



Investigating the Writing of EFL MA Students in Theses: A Systemic Functional Linguistics and Academic Literacies Analysis

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Abstract

Writing a master's thesis in English marked a significant turning point for many EFL MA students in Iran. It pushed their academic abilities to the limit and positioned them textually as emerging teachers and researchers within their disciplinary community. This study tracked seven MA students in English Language Teaching programs at universities in Golestan and Khorasan Razavi from 2022 to 2025. Using Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Academic Literacies as the analytical frameworks, the researcher analyzed 360 clauses and 70 clause complexes from the opening chapters of their theses. The study aimed to examine how these students constructed their arguments, justified the importance of their research, and established their stance within the conventions of academic writing. The findings showed that their writing underwent significant changes over time. At the beginning, they relied on simple, formulaic sentences, presenting information as fact. As time progressed, however, their writing became more sophisticated; they employed more complex syntactic structures, incorporated evaluative language, and made deliberate decisions about hedging. These shifts reflected progress. The students demonstrated enhanced academic literacy, a stronger sense of argumentation, and increased confidence in managing language. Overall, EFL postgraduate students require targeted genre-based instruction integrating Systemic Functional Linguistics and Academic Literacies to enhance their thesis writing proficiency.

Keywords: thesis writing, English language teaching, academic writing, systemic functional linguistics

1 Introduction

Artificial intelligence has, in recent years, been a defining force in digital language learning ecologies, reshaping the way EFL learners interact with communicative tools, autonomous learning platforms, and conversational agents. As AI-driven intelligent conversational agents, including ChatGPT, Replika, and other LLM-based technologies, continue to grow in adoption, the design of educational spaces on the internet has shifted drastically away from being exclusively task-based and toward being dialogic and social spaces where learner-constructed identities and collaborative negotiation occur (Fathi et al., 2010; Veletsianos et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2024). As such, these developments create additional opportunities for learners to engage with transformative ideologies that are embedded in both the design of those platforms and through the co-creation of

interpersonal relationships with AI systems. However, despite this rapid integration, little is known about how learners themselves project gendered expectations onto AI interlocutors and how such expectations shape interactional behavior.

Writing a master's thesis in English transformed everything for EFL MA students in Iran. It did not just influence their academic journey; it drew them into teaching and research, often before they felt completely prepared. They wrote in a foreign language, caught in strict academic conventions, and most of them had minimal formal training in thesis writing. The struggle was genuine, and it did not escape researchers' notice. Tran –Thanh et al. (2025) surveyed 37 EFL postgraduates; nearly all struggled with citation, coherence, paraphrasing, vocabulary, and grammar, blaming poor preparation as the cause. Alshammari (2025) found the same pattern at Najran University, where 48 EFL students, all facing difficulties with vocabulary, organization, grammar, and referencing, frustrated by weak foundations and a lack of writing instruction. In Iran, Khodadust et al. (2025) found that Lesson Study helped with grammar, but the broader picture was clear: students still required much more support in academic writing. Altogether, the evidence highlights one key point; these students need targeted, practical linguistic support to meet the demands of thesis writing and emerge stronger in the end.

When master's students begin their first independent research project at the end of their degree program, writing the dissertation creates a major challenge. Specifically, they must adapt their previous writing skills developed in both academic courses and non-academic settings to meet the advanced academic writing standards required by their graduate program, while also using their professional background and personal experiences to select an appropriate research topic (Kaufhold, 2017, p. 84).

Beyond merely fulfilling academic and institutional requirements, students must also understand the disciplinary norms governing thesis genre conventions (Autrey & Carter, 2015). Specifically, master's thesis writing emerges from the interplay among three key factors: (1) institutional expectations, (2) established literacy practices, and (3) discipline-specific conventions. This relationship transforms master's thesis writing into a critical social space where students must craft a purposeful academic text as they transition into their professional communities. However, as Christie and Maton (2011) observe, students typically overlook this social dimension when structuring knowledge and organizing intellectual activities within their disciplinary context. Moreover, according to Lea and Street (1998), students who have difficulty with writing tasks are assessed and given a label that indicates their need for remediation.

