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Maram Khamaiseh: Hungarian and Arabic Students' Perceptions of Writing Successful MA Thesis
Introductions: A Thematic Analysis of Semi-Structured Interviews
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Hungarian and Arabic Students' Perceptions of Writing Successful MA Thesis Introductions: A Thematic Analysis of Semi-Structured Interviews

In genre studies, most researchers have focused on examining various sections of the MA thesis genre by conducting a textual analysis; thus, this research aims to identify the features of successful MA thesis introductions in the EFL setting based on text writers' perceptions. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from six Hungarian and six Arabic L1 students. The findings showed that in their view successful MA introductions should be brief, general, clear, supported by references, organized, structured, catchy, and the opening chapter of the thesis. Both groups reported that mentioning the background, definitions, rationale, problem, aims, research design, questions, expectations, and thesis outline contribute to the quality of the introduction. The differences in their insights appeared in the inclusion of the thesis statement, context, research gaps, theoretical position, scope of the research, findings summary, limitations, and chapter structure. The two groups reported the application of different strategies to compose the section. Further investigation is needed to uncover the reasons behind the students' perceptions.

Keywords: introductions, thesis genre, interviews, Hungarian, Arabic

1. Introduction

In genre studies, investigating introductions has been gaining prominence, particularly after Swales's (1990) work on the rhetorical move structure of introductions in research articles. Introductions have been analyzed from many points of view: the use of citations (Jalilifar & Dabbi, 2012), within cross-disciplinary studies (e.g., Samraj, 2008), within different academic genres (e.g., in Choe & Hwang, 2014; Károly, 2007), in contrastive rhetorical analyses comparing texts in different languages (e.g., Hungarian and English in Árvay & Tankó, 2004) cultures (e.g., Ebadi et al., 2019; Wannaruk & Amnuai, 2016). The findings of these investigations showcase the significance of analyzing introductions, demonstrating their pivotal rhetorical functions in academic genres. As Feak and Swales (2011) pointed out, introductions “provide a context in which your reason for exploring your topic is apparent and in which topic appears to be worth pursuing” (2).

In genre analysis, the constituent elements conveying the functional objectives of the text are termed “moves” or “steps” (Swales, 1990). These elements help in structuring the text to achieve its communicative purposes effectively.

Introductions have also been widely researched from the lens of rhetorical move structure (RMS). Through RMS analysis, initially developed by Swales (1981), researchers looked at how the information was organized in the research article. The research expands to studying other genres, such as theses and dissertations. The analysis gives valuable information for writers, particularly non-natives who want to publish their work or communicate with other researchers in English. Moreover, RMS provides knowledge about writing in various languages. For instance, Árvay and Tankó (2004) found in their research that English and Hungarian introductions differ in the rhetorical move structure. English introductions incorporate more ways of communicating rhetorical functions than Hungarian ones. Nevertheless, similarities were also found as both languages include comprehensive text about the research context.

Books and manuals have been published to guide students in writing their MA thesis, including its introduction chapter. Table 1 lists some of these publications organized chronologically, starting from the most recent one. In cases where publications have identical dates, they were ordered based on their scope, from the broader to more specific. The authors have a chapter or section about the introduction and what contents should be included in the section.

Table 1. Books and manuals offering guidance in writing English MA thesis introductions

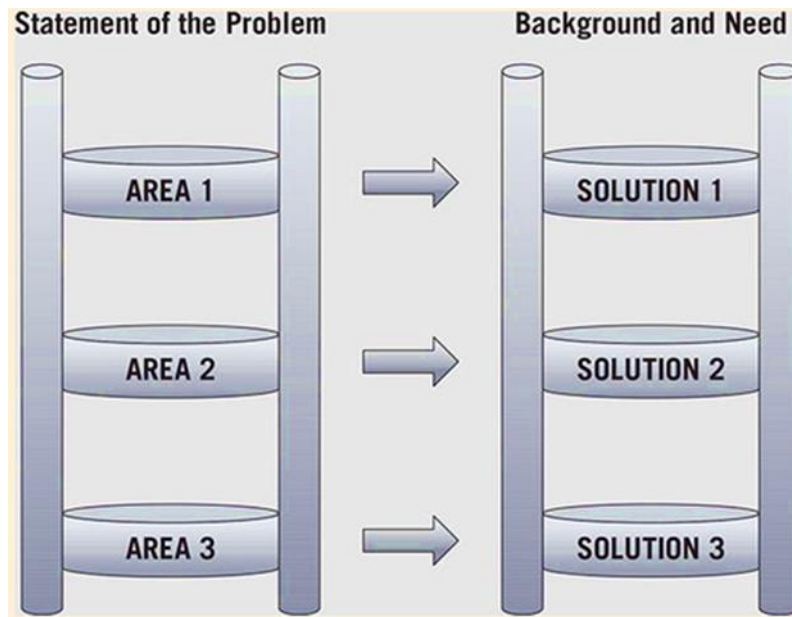
The Books and Manuals	Content of the MA thesis introduction
<i>How to Write a Master Thesis: The Easy Handbook</i> (El-Chaarani & El-Abiad, 2021)	the topic and its importance; background and the research gap; research problem and importance (also RQs); research objectives; definitions of research hypotheses; the methodology; mapping out the research
<i>How to Write a Master's Thesis</i> (Bui, 2019)	introduction, statement of the problem; background and need; the purpose of the study; research questions; significance to the field; definitions; limitations; ethical considerations
<i>A manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations: Chicago Style for Students and Researchers</i> (Turabian, 2018)	opening context or background; research questions or problem; question significance; your claim/promise to answer
<i>Writing the Winning Thesis or Dissertation: A Step-by-step Guide</i> (Joyner et al., 2018)	introduction to the chapter; the background of the study; the problem statement; the professional significance of the study; an overview of the methodology; limitations and delimitations of the study; definitions of key terms
<i>Writing Your Master's Thesis: From A to Zen</i> (Nygaard, 2017)	background topic and setting, academic conversation (literature review); communicating your ethos, dealing with hostile audiences, joining the conversation

