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Genre Analysis of Rhetorical Moves in Libyan MA Thesis Abstracts

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Abstract

This paper presents a detailed genre analysis of Master of Arts (MA) thesis abstracts written by Libyan students in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and Applied Linguistics. Utilizing John Swales' (1990) Create a Research Space (CARS) model, the study examines a corpus of 20 abstracts through a mixed-method approach to investigate how novice scholars rhetorically structure their research summaries. The analysis reveals a universal, formulaic adherence to the Introduction-Methods-Results-Discussion (IMRD) structure and the three CARS moves, indicating strong foundational training. Notable strengths include meticulous methodological description and clear presentation of aims and findings. Distinctive features include a pronounced orientation toward localized, practice-oriented justification of the research niche, a descriptive rather than persuasive rhetorical tone, and minimal engagement with prior international literature. When considered within the framework of intercultural rhetoric, these patterns reflect not a deficit but a strategic adaptation to the Libyan socio-educational context and a specific developmental stage in scholarly writing. The study concludes with a three-stage pedagogical framework designed to scaffold Libyan postgraduate students' transition from competent local reporters to persuasive, globally engaged scholars.

Keywords: *genre analysis, academic abstracts, CARS model, rhetorical moves, intercultural rhetoric.*

1. Introduction

The academic abstract serves as a critical gatekeeping genre in the scholarly world (Hyland, 2000). As a concise, structured summary of a larger work, it must perform a dual function: to accurately inform readers of the research's content and to persuasively argue for its significance and novelty. For postgraduate students, particularly those writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), mastering this genre is a fundamental component of their socialization into the discourse community of their discipline (Swales, 1990). This process involves navigating not only linguistic challenges but also complex, often culturally influenced rhetorical conventions that govern how knowledge is framed, justified, and claimed.

While extensive research has applied Swales' CARS model to abstracts in various international contexts (e.g., Al-Khasawneh, (2017); Aziz et al. (2021)), the academic periphery remains underexplored. This study contributes to genre theory not by proposing a new model, but by examining how existing rhetorical structures are strategically adapted within the unique socio-educational landscape of Libyan higher education, offering a novel interpretation of 'niche construction' as a locally-situated practice

1.2. Research Problem

The context of Libyan higher education provides a compelling and underexplored site for such an investigation. Following a period of significant socio-political transition, Libya's educational sector is engaged in reconstruction and development. Within this landscape, postgraduate programs in TEFL and Applied Linguistics have expanded, aiming to build local capacity and address pressing pedagogical needs. However, the academic writing practices and emergent scholarly identities of graduates from these programs have not been systematically examined. This gap in the literature is significant; a nuanced understanding of how novice scholars in a post-conflict, resource-constrained context enter academic discourse can illuminate the dynamic interplay between global genre conventions, local educational imperatives, institutional constraints, and the developmental trajectory of the writer.

1.3. Research Questions

This study addresses the identified gap through a genre analysis of 20 MA thesis abstracts from Libyan institutions of higher education. The research is guided by the following questions:

1. How consistently do Libyan MA TEFL/Applied Linguistics students realize the rhetorical moves of the CARS model in their thesis abstracts?
2. What are the predominant linguistic and rhetorical strategies used to realize these moves, and what distinctive features characterize the corpus?
3. How can these patterns be interpreted in light of theories of intercultural rhetoric and novice writer development?
4. What pedagogical implications arise from this analysis for supporting the academic writing development of Libyan postgraduates?

1.4. Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are:

1. to examine the structural and rhetorical conformity of Libyan MA thesis abstracts to Swales' (1990) CARS model.
2. to identify and describe the distinctive linguistic, rhetorical, and discursive features present in the corpus.
3. to interpret the observed patterns through the lens of intercultural rhetoric and novice writer development.
4. to propose a pedagogical framework for scaffolding the academic writing development of Libyan postgraduate students.

1.5. Research Terms

To ensure clarity, the following key terms are defined as they are used in this study:

Genre Analysis: The study of how texts are strategically structured to achieve specific communicative purposes within discourse communities (Swales, 1990).

