A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF RHETORICAL STRUCTURES IN ENGLISH L1 AND L2 UNDERGRADUATE DISSERTATION INTRODUCTIONS

ANÁLISIS COMPARATIVO DE LAS ESTRUCTURAS RETÓRICAS EN LAS INTRODUCCIONES DE TRABAJOS DE FIN DE GRADO EN INGLÉS L1 Y L2

<https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_misc/mj.202511384>

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Abstract

Undergraduate dissertations (UDs) are the final academic piece of work undertaken by undergraduate students and their purpose is to evaluate mastery of the skills acquired throughout the curriculum. They include an introduction that, among other rhetorical functions, sets the general style of the entire dissertation, presents the research context and objectives, and seeks to persuade the evaluation committee of its quality and, thus, its relevance in the academic context. Based on Swales's model (1990, 2004) for the analysis of research article introductions, we examine the rhetorical structure of UD introductions written by native and non-native speakers of English to establish whether there are differences in the rhetorical structure and the order of its moves and steps. The data analysed were retrieved from a comparable corpus of 40 introductions. Results indicate that non-native English speakers write shorter introductions with fewer steps and with a more linear rhetorical structure than their counterparts, and both groups fail to state the value of their research. Findings indicate that students require additional guidance in the writing of this academic genre.

Keywords: academic writing, undergraduate dissertation introduction, rhetorical structure, native English speakers, non-native English speakers.

Resumen

Los Trabajos Fin de Grado (TFG) son el trabajo académico final que realizan los estudiantes de grado y cuyo propósito es evaluar si se han alcanzado las competencias de la titulación. Incluyen una introducción que, entre otras funciones retóricas, establece el estilo general del documento, presenta el contexto y los objetivos de la investigación realizada, e intenta convencer al comité de evaluación de su calidad y, por tanto, de su relevancia en el contexto académico. Basándonos en el modelo de Swales (1990, 2004) para el análisis de introducciones de artículos de investigación, examinamos la estructura retórica de introducciones de los TFG escritas por hablantes nativos y no nativos de inglés para establecer si existen diferencias en la estructura retórica y el orden de sus movimientos y pasos. Los datos analizados se extrajeron de un corpus comparable de 40 introducciones. Los resultados indican que los hablantes no nativos escriben introducciones más breves, con menos pasos y con una estructura retórica más lineal que sus homólogos nativos de lengua inglesa, y ambos grupos omiten indicar la importancia de su investigación. Las conclusiones indican que los estudiantes necesitan orientación académica adicional para la redacción de este género académico.

Palabras clave: escritura académica, introducción del TFG, estructura retórica, hablantes nativos de inglés, hablantes no nativos de inglés.

1. Introduction

Success in higher education depends on the ability to write effective texts that conform to academic conventions. The undergraduate dissertation[1] (UD) is a crucial element in students' academic life, being the final requirement to obtain their university degree and marking the transition to professional life (Lillo-Fuentes and Venegas 2020: 4-5). Writing UDs is particularly demanding, especially for students in non-Anglophone universities that require UDs to be written in English, as is the case in some Spanish universities, particularly within the degree in English studies — an interdisciplinary area of study that encompasses the English language, its literature, linguistics, teaching and cultural contexts.

The introduction of the UD (UDI) is a key section, setting the context and rationale for the research and guiding the reader through the dissertation. Its purpose is to establish the research background, define the scope and outline the structure of

the work. For examiners, the UDI often shapes their first impression of the quality of the dissertation, serving as a presentation of the research carried out (Fitriyah 2020). Effective UDIs require genre knowledge, that is, an understanding of the conventions, structure and rhetorical strategies expected in academic writing (Tardy 2009; Driscoll et al. 2020).

The Create a Research Space (CARS) model (Swales 1990, 2004) was developed to analyse research article (RA) introductions. It is widely recognised as a valuable tool for understanding how writers establish a research territory, identify a niche and present their study. Although UDIs differ from RA introductions in authorship (novice vs. expert), audience (lecturers vs. academic peers) and purpose (academic assessment vs. scholarly research contribution), the two genres share similar rhetorical goals and organisational demands, making CARS a suitable approach for examining how undergraduates engage with academic conventions. Besides, there is a general consensus that the CARS model is a valid analytical tool (Hirano 2009: 240). It is important to note that the application of the CARS model in this study is descriptive rather than prescriptive, following Swales's original intent (1990, 2004) to characterise actual rhetorical practices instead of imposing prescriptive norms; thus, the introductions of Research Articles (RAIs) have been used as a point of reference for the closely related UDIs, without functioning as a rigid prescriptive standard.

Furthermore, comparing Spanish UDIs written in English with those of Anglophone students is essential to understanding both linguistic and cultural influences on academic writing. As English-medium instruction expands in non-Anglophone contexts, identifying challenges faced by writers for whom English is a foreign or additional language (L2) can inform targeted teaching strategies and support.

This study aims to compare the rhetorical structure of UDIs written by Spanish speakers of English (English L2) and US English speakers (English L1), using a corpus-based approach guided by Swales's (1990, 2004) CARS model. It also seeks to identify differences in the sequencing of rhetorical moves and steps and to explore the influence of linguistic and cultural factors on these patterns.

To address these aims, we briefly review the CARS model and relevant literature, describe our corpus and methodology, present our analysis of English L1 and L2 UDIs and discuss the pedagogical implications of our findings.

