

# Genre Analysis of Problem Statement Sections of MA Proposals and Theses in Applied Linguistics

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## Abstract

*The present study aimed to investigate the generic organization of Statement of the Problem (SP) in theses and proposals in the discipline of Applied Linguistics. The main purpose was to explore the degree of variability in the organization of this genre within a single field of study. The total data consisted of 100 SP sections in proposals and theses. Analysis was conducted by incorporating a modified version of Swales' (1990) Create A Research Space (CARS) model. Findings revealed that except for three steps, the other constitutive elements are taken to be obligatory; claiming centrality and outlining purposes are regarded as optional steps appearing in less than half of the proposals while question raising is not taken as a potential step for move three because of its egregiously low number. The findings of the study suggest implications for non-native post-graduate students to improve the generic structure of this text type in their proposals or theses.*

**Keywords:** *Proposal, Thesis, Statement of the problem, Move, Steps*

## Introduction

Proposal and thesis writing is often the most difficult and challenging aspect of postgraduate study, and this is especially so for students from language backgrounds other than English. Although a large number of English as a Second Language (ESL) students are undertaking degrees throughout the world where they are asked to write a thesis in English, they often have difficulty in meeting the demands of the kind and level of writing a thesis (Paltridge, 1997). The starting point of thesis writing is preparing a proposal which serves as a fundamental part of that process. Because of initial location of the proposal, this genre has the vital purpose of giving the advisory committee a good first impression, and persuading them that the proposed project is worth doing (Feng, 2006; Riazi, 2000). It will also be used as an index of the degree of facility with which the study will be implemented if appropriate. Therefore, writing a successful proposal or thesis that can convince the board of post-graduate studies requires more than a linguistically possible text but how the text functions in context, which shows the degree that an aspiring novice is familiar with the generic conventions set by the experts in the genre. In Swalesian linguistics, these generic conventions are realized in moves or macro structures that represent communicative functions and a set of steps or micro-structures that identify linguistic features of each move (Swales, 1990).

Every thesis or proposal is triggered by a question which is premised on a perceived problem. This problem can then be considered as the basic part of a research which may lead to a valuable or, even conversely, a worthless piece of writing. Thus, Statement of the Problem (SP) is a major component of a proposal or a thesis, while the other sections are the complimentary parts with the aim of contextual-

izing the problem (Riazi 2000). SP is a genre that crops up in, at least, two stages in students' post-graduate studies. It embodies the purpose of the study and, usually, researchers prepare research questions or hypotheses based on the perceived research problem. Hence, the research problem serves as the basis for the interrelatedness of the distinct elements entailed in research (Ellis & Levy, 2008). Once SP is written, the remaining parts of the research study should flow from it because SP is the first proposition, and one needs to accept it before considering the next proposition (Hernon & Schwartz, 2007). Therefore, as the triggering point for research (Ellis & Levy, 2008, p. 22) and the hub of any quality research activity (O'Connor, 2000), research problem recapitulates the whole research process and everything is built upon it.

Despite the existence of such claims in regard to the vital role of SP, studies on this kind of text type are still extremely low in number, except for Hernon and Metoyer-Duran (1993) and Metoyer-Duran and Hernon (1994) that supply sample SPs to researchers in library and information science and other social science disciplines in an attempt to investigate different attitudes toward the composition of SP. They discover nine attributes associated with SP: clarity and precision; identification of the study, while avoiding the use of value-laden words and terms; identification of an overarching question and key factors or variables; identification of key concepts and terms; articulation of the study's boundaries or parameters; generalizability; showing the study's importance, benefits, and justification; absence of unnecessary jargon; and describing the data and providing a snapshot (Hernon & Metoyer-Duran, 1993, pp. 82-83).

Consequently, although SP has a major function in proposals and theses, less attention has been given to its rhetorical structure. Atkinson (1997, as cited in Paltridge, 2002, p. 126) suggests a number of reasons for this nonchalant shrug. The first of these is the accessibility of the texts; that is, proposals and theses are often difficult to obtain in university libraries, and even more difficult to obtain from outside the university. Hence, the attendant would have to ask for a particular thesis to be brought to him/her. Another difficulty is the huge size of theses as texts for analysis (Swales, 1990). Moreover, the online versions of many of these theses are not accessible, and so any analysis would be conducted on site.

