

Move Strategies and Interactional Metadiscourse in EFL and ESL Doctoral Literature Reviews: A Corpus-Based Study

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ABSTRACT

As a key site of academic argumentation, the literature review (LR) chapter requires writers to move beyond summarising prior studies and strategically construct a research niche through rhetorical and linguistic choices. Accordingly, this study investigates how doctoral writers in EFL and ESL contexts construct LR chapters through rhetorical move strategies and interactional metadiscourse. Employing a comparative descriptive design with quantitative support, the study analyses a corpus of 30 LR chapters from doctoral theses using Kwan's (2006) move-based framework and Hyland's (2005) interpersonal model of metadiscourse. The findings revealed that both EFL and ESL writers predominantly employed strategies that assert confirmative claims about previous research, indicating a shared emphasis on consolidating existing knowledge. However, EFL writers demonstrated greater use of counter-claiming, gap-indicating, and relevance-establishing strategies, suggesting a more explicit effort to justify research niches. In contrast, ESL writers relied more on confirmative reporting of prior studies, reflecting a comparatively descriptive rhetorical orientation. Analysis of interactional metadiscourse showed that evidential markers constitute the most frequent category in both corpora, highlighting the central role of citation in establishing academic credibility. Attitude, hedges, and booster's markers occurred with moderate frequency, whereas engagement markers were used least frequently, indicating the predominantly impersonal nature of LR chapter writing. Overall, the findings suggest that doctoral writers in both contexts largely adhered to shared academic conventions while displaying subtle differences in rhetorical emphasis. The study contributes to genre and academic discourse research by demonstrating how move strategies and

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KEYWORDS:

Contrastive Analysis
ESL and EFL Doctoral theses
Metadiscourse features
Move analysis

CITATION:

Bikash, C. T., Ilyana, J., & Fatin Nabila, A. R. (2026). Move Strategies and Interactional Metadiscourse in EFL and ESL Doctoral Literature Reviews: A Corpus-Based Study. *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH)*, 11(6), e004051. <https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v11i6.4051>

metadiscourse resources interact in the construction of research niches within LR chapter. Pedagogically, the findings underscore the importance of integrating genre awareness, citation practices, and stance management into doctoral writing instruction to support more effective scholarly positioning and critical engagement with the literature.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by providing an integrated corpus-based analysis of rhetorical move strategies and interactional metadiscourse in EFL and ESL doctoral literature review chapters. It offers comparative evidence on how these discourse resources jointly support research niche construction and academic positioning in doctoral writing contexts.

1. Introduction

Scholarly interest in doctoral theses and their linguistic and rhetorical characteristics has increased considerably over the past few decades (Sun & Xiao, 2023). Doctoral writers are expected to produce original contributions to knowledge within their disciplines and, in doing so, must persuade supervisory committees that their work meets established academic standards of originality, rigour, and scholarly significance (Paltridge & Starfield, 2020; Kamler & Thomson, 2014). The evaluative worth of doctoral theses, therefore, depends not only on the robustness of their empirical claims but also on their adherence to discipline-specific linguistic and rhetorical conventions that construct academic credibility (Loghmani et al., 2020).

Among the constituent chapters of a thesis, the LR chapter is often regarded as one of the most challenging for doctoral writers to produce. A substantial body of research has shown that novice academic writers frequently struggle with expressing criticality and establishing an evaluative stance in this chapter (Machi & McEvoy, 2009; Shahsavari & Kourepaz, 2020). This difficulty arises because the LR does not merely summarise existing studies; rather, it requires writers to synthesise, evaluate, and critically engage with prior research in order to construct a coherent and informed academic argument (Akindele, 2008; Bruce, 1994; Bitchener & Banda, 2007; Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Shahsavari & Kourepaz, 2020). Thus, the LR plays a central role in identifying gaps, synthesising knowledge, and positioning the current study within an ongoing scholarly conversation (Swales, 2004; Kwan, 2006; Ridley, 2012). However, despite its central role in doctoral research writing, many graduate students receive limited formal training in synthesising, evaluating, and critically engaging with academic literature (Boot & Beile, 2005). Consequently, the quality of LR chapter is determined not by its length but by the writer's ability to demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the field, critically evaluate and construct a persuasive argument that supports the research problem (Boot & Beile, 2005). Since the identification of a research gap is fundamentally a critical act, examining how writers employ rhetorical strategies and linguistic resources to express evaluation, caution, certainty, and authorial stance can enhance our understanding of how criticality is linguistically constructed in doctoral thesis writing especially in the LR chapter (Swales, 2004; Hyland, 2005; Kwan, 2006; Charles, 2006). Gap construction is therefore an inherently evaluative and persuasive activity that requires writers to guide readers toward recognising the need for further investigation (Swales, 2004; Hyland, 2005; Koutsantoni, 2004). This process is accomplished through a range of linguistic resources that signal insufficiency, uncertainty, or limitation in

existing knowledge (Koutsantoni, 2004; Stotesbury, 2003). Previous studies have shown that writers often struggle to synthesise multiple sources, evaluate previous research critically, and construct coherent arguments that justify the need for further investigation (Boote & Beile, 2005; Hart, 2008; Ridley, 2012). Rather than engaging analytically with the literature, student writers frequently rely on descriptive summaries and extensive reporting of previous studies, resulting in weak argumentation and limited criticality (Kwan et al., 2006). This situation can be attributed to several factors. As novice researchers, doctoral students frequently have limited experience in conducting and writing comprehensive LR (Sharma, 2018). Furthermore, the synthesis and critical evaluation of relevant studies demand considerable time, effort, and analytical expertise (Casanave, 2019). These demands may be even greater for ESL and EFL doctoral writers, who must negotiate both disciplinary expectations and language-related challenges while establishing a credible academic identity within their research communities.

