

Rhetorical Moves and Structural Patterns in the Background of the Study Sections of EFL Master's Theses

^{*1}Anita Apriliyani Ningrum, ^{*2}Zulfa Sakhiyya

Universitas Negeri Semarang

Semarang, Indonesia

anitaapriyainin@students.unnes.ac.id;

zulfa.sakhiyya@mail.unnes.ac.id

Abstract. This study investigates the rhetorical structures realized in the Background of the Study sections of EFL master's theses using Swales' (1990, 2004) Create-A-Research-Space (CARS) model. Unlike previous studies that primarily focused on move identification, this study examines rhetorical structures in terms of moves and steps as well as their frequency, sequence, and completeness. Employing a qualitative genre-analysis approach, the study analysed 49 Background of the Study sections selected from EFL master's theses. The data were coded using Bunton's adaptation of the CARS model to identify rhetorical moves and steps and subsequently analysed for their frequency, sequence, and completeness. The findings reveal that all three CARS moves are present, with Move 1 (Establishing a Territory) dominating the corpus and accounting for 73% of all move occurrences. Within this move, Step 3 (Reviewing Previous Research) and Step 2 (Making Topic Generalizations) occur most frequently. In contrast, Moves 2 and 3 are less frequently realized and are often only partially developed. Furthermore, 45 out of 49 theses (91.8%) follow the conventional Move 1–Move 2–Move 3 sequence, indicating a strong tendency toward the expected rhetorical progression. However, considerable variation exists in the completeness of move realization, particularly in establishing research gaps and justifying the need for the study. These findings suggest that EFL master's students generally follow the conventional rhetorical organization of the Background of the Study but vary substantially in realizing its communicative purposes. The findings further indicate that rhetorical effectiveness depends not only on structural conformity but also on the extent to which research gaps, justifications, and significance are rhetorically developed. The study contributes to genre-analysis research by providing empirical evidence on rhetorical structures and patterns in EFL master's thesis writing and offers pedagogical implications for academic writing instruction and thesis supervision.

Keywords: Background of the Study; genre analysis; CARS model; rhetorical moves; EFL master's theses

* Corresponding author: Anita Apriliyani Ningrum, anitaapriyainin@students.unnes.ac.id

Introduction

Academic writing has become one of the most essential components of higher education, particularly in postgraduate programs where students are required to demonstrate their academic competence through thesis writing. A thesis not only reflects students' ability to conduct research but also represents their participation in academic discourse communities. Among the sections of a thesis, the Background of the Study plays a crucial role in establishing the research context, presenting the research problem, and justifying the significance of the study. Nevertheless, recent studies have shown that EFL students frequently experience difficulties in constructing rhetorically effective background sections. These difficulties are particularly evident in establishing a clear research niche, identifying research gaps, and providing convincing justifications for the necessity of the study (Rahayu et al., 2022; Ghorban Abdolmalaki et al., 2026). Research on rhetorical move analysis has further revealed that novice academic writers often rely heavily on contextual descriptions of the topic while giving limited attention to moves associated with creating and occupying a research niche, resulting in incomplete rhetorical progression and weaker research justification (Pandey, 2022; Ghorban Abdolmalaki et al., 2026). Furthermore, existing genre-based studies have predominantly examined thesis introductions as a whole rather than focusing specifically on the Background of the Study as an independent rhetorical unit (Pujiyanti et al., 2018; Pandey, 2022). This limited attention is noteworthy because the Background of the Study serves as the primary space where writers construct the rationale for their research and persuade readers of its significance. Therefore, investigating the rhetorical organization of this section can provide valuable insights into how EFL postgraduate students realize the communicative purposes expected in academic writing.

From a genre-analysis perspective, rhetorical organization is central to the effectiveness of academic writing because it enables writers to construct knowledge claims in ways that align with disciplinary expectations. Swales' Create-A-Research-Space (CARS) model has become one of the most influential frameworks for examining how writers establish a research territory, create a niche, and occupy that niche within academic texts (Swales, 2004). Building on this tradition, Hyland (2004, 2009) emphasizes that academic writing is not merely a process of presenting information but also a rhetorical act through which writers negotiate credibility, construct disciplinary identities, and persuade readers of the value of their research. Similarly, Dudley-Evans (1994) and Swales & Feak (2012) argue that successful academic texts require writers to balance information provision with persuasive argumentation. Consequently, the analysis of rhetorical moves and steps provides a valuable means of understanding how novice researchers construct research rationales and participate in academic discourse communities.