CARS Model: Swales' (1990) "Create a Research Space" model, consisting of three rhetorical moves: Establishing a Territory, Establishing a Niche, and Occupying the Niche.

Rhetorical Moves: Functional units or segments of a text that perform specific communicative acts within a genre.

Intercultural Rhetoric: A framework that examines the dynamic, complex influences on written communication across cultures, including L1 transfer, educational background, and disciplinary norms (Connor, 2004, 2011).

IMRD Structure: The conventional macro-structure of academic abstracts and research articles: Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion.

1.6. Literature Review

1.6.1. Genre Analysis and Academic Discourse Socialization

The theoretical foundation of this study is rooted in the tradition of genre analysis as established by John Swales (1990). Swales moved the study of specialized language beyond lexico-grammatical features to analyze how texts are strategically structured to achieve specific communicative purposes within discourse communities. From this perspective, a genre is not a rigid template but a "typified rhetorical action" recurring in response to recurrent situations (Miller, 1984, p. 159). Learning to write within a genre, therefore, is a process of socialization—of learning the shared values, epistemological assumptions, and rhetorical norms of a community (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Hyland, 2004). For the MA student, composing a thesis abstract is a key act of disciplinary enculturation, where they must learn to "speak the language" of their field to both demonstrate competence and gain entry.

1.6.2. The Research Abstract as a Persuasive Genre

The abstract has been extensively studied as a distinct genre with its own conventions. While Swales' (1990) three-move CARS model (Establishing a Territory, Establishing a Niche, Occupying the Niche) was designed for research article introductions, its logical structure has been effectively applied to abstract analysis, capturing the essential argumentative flow from general context to specific contribution (Samraj, 2005). Other

models, such as Santos' (1996) five-move framework for applied linguistics abstracts, offer further granularity. A critical consensus from this research is that abstracts are fundamentally promotional (Hyland, 2000). They are not neutral summaries but carefully crafted arguments designed to "sell" the research by highlighting its relevance, methodological rigor, novelty, and value. This persuasive function is often realized through strategic use of evaluative language, metadiscourse, and a clear articulation of the research gap and its implications (Hyland & Tse, 2004).

1.6.3. Intercultural Rhetoric and the Novice EFL Writer

The writing of NNES scholars must be understood within the framework of intercultural rhetoric (Connor, 2004, 2011). This field moves beyond the earlier, more static assumptions of contrastive rhetoric (Kaplan, 1966) to examine the dynamic, complex, and multi-directional influences on written communication, including L1 transfer, educational background, disciplinary norms, and exposure to target genres. Research within this paradigm has identified common challenges and patterns among novice EFL writers, such as a tendency towards more formulaic text structure, difficulties in establishing a critical niche in relation to existing literature, and a less confident use of persuasive metadiscourse (Bunton, 2002; Dong, 1998).

Recent years have witnessed a sustained scholarly interest in applying genre analysis to academic writing in non-native English contexts. Studies conducted across various

geographical and linguistic settings have consistently validated the robustness of Swales' (1990) CARS model as an analytical framework, while simultaneously revealing context-specific variations in its rhetorical realization. For instance, Al-Khasawneh (2017) examined Arabic EFL abstracts, identifying distinct patterns in how Saudi students structure their research summaries. Similarly, Aziz et al. (2021) focused on the Pakistani context, highlighting a pronounced reliance on the Method move, while Hamdi (2021) analyzed Tunisian MA theses, noting discrepancies in the use of the Conclusion move compared to native speaker norms. Collectively, this body of research underscores a crucial finding: while the macro-structure of academic abstracts is globally shared, its micro-level rhetorical execution is often shaped by local educational traditions, linguistic backgrounds, and disciplinary expectations.