Previous studies have extensively examined the rhetorical organisation of academic genres. Kwan (2006), for instance, proposed a move structure model for doctoral thesis LR and identified Move 2 (Creating a Research Niche) as a key rhetorical function through which writers establish research gaps. Similarly, Bunton (2014) and Swales (1990, 2004) provided influential frameworks for analysing rhetorical moves in thesis introductions. Although recent studies have advanced understanding of move structures in academic writing and highlighted variation in rhetorical organisation across disciplines, genres, and proficiency levels, these studies have largely focused on macro-level move identification rather than the linguistic resources that realise these rhetorical functions (Saricaoglu et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2023; Depry et al., 2023). One important framework for examining these linguistic resources is metadiscourse. Metadiscourse refers to the linguistic elements through which writers organise discourse, express stance, and engage readers in the negotiation of meaning (Hyland, 2005). Recent metadiscourse research has emphasised its role in academic persuasion and stance construction (Hyland & Jiang, 2021; Peng & Zheng, 2021), yet it continues to treat metadiscourse as a global textual phenomenon without systematic mapping to specific rhetorical moves. While previous studies have examined rhetorical move structures and metadiscourse separately, relatively few have investigated how metadiscourse features are deployed to realise specific rhetorical functions within doctoral thesis LR chapters (Kwan, 2006; Hyland, 2005; Khedri, 2022, Hu 2024).

Although previous research has examined rhetorical move structures and metadiscourse features in academic discourse (e.g., Huang & Ren, 2022; Zhao et al., 2024), these studies have primarily focused on research article genres, with comparatively less attention given to doctoral thesis LR chapters. While existing work has separately investigated move structures in LR and the use of metadiscourse in academic writing, limited studies have systematically integrated these two analytical perspectives, particularly in relation to Move 2 strategies. Consequently, how metadiscourse resources realise evaluative and stance-related functions within Move 2 in doctoral LR chapters remains underexplored, especially in comparative ESL and EFL contexts. This study addresses this gap by integrating Kwan's (2006) move framework with Hyland's (2005) interpersonal metadiscourse model to examine how Move 2 strategies are linguistically realised in the LR. By focusing on authentic doctoral theses, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how rhetorical structure and linguistic resources interact in academic niche construction across different linguistic

and educational contexts, with implications for genre-based pedagogy in ESL and EFL academic writing.

1.2. Research Objectives

- i. To analyse the rhetorical move structure of literature review chapters in doctoral theses written by ESL (Malaysian) and EFL (Bangladeshi, Iranian, and Chinese) writers
- ii. To investigate how metadiscourse features are used to realise and construct research gaps within the literature review chapters of doctoral theses.

2. Literature Review

Recent research on doctoral thesis writing has developed across several interrelated strands. A substantial body of work has examined the rhetorical structure and communicative purposes of key thesis sections, particularly introductions, literature reviews, and conclusions in doctoral theses (Li & Xu, 2021; Zhang, 2023). Alongside this, emerging studies have begun to investigate the interaction between move structures and metadiscourse features in academic discourse (Hu, 2024; Peng & Zheng, 2021; Saricaoglu et al., 2021). Furthermore, Studies in this tradition have largely employed genre- and move-based frameworks to explain how thesis sections function to establish research territory, construct a niche, and articulate scholarly contribution (Bunton, 2002; Kwan, 2006; Paltridge, 2002; Swales, 2004). Contrastive genre studies have further explored cross-linguistic variation in thesis organisation, including English–Japanese and English–Spanish comparisons of thesis sections and academic writing practices (Soler-Monreal et al., 2011; Soler-Monreal & Gil-Salom, 2011). Overall, these studies move beyond structural description towards more integrated accounts of doctoral writing that consider rhetorical, interpersonal, and socio-cultural dimensions.

Donaghue and Adams (2026) demonstrate that although attention to doctoral writing has increased, relatively little research has examined pedagogical approaches specifically designed for novice doctoral researchers. In a related vein, studies on genre-based pedagogy and instructors' experiences highlight the complexity and contextual sensitivity of teaching genre awareness, indicating that effective instruction must account for disciplinary conventions as well as students' developmental trajectories into research communities (Tardy et al., 2025). Cross-cultural investigations further reveal variation in doctoral writing practices across linguistic backgrounds. These studies report systematic differences in how writers construct arguments and promote claims in thesis sections, highlighting the need for section-specific and cross-cultural analyses of academic discourse (Paltridge, 2002; Kwan, 2006; Sheldon, 2011). Similarly, research on ESL and EFL academic writing emphasises how writers negotiate genre conventions and rhetorical expectations in postgraduate thesis writing (Hyland, 2005; Bunton, 2002). Previous cross-cultural research suggests that non-native writers' use of metadiscourse is shaped by culturally embedded rhetorical conventions, which in turn influence their acquisition of English academic discourse norms (Adnan, 2009; Sheldon, 2011). Building on this line of inquiry, recent studies on ESL and EFL contexts similarly demonstrate that metadiscourse practices vary across linguistic and educational settings, reflecting differences in how academic argumentation is constructed (El-Dakhs, 2020; Gai & Wang, 2022; Abel & Saministrado, 2024). Collectively, these findings indicate that genre conventions are not uniformly acquired; rather, they are mediated by learners' linguistic backgrounds, educational experiences, and the practices of their

respective discourse communities. While previous studies have enhanced understanding of metadiscursive practices, less is known about how metadiscourse resources function in constructing research gaps within specific rhetorical moves. This limitation constrains a more nuanced understanding of how writers from different linguistic backgrounds establish research niche and construct persuasive academic arguments.

3. Method

The present study employed a descriptive comparative qualitative approach with simple quantification used in the present study allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the research phenomenon, providing insights into the similarities and differences in the rhetorical structures and linguistic features of LR chapters written by ESL and EFL doctoral writers in the area of English Language. According to Maragh-Bass et al. (2016) and St. George (2010), the descriptive-interpretive approach provides a highly flexible qualitative technique that can shed light on phenomena that researchers seek to understand.

3.1. Corpus Design

This study relied on specialised corpora derived from the LR chapters of doctoral theses in the soft sciences, specifically within the English Language discipline. The corpus consisted of a total word count of approximately 351,309 words, which was considered a reasonable corpus size for qualitative discourse analysis and comparative corpus investigation. There were two justifications for the use of a corpus of this size in the present study. First, there was a practical justification. The study involved extensive manual coding of move strategies, which required detailed and time-consuming analysis. Second, and more importantly, there was a theoretical justification. Since the 30 texts that comprised the corpus belonged to the same genre and discipline, sufficient data were generated for meaningful analysis despite the relatively small corpus size. To maintain corpus balance, texts of relatively similar disciplinary focus, genre, and academic level were selected. The comparability of the corpus was further ensured through the selection of texts from the same discipline and academic genre, thereby allowing systematic comparison of rhetorical moves and metadiscourse features across ESL and EFL doctoral writing contexts.

