‘The main contribution of this study is…’ An analysis of statements of contribution in English published research articles and L2 manuscripts

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Abstract: Given the widespread use of English for the international dissemination of scholars’ research results, numerous intercultural analyses have been undertaken in the field of English for Academic Purposes in diverse genres. Rhetorical and discursive conventions across languages and cultures have been studied to help non-native English scholars to be successful in the difficult endeavour of being granted publication in international English-medium publications. The increasing competition to get one’s research published in international journals in English has resulted in the authors’ need to clearly spell out what their contribution to their discipline is, a rhetorical convention which seems to be currently crucial especially in some fields. It is the aim of this paper to trace statements of contribution in the Introduction and Conclusion sections of research articles published in two international journals in finance and to compare the results with those obtained from an analysis of three manuscripts written in English by a team of Spanish scholars sent to the same journals but which received major revision or rejection reports. Reference to these statements made by reviewers in their reports will also be analysed to explore to what extent (non) compliance with this rhetorical convention may influence their final decision (not) to recommend publication.

Keywords: research article, introduction, conclusion, English for Academic Purposes (EAP), genre analysis

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1. Introduction

The research article (RA) is considered the academic genre *par excellence* (Swales, 2004). In most disciplines the publication of RAs currently determines academic credentials, promotions and other rewards. It is now essential for an academic not just to publish RAs, but to publish RAs in international journals, which are almost exclusively –especially in certain fields– English-medium. As a great deal of research in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) has shown, scholars need to frame the results of their research into RAs which respond to the conventions prevailing in the disciplinary and linguistic/cultural context in which they seek publication if they want their research to be visible and their academic careers to develop.

Given the relevance of this academic genre, a great deal of previous research in EAP has particularly focused on the analysis of its rhetorical macrostructure in English, taking Swales (1990, 2004) IMRD (Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion) structure as a point of departure (Nwogu 1997; Posteguillo 1999; Yang and Allison 2004; Kanoksilapatham 2005, among others). Quite a lot of genre analyses have unveiled the rhetorical structure of given sections: the Introduction (e.g. Samraj 2005; Ozturk 2007); Introduction and Discussion (Lewin et al. 2001), Methods (e.g. Lim 2006), Results (e.g. Brett 1994; Williams 1999; Bruce 2009; Lim 2010), Discussions (e.g. Hopkins and Dudley-Evans 1988; Holmes 1997; Dubois 1997; Yang and Allison 2003). This research has aimed at discerning particular ways of unfolding and organising the information in published RAs, signalling particular disciplinary differences. The ultimate goal of this research has been to help novice and L2 scholars frame their research in conventional, rhetorically accepted ways for their research to become visible in the international publication sphere within particular disciplinary fields.

Some move analysis research has taken an intercultural perspective exploring rhetorical differences mostly in RA Introductions in international English journals and in national journals in another language: English and Spanish (Burgess 2002; Mur-Dueñas 2010; Sheldon 2011), English and Portuguese (Hirano 2009), English and Hungarian (Árvay and Tankó 2004), or English and Chinese (Loi 2010). This research has generally reported that whereas RA Introductions in the two languages tend to follow the Create a Research Space (CARS) structure (Swales 2004), differences arise in the extent of inclusion of certain moves and steps. That is, following Swales' (2004) move analysis model, RA Introductions in varied disciplines have been found to regularly include Move 1 (Establishing a territory), Move 2 (Establishing the niche) realized through different steps (Indicating a gap, Adding to what is known, Presenting positive justification) and Move 3 (Presenting the present work) realized through the obligatory step "Announcing present work" descriptively and/or purposively and a number of optional and more or less probable steps. Previous cross-cultural research has generally highlighted a less common inclusion of Move 2 in RAs published in languages other than English in national contexts of publication. Other intercultural differences have also been outlined in terms of the extent of inclusion of certain steps within each of the moves. These contrastive studies have pointed at the scholars' need to be made aware of rhetorical specificities in drafting RA Introductions in different languages and cultures.

With some exceptions (e.g. Burgess 2002; Sheldon 2011), little research has been carried out on the macro and microstructure of L2 English RAs and on the extent to which non-native scholars need to adjust their papers to given rhetorical structure patterns when writing for international English-medium publications. Burgess (2002) and Sheldon (2011), focused on language and linguistics RAs and concerning Spanish speaking authors writing in English, highlight that the audience to which the RA is addressed very much conditions the rhetorical strategies used and that the Spanish scholars' writing in English tends to accommodate at least to some extent to the rhetorical conventions prevailing in English-medium international publications. Furthermore, past research on the rhetorical organisation of RAs has tended to focus on written products, that is, published articles; more research seems to be needed on the writing for publication process so that we can gain a deeper insight into the specific difficulties of users of English as a lingua franca for academic international communication.

The research to be presented in this paper aims at comparing RA Introductions and Conclusions published in English in two high-impact journals in finance with manuscripts written by Spanish scholars seeking publication in those same journals. Within the English for Specific Purposes genre analysis framework (Bhatia 2004; Swales 2004), the focus will be on an increasingly important rhetorical step in international English-medium publications in certain fields: the statement of contribution.