To better understand these challenges, a growing body of genre-based research has investigated rhetorical structures in thesis introductions and related academic genres across different educational contexts. Studies conducted in Indonesia and other EFL settings consistently report that novice writers tend to rely heavily on territory-establishing moves while demonstrating less control over niche-establishing and niche-occupying moves (Pujiyanti et al., 2018; Rahayu et

al., 2022; Pandey, 2022). Similar patterns have also been identified in postgraduate writing, where students frequently encounter difficulties in articulating research gaps, constructing persuasive justifications, and demonstrating the significance of their studies (Hyland, 2009; Ghorban Abdolmalaki et al., 2026). Recent move-analysis studies further suggest that rhetorical performance varies across institutional, disciplinary, and cultural contexts, particularly regarding the realization of evaluative and argumentative functions required for niche construction. These findings indicate that while students may demonstrate awareness of conventional genre structures, they often experience challenges in fully realizing the communicative purposes associated with those structures. Collectively, this body of research highlights the continuing importance of examining rhetorical organization in postgraduate EFL writing.

Recent studies have continued to demonstrate the importance of rhetorical move analysis in understanding the development of academic writing among EFL students. Research conducted across various educational contexts has shown that novice writers frequently encounter difficulties in establishing research gaps, constructing persuasive justifications, and articulating the significance of their studies, despite generally demonstrating awareness of conventional genre structures (Lim, 2023; Jiang & Hyland, 2021; Moreno & Swales, 2022). Recent investigations have also emphasized that rhetorical performance is influenced not only by knowledge of move structures but also by writers' ability to employ evaluative language, authorial stance, and disciplinary conventions effectively (Hyland & Jiang, 2022; Lim, 2023). Furthermore, comparative studies on thesis and dissertation writing suggest that postgraduate students often exhibit uneven development across rhetorical moves, particularly in niche-establishing and niche-occupying functions, which remain among the most challenging aspects of academic writing in EFL contexts. These findings reinforce the need for further research examining not only the presence of rhetorical moves but also the broader patterns through which rhetorical functions are realized in postgraduate thesis writing.

Although previous studies have contributed significantly to understanding rhetorical move structures in academic writing, several issues remain underexplored. Much of the existing research has focused primarily on identifying the presence or absence of rhetorical moves and steps rather than examining broader organizational patterns across texts. As a result, relatively limited attention has been given to how frequently particular moves occur, how they are sequenced throughout a text, and how completely their communicative functions are developed. Furthermore, research specifically examining the Background of the Study section in postgraduate EFL theses remains scarce, despite its crucial role in establishing research rationale and significance. This gap suggests the need for a more comprehensive investigation that moves beyond move identification to explore rhetorical patterns as indicators of genre realization and academic writing competence.

Despite the valuable insights provided by previous studies, several limitations remain. First, research has largely focused on research article introductions, undergraduate theses, or thesis introductions as complete sections, with limited attention devoted specifically to the Background of the Study as an independent rhetorical unit. As a result, relatively little is known about how this

section independently fulfils its communicative purposes within postgraduate academic writing. Second, most studies have concentrated primarily on identifying rhetorical moves and steps, while giving limited attention to broader rhetorical patterns. In particular, little is known about the frequency with which specific moves and steps occur, the sequence through which they are organized, and the completeness with which rhetorical functions are realized across texts. Consequently, the organizational tendencies underlying move realization remain insufficiently understood. Third, previous investigations have often relied on descriptive move identification, making it difficult to explain how rhetorical structures are patterned across a corpus of texts and how such patterns contribute to the realization of communicative purposes. Finally, research examining the Background of the Study sections of Indonesian EFL master's theses remains limited. This focus is particularly important because master's theses occupy a distinctive position between undergraduate and doctoral writing, requiring students not only to demonstrate academic writing competence but also to establish a convincing research rationale and contribution to knowledge. Given the increasing emphasis on research quality and academic publication in postgraduate education, a more comprehensive investigation of both rhetorical structures and rhetorical patterns is needed to advance understanding of postgraduate EFL writing and to support effective academic writing instruction and thesis supervision.