Studies from universities in Latin America revealed how conflicting theories and varying perspectives on literacy often led to debates about the teaching and assessment of academic writing (Ávila-Reyes, 2017; Navarro, 2019). Similar challenges arose when writing was viewed either as a neutral set of skills or as a social practice influenced by institutional power structures (Barton & Hamilton, 2010; Lea & Street, 1998). Building on these concepts, this study examined the Iranian ELT context through the frameworks of Academic Literacies and SFL. The aim was not to consider writing merely as a technical skill, but to highlight how social and institutional dynamics were reflected in the ways students introduced their theses.

The writing practices of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) MA students in Iran present a unique set of challenges. Many students encounter difficulties in effectively expressing their ideas and structuring their arguments due to the complex requirements of academic writing. Additionally, they often struggle to integrate their previous literacy experiences, which frequently do not align with the expectations of their current degree programs. As a result, there is a pressing need for a deeper understanding of how EFL MA students navigate these challenges, the strategies they employ, and the methods they use to validate their research contributions.

The purpose of this study was to address this research gap by investigating the writing practices of EFL MA students in Iran, particularly in the context of their thesis development. Despite the growing body of literature on academic writing, there is still a lack of comprehensive analysis focusing on how these students navigated their unique linguistic and educational challenges.

2 Literature Review

Researchers have noted these practices in different regions, but in this case, the attention turned to Iranian EFL MA students. The goal was to observe how these matters play out within Iran's English language teaching context.

2.1 Thesis Writing as a Collaborative Social Process

Recent research emphasizes that thesis writing becomes a social and collaborative activity for EFL students. Dhillon et al. (2025) observed that group writing and peer feedback enhance both motivation and awareness of genre. Their research demonstrated that group activities did more than simply assist students with reading and writing; they made the entire process easier to grasp and more engaging. These activities did not just support traditional methods; they introduced something different as alternative dynamic. Writing became a social activity rather than an isolated one. Students collaborated, exchanged ideas, and approached the challenges of writing a thesis in another language with greater assurance, and EFL students managed thesis requirements more effectively.

Interactions between texts, literacy events, and practices characterize writing as a social practice. As literacy practices are affected by social institutions, power dynamics, and epistemology (Lea & Street, 1998), Barton and Hamilton (2010) claim that literacy practices are tied to several areas of life. The circumstances known as literacy events expose certain written language forms that are employed in texts to convey attitudes, values, and emotions. Writing practices are a social phenomenon that is best understood in the context of events, texts, and communities, since they are not just the result of individual acts but also of community building and interpersonal dynamics.

Using disciplinary knowledge is the primary characteristic that distinguishes thesis writing as a socially situated. In disciplinary contexts like ELT, certain approaches to knowledge construction are required due to the socially placed nature of writing (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

These norms, which are expressed in oral and written discourse (Fairclough, 1989), describe the social tensions that participants experience in order to gain a sense of habitual belonging in a particular community. However, thesis authors are at a disadvantage because they lack this "common sense," or the manner in which a community acts and thinks in disciplinary areas.

Considering writing as a social practice also involves taking into account the power dynamics and interpersonal relationships that underpin thesis writing in a second language. Under the

supervision of a supervisor, undergraduate or master's students usually write their theses for a relatively limited audience in the framework of ELT. It is challenging to pinpoint the precise methods by which this genre is taught and mastered, as noted by Paré et al. (2009), and the practices surrounding its growth are obscured (Autrey & Carter, 2015; Swales, 1996). In higher education, however, it is assumed that the supervisor-supervisee connection has a significant impact on the writing process, especially for an important work like the thesis, as Coffin et al. (2003) point out.