2. Literature Review

Swales's (1990, 2004) CARS model has been extensively adapted to examine the rhetorical structure of different academic genres and sub-genres that share core

rhetorical functions. Variations of this model result from the diverse data used in empirical and theoretical research (Árvay and Tankó 2004). Thus, numerous investigations have replicated or refined Swales's original proposal in various communicative events, including master's theses (Samraj 2002; Maher and Milligan 2019), PhD dissertations (Jara 2013; Soler-Monreal 2015; Kawase 2018), monographs (Álvarez and Velasco 2016) and RAIs within various disciplines like linguistics (Sheldon 2011; Lin 2014; Rahman et al. 2017), other humanities fields (Shim 2005; Acosta 2006), natural sciences (Samraj 2002; del Saz-Rubio 2011), social sciences (Soltani and Kuhi 2023), economics (Calle 2008), engineering (Joseph et al. 2014) or even variation across disciplines (Swales and Najjar 1987). These studies often cover one or a combination of disciplines, languages and particular linguistic features.

The question of whether the structure of non-English academic texts mirrors that of English L1 texts was raised by Sheldon (2011), among others, who found that English L1 writers target the international community, Spanish L1 writers address a smaller local audience, while L2 speakers of English seek acceptance in the international community. The challenges faced by Spanish scholars when writing in English for an international audience (Mur-Dueñas and Lorés 2009; Pérez-Llantada et al. 2011) and the difficulties experienced by L2 students when writing academic genres (Bunton 2002; Cheung 2012) have also been analysed.

A number of these and other academic texts, authored by novice L1 and L2 writers, are part of the Undergraduate Macro-Genre Graduation Project (UMGGP) (Venegas et al. 2016). They share an academic register, target specialised audiences and are evaluative instruments for degree accreditation (Thompson 2013; Lee and Casal 2014). Previous cross-linguistic research on UMGGP texts, including evaluative texts written by graduate students, shows how L2 students' writing often differ from the Swales format. These variations reveal the lack of a standardised form and significant alterations in sections and organisation. Uymaz (2017) examined English L2 master's thesis introductions in literature and English language teaching written by Turkish students, finding that they commonly omit essential sections like the problem statement, the significance of the study or the literature review; additionally, these introductions fail to identify a gap in previous knowledge.

Similar results have been found in related cross-cultural studies of Spanish/English L1/L2 academic written production. Lee and Casal (2014) investigated the results and discussion sections of engineering master's theses written by English L1 and Spanish L1 students, revealing that variation in the use of metadiscoursal resources is influenced by the writers' distinct lingua-cultural contexts. Gil-Salom et al. (2008) examined Spanish L1 PhD introductions (PhDIs) in computing,

demonstrating a greater number of steps and sub-steps in different cyclical patterns than those found in English PhDIs. They suggested that complex patterns arise from the characteristics of the specific field and the candidates' need to demonstrate familiarity. Also, Soler-Monreal et al. (2011) conducted a cross-linguistic study comparing the use of rhetorical strategies by English L1 and Spanish L1 doctoral candidates. They observed that English introductions to PhD theses tend to be more complex in structure, typically following the M1-M2-M3 model, whereas Spanish introductions do not always include M2. This indicates that English-speaking candidates prioritise identifying a research gap before presenting their own work, while Spanish candidates emphasise describing their field of study.

Providing a consistent and precise account of the main characteristics of UDs is complicated by the fact that requirements vary not only across countries but also among departments within the same university. In general, however, a UD follows a structure broadly aligned with the conventions of academic research writing. They are generally expected to demonstrate original research, critical thinking and effective scholarly communication.

Although UDs are important in the university curriculum, research on this genre is relatively scarce in the literature and mainly monolingual. One reason may be the lack of comparable corpora of English L1 and L2 UDs, or the absence of prior descriptions of L1 UDs suitable for contrasting with L2 writing features. Flores and Quiñonez (2021) analysed the rhetorical structure of Spanish L1 UDIs in mechanical engineering, revealing significant deviations in the use of steps from conventional PhDIs, which Arias (2018) attributed to the applied nature of the field. Velasco and Álvarez (2019) analysed Spanish L1 UD abstracts across scientific and humanities disciplines, noting that the latter tend to focus on descriptive and contextual information, rather than on methodology, results or discussion. Finally, Venegas et al. (2016) proposed a rhetorical model for UDs based on a multi-discipline Spanish corpus, observing a consistent rhetorical structure in introductions across disciplines.

3. Materials and Methodology

3.1. Materials: Corpus Description

Our study is based on a small specialised corpus of UDs compiled within the framework of a research project aimed at analysing and comparing the rhetorical structure used by English L1 and Spanish L2 speakers of English in their UDs. It is an academic, genre-specific, monolingual, comparable, synchronic and topic-specific corpus, as it includes UDs written in English by L1 and L2 speakers

between 2015 and 2020. Its texts cover various fields related to English studies, namely applied linguistics and grammar, literature, cultural studies and the study of English as a foreign language (EFL). They have been evenly selected, with 50% corresponding to literature and cultural studies fields and 50% corresponding to applied linguistics, grammar and EFL, thereby reducing the risk of bias in the rhetorical patterns observed. All the UDs are rhetorically structured, containing at least an introduction, a body and a conclusion. They were uploaded to an open repository and are related to the aforementioned disciplines; as such, they are written under similar conditions and are therefore comparable (Moreno 2008: 35).