As shown in Table 1, there is consensus among scholars regarding some content that should be included in the introduction, for example, the inclusion of research background and the gap/problem. It is noteworthy that different researchers use various labels to refer to these contents. For instance, the aim of the study was referred to as “research objectives” by El-Chaarani and El-Abiad (2018), whereas Bui (2019) called it “the purpose of the study.” Discussing the limitations was discussed under the label content by Bui (2019) and Joyner et al. (2018).

Furthermore, scholars proposed the structure for the introduction in terms of paragraphs. For example, Bui (2019) suggested that introductions must be written in at least four paragraphs. He proposed the funnel writing strategy, wherein the student initiates their introduction with a broad background on the research context. Subsequently, the writer moves to the specific research focus and problem in the following paragraphs. He also introduced the parallel ladders strategy, whereby the research problem is simultaneously aligned with the background and the need (see Figure 1).

The problem with the manuals or guidelines for writing an MA thesis may be lack of awareness of the disciplinary conventions and their effects on the content or organization of the genre or the sub-genre (e.g., the introductions). In her study, Samraj (2008) collected introductions from three disciplines: biology, philosophy, and linguistics. She found that the introductions in biology and linguistics show similarities in their rhetorical move structure, except for how students presented their research to the readers. In philosophy, students did not link their arguments to previous research studies. In another study, Cheung (2012) collected 23 introductions from five disciplines: physical education (10), applied psychology (10), and education management (10), as well as instructional design and technology (2) and applied linguistics (11). The introductions were written by students from Malaysia, China, Bangladesh, and Indonesia who were studying in Singapore. The findings revealed that only one introduction in applied linguistics began with Claiming the centrality of the research step, while in Samraj’s (2008) study, the centrality appeared in 6 out of 8 introductions and was employed by either referring to the world (4) or the research (2). Only three introductions have a review of previous research. Cheung (2012) explained that the students refrained from reviewing literature in their introductions because of what they had been taught about writing a thesis. That is, they were aware of the purpose of the literature review section: to cite previous work on the topic. Therefore, the convention of discipline and the practices and norms of the specific academic community affect how students may write academically.

Figure 1. Parallel Ladders for the Statement of the Problem and the Background and Need Sections
(Adapted from. Bui, 2019)



Despite the numerous studies on the MA thesis genre, including cross-cultural contrastive rhetorical investigations, no research has yet compared the perspectives of Hungarian and Arabic L1 students writing in English in the Hungarian EFL context. These two groups of students (Hungarian and Arabic) were chosen because they come from distinct cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds, which can provide unique and valuable insights into how students from different backgrounds view academic writing. Hungarian students, rooted in a European educational system, and Arabic students, from a Middle Eastern educational context, offer starkly contrasting perspectives that can enrich our understanding of cross-cultural differences in academic writing practices. This comparison is particularly valuable because it highlights the diverse influences of European and Middle Eastern educational traditions on students' writing approaches, offering insights that can inform EFL teaching and curriculum development.

The study focuses specifically on students in applied linguistics to maintain a clear and manageable scope. Applied linguistics students are particularly relevant because their training directly engages with EFL topics, which are crucial for understanding language use, writing conventions, and rhetorical structures. Their specialized knowledge and focus on language make their perspectives especially insightful for the current study. The study also intends to identify the similarities and differences between the perspectives of the two groups. The following questions guide the research:

1. What are the views of the Hungarian and Arabic L1 students regarding the features of successful EFL MA thesis introductions in applied linguistics?

2. What are the similarities and differences (if any) between the views of Hungarian and Arabic L1 students regarding the features of successful EFL MA thesis introductions in applied linguistics?

2. Methodology

The present study is part of extensive research that aims to analyze the MA thesis introductions of Hungarian and Arabic students. The larger research intends to compare the students' writing and their views on the features of successful MA thesis introductions. Such a comparison is needed for another study that explores the reasons behind similarities and differences between what the students wrote and what they reported about MA introductions. Therefore, the current study is crucial and bridges two phases of the large research, whose findings are expected to reveal important aspects regarding academic writing practices and strategies.

2.1. Participants

Participants were selected for the study using purposive sampling and were interviewed until data saturation was achieved, meaning no new information or themes were emerging (Guest et al., 2006). This process resulted in a final sample of twelve students, comprising six Hungarian and six Arabic L1 speakers. The participants had successfully completed their MA theses and defense. They were enrolled in the English Applied Linguistics specialization at a Hungarian University which is under investigation.

