

Rhetorical structure of introduction chapter in Vietnamese English-majored undergraduate's theses

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the rhetorical structure of the Introduction chapter of English major undergraduate theses, adopting Swales' Create-A-Research-Space framework (Swales, 1990, 2004). The data encompassed Introduction chapters of 30 theses written by English-majored students at a university in Vietnam. Move analysis was used to identify the frequencies of moves, steps, and patterns. Results indicated that all the introduction chapters in the corpus conform strictly to three moves in the model. However, students tend to employ fewer steps, in which gap-indication and result-presentation steps are not given sufficient attention. Findings from this research offer pedagogical implications for embedding the rhetorical genre structure of the thesis in writing courses for English major students. The study also recommends integrating critical thinking skills in the educational program at B University and other institutions of similar contexts to sharpen their scientific mindset in academic writing skills.

1. Introduction

Thesis completion as a requirement for graduation poses excellent challenges to English major students due to their lack of experience and unfamiliarity with the rhetorical convention of this academic genre in the target language. Rhetorical structure is ideas combining moves and steps to perform a communicative function of the text (Swales, 1990). A thesis must conform to the conventional structure, including chapters such as the Introduction, Literature review, Methodology, Results, Discussion, and Conclusion, with appropriate rhetorical moves in each chapter. In the Vietnamese context, to accomplish their theses, undergraduate students usually consult the guidebooks on thesis writing and/or refer to students' theses from previous courses (Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2014). The Introduction seems to be one of the most challenging in these chapters. The writers must establish the research territory, identify the research gap, and introduce the present study (Swales, 1990). Hence, the effective use of rhetorical structure in the Introduction chapter will facilitate the delivery of ideas, thereby achieving communicative function efficiently.

To date, many studies have been conducted to explore the rhetorical structure of journal research articles (Gollin-Kies, 2014; Hyland, 2000; Kanoksilapatham, 2005; Maher & Milligan, 2019) and post-graduate student theses (Bunton, 2002; Kwan, 2006; Maher & Milligan, 2019; Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2014; Soler-Monreal, 2015). However, undergraduate theses have received scanty attention from scholars due to the belief that these students typically acquire

knowledge instead of creating new knowledge. Additionally, English-medium undergraduate theses in non-Anglo-American contexts are generally overlooked (Xu et al., 2016), ostensibly leading to the lack of studies on this issue. The scrutiny of Introduction section in research articles (Gao & Pramoolsook, 2023; Kanoksilapatham, 2005; Samraj, 2002; Swales, 1990; Wang & Yang, 2015), Master theses (Fitriati et al., 2021; Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2014; Pujiyanti et al., 2018; Samraj, 2008), and Ph.D. dissertations (Bunton, 2002; Kawase, 2018; Kwan, 2006; Soler-Monreal et al., 2011) have been extensively addressed. However, research has been scarce on the rhetorical structure of the Introduction chapter of undergraduate theses, especially for non-English native speakers. To this end, this study attempts to uncover the conformity and non-conformity of the rhetorical structure of English major students at a university in Vietnam, using the adapted framework of Swales (2004), namely the CARS model. Specifically, drawing on move analysis, the study examines the frequencies of moves and steps in three moves in the Introduction chapter, including Establishing a territory, Establishing a niche, and Occupying the niche. The results of this study will serve as a valuable source of reference for the compilation of writing courses, considering embedding the rhetorical structure of the thesis genre and integrating critical thinking skills into the curriculum to improve students' academic writing skills.

2. Literature review

2.1. Genre analysis

Bhatia (2006) posits that genre analysis investigates situated linguistic behavior in academic or professional settings, playing a vital role in text analysis. The conformity of genre enables language learners to engage in their target discourse communities. Specific genre has its rhetorical structure, which is realized by moves and steps (sub-moves). In this regard, moves are discursial segments that perform the communicative function of the text. For example, when the writer addresses the under-researched issues in the literature, he/she tends to indicate the gap, which is identified as gap-move. Steps are considered as strategies to realize the communicative purposes of moves. While completing the thesis, knowledge about the rhetorical structure of the introduction chapter will facilitate novice writers to become aware of and conform to the conventions of this genre of academic writing.