Based on the stated criteria, 100 texts were randomly selected from US and Spanish universities that offer free access to full-text dissertations. The inclusion of dissertations from US universities in the corpus was primarily motivated by the predominance and global influence of American English in academic publishing and higher education. The selected US universities include the University of Arizona, the Ohio State University, the University of Michigan, the College of William & Mary, Texas A&M University, the University of Utah, the University of Florida, Brown University, the University of Vermont and Brandeis University; and the Spanish universities are Universidad de Valladolid, Universidad de Salamanca, Universidad de Oviedo, Universidad de Granada, Universidad de Zaragoza, Universidad de la Rioja, Universidad de la Coruña, Universidad de la Laguna, Universidad de Málaga and Universidad de Alicante.

To avoid source bias, a maximum of three UDs were downloaded from each university repository, specifically the first three that met the inclusion criteria specified above. Finally, due to the nature of the genre studied, this is a multi-author corpus. Since we were unable to contact the authors, we used the students' names and affiliations to infer their first language, thereby maximising the likelihood of including native speakers in both groups. Thus, following Luzón (2018), we only included UDs authored by students with Anglophone names in the L1 English subcorpus and by students with Spanish names in the English L2 subcorpus. We assumed that the US students were native English speakers and that the Spanish students were proficient in EFL, as expected upon completing a degree in English studies. It was not considered necessary to anonymise the corpus, as all the texts included in the two subcorpora are publicly available through institutional repositories and written for academic assessment. No personal or sensitive data were included, and the analysis focused on rhetorical patterns, not on individual authors. This follows standard practice in corpus-based discourse studies.

Once the texts were downloaded, we manually deleted the sections that would introduce noise into our analysis, i.e. reference lists, annexes, acknowledgements

and any information related to the evaluation committees. Then, the introductory sections were extracted after having been identified by means of their own transparent headings, that is, *Introduction*. Therefore, the corpus unit for this specific study is the text corresponding to the UDIs. The comparable corpus is composed of two subcorpora: (1) English L1 texts, and (2) English L2 texts written by Spanish speakers, each comprising a total of 50 texts and 72479 and 34962 words, respectively.

Although it is a small corpus, the choice of texts and number of words meet the criteria for qualitative and quantitative representativeness for the task at hand. The quantitative representativeness was calculated a posteriori using the ReCor computer application (Seghiri 2014). Quantitative representativeness refers to the process of ensuring that a corpus's minimum size is sufficient for representation by establishing a threshold with an algorithm (N-Cor) (Seghiri 2017). ReCor analyses each subcorpus and generates two representativeness graphs. To produce these graphs, ReCor was run independently on the two UDI subcorpora. According to the ReCor data (Figures 1 and 2), the L1 subcorpus achieves representativeness with approximately 13 texts and 17000 words, while the L2 does so with 8 texts and 8000 words. In each figure, Graph A (*Estudio gráfico A*) shows the number of documents (*nº de documentos*) on the x-axis, and Graph B (*Estudio gráfico B*) shows the number of tokens (tokens), while both y-axes display lexical variation across the corpus. Blue lines reflect alphabetical order (*orden alfábetico*) and red lines indicate a random order (*orden aleatorio*).

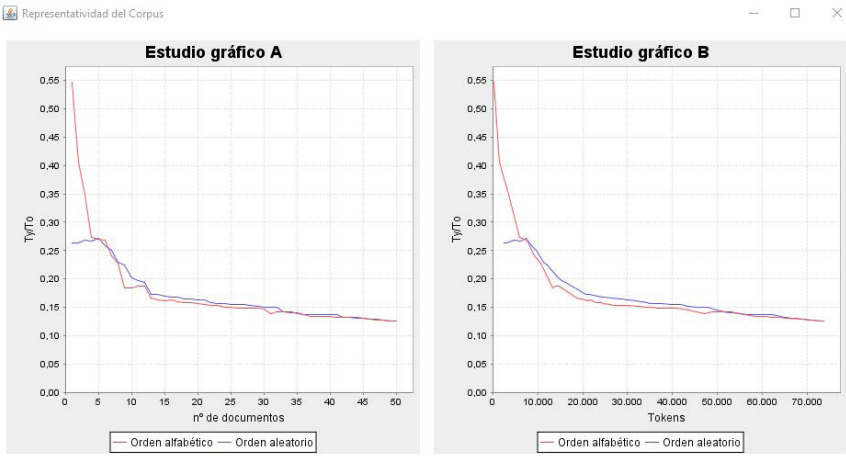

Figure 1. Representativeness: L1 (ReCor data)

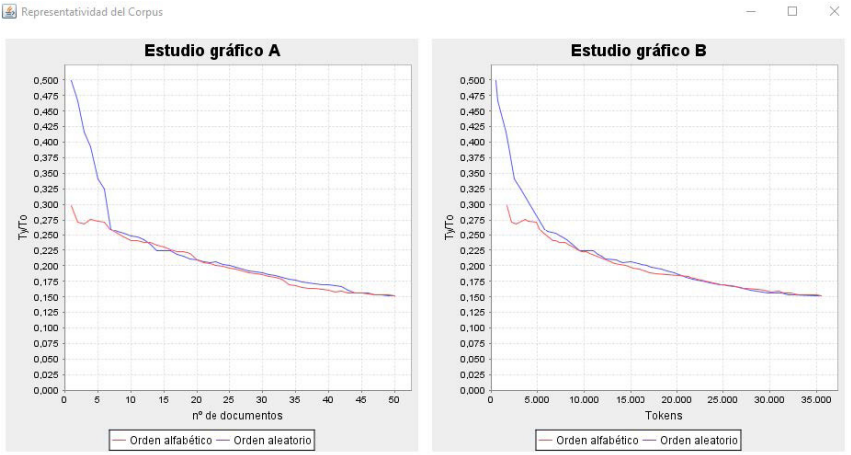

Figure 2. Representativeness: L2 (ReCor data)

Given ReCor results and the labour-intensive nature of manual rhetorical analyses, we decided to use 20 samples from each UDI subcorpus, which meets the representativeness requirements set by ReCor. Furthermore, a set of 20 random samples is a common standard for contrastive rhetorical studies. Table 1 presents quantitative information for both subcorpora.