The participants demonstrated a high level of English proficiency, equivalent to C1, according to the CEFR. Moreover, they reported proficiency in another language besides English, except for one Arabic participant who spoke only English as a foreign language. All participants were female, aged between 25 to 28 years old. The attempts to include male participants failed as they were unavailable during the designated interview period. This limitation should be understood within the context of the demographic characteristics of the English Applied Linguistics Department, where female students outnumber their male counterparts.

Hungarian participants came from Hungary and had obtained their previous degrees domestically, while Arabic participants were international students from Jordan, Tunisia, and Algeria. Their undergraduate studies were completed in their respective home countries. The Hungarian students, as per the requirements of European universities, are obliged to write a thesis for their BA degree. Three Hungarians wrote a theoretical thesis, two combined theoretical and empirical approaches, and one opted for an entirely empirical thesis. In contrast, empirical thesis requirements are less common for Arabic students in the Middle East. Remarkably, only one Arabic student from Algeria was mandated to write a 30–35-page empirical thesis within her Erasmus exchange study in Spain.

2.2 The Instrument

Qualitative research commonly employs semi-structured interviews to collect data (Cachia & Millward, 2011). This approach offers flexibility, allowing researchers to modify question sequences, adapt prompts during interviews, or introduce new inquiries (Berg & Lune, 2017). As the research aims to explore Hungarian and Arabic students' perspectives on writing successful MA thesis introductions, this methodology aligns well with the objectives of the study.

The interview guide, outlined in the Appendix, comprises three sections. The first section has inquiries about the biographical and educational backgrounds of the participants. It serves as an icebreaker as well as establishes rapport between the researcher and the participants (Dörnyei, 2007; Beins, 2018). The second section contains questions about the experiences of participants in thesis writing (e.g., the guidance of their supervisors and departmental requirements), thus providing an understanding of the thesis composition process. The third section concentrates on the perceptions of students on writing MA thesis introductions. Before piloting the guide, three expert researchers specializing in applied linguistics reviewed the interview questions and provided feedback. This process led to adjustments, such as incorporating more questions about the previous educational backgrounds of students, which may have an impact on their views. After this, the instrument underwent pilot testing with two MA students, leading to further refinements based on participant feedback, including clarifying ambiguous questions and adding sub-questions for greater depth of insight and alignment with the research question.

2.3. Procedures of Data Collection

The data collection comprises three main stages: sampling and contacting participants, conducting interviews, and transcribing interviews. First, a comprehensive list of Arabic and Hungarian L1 students who had graduated from the program was compiled, invitations to participate in the interviews were sent to these graduates via email or their social accounts, resulting in the recruitment of 12 participants—six Hungarian and six Arabic L1 speakers—who expressed willingness to contribute to the research. Before the interviews, participants were provided with a consent form, which includes all the information about the research purpose, participation process, and confidentiality agreements.

Interviews were conducted via Skype for convenience, enabling flexible scheduling, overcoming geographical constraints, and ensuring high-quality recordings. The participants were also assured confidentiality and given pseudonyms to hide their identities. Additionally, they were made aware of their right to withdraw from the interview at any time. All interviews were conducted in English to keep consistency since not all participants spoke the same first language as the researcher. The participants are also proficient in English, which justifies using English as the interview language. The interviews for both groups lasted between 20 and 36 minutes.

The final stage was transcribing the interviews using Otter.ai, which is an artificial intelligence platform known for its accuracy, user-friendliness, and adherence to data privacy standards. Transcriptions were cross-checked against recordings by the researcher and then shared with participants for review. Subsequent modifications were made to ensure the transcriptions accurately reflected the participants' intended meanings based on their feedback. The resulting corpus comprised 42,337 words, with 20,702 words from Hungarian interviews and 21,635 words from Arabic interviews.

2.4. Procedures of Data Analysis

Inductive thematic analysis, as outlined by Gioia et al. (2012), served as the cornerstone of the interview transcript analysis in this study. This approach involves deriving concepts, themes, or models from raw data through detailed readings and interpretations by the researcher (Thomas, 2006). While characterized by flexibility and independence from established qualitative methodologies (Liu, 2016), it necessitates adherence to systematic procedures tailored to the research context. Although predominantly inductive, selective employment of deductive methods occurred to align with specific research objectives. For instance, the coding of certain interview questions, such as “What information content does the MA thesis introduction have?” was informed by existing literature, with definitions guided by Swales's genre theory and his CARS model.

Combining inductive and deductive approaches often results in an abductive approach, seeking a balance between the two. However, in this study, the inductive approach took precedence, with interview texts serving as the primary data source. The initial stage of data analysis involved inputting interview transcripts into Atlas.ti 23, a qualitative data analysis software. This tool facilitated project management, analytical process tracking, and participant group comparison (Guest et al., 2012; Hwang, 2008). Subsequently, after two comprehensive readings of the transcripts, the data coding process commenced.

