the way information is organized in English and Persian, which is in contrast to the studies in the literature (Ahmad, 1997; Cmejrkova, 1996; Connor, 2008; Duszak, 1994; Flowerdew, 2002; Halliday & Hasan, 1990; Hirano, 2009; Hyland, 2000; Kaplan, 1966; Koutlaki, 2002; Moreno, 1997; Paltridge, 2004; Swales, 1990), which show that although research articles are based on the requirements of the genre, there are significant cultural differences in the rhetorical preferences of national cultures. Despite these similarities in the use of major Moves by the two groups of researchers, the findings revealed that NSEs and NSPs have differences in using some Steps. These subcategory similarities and differences are briefly discussed below.

4.2. The comparison of steps between the two corpora

Regarding Steps in Move 1, the NSEs are more eager to establish a territory by using the Sub-Steps of "Generalizing", "Reporting conclusion of previous studies", as well as "Time-frames of relevance", and the NSPs tend to use "Generalizing", "Terminologies/definitions", and "Time-frames of relevance". So, the most frequent Sub-Step in both groups is Step (1g): Generalizing, which is similar to the findings of Jalilifar et al.(2011) and Halleck and Connor (2006). Consequently, it can be concluded that in ELT studies, people tend to first present general knowledge around their topic of study and then go to the details. In addition, since there are no statistically significant differences between the two groups in using Step 1g, it can be concluded that researchers regardless of their L1 tend to establish a territory by writing about their own ideas and knowledge about the topic, so this

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

strategy can be considered a universally accepted way of establishing a territory in ELT studies. This idea is supported by Taylor and Tingguang (1991) and Najjar (1989). In this study, both the NSEs and NSPs showed the significance of their study through the mentioned Sub-Steps. Sheldon (2013) found that the frequency of Sub-Steps in Move 1 used by the English L1 group was greater than that of the Spanish L1 group in her study, which is in contrast with the present study. She claims that employing such rhetorical features assisted the NSEs to foreground the significance of their studies, and thereby attain research validation. NSEs tend to rely on conclusions of previous studies more than the NSP ones when they want to make topic generalization and find gaps in the literature. It suggests that NSPs prefer to write about the conclusions of previous studies in another Chapter, Review of the Literature, and not in Introduction sections or SP sections.

With regard to steps in Move 2, the most common Step in the two corpora is M2S1B: Stating the problem, supported by Jalilifar et al.(2011) and Swales and Feak (1994) who assert that Move 2 is considered as the key Move in SP sections that bridges the divide between Move 1 (what has been done) and Move 3 (what the current study is about). Bunton (2002) also supports this idea and claims that indicating a problem or need is frequent in Ph.D. thesis introductions. In other words, as Jalilifar et al.(2011) state researchers put more emphasis on Move 2, the aim of which is to explain the reason behind the research problem under investigation. They also believe that it is the nature of SP sections that needs more competition to establish a niche and to convince their discourse community of their research, and to show its validity The findings of the present study show that researchers in the two corpora use the strategy of M2S1C: Indicating a gap as the second most frequent Step. In the same vein, Swales and Feak (1994) argue that the most frequent occurrence of Move 2 in articles creates

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

a space by stating a gap and showing that the previous studies are not complete.

Another important issue is that the two groups of researchers do not tend to establish a niche by stating the limitations of previous studies. Similarly, they do not provide positive justification for their study. The reason behind this may be the fact that it is common to write about the limitations of the previous studies in Review of the Literature and justification for the present study in a section called Significance of the Study.

Another issue worth mentioning here is that M1S1B: Stating the problem/need is considered as an obligatory Step and other Steps seem to be optional, which is in contrast with the findings of Jalilifar et al.(2011)'s study. Since there are no statistically significant differences in using M2S1A, M2S1B, and M2S1C, they may have been conventionalized for NSEs and NSPs. In contrast, the findings illustrate that the proportion of the NSEs using Step 2 is significantly different from the proportion of the NSP ones. In fact, it seems that NSEs are more eager than NSPs to present justifications for their identified problem/gap.