Drawing on Swales' CARS (1990, 2004) model for the introduction section of research articles, the Introduction chapter comprises three moves, each of which includes several steps. The following rhetorical structure will serve as the analytical framework for the introduction chapter in the undergraduate thesis:

Table 1

Framework of Rhetorical Structure of Introduction Section Adapted from Swales (1990, 2004)

Moves and steps	Functions	Characteristics of the steps
Move 1	Establishing a territory	
<i>Step 1</i>	<i>Claiming centrality</i>	- Claim the importance of the research area
<i>Step 2</i>	<i>Making topic generalization</i>	- Statements about knowledge or practice or the uniqueness of the topic
<i>Step 3</i>	<i>Reviewing items of previous research</i>	- Finding from previous relevant studies

Moves and steps	Functions	Characteristics of the steps
Move 2	Establishing a niche	
<i>Step 1</i>	<i>Indicating a gap or</i>	- State that previous work suffers from limitations
<i>Step 2</i>	<i>Presenting positive justification</i>	- Highlight the need for their research
Move 3	Occupying the niche	
Step 1	Announcing present research descriptively and/or purposively	- Describe the main features/purposes of their research
Step 2	Presenting research questions or hypotheses	- State the research questions or hypotheses
Step 3	Definitional clarifications	- Provide definitions of terms
Step 4	Summarizing methods	- Briefly present the methods
Step 5	Announcing principal outcome	- Summarize the announcement of the principal findings
Step 6	Stating the value of the present research	- Emphasize significant contributions
Step 7	Outlining the structure of the paper	- Indicate the structure and occasionally the content of the remainder of the research article

Note. The data are from “Genre analysis” by J. M. Swales, 1990, Cambridge University Press. The data are from “Research genres” by J. M. Swales, 2004, Cambridge University Press

2.2. Review of related studies

Researchers have scrutinized the genre structure, including moves and steps of Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy) dissertations, MA (Master of Art) theses, and undergraduate theses. Specifically, Bunton (2002) investigated the Introduction chapters of 45 dissertations of different disciplines and discovered that the frequent pattern in his corpus was M1-M2 instead of M1-M2-M3 according to the CARS model. Regarding the MA thesis, Nguyen and Pramoolsook (2014) discovered that MA theses in their study conformed to all three moves; however, they tended to use fewer steps than the standard model due to their compliance with the fixed guidelines provided by their university. In another study concerning English major undergraduate theses, Indrian and Ardi (2019) found some non-conformities of rhetorical structure in the corpus, such as the lack of some steps, including: “reviewing previous research” and “indicating the gap based on previous research.” Fitriyah’s (2020) research revealed an adverse finding compared to Indrian and Ardi’s (2019) work in that most undergraduate students referred to past studies. However, these thesis writers failed to address critical judgments relating to the limitations or shortcomings of previous studies to highlight the research gap. Instead, they pinpointed the gap, drawing primarily on theoretical frameworks or current phenomena that have led to a lack of solid scientific evidence. Generally speaking, high- and low-performing students experience similar problems composing a successful introduction chapter (Fitriyah, 2020). Therefore,

rhetorical structure regarding moves and steps of the Introduction section should be integrated into writing courses as an enabler for thesis completion.

It is noted that the studies mentioned above mainly address students' conformities and non-conformities of the rhetorical structure; however, the interpretation of such substandard structure is not satisfactorily elucidated. Thus, this study attempts to identify the rhetorical features of 30 English major undergraduate theses adopting the CARS model framework. Subsequently, the non-conformities of the corpus will be interpreted in light of cultural influence, which is deemed a significant contribution to this study.