Subcorpora	No. of texts	UD words	UD min.-max.	UDI words	UDI min.-max.	UDI/UD ratio
English L1	20	247525	4016-27554	19958	264-2198	0.08
English L2	20	170956	2785-18665	10253	208-977	0.06
Total	**40**	**418481**		**30211**		**0.07**

Table 1. Corpus quantitative data

3.2. Methodology

We applied Swales's (1990, 2004) CARS model due to its robustness in analysing academic genres like UDs, focusing on rhetorical moves central to academic discourse. The model's structure —contextualising research, justifying relevance and articulating contributions— aligns with the communicative aims of UDs, even in narrower pedagogical contexts such as undergraduate writing. The model also facilitates cross-cultural analysis, revealing how structural deviations in undergraduate texts may reflect developmental stages or cultural influences. This offers pedagogical insights for guiding novice writers. We modified CARS

model Move 1 (M1) to better reflect the specifics of UDIs and their field of study, since different disciplines adopt distinct conventions for writing introductions. Most studies propose move structures that tend to accommodate the scientific or technical disciplines, which differ from those used in the humanities (Rahman et al. 2017: 71). Furthermore, although there are similarities in the macrostructure of UDIs and RAIs, they are different genres, produced and delivered in different contexts, and with different tenors due to the authors' expertise and writer-reader relationships (Parkinson 2017). Also, UD writers are novice researchers writing for their university lecturers, whereas RA writers are experts writing for their peers.

First, a manual top-down pilot analysis was carried out on a randomly selected corpus sample of five texts to establish the rhetorical structure of the UDIs. The texts were annotated using a move-based labelling protocol, and subsequently shared and cross-checked by both researchers via a cloud-based folder. Then, both researchers independently tagged the corpus, manually identifying its moves and steps. The results were compared to reach inter-coder agreement. As functional elements may lack distinct boundaries such as punctuation, this was a complex and labour-intensive task with occasionally divergent results. In instances where a segment of text could potentially be categorised under two distinct steps, it was assigned to the step that demonstrated greater dominance or comprised a higher number of sentences. When discrepancies arose between coders, a language informant was consulted to review the case and reach a consensus, thereby establishing inter-rater reliability (Kanoksilapatham 2005; Biber et al. 2007), which refers to the measures taken to ensure a high level of agreement between the researchers responsible for tagging the corpus.

Once the comparable corpus was tagged, we retrieved data from it. First, we created separate subcorpora for each move to obtain frequency data on the number of moves and steps used by English L1 and L2 speakers. Then, we analysed the frequencies of the different rhetorical components. Finally, the sequence of moves was analysed by manually transcribing the tags in their order of appearance within each corpus file. We grouped the results and compared them with the prototypical M1-M2-M3 CARS linear sequence to determine the preferred order and possible move patterns in the L1 and L2 subcorpora.

4. Results and Discussion

Our analysis shows the complexities and distinctive rhetorical strategies used by English L1 and L2 writers. We first present the results of our pilot analysis, followed by a discussion of the sequence of moves, and conclude with a detailed contrastive analysis subdivided into the three rhetorical moves.

4.1. Pilot Analysis

The pilot analysis, grounded in a rigorous application of the CARS framework, revealed a complex structure comprising three principal moves and 18 steps (see Table 2).

Moves	Steps
M1 Establishing a territory	S1 Claiming centrality and/or S2 Making topic generalisation(s) and/or S3 Reviewing items of previous research S4 Contextualising - Personal experience/opinion S5 Contextualising - Statement without evidence
M2 Establishing the niche	S1A Counter claiming in the previous research or raising a question about it S1B Indicating a gap S1C Question raising S1D Adding to what is known S2 Presenting positive justification S3 Implicit inconsistencies preluding a gap
M3 Occupying the niche	S1 Announcing present research descriptively and/or purposively S2 Presenting RQs or hypotheses S3 Definitional clarifications S4 Summarising methods S5 Announcing principal outcomes S6 Stating the value of the present research S7 Outlining the structure of the paper

Table 2. UDI rhetorical structure (English studies)

We added two steps to M1 because we observed that, while students employed Swales's steps to establish their territory, they also contextualised their work by reflecting on personal experiences when selecting the topic (S4), and by making a statement that was not specifically supported by previous research (S5), as shown in the examples below:

> *Excerpt 1.* M1-S4. The main reason why I have chosen this topic is because multimodality was studied on a subject named English Language VII in the last course of English Studies at the University of Alicante, and it really caught my attention since it was very useful for me and I could improve my communication in oral presentations. L2#015

> *Excerpt 2.* M1-S5. […] T.S. Eliot's works, deemed outlandish at first publication, are now revered for joining an unprecedented knowledge of canon and tradition with divergent lyrical form. Through the radical ways in which these writers approached their work, they were able to destabilise the form of the traditional novel and create within literature the senses of questioning and self-awareness that seized the West in the early 20th century. L1#021

4.2. Sequence of Moves

This section compares the overall number and distribution of rhetorical moves across the two subcorpora. The English L1 subcorpus exhibited a more complex rhetorical structure, with a higher total number of moves (135) compared to the L2 subcorpus (117) (Table 3). This complexity aligns with previous research on PhDs, where Soler-Monreal et al. (2011) found a larger disparity in their analysis of PhDIs in English and Spanish, with 145 moves in the English L1 dataset and 50 in the English L2 texts. This confirms that native-English-speaking writers tend to elaborate more extensively and employ a broader range of rhetorical strategies.