According to Sheldon (2013), Move 3: Presenting the present work introduces the research question after the niche has been established in Move 2. The most frequent Step in Move 3 across the two corpora is M3S1: Announcing present work descriptively and/or purposively", as supported by Sheldon (2013). This step is considered as an obligatory Step in SP sections because it occurred in more than half of the SP sections. This idea is parallel to the findings reported by Jalilifar et al., for which they contend that "the sole obligatory element in Move 3 is Step 1 (announcing present research)." (p. 92). As Swales (2004) claims, the preferred means for doing this is to state the applicability of the research and mention the claims about the novelty of the research problem. In contrast, Step 2: Presenting research

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

questions or hypotheses was used less than Step 1 in the two corpora; hence it is an optional Step. The same finding was reported by Jalilifar et al. (2011) that the final element Presenting research questions was rarely exploited in the data under their investigation. As Jalilifar et al.(2011) state, not presenting research questions in this part is due to the fact that usually stating research questions follows SP sections. In the same line, Kwan (2006) believes that one of the optional steps of occupying the research niche is stating research questions in research article Introductions (Move 3). In the same vein, research questions/hypotheses are also present occasionally in the Bunton's (2002) modified CARS model for Ph.D. dissertation Introductions. In other words, as Sheldon (2013) claims, the researchers place greater emphasis on situating their research descriptively in Step 1 and seem resistant to outline the research question, which is a strategy to talk about the study explicitly.

The standard Move pattern is based on the M1-M2-M3 pattern of Swales' (2004) CARS model, which has accounted for the majority of the research article Introductions. The findings illustrate that NSEs and NSPs after establishing the territory (M1), tend to establish the niche (M2). M1 and M2 recur throughout the SP sections. In addition, M1, which functions as a starting point, comes after M2 and M3 in some SP sections (e.g., [M3-M1] & [M2-M3-M1]). In this line, Swales (1990) claims that the insertion of recurring patterns to justify the identification of the research gap seems to be an effective textual strategy that assists writers to present the research gap in different sections because of the complexity of their research questions. The results show that Moves do not appear solely in canonical order, but in repeated cycles of internal moves (Swales, 1990). Similarly, Sheldon (2013) asserts that the skillful alternation from M1 to M2 assists the researcher to deepen the research space and strengthen the perceived need for the research. One explanation for the Move pattern variations can

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

be that, researchers are not obliged to organize their ideas according to what has been prescribed as the standard order of Moves.

5. Conclusion

This study sought to analyze SP sections as a genre that has been relatively unexplored in genre studies and the cultural variations within the genre. To sum up, the findings of the present study demonstrate that the Move organization of SP sections written by the NSEs and NSPs is similar to some slight differences in the Steps and their orders. It can be concluded that Move structures of SP sections, particularly in the area of ELT seem to be universal. This might show their gradual advancement toward a unitary model defined as the standard. Considering the preferred Moves in the two corpora, the findings reveal that Move 2, Move 1, and Move 3 are the most frequent Moves in SP sections respectively.

The findings of this study can be insightful for EFL instructors and material designers to use them in their writing classes. Hyland (2002) states that the mastery of genre knowledge helps the students become members of their disciplinary community. Similarly, Bhatia (1997) has shown that genre analysis is able to provide useful information to novice writers by exposing them to the conventions of a particular genre, and they will be able to explore and produce more complex genres as they acquire genre knowledge. Accordingly, explicit attention to the forms and functions of SP sections in theses can be of considerable value to second/foreign language writers.

Moreover, material developers can also use the results from genre studies to develop materials that make postgraduate students Move-sensitive. Second language writing instructors can design tasks and materials that focus not only on grammar, but also on Move structures and various writing genres. As the findings of this study demonstrated, some Steps in the two corpora had not been used very frequently in spite of their important roles in making SP sections more informative. So, instructors can provide some

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

examples of SP sections, which contain almost all the Moves and Steps, for postgraduate students to be familiar with different ways of developing their own ideas to reach the goals.

The major limitation of the study was the limited number of SP sections observed as the data, which was due to the fact that finding SP sections written by NSEs was not easily accessible. Therefore, this study can be replicated with a larger sample in order to increase the generalizability of the results of the study. Similarly, the number of studies done in the realm of identifying the generic organization of SP sections in theses and dissertations was low in number.

Future researchers may focus on SP sections written in Persian in theses and compare the overall structure with the findings of this study to assess any similarities and differences. This cross-cultural investigation can be useful in recognizing any L1 (Persian) transfer to L2 (English) in writing in English. In addition, researchers can identify the linguistic features in each Move and Step in order to gain a better understanding of Move structures. Another suggestion which is worth mentioning here is to invite future studies to consider the number of words employed in each Move and Step. The contribution of such analysis may help researchers to understand which Moves and Steps need more elaboration. Furthermore, future studies can analyze Move structures of SP sections in Ph.Ddissertations to find any probable similarities and differences in the findings of the present study. Finally, it is suggested to analyze SP sections written in English by researchers from different L1 backgrounds in order to be more familiar with their thought patterns.

