

Article

“This study has limitations as all studies do”: Structuring the Limitations Section in ELT Master’s Dissertations

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Abstract

How research limitations are acknowledged can influence the perceived value of a study. However, limitation statements have received limited attention in EAP writing, especially in master’s dissertations, where student writers must navigate both genre conventions and the specific constraints they encountered during the research process. To fill this gap, this study aims to explore the discourse practices underlying the construction of the Limitations section in master’s dissertations. Based on a corpus containing 85 Limitations sections from exemplar dissertations recognized by the ELT Master’s Dissertation Award, this study examines the rhetorical structure, evaluative focus, and linguistic realization of this part-genre within the move analysis framework. The findings show that the Limitations section follows a five-move rhetorical structure that allows for variation, serving both reflective and persuasive purposes. Among the four evaluative focuses identified, limitations involving the evaluation of research design and analysis are the most frequently acknowledged, and this type of limitation is typically addressed using the most complex rhetorical strategies, allowing writers to justify, mitigate, or reframe their research constraints. The study also finds that transitions from limitation statements to other communicative functions are often marked by overt linguistic signals. These findings have pedagogical implications for EAP instruction, particularly in raising students’ genre awareness and offer suggestions for genre-based pedagogy.

Keywords

Limitations, move analysis, corpus-assisted analysis, master’s dissertation writing, English for Academic Purposes

1 Introduction

From an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) perspective, master’s dissertation writing, for its length and the complex research and communicative tasks involved, is often regarded as the most demanding component of a postgraduate course (Thompson, 2019). The challenges students encounter can be partly

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attributed to limited language proficiency, but they may also result from a lack of understanding of genre conventions and supervisors' expectations (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006). Dissertation writing requires students to demonstrate disciplinary knowledge while positioning themselves as competent members of their academic fields (Hyland, 2009; Swales & Feak, 2012). To illuminate these discourse practices, abundant research has examined the structural organization of master's dissertations or doctoral theses (e.g., Basturkmen, 2009; Dudley-Evans, 1994; Hopkins & Dudley-Evans, 1988; Kwan, 2006; Samraj, 2008) following the genre analytical approach proposed by Swales (1990).

Beyond challenges related to writing itself, master's dissertation research often faces constraints in scope and scale, limiting the sample size, research design, and generalizability of findings (Woodrow, 2020). To navigate the situation, several dissertation writing handbooks advise students to openly acknowledge these shortcomings when evaluating their research, typically in the Discussion or Conclusion chapter (Bitchener, 2010; Paltridge & Starfield, 2019; Swales & Feak, 2012). Acknowledging limitations, the act of presenting the weaknesses of the study and noting its impact on research findings, is considered a way for writers to demonstrate critical reflection (Hyland, 2004a) and has been increasingly recognized as a promotional strategy in research writing (Moreno, 2022; Zhou & Jiang, 2023). However, given its potential distraction from research significance, previous studies have shown that effectively achieving its intended functions requires considerable rhetorical effort, either by linking limitations to future research (Boonyuen & Tangkiengsirisin, 2018; Joseph & Lim, 2019) or through specific linguistic framing (Koutsantoni, 2006; Montgomery, 2023; Sun & Crosthwaite, 2022). Except for Koutsantoni (2006), who examined hedging strategies employed by dissertation writers, most studies have focused on research articles (RAs) and PhD theses, leaving the limitation statements in master's dissertations under-investigated.

To address this gap, the present research analyzes the rhetorical and linguistic realization of the Limitations section in dissertations recognized by the ELT (English Language Teaching) Master's Dissertation Award (British Council, n.d.), a scheme established by the British Council to publish UK-based dissertation research that demonstrates strong potential for impact in the field of ELT. This study aims to reveal how writers of exemplary dissertations construct this part-genre through communicative functions, rhetorical strategies, and linguistic choices. These insights have pedagogical value for EAP instruction, particularly in helping student writers navigate the constraints of following genre conventions and the restrictions of carrying out their specific research projects.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Genre theory

Genre has increasingly been recognized as a central concept in the research and teaching of writing, as it provides a framework for investigating language use across contexts and for transforming such understanding into pedagogical practice (Hyland, 2004b). From an EAP perspective, Swales (1990) conceptualizes genre as a collection of structured communicative events that group texts sharing a common set of communicative purposes. These purposes constitute the rationale for the genre, thereby shaping its structural organization and imposing constraints on content and style. The Swalesian approach assumes that texts within a genre tend to demonstrate patterns in discourse structure, which can be described as a sequence of moves and steps. In genre analysis, a move refers to "a discoursal or rhetorical unit that performs a coherent communicative function" (Swales, 2004, p. 228) and can be further realized through one or more steps carrying more specific functions. Moves are categorized primarily through content rather than formal linguistic realization (Paltridge, 1994), although the identification of where a move begins and how it transitions to the next can be supported by grammatical features or lexical signals (Swales, 2004).

The emphasis on moves as units of textual content and function requires researchers to manually examine discourse to interpret communicative purposes (Kanoksilapatham, 2015). According to Moreno and Swales (2018), the labor-intensive nature of move annotation partly explains why it is typically applied to relatively small datasets (e.g., Kwan, 2006; Samraj, 2008; Yang & Allison, 2003). In addition, earlier studies often lack a detailed account of the sampling procedures used for text selection (e.g., Basturkmen, 2009; Hopkins & Dudley-Evans, 1988), which further limits the generalizability of findings, as the status of infrequent moves may be either neglected or overstated (Biber et al., 2007). To strengthen the methodology of move analysis, Biber et al. (2007) advocate a corpus-based approach to discourse organization, which involves describing the structure of individual texts and then identifying patterns and variations across the corpus. Analyses based on large, representative corpus samples of a particular genre can therefore provide detailed and generalizable descriptions of its rhetorical structure (Upton & Cohen, 2009). The move-annotated corpora are also perceived as pedagogically useful. For instance, Cotos et al. (2015) compiled and annotated a corpus of 900 empirical RAs from high-impact journals in 30 disciplines, and their findings have been transformed into classroom activities that allow learners to examine the distribution and sequencing of moves and steps (Cotos et al., 2016). Students can further be guided to notice the lexico-grammatical features associated with particular rhetorical functions (Flowerdew, 2015), therefore gaining multi-faceted genre knowledge.

2.2 Move analysis of limitation statements

For master's students, the dissertation often represents the most significant academic genre, being the most extended and complex academic text they will produce (Swales, 2004). Given its role in demonstrating students' critical engagement with research, the importance of acknowledging research limitations is highlighted in several thesis writing handbooks (Bitchener, 2010; Paltridge & Starfield, 2019; Panwar & Sahni, 2018; Swales & Feak, 2012; Woodrow, 2020). Within the genre-based approach, limitation statements are regarded as an essential component of the Discussion chapter, as they may affect the generalizability and validity of the findings (Paltridge & Starfield, 2019; Panwar & Sahni, 2018). Swales and Feak (2012) describe acknowledging limitations as an optional but important move in the Discussion or Conclusion sections. As limitations primarily concern the scope of a study, such statements are perceived as valuable opportunities for writers to display disciplinary knowledge regarding how evidence should be interpreted. In a handbook on dissertation and thesis writing in applied linguistics, Bitchener (2010) views limitations as a platform for proposing future research directions and suggests addressing them in a dedicated section.