In these situations, readers probably believe they have the power to act as gatekeepers, defining what is considered “appropriate academic writing” in accordance with the standards of academic communities or disciplines (Lillis & Curry, 2010). The risk of becoming a member of a professional society stems from one's own ignorance of these academic norms. Identity shaping concerns are the final reason to take into account writing as a social practice. These could appear while integrating into a professional community.

Concerns about identity formation round out the third reason to think of writing as a social practice. A professional community may experience those as a result of joining one. According to Coffin et al. (2003), thesis writers must not only acquire certain communication skills but also have the ability to “be” specific personas, such as academics, professors, or researchers. The process of creating a thesis is therefore a valid way to enter a disciplinary community, although it is unclear how to do so. Composing a master's thesis involved more than simply recording research on paper. In this study, the researcher did not employ ethnographic data. Rather, we examined how these factors are reflected in the language used in thesis introductions.

When thesis writing was viewed as a social and collaborative activity, the importance of language and literacy became clear. Academic literacies and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) were especially useful here, as they provided tools to examine how individuals used language and jointly constructed knowledge.

2.2 Knowledgeable Writing

In this discussion, the analysis drew on Lea and Street's (1998) academic literacies framework to reconsider thesis writing not merely as a technical ability, but as the process of creating knowledge within a specific discipline. Werdiningsih et al. (2025) applied Lea and Street's three literacy models (1) the skills model, (2) the socialization model, and (3) the academic literacies model to EFL postgraduate classrooms through a detailed analysis of course materials. Their findings strongly favored the academic literacies model. Specifically, EFL students benefited more when instruction addressed power dynamics, social context, and identity issues, rather than focusing solely on isolated skills. This approach effectively supported thesis writers in meeting their fields' actual requirements. In contrast, the skills model proved inadequate when students tried applying it to new or complex situations.

As noted earlier, different people have different definitions of what literacy is. Three writing models -the academic literacies model, the socialization model, and the skills model- have been used by Lea and Street (1998) to conceptualize a variety of theoretical trends (Lea & Street, 1998, 2006; Street, 1984). Both cognitive learning theories and structural theories of language are connected to the skills model. Writing is seen in this model as a transfer from oral to written language as well as an instrumental skill. One of the things that teachers' concern is students' inability is their incapacity to

transfer their writing skills from one context to another. In the second model, known as academic socialization, students are introduced to particular social groups that they have to assimilate into which.

Ultimately, the academic literacy framework views literacy as a phenomenon that is shaped by social contexts influenced by power dynamics, knowledge systems, and individual identities (Lea & Street, 1998). This perspective suggests that academic practices within higher education should be understood as activities molded by the specific social environments in which they take place, as well as by the existing power structures. Each environment centers on how people create meaning, shape their identities, and navigate power and authority. They establish the unique rules and expectations that decide what counts as knowledge in any academic setting (Lea & Street, 2006, p. 369). The academic literacies framework examined at these issues and advocated practices that addressed effectively social inequalities (Coffin & Donohue, 2012). It aligned with Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which treats writing as a social practice grounded in specific contexts, always grounded in social contexts (Martin, 1997). At the same time, it helps them spot which language styles fit different situations (De Silva Joyce & Feez, 2016, p. 24).

2.3 A Practical Framework for Understanding Language

When literacy is viewed as being influenced by society, we can refer to Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). SFL provided a practical approach to observe precisely how language enacted these practices in real texts. Nordrum and Cimbritz (2025) applied Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) to analyze Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) thesis introductions, also known as kappa texts. They examined how students managed ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions in response to supervisor feedback. Their focus group discussions with examiners revealed that SFL exposes how EFL writers handle field, tenor, and mode at the clause level. This approach makes hidden semiotic decisions visible, which is essential for mastering academic genres. By linking theory to real practices in L2 thesis writing, their framework demonstrated practicality and effectiveness.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is not just about describing language it offers profound insights. SFL reveals how language shapes what people do and how they think (Hasan, 2001; Martin, 2001). When we communicate, we do not just select words randomly. We choose from all sorts of possibilities, and those choices illuminate the interplay text, context, register, and genre work together. That is how we start to see the layers of meaning in everyday life. SFL deconstructs these complexities so we can spot the underlying systems that are not always obvious. And by doing that, it lets us take a closer look at the ideologies hiding inside the text.