3. Results and Discussion

This section delineates the key themes that emerged from the data analysis. It will encompass a comprehensive discussion of each theme, complemented by excerpts extracted from the transcriptions and their corresponding timestamps indicated within brackets. Furthermore, we will discuss the themes we found in relation to relevant scholarly articles to provide more context and support for our findings. Furthermore, we will discuss the themes we found in relation to relevant scholarly articles to provide more context and support for our findings. By comparing participants' perspectives with the literature, we aim to uncover how their cultural and educational backgrounds influence their views on MA thesis introductions. This approach allows us to highlight the alignment or divergence between students' insights and existing academic theories. Such a comparison is essential

for understanding the broader implications of our findings and ensuring that the analysis is grounded in established research. The themes will also include the similarities and differences between the perspectives of the two participant groups regarding MA thesis introductions, which will be integrated into the thematic discussion. The thematic analysis revealed the emergence of four overarching themes: (1) Features of successful MA introductions, (2) Information content of MA introductions, (3) Differentiating MA introductions from other sections, and (4) Strategies for writing MA introductions. These themes have been systematically arranged in accordance with their alignment with the research questions.

3.1. Theme 1: Features of Successful MA Introductions

The participants described the introduction section using adjectives like brief, general, and catchy. Both Hungarian and Arabic students used these terms, though the frequency varied between groups. Interestingly, “personal” was mentioned only by two Hungarian students, not by Arabic participants. The term “academic” was used to describe the need for formal language to maintain a professional tone. One Hungarian student noted, “The language itself is professional, so I have to be very professional. And, of course, when I speak in English, I do not really use specific words that were required in writing the thesis” (Dóra, 6:42). Another Hungarian student expressed the challenge of balancing an academic tone with making the writing engaging, stating, “It is always hard to find something that is academic but still kind of, you know, in a way eye-catching” (Júlia, 24:41).

Two Hungarian students advocated for a personal touch in the introduction, feeling it could make the writing more accessible and easier to craft. Anna articulated this by saying, “It is a great opportunity to take if you want to, like, give it a little personal voice” (Anna, 14:02). Adél added that “It [The introduction] can be a little more personal than the rest of the writing... I find it even easier to write it in this sort of tone” (Adél, 32:47). They suggested that a personal tone could set a positive first impression on the reader, making the text more relatable.

Both Hungarian and Arabic participants emphasized the importance of an attractive introduction to encourage further reading. Kamilla stated that the introduction “should be what catches the attention of the reader. And that is why they want to continue reading and, you know, go through the literature review” (Kamilla, 16:12). An Arabic interviewee suggested using questions to engage readers: “you will be raising questions just to integrate the reader, you will be you will be trying to call the reader's attention” (Samar, 28:15).

The consensus among five Hungarian and three Arabic participants was that the introduction should be brief to keep readers interested without overwhelming them. Kamilla explained, “It [the introduction] should be just short and snappy. And also, I do not think that you should spoil anything” (Kamilla, 15:30). Literature also supports a concise introduction, with guidelines suggesting two to

five pages. One Arabic and one Hungarian student proposed a length of three to four pages, while another Hungarian suggested one to one and a half pages.

Another key feature discussed was the generality of the introduction, providing an overview of the research topic. Eight participants, evenly split between the groups, agreed on this point. Samar emphasized this, advocating for a broad introduction that outlines the research topic and methodology in general terms. Other interviewees mentioned the importance of clarity. Kamilla used the term “straightforward” to describe this characteristic, while Salma highlighted the need for clarity to ensure readers can follow the thesis easily. Samar further suggested that a clear introduction helps readers decide whether to continue reading, noting, “If a person has an excellent introduction, a reader can skip any part and just read one part... the reader will be able to follow up without reading the literature review” (Samar, 21:04).

Four interviewees, two Hungarian and two Arabic, added that the introduction should be supported by references. Júlia said, “The introduction has a short amount of references to the literature. For example, specific researchers wrote about the use of English and about the Hungarian schooling examination. Now, in the introduction, I can reference, let's say, the Hungarian school examination and some articles about it.” (Júlia, 21:26).

Only one interviewee from each group provided information on the organization and structure of the introduction section. The Arabic student noted that introductions are usually presented as a single cohesive chapter without subheadings: “It's not divided at all. I just have one chapter introduction with no subheadings” (Samar, 29:27). A Hungarian student suggested that if the introduction is combined with the literature review, paragraphing and structuring are crucial for clarity: “If I do not have an introduction and the literature review part separately, then, of course, these two can be combined together. However, in that case, paragraphing and careful structuring can help the reader follow the line of thought of the writer” (Júlia, 21:26).

In reflecting on these insights, it becomes apparent that while the participants provided valuable descriptions and suggestions for MA introductions, some of their views appeared oversimplified or contradictory. For example, the emphasis on brevity and the need for a personal tone may sometimes conflict with the academic and professional standards required in thesis writing. Moreover, the diverse opinions on the length and structure of introductions highlight the subjective nature of these preferences. It is crucial to balance these insights with established guidelines and consider the specific requirements of the academic context.

In summary, the feedback of the participants highlights the complexity of crafting an effective introduction that meets diverse expectations and requirements. While their suggestions provide a useful starting point, a critical analysis and thoughtful integration of these insights are necessary to create a well-rounded and effective introduction section.

Table 2 below provides a summary of the MA introductions' features described by both groups. It also includes information on the number of participants who mentioned each feature.