To address these gaps, the present study employs Swales' (1990, 2004) Create-A-Research-Space (CARS) model to investigate the rhetorical structures of the Background of the Study sections in EFL master's theses. Specifically, the study aims to identify the rhetorical structures (moves and steps) employed in these sections and to examine the patterns and variations of their realization. In this study, rhetorical patterns refer specifically to the frequency of move and step occurrence, the sequence in which moves are organized, and the completeness with which rhetorical functions are realized across texts. The study does not focus on recursive or cyclical move structures but rather on the dominant organizational tendencies evident in the corpus. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What rhetorical structures (moves and steps) are employed in the Background of the Study sections of master's theses written by EFL students?
2. What patterns or variations are evident in the rhetorical structure of the Background of the Study in terms of the frequency, sequence, and completeness of rhetorical steps?

The findings of this study are expected to contribute both theoretically and pedagogically to the field of genre analysis and academic writing. Theoretically, the study extends previous genre-based research by providing a detailed account not only of the rhetorical structures (moves and steps) employed in the Background of the Study sections of EFL master's theses but also of the rhetorical patterns operationalized in terms of frequency, sequence, and completeness. Examining these patterns contributes to genre-analysis research by revealing how rhetorical resources are systematically organized to achieve communicative purposes, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of genre realization beyond move identification alone. Pedagogically, the findings may serve as a useful reference for EFL writing instructors, thesis supervisors, and postgraduate students

in developing greater awareness of rhetorical conventions. Such insights are particularly valuable for EFL postgraduate writers, who are expected to construct persuasive research rationales and participate effectively in academic discourse communities through thesis writing and future scholarly publication.

Method

This study employed a qualitative genre-based move analysis to investigate the rhetorical organization of the Background of the Study sections in EFL master's theses. The analysis was guided by Bunton's (2002) adaptation of Swales' Create-A-Research-Space (CARS) model (Swales, 1990, 2004), focusing on the realization of rhetorical moves and steps as well as their patterns in terms of frequency, sequence, and completeness.

The corpus consisted of 49 accessible master's theses produced in the Master's Program in English Language Education, Universitas Negeri Semarang, between 2020 and 2025. Due to institutional access restrictions, these 49 theses constituted the entire accessible corpus available during the data collection period. To be included in the study, a thesis had to be written in English, contain a complete Background of the Study section, and be officially approved and accessible through the university library repository.

Data were collected through document analysis. The Background of the Study sections were extracted and coded using a move-step coding checklist adapted from Bunton's CARS framework. The texts were segmented into sentences and clauses, which served as the primary units of analysis.

The coding scheme comprised three major moves and their associated steps, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Coding Scheme for Move Identification

Rhetorical Moves	Main Function	Representative Steps
Move 1: Establishing a Territory	Establishing the research area and context	Claiming centrality, making topic generalizations, reviewing previous research, establishing the research context
Move 2: Establishing a Niche	Justifying the need for the study	Indicating a gap, question-raising, continuing a tradition
Move 3: Occupying the Niche	Presenting the current study	Outlining purposes, announcing the present research, announcing principal findings, indicating thesis structure

Statements emphasizing the importance of a research area or reviewing previous studies were coded as Move 1, statements identifying research gaps or unresolved issues were coded as Move 2, and statements presenting research purposes or objectives were coded as Move 3.

The criteria used to evaluate the completeness of rhetorical organization are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Completeness Criteria

Category	Criteria
Complete	All three obligatory moves are present and the major communicative functions

	of each move are sufficiently developed.
Partially Complete	All obligatory moves are present, but one or more major steps are absent, underdeveloped, or only implicitly realized.
Incomplete	One or more obligatory moves are absent.

These criteria were subsequently applied during the analysis to classify the rhetorical completeness of each Background of the Study section. The analysis was conducted through five stages. First, each Background of the Study section was segmented into sentences and clauses and coded according to the move-step categories in Bunton's adaptation of the CARS model. Second, the occurrence of each move and step was recorded to calculate frequency distributions across the corpus. Move frequency was calculated at the occurrence level, meaning that every realization of a move or step was counted regardless of its position within the text.

