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Carving Out a Niche: Rhetorical Moves and Research Gaps in Introductions by Indonesian Undergraduate ELT Students

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ABSTRACT

Indonesian journals increasingly publish articles by undergraduate students, yet little is known about how these novice writers build introductions in articles that have passed editorial review. This study analysed 24 introductions written by undergraduate students and published in 2025 in an Indonesian national journal of English Language Teaching (ELT). It combined qualitative genre analysis based on Swales' Create a Research Space (CARS) model with descriptive statistics. Two coders identified the moves, the types of research gap, and the sequences of moves, and resolved disagreements through discussion. Moves 1 and 3 appeared in all introductions (100%), whereas Move 2 appeared in 22 of the 24 (91.7%). Among the 22 introductions that stated a gap, population and context gaps were the most common (50.0%), followed by technology and media integration gaps (31.8%) and methodological and genre gaps (18.2%). No writer used counter-claiming, and every gap was framed as an absence of research. Twenty-two introductions followed the standard sequence of Move 1, Move 2, and Move 3, and two moved directly from Move 1 to Move 3. The writers controlled the overall structure, and their difficulty lay in the range of strategies used to establish a niche. The omissions were few and should be read cautiously. The findings suggest that academic writing instruction could give explicit attention to gap statements and to evaluative strategies. Because the corpus came from one journal and year, the results cannot be generalized.

Keywords: CARS Model, Genre Analysis, Novice ELT Writers, Research Gap, Rhetorical Moves

INTRODUCTION

Publishing a research article has become a common expectation in higher education, and it now extends from postgraduate to undergraduate study. Many Indonesian journals accordingly receive and publish articles written by undergraduate students who use English as a second language (L2). Writing for publication requires more than reporting findings, because writers must also position their study within existing scholarship in a form that readers in the field recognize. For article introductions, the most widely used description of this form is Swales' Create a Research Space (CARS) model. The model comprises three moves, namely establishing a territory, establishing a niche, and occupying the niche (Geng et al., 2023; Lu et al., 2021). Together, these moves show where a study belongs in the literature and why it is needed.

Research on L2 writers reports difficulties in three broad areas. The first, and the one most often reported, concerns the niche. Aleshinskaya (2023) found that Russian authors of

computer science papers often avoided establishing a niche, a move that the study regards as obligatory in research paper introductions, and Nabilla et al. (2021) reported that novice Indonesian authors included Move 2 in only 60% of their introductions, whereas Moves 1 and 3 appeared in all of them. The second area concerns the linguistic resources needed to realize each move. Rustipa et al. (2023) reported that undergraduate students had limited knowledge of the linguistic features associated with each move and step, and corpus evidence shows that many phrase-frames are specific to particular move-steps (Lu et al., 2021). The third area concerns variation in rhetorical organization across groups of writers. Aleshinskaya (2023) compared how Russian and Anglophone authors realized the moves, and only 7% of the 200 dissertation introductions analysed by Prasetyanti and Tongpoon-Patanasorn (2023), written by native English-speaking and Indonesian doctoral students, followed the adapted CARS framework, with move reversals and recursive moves among the departures.

Studies of Indonesian student writing have documented comparable patterns. Rustipa et al. (2023) analysed the problem statements of 30 undergraduate students and supplemented the analysis with interviews. They identified nine types of rhetorical structure, most of which were incomplete, and the students themselves acknowledged limited knowledge of the relevant linguistic features. Dabamona et al. (2022) examined the introduction chapters of 32 bachelor theses from an English study programme at a state Islamic college and reported that the chapters did not fully follow the CARS structure. Nabilla et al. (2021) located the weakness more precisely in Move 2 and found that the niche strategies favoured by novice Indonesian authors differed between soft and hard science introductions, which suggests that disciplinary background also shapes how a niche is established. These studies show that incomplete rhetorical structures are common in Indonesian student writing, although they differ in text type and discipline.