3. Method

3.1. Context of the study

The data encompassed 30 Introduction chapters extracted from 30 theses of English major students at a university in Vietnam (henceforth B University). Thesis completion without oral defense is a required graduation exit at B University. Initially, the faculty provided students with guidance on the general structure of the whole thesis. Afterward, they undertook writing the paper and made the final submission of written work to their faculty under the scrutiny and acceptance of the supervisor.

3.2. Data collection

This study adopts the CARS model to analyze the moves and steps of the Introduction chapter in English major undergraduate theses at B University in Vietnam. Accordingly, 30 Introduction chapters from 15 theses in 2020 and 15 theses in 2021 were randomly selected for data analysis. Subsequently, the researcher identified and classified moves and steps based on the content and linguistic units. The frequency of moves and steps was categorized into three types, namely obligatory (100%), conventional (60% - 99%), and optional (less than 60%) (Kanoksilapatham, 2005).

30 Introduction chapters were coded from I1 to I30 in the corpus. Information about thesis titles and students' names is confidential for ethical reasons. The researchers also asked for permission from the university to employ the data for research.

3.3. Data analysis

The study adopted move analysis to analyze the text in the corpus. Move analysis uses cognitive judgment to determine the author's rhetorical purpose through content and language. According to Cotos (2018), move analysis has four steps: framework development, trialing, validation, and analytic description. More specifically, in this study, the framework was developed through Swales' CARS model with three communicative moves: Establishing a territory, Establishing a niche, and Occupying the niche with corresponding steps to achieve the purposes of the moves. Regarding the trialing step, a Ph.D. student in linguistics was invited to pilot coding the data to ensure inter-rater reliability. Before coding, the researcher conducted a training session to introduce knowledge about the move and step of rhetorical structure. Cohen's kappa coefficient was adopted to measure the inter-rater reliability, which achieved 95%. The next step validated the agreement and resolved any possible disagreement to reach a consensus between the two coders. Finally, the analytic description yielded the frequency and generalization of moves and steps through the annotated data.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Results

The frequency of moves and steps in the corpus are presented in the following table:

Table 2

Frequency of Moves and Steps in the Corpus

Moves and steps	Function	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Move 1	Establishing a territory	30/30	100
<i>Step 1</i>	<i>Claiming centrality</i>	30/30	100
<i>Step 2</i>	<i>Making topic generalization</i>	21/30	70
<i>Step 3</i>	<i>Reviewing items of previous research</i>	30/30	100
Move 2	Establishing a niche	23/30	77
<i>Step 1</i>	<i>Indicating a gap</i>	12/30	40
<i>Step 2</i>	<i>Presenting positive justification</i>	23/30	77
Move 3	Occupying the niche	30/30	100
<i>Step 1</i>	Announcing present research descriptively and/or purposively	28/30	93
<i>Step 2</i>	Presenting research questions or hypotheses	25/30	83
<i>Step 3</i>	Definitional clarifications	21/30	70
<i>Step 4</i>	Summarizing methods	30/30	100
<i>Step 5</i>	Announcing principal outcome	5/30	17
<i>Step 6</i>	Stating the value of the present research	20/30	67
<i>Step 7</i>	Outlining the structure of the paper	30/30	100

Note. Authors' source

The result indicated that all 30 Introduction chapters strictly conform to three moves, with 1 and 3 accounting for 100%, while move 2 comprised 77%. It is noticeable that in move 1, all the thesis introductions highlight the importance of the research issue (step 1) and review the previous studies (step 3) when these two steps occur at an obligatory level (100%). Step 2, "Making topic generalization," is conventional with 77% frequency. The purpose of move 2 is to establish a niche; however, a relatively small number of theses likely indicated the research gap as step 1 merely constituted 40%. 77% of this introduction stated the positive justification to support the idea that it is worth conducting the present research. In move 3, steps "Summarizing methods" and "Outlining the structure of the paper" accounted for 100%, making them obligatory steps in the corpus. The remaining steps, except for step 5, are conventional, and the frequencies range from 67% to 93%. Step 5, "Announcing principal outcome," only accounted for 17%, making it the least occurrence in move 3.

