

In the Name of God



SHEIKHBAHAE UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

**A Contrastive Study of Move Structures in Statement-of-the-
Problem Sections of M.A Theses: The Case of Native and
Non-Native Speaking Students**

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF
THE REQUIRMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF
ARTS IN TEACHING ENGLSH AS A FOREIGN
LANGUAGE

By

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THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT THE CONTENT, FORMAT AND QUALITY OF
PRESENTATION OF THE THESIS SUBMITTED BY

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ENTITLED:

**A CONTRASTIVE STUDY OF MOVE STRUCTURES IN
STATEMENT-OF-THE-PROBLEM SECTIONS OF M.A
THESES: THE CASE OF NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE
SPEAKING STUDENTS**

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis was composed by myself, that the work contained herein is my own except where explicitly stated otherwise in the text. This work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification except as specified.

To my wonderful parents

for their inspirational support throughout my life

and

to my sister and brother

for their encouragement

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Abstract

“Statement-of-the-Problem” (SP) sections are integral parts of theses and dissertations. However, many postgraduates find it difficult to write them. Therefore, comprehension of how to frame and structure this section is vital and is made possible by studying its generic structure. Accordingly, the current study intended to compare Move structures of the SP sections of M.A theses, related to English language teaching studies, written by Iranian postgraduate students and English L1 counterparts. To this end, 100 SP sections of theses (50 SP sections written by English L1 researchers and 50 written by Persian researchers) in the field of Teaching English as a Foreign or Second Language (TEFL/TESL) were selected. Analysis of Move structures was conducted by employing a modified version of Swales’ (2004) Create A Research Space (CARS) model. The analysis of the data revealed that Move structures of SP sections across theses written by English and Persian native speakers were similar. In both corpora, the three Moves, that is, “Establishing a territory” (Move 1), “Establishing a niche” (Move 2), and “Presenting the present work” (Move 3) were present and were considered Obligatory. There were some minor differences between the two corpora in using some Steps. Moreover, Move patterns were so variant that it was hard to decide which Move pattern best characterized the English L1 and English L2 SP sections except for [M1-M2] in the English L1 corpus and [M1-M2-M3] in the English L2 corpus. Finally, it was found that Move structures of the SP sections of descriptive, experimental, and correlational theses did not differ. The findings of this study can be of great significance for language teachers and material designers.

Abbreviations

L1: First Language

L2: Second Language

RA: Research Article

SP: Statement of the Problem

TEFL: Teaching English as a Foreign Language

TESL: Teaching English as a Second Language

M: Move

S: Step

M.A: Master of Arts

CARS: Create a Research Space

Chapter One:

Introduction

1.1. Preliminaries

Analysis of written academic discourse has recently gained attention among linguists, educators and professional researchers in various disciplines (Jogthong, 2001). An area of academic discourse written in English that has been investigated in recent years is that of thesis and dissertation writing.

Generally speaking, the studies done on thesis and dissertation writing can be broken down into two broad categories, regarding the purpose of investigation (Jalilifar & Mohammadi, 2014). The first category deals with the stylistic and grammatical features of particular genres including tense and aspect (Burrough-Boenisch, 2003), modality (Vassileva, 2001), adjectives (Soler, 2002), nouns (Flowerdew, 2003), reporting verbs (Thompson & Ye, 1991), etc. The second category focuses on the macro-organization of academic texts such as abstracts (Hyland, 2000; Samraj, 2005; Martin, 2003; Lores, 2004), introductions (Swales, 1981, 1990; Dudley-Evans & Henderson, 1990; Holmes, 1995), results (Brett, 1994; Williams, 1999), discussions (Hopkins & Dudley-Evans, 1988; Holmes, 1997; Jalilifar, et al, 2012), conclusions (Yang & Allison, 2003; Bunton, 2002), research paper titles (Haggan, 2004; Jalilifar, 2010), and so on (as cited in Jalilifar & Mohammadi, 2014).

One of the specific sub-genres of theses and dissertations is Statement of the Problem section (SP) which is the heart of a thesis and dissertation. In fact, this section is the place which illustrates the merits of a thesis or a dissertation. This

section provides some information for the reader about the purpose of the researcher and the reader will be convinced of its importance.