Thus, while the specific task of writing a proposal is preparation of an outline for a thesis (Paltridge, 1997, p. 61), and a thesis as a scholarly activity introduces educators to the world as their first scientific endeavor, studies around them are still too rare. The situation is more exacerbating when we realize that studies that address the generic structure of SP, as a subcomponent of theses and proposals, are even extremely low. Therefore, this study intends to examine the overall structure of the SP sections of theses and proposals in Applied Linguistics to identify the macro and micro structures. To this aim, the following question stands out: What rhetorical structures (Moves and Steps) characterize the SP sections of English MA proposals and theses in Applied Linguistics?

## Methodology

### Selection of Discipline

The selection of Applied Linguistics for this study was motivated by a number of factors. One important reason is the growing interest of novice researchers to attach themselves to this discipline. Another factor is the large number of proposals and theses that are written in English in this area. Almost every higher education school requests that MA candidates write and present a thesis proposal to the advisory committee sometime after a thesis topic has been selected and prior to the thesis defense. Thus, these days the current generation of researchers are required to be skilled in the composition of proposals and theses, and universities run courses on how to do the job (Weaire, 2007). Accordingly, the selection was pedagogically motivated to be in line with the rapid growth in the number of academic writers especially among non-native English speakers. Finally, the motive for deciding on this area was the bird's-eye view of it. Applied Linguistics is perceived as a broad field of research with various sub-disciplines, and many researchers (e.g., Keshavarz, Atai, & Barzegar, 2007; Ozturk, 2007; Ruiying & Allison, 2003; Samraj, 2002, 2005, 2008; Swales, 1990, 2004) have focused on this area to investigate generic conventions.

### Materials

The data used in this study consist of the Statement of the Problem sections of 100 English Masters proposals and theses in Applied Linguistics. Though very hard to access this occluded genre, this

quantity was assumed to be enough to permit the researchers for valid generalizations. Therefore, the rationale for the selection of these proposals and theses was their accessibility, picked from the Universities of Ahvaz (Shahid Chamran; Islamic Azad University: Science & Research Branch), Tehran University of Science and Technology, and University of Isfahan from the related departments of linguistics and English language teaching. These universities are regarded as representative of Iranian universities that offer MA programs in Applied Linguistics. Assuming that the temporal variable might have a bearing in text organization, in order to make the analysis more reliable, only proposals and theses presented since 2005 were chosen and included in the study.

Focus on SP was inspired by the difficulties of the students in meeting the demands of the kind of writing required of them at this particular level and that rhetorical analysis of this genre might reveal functional characteristics couched in this type of text.

### **Instrumentation**

The instrument used for analyzing the SP sections in proposals and theses was a modified version of Swales' (1990) Create A Research Space (CARS) model. The model is assured an appropriate framework for describing introductions, and it has successfully and extensively been applied by other researchers (Bunton, 2002; Connor & Mauranen, 2005; Fakhri, 2004; Fallahi Moghimi & Mobasher, 2007; Feng, 2006; Feng & Shi, 2004; Keshavarz, et al., 2007; Samraj, 2002; Samraj, 2008). Furthermore, no standard and universally-accepted format exists for the structure of SP, so the Swales' model was the incipient point for analyzing this section of theses and proposals. Following the model, SP can be schematically described in terms of three Moves with differences appearing in the number of steps: Move one, including claiming centrality, making topic generalization, and reviewing previous research; Move two, including limitations of previous research, stating the problem/need, and indicating a gap; and Move three, constituting announcing present research, outlining purposes, and question-raising.

### **Procedure**

After the selection of the representative sample, the data were scanned and word count was run on them to determine the total words and the average length of an SP, excluding all other parts proceeding and preceding this section. Subsequent to that, the data were studied very carefully and analyzed in order to find the general and particular patterns of a typical SP section in terms of macro and micro structures. At the macro level, the frequency and the mean number of moves in the sample texts were calculated to detect the possible differences among them and chi-square analysis was exploited to see whether the differences were noteworthy. At the micro-level, the corresponding steps were identified and tallied.