Within the broader Arab world, existing research has provided valuable insights into the rhetorical tendencies of EFL writers, often noting features such as a preference for collective authorship, indirectness in argumentation, and a strong practical orientation in research justification (e.g., Al-Ali, 2006). However, these studies tend to generalize across the region, potentially obscuring significant national and institutional variations. The Libyan context, in particular, remains conspicuously absent from the international literature. Despite the expansion of postgraduate programs in TEFL and Applied Linguistics within Libya's reconstructing higher education sector, no detailed, corpus-based genre analysis has

systematically examined how Libyan MA students construct their thesis abstracts. This study, therefore, positions itself to fill this specific and significant gap. By providing a micro-level analysis of a previously unexamined context, it not only contributes empirical data to the field of intercultural rhetoric but also engages in broader macro-level conversations about how genre conventions are adapted, negotiated, and enacted on the geopolitical and epistemological periphery

.2. Methodology

2.1. Corpus

The primary corpus for this study consists of 20 unpublished MA thesis abstracts from the Libyan Academy (Misurata). These texts, produced between 2022 and 2024, were selected for analysis.

2.1.1. Sampling Strategy and Justification

A purposive sampling strategy was employed in this study. This non-probability sampling technique was chosen deliberately to ensure that the selected texts possessed specific characteristics relevant to the research aims (Palys, 2008). Unlike random sampling, which aims for statistical generalization, purposive sampling is appropriate for qualitative and descriptive research where the goal is to select information-rich cases that allow for in-depth analysis of a particular phenomenon (Patton, 2015). In this context, the phenomenon under investigation is the rhetorical structure of MA thesis abstracts written by Libyan students in a specific discipline. Therefore, the selection was not random but was guided by the need to include texts that could adequately represent the target population and address the research questions.

All 20 abstracts were sourced from a single institution, the Libyan Academy (Misurata). This decision was made to control for potential institutional variation in supervisory styles and formal guidelines.

2.2. Ethical Considerations

As this study involved the analysis of existing, unpublished documents, formal ethical approval from a review board was not required by the institution. However, strict ethical protocols were observed. The abstracts were treated as textual data, and no identifying information about the authors (names, student IDs, or supervisor names) was collected or stored. The data were anonymized at the point of collection to ensure the confidentiality of the student writers, in accordance with standard ethical practices for document-based research (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018).

2.3. Analytical Framework

The study employs an adapted version of Swales' (1990) CARS model, informed by its application to abstracts (Samraj, 2005). The operational framework is as follows:

Move 1: Establishing a Territory

Step 1: Claiming centrality / Making topic generalizations.

Step 2: Reviewing items of previous research (optional, often condensed).

Move 2: Establishing a Niche

Step 1A: Indicating a gap (categorized as Local/Contextual or Theoretical).

Step 1B: Identifying a practical problem or need.

Move 3: Occupying the Niche

Step1: Outlining purposes (research questions/aims

Step 2: Describing methodology.

Step 3: Announcing principal findings.

Step 4: Stating conclusions, implications, or recommendations.

2.4. Analytical Procedure: A Mixed-Methods Approach

The analysis was conducted in two integrated phases:

1-Quantitative Move Analysis:

Each abstract was coded iteratively for the presence/absence and sequencing of the three macro-moves and their constituent steps. Frequencies and percentages were calculated. To ensure reliability, a second coder with expertise in discourse analysis independently coded a 25% sub-sample (5 abstracts). Inter-coder agreement was 92% for move identification and 86% for step categorization. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion, refining the coding protocol.

2- Qualitative Rhetorical-Linguistic nalysis:

This phase provided depth, examining the specific linguistic realizations (e.g., verb tense, voice, lexical bundles), rhetorical strategies (e.g., how the niche was framed, the tone of implications), and discursive features (e.g., use of metadiscourse) that characterized the corpus. This involved close, iterative reading to interpret the rhetorical effect of the structural choices identified in Phase 1.