Table 2. Features of MA Thesis Introductions by Hungarian and Arabic Groups

Features of Introductions	Hungarian Group	Arabic Group
Academic Tone	2 students emphasized the challenge of maintaining an academic yet attractive tone	mentioned by 1 student
Personal Tone	mentioned by 2 students as beneficial	-
Attractiveness	mentioned by 3 students	mentioned by 3 students, with suggestion to ask questions
Brevity	mentioned by 5 students	Mentioned by 3 students
Generality	mentioned by 4 students	mentioned by 4 students
Clarity	mentioned by 1 student	mentioned by 3 students
References	mentioned by 2 students	mentioned by 2 students
Organization and Structure	1 student mentioned structure with paragraphing and coherence	1 student mentioned single cohesive chapter without subheadings

3.2. Theme 2: Information content of MA Introductions

Participants were asked about the content of MA introductions, with the inquiry subdivided into two segments: what information should be included in the section and what should be left out. During the interviews, I referred to these elements as the information/content of MA introductions to ensure clarity for participants who are not specialists in the field of genre studies. Five interviewees provided insights into the purpose of MA introductions, generally agreeing that introductions should set the stage for the research by providing necessary context and rationale.

Background Information. Participants emphasized the importance of including background information. One participant noted that the introduction should offer general information or background about the topic, aiding readers' understanding of the arguments. This aligns with academic guidelines which state that personal background information should be excluded. As Manner articulated, "It [the introduction] should include general information or have background information about your topic" (16:36).

Thesis Statement. Two Arabic students mentioned the thesis statement, emphasizing its role in encapsulating the main idea and aim of the paper. Manar explained that the thesis statement "contains the aim" and is crucial for guiding

the research (19:36). This reflects common academic practices where the thesis statement serves as a central guiding element for the entire research.

Context. The need to specify the research context was particularly stressed by Arabic participants. They highlighted the importance of explaining the context within which the research is conducted. Samar noted, “I had to discuss the context and why I am doing the research within the context of Hungarian universities” (21:04). This reflects the need to define the study's setting clearly.

Definitions. Three students, one Hungarian and two Arabic, agreed on the necessity of defining special or crucial terms, particularly when introducing new concepts or using terms differently from existing literature. This ensures that readers fully grasp the research context and terminology. Samar provided an illustrative example: “I had to write the definition of flow even in the introduction because most people don't know what flow is.” (18:00)

Rationale. Six participants underscored the importance of explaining the research rationale. Adél recommended clarifying “Why you need to write about this topic, why this topic needs to be explored more” (27:07). This corresponds with Rojon and Saunders' (2012) definition of the rationale as the “why” question of a research project. An Arabic interviewee similarly noted the need to justify the research by explaining “why are we... talking about this research in particular” (Wafaa, 13:59).

Significance of Research. The significance of the research was also considered crucial by six participants. Wafaa referred to it as “relevance or the significance of the work” (16:52), while Hungarian participants linked it to previous research, emphasizing its importance in the broader academic context. Anna highlighted this by saying, “I [highlighted] parts of the theory that are used in the text later on” (11:29)

Background of the Problem. The background of the problem was highlighted by one Arabic interviewee, Wafaa, who remarked, “We would also have [in the introduction] somehow the problem and then the background of this problem” (14:03). This perspective aligns with Bui's (2019) recommendation that the problem should be presented first, followed by the background information.

The Research Problem. Articulating the problem was noted by three participants as essential. In Swales's CARS model, this corresponds to identifying a gap. However, different interpretations exist, such as distinguishing between a problem and a gap (Bunton, 1998; Pujiyanti et al., 2018). A Hungarian participant emphasized this need by noting, “You should clarify the problem you're addressing” (Anna, 12:45).

Research Aim. Half of the interviewees, including Samar, considered the research aim significant. Swales's CARS model (2004) views the research aim as an obligatory component of the introduction. Samar mentioned, “the research aim is the most crucial part” (17:08).

Research Gaps. Two Hungarian participants emphasized the importance of addressing research gaps, with one referring to them as “theoretical holes” and the other highlighting the lack of qualitative research in their field (Adél, 27:07; Kamilla, 14:39).

Theoretical Position. Two Hungarian participants mentioned the importance of indicating the theoretical frameworks used in the research. Adél stated, “It’s important to mention the theoretical positions to give context” (29:27).

Research Design and Methodology. Four interviewees stressed the importance of outlining the research design and methodology. They mentioned the need to describe the research approach, including whether it was quantitative or qualitative, and the sample size. Karolina mentioned, “You should provide a general description of the methodology, whether it’s quantitative or qualitative” (21:56).

Research Questions. Research questions were highlighted by nine interviewees as crucial for guiding readers. Karolina stated, “Research questions should be included. So, anyone can find out if they read it, what the study is about” (21:56).

Scope. Only one Arabic interviewee addressed the scope of the research, referring to it as delineating the context of the study. Wafaa mentioned the need to “specify the context and scope of the study” (15:17).

Research Expectations. A few participants mentioned articulating research expectations, which, while not commonly emphasized, could reflect the implications of the study. Lara suggested that students should articulate what they “expect from the research” (15:56).

Summary of Findings. While Karolina referenced the inclusion of a summary of findings, most participants advised against it to avoid revealing too much information upfront. Kamilla warned against “spoiling the fun” (15:30), which aligns with Turabian’s (2018) observation.