Move	L1 subcorpus no. (%)	L2 subcorpus no. (%)
M1	47/135 (35)	45/117 (39)
M2	25/135 (19)	13/117 (11)
M3	63/135 (47)	59/117 (51)
Total	135 (100)	117 (100)

Table 3. Move occurrences: L1 and L2 subcorpora

M1 and M3 show high frequencies in both the L1 and L2 subcorpora, with M3 being the most common in both. These findings are consistent with previous studies focusing on novice L1 and L2 academic writing (Sheldon 2011; Soler-Monreal et al. 2011; Uymaz 2017). This highlights a shared recognition of the need to establish context and describe the research undertaken, corroborating established cross-linguistic patterns in academic writing.

The number of moves per text varies significantly, ranging from 4 to 12 in English L1 UDIs and from 3 to 11 in L2 texts. Again, Soler-Monreal et al. (2011) found greater variation in their corpus, with the English L1 introductions ranging from 3 to 26 and the Spanish L1 from 2 to 9. This suggests that students acknowledge the importance of providing ample data and effectively articulating the specifics of their investigations.

As Table 4 shows, both subcorpora consistently employ M1 and M3 (100%), demonstrating students' recognition of the importance of providing sufficient data to support their research and describing the investigation undertaken in line with other cross-linguistic studies (Soler-Monreal 2015). M2 is present at lower frequencies, with English L1 speakers using it in 70% of the UDIs, compared to 35% for English L2 writers. This marked disparity in the frequency and realisation of M2 —particularly its underrepresentation among L2 writers— reveals a critical challenge for novice academic writers operating in a second language. L2 students often bypass the niche-establishing move, transitioning directly from background

to research description. This suggests both a transfer of L1 rhetorical habits and a lack of familiarity or confidence in engaging with prior literature.

Move	English L1 no. (%)	English L2 no. (%)
M1	20/20 (100)	20/20 (100)
M2	14/20 (70)	7/20 (35)
M3	20/20 (100)	20/20 (100)

Table 4. Move frequencies: L1 and L2 subcorpora

These findings contradict the model proposed by Venegas et al. (2016) for UDIs, which claims that M2 is prototypical for both linguistics and literature UDs. The absence of M2 in our corpus is likely related to novice writers' difficulty in identifying weaknesses in previous literature and posing questions that require answers. Although the literature on UDIs emphasises the necessity of M2, M2 is more prevalent in English texts than in other languages (Frederickson and Swales 1994). This M2 omission among Spanish learners of English suggests a transfer of L1 patterns into L2 writing. Furthermore, in non-competitive research communities, where students aim to meet the expectations of their supervisors and committee members (Soler-Monreal et al. 2011), M2 is often deemed unnecessary (Kwan 2006). The introduction should include specific moves that ensure a smooth transition of ideas throughout the section and serve the important purpose of engaging readers' interest (Suryani et al. 2015). However, deviations exist in the sequencing of moves among students compared to proficient users of academic English.

Following del Saz-Rubio (2011), Table 5 presents the move structures in the English L1 and L2 subcorpora, providing further insight into students' rhetorical awareness. Approximately 25% of the L1 samples strictly follow the canonical M1-M2-M3 sequence, reflecting a conventional approach, while this pattern is absent in the L2 subcorpus, where no examples of the strict prototypical CARS model are found. However, contrastive studies examining novice writing across various disciplines yielded different results. For instance, Soler-Monreal et al. (2011) found that 30% of the Spanish L1 introductions followed Swales's archetypical model, while none of the English L1 PhDIs did. Additionally, Ono's (2017: 485) study on literature PhDIs written by English L1 and Japanese L1 candidates reported that although the M1-M2-M3 rhetorical structure was preferred, it often varied depending on the subject matter, regardless of the language.

This deviation from the prototypical model could be attributed to the same factors that Hirano found in her research, namely "cross-linguistic/cross-cultural reasons" (2009: 244). Furthermore, considering that we are analysing texts written by undergraduates, it is possible that their supervisors did not require adherence to this structure.