In the identification process, sometimes, a particular Move or a Step was repeated in two or more distinctive paragraphs; if so, they were counted as repeating one occurrence of a Move. In other words, the Moves and Steps were considered as being present or absent. The analysis was accomplished primarily by the researchers; however, in order to improve and guarantee the intra-rater reliability of the analyses, the data were also analyzed for the second time by the researchers after a month interval. Besides, having analyzed the data twice, an experienced applied linguist rechecked and reanalyzed 30 percent of the data to reach an agreement in regard to certain ambiguous Moves and the estimated inter-coder reliability was 0.97.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Analysis of Move 1**

Table 1 on the following page reveals the occurrences of the functional units in the SP sections of theses and proposals. Also, in order to examine whether the differences of the parallel Moves in the data were significant, the chi-square test was employed, assuming 0.05 level of significance. The results for the constitutive Moves indicated no significant differences in the distribution of the Moves (M1, M2, and M3) across SPs, as revealed in Table 2.

*Table 1. Frequency of the Steps in Each Move in SPs*

Move	Step	Frequency
M1		
	S1	Claiming Centrality 43
	S2	Making Topic Generalization 69
	S3	Reviewing Previous Research 79
M2		
	S1A	Limitation of Previous Research 66
	S1B	Stating the Problem/Need 93
	S1C	Indicating a Gap 88
M3		
	S1	Announcing present research 82
	S2	Outlining Purposes 36
	S3	Question-Raising 3

Table 2. Chi-Square Results for the Constitutive Moves

Move	X <sup>2</sup>	p-value
Establishing a territory	0.081	0.96
Establishing a niche	0.004	0.998
Occupying a niche	1.834	0.4
P<0.05		Critical value= 3.84

The analysis showed that the frequency of claiming centrality (S1) is less than half of the total data (43%). This corresponds to Samraj's (2002) report of 12 research article (RA) introductions from *Wild-life Behavior and Conservation Biology*, premised on the Swales' CARS model. The results of her study revealed that S1 (centrality claims) is not a frequent structure (p. 14).

A closer look at the occurrence of the steps in the data revealed that two third of the samples included making topic generalizations (69%). Similarly, Halleck and Connor (2006) analyzed 300 proposals from three different subgenres (Research proposal, Pedagogical proposal, and Administrative proposal). In their study, this step appeared in more than half (62% of the Administrative, 67% of the Pedagogical, and 57% of the Research proposals) of the proposals. In the rest of the proposals (40%) that did not include a separate territory Move, this Move was embedded within another Move such as gap or goal. Therefore, they regarded it as an obligatory Move in their proposals.

The next step, reviewing the previous research, is often used to support topic generalization (Samraj, 2008). Reviewing the previous research (the last Step of Move one) demonstrates that the proposed research contributes to the overall body of knowledge (Levy & Ellis, 2006, p. 182) and ensures intertextuality. This Step, as the most frequent step of Move one (establishing a territory) with the frequency of 79 occurrences, acknowledges Swales's claim on the significance of this step.

Consequently, in light of the above description, it can be suggested that Move one is a characteristic of SPs in Applied Linguistics studies, with the first Step being optional and the next two steps obligatory in move characterization.

There are some out-of-the-ordinary points in regard to the first Move of SP which need to be addressed. One issue concerns the occasions when claiming centrality triggers Move one of SP. Claiming centrality usually expresses the report of a well-founded research and shows its importance. The SPs that we studied, however, did not always observe this principle and, in fact, they sometimes displayed claiming centrality that indicated the writer's uncertainty by the use of phrases like *it seems that* (see example 1). This might most probably occur in proposals where the researcher is not sure of the significance of his/her study. The fact is that proposals are the vignette of a research project at which time writers might be less sure of the relevance of the subject under investigation. Since novice writers might not have adequate knowledge, and their proposal is usually their first shot in academic writing, their claims about the significance of the subject under investigation might be along with some caution or mitigation.

*1. Therefore, it seems that appreciation and production of the citation functions plays an important role in grasping the writer's view and producing an effective piece of language communication. (a sample proposal)*

In addition, in a few cases, *claiming centrality* merged with *topic generalization* as illustrated in the example below. This is in line with Swales's (2004) modified CARS model based on considerable evidence from English-language article introductions in many leading journals. In his new model, the number of Steps in Move one has been reduced to one which is *topic generalizations of increasing specificity*.

