
A Genre-Based Investigation of Move Structure in Literature Review Sections of Applied Linguistics Research Articles

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ABSTRACT

The Literature Review (LR) section has been comparatively under-researched in genre-based studies, especially when it comes to published journal articles in Applied Linguistics, a genre that has been described as rhetorically complex. Although studies on LR sections have been conducted in doctoral dissertations and master's theses at the genre level, there has been no systematic study that has introduced the frequency-based classification criteria into the study of Applied Linguistics journal articles based on the four-move model proposed by Hsiao and Yu (2012). The purpose of this study was to describe the rhetorical move structure of the LR sections in Applied Linguistics research articles, to identify which moves are mandatory, conventional, and optional, and to compare the results with other studies conducted in similar situations (theses and dissertations). The data source consisted of a purposive sample of 10 articles from the areas of Applied Linguistics research field published between 2021 and 2026. The LR sections were analyzed in terms of the four-move analytical framework developed by Hsiao and Yu (2012): Move 1 (Conceptualizing Themes in a Field), Move 2 (Integrating Previous Works), Move 3 (Relating Previous Works to the Current Study), and Move 4 (Advancing to One's Own Research). All LR sections were analyzed sentence by sentence and the moves and steps were categorized according to the frequency-based criteria developed by Kanoksilapatham (2005, 2011) as obligatory (100%), conventional (60–99%) and optional (less than 60%). The findings showed that all four moves had to be made in all parts of the corpus; therefore, there was a high level of genre stabilization in the LR sections of Applied Linguistics journal articles. On the step level, five steps were considered obligatory, five were considered conventional, and one was considered optional, where gap-indication (Step 3.2) and source integration (Step 2.1) were the steps that were most consistently achieved. Unlike Sumayo and Tulus's (2021) thesis corpus, which yielded a discipline-specific step, no other steps beyond Hsiao and Yu's model were found. The results provide a genre description of LR conventions in Applied Linguistics and have implications for the teaching of academic writing in Applied Linguistics, especially for novice researchers and EFL/ESL learners.

Keywords: Genre Analysis, Literature Review, Rhetorical Moves, Applied Linguistics, Research Articles, Move Structure

1. INTRODUCTION

In every research work, the Literature Review (LR) section is an extremely important component. Yet, it has been noted that conducting the process can lead to many researchers being theoretically and practically confounded, bored, and disorganized (Galvan & Galvan, 2017). This is clearly true, particularly for the novice researcher and graduate students. Therefore, writing literature reviews is regarded as a tough, problematic and time-consuming work by novice researchers (Mohammed & Ahmed, 2019).

Academic genres offer valuable tools for research into communication conventions, social practices, and values within a discipline and research community (Bondi & Hyland, 2006). Research articles are a particularly valuable genre for these investigations since they have been through a strenuous review process, making them 'valorized and ratified by the very fact of being published' (Johns & Swales, 2002, p. 13). The genre-based study of the underlying schematic structure (the organization of moves and steps) of articles and sections has been used by many researchers, especially those influenced by Swales (1990, 2004). Schematic structure is known to reflect a text's purpose and, ultimately, the social expectations for a text, as described by Tardy & Swales (2008).

The genre-based approach has been used in many subjects such as Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (Basturkmen, 2009; Lim, 2010; Oztürk, 2007; Yang & Allison, 2003), Art History (Tucker, 2003), Education (Lim, 2010), Geology (Dressen, 2003), Management (Lim, 2006), Medicine (Li & Ge, 2009; Nwogu, 1997), Biomedicine (Dubois, 1997), and Social Sciences (Brett, 1994; Holmes, 1997; Lewin et al., 2001). In spite of this wide scope, genre studies have focused primarily on the Introduction, Methods, and Discussion sections. The LR section is a genre distinct from other sections and is a rhetorically complex genre, which has received relatively little scholarly attention (Kwan, 2006; Hsiao & Yu, 2012; Sumayo & Tulud, 2021).

The present study investigates the four-move model proposed by Hsiao and Yu (2012) to come up with a first systematic and genre-based description of the LR sections in a corpus of ten peer-reviewed research articles from the field of Applied Linguistics. The corpus consists of 10 articles published from 2021 to 2026 in reputable journals such as *Frontiers in Psychology*, *BMC Psychology*, *Heliyon*, and *PLOS ONE*, which are chosen for their source reliability, structural demarcation (LR sections are clearly labeled), and timeliness. The study aims to answer the following questions: (1) What are the moves and their associated steps that are found in Applied Linguistics journal article LR sections; (2) what are the frequency-based, obligatory, conventional, and optional moves and steps; and (3) is there a difference between the move patterns found in Applied Linguistics journal articles and the previously mentioned move patterns found in graduate thesis writing.

Move is a functional term. Researchers Kwan (2006) and Hsiao and Yu (2012) were the first to investigate the genres of writing literature reviews. Sumayo and Tulud (2021) used the model developed by Hsiao and Yu to 30 Master's theses in the field of Social Sciences in the Philippines and found that the writers were lacking in integrating and relating previous works to the current research study, and they discovered another step — announcing the conceptual framework — which was not mentioned in the published models of LR. Although the LR section is a genre that has not received much attention in the field of Applied Linguistics, it is also an important section for it, as well as for Applied Linguistics pedagogy, because an understanding of its schematic structure is crucial for both genre theory and pedagogical practice.

This study aimed to gain insight into the function of moves and into the adherence of writers to specific moves and steps in the specific genre of the Applied Linguistics research article. The study was performed with the aim of giving a rhetorical structure of published journal articles to help researchers and academic writing instructors understand the rhetorical pattern used in literature reviews in this discipline.