While most handbooks do not distinguish between master's and PhD students, Woodrow (2020), in a handbook for TESOL and applied linguistics master's students, notes that dissertation projects are often highly restricted in time and resources, which may, in turn, limit their breadth and scope. These shortcomings are therefore recommended to be discussed extensively under a separate section in the Discussion chapter, emphasizing the need to address them in future research. Thus, limitation statements in these thesis writing handbooks are primarily understood as an evaluation of the project through reflection on its constraints and weaknesses. As Thompson (2005) notes, such reflection helps to forestall criticism from examiners who also evaluate the research to determine whether the writer merits the award of the degree.

Advice literature indicates that limitation statements perform key rhetorical functions, closely interacting with communicative acts such as recommending future research. These rhetorical connections suggest that, when presented as a separate section, the limitations section may function as a distinct genre with its own structural organization and communicative intentions. While previous studies did not explicitly outline its internal organization, detailed accounts of how writers link limitation statements with other rhetorical functions were provided (Boonyuen & Tangkiengsirisin, 2018; Dudley-Evans, 1994; Kanoksilapatham, 2015; Yang & Allison, 2003). In Dudley-Evans' (1994) nine-move schema

for the Discussion section of master's dissertations, the *Limitation* move appeared to follow the *Claim* move where the writers highlighted the contributions of their research, addressing caveats related to the research findings, methodology, or generalizations made.

Based on a corpus of 20 RAs in applied linguistics, Yang and Allison (2003) investigated the rhetorical structure from the Results to the closing section. They found that the *Indicating limitations* step, along with *Indicating significance/advantage* and *Evaluating methodology* steps, functioned as strategies of *Evaluating the Study*. The limitations step occurred most frequently in the Conclusion sections (7 times in 13 sections) but was rare elsewhere, possibly reflecting the small sample size. In a related field, Boonyuen and Tangkiengsirisin (2018) conducted a move analysis of 103 RA Discussion sections in second-language writing. Their analysis revealed that the step *Indicating limitations* occurred in 36% of RAs and was used strategically to identify topics for future research. Joseph and Lim (2019) argued the rhetorical shift from limitations to future research helps to prevent potential criticism by proposing solutions and leaving a positive impression. This connection is also evident in engineering, where *Stating limitations and future research* was categorized as a combined move in around 70% of Discussion sections across 92 RAs (Kanoksilapatham, 2015). From the discussion above it can be concluded that while handbooks for dissertation writers certainly emphasize the importance of a dedicated limitations section, RAs across different disciplines may vary in the degree to which they adopt an *Indicating limitations* move. This suggests that postgraduate students may need to look beyond RAs as input and models for framing their limitations.

2.3 Presenting limitations in academic writing

Extending the guidance offered in thesis writing handbooks, previous studies observed that limitation statements were closely linked with a range of rhetorical functions involved in evaluating the research. However, their realization as either a move or a step varies across analytical frameworks, reflecting the inconsistencies inherent in move analysis. To address this methodological concern, Moreno and Swales (2018) propose a step-centered approach, viewing steps as more precise units for capturing rhetorical functions and their linguistic realizations. It is also pedagogically justified, as the associated linguistic features can guide readers to predict and interpret specific communicative purposes. Supporting this view, move analyses seeking to bridge the function-form gap in RA introductions (Cortes, 2013) and conference abstracts (Yoon & Casal, 2020) have shown that certain formulaic expressions, such as *the purpose of*, frequently occur at move-step boundaries, signalling the shifts in communicative intentions. From a learner perspective, interview data reported by Cai and Luo (2022) on factors influencing college students' cross-genre writing performance further indicate that students' comprehension of genre-specific structures and associated linguistic features tend to shape their ability to achieve intended communicative functions.

Drawing on this function-form relationship, recent studies have examined the linguistic features of limitation statements (Koutsantoni, 2006; Montgomery, 2023; Sun & Crosthwaite, 2022; Zhou & Jiang, 2023). In a mixed-method approach, Montgomery (2023) combined genre analysis with corpus methods to investigate how the *Limitations* move is realized in 200 RAs in applied linguistics. The analysis revealed that evaluative frames, such as *it is important to*, were mostly frequently employed to acknowledge limitations in an open, unapologetic tone, constructing writers' authoritative stance. In a comparative approach, Koutsantoni (2006) explored the hedging strategies employed by expert and novice writers to acknowledge limitations. Based on a corpus of 17 RAs and 9 theses in engineering, the study found that student writers used a higher number of hedges and tended to avoid personal attribution and presence, therefore distancing themselves from the claims made. This reflected the different statuses of novice and expert writers in academic communities, although the study did not distinguish between master's dissertations and doctoral theses written by students with different academic competence.

Focusing on doctoral theses, Sun and Crosthwaite (2022) argued that the Limitations section is a high-stakes part-genre employed by writers to acknowledge potential constraints, justify methodological decisions, and minimize the potential impact on research findings. Their analysis of 120 Limitations sections across four disciplines showed that these functions are often realized through the co-occurrence of negation and appraisal features, with the most frequent pattern combining negation and attitude (e.g., not successful) to introduce limitations in all fields. Their cross-disciplinary comparison also showed that soft-applied disciplines used more negation than soft-pure fields, reflecting a tendency to limit alternative propositions and engage readers.

Centering on the *Limitations* step, Zhou and Jiang (2023) examined its linguistic features and evaluative focus in the Conclusion sections of 100 PhD theses and 200 RAs in applied linguistics. They found that thesis writers made greater use of frame markers to manage the extended discussion and frequently used the inclusive “we” to engage supervisors in limitation statements. Regarding evaluative focus, both thesis and RA writers primarily acknowledged limitations by evaluating the appropriateness of research design and analysis. However, thesis writers were more likely to report limitations related to research quality and writers’ competence, which were perceived as more threatening to the research significance and therefore rarely occurred in RAs. In terms of responses to limitations, PhD students often attributed them to contextual constraints, whereas RA writers more frequently proposed follow-up measures, thereby demonstrating problem-solving ability and promoting their research more effectively.

Despite the growing attention to limitation statements across genres and disciplines, systematic descriptions of their rhetorical construction remain limited, especially when they are presented as a distinct section. In addition, existing research has primarily focused on RAs and doctoral theses, leaving master’s dissertations largely unexplored. Building on Zhou and Jiang’s (2023) categorization of evaluative focus and self-justification strategies, it would be meaningful to explore how different types of limitations are addressed in terms of moves and steps. Such investigations would enhance understanding of writers’ communicative intentions in promoting their research. As shown in Hopkins and Dudley-Evans’ (1988) comparison of discussion sections of master’s dissertations and conference proceedings, conference articles often followed a fixed move sequence to present results, whereas moves in dissertations demonstrated greater variation depending on students’ satisfaction with the outcomes. With limited time to redo the analysis, when results were unexpected, master’s students often drew on additional moves such as offering explanations or comparing with previous research. Therefore, the move-step approach will offer pedagogical insights into how student writers evaluate and address the constraints of their own research while maintaining its perceived significance.

Following Sun and Crosthwaite’s (2022) definition of the Limitations section as a high-stakes part-genre, this study seeks to provide a systematic description of rhetorical functions employed in this section. In response to the practical constraints faced by masters’ students (Hopkins & Dudley-Evans, 1988; Woodrow, 2020), the present research examines a set of master’s dissertations recognized by the ELT Master’s Dissertation Award (MDA). Specifically, it investigates how the Limitations section is structured by different communicative functions and extends beyond structural analysis to explore the linguistic features that signal rhetorical transitions. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What rhetorical functions are realized in the Limitations section of ELT master’s dissertations?
2. What aspects of research are evaluated in the Limitations section, and how are they evaluated?
3. How are the transitions among rhetorical functions realized linguistically?