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

6. References

Ahmad, U. K. (1997). Research article introductions in Malay: Rhetoric in an emerging research community. In A. Duszak (Ed.), *Culture and styles of academic discourse* (pp. 273–304). New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Arvay, A., & Tanko, G. (2004). A contrastive analysis of English and Hungarian theoretical research article introductions. *IRAL, 24* (1), 71-100.
Bhatia, V. K. (1997). Introduction: Genre analysis and world Englishes. *World Englishes, 16*(3), 313–319.

Bitchener, J., & Basturkmen, H. (2006). Perceptions of the difficulties of postgraduate L2 thesis students writing the discussion section. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 5*, 4–18.

Bitchener, J., Basturkmen, H., & East, M. (2010). The focus of supervisor written feedback to thesis/dissertation students. *International Journal of English Studies, 10*, 79-97.

Bunton, D. (2002). Generic moves in PhD thesis introductions. In J. Flowerdew (Ed.), *Academic discourse* (pp. 57-75). Harlow: Pearson.

Bunton, D. (2005). The structure of Ph.D. conclusion chapters. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 4*(3), *207-224.*

Carrió-Pastor, M. (2009). Contrasting specific English corpora: Language variation. *International Journal of English Studies, 14*(1), 221–234.

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

Carrió-Pastor, M. (2013). A contrastive study of the variation of sentence connectors in academic English. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 12*(3), 192–202.

Cmejrkova, S. (1996). Academic writing in Czech and English. In E. Ventola, & A. Mauranen (Eds.), *Academic Writing: Intercultural and Textual Issues* (pp. 137-152). Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Coker, W., & Coker, W. (2012). Stating the research problem: A genre-based study of English language M.Phil. theses in a Ghanaian Public University. *LANGUAGE IN INDIA*, 12, 509-518.

Connor, U. (2008). Mapping multidimensional aspects of research: Reaching to intercultural rhetoric, In U. Connor, E. Nagelhout, & W. V. Rozycki (Eds.), *Contrastive Rhetoric*: *Reaching to Intercultural Rhetoric*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Cooley, L., & Lewkowicz, J. (1995). The writing needs of postgraduate students at the University of Hong Kong: A project report. *Hong Kong Papers in Linguistics and Language Teaching, 18,* 121-123.

Dong, Y. R. (1998). Non-native speaker graduate students' thesis/dissertation writing in science: Self-reports by students and their advisors from two US institutions. *English for Specific Purposes, 17*, 369-390.

Dudley-Evans, T. (1986). Genre analysis: An investigation of the introduction and discussion sections of M.Sc. dissertations. In M. Coulthard

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

(Ed.), *Talking about text* (pp. 128-145). Birmingham: English Language Research, University of Birmingham.

Dudley-Evans, T. (1994). Genre analysis: An approach to text analysis for ESP. In M. Coulthard (Ed.), *Advances in written text analysis* (pp. 219-228). London: Routledge.

Dudley-Evans, T. (1995). Common core and specific approach to the teaching of academic writing. In D. Belcher & G. Braine (Eds.), *Academic Writing in a Second Language* (pp. 293-312). Norwood, N.J.: Ablex.

Duszak, A. (1994). Academic discourse and intellectual styles. *Journal of Pragmatics, 21*, 291-313.

Duszak, A. (1997a). Cross-cultural academic communication: A Discourse-community view. In A. Duszak (Ed.), *Culture and styles of academic discourse* (pp. 11-39). New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Duszak, A. (1997b). Introduction. In A. Duszak (Ed.), *Culture and styles of academic discourse (pp.1-8).* New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Ellis, T. J., & Levy, Y. (2008). Framework of problem-based research: A guide for novice researchers on the development of a research-worthy problem. *Informing Science: The International Journal of an Emerging Transdiscipline, 11*, 17-33.

Flowerdew, J. (2002). *Academic Discourse*, London: Longman.

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

Halleck, G. B., & Connor, U. M. (2006). Rhetorical moves in TESOL conference proposals. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 5*, 70-86.

Halliday, M., & Hasan, R. (1990). *Language, context, and text: Aspects of language in a social semiotic perspective.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Hewings, M. (1993). The end! How to conclude a dissertation. In G., Blue (Ed.), *Language, learning and success: Studying through English. Review of English language teaching* (pp. 105-112). London: Macmillan.