Limitations. Including research limitations was mentioned as important by one Arabic participant. Samar noted the importance of discussing limitations: “It’s crucial to mention any limitations in the introduction” (17:65).

Thesis Outline. Half of the participants emphasized the necessity of presenting the thesis outline in the introduction. Adél and Kamilla highlighted its importance for guiding readers. Adél stated, “It’s important to provide a basic outline of the thesis” (29:27), while Kamilla added, “Outlining the thesis structure helps the reader follow along” (13:58).

Overall, the participants provided valuable insights into the content of MA introductions. Their suggestions highlight important elements such as background information, thesis statements, research rationale, and significance of research. Integrating these insights with established academic guidelines can help students in their writing. Their views are informative for understanding the key components of effective MA introductions.

The following table (i.e., Table 3) highlights the differences in the information content mentioned by Hungarian and Arabic students in their MA thesis introductions. It summarizes the key contents discussed by participants and the number of students who mentioned each one.

Table 3. Summary of Information Content in MA Thesis Introductions by Hungarian and Arabic Groups

Information Content	Hungarian Group	Arabic Group
Background Information	mentioned by 4 students	mentioned by 1 student
Thesis Statement	-	mentioned by 2 students
Context	-	mentioned by 2 students
Definitions	mentioned by 1 student	mentioned by 2 students
Rationale	mentioned by 4 students	mentioned by 2 students
Significance of Research	mentioned by 3 students	mentioned by 2 students
Background of the Problem	-	mentioned by 1 student
The Research Problem	mentioned by 2 students	mentioned by 1 student
Research Aim	mentioned by 2 students	mentioned by 4 students
Research Gaps	mentioned by 2 students	-
Theoretical Position	mentioned by 2 students	-
Research Design/Methodology	mentioned by 1 student	mentioned by 3 students
Research Questions	mentioned by 4 students	mentioned by 5 students
Scope	-	mentioned by 1 student
Research Expectations	mentioned by 1 student	mentioned by 2 students
Summary of Findings	mentioned by 1 student	consensus against including
Limitations of Research	-	mentioned by 1 student
Thesis Outline	mentioned by 4 students	mentioned by 2 students

3.3. Theme 3: Differentiating MA Introductions from Other Sections

The participants shared their opinions on the unique character of the introduction section within MA theses, emphasizing its distinct functions, contents, and associated writing challenges. Their varied perspectives offer valuable insights into the multifaceted roles of introductions in the MA thesis genre, shedding light

on their significance in guiding readers, establishing coherence, and setting thematic trajectories.

Samar underscored the integrative role of introductions, emphasizing their function in unifying the thesis and providing cohesion: “The introduction unites, and as cohesive and coherent to the thesis itself, it makes this thesis cohesive and coherent” (21:36). Lara echoed this sentiment, emphasizing how well-crafted introductions facilitate the reading experience across subsequent chapters: “a successful introduction makes it easy to read other chapters” (16:00). She further elucidated their role in orienting readers to the thematic landscape of the research, articulating research questions, and outlining expected outcomes:

The introduction lets whoever is reading the thesis know in which direction the topic is taken. Where is the research? What is it about? What is the research question? What can be expected to be solved or found during the research? (25:13)

Kamilla emphasized the pivotal role of the introduction in capturing readers' interest and justifying the research's relevance, stating, “The introduction, you know, ideally, should be what catches the attention of the reader. And that’s why they want to continue reading and, you know, go through the literature review” (16:12). She also highlighted the complementary functions of the introduction and literature review in contextualizing the research and synthesizing existing knowledge.

Mannar drew a clear distinction between the introduction and the methods section. The former provides an overview of the research endeavor, while the latter gives technical details about the methods of the research:

In the methods, you’re supposed to be talking about technical stuff, like what you did, what your instrument was, and everything. In the introduction, no, you’re just starting to introduce what you’re going to do in this whole article. So introductions, I mean, beginnings, are very important for me. So introducing whatever it is that you’re doing is really important. (18:27)

Some participants recommended maintaining brevity and avoiding detailed discussions within the introduction, particularly regarding literature, methodology, or results. It aligns with scholarly conventions, which reserve in-depth analysis for dedicated sections like the literature review.

Samar highlighted the inclusivity of introductions, encompassing insights from all subsequent sections without delving into detailed discussions: “In the literature review, you don’t discuss your participants. In the introduction, you discuss the literature review, and you do discuss the participants... introduction is [to be] general. Others are specific” (27,08). Dóra also commented on how the introduction relates to the literature review section: “Literature review, we

[students] mention the exact literature we have in the topic it is much longer and specific, the introduction is very brief and a summary of the literature review” (32:00). Lara added that the introduction also offers “some expectations that have to be found at some point in the results section” (26:04).

The comparison between the introduction and abstract regarding their length was only reported by two Hungarian interviewees, Karolina and Adél. Karolina described the introduction as “a lengthier version of the abstract” (16:14). According to Cals and Kotz (2013), abstracts have a word limit, whereas introductions do not; nevertheless, they should be kept brief, usually comprising 10% to 15% of the overall paper.