Creswell (2005), Hicks and Turner (1999), and Sekaran (2003) claim that the importance of basing research on a well-articulated problem statement is well accepted across disciplines such as information systems, education, and engineering (as cited in Ellis & Levy, 2008). According to Kerlinger and Lee (2000), the identification of the research problem is “the most difficult and important part of the whole research process” (p. 15). A well-structured, properly-reported study must provide answers to all questions regarding the what, why, when, how, where, and who associated with the research (Ellis & Levy, 2008). The problem statement offers the context necessary for addressing the why question (Tracy, 2007).

Despite the existence of such claims in regard to the vital role of SP sections, studies on this kind of text type are still extremely low in number. For instance, Hernon and Metoyer-Duran (1993) and Metoyer-Duran and Hernon (1994) supplied sample SP sections to researchers in library and information science and other social science disciplines in an attempt to investigate different attitudes toward the composition of SP sections. They discovered nine attributes associated with them: 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).

Considering the importance of knowing how to write a well structured SP section, the current study aims to analyze the generic organization of SP sections in M.A theses written by English native speakers and those written in English by Persian speakers and to discover any probable differences between the two corpora.

1.2. Statement of the problem

As Jalilifar, Firuzmand, and Roshani (2011) claim, 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 contextualizing the problem (Riazi, 2000).

Considering the importance of writing a successful thesis in general and statement-of-the- problem section in particular, Jalilifar et al. (2011) assert that English as foreign language (EFL) learners need to know how to write a linguistically possible text as well as a text based on generic conventions. Although researchers have tried to identify these schematic structures in research articles, theses and dissertations, few EFL learners tend to read such studies. Consequently, Duszak (1994) points that their products may obtain lower interest and or/appreciation or they simply fail to get themselves published (as cited in Sheldon, 2011). Similarly, Salmani Nodoushan and Khakbaz (2011) state that:

A close look at the literature on teaching writing reveals that most students, even those with high scores in English, often have difficulties in expressing themselves in writing. They have not only difficulties in choosing proper

vocabulary and correct grammar rules but also in organizing the structure depending on topic. (p. 112)

Ahmad (1997), Paltridge (2003), and Tahririan and Jalilifar (2004) note that the need for being aware of the generic structure of research articles is more critical for those non-native writers whose papers are unpublished because of their wrong organizational patterning in contrast with their international counterparts (as cited in Khany & Tazik, 2010). In this regard, theses and dissertations in general and SP sections in particular are not the exceptions.

Many studies have been done on genre and discourse analysis, but less attention has been given to writing theses in general and SP sections in particular. The present study is an attempt to identify the generic organization of SP sections in M.A theses written by English L1 and English L2 (Iranian postgraduate counterparts) researchers.

1.3. Research questions

1. What are major Move structure differences in SP sections of theses written by Iranian postgraduate students of TEFL and their English L1 counterparts (TESL)?
2. What are major differences regarding the Steps used in each Move in the SP sections of theses written by Iranian postgraduate students of TEFL and their English L1 counterparts (TESL)?
3. What are major Move structure differences in the SP sections of descriptive, experimental, and correlational theses?

1.4. Significance of the study

Generally, Statement of the Problem (SP) sections are understood to play important roles in theses. Therefore, researchers should pay attention to the way they are going to arrive at a viable problem statement for their theses in terms of the overall organization, which should be based on the specific features of this genre. This study

explores the ways in which the textual organization of the SP sections progresses through Moves and Steps to achieve the social purpose of the text and allow writers to make knowledge claims.

So identifying EFL learners' problems in following standard organization of SP sections would make instructors to be aware of the way they can investigate EFL learners' genre-based problems and give valuable feedbacks to them.

1.5. Definition of the key terms

The key words of this study are defined in the following:

1.5.1. Statement-of-the-Problem sections

According to Ibrahim & Nambiar (2011), "Statement of the Problem section" (SP) is a genre usually subsumed under Introduction section of theses and dissertations. In SP sections, the research problem under investigation is elaborated.

1.5.2. Genre

According to Richards and Schmidt (2002), "a genre can be defined as: a type of discourse that occurs in a particular setting, that has distinctive and recognizable patterns and norms of organization and structure, and that has particular and distinctive communicative functions" (p. 224) (as cited in Sadeghi, Hassani, & Hemmati, 2013)

1.5.3. Genre analysis

Genre analysis in the present study means to investigate the Move-Step structures of the genre of Statement of the Problem sections in theses. According to Qian (2010), analyzing genre means investigating instances of conventionalized textual artifacts in