	English L1 subcorpus			English L2 subcorpus		
	Move sequence	**No. texts**	**%**	**Move sequence**	**No. texts**	**%**
Preferred CARS model	M1-M2-M3	5	25	M1-M2-M3	0	0
CARS linear structure without M2	M1-M3	5	25	M1-M3	9	45
CARS linear structure with cyclicity	M1-M2-M1-M3	2	10	M1-M2-M1-M3	1	5
	M1-M2-M1-M2-M3	1	5	M1-M2-M1-M2-M1-M3	1	5
				M1-M3-M2-M3	1	5
CARS linear structure with cyclicity, without M2	M1-M3-M1-M3	1	5.0	M1-M3-M1-M3	3	15.0
No specific pattern with cyclicity	M1-M3- M2-M1- M2-M1- M3	1	5.0	M1-M2-M1-M3-M1-M2-M3-M1-M3	1	5.0
	M1-M3- M1-M3- M2-M3	1	5.0	M2-M1-M2-M1-M2-M3	1	5.0
	M1-M2-M3-M2-M3	1	5.0	M3-M1-M3	1	5.0
	M1-M2-M1-M3-M2-M3	1	5.0	M3-M1-M2-M3	1	5.0
	M3-M1-M2-M1-M3	1	5.0	M3-M2-M1-M3-M2-M3	1	
	M1-M2-M3-M2-M3-M1-M2-M3	1	5.0			
Total		**20**	**100**		**20**	**100**

Table 5. Move sequences: L1 and L2 subcorpora

A closer look at Table 5 reveals a significant correspondence between the UDIs and the general CARS progression in a linear sequence, with 50% of L1 and 45% of L2 samples adhering either to the strict linear structure M1-M2-M3 or to a variant that preserves the sequential order but omits M2, i.e. the M1-M3 sequence.

Most English L1 (95%) and English L2 (80%) students begin their UDIs with M1, indicating adherence to the conventional practice of establishing the research field under discussion. Additionally, all introductions conclude with M3, reflecting that these novice writers recognise the importance of concluding their introductions with a description of the research being conducted. These findings align with those obtained by Bunton (2002) and Soler-Monreal et al. (2011) for PhDIs, and with those of Lin (2014) for RAIs.

The remaining CARS structures (15% L1 and 15% L2) follow a cycling configuration, as defined by Lin (2014) and Swales (1990). Most introductions are cyclical (50% L1 and 55% L2), which is generally consistent with previous findings by Futász (2006), Lin (2014), Kawase (2018) and Soler-Monreal et al. (2011) on RAIs in literature and linguistics, linguistics PhDIs and related areas. Cyclicity involves the repetition of one (2/L1, 4/L2), two (5/L1, 6/L2) or three moves (3/L1, 1/L2). As in Lin's (2014) work, two-move repetition is the most frequent pattern, with M1-M3 cyclicity occurring most often (3/L1, 5/L2), followed by M1-M2 (1/L1, 2/L2) and M1-M2-M3 (3/L1, 0/L2). Our results differ from those of Bunton (2002), who observed that M1-M2 was the most common sequence and M1-M2-M3 the least common, and with Swales's (1990) findings, who linked cyclicity mainly to M1 and M2.

Several factors can explain move recurrence. Swales (1990: 158) suggests that the probability of a cycling configuration increases with the length of the introduction; additionally, certain disciplines, particularly the social sciences, tend to exhibit more cyclicity. Soler-Monreal et al. (2011: 6) propose that students may use cyclicity to demonstrate their reading and research efforts to their supervisors and committee members. Jara (2013: 84), in his study of PhDIs, suggests that these phenomena may arise from the absence of restrictions in the introductory section, the need for a detailed explanation of the research problem, or, what seems more applicable in our case, the inexperience of students as academic writers.

Structures with no specific pattern represent 30% of both subcorpora, with none exceeding 5%. Furthermore, these patterns range from three-move to nine-move patterns, with recycling configurations.

4.3. Move Analysis

This section provides a detailed analysis of the three moves, focusing on a comparative study between English L1 and L2 subcorpora.

4.3.1. *Establishing a Research Territory (M1)*

Although M1 was present in all samples from both subcorpora, we observed differences in the use of its constituent steps when comparing the English L1 and L2 subcorpora. We modified this move by adding two steps to Swales's original model (S4 and S5, see Table 2). Table 6 shows the M1 results with the percentages of occurrences of each step.

In the L1 subcorpus, we found a recurrent use of S3-*Reviewing items of previous research* (75%), which indicates that most native-English-speaking writers chose to refer to previous studies to anchor their own research. Over 50% of UDs

use S2-*Making topic generalisation* (55%), while 50% contextualise the topics with statements lacking supporting evidence (S5). The remaining steps are less frequently used.

In the L2 subcorpus, students use M1 to open the UD introduction section, with S2-*Making topic generalisation* being their preferred step (50%). It is noteworthy that one of the added steps, S5 (*Contextualising - Statement without evidence*), appears in 45% of dissertations. Whenever L2 students use S5, they do not review the previous research (S3); thus, they make claims unsupported by specific research, probably due to a limited familiarity with academic conventions or difficulty accessing documented sources.

Subcorpora	M1-S1 No. (%)	M1-S2 No. (%)	M1-S3 No. (%)	M1-S4 No. (%)	M1-S5 No. (%)
English L1	6/20 (30)	11/20 (55)	15/20 (75)	5/20 (25)	10/20 (50)
English L2	5/20 (25)	10/20 (50)	7/20 (35)	3/20 (15)	9/20 (45)

Table 6. M1 steps: Contrastive analysis

The most relevant difference between the L1 and L2 subcorpora is observed in S3, which indicates a lower importance of this step among L2 undergraduates (35%) compared to L1 students (75%). This seems to be caused by the added difficulty of researching and reading in a second language, even for advanced learners of English, compared to English L1 speakers. Both English L1 and L2 students use S2 and S5 at similar frequencies. The presence of S5, indicating a lack of citation of other authors' work, suggests that students in both groups have not yet fully mastered citation conventions and are still novice writers rather than expert scholars. The added steps (S4, S5) appear with comparable frequencies across both subcorpora.