3 Methodology

3.1 Corpus

To address the above research questions, a corpus of 85 Limitations sections was compiled from dissertations recognized by the ELT Master's Dissertation Award (MDA) ([British Council, n.d.](#)). The rationale for analyzing these award-winning dissertations is their high quality. While e-thesis databases are increasingly available online, such samples often lack grading information, making it difficult to verify their quality ([Thompson, 2019](#)). For dissertations examined in the current study, their quality is ensured by a rigorous judging process outlined on the MDA website: each UK institution nominates one dissertation marked at distinction level (above 70%), which then undergoes two rounds of evaluation by ELT experts from UK institutions and the British Council. Therefore, these dissertations can be considered exemplars as they effectively achieve the intended communicative purposes and are acknowledged by the discourse community.

It should be noted that the corpus is constrained in scope, reflecting the discourse norms of a specific discipline (ELT) and cultural context (UK). Consequently, the findings may not be generalized to other academic disciplines with different conventions ([Hyland, 2004a](#)). The decision to focus the analysis exclusively on limitation statements in ELT dissertations is motivated by the applied nature of this field, where research often engages with real-world teaching contexts and educational practices. Therefore, discussions of limitations can reveal students' awareness of situational or practical factors that affect the application of their findings. Moreover, while cross-disciplinary research can provide broad overviews and highlight differences in disciplinary practices, focusing on a specific discipline allows for a more in-depth analysis and contextualized interpretation. Since disciplinary variation is a stronger factor shaping the rhetorical structure of dissertations than national or institutional contexts ([Johns & Swales, 2002](#)), the findings of this research can be pedagogically useful for master's students in ELT or applied linguistics more generally.

To ensure the data reflects current academic writing conventions, only dissertations published within the past five years (2019-2024) were selected for analysis. A total of 87 dissertations were freely accessible and downloaded in PDF format from the MDA website. As this research focused on limitations presented as a separate section, the keyword "limitation" was employed to search through each text to identify sections explicitly labelled by headings containing "limitations", which are considered markers of prominent, intentional discussion ([Montgomery, 2023](#)). As such, 12 dissertations without a separate Limitations section were excluded, leading to a final selection of 75 dissertations, each containing at least one Limitations section. In total, 85 Limitations sections were collected and numbered for analysis (MDA-01 to MDA-85; see Appendix 1 for the list of sources of quoted examples). Notably, 82 of these sections had their headings listed in the table of contents, validating their prominence.

The collected data, including the headings and content of the Limitations sections, were converted into plain text format and stored separately, with irrelevant information such as footnotes removed using the software tPMCrafty ([Jeaco, 2021](#)), a tool designed for pre-processing corpus data. The corpus tool #LancsBox X ([Brezina & Platt, 2024](#)) was used to compile the self-built MDA Limitations corpus. The final corpus reached 26,503 words, containing 85 separate Limitations sections ranging from 78 to 982 words with an average length of 312.

3.2 Procedures

The data analysis involved three main stages. First, the MDA Limitations corpus was annotated for move-step types. Second, each limitation statement was categorized based on its evaluative focus and mapped to the corresponding move-step sequences. Lastly, transitions within these sequences were

examined in terms of their linguistic realizations. Each process is discussed in detail in the following sections.

3.2.1 Rhetorical move analysis

The first stage of data analysis was the annotation of the MDA Limitations corpus. In the current study, rhetorical moves were identified based on Swales' (2004) definition, which views moves as functional units that serve coherent communicative purposes across texts and may be realized through a single clause or multiple sentences. Steps are lower-level text segments that specify how moves achieve their functions (Biber et al., 2007; Yang & Allison, 2003). To further refine the coding framework, the research adopted Moreno and Swales' (2018) model, distinguishing *announcing* and *elaborating* functions with move and step per se. The *announcing* function signals the following moves or steps without stating propositional content, while the *elaborating* function provides exemplification, clarification, or justification to complement the core communicative function of a move or step. As these functions do not independently advance the discourse, they are considered secondary and therefore annotated but excluded from the move-step analysis.

The Limitations sections were first annotated at the step level and then grouped into broader move types. Following Moreno and Swales (2018), this step-centered analysis allows a more precise identification of rhetorical functions and their linguistic realizations. Based on several rounds of close reading, each sentence or clause was manually examined and categorized into discourse units according to its communicative intentions. To ensure each unit was assigned its most salient function, a combination of content, linguistic, and structural analysis was conducted. The coding was largely an inductive process, involving multiple rounds of iterative refinement of the proposed step types. For instance, after analyzing approximately 60% of the sample, a new step, "reporting sample characteristics" was identified. This step was previously categorized under the label "stating methodology", but a closer analysis revealed that it served a distinct function, describing features of research participants, particularly in studies employing questionnaires as research instruments. This led to the re-coding of the previously analyzed samples to ensure consistency. The final coding framework is presented in Table 1. It is important to note that the order of moves and steps displayed in the table does not prescribe their sequence but is arranged in a logical order.

Table 1

Communicative Functions and Descriptions in the Limitations Section

Labels	Descriptions
Announcing	Announcing the upcoming move or step
Move 1: Providing background information	Establishing the context for the evaluation
Step 1.1: Stating research aims	Stating the research objectives, purposes, or scope
Step 1.2: Stating methodology	Stating methodological details
Step 1.3: Reporting findings	Reporting key findings
Step 1.4: Reporting sample characteristics	Reporting demographic or other relevant features of participants
Move 2: Acknowledging limitations	Acknowledging perceived shortcomings and their influence on research findings
Step 2.1: Attributing limitations	Identifying the causes of limitations
Step 2.2: Stating limitations	Stating research limitations, without necessarily attributing them to a particular cause

Move 3: Responding to limitations

Step 3.1: Self-justifying

Step 3.2: Mitigating

Step 3.3: Proposing alternative approaches

Addressing the acknowledged limitations

Justifying why limitations are unavoidable or only have minimal influence

Presenting approaches taken to mitigate the limitations

Proposing potential approaches to address the limitations

Move 4: Validating research significance

Step 4.1: Highlighting strengths

Step 4.2: Highlighting contributions

Emphasizing the research value

Stressing the strengths or positive features of the research

Highlighting theoretical or practical contributions of the research

Move 5: Proposing future directions

Step 5.1: Suggesting future research

Step 5.2: Drawing practical implications

Presenting potential future directions

Recommending areas that merit future research

Providing recommendations for practical application

Elaborating

Exemplifying

Clarifying

Justifying

Supporting the functions of moves or steps

Illustrating the propositions with examples

Clarifying the propositions

Justifying the propositions, often by referring to external sources

Annotation tags were created by combining move and step numbers (e.g. M1S1 for step 1.1) and were manually placed in the step boundary when coding in Microsoft Word. Therefore, the corpus in the current research exists in two forms: unannotated and annotated by steps. The frequency and distribution of moves-steps were attained by searching the annotation tags in the KWIC (Key Word in Context) tool in #LancsBox X. Move-step types were further separated into sub-corpora to calculate the total word count and average word length of their realizations.