3.2. Sampling Procedure

The first stage of the sampling process involved selecting the discipline. The English Language discipline was chosen because it consistently included LR chapter as clearly identifiable and substantial components of thesis writing. In the social sciences, particularly in the English Language discipline, arguments are often constructed through interpretation, evaluation, and critical discussion rather than experimental certainty. Consequently, LR chapter in this discipline tends to employ rhetorical strategies and metadiscourse resources to justify the necessity of their research and establish an academic contribution. The selection of this discipline therefore ensured structural consistency and alignment with the objectives of the present study. Furthermore, the inclusion of English Language supported the broader aim of examining cross-cultural rhetorical practices in academic writing (Swales, 1990; Hyland, 2004).

The sampling technique employed in this study was purposive sampling. A total of 30 doctoral theses submitted by ESL (Malaysian) and EFL (Bangladeshi, Iranian, and Chinese) doctoral writers were selected for contrastive examination. Fifteen theses were written by ESL doctoral writers in the Malaysian context, while the remaining fifteen were written by EFL doctoral writers from Bangladeshi, Iranian, and Chinese contexts. As shown by table 1 presents the composition of the corpus used in this study. The ESL corpus comprised 200,500 words, whereas the EFL corpus contained 150,809 words, resulting in a total corpus size of 351,309 words. The difference in corpus size reflects natural variation in the length of the selected LR chapters rather than differences in the number of texts included. Nevertheless, both corpora were considered sufficiently large and comparable for the purposes of contrastive rhetorical and metadiscourse analysis. The substantial size of the corpus provided a robust dataset for examining rhetorical move strategies and interactional metadiscourse features across the two contexts.

All selected theses were completed between 2018 and 2022 as part of the requirements for the PhD degree. The theses were written in English and followed a traditional thesis structure consisting of an introduction, literature review, methodology, results, and conclusion chapters. This format was selected because it was commonly used across the discipline. The samples were selected based on their availability and accessibility. Hard-copy theses were accessed through the faculty library and the university central library, including annual collections of doctoral theses. An ethical approval letter assisted the researcher in obtaining access to the theses. Since the study focused specifically on ESL (Malaysian) and EFL (Bangladeshi, Iranian, and Chinese) doctoral writers, the nationality of the writers was identified from the biographical information provided in the thesis. This study was limited to the soft sciences, specifically the English Language discipline. Only PhD theses were included in the study, while Master's theses were excluded. The dataset consists of English Language theses collected from ESL and EFL contexts

Table 1: Description of the corpus used in the study

Category	ESL	EFL
Number of theses	15	15
Total words	200,500	150,809

Overall corpus size: 351,309 words

3.3. Data Analysis

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to analyse rhetorical move strategies and metadiscourse features in LR chapters of doctoral theses. Qualitative analysis was used to examine sentences functionally and contextually based on Kwan's (2006) framework and Hyland's (2005) metadiscourse model. Quantitative analysis involved the use of descriptive statistics, including frequency counts and percentages, to identify the distributional patterns of rhetorical strategies and metadiscourse features across ESL and EFL corpora. First, a move analysis was conducted manually using a functional discourse-analytic approach adopted from Kwan's (2006) framework. Each LR text was segmented into sentences, and the sentence was treated as the primary unit of analysis because it functions as a meaningful rhetorical unit capable of conveying a specific communicative purpose (Holmes, 1997; Dudley-Evans, 2002). All 30 LR samples were examined sentence by sentence to identify rhetorical strategies and their communicative functions.

The coding process followed a functional-semantic approach in which cognitive judgment was employed to determine the intention and boundary of each text segment rather than relying solely on linguistic forms (Bhatia, 1993; Paltridge, 1994). Items were counted only when occurring inside segments manually coded as Counter-claiming move. Each sentence was interpreted according to its local rhetorical purpose, such as “counter-claiming, gap-indicating, asserting confirmative claims about previous studies, asserting the relevance of prior research to the current study, and synthesising knowledge claims to establish a theoretical position or framework”. The identified segments were then coded according to Kwan’s (2006) Move 2 strategies. To ensure reliability in classification, the texts were read repeatedly and cross-checked where necessary, particularly when the interpretation of a sentence required verification from surrounding discourse. The coded data were then tabulated to identify the frequency and distribution of Move 2 strategies across the corpus. Descriptive statistics, including frequency counts and percentages, were used to compare rhetorical patterns between ESL and EFL doctoral theses.

The coding was conducted in two stages. First, the body of LR chapters was divided into thematic units and coded for various moves and strategies employing a functional semantic approach, that is, cognitive judgment, to identify the purpose and boundary of a text (Kwan, 2006). During the coding process, two major challenges were encountered. The first challenge was the considerable length and complexity of the LR chapters, which often contained multiple themes and overlapping rhetorical functions. The second challenge involved identifying clear boundaries between rhetorical strategies, particularly in sections where several communicative purposes were realised within closely connected stretches of text. To address these challenges, a sectional analysis approach was adopted following Kwan (2006) approach in analysing the moves and strategies in terms of these multi-themed sections. Each LR chapter was divided into thematic units according to sectional boundaries signalled by organisational features such as section breaks, headings, subheadings, and numbering systems. This procedure facilitated more systematic coding and improved the consistency of move identification across the corpus. To ensure the reliability of the analysis, inter-rater reliability procedures were employed during the coding process. The researcher and a coder independently hand-coded review the chapters using the established Move 2 analytical framework (Kwan's, 2006). The purpose of this procedure was to verify the consistency and accuracy of the coding decisions and minimise subjective interpretation during the analysis.