Studies of experienced writers provide a point of comparison. Geng et al. (2023) compared 50 linguistics article introductions from non-Scopus journals with 50 from Scopus journals, using an adapted CARS model. Move 1 was the most frequent move in both groups, followed by Move 3 and then Move 2. The non-Scopus introductions contained more moves overall, which the authors interpreted as overuse by less experienced writers, and the occurrence of Move 3 Step 1B was significantly related to journal indexing. Lu et al. (2021) analysed 600 introductions from six social science disciplines and mapped phrase-frames onto specific move-steps, while Lu et al. (2020) found that syntactic complexity varies with the rhetorical function of a sentence in the same corpus. These findings suggest that experienced writers draw on lexical and syntactic patterns linked to particular rhetorical purposes, resources that novice writers may not yet control (Rustipa et al., 2023).

Despite this body of work, the Indonesian studies of student writing cited above have mostly examined texts prepared for assessment, such as problem statements and bachelor theses (Dabamona et al., 2022; Rustipa et al., 2023). Studies of published articles, in contrast, have mainly examined professional authors or compared journals by indexing status (Geng et al., 2023; Lu et al., 2021). Little attention has therefore been given to how undergraduate writers use CARS moves in articles that have already passed through a journal's editorial and review process. It remains unclear whether the weakness of Move 2 reported in student texts persists in published articles, or whether journal guidelines and review reduce it.

The present study therefore examines the rhetorical move structure of the introductions of 24 research articles written by undergraduate students and published in an Indonesian national English Language Teaching (ELT) journal in 2025. The analysis adopts the original version of the CARS model, in which Move 2 can be realized through counter-claiming,

indicating a gap, raising a question, or continuing a research tradition, because these four strategies provide a basis for classifying how writers construct a niche. Particular attention is given to the types of research gap that the writers present and to the sequences in which the moves occur. By analysing published undergraduate writing, the study extends earlier work that has relied on theses, problem statements, and other texts prepared for assessment.

Three research questions guide the analysis. The first concerns the distribution and realization of the three moves in the introductions. The second asks what types of research gap the writers construct when they establish a niche. The third examines which move sequences and structural omissions characterize the writers' attempts to create a research space.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The CARS model describes a research article introduction as a sequence of three moves that lead from a broad research area to the specific study. Move 1 establishes a territory by claiming the centrality of the topic, making topic generalizations, and reviewing earlier research. Move 2 establishes a niche by showing that the existing literature calls for further work. Move 3 occupies that niche by stating the purpose or nature of the present study and, in many cases, its research questions, method, or organization (Geng et al., 2023; Lu et al., 2021). Because the model links text structure to the communicative purposes of writers, it has been applied to introductions across disciplines and writer groups, including social science articles by experienced authors (Lu et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2021) and the writing of novices (Dabamona et al., 2022; Rustipa et al., 2023).

Two versions of the model are in use, and the choice between them affects how Move 2 is analysed. The original version lists four strategies for establishing a niche: counter-claiming, indicating a gap, raising a question, and continuing a tradition. The revised version reduces Move 2 to two steps, indicating a gap and adding to what is known, and it expands the options available in Move 3. Studies of experienced writers have often adapted the revised version (Lu et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2021), whereas Geng et al. (2023) adapted the original. The present study uses the original version for Move 2, because it distinguishes confrontational strategies such as counter-claiming from less confrontational ones such as continuing a tradition, and this distinction is needed to interpret the strategies that novice writers choose. The gap types identified in the data, such as population or technology gaps, are treated as classifications of the content of a gap and not as additional moves.

Move 2 carries much of the argumentative weight of an introduction, since it connects what earlier studies have established with the reason for conducting a new one. Writers realize this connection through lexical and syntactic choices, and corpus studies show that phrase-frames (Lu et al., 2021) and syntactic complexity (Lu et al., 2020) are associated with particular rhetorical functions. Writers who lack these resources may find it difficult to express a gap even when they recognize one (Rustipa et al., 2023).