Third, sequence patterns were identified by examining the order in which moves appeared in each text (e.g., M1–M2–M3, M1–M1–M2–M3, or M1–M3). The identified sequences were then compared across the corpus to determine dominant and variant rhetorical patterns. Fourth, the completeness of rhetorical organization was evaluated according to the criteria presented in Table 2. Each Background of the Study section was classified as complete, partially complete, or incomplete based on the realization of obligatory moves and major steps.

Finally, the quantitative results obtained from frequency, sequence, and completeness analyses were integrated with qualitative interpretation. Recurring rhetorical patterns and variations were examined in relation to genre analysis and academic writing theories to explain how EFL master's students constructed research backgrounds and how their rhetorical organization reflected the communicative purposes represented in the CARS model. This combination of descriptive frequency analysis and qualitative interpretation enabled a comprehensive understanding of both the distribution and the functional realization of rhetorical moves across the corpus.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the coding framework and coding decisions were reviewed by an expert in genre analysis and academic writing. Feedback obtained from the expert was incorporated throughout the analytical process to improve consistency and reduce potential subjectivity in move identification and classification. In addition, theoretical triangulation was employed by interpreting the findings through multiple perspectives on genre, academic discourse, and rhetorical organization. Although formal inter-rater reliability statistics were not calculated, expert review and triangulation were used to improve the credibility and consistency of the analysis.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings and discussion in response to the two research questions: (1) What rhetorical structures (moves and steps) are employed in the Background of the Study sections of EFL master's theses? and (2) What

patterns and variations are evident in the rhetorical structure of the Background of the Study sections in terms of frequency, sequence, and completeness?

What rhetorical structures (moves and steps) are employed in the Background of the Study sections of EFL Master's theses?

To identify the rhetorical structures employed in the corpus, all moves and steps were coded based on Bunton's (2002) adaptation of Swales' CARS model. Move frequency was calculated at the occurrence level; therefore, every realization of a move or step was counted regardless of its position in the text. Consequently, multiple occurrences of the same move within a single thesis were counted repeatedly and included in the overall frequency. Table 1 presents the distribution of rhetorical moves identified in the 49 Background of the Study sections.

Table 3. Distribution of Rhetorical Moves

Rhetorical Moves	Frequency	Percentage
Move 1: Establishing a Territory	705	73.3%
Move 2: Establishing a Niche	135	14.0%
Move 3: Occupying the Niche	123	12.7%
Total	963	100%

Note. Frequencies represent occurrence-level counts of rhetorical moves. Every realization of a move was counted regardless of its position in the text. Multiple occurrences of the same move within a single thesis were counted repeatedly. Percentages were calculated based on the total number of move occurrences (N = 963).

As shown in Table 1, Move 1 overwhelmingly dominates the corpus, accounting for 73.3% of all move occurrences. In contrast, Move 2 and Move 3 account for only 14.0% and 12.7% respectively. This distribution indicates that the writers devoted considerably more attention to introducing and contextualizing their research topics than to establishing a research gap or emphasizing the contribution of their studies.

Move 1 is commonly realized through claiming centrality, making topic generalizations, and reviewing previous studies. For example:

Extract 1:

"Nowadays, reading is one of the essential skills ..."
(Source: T3)

The excerpt above represents Step 1A (claiming centrality), in which the writer emphasizes the importance of the topic. Similarly, another example demonstrates topic generalization:

Extract 2:

"Foreign language learners may encounter various communication problems ..."
(Source: T1)

This excerpt reflects Step 1B (making topic generalization). In addition, literature review is frequently used to support the background discussion, as shown in the following example:

Extract 3:

"Indonesia has been classified as one of the low English capability

countries ..."
(Source: T4)

The excerpt illustrates Step 1C (reviewing previous studies), where the writer refers to external sources to strengthen the discussion.

The predominance of Move 1 suggests that the writers devoted substantial attention to establishing the research territory before introducing the specific focus of their studies. This finding may be explained through the perspective of genre acquisition. According to Swales (1990, 2004) and Bunton (2002), effective academic writing requires writers to move progressively from establishing a territory to creating and occupying a niche. However, novice academic writers often acquire descriptive rhetorical functions earlier than argumentative and evaluative functions. Consequently, they tend to rely heavily on topic explanation and literature review because these rhetorical practices are more familiar and less demanding than critically evaluating previous studies or constructing persuasive research justifications.