3.2.2 Identification of evaluative focus

Beyond identifying rhetorical functions, the research also investigated the focus of evaluation within the Limitations sections by examining which aspects of research were evaluated and how these evaluations were articulated. Building on previous literature, a schema for categorizing different types of limitations was developed and subsequently adapted to the features of the present data. Focusing on RAs and PhD theses, Zhou and Jiang (2023) found that research limitations were broadly contextualized on four evaluative focuses: generalizability of findings, overall quality of research, research design and analysis, and writer's competence. Comparatively, projects at the master's stage are often highly constrained in time and resources, resulting in a more restricted scope and scale (Woodrow, 2020). Guided by these categories, content analysis (Flick, 2018) was conducted to determine the evaluative focus of each limitation in the corpus. The refined coding framework is presented in Table 2. After assigning text segments to these categories, the previously classified steps in each Limitations section were re-examined, and the sequence of moves and steps used to present each limitation was recorded and summarized, representing different rhetorical strategies employed to address research limitations.

Table 2

Descriptions of Evaluative Focus of Limitations

Categories	Descriptions
Research design and analysis	How the research was conducted, how the data was collected and analyzed and how appropriate the data analysis was
Generalizability of findings	The extent to which the findings can be extended beyond the studied context
Scope/Scale of research	The boundaries and extent of the research, including its focus or size
Research implications	The extent to which the research has theoretical or practical implications

3.2.3 Transition patterns at move-step boundaries

The final stage of analysis was to examine the linguistic realization of transitions within the identified move-step sequences. The analysis began by searching the tag “M2S2” (stating limitations) in the annotated MDA Limitations corpus. The concordance search returned 319 cases, including 13 instances where M2S2 served as the closing step of the section with no subsequent steps. To investigate the linguistic features that signal transitions, the “Summary table” function in #LancsBox X was used to generate an overview of the right context of M2S2.

Table 3

Collocations of M2S2 in R1 Position, Ranked by Frequency

Collocates	Frequency
however	25
the	23
in	19
this	17
as	11
future	10
for	10
it	9
although	9
a	8
to	7
thus	6
furthermore	6
while	6
secondly	5
moreover	5
because	5
therefore	5
whilst	5

Table 3 presents the collocations of M2S2 in the R1 position, with a minimum frequency of five occurrences. Notably, the list is dominated by various linking adverbials (in bold). Following this

observation, all instances of M2S2 were examined through concordance lines to analyze the linguistic features at the onset of the following steps. This procedure ensured the capture of low-frequency but pedagogically meaningful patterns and enabled a comprehensive description of multi-word units, such as “in addition to” and “due to the fact that”. The identified lexical items were then categorized according to the step types they initiated, and their transition-signaling functions are discussed in the following sections.

4 Results

4.1 Rhetorical structure of the Limitations section

The results of move analysis are summarized in Table 4. For each move or step, its overall frequency, the average occurrences per section, the number and percentage of Limitations sections it appears in, as well as the total word count and average word length of its realizations are reported.

Table 4

Descriptive Overview of Moves/steps in the Limitations Section

Moves and Steps	Observed Freq.	Avg. Freq./ Section	Sections (%) with move/ step	Total Words	Avg. Length (Words)
M1: Providing background information	64	0.75	39 (46%)	1,964	31
M1S1: Stating research aims	18	0.21	15 (18%)	410	23
M1S2: Stating methodology	21	0.25	19 (22%)	882	42
M1S3: Reporting findings	12	0.14	8 (9%)	296	25
M1S4: Reporting sample characteristics	13	0.15	12 (14%)	376	29
M2: Acknowledging limitations	443	5.21	84 (99%)	10,358	23
M2S1: Attributing limitations	124	1.46	61 (72%)	3,092	25
M2S2: Stating limitations	319	3.75	84 (99%)	7,266	23
M3: Responding to limitations	154	1.81	60 (71%)	3,935	26
M3S1: Self-justifying	56	0.66	36 (42%)	1,387	25
M3S2: Mitigating	39	0.46	29 (34%)	1,104	28
M3S3: Proposing alternative approaches	59	0.69	32 (38%)	1,444	24
M4: Validating research significance	81	0.95	46 (54%)	1,934	24
M4S1: Highlighting strengths	54	0.64	34 (40%)	1,188	22
M4S2: Highlighting contributions	27	0.32	22 (26%)	746	28
M5: Proposing future directions	105	1.24	41 (48%)	3,049	29
M5S1: Suggesting future research	97	1.14	41 (48%)	2,738	28
M5S2: Drawing practical implications	8	0.09	6 (7%)	311	39

Among the five moves, Move 1 *Providing background information*, referring to the writer's attempt to establish the context for evaluating their research, is the least frequent, occurring 64 times in 46% of the Limitations sections. When present, this move tends to appear at the beginning of the section, as it provides relevant information to prepare readers for the discussion. It can be realized in four ways, by stating the research aims (M1S1, 18%), referring to methodological details (M1S2, 22%), reporting key findings (M1S3, 9%) or describing relevant features of participants (M1S4, 14%).

To illustrate these rhetorical functions, examples from the corpus are provided with move-step labels and the corresponding text ID and relevant linguistic features are underlined. In Example 1, the statement of research purpose is introduced through the expression “the aim of this study” (M1S1). Methodological details are typically marked by references to research design or procedures (M1S2, Example 2), while key findings tend to be introduced with past-tense verbs such as “revealed” (M1S3, Example 3). As shown in Example 4, reporting sample characteristics often involves detailed descriptions of demographic or other relevant attributes of participants (M1S4). These four steps are less likely to co-occur, with M1S2 *Stating methodology* being the most frequent strategy (21 occurrences) and receiving the most detailed description, averaging 42 words.

Example 1 The aim of this study was to analyse reading and writing strategies that the textbooks English 9 and English 10 motivate students to use. [M1S1] (MDA-22)

Example 2 At the end of the data collection process, a number of 6 texts were collected alongside three digital images. [M1S2] (MDA-29)

Example 3 In addition, the study revealed differences in the assessment process and judgments made by the ARs and the JTs. [M1S3] (MDA-64)

Example 4 This study examined a small, very specific sample, consisting of ten Catalan / Spanish learners of English, aged between sixteen and eighteen and studying at PET or FCE level (B1 or B2 according to the CEFR). [M1S4] (MDA-66)

Move 2 *Acknowledging limitations* captures how writers discuss the perceived shortcomings and potential impact on research findings. As might be expected, it is the most dominant move, occurring 443 times and present in 99% of sections. This move is realized either by identifying the causes of the limitations (M2S1, 72%), or directly stating the weaknesses (M2S2, 99%). Appearing 319 times, M2S2 *Stating limitations* is the most frequent step across the corpus, with an average of 3.75 occurrences per section, suggesting a highly cyclical presentation. Examples 5 and 6 illustrate how M2S2 may appear independently to report research constraints such as restricted scope or insufficient corpus size, without offering further explanations.

Example 5 The research only looked at a small number of language items and features of spoken language which might show a few aspects of the features of the research materials. [M2S2] (MDA-03)

Example 6 Firstly, the MICASE lectures sub-corpus is not sufficiently large to conduct a lexical investigation which can produce fully representative results. [M2S2] (MDA-18)

M2S2 can also co-occur with M2S1 *Attributing Limitations*, which appears on average 1.46 times per section. As shown in Examples 7 and 8, M2S1 may either precede or follow M2S2 to establish a causal relationship marked by the phrase “due to,” attributing the limitation to practical constraints. Both steps are relatively concise, with average word lengths of 25 and 23, respectively.