Second coding was conducted to identify metadiscourse features that indicate the move strategy in the LR chapters. Metadiscourse features were identified manually within sentences previously classified under Move 2 strategies. Following the move analysis, metadiscourse analysis was conducted based on Hyland’s (2005) interpersonal model, which categorises metadiscourse into interactive and interactional resources. Each linguistic item was coded according to its functional category and recorded alongside its corresponding rhetorical strategy. After the coding process, the frequency of each metadiscourse category was calculated within each Move 2 strategy to determine the distributional patterns of linguistic resources across rhetorical functions. Frequency counts and percentages were used to compare the occurrence of metadiscourse features in different Move 2 strategies across the ESL and EFL corpora. This procedure enabled the integration of rhetorical and linguistic analyses and provided deeper insights into

how doctoral writers evaluated previous studies and established research gaps in the LR Chapter.

3.4. Analytical Framework

Kwan's (2006) model was used to identify and classify Move 2 strategies in the LR chapters, while Hyland's (2005) interpersonal model was employed to analyse the interactive and interactional metadiscourse resources used to realise these rhetorical functions. As shown in Table 2, Kwan's (2006) move structure provides a detailed description of the rhetorical organisation of LR chapters, comprising three major moves and their associated strategies. Of particular relevance to the present study is Move 2, Creating a Research Niche, which consists of five strategies through which writers evaluate previous research and establish the justification for their own study. Since the study focuses on the construction of research gaps and scholarly positioning, move 2 was selected as the primary unit of rhetorical analysis. As many scholars (e.g., Hart, 2008; Turner & Bitchener, 2008; Machi & McEvoy, 2009) pointed out, LR is in essence an extended persuasive argument built across the three moves for the worth of the writer's own study. At a broader level of organisation, LR chapters typically comprise three constituent sections: an introduction, which serves as an advance organiser; a body, which constitutes the main section reviewing and synthesising different strands of research; and a summary or conclusion, which provides a concise reiteration of the key arguments and highlights the overall contribution of the review (Ridley, 2012). The body can be divided into various thematic units which can have their own move structure (Kwan, 2006; Soler-Monreal, 2019; Xie, 2017). A move, in this context, is "a segment of text that is shaped and constrained by a particular communicative function" (Holmes, 1997, p. 325) and contributes to the overall purpose of justifying the current research. In each move, the writer navigates evaluation to serve for a specific argument, and progressively achieves the ultimate purpose of LR. Move 2, Creating a Research Niche strategy was specifically selected in this study because it represents the central rhetorical stage in which writers evaluate previous studies and establish the justification for their research.

However, while Kwan's model provides a robust account of rhetorical structure, it remains primarily descriptive at the macro-level and does not investigate the linguistic resources that realise these rhetorical functions. Therefore, Hyland's (2005) metadiscourse framework was adopted to analyse the interpersonal meanings embedded within Move 2 strategies. As presented in Table 3, Hyland's model distinguishes between interactive and interactional metadiscourse resources. Interactive resources help organise discourse and guide readers through the text, whereas interactional resources allow writers to express stance, evaluation, and engagement. The present study focuses specifically on hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and engagement markers, because these resources play a central role in expressing evaluation and positioning claims when constructing research niches. The combined use of Kwan's (2006) and Hyland's (2005) frameworks therefore enables a comprehensive analysis of LR chapters writing by examining both the rhetorical strategies used to establish research gaps (Table 2) and the linguistic resources employed to realise those rhetorical purposes (Table 3).

Table 2: Kwan's (2006) move structure for the thematic units in LR chapters of applied linguistics PhD theses

Move 1 Establishing one part of the territory of one's own research by:
Strategy A Surveying the non-research-related phenomena or knowledge claims
Strategy B Claiming centrality
Strategy C Surveying the research-related phenomena
Move 2 Creating a research niche (in response to Move 1) by:
Strategy A Counter-claiming
Strategy B Gap-indicating
Strategy C Asserting confirmative claims about knowledge or research practices surveyed
Strategy D Asserting the relevancy of the surveyed claims to one's own research
Strategy E Abstracting or synthesising knowledge claims to establish a theoretical position or a theoretical framework
Move 3 (optional) Occupying the research niche by announcing:
Strategy A Research aims, focuses, research questions or hypotheses
Strategy B Theoretical positions/theoretical frameworks
Strategy C Research design/processes
Strategy D Interpretations of terminology used in the thesis

Table 3: Metadiscourse Framework: Hyland (2005)

Dimension	Category	Function	Examples
Interactive	Transition Markers	Express relations between clauses and sentences	<i>and, but, thus, in addition</i>
	Frame Markers	Refer to discourse acts, sequences, or stages in the text	<i>finally, to conclude, my purpose is to</i>
	Endophoric Markers	Refer to information in other parts of the text	<i>noted above, see Figure 1, in Section 2</i>
	Evidentials	Refer to information from external sources	<i>according to X (1990), Z states</i>
	Code Glosses	Elaborate or explain propositional meanings	<i>namely, e.g., such as, in other words</i>
Interactional	Hedges	Withhold commitment and open dialogue with readers	<i>might, perhaps, possible, about</i>
	Boosters	Express certainty and emphasize propositions	<i>in fact, definitely, it is clear that</i>
	Attitude Markers	Express the writer's affective attitude toward propositions	<i>unfortunately, surprisingly, I agree</i>
	Self-Mentions	Explicitly refer to the author(s)	<i>I, we, my, me, our</i>
	Engagement Markers	Explicitly involve readers and build relationships	<i>consider, note that, you can see that</i>

4. Result

4.1. Distribution of Words Across Move 2 Strategies

The distribution of Move 2 strategies revealed that both EFL and ESL doctoral writers predominantly relied on confirmative reporting of prior research, although important differences emerged in the extent to which they engaged in gap identification, relevance building, and synthesis. In particular, EFL writers tended to allocate more textual space to critical positioning and integrative functions, whereas ESL writers demonstrated a stronger orientation toward combining and reaffirming existing knowledge. These patterns indicated variation in rhetorical stance-taking and research space construction across the two contexts. This pattern shows that both groups mainly focus on building a knowledge base by summarising and combining previous research, in line with Kwan's (2006) Move 2 Creating a research niche. However, they differ in how they move from this stage to creating a research gap. As shown in Table 4 Strategy C (asserting confirmative claims about knowledge or research practices surveyed) was the most dominant strategy in both corpora, with 6,425 words in the EFL and 12,513 words in the ESL corpus. This represented a substantially larger proportion in the ESL corpus, indicating a stronger tendency among ESL writers to emphasise reporting and reaffirmation of established research. In contrast, Strategy B (gap-indicating) showed a higher proportional representation in the EFL corpus (2,248 words) compared to the ESL corpus (1,082 words), suggesting that EFL writers more explicitly constructed research gaps as part of their justification strategy. This finding aligns with previous studies (e.g., Hyland, 2000; Kwan, 2006), which suggest that doctoral writers tend to prefer indirect evaluative strategies rather than overtly adversarial critique.