This pattern may also reflect the development of academic literacy among EFL master's students. Constructing a convincing research argument requires writers not only to summarize previous studies but also to critically evaluate them and identify unresolved issues. Such critical engagement is considerably more demanding than presenting definitions or reporting prior findings. Therefore, the dominance of Move 1 may indicate that students were more confident in presenting background knowledge than in positioning their studies within ongoing scholarly conversations.

Move 2 (Establishing a Niche) is generally realized through identifying research gaps and highlighting unresolved issues. For example:

Extract 4:

"Nevertheless, no statistically significant relationship ..."
(Source: T1)

This excerpt reflects Step 2A (indicating a gap). Another example is presented below:

Extract 5:

"However, how EFL learners communicate ... is still under investigated."
(Source: T6)

Similarly, the writer attempts to establish the necessity of the study by highlighting insufficient previous research.

Although Move 2 appears in most texts, its frequency remains considerably lower than that of Move 1. This finding suggests that many students experienced difficulties in critically positioning their studies within existing scholarship. Establishing a niche requires writers to identify limitations, inconsistencies, or unexplored aspects of previous studies, which demands a higher level of analytical and evaluative ability. The relatively infrequent realization of Move 2 therefore indicates that many students had not yet fully developed the critical literacy necessary to justify their research persuasively.

Move 3 (Occupying the Niche) is mainly realized through statements of research purpose and study focus. For example:

Extract 6:

"The writer tried to apply role-play ..."
(Source: T2)

The excerpt above reflects Step 3A (stating research purpose). Similar realizations can also be found in the following examples:

Extract 7:

"The researcher intends to review how much DuoLingo mobile application ... can help students ..."

(Source: T5)

"This study is intended to investigate ..."

(Source: T11)

These excerpts illustrate how students announced the objectives of their studies. Step 3B (Announcing Present Research) was also found in several texts, as illustrated below:

Extract 8:

"Based on the problems above, this study focuses on investigating ..."

(Source: T18)

The excerpt demonstrates how the writer explicitly introduces the present study after discussing the research problem.

To provide a more detailed picture of rhetorical realization, the distribution of rhetorical steps was analysed. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 4. Distribution of Rhetorical Steps

Rhetorical Moves	Frequency	Percentage
Step 1A: Claiming Centrality	63	6.9%
Step 1B: Topic Generalization	242	26.5%
Step 1C: Reviewing Previous Studies	397	43.6%
Step 1D: Concluding Territory	3	0.3%
Step 2A: Indicating a Gap	125	13.7%
Step 2B: Question Raising	5	0.5%
Step 2C: Continuing Tradition	4	0.4%
Step 3A: Stating Research Purpose	62	6.8%
Step 3B: Announcing Present Research	56	6.1%
Step 3C: Announcing Principal Findings	2	0.2%
Step 3D: Indicating Significance	4	0.4%
Total	963	100%

Note. Frequencies represent occurrence-level counts of rhetorical steps. Every realization of a step was counted regardless of its position in the text. Multiple occurrences of the same step within a single thesis were counted repeatedly. Percentages were calculated based on the total number of step occurrences (N = 963).

As shown in Table 2, Step 1C (Reviewing Previous Studies) is the most dominant step, accounting for 43.6% of all step occurrences, followed by Step 1B (Topic Generalization) with 26.5%. Together, these two steps account for more than two-thirds of all rhetorical realizations in the corpus. This finding indicates that students relied heavily on literature review and contextual explanation when constructing the Background of the Study sections.

In contrast, several steps associated with niche establishment and niche occupation appeared only rarely. Step 2B (Question Raising), Step 2C (Continuing Tradition), Step 3C (Announcing Principal Findings), and Step 3D (Indicating Significance) together account for only 1.5% of all occurrences. The rarity of Step

3C is particularly noteworthy. Because the Background of the Study section conventionally precedes the presentation of findings, its appearance in only two cases may indicate partial uncertainty regarding disciplinary genre conventions. Some writers appeared to preview anticipated outcomes rather than strictly focusing on research justification.

Similarly, Step 3D appeared only four times, suggesting that many students did not explicitly articulate the significance of their studies. For example:

Extract 9:

"The findings of this study are expected to provide useful insights for English teachers in improving classroom practices ..."