Example 7 However, due to time constraints of the Master's dissertation combined with covid restrictions on travel to Japan, [M2S1] I was not able to complete a fully in-depth ethnographic study. [M2S2] (MDA-69)

Example 8 Both the survey sample size and the interview sample size were relatively small. [M2S2] This could be due to the short recruitment period that was allotted for the study, leading to potential participants to miss [sic] the deadline. [M2S1] (MDA-45)

Move 3 *Responding to Limitations* is another core move, occurring 154 times across more than 70% of sections. This move mainly functions as a follow-up of Move 2, consisting of three rhetorical steps: justifying why certain limitations are unavoidable or have minimal influence on the findings (M3S1, 42%), mentioning what approaches have been taken to mitigate the foreseen impacts (M3S2, 34%) or proposing alternative approaches that can potentially address the problems (M3S3, 38%). M3S1 *Self-justifying* (56 occurrences) and M3S3 *Proposing alternative approaches* (59 occurrences) are the two most frequently employed strategies. These two steps can sometimes be combined. As illustrated in Example 9, M3S1 may follow M3S3 to evaluate the proposed solution as not being feasible within the scope of the study.

Example 9 Inclusion of students' perspectives might allow these aspects to be better explored, [M3S3] yet it was beyond the scope of this study. [M3S1] (MDA-12)

M3S2 *Mitigating* is more likely to occur independently (39 occurrences) but tends to receive a slightly more detailed discussion, with an average length of 28 words. As Examples 10 and 11 show, this step is often marked by the first-person pronoun "I", foregrounding the writer's active role in addressing the limitations.

Example 10 I also tried to embody the concept of 'listen carefully and be slow to speak' (Roulston, 2010, p.200) in order to limit my influence as far as possible. [M3S2] (MDA-80)

Example 11 I address this limitation in my research by seeking the validation of my reflections through the perspectives of others portrayed. [M3S2] (MDA-78)

Present in over 50% of sections, Move 4 *Validating research significance* occurs with moderate frequency (81 instances). This move is employed by the writers to highlight the value of their research, either preceding Move 2 to position the discussion of limitations within a positive context or following it to redirect the focus toward a more favorable evaluation. This can take the form of highlighting the advantages of the research (M4S1, 40%) or stressing its contributions (M4S2, 26%). While M4S1 *Highlighting strengths* tends to emphasize the specific positive features of the study (Example 12), Examples 13 and 14 illustrate that M4S2 *Highlighting contributions* is often signaled by lexical items such as "insight" or "contribution". Among the two steps, M4S1 is more frequently used (54 occurrences), showing a usage pattern comparable to steps in Move 3. M4S2 appears less often (27 occurrences) but tends to be elaborated more, averaging 28 words.

Example 12 The questionnaires and the interview questions worked quite well. [M4S1] (MDA-28)

Example 13 However, the data still allowed a valuable insight into the interactions in writing consultations and the role of the tutor, which had been given little attention in previous research. [M4S2] (MDA-05)

Example 14 The third contribution is that it provides information to inform the development of materials for the parents of nursery children. [M4S2] (MDA-57)

Move 5 *Proposing future directions*, with 105 occurrences across around 50% of the sections, is recognized as another important move. Distinct from the previous moves that primarily focused on the current study, the move is used by writers to present future directions. Writers can either recommend future research to address existing gaps or extend the current topic (M5S1, 48%), or draw from their findings to provide practical recommendations for real-life applications (M5S2, 7%). As illustrated by Example 15, M5S1 *Suggesting future research* can be signaled by phrases such as "future studies",

whereas M5S2 *Drawing practical implications* often involves recommendations for policymaking, material design, or classroom practice (Example 16), reflecting the applied nature of ELT. M5S1 is a more common strategy, occurring 1.14 times per section compared to 0.09 for M5S2. However, M5S2 tends to be elaborated, with an average length of 39 words.

Example 15 Future studies could be conducted with a larger population and by employing different research approaches and instruments. [M5S1] (MDA-31)

Example 16 Second, the curriculum reform should be closely followed by the reform of the evaluation system. [M5S2] (MDA-39)

4.2 Mapping evaluative focus across move-step sequences

In addition to identifying the rhetorical moves and steps, this research also investigates the evaluative focus of each limitation statement by examining which aspects of research are evaluated. Overall, 268 cases of evaluative focus were identified in the corpus, which can be categorized into four types. Table 5 summarizes the frequency and percentage of each category.

Table 5

Focus of Evaluation in the Limitations Section

Category	Research design and analysis	Generalizability of findings	Scale/scope of research	Research implications	Total
Frequency	173	46	45	4	268
Percentage	64.6%	17.2%	16.8%	1.5%	100.0%

Notably, evaluations on *research design and analysis* are the most frequent, accounting for approximately 65% of the total evaluative focuses. This aspect captures how writers acknowledge the constraints of their studies by reflecting on the rigor of their methodological approach and the appropriateness of data analysis procedures. As shown in Example 17, the writer identifies the research shortcomings by evaluating how the cross-sectional approach restricted the amount of data collected.

Example 17 As a result, the cross-sectional approach in this study could not gather a large amount of contextual information from the participants. (MDA-36)

The second category represents how writers evaluate the *generalizability of findings* by commenting on the extent to which they can be generalized beyond the studied context. This category is the second most frequent, taking around 17% of the overall focus. In Example 18, the writer cautions that the findings are only applicable to the participants of the current study.

Example 18 The findings of this study should not be generalised or presented as true of all teachers. (MDA-33)

Limitations concerning the *scale or scope of the research* are almost as frequent as those focusing on the generalizability of findings, with 45 cases accounting for approximately 17% of the total focus. This type of limitations highlights how writers report restrictions concerning the size or focus of their studies. The two factors are sometimes related, as shown in Example 19, where the writer reflects on both the scope of the research and the limited sample investigated.

Example 19 Secondly, due to the limited scope of the project, only four EAP textbooks were investigated. (MDA-18)

The final category, *research implications*, captures how the writers identify the limitations by evaluating the theoretical or practical contributions of the research. In Example 20, the writer acknowledges the limited reach of their research, noting fewer students will benefit from it. Rather predictably, this type only includes four cases, as these dissertations are awarded for their potential implications.

Example 20 So although these magazines are studied, the students who use them are a minority rather than majority [sic]. (MDA-17)

Having outlined the different evaluation focuses, the following analysis presents the move-step sequences employed by writers to address these limitations. Evaluations of *research implications* are excluded from further analysis due to their limited occurrences. As discussed in Section 4.1, Move 2 *Acknowledging limitations* appears in a highly cyclical pattern. Therefore, the analysis focuses on the moves or steps immediately following this move. Although considerable variations exist, the identified move-step sequences can be categorized into three major types based on the rhetorical function they intended to achieve. Table 6 summarizes the frequency and percentage of identified move-step sequences.

Table 6
Move Patterns for Discussing Limitations

Move sequence	Frequency	Percentage
Acknowledgement-focused	91	34.5%
Move 2	91	34.5%
Evaluation-focused	39	14.8%
Move 2-M3S1	20	7.6%
Move 2-M3S1-Move 4	3	1.1%
Move 2-Move 4	16	6.1%
Solution-focused	134	50.8%
Move 2-M3S2	29	11.0%
Move 2-M3S2-M2S2	6	2.3%
Move 2-M3S3	38	14.4%
Move 2-M3S3-M3S1	13	4.9%
Move 2-M3S3-M5S1	3	1.1%
Move 2-M5S1	45	17.0%
Total	264	100.0%

Notably, 34.5% of limitations are presented as bare acknowledgements, either closing the section or being immediately followed by another limitation without further discussion. In contrast, around 15% are accompanied by evaluative commentary, which can take the form of self-justifying (M3S1) or highlighting research significance (Move 4). The majority (50.8%) adopt a solution-focused approach, realized through mitigations taken by the writers (M3S2), hypothesized alternative approaches (M3S3), or suggestions for future research (M5S1).