The uniqueness of this study is in its analysis of the literature review sections of recent peer-reviewed journal articles in Applied Linguistics and its systematic application of the four-move model and frequency-based classification criteria developed by Hsiao and Yu (2012). This focus is important since the majority of

previous investigations have focused on postgraduate theses and not published research articles.

1.1. Research Objectives

In alignment with the research questions above, the following objectives guide this investigation:

- i. To recognize and examine how researchers could frame the Literature Review parts of the chosen Applied Linguistics research articles based upon the four-move model proposed by Hsiao and Yu (2012).
- ii. To see how well the rhetorical moves and steps in the Literature Review sections of Applied Linguistics research articles have been implemented in the research articles according to the frequency-based criteria of Kanoksilapatham (2005, 2011) as obligatory, conventional and optional.
- iii. To compare the move structure of Applied Linguistics journal article LR sections with findings from comparable studies, particularly Sumayo and Tulud (2021) and Kwan (2006).

1.2. Research Questions

To examine the rhetorical move structures of LR sections in Applied Linguistics research articles, this study raised the following research questions:

- i. How do researchers arrange the literature review section in the selected articles according to Hsiao and Yu's (2012) four-move framework?
- ii. To what extent do LR sections in Applied Linguistics research articles demonstrate obligatory, conventional and optional rhetorical moves and steps according to Kanoksilapatham (2005, 2011)?
- iii. What are the similarities and differences between the rhetorical move structure of Literature Review sections of research articles in Applied Linguistics and that reported by Sumayo and Tulud (2021), and Kwan (2006)?

1.3 Significance of the Study

The present study adds greatly to the field of genre-based research, Applied Linguistics, and academic writing pedagogy. It goes beyond the previous research in that it moves from graduate theses to published journal articles, the most highly valued and protected form of disciplinary communication. In terms of methodology, it shows how the framework of Hsiao and Yu (2012) could be applied to a new context of text type and can be highly diagnostic by applying standard criteria that can facilitate the direct comparison of commonly used publication formats across academic levels. In practice, the research will enable writing instructors and supervisors to have a holistic understanding of the literature review in terms of the rhetorical conventions that are assumed and make them more explicit, thus giving them an empirical basis for their writing instruction. It is particularly useful for new researchers and ESL/EFL students who are trying to navigate the academic course of English in order to become more persuasive, discipline-appropriate, and effective writers of reviews.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Hsiao and Yu's (2012) Four-Move Model. This study is conceptualized through Hsiao and Yu's (2012) rhetorical moves and steps model for Literature Reviews, comprising four moves. This model was selected as the primary analytical framework because it was designed specifically for the LR genre, unlike Swales' (1990) CARS model, which was developed for Research Article Introductions and because it has been validated in empirical studies, including Sumayo and Tulud (2021) and Nguyen (2014). The four-move structure is as follows:

Move 1: Conceptualizing Themes in a Field Writers introduce built concepts, identify patterns, or

categorize themes in the articles reviewed, through four steps: (1.1) Presenting field knowledge/theory/belief/practices; (1.2) Identifying subfields; (1.3) Organizing major themes to be reviewed; and (1.4) Surveying research activities.

Move 2: Integrating Previous Studies on the Themes Writers integrate previous works through: (2.1) Grouping and drawing ideas from source materials; and (2.2) Critiquing the quality of research discussed.

Move 3: Relating the Previous Studies to the Current Study Writers establish a relationship between the synthesis and the proposed study through: (3.1) Claiming relevancy; and (3.2) Indicating a gap.

Move 4: Advancing to Personal Research This move occupies the niche created in Moves 1–3 through: (4.1) Announcing the aim; (4.2) Announcing the research design; and (4.3) Announcing the theoretical position or framework.

In addition to Hsiao and Yu's (2012) framework, Kwan's (2006) Swalesian model and Swales' (1990, 2004) CARS model provide a broader theoretical context for triangulating analytical decisions and interpreting findings within the established tradition of genre-based research.

2.2 The Concept of Genre and Move Analysis

The study of the rhetorical organization of academic texts is fundamentally rooted in the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) tradition of genre analysis. Swales (1990) defines a genre as a class of communicative events shared by a discourse community that possesses a common set of communicative purposes. Central to this definition is the concept of schematic structure, which Swales characterizes as the internal organization of a text into 'moves' and 'steps.' A move is a functional unit that performs a specific communicative act, while a step is a lower-level element that provides the specific content to realize that move (Swales, 2004).

The most influential framework for analyzing these structures is the Create a Research Space (CARS) model (Swales, 1990). Originally developed for Research Article Introductions, the CARS model posits three primary moves: establishing a research territory, establishing a niche, and occupying the niche. While successfully applied to introductory sections across disciplines (Nwogu, 1997; Dressen, 2003; Holmes, 1997), scholars have noted that the LR section possesses a distinct rhetorical complexity requiring a more specialized analytical lens (Kwan, 2006). Move analyses have been progressively conducted from Swales' foundational work. Bhatia (1993), Lorès (2004), and Santos (1996) studied research abstracts; Kwan (2006) and Hsiao and Yu (2012) pioneered LR genre studies; Nwogu (1997), Lim (2006), and Tulud (2017) explored methods sections; Bunton (2005) and Yang and Allison (2003) studied conclusion sections.

2.3 Critical Review of Key Prior Studies

2.3.1 Genre-Based Research on Literature Review Sections

Unlike the relatively linear progression of Introductions, LR sections are often characterized by their cyclical and thematic nature (Swales, 2004). Kwan (2006) addressed the limitations of applying the CARS model directly to the LR by proposing a refined framework for LR sections in Applied Linguistics doctoral theses, identifying three broad moves: Establishing a Theoretical Framework, Surveying Prior Research, and Identifying a Niche.