Strategy A (counter-claiming) demonstrated a relatively balanced distribution across both corpora, with 2,311 words in EFL and 2,429 words in ESL, indicating comparable engagement in evaluative challenge of prior studies. Similarly, Strategy D (asserting the relevancy of surveyed claims to one's own research) was more prominent in the EFL corpus (2,387 words) than in the ESL corpus (1,725 words), reflecting a stronger tendency among EFL writers to explicitly connect prior findings to their own research agendas. Strategy E (abstracting or synthesising knowledge claims) was also more extensively used in the EFL corpus (2,684 words) compared to the ESL corpus (925 words), indicating greater engagement in conceptual integration and theoretical positioning. From a rhetorical perspective, this indicates a stronger engagement with integrative knowledge construction, which is a key feature of advanced academic argumentation in the LR chapter. Overall, the findings summarised in Table 4 indicated that while both groups prioritised confirmative reporting (Strategy C), EFL writers exhibited a comparatively stronger orientation toward gap construction, synthesis, and relevance building, whereas ESL writers relied more heavily on consolidating existing research. These differences suggested variation in rhetorical sophistication and stance construction in LR chapters writing across the two contexts.

Table 4: Move and strategy Size of sub- corpus

Move Strategy	EFL (Words)	ESL (Words)
A. Counter-claiming	2,311	2,429
B. Gap-indicating	2,248	1,082
C. Asserting confirmative claims about knowledge or research	6,425	12,513

Move Strategy	EFL (Words)	ESL (Words)
practices surveyed		
D. Asserting the relevancy of the surveyed claims to one's own research	2,387	1,725
E. Abstracting or synthesising knowledge claims to establish a theoretical position or framework	2,684	925
Total	16,055	18,674

While the Table 4 analysis examined the overall occurrence of Move 2 across the LR chapters, Table 5 provides a more detailed comparison of the specific strategies used by EFL and ESL doctoral writers to create a research niche. Table 5 also shows variations in the distribution of the five Move 2 strategies, highlighting differences in how writers establish the significance and originality of their research.

Table 5: Frequency Distribution of Move 2 Strategies (Creating a Research Niche) in EFL and ESL Theses: Literature Review Chapters

Strategy	EFL (n=15 theses)	EFL (%)	ESL (n=15 theses)	ESL (%)
A Counter-claiming	64	24.15	57	25.68
B Gap-indicating	62	23.40	34	15.32
C Asserting confirmative claims about knowledge or research practices surveyed	48	18.11	77	34.68
D Asserting the relevancy of the surveyed claims to one's own research	65	24.53	34	15.32
E Abstracting or synthesising knowledge claims to establish a theoretical position or framework	26	9.81	20	9.01
Total	265	100%	222	100%

The distribution of Move 2 strategies indicates clear cross-contextual differences in how EFL and ESL doctoral writers construct a research niche within LR chapters. Overall, EFL writers produced a higher number of Move 2 realisations (265 occurrences) compared to ESL writers (222 occurrences), suggesting a comparatively stronger engagement with evaluative and justificatory discourse in developing research space. A prominent pattern emerges in relation to gap-oriented and critical positioning strategies. EFL writers demonstrated substantially higher use of gap-indicating moves (62 vs. 34) and counter-claiming (64 vs. 57), indicating a more explicit orientation toward identifying limitations, unresolved issues, and alternative interpretations within the literature. This suggests that EFL writers more actively problematised existing knowledge rather than simply combining it, thereby strengthening the justificatory force of their research positioning. This finding aligns with Swales' CARS model, where Move 2 functions to create a research niche through gap identification and critical positioning (John Swales, 1990, 2004). This tendency observed in the present study is also consistent with Bunton's (2002) move analysis of PhD thesis introductions, which shows that gap-establishing strategies are commonly used to justify research necessity. This tendency is illustrated below through counter-claiming, where writers present contrasting definitions or interpretations to challenge established views. For example:

- i. However, most researchers are in agreement with Halliday (1970, 2015), who argued that there are in fact only three key functions that are associated with intonation: grammatical, attitudinal, and informational

This sentence qualifies as counter-claiming because it presents an alternative positioning of Halliday's classification by implicitly challenging its exclusivity through academic contrast.

Similarly, in gap-indicating, writers highlight limitations or underexplored areas in prior research to justify further investigation. Intonation functions are limited to grammatical, attitudinal, and informational roles, some studies suggest that further empirical research is still needed to refine or extend these functional categories. This illustrates how writers construct research gaps by pointing to areas where existing frameworks remain incomplete or require further validation. For example:

- i. Although these current limited studies that have explored the perception and effect of different types of feedback on writing performance provided positive results indicating that students prefer to receive feedback and found it to be effective, there are no experimental studies that compare teacher feedback to another type of instructional practice like self-assessment

This example identifies a methodological gap (lack of experimental comparison), which is used to justify the need for the present study.

- i. However, up until the present, no empirical studies have specifically contrasted the speech act of refusal between Malay and German languages within the framework of the native language of Malays and Germans.....

This highlights a clear research gap in cross-linguistic pragmatic studies, showing that the topic has not been empirically explored.

In contrast, asserting confirmative claims about knowledge or research practices surveyed was the dominant strategy in the ESL corpus (77 occurrences), compared to the EFL corpus (48 occurrences). This suggests that ESL writers tended to emphasise alignment with existing scholarship rather than overtly challenging or problematising prior studies. For example:

- i. Amadu et al. (2018) found that interaction with peers, PEOU, and PU had a strong positive influence on collaborative learning through social media among university students.