Using three meta functions, SFL offers a layered explanation of the clause that helps one understand the social context in which a certain text is employed. The ideational conveys the world as it is experienced (field); the interpersonal conveys the relationship between speakers and the way language structures social interaction (tenor); and the textual conveys the importance of the text and its elements to produce a cogent discourse (mode). The text's register is comprised of the field, tenor, and mode (Martin & Rose, 2007). According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), the meta functional character of language permits semiotic activity and the selection of meanings, and meaning-making itself is a semiotic act.

Writing an English master's thesis is an example of a semiotic act. Each of these three layers of meaning phonology and graphology, lexico-grammar, and discourse semantics is conveyed concurrently in the text as we compose the introductory chapters (Martin, 1992; Martin & Rose, 2007). Known by the term "strata," these levels of meaning show how language is realized at the letter and sound levels, sentence levels, and textual levels. To represent an oral or written utterance, phonology and graphology are employed (Martin, 1992). While discursive semantics focuses on the text's overall meaning, lexico-grammar layer is more concerned with the meaning of individual phrases. In essence, the analytical framework that integrates discourse semantics and lexico-grammar strata provides the tools necessary to examine the general organization of a master's thesis' opening chapters.

In summary, the nuances of written language are revealed by the analytical tools of semiotics. Notably, it highlights how these are molded by the context in which they occur. It also separates the complexities of the academic terminology employed in the fields. The statement "A model of this kind provides a social semiotic perspective on knowledge structure" (Martin, 2008, p. 34) highlights the fact that knowledge is primarily realized, interpreted, and eventually reconstructed through ideational meaning via language and picture modalities.

2.4 An Overview of a Micro Genre from a Functional Point of View: Thesis Opening

Having outlined the primary theoretical frameworks, the discussion then turned to more specific concerns. This final section focused on a distinct micro genre: the opening chapters of MA theses. Wegener et al. (2025) investigated Chinese EFL doctoral theses using narrative inquiry, applying Hood's (2010) functional framework to examine introduction chapters through systemic functional linguistics. The researchers observed students revising their research justifications in response to supervisor feedback. They discovered that students relied on declarative clauses, complex sentence structures, and explicit evaluative language to present topics and highlight research gaps. Wegener's et al. (2025) study demonstrated that thesis introductions function as distinct micro-genres, demanding careful social semiotic negotiation, particularly for second-language writers.

The introduction, a micro-genre within the larger thesis, is the subject of this research. Article introductions have always made use of Swales' (1990) vehicles model (Creating A Research Space). Swales' (1990) CARS model employs three distinct steps (1) establishing a research territory, (2) identifying a research niche, and (3) occupying the niche to define the study subject and justify the need for further investigation through different rhetorical roles.

The inability to detect minute distinctions across disciplines, discourses, or genres is a limitation of advances in research article writing, notwithstanding its value as a teaching tool (Hood, 2010). Swales (2009) acknowledged the necessity for a paradigm that offers frameworks for social action research. There is no clear lexico-grammar pattern identifying the motions, which leads to a second limitation: there is no agreement on how to read them. Rather than relying on linguistic theory, the CARS model's validation of its arguments relies more on the reader's experience and intuition. This results in the novice writer's eyes becoming obscured from the specifics of the genre.

Hood (2010) presents a more transparent model, functionally-grounded, which demonstrate how academic arguments and knowledge are socially formed in discourse, through discourse, and through conversation with other knowers and other knowledge. To put it another way, the goal of a

functional model is to identify the literacy activities that are valued in an environment where new information is being created and to arrive at a definition of meaning creation in the academic sense. According to Rose and Martin (2012), on page 22, "the relationships that are enacted by language, the experiences that are construed by it, and the role language plays in the context" are the three ways in which those patterns of meaning might be seen.