Evidence from Indonesian and other L2 contexts suggests that novice writers find the niche harder to establish than the other moves (Aleshinskaya, 2023; Nabilla et al., 2021). Student and dissertation introductions also often depart from the canonical sequence of moves (Dabamona et al., 2022; Prasetyanti & Tongpoon-Patanasorn, 2023), and explicit genre-based instruction has been proposed as a response (Rustipa et al., 2023). Journal guidelines may influence these patterns, but their effect on the introductions of student writers has received little attention. The present study addresses this question by analysing the introductions of undergraduate-authored articles published in an Indonesian national ELT journal.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative genre analysis combined with descriptive quantitative analysis to examine the rhetorical moves and research gap strategies in the introductions of articles written by novice ELT writers. The data comprised 24 article introductions drawn, through purposive sampling, from the metadata of an Indonesian scientific journal on English Language Teaching. The articles were published across three volumes in 2025, and they were selected with attention to the authors' educational background and the availability of the full text. Two inclusion criteria guided the selection. The first concerned authorial background: the articles had to be primary empirical or conceptual studies that were sole-authored or lead-authored by undergraduate L2 students enrolled in an English language teaching programme at an Indonesian university. The second concerned genre and text boundary: only the introductions of full-length published research articles were analysed, and titles, abstracts, literature review sections, methodology sections, and references were excluded.

The main analytical instrument was the original version of the CARS model, which describes three moves. Move 1, establishing a territory, shows the importance of the research area through claiming centrality, making topic generalizations, and reviewing previous studies. Move 2, establishing a niche, justifies the study through four strategies: counter-claiming, indicating a gap, raising a question, and continuing a research tradition. Move 3, occupying the niche, outlines the purposes of the study or announces the present research, and indicates the structure of the article. Statements of research questions, hypotheses, and methods were coded within Move 3 as part of announcing the present research.

To answer the three research questions, the model was operationalized into three analytical categories. The first category, macro-level move realization, addressed the first research question. The presence or absence of each move was recorded and expressed as a percentage. Moves present in all introductions (100%) were classified as obligatory, those present in 60% to 99% as conventional, and those present in fewer than 60% as optional, following the frequency criterion applied in earlier move analyses (Alyousef, 2021). The second category, research gap typology, addressed the second research question. The Move 2 strategies were identified first, including whether counter-claiming was used. Where a gap was indicated, its content was classified as a population and context gap, a technology and media integration gap, or a methodological and genre gap, and introductions in which Move 2 was absent were coded as a missing gap. The third category, rhetorical move sequences and structural patterns, addressed the third research question. The introductions were classified by structural order as either M1–M2–M3, the standard progression, or M1–M3, in which Move 2 is omitted.

The data were analysed through a top-down corpus discourse analytic procedure consisting of three stages: text preparation and formatting, discourse segmentation, and move-step tagging. Descriptive statistics were then calculated from the main coding matrix, including frequency counts, percentages, and realization rates for the macro-level moves, gap categories, and sequential move patterns. To strengthen validity and reliability, two coders coded the data, and differences in move identification or gap classification were resolved through discussion until agreement was reached. The results were then interpreted and compared with previous studies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section reports the genre analysis of the 24 introductions and discusses the results in relation to the three research questions and to earlier studies.

DISTRIBUTION AND REALIZATION OF RHETORICAL MOVES

Table 1 summarizes the realization of the three moves. Moves 1 and 3 appeared in all 24 introductions and were therefore obligatory, whereas Move 2 appeared in 22 introductions (91.7%) and was classified as conventional.

Table 1 Macro-Level Rhetorical Move Realization

Rhetorical move	Communicative function	Present (n)	Absent (n)	Realization rate (%)	Status
Move 1: Establishing a territory	Centrality claims, topic generalizations, and literature review	24	0	100.0	Obligatory
Move 2: Establishing a niche	Gap articulation, counter-claiming, or question raising	22	2	91.7	Conventional
Move 3: Occupying the niche	Outlining research aims, the present study, and research questions	24	0	100.0	Obligatory

All writers opened by claiming the centrality of a specific ELT topic, such as writing self-efficacy or speaking anxiety, gave background generalizations, and reviewed the literature. All writers also stated their research objectives, questions, or methodological frameworks. Move 2 was absent from two introductions (8.3%), in which the writers moved directly from the literature review to the research aims without stating a gap.

The full realization of Moves 1 and 3 is consistent with Geng et al. (2023), who found Move 1 to be the most frequent move and Move 3 the second most frequent in both Scopus and non-Scopus linguistics articles. It suggests that the writers were familiar with the opening and closing functions of an introduction, which follow recognizable conventions: a topic is introduced with a claim of importance, and a study is announced with a statement of purpose. Move 2 may be harder to produce by convention alone, because it requires the writer to evaluate the literature and to decide what remains unresolved. This would explain why the niche is the move most often reported as avoided or weakened (Aleshinskaya, 2023; Nabilla et al., 2021).