Hsiao and Yu (2012) further developed genre-based analysis of LR sections by proposing a four-move model capturing a more detailed and pedagogically applicable description of the LR structure. Their model accounts for the surveying and niche-building phases as well as the integration of prior works and the advancement to one's own research position. Abdullah (2018) revealed that move-sensitivity must be implanted and developed earlier to help students write compelling LR sections. Jian (2010) stated that surveying and summarizing previous research is one of the essential move structures allowing learners and novice writers to cope with structuring problems in LR writing.

Sumayo and Tulud (2021) applied Hsiao and Yu's (2012) model to 30 LR sections from Social Sciences master's theses in the Philippines. Their findings revealed no general pattern or universal format in writing LRs across theses; most writers utilized Move 1 and Move 4, but were deficient in Moves 2 and 3. A new step, 'Announcing the Conceptual Framework' was detected, which was not mentioned in other publication models, suggesting that rhetorical options in LR sections are greatly influenced by the disciplinary and institutional context.

2.3.2. Disciplinary Variation in Move Structures

Research on moves has increasingly focused on the frequency and sequence of moves, which are found to be extremely sensitive to disciplinary conventions (Hyland, 2006). The 'soft' sciences like Applied Linguistics and Sociology have been found to employ more expansive and evaluative moves than the 'hard' sciences that tend to be more descriptive and linear (Peacock, 2002; Samraj, 2002). Key move cycles were found to occur significantly more in Language and Linguistics than in Physics or Environmental Science in Peacock's (2002) large-scale study across seven disciplines. Although writers in different disciplines might use the same steps to make moves, some steps may be used much more frequently than others, as noted by Lim (2010). In a genre-based study of Discussion sections in Dentistry, Basturkmen (2012) revealed that meaningful disciplinary divergence can be seen more at the step and sub-step level than at the move level. The results of the study were the same as those of Basturkmen's (2009) Applied Linguistics study in a Dentistry Corpus, which revealed that the differences in step frequency were also more diagnostic, besides the move-level patterns. The methodological implication for the present study is that analysis should not only be conducted on the level of the move, but also on the level of the step and step-sequence in order to describe the disciplinary norms in a faithful manner. Although these insights are gained, the literature around the move structure of the LR as a separate entity in research articles is still limited compared to the vast amount of research in the Discussion and Introduction sections.

2.4 Critical Synthesis of Key Studies

Five important studies are critically discussed in the next section to determine their contribution and limitations in relation to LR genre research in Applied Linguistics. According to Kwan (2006), the schematic structure of literature reviews in Doctoral Theses consists of three parts:

The conversation surrounding literature review (LR) genre analysis fundamentally shifted with Kwan's (2006) exploration of doctoral theses in Applied Linguistics. By analyzing ten texts, Kwan moved past the introduction-centric focus of Swales' classic CARS model to propose a specialized three-move framework: Establishing a Theoretical Framework, Surveying Prior Research, and Identifying a Niche. A defining insight from this work was that surveying prior research is rarely linear; instead, it operates as an internally recursive, cyclical structure built around thematic clusters. While the discipline-specific nature of this study successfully isolated local academic norms, its reliance on a small graduate student corpus limits its generalizability to the highly competitive space of peer-reviewed journal articles. Furthermore, because Kwan did not mathematically quantify move frequencies, statistical comparison remains difficult—a limitation that the present inquiry explicitly targets.

Building directly on this foundation, Jian (2010) shifted the focus closer to the research article format by evaluating literature reviews published in both Chinese and international Applied Linguistics journals. This analysis revealed structural patterns highly consistent with Kwan's model, finding that summarizing prior research was the dominant move while gap-spotting steps were used far more systematically in international publications than in local Chinese ones. Despite its relevance, Jian's inclusion of Chinese-medium papers created an unaddressed cross-linguistic variable, as local rhetorical conventions frequently deviate from global English-medium expectations. More importantly, because this study predated the development of later four-move frameworks, it lacked the specialized analytical tools

required to capture modern niche-advancing and data-integration functions.

To capture that full rhetorical trajectory more comprehensively, Hsiao and Yu (2012) expanded prior frameworks into a four-move model by introducing a dedicated final move: Advancing to One's Own Research. By assessing literature reviews from high- and low-rated postgraduate theses in Taiwan, their work provided a fine-grained, four-step tool for conceptualizing fields and a three-step tool for mapping how authors establish their own research agendas. Where this model falls short, however, is its contextual origin in EFL student thesis writing. The assumption that authors announce their explicit research designs within the literature review chapter rarely holds for published journal articles, where such details are reserved for the methodology section. Additionally, their reliance on qualitative descriptions over frequency-based criteria left the distinction between optional and obligatory steps unresolved.

Adding a crucial cultural and linguistic dimension to this timeline, Nguyen (2014) monitored how Vietnamese TESOL postgraduates constructed their thesis literature review chapters. Navigating both Kwan's and Hsiao and Yu's models, the study showed that these writers heavily favored conceptualizing themes over relating prior research to their current study, leaving gap-indication steps significantly underrepresented. Nguyen linked this discrepancy to broader Confucian rhetorical traditions that subtly discourage student writers from overtly critiquing established scholars or pointing out gaps. This cultural variable acts as a major confound when trying to translate thesis norms into global journal article writing, where editorial gatekeeping strictly enforces overt gap-building regardless of an author's cultural background. Most recently, Sumayo and Tulud (2021) provided a direct methodological parallel to modern research by applying Hsiao and Yu's model to 30 Social Sciences master's theses in the Philippines. Their findings highlighted that while student writers readily conceptualize themes and advance to their own work, they consistently struggle to critically integrate source materials or justify their study through gap-spotting. Interestingly, they identified a unique localized step—Announcing the Conceptual Framework—that was missing from the original 2012 model. However, because this dataset was limited to a single institutional context and captured novice student writing, it cannot faithfully represent the high-level rhetorical sophistication expected in international, peer-reviewed Applied Linguistics journal articles.