The following excerpt was extracted from a thesis whose topic is investigating the challenges of listening skills of English major students at B University:

... (**Move 1-Step 1**) *In foreign language learning, listening is a valuable means of providing students with understandable input, an essential component of the language learning process. Teaching listening skills in the classroom will help students transition from classroom English to real-life English more efficiently and effectively. (Move 2-Step2) Therefore, this study was conducted to help students and teachers pay more attention to listening skills.*

Learners face a lot of problems when listening. If teachers want to help learners improve their listening skills, they must discover what difficulties learners often face to find suitable listening strategies or adequate remedies. Moreover, learning English in Vietnam is about memorizing new words and sentence structure on paper. As a result, many Vietnamese students, even those who score well on grammar tests, cannot successfully communicate with foreigners in everyday conversations. According to Nguyen (2020), being unable to understand what native speakers say due to lack of understanding is the most serious cause. (Move 2-Step 1) In addition, at B University, very few studies describe the problems of second-year students in studying listening skills.

(...) (**Move 1-Step 3**) *First, a research paper by Nguyen (2013) etc. conducted a study to find out the main difficulties in learning the listening skills of first-year students etc. Second, Bui (2018) conducted a research paper titled "Difficulty in listening comprehension of first-year students of the Foreign Language Department of HP University." This is an outstanding problem that students in general and first-year students in particular, the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Hai Phong Private University face: feeble listening comprehension. (...) Through the comparison of domestic studies on the above topic, the shortcomings of that topic are the basis and gaps for the study to find and discover, realizing that the study also applies several sources of knowledge and experience to find new points and other points that need to be clarified.*

(...) (**Move 3-Step 1**) *More specifically, this study investigates to identify factors that cause challenges for second-year English students at B University in learning English listening. In addition to uncovering the problems second-year students face, the researcher wishes to offer some recommendations and possible solutions to overcome the difficulties and meaningful challenges, as well as pedagogical suggestions to improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning effective listening skills at B University. (Move 3-Step 6) They will be invaluable for teachers in motivating their students in listening classes. These suggestions are also intended to help students get up to speed in a normal conversation in life, thereby improving communication.*

(**Move 3-Step 4**) *In this study, the researcher conducted the research using a quantitative method. The study was conducted with 130 second-year students from the Faculty of English at B University, including survey questionnaires and interview questions for 2nd-year students. This study aimed to obtain factual descriptive data on listening comprehension problems in the second semester of second-year English majors at B University.*

(...) (**Move 3-Step 7**) *My graduation paper consists of four main chapters as follows:*

Chapter 1 presents a synthesis of the general theory of listening skills etc.

Chapter 2 presents the literature review etc. (I25)

The above extract follows **M1.S1 - M1.S3 - M2.S1 - M2.S2 - M3.S1 - M3.S4 - M3.S6 - M3.S7** structure. Specifically, in the introduction, the author established the importance of listening skills through formulaic language, such as *useful means and essential components (M1.S1)*. Reviewing previous research is subsequently recognized via phrases: *a research paper by etc., ... conducted a study, a research paper is carried out etc. (M1.S3)* in which the writer

addressed the results of past studies. The review indicated the gap: “*Very few studies describe in detail the problems of second-year students in studying listening skills*” (M2.S1). Gap identification was consolidated by presenting positive justification: “*This study was conducted to help students and teachers pay more attention to listening skills*” (M2.S2). The aims of the research were then specified, namely “*identify factors that cause challenges,*” “*... uncovering the problems*”, “*... offer some recommendations*”, and “*... improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning listening skills*”. (M3.S1). Move 3 was strengthened by using step 4 to feature the study methods (*quantitative method, etc. the participation of 130 second-year students, etc. survey questionnaires, and interviews*) (M3.S4). The thesis writer proceeded to affirm the contribution of the research (*helpful for teachers to motivate their students, etc. help students speed in a normal conversation etc.*) (M3.S6) and state the structure of the study (*My graduation paper consists of four main chapters as follows:*) (M3.S7).

