

Establishing a Niche in Applied Linguistics master thesis introductions of Moroccan L2 graduate writers of English

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ABSTRACT

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Though significant and popular, the Create-a-Research-Space model (CARS) and its subsequent components remain underutilised in the Moroccan context. This is evident in the lack of published studies employing the model as means of analysis. As such, using Swales' (2004) CARS model, the present study analyses 30 master thesis introductions written by Moroccan L2 Applied Linguistics and English Language Teaching majors for if and how a niche is established. The introductions are sourced from the Faculty of Education Sciences in Rabat and the Faculty of Languages, Letters, and Arts in Kenitra. It is shown that a niche is a) established the 93% of all introductions and b) is constructed mainly by chaining two steps (i.e., Move 2 – Step 1A and Move 2 – Step 2). Further, the niche created is found to be local to the Moroccan context and motivated by a need to enhance practice. Seeking acceptance by and integration in the discourse community of university professors and English Teaching practitioners are used to account for the results found.

1. Introduction

Novice and experienced academics often utter the relatively sarcastic comment “*Publish or Perish*” to describe the current publication status quo. A researcher’s career is largely dependent upon publishing research papers that contribute significantly to the state of knowledge. Arguably, this impacted the scientific scene positively, as many innovative papers were and will be published. These papers usually cross-investigate whole countries, extensively examine representative samples, or create entirely new fields of study, rendering them staples for researchers to cite and build upon. Unfortunately, this degree of innovation made it increasingly competitive to get published.

In his influential book on genre analysis, Swales (1990) put forward a model for research article introductions (RAIs) mirroring their main talking points. He referred to it as the Create-a-Research-Space model (CARS). The model consists of three main parts (see Figure 1) called moves, i.e., “discoursal or rhetorical unit(s) that performs a coherent communicative function in a written or spoken discourse.” (Swales, 2004, p. 228). It is in Move 2 that writers communicate the newness and innovativeness of their research to their readers. In other words, writers display their “knowledge and understanding of the state of the art of their discipline” (Shehzad, 2008, p. 27). Swales labelled this act as *Niche Establishment* (NE), taking inspiration from competition in Ecology since “academic writers seeking to publish must compete for ‘*light and space*’ as do plants and animals” (Paltridge & Starfield, 2019, p. 113).

Figure 1

Swales (1990) Create-a-Research-Space Model

| | | |
|--------|---------------------------------|--|
| Move 1 | Establishing a territory | |
| | Step 1 | Claiming centrality <i>and/or</i> |
| | Step 2 | Making topic generalizations <i>and/or</i> |
| | Step 3 | Reviewing items of previous research |
| Move 2 | Establishing a niche | |
| | Step 1A | Counter-claiming <i>or</i> |
| | Step 1B | Indicating a gap <i>or</i> |
| | Step 1C | Question raising <i>or</i> |
| | Step 1D | Continuing a tradition |
| Move 3 | Occupying the niche | |
| | Step 1A | Outlining purposes <i>or</i> |
| | Step 1B | Announcing present research |
| | Step 2 | Announcing principal findings |
| | Step 3 | Indicating RA structure |

Note: Adapted from *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings* (1st ed., p 141), by J. Swales, 1990, Cambridge.

In fact, Swales' work proved so influential that it sparked much research probing into the schematics of RAIs, including NE. The findings of such research can be divided into two main categories: 1) the frequency of niche establishment and 2) the manner of niche establishment. On the one hand, it is almost unanimously reported that academic writers include a niche in their RAIs regardless of their source discipline. Its occurrence frequency ranges between 70% to 100% of the overall studied corpus (e.g., Bruce, 2014; Chang & Schleppegrell, 2011; Milagros del Saz Rubio, 2011; Moghaddasi & Graves, 2017; Samraj, 2002; Shehzad, 2008; Tessuto, 2015). This positions NE as an obligatory component of RAIs (Moghaddasi & Graves, 2017). On the other hand, niche construction is not as universal, which can potentially be attributed to the evolution of the CARS model. The initial 1990 model suggested that academic writers can establish their niche by opting for one of four steps, i.e., the elements that concretise a move. These can be seen in Figure 1 above. One direct outcome of the popularity of the 1990 CARS model is the constructive criticism it received, which can be summed under the model not being adequate enough to satisfactorily account for the structure of RAIs across all disciplines (Swales, 2004). This led to Swales updating his model in 2004 by collapsing the four steps of Move 2 into two broad steps (see Figure 2 below). Researchers have aligned themselves with either version of the CARS model, depending on their perception of NE and its subsequent steps. That is, neither the 1990 nor the 2004 model has managed to position itself as the default model for RAIs analysis. One motive behind this is the analytical ease and flexibility the four steps provide (Moghaddasi & Graves, 2017). However, personally speaking, both versions are sides of the same coin because the main difference between the two is a matter of economy of steps.