3. Results

3.1. Structural Uniformity and Formulaic Compliance

Table 1 provides a quantitative summary of how Libyan EFL MA thesis abstracts realize the rhetorical moves and steps of Swales' CARS model. The findings reveal a high degree of structural uniformity across the corpus, which can be broken down into several key observations:

1. Universal Adherence to the IMRD and CARS Framework

IMRD Structure: All 20 abstracts (100%) followed the Introduction-Methods-Results-Discussion macrostructure. This suggests that Libyan MA students have been systematically trained in a standardized, formulaic approach to abstract writing, likely reinforced by institutional guidelines or supervisory norms.

CARS Moves: Similarly, all three CARS moves were present in every abstract:

Move 1 (Establishing a Territory): 100%

Move 2 (Establishing a Niche): 100%

Move 3 (Occupying the Niche): 100%

This indicates a strong foundational understanding of the rhetorical expectations of an academic abstract, at least at the macro-level.

Table 1. *Frequency and Realization of CARS Moves (N=20)*

Move & Step	Freq	%	Characteristic Realization
MOVE 1: Territory	20	100	
• Step 1: Claiming Centrality	20	100	"X has been a worldwide concern"; "Received considerable attention"
• Step 2: Literature Review	3	15	Vague, nonspecific ("Previous studies have shown…")
MOVE 2: Niche	20	100	
• Step 1A: Indicating a Local Gap	17	85	"Little attention… in Libya"; "aims to examine… Libyan students"
• Step 1B: Identifying Practical Need	2	10	Based on observed classroom deficiency
• Step 1C: Questioning Prior Research	1	5	Very mild, implicit
MOVE 3: Occupation	20	100	
• Step 1: Outlining Purposes	20	100	"This study aims/investigates/examines…"
• Step 2: Describing Methodology	20	100	Highly detailed, instrument-specific
• Step 3: Announcing Findings	20	100	"The findings revealed/showed that…"
• Step 4: Stating Implications	18	90	Practical recommendations for Libyan context

3.2. Distinctive Feature 1: The Hyper-Localized Niche

The realization of Move 2 was the corpus's most distinctive rhetorical signature. An overwhelming 85% of abstracts established their niche by indicating a gap explicitly and exclusively situated in the Libyan context. This was not a gap in the international literature per se, but a gap in local knowledge or a local pedagogical problem. Examples are unequivocal: "The present study first aims to examine the difficulties experienced by first year Libyan EFL students…" (Pronunciation abstract); "investigate the spelling error problems among Libyan secondary school learners" (Spelling abstract). The niche is fundamentally geographical and applied.

3.3. Distinctive Feature 2: Methodological Detail as a Cornerstone of Move 3

Move 3 was executed with notable precision, particularly Step 2 (Methodology). Abstracts displayed a meticulous, technical description of research design, often naming specific instruments (Written Discourse Completion Task, Multiple-Choice Discourse Completion Task, content analysis checklists), stating exact sample sizes, and detailing analytical procedures. This focus on procedural transparency functions as a

primary source of credibility. Steps 1 (Purposes) and 3 (Findings) were consistently present but reported in a straightforward, declarative manner. Step 4 (Implications) was predominantly (in 17 of 18 cases) framed as direct, practical recommendations for Libyan teachers, curriculum designers, or policy-makers.

3.4. Distinctive Feature 3: The Attenuated Literature Review and Reportorial Stance

Only 15% of the abstracts included any form of literature review, and these were minimal and non-specific (e.g., "Previous studies in various contexts have proved…"). This absence profoundly shapes the rhetorical effect: the research is justified by its local relevance, not by its dialogue with a global scholarly conversation. Linguistically, the tone was consistently descriptive and reportorial. The passive voice was correctly deployed in methodology sections. There was a marked scarcity of persuasive metadiscourse (e.g., "notably," "this study makes a key contribution") or language explicitly arguing for the novelty or theoretical significance of the work. The dominant authorial stance was that of the reporter, not the claimant.