4.3.2. *Establishing the Niche (M2)*

English L1 writers used five distinct steps to establish the niche of their introductions (Table 7). Of the 14 UDs that include M2, nine (64%) chose to give a positive justification for the selected topic (S2), with the second most common option being the raising of a question (S1-C, 43%), followed by indicating a gap in research or knowledge (S1-B) and counterclaiming previous research (S1-A), which were used in 29% of UDs.

We have already noted that most UDIs written by English L2 learners omit M2, which serves to connect the broader research area (M1) with the specific focus of their study (M3). Only 35% of these texts include M2, primarily by indicating a gap (S1B, 86%). This may be because students perceive this step as the simplest way to establish a niche, given that it apparently requires less

authority and experience than other steps that demand comprehensive knowledge of previous literature (S1A, S1C, S1D, S3) and confidence in the argumentative strategies (S1A, S2, S3). Notably, there is an absence of S2-*Presenting positive justification* and S3-*Implicit inconsistencies preluding gap,* as these steps require sound arguments (S2) and thorough familiarity with previous research (S3). The absence of M2 should not be interpreted as a flaw, but rather as a genre-specific adaptation reflecting the UDI function as an academic evaluation instead of a contribution to a competitive research community, that is, it constitutes a specific characteristic of UDIs.

Subcorpora	M2 no. (%)	M2-S1 A no. (%)	M2-S1 B no. (%)	M2-S1 C no. (%)	M2-S1 D no. (%)	M2-S2 no. (%)	M2-S3 no. (%)
English L1	14/20 (70)	4/20 (20)	4/20 (20)	6/20 (30)	2/20 (10)	9/20 (45)	
English L1		4/14 (29)	4/14 (29)	6/14 (43)	2/14 (14)	9/14 (64)	
English L2	7/20 (35)	1/20 (5)	6/20 (30)		1/20 (5)		
English L2		1/7 (14)	6/7 (86)		1/7 (14)		

Table 7. M2 Steps: Contrastive analysis
Note. M2 is used in 14 L1 files and 7 L2 files.

The contrastive analysis reveals that S3-*Implicit inconsistencies preluding gap* was not used in any introduction, as its inherent difficulty poses a challenge for novice writers regardless of whether they are L1 or L2 users of English. In contrast, the preferred strategy in the L1 corpus was S2, with 64% of the L1 introductions establishing a niche by providing a positive justification for the chosen line of study. Interestingly, this strategy was not used in any L2 introduction. Within M2, a relevant percentage (86%) of English L2 students employed the S1B-*Indicating a gap* strategy, while the use of other steps was rare or non-existent. Although the reasons for this pattern are not entirely clear, it may be suggested that L2 writers adopt this approach to avoid "direct confrontation with a particular researcher" and pursue "a more secure and potentially practical endeavour" (Árvay and Tankó 2004: 85).

4.3.3. *Occupying the Niche (M3)*

M3 rhetorical structure includes seven steps to narrate how to occupy the niche, which English L1 undergraduates used to varying extents (see Table 8). Most of them chose to present a research question or hypothesis (S2, 75%) and summarise their methods (S4, 65%), with a similarly high percentage introducing the research (S1, 65%). Fewer included paper structure details (S7, 40%) or defined terms for

reader clarification (S3, 30%), while only a small number discussed main outcomes (S5, 20%) or emphasised the importance of their research (S6, 20%). Álvarez et al. (2016) agree that the primary difficulties in M3 arise from insufficient information on the study's approach, expected results and limitations.

Subcorpora	M3-S1 no. (%)	M3-S2 no. (%)	M3-S3 no. (%)	M3-S4 no. (%)	M3-S5 no. (%)	M3-S6 no. (%)	M3-S7 no. (%)
English L1	13/20 (65)	15/20 (75)	6 /20 (30)	13/20 (65)	4/20 (25)	4/20 (20)	8/20 (40)
English L2	17/20 (85)	5 /20(25)	3/20 (15)	10/20 (50)	2/20 (10)	2/20 (10)	12/20 (60)

Table 8. M3 steps: Contrastive analysis

In the L2 subcorpus, 85% of students preferred to announce their research descriptively and/or purposively (S1). This high frequency results from the fact that this is the simplest way to present their research in a context, as most writers omitted M2. The next most common steps were S7-*Outlining the structure of the paper* (60%) and S4-*Summarising methods* (50%). Explicit hypotheses or research questions (S2, 25%) and clarifying definitions of the concepts used (S3, 15%) were infrequent, reflecting the limited inclusion of these elements by English L2 writers. Surprisingly, both announcing principal outcomes (S5) and stating the value of the present research (S6) were rare (10%), which may be attributed to a lack of understanding regarding the expectations for UDIs, the low importance given by students to appraising their work, or the absence of a final reflection that would allow students to summarise key findings and positively evaluate their research.

The most unexpected finding in the comparison between the L1 and L2 subcorpora is the low frequency of steps S6 and S5. This finding suggests that students tend to avoid engaging in complex discussions or self-evaluations highlighting salient aspects of their own work. Instead, they prefer alternative strategies, such as describing their work (S1), formulating a hypothesis or research questions (S2) or discussing the methods used (S4). Both subcorpora showed a clear preference for these steps, although with certain differences. English L1 undergraduates preferred S2, while English L2 undergraduates tended to use S1. A possible explanation for the low frequencies of S6 and S5 is that the writers are students rather than established authors accustomed to promoting their own work. Finally, it should be noted that English L2 students used step S7-*Outlining the structure of the paper* more frequently (60%) than their L1 counterparts (45%), likely because this step is quite standard in terms of content and language, making it easier to write.