(Source: T27)

This excerpt reflects Step 3D (Indicating Significance), where the writer explicitly highlights the potential contribution of the study. The very limited occurrence of this step suggests that students tended to view the Background of the Study primarily as a space for describing research problems rather than demonstrating the value and contribution of their research. From the perspective of novice–expert writing differences, this finding indicates that students focused more on explaining what the study intended to investigate than on persuading readers why the study was important.

Several contextual factors may explain these patterns. Educationally, academic writing instruction may place greater emphasis on literature review and theoretical explanation than on constructing persuasive research arguments. Linguistically, identifying research gaps and articulating significance require evaluative language and critical stance-taking, which can be challenging for EFL writers. Culturally, students may also be reluctant to explicitly challenge previous studies because academic traditions often emphasize respect for established scholars. These educational, linguistic, and cultural influences may collectively contribute to the strong dominance of Move 1 and the comparatively limited realization of Moves 2 and 3.

What patterns and variations are evident in the rhetorical structure of the Background of the Study sections in terms of frequency, sequence, and completeness?

To examine rhetorical patterns, the sequence of moves across the corpus was analysed. Table 3 presents the distribution of sequence patterns identified in the 49 theses.

Table 5. Distribution of Sequence Patterns

Sequence Pattern	Frequency	Percentage
M1 → M2 → M3	45	91.8%
M1 → M3	1	2.0%
M1 → M2	1	2.0%
M1 Only	2	4.1%
Total	49	100%

Note. Frequencies represent the number of theses exhibiting each sequence pattern. Percentages were calculated based on the total corpus of 49 Background of the Study sections.

Table 3 shows that the dominant sequence pattern is M1–M2–M3, appearing in 45 out of 49 theses (91.8%). This finding indicates that most students generally followed the conventional rhetorical progression proposed in Bunton's (2002) adaptation of the CARS model.

For example, in T21, the writer begins by introducing the topic, proceeds to identify a research gap, and concludes by stating the purpose of the study:

Extract 10:

"In recent years, educational methods have evolved to prioritize student-centered learning ..."

(Source: T21)

"However, the effectiveness of this approach across different genders has yet to be thoroughly explored."

(Source: T21)

"This study aims to examine the impact of the flipped classroom method ..."

(Source: T21)

The excerpts above clearly demonstrate the expected progression from establishing a territory to establishing a niche and subsequently occupying the niche.

At first glance, the high percentage of the M1–M2–M3 pattern suggests strong rhetorical awareness among the writers. However, a closer examination reveals a more complex picture. Although most students followed the expected sequence, many did not fully elaborate the communicative functions associated with each move. This finding suggests that structural conformity does not necessarily guarantee rhetorical effectiveness.

Several incomplete patterns were also identified. The M1–M3 pattern indicates that the writer moved directly from topic discussion to research purpose without explicitly identifying a research gap.

Extract 11:

"Translation plays an important role in communication ..."

(Source: T33)

"This study aims to investigate ..."

(Source: T33)

The omission of Move 2 weakens the justification of the study because readers are not provided with a clear explanation of why the research is necessary. Similarly, the M1–M2 pattern lacks an explicit statement of research purpose, while the M1-only pattern consists solely of background information without progressing toward research justification or contribution.

The completeness and rhetorical development of the Background of the Study sections were further analysed to examine the extent to which students fully realized the communicative functions associated with the expected move structure. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 6. Completeness and Rhetorical Development of the Background of the Study Sections

Category	Frequency	Percentage
High Development (Complete)	2	4.1%
Medium Development (Partially Complete)	43	87.8%
Low Development (Incomplete)	4	8.2%
Total	49	100%

Note. High development refers to texts that fully realized the expected rhetorical moves and major communicative functions. Medium development refers to texts that followed the expected rhetorical structure but only partially elaborated some rhetorical functions. Low development refers to texts with substantial omissions of expected moves or communicative functions. Categorization was based on the completeness of move realization and the extent to which the communicative functions associated with the moves were elaborated across the Background of the Study sections.

As shown in Table 4, only two theses (4.1%) demonstrated high rhetorical development and were categorized as complete. In contrast, the overwhelming majority of theses (87.8%) fell into the medium-development category, indicating partial realization of the expected rhetorical functions. Four theses (8.2%) were classified as exhibiting low rhetorical development because important rhetorical components were absent or insufficiently elaborated.