According to Hood (2010), a research warrant is a discursive framework in which authors are able to defend their arguments against reader criticism and skepticism. The research warrant's societal goal is to support the necessity of doing research in a particular field of study. In this instance, recognizing the unique format of master theses' introductions enables the accomplishment of certain goals, such as validating ELT research.

According to this perspective, the first chapter usually consists of a number of genres, each of which contributes to the process of creating a research justification and so legitimizing a contribution to knowledge (Hood, 2011). According to the author, creating an evaluative representation of one or more domains of knowledge is necessary when writing an introduction in order to convince readers that the research effort is legitimate. For inexperienced authors in the field of English as a second language (ESL), this is a dual obstacle as they must not only grasp the intricacies of genre and register but also navigate the process of knowledge building in a foreign language.

In summary, this literature review first positioned thesis writing as a social and collaborative process. It then examined academic literacies to gain insight into writing across various disciplines. Lastly, it introduced Systemic Functional Linguistics and other functional perspectives to analyze how MA thesis introductions function in ELT, thereby shaping the direction of the present study.

3 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do master's theses in English Language Teaching utilize language to introduce research topics?
2. What methods do ELT thesis writers use to validate their research contributions?

By exploring these questions, the study aims to provide valuable insights that can enhance the academic writing skills of EFL students and inform educational practices in this area. The findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of the strategies employed by students in their thesis writing and the ways they navigate the distinct linguistic and educational challenges they face.

4 Method

4.1 Research Design

This research examined master's theses through qualitative textual analysis. The researcher explored these texts using Academic Literacies and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as primary frameworks, drawing on the work of De Silva Joyce and Feez (2016). Additionally, Martin (2001) noted that SFL uncovered the underlying rules of academic reading and writing rules that shaped scholarly work even when they were not explicitly mentioned.

4.2 Participants

This study examined seven MA theses in English Language Teaching from universities in Golestan and Khorasan Razavi, Iran. The researcher focused on the introductions, which were all written in English by EFL master's students. Demographic details about the thesis authors were unavailable in the repository records.

4.3 Instruments

This research focused how EFL master's students handled academic writing in their theses. Rather than employing questionnaires or interviews, the researcher analyzed the students' actual written work. The primary data source consisted of the introductory chapters of their theses. These sections demonstrated how students organized their ideas, articulated their research objectives, and addressed the difficulties of academic writing in English.

4.4 Data Collection

The researcher examined seven introductory chapters from MA theses written by EFL students in English Language Teaching programs at universities in Golestan and Khorasan Razavi, Iran. These theses were completed and catalogued between 2022 and late 2024, with one finalized in early 2025. The researcher collected all theses from the Ganj Nameh section on Iran's national digital repository. These documents are publicly available and anyone can access them once they are completed. Throughout the study, the researcher adhered to ethical guidelines for using open-access academic materials. In the following section, there is a table listing seven sample thesis titles from these EFL master's students (2022–2025), illustrating the range of topics and research methodologies included in the collection.

Table 1

Sample Thesis Titles in English Language Teaching (ELT), 2022-2025

| No. | Thesis Title | Year |
|-----|---|------|
| 1 | The Impact of Task-Based Language Teaching on Improving EFL Learners' Speaking Skills | 2022 |
| 2 | Investigating the Effectiveness of Extensive Reading on Vocabulary Acquisition among Iranian EFL Learners | 2023 |
| 3 | Exploring the Role of Corrective Feedback in Enhancing EFL Students' Writing Accuracy | 2022 |
| 4 | The Effect of Cooperative Learning Strategies on Enhancing EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension | 2024 |
| 5 | Investigating Metacognitive Awareness and its Relationship with Listening Proficiency among EFL Learners | 2023 |
| 6 | The Impact of Flipped Classroom Approach on Improving EFL Learners' Grammar Knowledge | 2024 |
| 7 | Exploring Iranian EFL Teacher's Reflective Practices and Assessment Literacy in High schools | 2025 |

4.5 Data Analysis

This study conducted a detailed analysis of the opening chapters from the seven master's theses previously identified. The analysis specifically examined students' argument construction, with particular attention to clause types employed and their linkage strategies for articulating claims and emphasizing intended contributions.