5. Conclusion

Using Swales's (1990, 2004) CARS model, this study conducted a contrastive analysis of UDIs written by English L1 and L2 speakers to determine whether there are differences in their rhetorical structure patterns in comparison to the established RAI standards, since this is the genre described in the literature that comes closest to the one under analysis.

Regarding the rhetorical structure of the UDIs, our findings shed light on how English L1 and L2 undergraduates structure their texts. Although most UDIs conform to Swales's move and step model for RAIs, their sequence and distribution vary considerably between the two subcorpora:

- Complexity and sequence. UDIs written by L1 students show a more complex organisation of the information presented, exhibiting a close affinity with the M1-M2-M3 sequence of the CARS model. In contrast, this model is not reflected in English L2 UDIs, which may be due to cross-linguistic and/or cross-cultural factors (Hirano 2009), or simply not being required by supervisors.
- Adherence to general structure. Nearly 50% of the texts in both subcorpora follow the general linear sequence, although with some deviations (M1-M2-M3 or M1-M3) and/or cyclicity. This recurrence of moves can be attributed to the inexperience of these untrained writers.
- Omission of M2. M2 is frequently omitted, especially in L2 UDIs. This tendency may be linked to the nature of the genre: UDs belong to non-competitive research communities (Soler-Monreal et al. 2011), where students may not feel compelled to identify research gaps.
- Step-specific preferences. When we examined each move independently, we found that in M1, English L1 writers prefer to anchor their research with references to previous studies, whereas English L2 writers tend to make unsupported generalisations. In M2, about 70% of L1 writers use this move to provide positive justifications, while only 35% of L2 students do so, often opting instead to indicate a knowledge gap and avoiding direct references to other scholars or explicit explanations of their choices. Finally, when stating where their research fits in (M3), English L1 writers commonly present research questions or hypotheses, while L2 writers describe their own research without formulating specific research questions or hypotheses. In neither group did the students specify their main findings or evaluate their study.

The main implication of these findings is that novice writers, especially L2 learners, need further extensive supervised reading and explicit instruction in

writing UDs, particularly their introductions and the rhetorical patterning of these texts. Although formal rhetorical knowledge may be considered *simplistic genre knowledge*, as opposed to *nuanced genre knowledge* (Driscoll et al. 2020), it remains fundamental for acquiring the other three dimensions of genre knowledge (Tardy 2009). Without such guidance, students might adopt the simplest approach to demonstrate to their supervisors and evaluation committee members that they can complete their UDs, resulting in UDIs that do not fully conform to the rhetorical standards of the genre. This view aligns with John's (2011: 65) recommendations for genre-based writing instruction, advocating that L2 students should start with genre analysis, understanding structure, relationships and contexts before moving on to critique. Developing specific teaching materials for L2 UD writing would contribute to improving academic guidance in this task.

Another important point concerns the need to distinguish between a non-standard yet acceptable use of the rhetorical structure of UDIs and a "local use" characteristic of English L2 writers. This issue was raised by Lee and Chen (2009) when discussing whether novice writers should use their "local flavour" or adopt "expert-like writing". We agree with them that academic writing should aim for "international intelligibility and maximum acceptability" (Lee and Chen 2009: 292). Accordingly, the L1-L2 variations identified in our description of the rhetorical structure of UDIs may be considered acceptable, provided they do not compromise the intelligibility and acceptability of UDs in their respective discourse communities. These differences underscore the importance of developing genre awareness in academic writing instruction, recognising genres as flexible and evolving, rather than fixed and prescriptive.

Our research faces certain methodological limitations. In corpus-based studies, representativeness and availability are always challenges, and the use of larger corpora would allow for more fine-grained analyses and more reliable extrapolation. Additionally, cultural and other contextual factors play an important role in shaping how rhetorical structures are used across different linguistic communities. Moreover, the inherent diversity among L2 learners poses a challenge to the generalisation of findings. Future research could further explore field variation within English studies UDIs to deepen the understanding of rhetorical structures in undergraduate dissertations. Similarly, comparing Spanish UDIs written in English with those written in Spanish by students of Hispanic studies would offer another valuable area of research. All these questions indicate the need for further research on this topic, as well as other linguistic aspects, such as grammatical, phraseological and lexical features of UDIs.

Author Contributions

This article is the result of a joint effort by both authors. All stages of the study —design, theoretical framework, qualitative analysis, drafting and revision of the manuscript— were carried out in collaboration. The only tasks undertaken individually were the compilation and initial annotation of the subcorpora: Isabel Pizarro Sánchez was responsible for the English L2 subcorpus, while Leonor Pérez-Ruiz compiled and annotated the English L1 subcorpus. Subsequently, the annotations were collaboratively reviewed and discussed to achieve interrater reliability.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation [PID2020-114064RB-I00] (Isabel Pizarro Sánchez). Leonor Pérez-Ruiz declares no specific funding for this research.

Notes

1. While undergraduate students in Spain are required to complete an undergraduate dissertation (*Trabajo Fin de Grado*, TFG) as an integral component of their degree programme, in the United States, such a requirement is often associated specifically with graduating with honours. This culminating project is variously termed across US higher education institutions: it is referred to as an honors thesis at the University of Arizona and the University of Utah, undergraduate thesis at the Ohio State University, thesis at the University of Michigan, and honors project at the College of William & Mary, to name a few.

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Received: 24/02/2025
Accepted: 28/07/2025