By mapping the identified focuses of evaluation onto the move-step sequences, it is observed that different types of limitations tend to be discussed within distinct move-step patterns, as summarized in Table 7. For limitations focusing on research design and analysis, writers are more likely to follow up with a proposed solution, accounting for 56% of the total move patterns. In contrast, the

acknowledgment-focused patterns are more common when writers discuss limitations related to the generalizability of findings (41.3%) and the scale or scope of research (46.7%), with fewer solutions provided. Across all types of limitations, it is relatively uncommon for writers to conclude with an evaluation.

Table 7

Distribution of Move Sequences for Types of Limitations

Limitations	Acknowledgment-focused	Evaluation-focused	Solution-focused	Total
Research design and analysis	51 29.5%	24 13.9%	98 56.7%	173 100.0%
Generalizability of findings	19 41.3%	11 23.9%	16 34.8%	46 100.0%
Scale/Scope of research	21 46.7%	4 8.9%	20 44.4%	45 100.0%

4.2.1 Limitations: Acknowledgment-focused

As previously discussed, around 34% of limitations are presented using an acknowledgment-focused pattern, with no justification or solution proposed. This pattern is more commonly employed to discuss limitations focusing on the generalizability of findings or the scale and scope of the research and it is also relatively frequent when evaluating research design and analysis (29.5%). Example 21 demonstrates how limitations can be discussed through bare acknowledgment. The writer presents the first limitation by identifying its cause (M2S1) and indicating its impact on the results (M2S2). The linking word “lastly” is used to directly introduce the following limitation (M2S2), presenting the two limitations in sequence, with no follow-up moves or steps.

Example 21		
as these teachers may have volunteered to participate given their own vested interest in the research topic	M2S1: Attributing limitations	Limitation (1): research design and analysis
therefore, there is the potential that their responses were positively skewed.	M2S2: Stating limitations	
<u>Lastly</u> , only 19.05% of participants from the questionnaire volunteer to be interviewed which could possibly affect the reliability of the study	M2S2: Stating limitations	Limitation (2): research design and analysis

(MDA-82)

4.2.2 Limitations: Evaluation-focused

Evaluation-focused move-step sequences are the least frequent across three types of limitations. Table 8 demonstrates one variation observed in the corpus, where M3S1 and Move 4 can be combined, transitioning the focus from acknowledging limitations to favorably evaluating the research.

Table 8

Distribution of the Evaluation-focused Move Sequences

Move-Step sequence	Research design and analysis (24)	Generalizability of findings (11)	Scale/Scope of research (4)
Move 2-M3S1	15	2	3
Move 2-M3S1-Move 4	2	1	0
Move 2-Move 4	7	8	1

This pattern is illustrated in Example 22. After outlining a limitation regarding the generalizability of findings (M2S2), the writer immediately justifies the methodological choice as representative of real-world conditions (M3S1). With the use of “furthermore”, the writer highlights the benefits brought by participants’ academic discipline diversity (M4S1). Strategically, the limitation is reframed as a strength of the study, helping to leave a positive impression on the readers.

Example 22

Although this may prevent generalization to more linguistically diverse EMI classrooms,	M2S2: Stating limitations	
uniform L1 background was selected as representative of regional HE institutions’ EMI classroom realities (Murata & Iino, 2018).	M3S1: Self-justifying	Limitation: generalizability of findings
Furthermore, listeners’ and speakers’ academic discipline diversity necessitated elicitation of more generalized EMI classroom speech, which may have benefited resulting understanding.	M4S1: Highlighting strengths	

(MDA-08)*4.2.3 Limitations: Solution-focused*

As noted, limitations concerning research design and analysis are predominantly characterized by solution-focused patterns. As shown in Table 9, evaluating research design and analysis tends to create more space for extended discussion, as several variations of move combinations are observed exclusively within this type of limitation.

Table 9

Distribution of the Solution-focused Move Sequences

Move-Step sequence	Research design and analysis (98)	Generalizability of findings (16)	Scale/Scope of research (20)
Move 2-M3S2	25	2	2
Move 2-M3S2-M2S2	6	0	0
Move 2-M3S3	34	2	2
Move 2-M3S3-M3S1	13	0	0
Move 2-M3S3-M5S1	3	0	0
Move 2-M5S1	17	12	16

Within the corpus, there are six cases of the move sequence M2-M3S2-M2S2. As shown in Example 23, the writer first states a limitation regarding the subjectivity of the researcher (M2S2). This is followed by the mention of a mitigation strategy (M3S2), after which the writer restates the limitation (M2S2), emphasizing that full objectivity cannot be achieved. In this way, the writer highlights the effort to address the limitations while simultaneously demonstrating a critical awareness of the issue.

Example 23

Similarly, the fact that the researcher also played the role of the teacher in this research project also reduces the objectivity of the findings.	M2S2: Stating limitations	Limitation: research design and analysis
The incorporation of quantitative scorings notwithstanding	M3S2: Mitigating	
the results were not totally objective.	M2S2: Stating limitations	

(MDA-42)

The second variation is that M3S1 can sometimes be combined with M3S3 (13 cases), helping to justify why the hypothesized solution is impractical within the current research setting. This pattern is illustrated by Example 24, in which the writer proposes that a hardcopy version of the instrument could address the limitations regarding internet access (M3S3). The writer then provides a counter-argument indicated by the conjunction “however”, claiming that this approach is not possible due to practical constraints (M3S1). Therefore, the sequence of argument and counter-argument effectively defends the chosen methodological approach, framing the limitations as unavoidable due to external factors.

Example 24

This might have prevented teachers with no internet access from participating in the study.	M2S2: Stating limitations	Limitation: research design and analysis
A hardcopy version of the instrument could have been provided to survey a wider number of participants.	M3S3: Proposing alternative approaches	
<u>However</u> , due to location and time constraints, this was not possible.	M3S1: Self-justifying	

(MDA-06)

It is also observed that M5S1 can follow M3S3, framing the alternative approaches as methodological suggestions for future research. As shown in Example 25, after openly acknowledging the methodological constraints (M2S2), the writer proposes a potential approach to enhance the credibility of the research (M3S3). The transition is indicated using “while” to frame the comparative approach as a concession and introduce the method that would strengthen the research. By using “this”, the writer then presents the proposed approach as a direction for future studies (M5S1). Therefore, the suggestion for future research is presented as drawn from the writer’s critical reflection of the limitations.

Example 25

In this regard, one epistemological limitation of my study is that I only elicited teachers' reported classroom practice rather than observing this practice through ethnographic participant observation.

M2S2: Stating limitations

While it was still possible for me to compare teachers' views with their reported classroom practice, it would undoubtedly add to the credibility of the research to triangulate interview data with participant observation.

M3S3: Proposing alternative approaches

Limitation: generalizability of findings

This suggests a direction for future research.

M5S1: Suggesting future research

(MDA-19)

4.3 Linguistic realizations of move-step transitions

This section provides a detailed description of linguistic resources used to signal transitions across move-step boundaries. While the previous sections occasionally referenced relevant linguistic features to illustrate rhetorical functions, the focus here is to present how writers linguistically realize the shifts from limitation statements (M2S2) to subsequent rhetorical functions. Table 10 contains the lexical items that initiate the steps following M2S2 and shows the extent to which these items can signal multiple steps or are more exclusively associated with a single communicative purpose.