The example indicated the conformity of three moves in the Introduction chapter. However, the omission of several steps, such as: “Presenting research questions or hypotheses,” “Definitional clarifications,” and “Announcing principal outcome,” makes the introduction less persuasive. Moreover, it is noted that the literature is just reviewed with the presentation of findings from previous studies, hardly reflecting the writer’s high-order-thinking skills, such as critical thinking in providing judgment about literature. As a result, the step “indicates the gap” is not sufficiently supported by essential and scientific judgment from previous studies. Instead, the writer addressed the problem subjectively by stating that few studies were conducted on this issue, so it was essential to carry out their current study. This is a common phenomenon in other introductory chapters in the corpus, as the judgmental ability of students to argue the gap is quite limited.

4.2. Discussion

This study’s result uncovers that all the introduction chapters conform strictly to three moves in the CARS model. However, there is a tendency for students to employ fewer steps than the standard model, which are the indication of gap (M2-S1) and the presentation of main results (M3-S5). The results align with Indrian and Ardi’s (2019) study, in which gap indication is not meticulously touched upon. This finding can be explicable from a cultural perspective, as the differences between Western and Eastern norms result in differences in text organization. To this end, Nguyen (2019) posits that Vietnamese people typically generate ideas based on personal experience without consulting scientific evidence. Hence, given that students are aware of the need to review literature, they present facts and figures from previous studies and hardly provide any viewpoints to judge and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of what has been done in such studies. Another reason for the gap indication not being thoroughly discussed is the lack of critical thinking in education for young people in Vietnam, which results in the deficiency of essential literature evaluation. Although recent attempts have been made to enhance students’ critical thinking in higher education, hindrances remain regarding passive learning style for examination, face-saving, and hierarchical relationship culture between teachers and students (Ho et al., 2018).

Additionally, according to Nguyen et al. (2005), the collectivist tradition in Vietnam advocates the harmony of people’s relationships; therefore, the critical and opposing evaluation of others’ works should be avoided to save their faces (Amnuai & Wannaruk, 2013; Loi, 2010). These cultural traits seem to be divergent from Westerners when people frankly express their ideas and critically make judgments with the hope of improving the quality of work. Westerners are more open to criticism as people are encouraged to exhibit their inner feelings and to influence other people (Tsai et al., 2007)

The findings offer some important implications for improving academic writing skills in general and thesis writing in particular. First of all, the educational syllabus should integrate the rhetorical structure of the thesis into the academic writing program so that students will be equipped with essential knowledge about the standard rhetorical structure of the Introduction chapter and the overall dissertation. Second, critical thinking skills need to be fostered among students to sharpen their minds when presenting information in scientific text. To achieve this aim, cultural barriers that impede the development of critical thinking skills must be analyzed and resolved to change students' mindsets, thereby successfully integrating this skill into the educational program.

5. Conclusion

This study investigates the rhetorical structure of the Introduction chapter in English major undergraduate theses at a university in Vietnam. The findings offer some crucial implications for fostering the academic writing ability of students at B University and other institutions in a similar context. The university needs to integrate the rhetorical structure of academic genre in the writing courses to help them familiarize themselves with this kind of text and raise their awareness of the requirements to conform to international academic discourse benchmarks. Moreover, critical thinking should be cultivated and nurtured in the curricula to promote the habit of systematically and methodically presenting information in scientific text. This study contributes significantly to the body of literature in that little research investigates the rhetorical structure of undergraduate students' theses. More importantly, the findings of this research are elucidated in light of the cultural lens, which provides insights into the adoption of text organization by non-native English writers in Eastern culture.

The study limits itself to small data, which leads to the inability to yield a precise generalization of the results. Thus, it is recommended that further research with a larger corpus should be implemented to validate the findings of this study. In addition, research centers on different chapters, such as the literature review, methodology, results and discussion, and conclusion, which need to be examined to offer more implications for the generic structure of the whole thesis.

NO CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

All authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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