The realization rate of Move 2 in the present corpus (91.7%), however, is considerably higher than the 60% reported by Nabilla et al. (2021) for novice Indonesian authors. Several differences could account for this. Nabilla et al. analysed introductions from soft and hard science fields, whereas the present corpus consists of ELT articles. The articles analysed here had also passed through a journal's editorial and review process, whereas many studies of student writing have used texts prepared for assessment (Dabamona et al., 2022; Rustipa et al., 2023). Journal context may play a further role. Geng et al. (2023) found that introductions in non-Scopus journals contained more moves overall than those in Scopus journals, and Arsyad and Zainil (2023) reported that articles in Quartile 1 applied linguistics journals used the most research gap strategies. Both findings suggest that publication context is associated with how writers handle the niche, although neither study examined student writers. The present data cannot show whether the guidelines or reviewers of the journal shaped the introductions,

because the drafts submitted before review were not available. In addition, the realization rate records only the presence of Move 2 and not how persuasively it was developed, so the typology below gives a better indication of its quality.

TYPOLOGY OF RESEARCH GAPS

Table 2 presents the gap types found in Move 2. All 22 introductions that contained Move 2 indicated a gap, and none used counter-claiming. The gaps fell into three types, and the two remaining introductions were coded as missing gaps.

Table 2 Typology of Research Gaps in Move 2

Research gap category	Operational definition	Articles (n)	Share of all articles (%)	Share of gap-present articles (%)
Population and context gap	Applying theories or tools to unexamined educational levels, geographic regions, or vocational demographics	11	45.8	50.0
Technology and media integration gap	Evaluating newly emerging digital tools, AI platforms, or MALL applications in ELT instruction	7	29.2	31.8
Methodological and genre gap	Deploying specific research designs, evaluative taxonomies, or specialized text genres	4	16.7	18.2
Missing gap (structural omission)	Move 2 skipped completely, with a direct transition from Move 1 to Move 3	2	8.3	N/A
	Total	**24**	**100.0**	**100.0**

Population and context gaps. This was the most frequent type (n = 11; 50.0% of the gap-present introductions). The writers acknowledged earlier studies but argued that they had examined other educational levels or settings, which left specific levels, regions, or fields under-researched. They signalled the gap with contrastive connectors (*although*, *however*, *while*) and with expressions such as *unexamined*, *underexplored*, *little attention*, and *scarce*. In ART-01, on speaking anxiety, the writer restricted the gap to the educational level, and in ART-05, on vocabulary mastery, to the age group:

> ART-01 (speaking anxiety): "However, most prior studies focused on higher education, leaving secondary school anxiety unexamined."

> ART-05 (vocabulary mastery): "However, interactive game-flashcard combinations remain underexplored in young learner contexts in primary schools."

The gap in ART-16, on AI ethics in rural ELT, was geographic, and that in ART-22, on technical English for petroleum engineering, was vocational:

> ART-16 (AI ethics in rural ELT): "While AI benefits urban education, rural teachers' ethical tensions and cultural 'adab' concerns remain unexplored."

> ART-22 (technical English for petroleum engineering): "While general flashcards exist, QR audio flashcards for petroleum engineering technical terms have received little attention."

Technology and media integration gaps. Seven introductions (29.2% of the corpus and 31.8% of the gap-present introductions) used this type. The writers introduced emerging digital applications, gamified tools, or generative AI platforms and argued that empirical testing of them in ELT remained scarce.

> ART-02 (Edmodo for academic listening): "Although social media tools are popular, empirical evidence on Edmodo for academic listening remains limited."

> ART-03 (Prodigy gamification for grammar): "While gamification is widely advocated, little empirical research explores Prodigy's effect on tenses among digital natives."

> ART-10 (ELSA Speak ASR feedback): "Despite ASR advances, empirical data on ELSA Speak's instant phonetic feedback for high school intonation is scarce."

> ART-19 (Google Gemini scaffolding): "While LLMs are emerging, Google Gemini's specific scaffolding role in vocational culinary exposition writing is uncharted."