2.5 Research Gap

Notwithstanding that genre-based academic writing research is on the rise, the present study finds a number of gaps in the research. The literature reviews section of the Applied Linguistics published journal articles is not sufficiently explored in most of the existing studies. Moreover, it is not known if the writers of journal articles adopt consistent structures such as that proposed by Hsiao and Yu (2012), and whether moves are obligatory or optional. Past studies have also not attempted to employ this full four-step approach in articles written in English, employing quantified classification criteria. These gaps are addressed in this study by conducting an analysis of a corpus of ten studies on Applied Linguistics research articles, using validated move-tagging procedures. Finally, this investigation is, to my knowledge, the first systematic description of its kind, and it builds on previous graduate student writing work in the hallowed realm of peer-reviewed journal articles.

The current study examines literature review sections of recent peer-reviewed research articles on Applied Linguistics in contrast with previous studies, which mostly focused on literature reviews in doctoral theses, master's theses, or student writing contexts (Kwan, 2006; Hsiao & Yu, 2012; Nguyen, 2014; Sumayo & Tulud, 2021). Moreover, it follows Hsiao and Yu's (2012) full four-move model with clear, frequency-based standards for the classification of moves and steps as mandatory, conventional, or optional. This study builds on the current genre research by limiting the analysis to published journal articles, instead of student writing, and offers empirical evidence about the rhetorical organization of literature reviews within current Applied Linguistics scholarship.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study is genre-based descriptive qualitative research that examines the rhetorical organization of the literature review section in research articles of the Applied Linguistics genre. The approach followed in the study is descriptive, not evaluative, based on the methodological approach of Sumayo and Tulud (2021). It is not to evaluate the quality of sections of literature reviews, but to analyze and identify the rhetorical organization of them within a given framework.

3.2 Data Sources

In this study, two main sources of data were used. The first source was ten literature review sections obtained from research articles in the peer-reviewed Applied Linguistics journals. The second material was the four-move model of Hsiao and Yu (2012) for the LR section, which served as the analytical framework for rhetorical move structure analysis.

The LR sections of research articles (hereafter ARLR) served as the genre and corpus of the study. A corpus of ten articles is consistent with the sample sizes employed in comparable genre-based studies of individual article sections (Basturkmen, 2009, 2012; Lim, 2010; Nwogu, 1997; Sumayo & Tulud, 2021). The purpose of the study was not to obtain a statistical generalization of the rhetorical move structures, but to make an in-depth analysis of the rhetorical move structures based on the genres. The corpus size is relatively small. This corpus was formed by using purposive sampling in peer-reviewed journals that published the research in Applied Linguistics and language education. The articles chosen were published in journals covered under *Frontiers in Psychology*, *BMC Psychology*, *Heliyon*, *PLOS One*, *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, *LEARN Journal*, *Pakistan Journal of Languages and Translation Studies*, and *NECTFL Review*. The articles were scanned from 2021 to 2026, and those with a clearly defined Literature Review section for move analysis were chosen. Articles that do not include a separate Literature Review section or papers not following the typical research article format were not included. The articles were selected based on three primary criteria:

- **Source Reliability:** Articles were drawn from high-impact, peer-reviewed journals in Applied Linguistics to ensure the texts represent the valorized and ratified conventions of the field (Johns & Swales, 2002).
- **Structural Demarcation:** Only articles containing a clearly labeled 'Literature Review' section were included, to ensure comparability across the corpus.
- **Recency:** The corpus is limited to articles published between 2021 and 2026 to reflect contemporary rhetorical practices in the field.

Each article was read completely, as also validated in Basturkmen (2012) and Sumayo and Tulud (2021), before the LR was subjected to move analysis, a procedure that is crucial to prevent misclassification due to inadequate contextualization of the article. In order to make the corpus transparent and replicable, the ten articles that make it up are reproduced in full in Appendix A. To improve transparency and to enable replication of the study, complete bibliographic details of all selected articles (author(s), year of publication, journal from which the article was taken, article title, and corpus code assigned to each article (ARLR1–ARLR10) are given in Appendix A. Each article was given a corpus code (from ARLR1 to ARLR10) relating to the articles in Appendix A for confidential analysis and coding.

3.3 Data Analysis Procedure

Utilizing the rhetorical move model of Hsiao and Yu (2012), the researcher analyzed the ten ARLR sections for the presence or absence of the four moves and their constituent steps. Following the procedures described by Basturkmen (2009, 2012), each sentence or group of sentences was tagged based on its primary communicative intent. Identification of elements relied on text comprehension and linguistic

evidence, including textual divisions (paragraphing), discourse markers, and new lexical references (Ding, 2007). The procedure involved four distinct stages:

- **Initial Survey:** A preliminary reading of the entire corpus was conducted to identify the general boundaries and thematic flow of each LR section.
- **Move Tagging:** Using Hsiao and Yu's (2012) four-move framework, the researcher identified the moves and steps present in each text, repeatedly reviewing and revising initial classifications.
- **Frequency and Status Determination:** Following Swales (2004) and Kanoksilapatham (2005, 2011), the frequency of each move and step was calculated. Moves appearing in 100% of the articles were classified as *obligatory*; those appearing in 60–99% as *conventional*; and those below 60% as *optional*.
- **Sequence Mapping:** The order of the moves was mapped to determine whether the discipline follows a linear progression or a cyclical pattern, as suggested by Kwan (2006).

4. FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the move analysis conducted on ten Applied Linguistics research article Literature Review sections (ARLR1–ARLR10) using Hsiao and Yu's (2012) four-move framework. The analysis was conducted sentence by sentence, with each unit of text coded according to its primary communicative function. Results are organized around the four moves and their constituent steps, followed by a summary frequency table. The discussion of each move draws on coded excerpts from the corpus and interprets the findings in relation to prior genre-based studies, particularly Sumayo and Tulud (2021), Kwan (2006), and Jian (2010).

4.1 Introductory Texts

A preliminary reading of the corpus revealed that introductory texts defined here as brief orienting statements preceding the main body of the LR section were present in 6 out of 10 articles (60%). These introductory texts were typically one to three sentences in length and served to signal the scope, purpose, or organization of the review to follow. For example, ARLR2 opens its LR with the statement: "This study reviewed previous research and theoretical frameworks, aiming to examine the above-mentioned underlying variables that may shape and influence perceived English proficiency among EFL learners," thereby introducing the focus and scope of the review section. In contrast, four articles (ARLR1, ARLR5, ARLR6, and ARLR9) moved directly into thematic subheadings without an overarching introductory statement. This finding aligns broadly with Sumayo and Tulud (2021), who found introductory texts in 17 out of 30 (56.67%) thesis LR sections, and with Nguyen (2014), who similarly reported introductory texts in TESOL master's theses.

4.2 Move 1: Conceptualizing themes in a field

Move 1, which serves the function of conceptualizing themes in the field, was present in all ten articles in the corpus (10/10; 100%), suggesting its obligatory status within the present corpus as a move-level feature of the Applied Linguistics LR genre. This move establishes the theoretical and conceptual territory within which the study operates, and it was realized through four steps of varying frequency and classification, as detailed below.

Step 1.1: Presenting field knowledge, theories, beliefs, or practices related to the current study(10/10 Obligatory).

This step was classified as obligatory, appearing in all ten articles (100%). It was among the most consistently and extensively realized steps in the corpus, functioning as the opening rhetorical gesture of every LR section analyzed. Writers used it to define key theoretical constructs, introduce foundational

frameworks, and present the prevailing knowledge base of their respective fields. This was used by the writers to outline important theoretical concepts and to set the conceptual bases for the study. For instance, ARLR1 brought up the Involvement Load Hypothesis, and ARLR10 identified foreign language speaking anxiety as the main concept of the study.

Step 1.2: Identifying subfields in the major field (9/10 Conventional). Step 1.2 was classified as conventional, appearing in 9 out of 10 articles (90%). Only ARLR2 did not employ this step, moving directly from broad definitions of English proficiency to individual thematic subsections without explicitly demarcating disciplinary subfields. In the remaining nine articles, writers identified the internal divisions or component categories within their topic area. The step was usually accomplished through the delineation of categories or subcategories in a larger field. For instance, ARLR3 categorized SRL into several types of strategies and ARLR4 focused the discussion on various ways of conducting needs analysis.

Step 1.3: Organizing major themes to be reviewed for the current study (10/10 Obligatory). Step 1.3 was classified as obligatory, present in all ten articles (100%). Every writer in the corpus used explicit subheadings, numbered section headings, or clearly demarcated thematic divisions to organize the content of their LR sections. This transparency of organization is a good disciplinary norm for journal articles in Applied Linguistics. ARLR3 has three subsections numbered, ARLR4 has four subheadings that correspond to four needs analysis models, and ARLR6 has four thematic headings under which the review is organized. Even the shortest LR in the corpus, ARLR10, clearly marks off content under two thematic headings: “Definition of Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety” and “Impact of Foreign Language speaking anxiety on students.”

Step 1.4: Surveying Research Activities(10/10 Obligatory).

Step 1.4, present in all ten articles (100%), was classified as Obligatory. This is done by systematically presenting the research activity parts of cited studies, their aims, participants, methods, results, and conclusions. It constitutes the substantive body of each LR section and is usually the longest step in terms of the number of words in the raw text. This is most thoroughly illustrated in ARLR8, which reports findings, methodology and implications from six previous review articles on AI-assisted language learning. For instance, ARLR5 conducted a review of a number of meta-analytic studies on Problem-Based Learning and summarized the findings and implications for learning.

4.3 Move 2: Integrating Previous Studies on the Themes 4.3 All ten articles (10/10; 100%) mentioned move 2, which is obligatory. This is not just reporting, where writers incorporate, synthesize, and sometimes assess previously discussed studies.

Step 2.1 – Grouping and Drawing Ideas from Source Materials (10/10 Obligatory). Step 2.1 was marked as obligatory (100% of 10 articles). This will involve writers getting past the phase of just quoting and summarizing to actual synthesis. For example, ARLR3 synthesized previous research on SRL and SBI, while ARLR1 compared the explanatory value of the ILH and TFA frameworks.

Step 2.2 - Critiquing the quality of research discussed (7/10 conventional). Step 2.2 was rated conventional and was found in 7 of 10 articles (70%). In three articles (ARLR2, ARLR9, and ARLR10), there was no explicit critique used. If one was, three types of critique were identified: contradiction-pointing (ARLR6, e.g., Bahník and Vranka (2017) did not find any significant correlation between growth mindset, grit and academic achievement); inconclusive-evidence (ARLR3, e.g., empirical evidence regarding efficacy of SBI in English language acquisition is inconclusive); scope-limitation (ARLR7, e.g., most studies were conducted in the field of sciences or mathematics).