The interviewees reported facing challenges in writing the thesis introductions they did not encounter in other sections. These difficulties were attributed to the unique characteristics and role of the introduction. Adél, for instance, reported that she moved some information from the introduction to the literature review, as she believed that her introduction was too long:

I think my introduction was a bit too long at first. Um, I actually think that I did put some parts into the literature review section. So it’s always like a bit of a difficulty to decide, like, what’s too much. (30:47)

Karolina expressed similar obstacles: “I had difficulties with writing the introduction because it was always very long. I feel like it just really needed to be short and more focused” (26:22). Nygaard (2017) suggested that students can decide how much information to include in the introduction based on their specific research focus and question. An interviewee from the Arabic cohort also voiced concerns in regard to striking a balance between providing the readers with context and writing the appropriate amount of information, a task which was not clear to her: “You have to introduce people to the context itself, and you don’t know how much information to include and how much information to exclude” (Mannar, 7:00).

Four interviewees highlighted that they struggled to craft the first sentence or the beginning of the introduction. This concern may stem from the introduction’s role as the first section, which is expected to make a strong impression on the reader. Júlia articulated this difficulty: “How exactly do you start introducing anything like, what is the first sentence that you are writing?... I never know how to start something and not sound boring” (25:13).

Several interviewees identified the introduction as the most difficult section to write due to uncertainty about “what to include and what to exclude” (Mannar, 7:00). During the interview, Dóra was asked a follow-up question about the most challenging section for her to write; she responded, “The introduction part because I didn’t really know what to include” (7:11). Lara provided an example of this confusion, stating that “I didn’t know really how to differentiate between the literature review and the introduction, and what can I skip from the literature

review and mention in the introduction and vice versa” (28:00). In the literature, Nygaard (2017) elaborated on how the literature review and introduction sections differ:

The difference between background and the literature review is comparable to the difference between reporting the scores of a football game and providing expert commentary. While the background focuses typically on the relevant facts that are important for the reader to know, the literature review tells the reader how the topic is being discussed by an academic audience. (108)

Participants highlighted the unique challenges and essential functions of MA thesis introductions. They emphasized its role in capturing the interest of readers, providing a cohesive overview of the research, and differentiating it from other sections like the literature review and methods. The insights reveal the importance of this section in guiding the reader and setting the thematic direction of the thesis, while also reflecting on the common difficulties faced in writing this section.

Table 4 summarizes the aspects that participants from each group identified as distinguishing MA introductions from other sections.

Table 4. Differentiating MA Introductions from Other Sections by Hungarian and Arabic Groups

Aspect	Hungarian Group	Arabic Group
Function and Role	emphasizes the cohesive and guiding role (e.g., Kamilla)	emphasizes the cohesive role (e.g., Samar)
Capturing Reader's Interest	stresses the importance of capturing interest (e.g., Kamilla)	stresses the importance of capturing interest (e.g., Samar)
Comparison with Other Sections	compares with literature review; maintains brevity (e.g., Dóra)	compares with methods section; avoids detailed discussions (e.g., Mannar)
Length and Brevity	challenges with keeping it brief (e.g., Karolina)	challenges with balancing context and length (e.g., Mannar)
Abstract Comparison	introduction as a lengthier abstract (e.g., Karolina)	-
Writing Challenges	difficulties in deciding content, starting sentences (e.g., Adél)	difficulties in deciding content, starting sentences (e.g., Mannar)
Most Difficult Section	identified as the most difficult section to write (e.g., Dóra)	identified as the most difficult section to write (e.g., Lara)
Distinguishing from Literature Review	confusion between introduction and literature review (e.g., Lara)	confusion between introduction and literature review (e.g., Mannar)

3.4. Theme 4: Strategies for Writing MA Introductions

This topic emerged as a subcategory pertaining to the main research query. A total of 11 interviewees delineated their approaches to crafting their MA thesis introductions, revealing disparities between groups regarding the timing and methodology of their introduction composition. Notably, the majority of Hungarian participants opted to pen their introductions after completing the other thesis sections. For instance, Adél elucidated her rationale for this approach, citing guidance from an instructor:

I kind of left the introduction of the thesis for the last because... one of the professors said that it was the best to finish the introduction, the last, actually, because by that time, you have this whole thesis that is really streamlined and it's complete. And so you can actually write a proper introduction of what it's going to be like and what the final thesis is about. (20:41)

Similarly, two Arabic interviewees echoed this sentiment, with Wafaa stating, “I probably would just leave it [the introduction] till the end” (19:00). This approach is also corroborated in academic literature; for instance, Cals and Kotz (2013) advocate for composing the introduction once the content of the paper is fully conceptualized, positing it as the initial section where readers gain insight into the overall work.

Another approach highlighted by the Hungarian interviewees involves a two-stage drafting process for the introduction. Specifically, two interviewees composed the introduction in two phases: an initial draft penned at the outset and a subsequent revision after completing other thesis components. Anna elaborated on this technique, elaborating,

I write it in two parts; I usually write up the first half of the whole thing that can be written before you write anything; it's kind of like a helping guide for you to organize your thoughts and foreshadow what you want to write about and organize the topic. And then, you do the other sections of your paper. And then, in the end, you come back... I don't necessarily need to write this first just because it's the beginning of the paper. (16:33)

Turabian (2018) similarly advocates for a dual-stage approach to introduction drafting in her work *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. Initially, the introduction serves as a scaffold for subsequent sections, with the final iteration composed after completing the remaining thesis content.