Table 10

Lexical Clues in the Move-step Boundaries

Function	Lexical items	Following steps	Frequency	Percentage
Contrasting (58)	However (25)	M2S1	2	8.0%
		M3S1	5	20.0%
		M3S2	5	20.0%
		M3S3	3	12.0%
		M4S1	7	28.0%
		M4S2	2	8.0%
		M5S1	1	4.0%
	Although (9)/though (2)	M2S2	1	9.1%
		M3S1	6	54.5%
		M3S2	2	18.2%
		M4S1	2	18.2%
	While (7)/Whilst (4)	M2S1	1	9.1%
		M2S2	1	9.1%
		M3S1	1	9.1%
		M3S2	2	18.2%
		M3S3	1	9.1%
		M4S1	4	36.4%
		M4S2	1	9.1%

	But (4)	M3S1	3	75.0%
		M5S1	1	25.0%
	Nonetheless (3)/Nevertheless (1)	M3S1	2	50.0%
		M3S2	1	25.0%
		M4S1	1	25.0%
	Despite (3)	M4S1	3	100.0%
Sequential (14)	Second (1)/Secondly (4)	M2S1	1	20.0%
		M2S2	4	80.0%
	Third (4)/Thirdly (2)	M2S1	1	16.7%
		M2S2	5	83.3%
	Lastly (2)/Finally (1)	M2S2	3	100.0%
Parallel/Additive (20)	Similarly (2)	M2S2	2	100.0%
	Another (3)	M2S1	1	33.3%
		M2S2	2	66.7%
	In addition (to) (4)/Additionally (1)	M2S1	1	20%
		M2S2	4	80%
	Furthermore (4)/Moreover (5)	M2S1	1	11.1%
		M2S2	8	88.9%
	Besides (1)	M2S2	1	100.0%
Casual (25)	Due to (6)/due to the fact that (1)	M2S1	7	100.0%
	Because (3)/because of (3)	M2S1	6	100.0%
	Thus (6)/Therefore (5)/Thereupon (1)	M3S2	2	16.7%
		M5S1	10	83.3%

As shown in Table 10, most lexical items are categorized as carrying contrastive meanings (58 cases) and can be used to signal a wide range of rhetorical functions. The following examples illustrate how three distinct communicative purposes are signaled by the most frequent word “however” (25 cases), shifting the focus from limitation statements to justify the purpose of the study (M3S1, Example 26), highlighting efforts to mitigate limitations (M3S2, Example 27), and foregrounding the depth of analysis as a strength of the research (M4S1, Example 28).

Example 26 However, the purpose of this study on code-switching is not to arrive at a generalisable conclusion. [M3S1] (MDA-78)

Example 27 *However*, extensive piloting combined with the mixed-methods nature of this study helps to mitigate the aforementioned limitations as much as possible. [M3S2] (MDA-24)

Example 28 *However*, choosing a small sample size allowed the researcher to provide more in-depth descriptions. [M4S1] (MDA-47)

In contrast, sequential markers (14 cases) and parallel or additive markers (20 cases) are more likely to signal the subsequent limitation statements (M2S2), reflecting the previously discussed acknowledge-focused pattern in which two limitations are presented in sequence. These markers may occasionally introduce the cause of limitations (M2S1), as the two steps are closely connected. However, as shown in Example 29-30, the clausal relationship in M2S1 is typically made more explicit through markers such as “due to” and “because”, which are more exclusively associated with this rhetorical function.

Example 29 *due to* the fact that some of the children finished nursery prior to the research taking place. [M2S1] (MDA-57)

Example 30 *because* it was their first time attempting to write a story for others to read, knowing that the ones reading theirs are teachers too. [M2S1] (MDA-30)

In addition, linking adverbials such as “thus” or “therefore” are also found to introduce suggestions for future studies (M5S1). This pattern is illustrated in Example 31, in which “thus” signals a transition to future research directions and justifies their significance based on limitations identified in the current study.

Example 31 *Thus*, future studies may conduct cross-cultural research on FLA and FLSA to examine these topics from an international perspective. [M5S1] (MDA-85)

5 Discussion

Aiming to reveal the discourse conventions of the Limitations section in master’s dissertations, this study examined its rhetorical structure, evaluative focus, and linguistic realizations in the self-compiled MDA Limitations corpus. A move analysis of 85 Limitations sections revealed its structural organization and the recurring move-step patterns associated with different evaluative focuses. These findings, supported by linguistic analyses on move-step transitions, contribute to Swalesian genre theory and extend previous research on limitation statements in academic writing.

In response to the first research question on rhetorical functions, the findings revealed the Limitations section functions as a staged genre comprising five distinct rhetorical moves. The dominant Move 2 *Acknowledging limitations* occurred repeatedly, indicating a cyclical organization pattern. This move, together with two other central moves: Move 4 *Validating research significance* and Move 5 *Proposing future directions*, as well as the relatively marginal Move 1 *Providing background information*, largely aligned with the communicative functions found in the Discussion sections of dissertations (Dudley-Evans, 1994; Hopkins & Dudley-Evans, 1988). These results highlight the evaluative nature of the Limitations section and support Yang and Allison’s (2003) view that critical evaluation can involve both acknowledging limitations and highlighting research strengths.

Notably, Move 3 *Responding to limitations* emerged inductively from the data as a distinctive feature of this part-genre. While this rhetorical function was previously treated as part of the limitations step in Zhou and Jiang’s (2023) analysis of conclusion sections, the focused scope of the present study on the Limitations section enabled a more precise categorization. Specifically, Move 3 was realized through three rhetorical strategies (self-justifying, mitigating, and proposing alternative approaches), demonstrating students’ efforts to minimize the impact of identified limitations. The relatively high frequency of Move 3 demonstrates dissertation writers’ active role in managing the limitations. This

may be attributed to the gate-keeping role of dissertations (Hyland, 2009), where students must strike a balance between critical self-reflection and maintaining the significance of their research. Together, these findings suggest that the Limitations section serves both evaluative and persuasive purposes, in line with Moreno's (2022) view of the limitation statements as a promotional strategy in research writing.

To address the second research question on evaluative focus, content analysis was conducted to identify which aspects of the research were evaluated when discussing limitations. The finding aligns with Zhou and Jiang's (2023) analysis of RA and thesis writing, revealing that successful dissertation writers most often acknowledge limitations related to research design and analysis. Notably, this type of limitation also triggered the most complex move-step sequences in the corpus, as writers frequently proposed potential solutions to improve the research. Extending the suggestions of applied linguistics handbooks that limitations should be explicitly linked to future research (Bitchener, 2010; Woodrow, 2020), this study found that the proposed solutions can also take the form of mitigation and hypothetical alternative approaches. As Swales and Feak (2012) argue, stating limitations can showcase students' disciplinary knowledge; in this context, rhetorical strategies of mitigation or proposing alternative approaches can demonstrate writers' methodological understanding and problem-solving skills, thereby enhancing the perceived value of their research. At the same time, this rhetorical effort reflects the high-stakes nature of limitation statements (Sun & Crosthwaite, 2022), particularly when addressing weaknesses that could undermine the study's methodological significance.