This further reinforces existing research findings by reporting consistent positive relationships, illustrating a descriptive and confirmatory stance.

In a similar vein, asserting the relevancy of the surveyed claims to one's own research was considerably more frequent in the EFL corpus (65 occurrences) than in the ESL corpus (34 occurrences). This suggests that EFL writers were more inclined to establish explicit links between previous studies and their own research objectives, thereby strengthening the rationale and significance of their investigations. Through this strategy, writers demonstrate how existing theories, concepts, or findings directly inform the focus, framework, or variables of the current study. For example:

- ii. Thus, the focus in this study is the concept of digital engagement. Digital engagement is a concept that explains the usage of the internet.

This example establishes relevance by drawing on an existing concept from the literature and directly positioning it as the central focus of the current study. The writer explicitly links prior knowledge to the research topic, thereby justifying the current study's direction.

The least frequently used strategy in both corpora was abstracting or synthesising knowledge claims to establish a theoretical position or framework (EFL: 26; ESL: 20). Although limited in frequency, this strategy indicates an attempt in both groups to move beyond description toward conceptual integration of prior research. For example:

- iii. Based on the above justifications, therefore, the concepts of new genre theories and critical discourse analysis (CDA) are suitable for this study

This demonstrates synthesis by combining two theoretical perspectives and new genre theory and critical discourse analysis to establish the theoretical foundation of the study. Rather than discussing the theories separately, the writer integrates them into a unified analytical framework. For example:

- iv. That is why Bickerton and Huebner's framework is widely used to identify the contexts in which articles appear in previous research.

This example reflects abstraction and synthesis because the writer draws on an established framework and positions it as an overarching analytical tool for understanding findings across previous studies. The framework is synthesised from prior research and adopted as a conceptual basis for the current investigation.

Overall above findings suggest that while both groups relied on confirmative discourse as a foundation for LR writing, EFL writers exhibited a more diversified and rhetorically dynamic repertoire, particularly in relation to gap construction, counter-positioning, and relevance building. ESL writers, by contrast, demonstrate a stronger orientation toward consolidating existing knowledge, reflecting a more descriptive rather than argumentative engagement with the literature. These differences point to variation in rhetorical socialisation and genre awareness across academic contexts and are consistent with previous genre-based research on doctoral writing practices (Swales, 1990, 2004; Hyland, 2004).

The comparative distribution of metadiscourse markers in the LR chapters of EFL and ESL doctoral theses indicates a striking convergence in rhetorical preference, alongside subtle variation in functional emphasis. In particular, evidential markers dominate both corpora almost equally (65.1% in EFL and 65.0% in ESL), suggesting a shared disciplinary orientation toward grounding arguments in external research authority. This near-identical pattern reflects the epistemic nature of LR writing, where citation-based justification functions as the primary mechanism for constructing credibility and positioning claims within existing literature. Such a pattern is consistent with the epistemic function of LR, where establishing authority through citation and prior studies is central. It suggests that regardless of linguistic background, writers prioritise evidentiality as the core linguistic resource for knowledge construction.

Table 6: Overall Frequency Metadiscourse Markers from Move Strategy in Literature Review Chapters of ESL and EFL Doctoral Theses

EFL	Number of hits	Percentage	ESL	Number of hits	Percentage
Attitude Markers	80	17.1%	Attitude Markers	76	16.6%
Hedges	67	14.3%	Hedges	74	16.2%
Booster	70	15.0	Booster Markers	85	18.6%
Evidential	196	41.9%	Evidential	182	39.8%
Engagement Markers	55	11.8%	Engagement Markers	40	8.8%
Total	468	100%	Total	457	100%

4.2. Attitude Markers

Attitude markers are used to express evaluation, judgment, and stance toward previous research. In the corpora, attitude markers appeared through lexical items such as “crucial factor,” “problematic,” “vital,” “fruitful,” “significant,” “negative outcome,” and “important.” These expressions indicate that both groups did not merely report literature but also actively evaluated it. EFL (17.3%) and ESL (16.6%) writers demonstrated a strong evaluative orientation in LR writing. However, EFL writers showed a marginally higher frequency, suggesting slightly more overt stance-taking. This pattern aligns with Hyland’s (2017) view of academic writing as inherently interactional, where writers consistently project evaluative stances to position prior knowledge. It also corresponds with findings in corpus-based academic writing studies (e.g., Ädel, 2018; Mur-Dueñas, 2016), which show that advanced academic writers regularly employ attitude markers to evaluate prior research and guide reader interpretation. The slightly higher frequency in ESL writing contrasts with earlier research suggesting that L2 writers tend to adopt more cautious and less overtly evaluative rhetorical strategies in academic discourse (Hyland, 2005; Hyland, 2017; Ädel, 2006). However, the present findings indicate convergence between EFL and ESL doctoral writers, suggesting that disciplinary training and doctoral-level academic socialisation may override linguistic background in shaping evaluative practices. For example:

- v. But this method was argued by Hirumi (2002) as he proposed another framework for interaction based on 3 levels as he suspect that the previous method failed to represent many **crucial factor** and he quote " they neither illustrate the relationship between, nor provide practical guidelines for practical guidelines for sequencing eLearning interactions to facilitate achievement of specified objectives" (p.143).

Here adjective “crucial” conveys a strong positive evaluation of importance. Rather than merely reporting previous findings, the writer explicitly signals that the factor plays a significant role in the phenomenon under investigation.

- vi. “A survey conducted in Australia by Jarman et al. (2021) **revealed** that there was a **significant** direct relationship between higher appearance-focused social media use and subjective well-being among adolescents.”

The reporting verb “revealed” attributes the finding to an external empirical study. In addition, the adjective “significant” evaluates the strength and importance of the

reported relationship rather than simply describing it neutrally. This combination shows how writers integrate evidentiality with evaluative stance to emphasise the relevance of research findings. Both of the examples demonstrate how attitude markers enable writers to express evaluative judgments toward prior studies.