*2. In recent years, thematic organization and progression have been widely studied and have been proved to be very important cohesive elements at the level of discourse. (a sample proposal)*

Moreover, thesis writers sometimes resort to a wider *topic generalization* in order to establish a space for their research, and this requires relatively more review of previous works than proposal writers to corroborate their generalizations. As the following examples demonstrate (see examples 3, 4, and 5), there is more space in hand to comprehensively talk about the issue and, in fact, a more elaborate literature and *topic generalization* might be requested by the supervisor or the advisory committee. Furthermore, writers of proposals usually concentrate on the novelty of the proposal and the methodology for conducting the study; however, less attention might be given to the review of literature before the proposal is approved as can be noted in the following example.

*3. As complex process, designing an EAP course will be affected by many factors. Among these factors need analysis and target analysis are the most fundamental. Besides, teachers and language need analysts will be involved. Consequently, every EAP course will be different from another. During the last decades, there have been prolific courses under the name of academic literacy and curriculum around the world. In Iran, for example, the Center for Research and Development in Humanities is responsible for EAP courses. This center aims at designing English courses and translating main and peripheral sources in light of cooperation of the academics in different disciplines. Despite the troubles involved in compiling materials academic purposes, there is general consensus that this has been an important step in the way of meeting the current needs of students at the university level in Iran. (a sample proposal)*

Though a mandatory step in SP, previous works are usually reviewed and discussed with little criticism or evaluation. Note the following example derived from a sample.

*4. Theses and dissertation writing is a difficult process for native speaker students and often doubly so for non-native speaker students (Paltridge, 2002, p. 137). Some researchers consider MA theses as one of the key genres used by scientific communities to disseminate knowledge (Koutsantoni, 2006, p. 20); others consider MA theses as a high stakes genre at the summit of a student's academic accomplishment (Hyland, 2004, p. 134). Samraj and Monk consider master's theses and doctoral dissertations as students writing. They believe that many works have been done on published academic texts, such as research articles, but in terms on graduate student's writing, to which MA theses belong; little work has been done (Samraj & Monk, 2008, p. 194). (a sample proposal)*

As seen in the above example, this part is restricted to a review of a few works with little or no reflection made by the writer on the studies. RA authors are usually required to critically review the existing studies while students, in their proposals, usually refer to the earlier studies in their related field without

much reflecting on those works. The fact is that RAs are scholarly published activities and address a wider community while proposals and theses address only a few people who are regarded as the members of the advisory committee. Consider another lengthy example derived from the SP of a thesis:

*5. The study of motivation in second language acquisition has become an important research topic with the development of socio-educational models on second language motivation (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Gardner, 1985; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995). According to Gardner and Lambert (1972), motivation to learn a second language is grounded in positive attitudes towards the second language community and in a desire to communicate with valued members of that community and become similar to them. To measure L2 learners' motivation, Gardner (1985) developed the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB), a multi-component motivation test made-up of around 130 items concerned with variables such as attitudes towards French Canadians, European French people and learning French, interest in foreign languages, orientation to learn French, French class anxiety, parental encouragement, motivation intensity, desire to learn French, and motivation index. The development of the Battery has resulted in numerous research studies on L2 motivation (Clement et al., 1994; Gardner, Lalonde & Pierson, 1983; Gardner, Lalonde & Moorcroft, 1985; Gardner, Lalonde, Moorcroft & Evers, 1987; Gardner, Moorcroft & Metford, 1989; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1991; Lai, 2000; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995). Gardner et al.'s study (1983) supported the claim that proficiency in a second language was affected by attitudinal variables, which was confirmed by a later research study (Gardner et al., 1985). The study also showed that motivation had a direct effect on situational anxiety and second language achievement. (a sample thesis)*

The above writer followed the same pattern with little explanation or comment on the previous studies. On the contrary, many, if not all, studies conducted by experienced researchers emerge as a result of careful observation of earlier studies and contradictions observed. Thus, later studies are introduced to modify or rectify earlier studies. However, experience has shown that since students feel pressed for time and rush to finish their studies on time— if not so, then they incur more charges— they might not read previous works with adequate concentration, and thus oftentimes they do not have the required knowledge to evaluate these studies, find the rub, and consequently justify their own study. Instead, many of the studies they suggest are replications rather than innovations. As a result, SP appears as perfunctory, with inadequate juxtaposition of studies for comparison and contrast.