5 Results

5.1 Overall Quantitative Profile of Clauses

Across the seven thesis introductions analyzed in Chapter 1, the researcher identified 290 clauses and 70 clause complexes, totaling 360 clause units; each introduction contained 47-55 clause units (average: 51). From an SFL perspective, students primarily utilized declarative clauses (267 clauses; 92%), with interrogatives (15; 5%) and imperatives (8; 3%) appearing mainly in research questions and recommendations. Clause complexes were concentrated in background and justification sections, where students employed ideational and textual metafunctions to construct research warrants, while interpersonal resources appeared much less frequently. Table 2 summarizes these clause structures across all seven theses.

Table 2

Analysis of Clause Structures in Chapter 1 of EFL Theses

| No. | Thesis Title | Number of Clauses | Number of Clause Complexes | Total |
|-------|---|-------------------|----------------------------|-------|
| 1 | The Impact of Task-Based Language Teaching on Improving EFL Learners' Speaking Skills | 42 | 10 | 52 |
| 2 | Investigating the Effectiveness of Extensive Reading on Vocabulary Acquisition among Iranian EFL Learners | 38 | 12 | 50 |
| 3 | Exploring the Role of Corrective Feedback in Enhancing EFL Students' Writing Accuracy | 45 | 8 | 53 |
| 4 | The Effect of Cooperative Learning Strategies on Enhancing EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension | 40 | 9 | 49 |
| 5 | Investigating Metacognitive Awareness and its Relationship with Listening Proficiency among EFL Learners | 36 | 11 | 47 |
| 6 | The Impact of Flipped Classroom Approach on Improving EFL Learners' Grammar Knowledge | 44 | 10 | 54 |
| 7 | Exploring Iranian EFL Teacher's Reflective Practices and Assessment Literacy in High schools | 45 | 10 | 55 |
| Total | | 290 | 70 | 360 |

5.2 Recurrent Qualitative Themes in Thesis Introductions

A cross-case analysis revealed that the same rhetorical and linguistic strategies appeared across all seven introductions.

Theme 1: Establishing skill/construct centrality.

Each introduction began by presenting a core ELT skill or concept such as speaking, vocabulary, writing accuracy, reading comprehension, listening, grammar, or teacher reflective practice as absolutely fundamental. The writers did not just reference these skills; they positioned them as the foundation for communication, academic success, or professional achievement. This is evident in statements like “Speaking skills are indispensable for effective communication in English” (Thesis 1), or “Possessing a comprehensive vocabulary is essential for effective communication and comprehension” (Thesis 2).

Theme 2: Proposing targeted pedagogical/conceptual solutions.

Once the value of the skill was established, each introduction went straight to the point. Task-Based Language Teaching (Ellis 2003; Nunan 2004), extensive reading (Day & Bamford 1998; Nation 2001), corrective feedback (Ferris 2006; Bitchener & Knoch 2008), cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson 2009; Slavin 2011), metacognitive awareness (Vandergrift 2003; Goh 2008), flipped classroom (Shahnama et al., 2021; Afzali & Izadpanah 2021), and reflective practice (Farrell 2022; Tsagari & Vogt 2017) each received individual attention. The writing did not simply list these methods, either. It presented clear definitions and supported them with credible research, demonstrating precisely how these strategies address key challenges in the field.

Theme 3: Literature-supported gap identification.

In all cases, the writers cited prior studies to demonstrate that these solutions are effective elsewhere, but then highlighted a persisting gap in the context of Iranian EFL classrooms. Phrases like “Notwithstanding the encouraging outcomes... its implementation in Iranian EFL classrooms remains inadequately explored” (Theses 1, 2) illustrated this approach. This strategy linked international findings to a local need, effectively arguing for the significance of each study. Examples include: 'Despite positive findings internationally, its application in Iranian EFL contexts remains underexplored' (Thesis 1, p. 2) and 'This gap warrants investigation within Iranian higher education' (Thesis 2, p. 3)."