4.3. Hedges

Hedges are used to avoid overgeneralisation and maintain academic politeness when evaluating existing research. Hedges are frequently employed when discussing limitations of prior studies, particularly in evaluative and critical sections of LR. Common realisations include “may,” “might,” “it is suggested,” “it can be said,” “some researchers argue,” “relatively,” “appears,” and “to some extent.” Both groups demonstrated awareness of academic caution, with EFL writers (14.3%) using slightly lower hedges than ESL writers (16.2%). This suggests that ESL writers tended to adopt a marginally more cautious epistemic stance. This pattern is consistent with Hyland’s (2017) interactional metadiscourse framework, which positions hedging as a central resource for managing epistemic commitment and maintaining appropriate academic distance. It also aligns with corpus-based findings in academic writing research (e.g., Ådel, 2006; Mur-Dueñas, 2016), which report that advanced academic writers across disciplines systematically employ hedging to soften claims and enhance reader negotiation of meaning. The slightly higher use in EFL writing may reflect greater linguistic caution or stronger adherence to conventional academic politeness norms. This is broadly consistent with earlier research in L2 academic writing, which indicates that non-native writers tend to employ hedging more frequently as a strategy to mitigate potential face-threatening acts and enhance perceived academic credibility (Hyland, 2005; Ådel, 2006). Despite this difference, both groups used hedging as a face-saving strategy that maintains scholarly credibility while avoiding overly strong claims. Thus, hedges function as an epistemic control mechanism in both corpora, enabling cautious knowledge construction in LR writing. For example:

- vii. **It is suggested** that the students’ errors resulted from difficulties they encountered in certain language areas. They concluded that, in general, the sources of errors were due to L1 interference and

The phrase “it is suggested” presents the explanation as a plausible interpretation rather than a definitive conclusion. By avoiding absolute certainty, the writer acknowledges that alternative explanations may exist and demonstrates appropriate academic caution when discussing the causes of students’ errors. For example:

- viii. “Although extensive research has been carried out on these variables, it **may be said that** no reliable evidence was found that a study has examined all four variables in one study.”

The expression ‘it may be said’ reduces the strength of the claim and signals that the conclusion is based on the available evidence rather than an unquestionable fact. Through this cautious formulation, the writer avoids overgeneralisation while maintaining the credibility of the argument. These examples illustrate how hedges help writers moderate the force of their claims and demonstrate appropriate scholarly caution. Through expressions such as ‘it is suggested’ and ‘it may be said’ writers present knowledge as tentative and open to further verification rather than as absolute truth.

4.4. Booster

Booster markers are used to express certainty, emphasis, and strong commitment to a proposition. In both corpora, boosters appear through expressions such as “clearly,” “indeed,” “it is evident,” “strongly,” “undoubtedly”. Boosters often co-occur with evidential markers, strengthening claims derived from prior studies (e.g., “studies clearly show...”). This co-occurrence suggests that both groups used boosting strategically rather than independently, embedded certainty within citation-based claims. Such interaction between evidentiality and boosting has also been observed in previous research (e.g., Hyland & Jiang, 2019), where writers combine attribution with evaluative reinforcement to enhance rhetorical persuasion. Boosters were used with EFL writers (15 %) showing slightly higher in ESL writers (18.6%). This indicates that both groups employed boosters to reinforce certainty, particularly when highlighting established findings or emphasising research significance. This pattern is consistent with Hyland’s (2017) interactional metadiscourse framework, which identifies boosting as a key strategy for increasing writer commitment and strengthening argumentative force in academic discourse. It also aligns with corpus-based studies in academic writing (Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2016), which report that advanced academic writers use boosters strategically to reinforce claims rather than to express personal emotion or exaggeration. The slightly higher use in ESL writing may indicate a compensatory strategy to reinforce argument strength within a heavily evidential discourse. However, both groups maintain a balanced relationship between caution (hedging) and certainty (boosting), reflecting awareness of academic rhetorical norms. This balance is widely recognised as a defining feature of expert academic writing, where stance modulation is carefully managed to maintain credibility while asserting knowledge claims. Overall, boosters function as a rhetorical strengthening device in both corpora, enhancing emphasis and assertiveness in selected claims. For example:

- ix. Vandergrift discussed that the restrictions on listening comprehension processing at the novice-level are **clearly evident** in the use of some metacognitive listening strategies such as monitoring

The adverb “clearly” conveys a high level of certainty and confidence in the reported finding. By using clearly, the writer emphasises that the evidence strongly supports the claim and presents the relationship as apparent and well-established rather than tentative. This linguistic choice reduces ambiguity and reinforces the credibility of the cited research, thereby strengthening the persuasive force of the argument. This explanation aligns with Hyland’s (2005) definition of boosters as expressions that allow writers to assert propositions with confidence and close down alternative interpretations.

- x. The majority of Malays are Muslims so Islam is embedded in the Malay culture. Therefore, Al-Issa’s (2003) framework is **strongly relevant** to the current study

“Strongly relevant” emphasises the writer’s high level of confidence in the applicability of Al-Issa’s framework to the study context. Moreover, by using “strongly relevant”, the writer presents the relationship between the framework and the research setting as highly convincing and well-established, leaving little room for alternative interpretations. Therefore, through expressions such as “clearly” and “strongly relevant”, writers reinforce the validity of particular claims and guide readers toward accepting them as credible and persuasive.

4.5. Evidential markers

Evidential markers are primarily realised through reporting verbs such as “investigated”, “examined”, “analysed”, “reviewed”, “asserted”, “found”, “revealed”, “indicated”, “showed”, “emphasised”, and “concluded”. These evidential forms allow writers to acknowledge prior scholarship, establish credibility, and situate their arguments within the existing body of knowledge. The high frequency of such markers demonstrates that LR writing is heavily dependent on citation-based discourse, where authority is constructed through the integration and synthesis of previous research rather than personal opinion. Evidential markers dominated both EFL (41.9%) and ESL (39.8%) corpora, indicating an almost identical reliance on citation-based discourse. Both EFL and ESL writers relied heavily on external sources to construct authority, rather than personal stance. This strong evidentiality reflects disciplinary conventions that prioritise citation density and academic referencing as a core requirement of LR writing. The near-identical distribution suggests that linguistic background has minimal influence on this feature, as both groups conform strongly to academic norms of knowledge construction through external validation. Thus, evidential markers function as the core rhetorical backbone of LR writing in both corpora, enabling authority construction through prior research. For example:

- xi. “Aboshady et al. (2015) **investigated** undergraduates’ perceptions toward MOOCs,” “Cui (2019) found that TikTok was a useful educational tool,” and “Weigle (2005) **asserted** that EFL writers need to focus on grammatical and lexical repertoires.”