Moreover, novice writers frequently postpone reflection on the previous research to other sections such as Discussion, for the reason that they consider introduction chiefly as a vehicle to demonstrate previous studies and only set the scene for their own study. In other words, such literature reviews need no evaluation because writers use citations to show a neglected area in earlier studies with the aim of announcing the present research. Therefore, it should be claimed that there is no need for the thorough review of existing studies critically and argumentatively in the SP section of proposals and theses.

Though it accompanies *topic generalization, review of previous research* also occurs in the other sections of SP. Samraj (2002, p. 7) argues that reference to previous literature is not an element that is just found in Move one and, in fact, could be found throughout the introduction (and, of course, the rest of the proposal or thesis). It can prominently take part in Move two to support gaps in previous research (p. 15). She furthers that the review of literature in introduction is a step that can also be subordinated within another step in a different Move, for example, the specification of the goal of the study (Move three, step one). She concludes that literature should not be part of any particular Move in the CARS model. Instead, "it should be a freestanding sub-step that can be employed in the realization of any step in the introduction" (p. 16). In SPs, the description of previous works was rampant, and authors utilized previous studies differently in different parts of SPs, so following Swales's (2004) yardstick, this element was no longer restricted to Move one and was exploited in Moves two or three too.

## Analysis of Move 2

As we can see in Table 1, the most common step was stating the problem, with 93 occurrences followed by indicating a gap with 88 occurrences, both as constitutive rhetorical structures of the second Move. In the limitations of previous research (S1A), "writers introduce caveats about the findings, methodologies, and claims of previous studies" (Dudley-Evans, 1994, pp. 224-228). S1A occurred in 66 percent of the data. The results of the analyzed masters' theses by Samraj (2008) revealed that linguistics students occupied a more central position in terms of intertextual links to previous research. On the contrary, the absence of disciplinary pressure to situate the current study within a body of related studies probably explains the dearth of intertextual links (Samraj, 2008).

According to Halleck and Connor (2006, p. 77), gap indicates a lack of knowledge or a problem in the territory, whether in the “real world” (ESL/EFL teaching or administration) or in the research field. In other words, in S1B, writers spell out the problems or needs in order to indicate a gap. Stating the problem/need emerged in more than 90% of proposals and theses. Similarly, S1C (indicating a gap) considerably appeared in this genre (88%). Accordingly, in the present study, writers tended to lay more emphasis on Move two which is the most recurrent move that serves to explain the motivation and the rationale for developing SP. Move two is considered as the key Move in SP that bridges the divide between Move one (what has been done) and Move three (what the present research is about) (Swales & Feak, 1994, p. 175).

The second Move of SP is very similar to the second Swalesian introduction Move (establishing a niche) though counter claiming, question-raising, and continuing a tradition of Swale’s (1990) model were not utilized at all. Along the same lines, counter claiming was infrequently present in Ph.D. thesis introductions (Bunton, 2002, p. 74) while indicating a gap in research and indicating a problem or need were frequently exploited. Kwan (2006) believes that although they are not particularly addressed in previous CARS studies, needs and gaps are, in fact, alluded to as being semantic attributes, and hence lexical realizations of gap-indicating. For this reason, need is taken to be both a semantic attribute and a lexical choice that is used to realize the gap-indicating strategy. In many proposals, the gap is introduced lexically, most often by however (Halleck & Connor, 2006). Sometimes, this Move is signaled by the word gap, or by although. In addition, the phrase little is known further reinforces the notion that something is missing.

As the results of the present study illustrated, in most of the proposals and theses, S1A (limitations of the previous research) was introduced lexically, most often by even though or although besides the words little, few, or low as in the following examples.