Methodological and genre gaps. This was the least frequent type (n = 4; 18.2%). The writers argued that earlier work had relied on generic tasks and had not considered specific analytical taxonomies, specialized genres, or curriculum frameworks.

> ART-08 (coping taxonomies): "Previous research documented anxiety, yet few studies systematically categorized real-time processing strategies."

> ART-12 (viewing competency in the curriculum): "While reading and writing dominate curriculum studies, viewing skills as a distinct receptive competency remain undertheorized."

> ART-18 (British Parliamentary debate genre): "Although communicative tasks abound, British Parliamentary debate for targeted agreement/disagreement structures is underexamined."

Missing gaps. Two introductions omitted Move 2 completely and moved from Move 1 to Move 3. In both, the transition was marked by a purpose statement (*therefore, this study aims to…*; *this research investigates…*) with no preceding statement of a gap.

> ART-06 (reading anxiety and comprehension): "(Move 1: Background on reading comprehension …) Therefore, this study aims to examine the relationship between reading anxiety and comprehension…" (Move 3, with no Move 2 present)

> ART-15 (reflective teaching strategies): "(Move 1: Claims on teacher professionalism …) This research investigates how secondary school educators implement reflective teaching practices …" (Move 3, with no Move 2 present)

The prominence of population and context gaps suggests that writers preferred to establish a niche by extending an established topic to a new setting. Such a gap can be justified

by describing a setting without evaluating earlier findings, but the data do not show the writers' reasons for the choice. The technology and media gaps often named a specific tool, such as Edmodo, Prodigy, ELSA Speak, or Google Gemini, and stated that evidence on it was limited. This form of gap can be established by naming a recent tool and noting the scarcity of empirical work, so it may be easier to produce than a gap that requires an evaluation of earlier findings. The methodological and genre gaps, the least frequent type, required the writers to specify what earlier designs, taxonomies, or genres had left out, which may be more demanding. These readings are tentative, because the data show the form of the gaps and not the effort of writing them. The studies reviewed above also did not classify the content of gaps, so the typology cannot be compared directly with earlier work.

A comparison with experienced writers is possible at the level of strategy. Arsyad and Zainil (2023) found that authors in reputable international applied linguistics journals most often indicated inadequate research and pointed to contradictory or conflicting evidence. The undergraduate writers in the present corpus relied on the first of these, since every gap was framed as limited or missing research, and no introduction pointed to conflicting evidence. This difference suggests that the students built their niche mainly on what had not been studied and not on disagreements among earlier studies, which would require them to compare and weigh the findings of several sources. Arsyad and Zainil also reported that writers commonly signalled gaps with adversative conjunctions, and the same device appears throughout the extracts above (*however*, *while*, *although*, *despite*). The recurrent pairing of such a connector with a limiting expression resembles the move-specific phrase-frames described by Lu et al. (2021). The two introductions without Move 2 contained no such expression and moved straight from the background to the aim.

The absence of counter-claiming deserves separate comment. Every gap was framed as an absence of research or as a limit of scope, and none was framed as an error or weakness in earlier studies. Aleshinskaya (2023) similarly found that Russian authors tended to avoid the niche, which suggests that the avoidance of confrontational strategies is not specific to this corpus. Three explanations are possible. The writers may have been reluctant to criticize published work, they may have lacked the experience needed to evaluate it, or they may have found lower-risk strategies sufficient. These explanations are speculative, however, because the present data consist of published texts only, and the study did not examine the writers' reasons. Interviews with the writers would be needed to test them. The finding is nonetheless informative for instruction, because it shows that the strategy most associated with a critical reading of the literature was not used by any of the 24 writers.

PREDOMINANT RHETORICAL MOVE SEQUENCES AND STRUCTURAL OMISSIONS

Table 3 Predominant Rhetorical Move Sequences and Structural Omission

Sequence	Structural classification	Description and functional impact	Articles (n)	Percentage (%)
M1 → M2 → M3	Standard progression	Complete linear sequence from territory (M1) to niche (M2) to occupation (M3)	22	91.7
M1 → M3	Structural omission	Incomplete sequence that skips the niche and moves directly from background to the objectives of the study	2	8.3
		Total	**24**	**100.0**

Twenty-two introductions (91.7%) followed the standard M1–M2–M3 sequence. These introductions were linear and non-cyclical: the writers established the territory, stated a gap, and then announced the objectives. The two remaining introductions followed the M1–M3 pattern, skipping Move 2 and leaving the research gap unstated.