These evidential forms (investigated, asserted) allow writers to acknowledge prior scholarship, establish credibility, and situate their arguments within the existing body of knowledge. The high frequency of such markers demonstrates that LR writing is heavily dependent on citation-based discourse, where authority is constructed through the integration and synthesis of previous research rather than personal opinion. For example:

- xii. Cui (2019) **found** that TikTok was a very good tool to conduct education programs among university students in China.

The reporting verb “found” presents the statement as research finding derived from Cui’s (2019) study. Rather than making an unsupported assertion, the writer relied on previous empirical evidence to support the argument. The use of evidentiality strengthens the authority of the claim and situates it within the existing body of research. Therefore, through reporting verbs such as “found” and “investigated” writers establish credibility, acknowledge intellectual sources, and position their studies within the broader scholarly conversation.

4.6. Engagement Markers

Engagement markers are the least frequent category in both corpora and are primarily used to guide reader interpretation and organise the flow of ideas across the LR. They included discourse-organising expressions such as “as can be seen,” “as mentioned earlier,” “in this regard,” “on the other hand,” and “to sum up,” which function to connect ideas and signal relationships between propositions. EFL (11.8%) and ESL (8.8%) writers demonstrated minimal use of engagement markers, indicating that LR writing is generally impersonal and analytically detached in both groups. However, EFL writers showed slightly higher usage, suggesting a marginally stronger tendency to guide

readers through textual organisation and interpretive sequencing. This pattern reflects established academic conventions that prioritise objectivity and informational density, where overt interaction with the reader is minimised. When engagement markers are used, they primarily function to structure arguments, signal transitions, and maintain coherence across ideas rather than to establish direct interpersonal involvement. This indicates that engagement markers in LR are largely textual and discourse-structuring in nature. For example:

- xiii. **On the other hand**, Tench (2005) asserted that sentence type intonation is also relevant for English language learning.”

“On the other hand” phrase guides the reader to interpret the following claim as a contrasting viewpoint, thereby improving the logical organisation of the discussion. In another instance:

- xiv. **In this regard**, Lakoff and Johnson claim that the subjective judgment is ‘knowledge’, the sensorimotor domain is ‘vision’, and the primary experience is ‘getting information through vision’ (1999, p.54).

Phrase “In this regard” connected the present argument to a previously established context, directing the reader’s attention toward continuity of ideas.

- xv. **To sum up**, throughout the review of past studies on PM Nouri al-Maliki, not one study investigated this political figure’s political speeches from a language perspective

The expression “to sum up” signals closure and synthesis of preceding points, helping readers consolidate the argument and understand the overall conclusion of the discussion. Above examples demonstrate that engagement markers in both corpora primarily serve a cohesive and organisational role, guiding readers through the structure of the argument while maintaining an overall impersonal academic tone.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the deployment of Move 2 strategies and interactional metadiscourse in the LR chapters of EFL and ESL doctoral theses. The analysis revealed no significant structural differences between ESL and EFL writers computing LR examined in the study. The Findings indicate that the Move 2 strategies proposed in Kwan’s model were consistently employed across the LR chapters. Despite differences in the extent of strategy use, the results support the usefulness of Kwan’s framework in explaining how writers construct research gaps and establish the significance of their research. Across move strategies, both EFL and ESL writers devoted the greatest textual space to asserting confirmative claims about prior research. This dominance suggests that LR writing at the doctoral level is primarily grounded in knowledge consolidation and descriptive reporting of existing studies rather than in overt gap construction or theoretical abstraction. Moreover, the analysis revealed notable differences in the organisation of Move 2 strategies. EFL writers tended to integrate research gap identification, counter-claiming, and relevance-establishing strategies throughout the LR in a continuous argumentative flow. This indicates a more embedded and progressively developed form of niche construction. In contrast, ESL writers frequently presented the research gap as a separate and explicitly marked section within the LR, resulting in a more segmented rhetorical structure in which gap construction was explicitly marked

rather than continuously developed. The study also found that in relation to interactional metadiscourse, evidential markers were the most dominant category in both groups, while attitude markers, boosters, and hedges occurred with relatively similar frequencies, reflecting shared disciplinary conventions of evaluation and stance-taking. Engagement markers were the least frequent category, confirming the predominantly informational and non-dialogic nature of LR discourse. Overall, the findings suggest that doctoral writers draw on a common repertoire of academic discourse practices, although differences in rhetorical emphasis may reflect variations in academic training and disciplinary socialisation. Thus, the findings demonstrate the complementary role of rhetorical move strategies and metadiscourse resources in the construction of research niches within LR chapters.

The findings have several implications for academic writing instruction and genre-based pedagogy. The strong predominance of evidentiality suggests that citation practices should be taught not merely as technical referencing skills but as rhetorical resources for constructing academic argumentation. In addition, explicit instruction in move structures and metadiscourse functions may enhance doctoral writers' ability to produce more rhetorically coherent and persuasive LR chapters. However, the findings should be interpreted in light of the study's limitations, including its focus on Move 2 and a relatively small corpus of 30 doctoral theses from selected EFL and ESL contexts. Future research could extend this investigation to all rhetorical moves in LR chapter and employ larger, multilingual, and cross-disciplinary corpora to provide a more comprehensive account of doctoral academic writing.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the ethics committee of Universiti Putra Malaysia, (JKEUPM), and all research procedures were conducted in accordance with the university's ethical guidelines and approval requirements.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my profound gratitude to my supervisor committee, for their kind helping, guidance, constructive feedback to complete this study.

Funding

There was no funding for the study. It was self-financed by the corresponding author himself.

Conflict of Interest

The researcher reports no conflicts of interest and declares neither potential conflict of interest with regard to this work nor the authorship and/or publication of this article.

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