2008). Among the few prominent studies that investigated the dissertation introduction genre are the likes of Bunton (2002), Samraj (2008) and Kawase (2018). Bunton (2002) and Kawase (2018) communicated somewhat similar results. Their studies of PhD introductions revealed that indicating a gap is the primary way a niche was established. Samraj (2008) cross-compared master thesis introductions from Philosophy, Biology, and Linguistics. It was reported that the steps of *indicating a gap in the literature or a problem in the real world* were the most frequent throughout the three disciplines. Further, positive justification was present in equal percentages in Biology and Linguistics.

The scarcity spoken of above largely extends to contaminate the Moroccan academic writing sphere. To my knowledge, in Morocco, little to no published research has been conducted to investigate master thesis introductions, regardless of discipline, using the CARS model in any of its iterations. This is particularly odd. The CARS model, to an extent, is proven to be the backbone of RAIs and thesis introductions, which is accounted for by the existence of the model in both corpora. One can link knowledge of the model and its elements to having knowledge of the academic introduction genre, generally speaking. That is, “students in different parts of the world need to learn the discursive practices of their discipline and to develop a knowledge of genres and their communicative purposes” (Johns, 1997, as cited in Kuteeva & Negretti, 2016, p. 3). Having such knowledge could strongly enable native and non-native students to a) have their research article get published and b) have their thesis successfully defended. In fact, this current paragraph is an exercise in NE. This paper’s niche, to put it differently and explicitly, is the alarming scarcity of studies dealing with how Moroccan master students construct their niche in their master thesis introduction.

The present research paper investigates how Moroccan master students majoring in *Applied Linguistics* and *English Language Teaching* establish a niche in their master thesis introductions. The sample analysed consists of 30 thesis introductions in total. How the corpus is collected will be detailed later on. It should be noted that the corpus and this study as a whole are part of an even larger PhD project where the thirty introductions are subjected to a meta-move analysis, i.e., the examination of the functional interplay between moves and the metadiscursive items that fall within those moves. To this end, the research questions this paper attempts to answer are as follows:

- 1- Do this study’s target writers establish a niche in their thesis introduction?
- 2- If so, how is that niche established?
- 3- What are the most frequent steps whereby a niche is established?

2. Methodology

2.1. Corpus collection

The corpus studied originates from two Moroccan English major faculties. It consists of two sets of 15 introductions. The first set is collected from the Faculty of Letters, Languages, and Arts (FLA) in Kenitra. The second set is compiled from the Faculty of Education Sciences (FSE) in Rabat. Once the necessary authorisations needed to access the master thesis archives were had, 15 samples were taken out at random from each faculty. It should be noted that the FLA corpus involved a greater deal of randomisation as the archive keepers have a written ledger specifying the 50 master theses defended between the years 2017 and

2019. Here, each of the 50 theses was assigned a number that was inputted into the online Randomiser Tool to output 15 samples (Plous & Geoffrey C, 2022). It is worth mentioning that 30 corpus items were successfully defended in front of relevant juries between 2010 and 2019.

2.2 Corpus Treatment

Since the theses were available as hard copies only, the introductions had to be digitised. To do so, pictures were taken of the 30 selected introductions. Then, they were imported into the OCR (Optical character recognition) software of choice: *Abby FineReader OCR Editor 15* (ABBYY, 2020). Later, the text was copied to a separate .DOC file once the text was extracted from the images and the mis-scans were rectified. This process was repeated for each one of the 30 introductions according to the following naming scheme. The FLA corpus set is named FLA-NE X and the FSE corpus set is named FSE-NE X. X stands for the number of the introduction.

2.3 Corpus Analysis

The 30 WORD DOC files were imported into the analysis software of choice: *MAXQDA Analytics Pro 20.3.0* (VERBI Software, 2020). Then, each introduction was read multiple times to identify whether Move 2 existed. If it were found to exist, the segment corresponding to the move was given a code. The segment was sub-coded for the steps of Move 2 according to the coding scheme seen in Table 1 below. To put it differently, a top-down move analysis approach was adopted. Such an approach takes a pre-existing genre-based move/steps model and maps it onto stretches of text (Biber et al., 2007). In the case of this study, the model adopted was Swale's revised 2004 CARS model (see Figure 2 above).

Using the *MAXQDA* software, the frequencies of moves and their corresponding steps were extracted (i.e., the quantitative aspect of the study). As for the qualitative aspect, each occurrence was inspected and contrasted against the prescribed communicative aim of move 2 in the CARS model.