4. Discussion

4.1. The Localized Niche as Socio-Rhetorical Adaptation

The predominance of the localized niche (85%) cannot be dismissed as a simple rhetorical failure. Instead, it should be interpreted as a strategic socio-rhetorical adaptation (Connor, 2011) to a specific academic ecosystem. In a nation prioritizing educational reconstruction, the most legitimizing and urgent research questions are inherently local. This reflects a powerful applied epistemology where the value of knowledge is directly tied to its utility in solving immediate, contextual problems. From a discourse socialization perspective, students are successfully internalizing the priorities of their immediate academic community—supervisors, examiners, and local journals—for whom local relevance is paramount. Thus, the localized niche is a rhetorically astute and context-appropriate choice. However, it also constructs a boundary, socializing students into being contributors to Libyan pedagogical discourse, potentially without the parallel training to frame their work as a contribution to international disciplinary debates where niches are established through engagement with a transnational literature (Swales, 2004).

4.2. Methodological Rigor Instead of Theoretical Framing

The exceptional detail in methodological description serves a crucial rhetorical function: it becomes the primary source of ethos (credibility) for these novice writers. In the absence of an extensive literature review or a strong theoretical framework, a meticulously detailed methods section demonstrates research competence, seriousness, and adherence to positivist-leaning norms common in applied linguistics. It effectively communicates, "While I may not be extensively engaging with global theory, you can trust the rigor of my empirical process." This represents a strategic deployment of one form of disciplinary knowledge (methodological) to compensate

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for a less developed deployment of another (theoretical).

4.3. The Descriptive-Persuasive Divide and Authorial Identity

The descriptive tone and lack of promotional metadiscourse point to a specific, culturally and developmentally influenced authorial stance. The stance of the reporter or data presenter contrasts with the arguer or claimant stance valorized in many international journals (Hyland, 2000). This reporter stance may be influenced by: a cultural preference for modesty and avoiding perceived boastfulness; a novice writer's uncertainty about making bold, generalizable claims; and an academic tradition that may emphasize objectivity and factual reporting. The result is an abstract that is highly competent at summarizing the "what" and "how" of the research but underdeveloped in marketing the "so what" to a broader audience.

4.4. Positioning the Libyan Case within Intercultural Rhetoric

The Libyan case, as revealed in this corpus, presents a distinct profile within intercultural rhetoric. It is characterized by:

1. Context as Justification: An extreme emphasis on the immediate national context as the sole, sufficient rationale for research.

2. Practice-Oriented Epistemology: Knowledge is framed almost exclusively as a tool for local problem-solving.

3. Methodology as Central Ethos: Credibility is built more through procedural transparency than through theoretical sophistication or literary engagement.

4. Reportorial Authorial Stance: A preference for descriptive reporting over overtly persuasive argumentation.

This profile is not a deviation from a universal norm but a coherent, contextualized manifestation of genre knowledge, shaped by local educational.

4.5. Pedagogical Implications: A Developmental Scaffolding Framework

The analysis suggests a need for pedagogy that is additive and scaffolding, designed to expand students' rhetorical repertoires without devaluing their existing, context-appropriate competencies.

Stage 1: Consolidating and Celebrating Foundational Knowledge

Goal: Validate students' demonstrated mastery of the IMRD/CARS blueprint.

Activity: "Genre Awareness Workshops." Use students' own abstracts as examples of successful structural compliance. Deconstruct published abstracts from international journals to show the same underlying moves, demonstrating that their foundational knowledge is a shared, global asset.

Stage 2: Expanding the Rhetorical Toolkit

Goal: Introduce strategic flexibility in realizing moves, particularly Move 2 (Niche) and Move 3, Step 4 (Implications).

•**Activities:**

Niche Reframing Exercise: Students take their "local gap" and rewrite it three ways: 1) As a theoretical gap ("While theory X posits Y, the Libyan context suggests a potential limitation…"), 2) As a methodological gap

("Prior studies on X have relied on method A; this study employs method B to offer a different perspective…"), 3) As a contributory case study ("Libya provides a critical case for examining X, offering insights relevant to broader discussions in Y contexts.").

- Crafting the "Contribution" Statement: Students practice writing implication statements that move beyond local recommendations to suggest methodological, theoretical, or pedagogical contributions to the wider field.
- Metadiscourse Mini-Lessons: Explicit instruction on using "boosters" (clearly, demonstrate) and "attitude markers" (interestingly, importantly) to add persuasive weight.