Conversely, three Arabic interviewees preferred initiating their introduction composition at the outset of their thesis writing process. Lara articulated her rationale, stating, “It is something that I started with; I remember when I started, I started with the introduction because it is what makes the rest clearer for me to

write about” (Lara, 20:21). However, one participant did not delineate their approach to or timing of introduction composition.

Participants revealed varied approaches to crafting their MA thesis introductions, with most Hungarian participants writing the introduction last to align with the final thesis, while some Arabic participants preferred starting with the introduction to clarify their direction. Additionally, a two-stage drafting process was highlighted by some Hungarian interviewees. Thus, there are diverse strategies students employ based on personal and instructional guidance.

Table 5 summarizes the key strategies of writing MA introduction mentioned by both Hungarian and Arabic students.

Table 5. Strategies for Writing MA Introductions by Hungarian and Arabic Groups

Strategy	Hungarian Group	Arabic Group
Writing After Completing	followed by 4 students (e.g., Adél)	followed by 2 students (e.g., Wafaa)
Two-Stage Drafting Process	followed by 2 students (e.g., Anna)	-
Writing at the Outset	-	followed by 3 interviewees (e.g., Lara)

4. Conclusion

This qualitative research explored the perspectives of Hungarian and Arabic L1 speakers about the successful features of MA thesis introductions. It aimed to show the similarities and differences between these two groups. The results indicated that the two groups cannot be clearly distinguished. Rather, there are some similarities and some differences but these do not pertain to one group or the other distinctly. However, there are some individual differences among students. These are: effective MA introductions should be concise, include pertinent references, and be well-structured while possessing a clear and engaging tone. Additionally, some Hungarian participants emphasized the importance of infusing a personal touch into their introductions. The Hungarian and Arabic groups commonly included background information, definitions, rationale, research objectives, and methodological details in their introductions. However, discrepancies arose in information contents such as the thesis statement, contextualization, research gaps, theoretical framework, scope, summary of findings, limitations, and chapter structure. This underscores the distinctive nature of introductions compared to other sections of MA theses, particularly in terms of their purpose, content, and challenges in composition. Moreover, the two groups demonstrated varying approaches in crafting their introductions. The shared approach between the two groups was to compose the thesis introduction at the end of the writing process. However, two Hungarian interviewees preferred to

write the section in two drafts. Three Arabic participants opted to begin crafting their introduction at the start of their thesis writing process.

The findings of this research carry significant pedagogical implications in the context of teaching academic writing and thesis preparation. By identifying the key features of successful MA thesis introductions as perceived by students themselves, educators can tailor instructional strategies to meet the needs of learners better. For instance, instructors can design writing workshops or courses focusing on honing the skills necessary to craft concise, clear, and well-structured introductions and other sections. Moreover, the results regarding the similarities and differences in the views of Hungarian and Arabic L1 students can inform cross-cultural teaching approaches, fostering a more inclusive and culturally sensitive learning environment.

The study has some limitations related to the interview environment and circumstances. The interviews were conducted with MA students who have already graduated and defended their thesis; thus, they might have forgotten some information regarding their thesis writing process, particularly the introduction section. In addition, the interviews were conducted online, which may affect the flow of the conversation because of the internet connection. Future research may delve more into the knowledge of the students regarding the content information of various sections as well as the perceptions, evaluations, and impact of their supervisors.

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Appendix: Semi-structured Interview Guide

I am a PhD candidate at Eötvös Loránd University in the Language Pedagogy and English Applied Linguistics PhD Programme. I would like to ask for your help with my research. The following interview aims to examine MA students' perceptions about their thesis writing, supervisors, the department's requirements, and the introduction section of a thesis. If you consent, the interview will be recorded and transcribed for later use and kept until the transcriptions are ready. The interview is anonymous, and participation is voluntary. You have the right to step back at any point in the interview. I am curious about your opinion, so please give your honest answers. This is very important for the credibility of the research.

Personal Questions (icebreakers)

1. What is your age?
2. What is your nationality?
3. What is your first language?
4. How many languages do you speak? What are they? Proficiency?
5. Could you tell me about your university studies? E.g., the country or countries you studied in, the degrees you obtained, and the years of study besides your experiences
6. Have you written a thesis for your bachelor's study? If yes, was it theoretical or empirical, or both?

Thesis Writing Experience

1. How do you describe the thesis writing process?
2. What went smoothly during the process of your thesis writing?
3. What difficulties did you face while writing your thesis?

4. How do you manage to overcome the difficulties?
5. What eased the process of your thesis writing?
- 6.. In what way did your supervisor help you during your thesis writing process?
7. In what way do the institutions' requirements help you in your thesis writing?
8. In what way do the institutions' requirements hinder your thesis writing?

MA Thesis Introduction Section

1. What do you think of the MA thesis introduction section?
2. What is the function of the introduction section in the MA thesis?
3. What information content does the MA thesis introduction have? In your opinion
 - 3.1 What information should be included in the MA thesis introduction?
 - 3.2 What information should not be included in the MA thesis introduction?
4. How does the introduction section relate to other sections of a master's thesis?
5. What difficulties did you face while writing this part?

Thank you for your participation and time. Would you like to add anything?