4.4 Move 3: Relating Previous Studies to the Current Study There was a strong obligatory evidence for Move 3, as it was reported in all ten articles (10/10; 100%). The importance of this in a rhetorical context lies in the fact that it is the threshold where the writer has gone from discussing the general field to the need for and importance of their own research.

Step 3.1: Making the claim of Relevancy to the current study (9/10 Conventional). Step 3.1 was categorized as conventional and had 9 out of 10 articles (90%). The latter step was not used for only ARLR1, with the others going straight from the description of the TFA framework to the announcement of research questions. Three patterns were identified in the execution of this step: addressing prior research suggestions (ARLR2), underscoring the importance of the area (ARLR3), and emphasizing relevance to a particular educational setting (ARLR7).

Step 3.2: Indicating a Gap (10/10 Obligatory). Step 3.2 was the most rhetorically prominent in Move 3 and was classified as obligatory, appearing in all ten articles (100%). Three strategies for establishing gaps were identified: underscoring neglected research areas (ARLR2), stressing restricted contextual coverage (ARLR7), and noting contradictory results in earlier studies (ARLR6).

4.5 Move 4: Advancing to Personal Research

Move 4 was present in all ten articles in the corpus (10/10; 100%), confirming its obligatory status as a move-level feature of the Applied Linguistics LR genre. However, the realization of this move at the step level displayed considerable variation, with its three constituent steps exhibiting different frequencies and classifications.

Step 4.1: Stating the aim of the research (7/10 Conventional). Step 4.1 was classified as conventional, present in 7 out of 10 articles (70%). Three articles-ARLR5, ARLR6, and ARLR10-did not include an explicit statement of research aims or research questions within their LR sections, preferring instead to present these in separate Introduction or Methodology sections. In the seven articles where this step appeared, it was typically realized through explicit research question announcements positioned at the close of the LR section. ARLR8 provides the most structured example, announcing three explicitly numbered research questions at the end of its review. ARLR9 announces two research questions directly in the LR section.

Step 4.2: Stating the Research Design or Research Process (1/10 Optional). Step 4.2 was classified as optional, appearing in only 1 out of 10 articles (10%). Only ARLR1 employed this step within the LR section, briefly describing the research procedure: ARLR1 briefly summarized its research process by detailing the choice and assessment of vocabulary learning activities.

Step 4.3: Stating the Theoretical Position or Theoretical Framework (8/10 Conventional). Step 4.3 was classified as conventional, present in 8 out of 10 articles (80%). Two articles, ARLR8 and ARLR10, did not explicitly announce a theoretical framework within the LR section. In the eight articles employing this step, it took the form of explicitly naming and foregrounding the theoretical anchor for the study. ARLR2 provides a clear instance, naming Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Ryan and Deci as the guiding framework. ARLR9 explicitly foregrounds Swales (1990) CARS model and Kwan's (2006) framework as theoretical anchors. ARLR5 anchors its study in constructivism and the Savery and Duffy (1995) PBL framework.

4.6 Move Sequencing Patterns

The literature review papers were examined and the results showed that most of the papers were linear in their move-sequencing along the framework of Hsiao and Yu (2012). The majority of texts were transferred from Move 1 (Conceptualizing Themes in a Field) to Move 2 (Integrating Previous Works), then to Move 3 (Relating Previous Works to the Current Study) and finally to Move 4 (Advancing to One's Own Research). There were no patterns found of extensive cycles between Moves 1 and 2, although some recursive

movement was noted when writers switched back and forth between presenting field knowledge and synthesizing previous studies. In general, these results indicate that the literature review in research articles in the field of Applied Linguistics has a relatively stable and linear rhetorical structure.

4.7 Summary of Occurrences of Rhetorical Moves and Steps

Table 1 presents the frequency, percentage, and classification of all moves and steps identified across the ten-article corpus.

Table 1

Occurrences of Rhetorical Moves and Steps in Literature Review Sections of Applied Linguistics Research Articles (N=10)

Rhetorical Moves and Steps	Frequency (N=10)	Percentage (%)	Classification
Move 1: Conceptualizing themes in a field			
Step 1.1: Presenting field knowledge, theories, beliefs, or practices related to the current study	10	100%	Obligatory
Step 1.2: Identifying subfields in the major field	9	90%	Conventional
Step 1.3: Organizing major themes to be reviewed for the current study	10	100%	Obligatory
Step 1.4: Surveying research activities	10	100%	Obligatory
Move 2: Integrating previous Studies on the Themes			
Step 2.1: Grouping and drawing ideas from source materials	10	100%	Obligatory
Step 2.2: Critiquing the quality of research discussed	7	70%	Conventional
Move 3: Relating Previous Studies to the Current Study			
Step 3.1: Claiming relevancy to the current study	9	90%	Conventional
Step 3.2: Indicating a	10	100%	Obligatory

gap			
Move 4: Advancing to Personal research			
Step 4.1: Stating the aim of the research	7	70%	Conventional
Step 4.2: Stating the research design or research process	1	10%	Optional
Step 4.3: Stating the theoretical position or theoretical framework	8	80%	Conventional

Note. 100% = Obligatory; 60–99% = Conventional; below 60% = Optional; 0% = Non-evident move. Classification criteria adapted from Kanoksilapatham (2005, 2011) and Swales (2004), as applied in Sumayo and Tulud (2021).