Table 1

Coding Scheme

| Step | Corresponding code |
|------------------|--------------------|
| Move 2 – Step 1A | M2-S1A |
| Move 2 – Step 1B | M2-S1B |
| Move 2 – Step 2 | M2-S2 |

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 The Frequency of Niche Establishment

As per Table 2 and Table 3, a niche is established in 13 out of 15 introductions in the FLE corpus (83.3%) and in every introduction in the FSE corpus (100%). The overall percentage of niche creation found is 93.3%. The frequency range of niche establishment occurrence was between 1 and 3. One introduction (e.g., FLA-NE 10) was found to be the outlier as a niche is established 4 times.

Table 2

Move Occurrence Frequency in the FLA Corpus

| | Occurrence frequency |
|-----------|----------------------|
| FLA-NE 1 | 2 |
| FLA-NE 2 | 1 |
| FLA-NE 3 | 2 |
| FLA-NE 4 | 1 |
| FLA-NE 5 | 2 |
| FLA-NE 6 | 1 |
| FLA-NE 7 | 1 |
| FLA-NE 8 | 1 |
| FLA-NE 9 | 1 |
| FLA-NE 10 | 4 |
| FLA-NE 11 | 0 |
| FLA-NE 12 | 2 |
| FLA-NE 13 | 1 |
| FLA-NE 14 | 2 |
| FLA-NE 15 | 0 |

Table 3

Move Occurrence Frequency in the FSE Corpus

| | Occurrence frequency |
|-----------|----------------------|
| FSE-NE 1 | 3 |
| FSE-NE 2 | 3 |
| FSE-NE 3 | 1 |
| FSE-NE 4 | 1 |
| FSE-NE 5 | 1 |
| FSE-NE 6 | 2 |
| FSE-NE 7 | 2 |
| FSE-NE 8 | 2 |
| FSE-NE 9 | 1 |
| FSE-NE 10 | 1 |
| FSE-NE 11 | 1 |
| FSE-NE 12 | 1 |
| FSE-NE 13 | 1 |
| FSE-NE 14 | 2 |
| FSE-NE 15 | 1 |

As can be seen in table 4, Move 2 -Step 1B occurs the least by far. Move 2 – Step 2 is the most frequent in both sets followed by Move 2 – Step 1B. At the level of the two corpora, the FLA corpus has fewer Move 2 – Step 1A and Move 2 – Step 2 instances

than its FSE equivalent. To put the results differently, a niche is established primarily using the two steps pair. This finding is further consolidated when inspecting the distribution of the three steps in each introduction separately (see Table 5 and Table 6).

Table 4

Overall Step Occurrence Frequency

| Corpora | Step | | |
|---------|----------|----------|---------|
| | M2 - S1A | M2 - S1B | M2 - S2 |
| FLE-NE | 9 | 0 | 17 |
| FSE-NE | 18 | 2 | 19 |
| Total | 27 | 2 | 36 |

Table 5

Step Occurrence Frequency in the FLA Corpus

| | Step | | |
|-----------|----------|----------|---------|
| | M2 - S1A | M2 - S1B | M2 - S2 |
| FLA-NE 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| FLA-NE 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| FLA-NE 3 | 2 | 0 | 1 |
| FLA-NE 4 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| FLA-NE 5 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| FLA-NE 6 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| FLA-NE 7 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| FLA-NE 8 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| FLA-NE 9 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| FLA-NE 10 | 1 | 0 | 4 |
| FLA-NE 11 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| FLA-NE 12 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| FLA-NE 13 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| FLA-NE 14 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| FLA-NE 15 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Table 6*Step Occurrence Frequency in the FSE Corpus*

| | Step | | |
|-----------|----------|----------|---------|
| | M2 - S1A | M2 - S1B | M2 - S2 |
| FSE-NE 1 | 4 | 0 | 2 |
| FSE-NE 2 | 3 | 0 | 2 |
| FSE-NE 3 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| FSE-NE 4 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| FSE-NE 5 | 1 | 0 | 3 |
| FSE-NE 6 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| FSE-NE 7 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| FSE-NE 8 | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| FSE-NE 9 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| FSE-NE 10 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| FSE-NE 11 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| FSE-NE 12 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| FSE-NE 13 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| FSE-NE 14 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| FSE-NE 15 | 1 | 0 | 2 |

The percentage and frequencies reported indicates that NE is an obligatory element of the studied corpus which is in line with the research discussed earlier. NE reoccurring multiple times can be interpreted as the students' active effort to solidify their niche. This can be attributed to the students seeking the approval of a) their supervisor and b) jury members. The first and the latter are the senior members of the discourse community to which students belong. Being in such a hierarchy can put the students in the critical position where they must exercise a great deal of vigilance when presenting novel claims (Alshahrani, 2015). Similar discourse community influences on NE were reported by Fredrickson & Swales (1994). They found that Swedish researchers rarely establish a niche in their RAIs given how small and uncompetitive their discourse community is.