6. *Although a great number of works have been done in relation to citation, relatively little attention has been paid to the variation due to their linguistic environments. (a sample proposal)*

7. *Even though this area has been extensively studied by researchers in different disciplines (e.g. Hyland, 1999) and recently in a few sub-disciplines, few studies have focused on the macro-perspective (citations) and micro-perspective (function of citations) of discussion sections across different sub-disciplines of Applied Linguistics. (a sample thesis)*

Furthermore, S1B (stating the problem) was displayed lexically, as often as not, by phrases such as one of the difficulties or one more added problem as in the following examples:

8. *One of the difficulties that Iranian EFL students may have in their writing is how to achieve cohesion, which contributes substantially to their scores in examinations; one reason behind this difficulty may be thematic fitness between ideas, sentences and details in the text. (a sample proposal)*

9. *One more added problem is that sometimes non-native writers of research articles (RAs) may not follow the conventions of citation analysis, and this makes the content of non-native articles different from that of native writers. (a sample thesis)*

In addition, gap indicating was more often than not realized lexically, by the word *neglected*, or sometimes by the negative marker *not* as in the following examples. Also, the phrase *a dearth of* further supports the idea that something is missing (see example 12).

10. *It is unfortunate that, this area of study has been a neglected research territory by Iranian researchers. (a sample proposal)*

11. *Teaching drama in EFL contexts has not been seriously investigated. (a sample thesis)*

12. *There is a dearth of research on form-oriented alternatives. (a sample proposal)*

Through Move two, writers try to persuade readers that the research was carried out to add something to the existing pool of knowledge. Therefore, authors have to establish that the previous research literature is not complete and requires more exploration. The ultimate goal is to re-establish the significance of the research in the eyes of the discourse community. Thus, MA research writers in Applied Linguistics, as a competing field of enquiry, try to indicate a gap and offer convincing reasons for their study which results in wider usage of Move two. It also is the nature of SP that needs more competition to *establish a niche*, hence more application of this Move. Therefore, writers resort to Move two in order to occupy a publication space, to convince their discourse community of their research, and to show its validity. Swales and Feak (1994) argue that most occurrences of Move two in articles set up a space by indicating a gap, by showing that the research story so far is not yet complete, so making Move two a particular kind of critique (p. 186).

### Analysis of Move 3

The sole obligatory element in Move three is S1 (announcing present research). The preferred means for doing this, following Swales (2004), is "to stress the applicability of the research reported followed by claims about novelty of what is about to be described" (p. 231). As shown in Table 1, S1 (announcing present research) was substantially employed by writers, making it a crucial step to documenting research.

In addition, outlining purposes (S2) which is the statement of aim or general objective of the proposed activity appeared in slightly above one third of the total data (36). Accordingly, it might be claimed that Iranian Master's students do not tend to reveal the purpose of their study as a major strategy for accomplishing Move three at this stage. In addition, in some cases, these authors used a mixed title (Statement of the Problem and Statement of the Purposes) for the SP section. Since stating the purposes is considered as an optional not a major strategy for Move three and Iranian writers mostly see this step overlapping with other steps such as announcing the present research, therefore, writers make use of a mixed title whenever they want to state the purposes in the SP section.

On the other hand, the final step, question raising, nearly a final element, was rarely exploited in the data. This is partly due to the fact that research questions typically follow SP as a sub-section of it or are usually considered as an independent section by writers. In the same line, Kwan (2006) considered research questions as one of the optional steps of occupying the research niche in article introductions (Move three). The frequency of occurrence of step 3, as seen in Table (1), was the lowest (three occurrences) which may prove that MA students of Applied Linguistics do not usually raise their questions at this stage. In the same vein, research questions/hypotheses were also present occasionally in the Bunton's (2002, p. 74) modified CARS model for Ph.D. thesis introductions. To sum up, this Move explains what it is the proposers want to get done and is seldom signaled by reference to the objective of the study as well as research questions.

## Conclusion and implications

Samraj (2005) argues that "the results of previous studies on academic genres have been translated into pedagogical applications" (p. 153). Similarly, this study could provide a foundation for less experienced proposal and thesis writers to write such that it conforms to the conventions or expectations of the discourse community. Accordingly, the results of this study can be used to teach advanced level students, pursuing master's degree, the structure of SP and the more common conventions as a framework during their writing. Moreover, the results can provide helpful evidence for novice researchers to raise their awareness of the rhetorical importance of proposals and theses and the way they can structure their SP in them.

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