5. Discussion

5.1. Move 1: Conceptualizing themes in a field

The findings relating to Move 1 demonstrate the central role of conceptualization in Applied Linguistics Literature Reviews. The universality of Step 1.1 confirms what Kwan (2006) and Sumayo and Tulud (2021) found in their respective corpora: presenting field knowledge is the single most fundamental rhetorical act of the LR genre, regardless of discipline or text type. Similarly, the frequency of occurrence of step 1.2 corresponds to what Hsiao and Yu (2012) described as helping readers trace the organization of ideas and sources. This result corroborates the result of Sumayo and Tulud (2021), who got Step 1.3 in 29 out of 30 (96.67%) LR sections, and the result of Hsiao and Yu (2012) that thematic organization strengthens readers' tracing ability for topic classification. The consistent presence of Step 1.4 in all ten articles is comparable with Sumayo and Tulud (2021), where they found the step in 26/30 (86.67%) thesis LR sections, which shows their critical role in establishing empirical credibility.

5.2. Move 2: Integrating Previous Works on the Themes

This mandatory position is in contrast to the optional position of Step 2.1 (13/30; 43.33%) for thesis LRs in Sumayo and Tulud (2021), which indicates that journal articles require a more forceful rhetorical argument for the genuine incorporation of previous work. The result indicates that it was expected from the Applied Linguistics journal writers that they not only reported previous research conducted but also synthesized it in a coherent research narration. This synthesis demonstrates the disciplinary focus on building knowledge, rather than the creation of isolated studies. This prominence might therefore be associated with the nature of research articles as they are persuasive and for publication, for which an author has to prove his/her knowledge of an area and create a niche for his/her research work. The conventional status of Step 2.2 highlights the fact that, although critique is a good disciplinary norm in journal article LRs, it is not used in every instance.

5.3. Move 3: Relating Previous Works to the Current Study

The high frequency of Step 3.1 confirms Kwan's (2006) observation that claiming relevancy is a near-obligatory rhetorical act in Applied Linguistics academic writing. The obligatory status of Step 3.2 is one of the most significant findings of this study, contrasting starkly with Sumayo and Tulud (2021), who found gap-indicating in only 8/30 (26.67%) thesis LR sections. This difference confirms that journal article

writers are considerably more systematic in gap-building than thesis writers, reflecting the higher argumentative standards of peer-reviewed publication. In the discipline, creating a research gap seems to be one of the most important processes in creating new research and showing its value to the current academic dialogue. This is a mandatory requirement, suggesting that rhetorical expectations of novelty and contribution are highly valued in published research articles.

5.4. Move 4: Advancing to One's Own Research

The conventional rather than obligatory status of this step suggests that Applied Linguistics journal writers treat the LR as a space primarily for establishing theoretical groundwork and identifying gaps, with explicit aim-announcement sometimes reserved for other sections, contrasting with Sumayo and Tulud's (2021) finding that Step 4.1 appeared in 23/30 (76.67%) thesis LR sections. The near-absence of this step in the Applied Linguistics journal article LR corpus is not surprising: in the research article format, research design information is conventionally reserved for the Methodology section. This reflects a clear genre distinction between journal article and thesis LR conventions, as Sumayo and Tulud (2021) found Step 4.2 in 6/30 (20%) thesis LR sections, where design information is sometimes visualized through diagrams presented within the LR chapter.

No entirely new steps beyond Hsiao and Yu's (2012) model were identified in the present corpus, in contrast to Sumayo and Tulud (2021), who identified Step 4.4 (Announcing the Conceptual Framework) as a new step. This absence suggests that Applied Linguistics journal article LRs follow Hsiao and Yu's model more closely than Social Sciences thesis LRs. Usually, no new discipline-specific steps are given because journal articles are highly conventionalized. Research articles are subjected to strict peer review and editorial processes of the scientific publication that are designed to ensure that they comply with scientific standards and conventions. As such, writers can use "known" rhetorical patterns rather than add new ones. This finding implies that not only can the model be applied to the literature survey of Applied Linguistics journals, but it can also be applied to the literature of other disciplines, such as education, science, and foreign languages, with certain modifications. Furthermore, the rhetorical trends of Applied Linguistics as a discipline are mostly congruent with the existing model by Hsiao and Yu (2012). Thus, Objective 2 was not achieved by finding new steps, but rather by establishing the sufficiency and stability of the framework in this subject area.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary of Findings

This study set out to provide a genre-based description of the rhetorical move structure of Literature Review sections in Applied Linguistics research articles, applying Hsiao and Yu's (2012) four-move framework to a corpus of ten published journal articles. The analysis revealed the following schematic structure. At the move level, all four moves in Hsiao and Yu's (2012) model were confirmed as obligatory (100%) in the Applied Linguistics journal article LR, appearing in all ten articles. This finding indicates a high degree of genre stabilization and confirms that Applied Linguistics journal writers consistently follow the four-move rhetorical trajectory: conceptualizing the field, integrating prior works, relating those works to the current study and advancing to one's own research.

At the step level, five steps were classified as obligatory (Steps 1.1, 1.3, 1.4, 2.1, and 3.2), five as conventional (Steps 1.2, 2.2, 3.1, 4.1, and 4.3), and one as optional (Step 4.2). No step was entirely non-evident. The most significant findings include: the obligatory status of Step 2.1 (Grouping and drawing ideas), which was optional in Sumayo and Tulud's (2021) thesis corpus; the obligatory status of Step 3.2 (Indicating a gap), which was largely absent in Sumayo and Tulud's corpus; and the optional status of Step 4.2 (Announcing research design), which reflects the genre conventions of journal articles. No new steps beyond Hsiao and Yu's (2012) model were identified, suggesting that Applied Linguistics journal article

LRs adhere more closely to the prescribed four-move model than Social Sciences thesis LRs.