Hirano, E. (2009). Research article introductions in English for specific purposes: A comparison between Brazilian Portuguese and English . *English for Specific Purposes, 28*, 240–250.

Hyland, K. (2000). *Disciplinary Discourses: Social Interactions in Academic Writing.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hyland, K. (2002). Options of identity in academic writing. *ELT Journal, 56*, 351-358.

Hyland, K. (2004). Graduates' gratitude: the generic structure of dissertation acknowledgements. *English for Specific Purposes, 23*, 303–324.

Ibrahim, N., &Nambiar, M.K. (2011). What is the problem with the statement of problem? The case of postgraduate international students and the introductory sections of a project paper. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences, 15*, 1713–1717.

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

Jalilifar, A. R., Firuzmand, S., & Roshani, S. (2011). Genre analysis of problem statement sections of M.A proposals and theses in Applied Linguistics. *Language, Society and Culture, 33*, 85-93.

Jenkins, S., Jordan, M. K., & Weiland, P. O. (1993). The role of writing in graduate engineering education: A survey of faculty beliefs and practices. *English for Specific Purposes, 12*(1), 51-67.

Kaplan, R. (1966). Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education. *Language Learning, 16,* 1–20.

Koutlaki, S. A. (2002). Offers and expressions of thanks as face enhancing acts: Ta'arof in Persian. *Journal of Pragmatics, 34*, 1733-1756.

Kwan, B.S.C. (2006). The schematic structure of literature reviews in doctoral theses of applied linguistics. *English for Specific Purposes*, *25*, 30-55.

Mauranen, A. (2012). *Exploring ELF: Academic English shaped by non-native speakers.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mauranen, A. (2013a). Lingua franca discourse in academic contexts: Shaped by complexity. In John Flowerdew (Ed.), *Discourse in context: Contemporary applied linguistics* (pp. 225–245). London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Moreno, A. I. (1997). Genre constraints across languages: Causal metatext in Spanish and English RAs. *English for Specific Purposes, 16*, 161-179.

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

Najjar, H. Y. (1989). *Scientific Arabic: The agricultural research article.* (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan).

Paltridge, B. (2004). The exegesis as a genre: An ethnographic examination. In Ravelli, L and Ellis, A (Eds.), *Analysing academic writing: Conceptualized Frameworks,* (pp. 84-103). London: Continuum.

Samraj, B. (2002). Introductions in research articles: Variations across disciplines. *English for Specific Purposes, 21, 1-17.*

Samraj, B. (2008). A discourse analysis of master's theses across disciplines with a focus on introductions. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 7*(1), 55-67.

Samraj, B.& Monk, L. (2008). The statement of purpose in graduate program applications: Genre structure and disciplinary variation. *English for Specific Purposes, 27,* 193–211.

Sayfouri, N. (2010). *SFL and ESP genre analysis of English research articles in Iranian and English-American medical journals: A contrastive study* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Tehran). Retrieved from http://www.isfla.org/Systemics.

Shehzad, W. (2008). Move two: Establishing a niche. *Ibérica, 15,* 25–50.

Sheldon, E. (2013). *The research article: A rhetorical and functional comparison of texts created by native and non-native English writers and native Spanish writers* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Technology). Retrieved from httpa.org/Systemics/Print/Theses.

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

Swales, J. M. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings.* Cambridge Cambridge University Press.

Swales, J. M. (2004). *Research genres: Explorations and applications*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Swales, J., & Feak, C. (1994). *Academic writing for graduate students. A course for nonnative speakers of English.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Taylor, G., & Tingguang, C. (1991). Linguistic, cultural, and subcultural issues in contrastive discourse analysis: Anglo-American and Chinese scientific texts. *Applied Linguistics, 12*, 319-336.

Thompson, P. (1999). Exploring the contexts of writing: Interviews with Ph.D. supervisors. In P. Thompson (Ed.), *Issues in EAP writing research and instruction* (pp. 37-54): Reading, UK: CALS.

Notes on Contributors:

Soheila Parsa received her MA in TEFL from Sheikhbahaee University, Isfahan, Iran. Her areas of research interests include genre analysis, pragmatics, and ESP.

Mohammad Hasan Tahririan is a professor of applied linguistics at Sheikhbahaee University. He has widely published in International journals and supervised many MA and PhD theses to completion. His major areas of interests are EFL material development and ESP.

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]

[Downloaded from ijal2.khu.ac.ir on 2026-11-24]