3.2 The Manner of Niche Establishment

The way a niche was created by this study's target writers can be segmented into two categories. The first category has to do with Move 2 – Step 1A. The students plainly signalled that their research gap had never been addressed in Morocco (e.g., Extract 1, 2, 3, and 4). The gap targeted mostly concerned the profession of English teaching to a large extent.

- 1- ... **a limited number of studies on communication strategies conducted especially in Morocco targeted the writing skill** such as in ... Hind Brigui (2003). (FLE-NE 6)
- 2- ... Moreover, to our modest knowledge and research, **this type of study dealing with students' perceptions of assessment principles was not found to be investigated in the Moroccan contexts**, mainly the extent to which English

examinations, at the university level, respect the language assessment principles, and the fact whether there is a relationship between students' proficiency level and their perceptions of assessment. (FSE-NE 6)

- 3- **However, research on the effect of portfolios alone and combined with self-assessment is scarce.** What's more, no studies that compare the effects of using portfolios and portfolios combined with self-assessment checklists with the same scenario of this study were found. (FSE-NE 9)
- 4- **Listening and speaking skills are given less attention by both teachers and curricular designers.** (FLE-NE 14)

The second category has to do Move 2 – Step 2. The positive justification given presented the research to come as an attempt to ameliorate the profession of teaching (see Extract 5 and 6). The driving motive behind the positive justification was found to be sourced to some personal convictions or to real world experiences (e.g., Extract 7 and 8).

- 5- The rationale behind choosing this topic is that **listening and speaking tend to be very neglected by teachers and textbook designers** though they are very essential for language mastery. In many EFL classrooms, these two skills tend to be much neglected. (FLE-NE 14)
- 6- ... **This need stemmed from** the fact that in the general practice of teaching reading, the learners would be assigned a reading task to read by themselves and do the post reading tasks. Here, **the teacher would not provide any activities that could motivate the reader to achieve better comprehension of the reading material.** Consequently, **it becomes very necessary** for teachers to **incorporate pre-reading activities** in teaching **reading comprehension in order to activate students' background knowledge** (FSE-NE 10)
- 7- **This study is also motivated by our own observation** that first and second year Moroccan students of the English department often struggle with vocabulary and language comprehension. (FSE-NE 4)
- 8- ... **Having been an EFL learner for a respectable amount of years, I would admit** that **I have gone through** hard times when expressing and interacting using the target language. **Word loss and blockage** in the middle of a conversation **always made me feel** embarrassed and uncomfortable. (FLE-NE 6)

The niche established can be described as local to the Moroccan TEFL context. Arguably, this is the student's attempt at integrating themselves with a discourse community composed of members other than their immediate university instructors. They seek integration in a discourse community composed of Moroccan teachers of English. Their offering to this community is their research endeavour, aimed at enhancing practice. Further, the motives behind carrying the said research, perhaps, exceed mere integration. The students might be in pursuit of establishing themselves as relatively well researched partitioners. Likewise, establishing a niche that is locally and contextually sensitive is reported by Annuai (2021). Her targeted Thai RAI writers were found to create a niche that is relevant to Thailand.

4. Conclusion

I would like to conclude this research paper by mentioning 1) the limitations of the study and 2) the suggested recommendations for future research.

4.1 Study Limitations

The corpus investigated is not representative of the overall Moroccan English major master students. Instead, the corpus is informative of its respective population. Compiling a corpus that is larger and more representative proved to be problematic. On the one hand, unfortunately, an online database for the theses defended in Morocco is yet to be created resulting in researchers unable to fully and satisfactorily randomise their corpus collection process. Further, as a consequence of not being available online as soft copies, the theses need to be digitised which can be a demanding task for single-handed researchers. Because the larger a corpus gets, the chance for a researcher to overlook mistakes when digitising the corpus gets higher. This leads to the second issue. On the other hand, top-down corpus-based studies require a corpus to be analysed and coded by at least two researchers. This is to have reliable results guaranteed by calculating an inter-rater reliability score. To put it differently, the present study lacks an inter-reliability score. Yet, one advantage this study has is the size of the corpus. One can make the bold claim that 30 introductions is a manageable corpus for a single-handed researcher to work on resulting in reliable results.

4.2 Suggestion for Future Research

Given the lack of this sort of studies in the Moroccan context, researchers have ample study threads to pursue from which the following can be distinguished:

- 1- Researchers can study the quality of niche establishment.
- 2- Researchers can examine the degree to which students are aware of niche establishment and how that knowledge is reflected in their introductions.
- 3- Researchers can investigate whether academic writing courses speak of niche establishment.
- 4- Researchers can investigate the effect of explicit niche establishment instructions on the quality of niche construction.

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