6.2 Implications for Educational Practice

The theoretical insights gained from this research suggest practical implications for all concerned in the field of pedagogy, specifically in the realm of academic writing. This study has identified a common move structure that can be explicitly learnt in research writing and thesis writing classes. This aligns with the rhetoric literature reviewing paradigm suggested by Kwan (2006) and Hsiao and Yu (2012), which found that the knowledge of common patterns in literature reviewing helps writers as academic readers and writers. Students can produce more effective and discipline-specific LR sections if they are familiar with the conventions of literature review, such as move structure and its linguistic realisations.

Obligatory, conventional, and optional steps can also be used to inform teaching priorities. Emphasis can be given to the required parts of the process (presentation of field knowledge, integration of prior research, identification of gaps in research), and the conventional and optional parts of the process can be taught as rhetorical options that would change depending on the conventions of the discipline and genre. This awareness can assist novice researchers in writing Literature Reviews that are more like those published in the Applied Linguistics research article.

Furthermore, Sumayo and Tulud (2021) in their previous study found that the students engaged in the writing of the MA thesis spend too much time presenting their field knowledge and insufficient time on writing higher-order synthesis; therefore, teachers could design tasks that focus on the development of higher-order synthesis skills. Students could be strengthened in critical thinking by engaging in training workshops where they have to criticize research papers based on methodological appropriateness or theoretical adequacy, which would further strengthen the quality of their LR writing.

6.3 Implications for Future Research

As far as future research is concerned, the researchers recommend further research to be conducted in other disciplines to see if the discrepancy in the use of the moves also exists there or if there are specific characteristics of the tailoring of LR sections in different disciplinary contexts. In addition, further investigation of the same corpus with other move models, e.g., Kwan's (2006) model, can be conducted to find out which one is the most comprehensive model.

In addition, future studies could investigate the lexico-grammatical means (tense, modality, hedging) by which writers execute individual moves and steps. A study of language-level patterns combined with a study of move analysis would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which writers in Applied Linguistics rhetorically enact language-level moves. Finally, a comparison study between two classes of disciplines – Applied Linguistics and a more related discipline (Education) or a more distant discipline (Biomedicine) – would be useful to give a more theorized description of the relationship between disciplinary epistemology and LR rhetorical structure.

Importantly, future studies with larger corpora would be useful to increase the generalizability of results and to validate the patterns identified in this study and determine if they hold across a larger research article corpus.

6.4 Limitations of the study

The study has some limitations that should be taken into consideration for the interpretation of the findings. By, using an existing move framework (Hsiao and Yu, 2012), identification of moves and steps was a subjective process, which may lead to a certain level of subjectivity in coding. Future research might overcome these limitations by adding more and larger corpora and by using inter-coder procedures with reliability to increase methodological rigor. Also, the study used no inter-rater reliability or second-coder validation processes when identifying the moves.

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APPENDIX A

Corpus of Analyzed Articles (ARLR1–ARLR10)

The ten research articles used for this genre-based investigation were selected from the corpus. For systematic analysis and confidential reporting in this study, each article was given a corpus code (ARLR1–ARLR10). Codes are the same as the ARLR used in the Findings section (Section 4). The articles were chosen from peer-reviewed Applied Linguistics journals published between 2021 and 2026 based on the

following factors: applicability of the articles, demarcation in the article (the presence of Literature Review sections), and the recency of the articles.

- ARLR1.** Eskandari, Z., Khatin-Zadeh, O., Farsani, D., & Banaruee, H. (2024). The effect of the type of task on EFL learners' vocabulary learning: An investigation of the Technique Feature Analysis (TFA). *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15, Article 1398324. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1398324>
- ARLR2.** Kao, P.-C. (2024). Exploring the roles of academic expectation stress, adaptive coping, and academic resilience on perceived English proficiency among EFL learners. *BMC Psychology*, 12, Article 196. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-024-01700-7>
- ARLR3.** Zeng, M., Chen, X., & Liu, Y. (2025). A bibliometric and content analysis of strategy-based instruction and self-regulated learning in second or foreign language teaching (1994–2024). *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16, Article 1535442. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1535442>
- ARLR4.** Al-Mohammadi, N., & Alkhaldi, T. (2024). A needs analysis of ESP courses in colleges of art and design: Theoretical models and practical implications. *Heliyon*, 10(11), e32014. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e32014>
- ARLR5.** Guo, Q., Jamil, H., Ismail, L., Luo, S., & Sun, Z. (2024). Effects of problem-based learning on EFL learning: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLOS ONE*, 19(12), e0315480. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0315480>
- ARLR6.** Alikhani, M., & Ghanizadeh, A. (2021). The role of English as a foreign language learners' language mindset and academic motivation in their grit. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, 50(6), 1367–1389. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10936-021-09777-4>
- ARLR7.** Choosri, C., & Intharaksa, U. (2021). Relationship between mindset and English language learning achievement and behavior: A study of Thai EFL university students. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, 14(1), 200–222.
- ARLR8.** Li, R., & Luo, J. (2025). Learner emotions in AI-assisted ESL/EFL learning: A systematic review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 16, Article 1540661. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1540661>
- ARLR9.** Naqvi, S., & Shah, S. K. (2021). Rhetorical structure of literature review sections in Pakistani PhD theses: A genre-based move analysis. *Pakistan Journal of Languages and Translation Studies*, 9(2), 1–24.
- ARLR10.** Lucero, A. (2021). Overcoming foreign language speaking anxiety: Practical approaches in the classroom. *NECTFL Review*, 87, 65–90.