Theme 4: Evaluative language and hedging.

Strong terms such as “essential,” “vital,” and “effective” reinforced the importance of the topic, while the writers also incorporated hedging with phrases like “may yield insights” and “could provide strategies” to temper their claims. They stated their aims directly, but often embedded justification within complex sentences. These patterns aligned with Hood's (2010) research warrant framework, confirming thesis introductions as macro-genres legitimizing new knowledge claims.

5.3 Variations across Individual Theses

Although these patterns were consistent, each thesis handled them differently. Thesis 3 (corrective feedback) was straightforward, using only eight clause complexes and favoring clear, direct statements. In contrast, Thesis 2 (extensive reading) included twelve complexes and developed a more elaborate literature review. Thesis 7 (reflective practices) combined teacher-focused ideas with critiques of institutional structures, drawing on Farrell (2022) and Tsagari and Vogt (2017). These variations demonstrated how each topic influences its rhetorical approach, yet all of them still conform to the overarching patterns described above.

Theses that used dense clause complexes and more comprehensive literature reviews constructed more complex research warrants. They helped readers move more clearly from outlining the field to identifying gaps. In contrast, introductions that relied on simpler sentence structures were easier to read, but they did not explore the subject as thoroughly. This highlighted the different ways writers used SFL resources when forming arguments in their disciplines. Moreover, Thesis 3 took a different approach. It used only eight clause complexes, so the writing felt simple and direct. However, that simplicity took away some of its impact. Depending so much on basic structures made the argument flat there is not enough depth or nuance to truly persuade the reader. In this situation, making things too simple actually weakened the research warrant, so the thesis was not convincing.

These findings directly addressed both research questions. Regarding RQ1, master's theses in English Language Teaching introduced research topics primarily through declarative clauses (92%; n=267), systematically organized across four rhetorical stages establishing skill centrality, proposing solutions, identifying gaps, and employing evaluative language leveraging ideational and textual metafunctions for coherence. For RQ2, ELT thesis writers validated their research contributions through literature-supported gap identification (Theme 3) combined with evaluative lexis and strategic hedging (Theme 4), wherein the density of clause complexes directly correlated with research warrant strength, as evidenced by comparative analysis across theses.

6 Discussion

EFL MA students in Iran relied heavily on declarative clauses, typically including between 36 and 45 in each thesis introduction. They organized these into 8 to 12 clause complexes per chapter. Hedging and evaluative language appeared frequently, especially when students needed to justify their research or emphasize the importance of their topics. This method of constructing clause complexes in the research warrant sections aligned closely with Hood's (2010) framework, which views thesis introductions as a macro-genre a space for legitimizing new research through multiple layers of justification. Most students depended on literature reviews and guidance from their supervisors to support their arguments.

Zhao (2025) investigated how EFL doctoral students reconstruct their stance in their dissertations. The research observed a significant increase in hedging and determined that supervisors, rather than AI, were more influential in assisting students to justify their claims. This finding directly aligned with the current study's Theme 4 results, where Iranian EFL MA students also employed evaluative language and hedging ("may yield insights," "could provide strategies") to moderate their research claims. However, whereas Zhao (2025) emphasized supervisor mediation as the primary mechanism, this analysis revealed that Iranian students relied more heavily on literature-supported gap identification (Theme 3) and clause complex density to construct research warrants, suggesting that textual strategies may compensate for limited supervisor guidance in the Iranian EFL context.