Two other relatively frequent evaluative focuses, generalizability of findings and scale/scope of research, were also identified in the corpus. These limitations are likely to be influenced by the inherent constraints of dissertation research, such as limited time and resources (Woodrow, 2020). Notably, compared with limitations on research design and analysis, these limitations were acknowledged in a more open-ended approach, with fewer solutions provided. This observation might be explained by the specialized readers of dissertations (Thompson, 2005). While methodological constraints are more specific and potentially threatening, limitations related to generalizability and scale or scope tend to be more universal, thus requiring less justification for examiners. Overall, the analysis shows that move-step patterns reflect writers' rhetorical choices in responding to different types of limitations, supporting Hopkins & Dudley-Evans' (1988) view that such patterns are not fixed but shaped by communicative intentions.

Regarding the third research question, due to space constraints, the study focused on examining the linguistic features that signal transitions from limitation statements to other communicative functions through concordance analysis. In line with Zhou and Jiang's (2023) finding that thesis writers use more frame markers to manage extended discussions of limitations, this study found that frame markers and additive adverbials were frequently employed to introduce new limitations and present them in sequence. This pattern is likely to reflect the cyclical nature of how limitations are discussed. Moreover, contrastive adverbials were found to signal a wide range of communicative functions, guiding readers to shift from presenting weaknesses to emphasizing positive aspects of the study. This is considered in previous research as a rhetorical strategy aimed at leaving a favorable impression on readers (Joseph & Lim, 2019). More exclusively, shifts from acknowledged limitations to suggestions for future research were typically signaled by causative connectors, reinforcing the close rhetorical link between limitations and future research observed in previous studies (Boonyuen & Tangkiengsirisin, 2018; Joseph & Lim, 2019; Kanoksilapatham, 2015).

One possible explanation for the use of these overt linguistic signals at move-step boundaries is students' awareness of their readers. Given that examiners evaluate both the content and presentation of the dissertation, student writers may strategically use frame or transition markers to manage the discourse and redirect attention toward more positive evaluations, which helps to avoid overemphasis on the studies' weaknesses. Theoretically, these findings contribute to the Swalesian genre theory by illustrating how move-step identification can be supported by typical linguistic features (Swales, 2004). Pedagogically, these linking expressions can be used by EAP instructors to raise students' awareness of

rhetorical intentions. Students can be guided to use specific lexical or grammatical signals to convey their communicative purposes more effectively, which may also enhance their ability to interpret the rhetorical functions of academic genres.

6 Conclusion

In sum, the study found that the Limitations sections from exemplar dissertations are strategically structured to both acknowledge and manage their research constraints, with communicative purposes and language use shaped by rhetorical intentions and expectations of academic readers.

Pedagogically, these findings have implications for EAP writing instruction, particularly in raising dissertation writers' awareness of the Limitations section as both a reflective and persuasive part-genre. To use limitation statements as opportunities to demonstrate disciplinary knowledge, students are encouraged to reflect critically on their methodological design and offer potential solutions, thereby displaying their problem-solving skills. These corpus-informed insights can also enhance dissertation writing handbooks by providing more authentic examples. Additionally, EAP practitioners can be encouraged to incorporate genre analysis into writing instruction. For example, students can engage in move analysis to reflect on writers' communicative intentions in small, specialized corpora and examine relevant linguistic features, fostering a more contextualized understanding of disciplinary conventions. Move analysis can show useful pathways for novice researchers to follow while encouraging a variety of realizations; EAP instruction informed by move analysis can help students not only find ways to express these important aspects of their research more clearly but also guide them through critical engagement with a range of perspectives on their research design and research execution.

Such instruction can be especially crucial in the current age of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI). Identifying research limitations often requires critical reflection on research design. However, this process might be oversimplified by AI tools which can generate plausible limitations automatically, or by relying too much on AI feedback. Deng et al. (2026) have noted ways in which the strengths of teacher feedback and AI feedback need to be combined, and their findings related to teachers' abilities in "identifying core issues and delivering holistic evaluations" (p. 102) would seem to be particularly pertinent for this section of the dissertation. In this context, EAP practitioners are encouraged to adapt their pedagogical practices in response to ongoing technological developments (Bell, 2025). Therefore, through personalised feedback tailored for their specific project, greater emphasis should be placed on guiding postgraduate students to engage critically with their own research constraints and express them clearly, as this can help them develop and demonstrate deeper disciplinary understanding and stronger research competencies—not only to their supervisors and examiners, but also to the broader academic community.

Admittedly, this research has several limitations. While it aimed to provide a multi-faceted genre analysis of the Limitations section, the description was confined to the textual dimension. Given that genre is often perceived as a form of social practice, a socially oriented perspective can be necessary to capture its communicative purposes and associated community expectations. Future research could consider combining textual analysis with interviews with dissertation writers or supervisors, as their perspectives on discourse practice may offer valuable insights into the rhetorical function of this part-genre. Regarding the function-form gap, the study focused on how transitions from limitation statements to subsequent rhetorical functions were realized, offering a partial answer to the third research question. Nevertheless, it highlights the step as an appropriate analytical unit to capture writers' communicative intentions. Future research could provide a more comprehensive description of linking resources signaling move-step boundaries, which would further inform EAP writing instructions.

While acknowledging its scope, this study offers fruitful insights into the Limitations section as a distinct part-genre in master's dissertations and provides an actionable approach for EAP instructors and

researchers to promote genre-based pedagogy using limitations sections in dissertations as models, rather than relying on the narrower focus of limitations from Research Articles.

Appendix 1. List of sources for quoted examples

MDA-	Author	Year of Award and Dissertation Title
03	Xu Han	2019-2020: Evaluation of Authenticity: Comparison of Dialogues in a Chinese Coursebook and Authentic Interactions
05	Caroline Collier	2019-2020: The perceived roles of the tutor in writing consultations for international students in a UK higher education institution
06	Sthephanie Llanos Gonzalez	2019-2020: Exploring Chilean EFL Teachers' Beliefs and Practices in Learner Autonomy as Language Learners and Language Teachers
08	Douglas Evans	2019-2020: Speaking to be understood: Indonesian students' perceived and actual understanding of Indonesian academics' English speech
12	Zening Yang	2020-2021: Motivational Strategies in an Online Learning Environment L2 Teacher Cognitions and Practices
17	Amanda Jane Hawthorne	2020-2021: Black in the British Analysing the visual representation of Black people in British Council Teaching Materials
18	Beatrice Massa	2020-2021: Get-Passive and Copular Get in University Classroom Discourse and EAP Textbooks
19	Daniel Calvert	2020-2021: Exploring the language orientations of third-sector ESOL teachers in London towards translanguageing
22	Elvira Ismaeva	2020-2021: Critical evaluation of English textbooks for high school students in Kyrgyzstan
24	Frederick Leverance Ryder	2020-2021: Why stay in TESOL. A mixed-methods study into in-service English language teacher motivation
28	Satomi Suzuki	2020-2021: What influences Japanese junior high school classroom practice
29	Shahd Almnaies	2020-2021: Stories of Kuwaiti English Language Teachers A Multimodal Narrative Inquiry
30		
31		
33	Timothy Hampson	2020-2021: What we talk about when we talk about teaching Teacher knowledge sources in an online community
36	Charlotte Elizabeth	2021-2022: Language teacher agency, emotion labour and emotion rewards in ESOL language programs
39	Zhengqing Luo	2021-2022: Why do I (no longer) love teaching?' Investigating (de) motivation of EFL teachers in Chinese middle schools
42	Van Thang Nguyen	2021-2022: The Effects of Using Rhetorical Structure Theory in Facilitating Global Coherence in Written Performance of L2 Writers
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