The dominance of the linear sequence contrasts with the recursive and reversed moves reported for dissertation introductions (Prasetyanti & Tongpoon-Patanasorn, 2023). A journal article leaves less room for cyclical development than a dissertation, and the linear sequence may also reflect the influence of journal guidelines or templates. Geng et al. (2023) found that the occurrence of one Move 3 step was significantly related to journal indexing, which indicates that journal context is associated with rhetorical choices, but their study did not isolate the effect of guidelines. Comparing submitted drafts with published versions would show whether editorial review adds missing moves, and until such a comparison is made, the role of guidelines remains a hypothesis.

The two omissions are few. They may indicate a weakness in genre awareness in which a general summary of the topic (Move 1) is treated as sufficient justification for a study, which produces an abrupt transition to the objectives (Move 3). Because they occurred in only 2 of 24 introductions, they should be read as a tentative signal and not as evidence of a widespread problem. Taken together with the narrow range of gap strategies, however, they point to the same area of difficulty, which is the step from reviewing the literature to evaluating it.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTRUCTION

The findings point to instruction that targets Move 2 specifically. Rustipa et al. (2023) proposed a critical genre-based model for teaching problem statements, intended to raise learners' awareness of the rhetorical structure of the genre, and Lu et al. (2021) discussed teaching applications of phrase-frames matched to move-steps. Dong and Lu (2020) reported that guided activities built on an annotated corpus of research article introductions improved the genre knowledge and genre-based writing of students in an EFL academic writing course. Arsyad and Zainil (2023) recommended that novice writers combine several gap strategies with suitable linguistic features. Applied to the present findings, a course could ask students to annotate published introductions for moves, compare gap statements built with different strategies, practise expressions that signal a gap, and rewrite background-only introductions so that they include a niche. Such activities would address the omission of Move 2 and the narrow range of gap types. Counter-claiming, which no writer used, could be introduced through milder forms of evaluation, such as noting methodological limits or conflicting findings in earlier studies.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the rhetorical move structure of the introductions of 24 undergraduate-authored articles published in an Indonesian national ELT journal in 2025. Moves 1 and 3 appeared in every introduction, and Move 2 appeared in 22 of the 24 (91.7%). The writers therefore showed secure control of the overall structure of the introduction. Difficulty with Move 2 was visible mainly in how the niche was built, and not in whether it was present. Population and context gaps accounted for half of the gap-present introductions (50.0%), technology and media integration gaps for 31.8%, and methodological and genre gaps for 18.2%. No writer used counter-claiming, and every gap was framed as an absence of research or a limit of scope. Twenty-two introductions followed the standard M1–M2–M3 sequence,

and two skipped Move 2 and moved directly from Move 1 to Move 3. By analysing published undergraduate writing, the study adds evidence from a context that earlier work, based largely on theses, problem statements, and other texts prepared for assessment, has not covered.

These findings suggest that instruction in academic writing should give Move 2 specific attention. Teaching could focus on building gap statements from a wider range of strategies, on the expressions that signal a gap, and on moderate forms of evaluation, such as noting methodological limits in earlier studies, as a first step toward counter-claiming. The two introductions without a niche indicate that some writers treat background alone as sufficient justification for a study. Because they are only 2 of 24, this should be treated as a tentative signal and not as grounds for broad curricular change. The high realization rate of Move 2 may also reflect the influence of journal guidelines and review, an explanation that the present design could not test.

The study has several limitations. It analysed 24 introductions from one journal and one publication year, so the results cannot be generalized to other journals or to student writing as a whole. It examined published texts only, without drafts, reviewer feedback, or interviews with the writers, so the reasons behind the writers' choices, including the absence of counter-claiming, remain untested. It also coded the presence and type of moves and not how persuasively they were developed. Future research could compare submitted and published versions of the same introductions, interview the writers, include several journals, and assess the quality of the niche as well as its presence.

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