Stage 3: Fostering Dual Audience Awareness

• Goal: Develop students' ability to code-switch rhetorically for different audiences.

Activity: The "Dual-Audience Abstract." Students prepare two versions of their abstract: Version A for thesis submission (optimized for the local examining committee), and Version B for a hypothetical submission to a specified international journal (requiring a succinct literature hook, a globally framed niche, and implications speaking to international readers).

Curriculum Integration: Thesis proposal guidelines could be amended to require a separate section on "International Significance," compelling students to articulate their work's relevance beyond the national context from the outset.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This detailed genre analysis has illuminated the pathway of academic enculturation within the Libyan EFL context. Libyan MA students exhibit a robust, formulaic command of the abstract's structural conventions, deploying the CARS model with remarkable consistency to report on methodologically rigorous and contextually relevant applied research. The distinctive features that emerged—the hyper-localized niche, the methodological ethos, and the reportorial stance—are not markers of deficiency. They are coherent, strategic adaptations to the socio-educational landscape, reflecting the values and immediate needs of the local discourse community.

The central pedagogical task, therefore, is not to replace this local competence but to augment it with a global rhetorical fluency. The proposed developmental framework seeks to equip students with a flexible repertoire, enabling them to navigate between the rhetorics appropriate for local and international scholarly forums. By doing so, academic programs can honor the vital, grounded work of addressing Libya's educational challenges while simultaneously empowering a new generation of scholars to translate their local insights into contributions that resonate on the international stage. In this way, genre-focused pedagogy becomes a tool not just for improving writing, but for fostering scholarly agency and global intellectual citizenship.

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Conflict of Interest
The author declares no conflict of interest.

Declaration of AI Use
The author declares that he did not use any AI tools in the preparation of this manuscript. The author also confirms that no AI tools were used for data collection, analysis, discussion, or conclusions.

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تحليل الأجناس النصية للحركات الاسلوبية في ملخصات رسائل الماجستير الليبية

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ملخص البحث:

تقدم هذه الورقة تحليلًا تفصيليًا للأجناس النصية لملخصات رسائل الماجستير المكتوبة من قبل الطلاب الليبيين في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية واللسانيات التطبيقية. باستخدام نموذج "خلق مساحة بحثية" (CARS) لجون سويلز (1990)، تفحص الدراسة مجموعة نصية مكونة من 20 ملخصًا عبر منهجية مختلطة لاستكشاف كيف يقوم الباحثون المبتدئون ببناء ملخصات أبحاثهم بلاغيًا. يكشف التحليل التزامًا شاملًا وقالبيًا بهيكل المقدمة–المنهجية–النتائج–المناقشة (IMRD) وخطوات نموذج CARS الثلاث، مما يشير إلى تدريب أساسي قوي. تشمل نقاط القوة الملحوظة وصفًا منهجيًا دقيقًا وعرضًا واضحًا للأهداف والنتائج. وتتمثل السمات المميزة في توجه بارز نحو تبرير مكانة البحث محليًا وتطبيقيًا، ولهجة بلاغية وصفية بدلًا من إقناعية، وتفاعل محدود مع الأدبيات الدولية السابقة. عند النظر إليها ضمن إطار البلاغة بين الثقافات، لا تعكس هذه الأنماط قصورًا، بل تكيفًا استراتيجيًا مع السياق الاجتماعي التعليمي الليبي ومرحلة تطورية محددة في الكتابة الأكاديمية. وتختتم الدراسة بإطار تربوي ثلاثي المراحل مصمم لدعم انتقال طلاب الدراسات العليا الليبيين من كتّاب بارعين في وصف الواقع المحلي وتقريره، إلى باحثين مقنعين ومنخرطين عالميًا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: *تحليل الاجناس النصية، الحركات البلاغية، الملخصات الأكاديمية، البلاغة بين الثقافات.*