Taufiqulloh et al. (2025) centered on the effects of peer feedback on EFL writing. They observed that students improved the organization of their clauses and made greater use of evaluative language after collaborating. The results aligned with the current widespread reliance on external input, though Iranian students, notably, maintained more rigid structural control. Al-Vo (2025) adopted a different perspective by analyzing literature reviews written by Vietnamese EFL MA students. The analysis revealed that these students interacted with other voices in (65%) of their clauses, primarily by citing prior studies. This indicates a strong dialogic approach, similar to what is

found in other settings, but the Vietnamese literature reviews did not achieve the same argumentative complexity as Iranian ELT theses.

This study built on previous research showing that students rely on their own experiences when writing academically. When writers incorporate their lives into their writing, it's more than just adding a personal element it helped them gain readers' trust and demonstrated their place in the academic community, as noted by Hood (2012). These findings extend Hood's ideas to EFL contexts. They clearly showed that experiential knowledge is crucial for constructing strong research arguments. However, the results also revealed that Iranian students had difficulty delving deeply when shared their experiences. Experiential knowledge has a significant impact on thesis writing. Despite this, English Language Teaching (ELT) has not given it much attention. The field should move beyond treating writing as merely following rules or mastering techniques. It is important to consider a broader range of genres, styles, and writer identities.

In most thesis introductions, a familiar pattern emerges: writers provide a brief background, cite a few key studies, and perhaps include a definition. There is some reference to personal experience particularly in education but it tends to be superficial, lacking in depth and fresh interpretations. Hood (2012) advocated for more substantial discussions of research design to enhance the quality of academic writing. This study sought to address these shortcomings by encouraging a broader perspective on writing, one that integrates personal experience and various rhetorical strategies to enliven academic work in ELT.

Lea and Street (1998) observed that including personal narratives in academic writing can enhance a writer's credibility. However, this by itself does not fulfill all the requirements of thesis writing whether academic, social, or institutional. This is where their Academic Literacies model becomes relevant: EFL students navigate academic power dynamics by referencing existing literature and employing cautious hedging. Yet, when students adhere too rigidly to standardized formats, it indicates they have not fully integrated into the disciplinary community. Paltridge and Starfield (2007) made similar observations thesis writing is shaped by a specific social context. Introductions, in particular, often follow set rhetorical patterns. But there is more at play. As Hood (2010) explained, the structure reflected more than just genre knowledge; it also demonstrated the gradual acquisition of academic literacies that Lea and Street (1998) described, highlighting the significant need for explicit genre instruction. In this research, EFL MA students largely followed these established conventions. This tendency made it difficult for them to express their individual voices or incorporate personal experiences. The trend remains: formulaic approaches offer security, but they can also limit originality.

A major limitation of this study lied in its narrow scope: it examined only seven thesis introductions from two universities and considered only the written text. This made it difficult to draw conclusions about what writers actually experienced or how the entire thesis-writing process developed.

7 Conclusion and Implications

This study applied Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as its primary framework and examined how Iranian EFL MA students composed the introductions to their theses in English Language Teaching. The researcher analyzed the types of clauses the students employed and the

rhetorical moves they performed. What emerged was that these writers relied predominantly on declarative clauses typically ranging from 36 to 45 per introduction and incorporated a notable variety of clause complexes, about 8 to 12 per chapter, to present their topics and support their research rationale. To strengthen their arguments, they frequently combined claims about gaps in the literature with careful, hedged language. This blend allowed their writing to appear confident yet measured. The way they constructed clause complexes illustrated the textual metafunction at work, while their use of hedging and careful evaluation of claims emphasized the interpersonal metafunction. This strategy enabled them to legitimize their research and extended Hood's (2010) macro-genre framework into the EFL context.

On the theoretical front, the study demonstrated that integrating SFL with Academic Literacies illuminated how novice writers acquire academic conventions in the ELT discipline in practical terms; the findings strongly support the inclusion of SFL-based genre strategies in ELT curricula. The students required explicit instruction on developing research warrants, managing complex clauses, and employing hedging to achieve a balanced tone between confidence and caution in their writing. For future research, following entire theses over time and including interactive data such as supervisor feedback would provide a deeper understanding of how SFL choices change as students' progress through the thesis-writing process.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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