This finding is particularly noteworthy because it contrasts sharply with the dominance of the M1–M2–M3 sequence pattern reported earlier. Although 91.8% of the theses followed the expected move sequence, only 4.1% fully developed the communicative purposes associated with those moves. This discrepancy suggests that many students were able to reproduce the structural framework of the genre but experienced difficulties in fully realizing its rhetorical functions.

In many cases, Move 1 was extensively elaborated through topic explanation and literature review, whereas Moves 2 and 3 were relatively brief and underdeveloped. Consequently, the primary challenge for many EFL master's students appears to lie not in recognizing the expected rhetorical structure but in using that structure persuasively and effectively. The findings therefore indicate that rhetorical effectiveness depends not only on the presence of moves but also on the depth with which their communicative purposes are developed.

Taken together, the findings suggest that EFL master's students generally possess structural awareness of the rhetorical conventions expected in the Background of the Study section. However, many continue to experience difficulties in fully realizing the communicative functions of those conventions, particularly in establishing convincing research gaps and articulating research significance. These findings demonstrate that the main issue in EFL thesis writing is not merely the presence or absence of rhetorical structure but the depth and effectiveness of rhetorical realization. Consequently, the results highlight the importance of genre-based instruction that explicitly develops students' ability to identify research gaps, construct persuasive justifications, and communicate the significance of their studies effectively.

While the findings provide valuable insights into the rhetorical organization of the Background of the Study sections in EFL master's theses, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study analysed a corpus of 49 theses drawn from a single English Education Master's Program at Universitas Negeri Semarang, which may limit the representativeness of the findings across other institutional contexts. Second, the investigation focused exclusively on the discipline of English Language Education; therefore, the rhetorical patterns identified may not reflect thesis-writing practices in other academic fields where disciplinary conventions differ. Third, although the coding procedure followed Bunton's (2002) adaptation of the CARS model and was reviewed by an expert

validator, the identification and classification of moves inevitably involved a degree of researcher interpretation. Consequently, some level of subjectivity in move coding cannot be entirely excluded. For these reasons, the findings should be interpreted with caution and should not be generalized beyond the investigated context. Future studies involving larger corpora, multiple institutions, diverse disciplines, and formal inter-rater reliability procedures would provide a broader understanding of rhetorical practices in postgraduate academic writing.

Conclusion

This study examined the rhetorical organization of the Background of the Study sections in EFL master's theses by analysing the realization of rhetorical moves and steps as well as their patterns in terms of frequency, sequence, and completeness. The findings indicate that while most students generally followed the conventional rhetorical structure proposed in Bunton's (2002) adaptation of Swales' CARS model, the rhetorical functions associated with the moves were not always developed to the same extent. In particular, students tended to devote considerable attention to establishing the research territory, whereas the rhetorical functions related to gap identification, research justification, and significance were less consistently elaborated.

The study contributes theoretically to genre-analysis research by providing empirical evidence that rhetorical competence involves not only the presence and sequence of moves but also the depth of their communicative realization. The findings demonstrate that structural conformity to a genre model does not necessarily guarantee rhetorical effectiveness, thereby highlighting the importance of examining rhetorical development in addition to move occurrence and sequencing. By focusing specifically on the Background of the Study section as an independent rhetorical unit, this study also extends previous genre-based research that has predominantly examined thesis introductions as a whole.

Pedagogically, the findings suggest the need for more explicit instruction in rhetorical argumentation within thesis-writing courses and academic supervision. EFL postgraduate students may benefit from guided practice in identifying research gaps, critically evaluating previous studies, constructing persuasive research justifications, and articulating the significance of their research. Thesis supervisors may also consider providing more focused feedback on the rhetorical functions of background sections rather than emphasizing structural completeness alone.

Future research is recommended to investigate rhetorical patterns across different universities, disciplines, and educational contexts in order to examine the extent to which the findings are transferable beyond the present study. Studies employing larger corpora, comparative designs, and formal inter-rater reliability procedures may further strengthen understanding of rhetorical development in postgraduate academic writing. In addition, future research may explore the relationship between rhetorical organization and thesis quality to provide deeper insights into the role of genre competence in successful academic writing.

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