Current fierce competition in the academia to get one's research published in international English-medium publications at least in certain fields has led authors to emphasise the relevance of their research and its right to be published. Especially in the Introduction, scholars need to "market" their research, emphasising its centrality, validity and, especially, its relevance for the advancement of the discipline. At least in international publications in English in some disciplinary fields, scholars appear to be required to spell out what their specific contribution to their discipline is. These statements of contribution seem to be a direct consequence of the great number of papers being drafted for publication and the editors' and reviewers' concern with publishing only those articles which really constitute an addition to the body of knowledge of a given field and promote its advancement in any clear way. A statement of contribution is considered a positive critical evaluation of the scholars' own research justifying its importance and appropriateness in terms of its link to previous research, as in the following examples from the corpus:

1. We contribute to the growing accounting literature on International Accounting Standards, but also extend and compliment [sic] the literature in both finance and accounting that links information to the cost of capital. (JBFA13-I)

2. The current study adds to a literature that has yielded mixed results with respect to the impact of taxes on bond prices and yields. (JBF9-I)

As such, they can be considered a realization of Swales' (2004) "possible in some fields, but unlikely in others" step 6 "Stating the value of the present research" in Move 3, Occupying the niche. Statements of contribution are sometimes restated in the Conclusion section to emphasise once more the relevance of the research and how it builds upon previous research, advancing the particular field of knowledge. It could also, therefore, be considered a further step in this section. Scholars, at least in certain fields, may now be required to cover this rhetorical step to more readily secure publication in an international site in given fields in which competition to get one's research published is very high.

The extent of inclusion of statements of contribution in a corpus of Introductions and Conclusions of RAs published in high-impact finance journals and how they are lexico-grammatically realised will be presented in this paper. Taking an intercultural perspective the paper further explores the extent to which these statements of contribution are included in three English manuscripts drafted by Spanish scholars and submitted to the same high-impact finance journals. In addition, the referee reports received on those manuscripts will be explored to determine whether gatekeepers require such a rhetorical step for RAs to be granted publication in this field. By looking at the writing process, an insight will be gained into the extent to which Spanish scholars adjust (or are forced to adjust) to the rhetorical structure prevailing in international English-medium publications. Thus, this study contributes to EAP literature, and more specifically to Genre Analysis, as well as to Intercultural Rhetoric and will shed some light on the scholarly publication practices in a particular disciplinary field.

2. Corpus and methods

The corpus on which the analysis is based consists of: the Introduction and Conclusion of 30 RAs published in two top-indexed journals in finance, *Journal of Business Finance & Accounting* (JBFA) and *Journal of Banking & Finance* (JBF); the Introduction and Conclusion of three manuscripts drafted by a team of Spanish researchers and submitted to the same journals; two rejection referee reports (1,453 words and 371 words respectively) and a major revision report (1,065 words) received upon submission of those manuscripts. The choice of the two journals was motivated by the Spanish scholars' aim of having their research published at these international high-impact sites and by the fact that two of their manuscripts sent to these two journals had been rejected. Both journals are included in the ISI Journal Citation Reports Ranking, so they are highly prestigious in the field. In 2009, when the manuscripts were submitted for publication, JBFA ranked 28th (out of 52 journals in the field) and had an impact of 0.832 and JBF ranked 6th and had a much higher impact factor, 1.908.

The RAs that constitute the corpus were published in 2009 and 2010. They were randomly selected: the first and the fifth article from the last published issues at the time of compiling the corpus were chosen; two exceptions were made in the compilation of the JBF sub-corpus, as the second (instead of the first) and the fourth (instead of the fifth) RAs were chosen, the disregarded papers being too mathematically loaded and diverging considerably in terms of purpose and topic from the rest of the RAs in the corpus, and also from the Spanish scholars' manuscripts.

The RA Introductions and Conclusions in the corpus were carefully examined to extract statements of contribution, that is, positive evaluations of their own research as regards its relevance and its connection with previous research in such a way that it is made explicit that something new and worthwhile is offered to the discipline, thus prompting its advancement. Further, following Lewin et al.'s (2001) work this step is analysed in terms of the key feature(s) and its linguistic realization, highlighting what lexico-grammatical features are characteristic in the expression of this communicative purpose.

The number of words in the sub-corpora are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Description of the corpus of published RAs

	Journal of Business Finance & Accounting	Journal of Banking & Finance	TOTAL
Nº of Introductions	15	15	30
Nº of words in Introductions	17,196	16,074	33,270
Nº of Conclusions	15	15	30
Nº of words in Conclusions	6,200	5,938	12,138
Total nº of words	23,396	22,012	45,408

The extent of inclusion and the lexico-grammatical realization of statements of contribution were also analysed in three manuscripts written in English by a team of Spanish researchers and compared with the findings obtained from the analysis of the published RAs. Thus, the extent to which the Spanish L2 scholars adjust to or differ from this rhetorical convention as featured in successfully published RAs will be explored. Manuscript 1 was sent to JBFA and rejected; manuscript 2 was sent to JBF and also rejected; and manuscript 3a was sent to JBF, a major revision report was received, and upon revision it was accepted for publication (manuscript 3b). The rejection and major revision reports the Spanish scholars received on their manuscripts were also analysed to explore whether comments related to this rhetorical convention were made and to try and determine its possible influence on the final decision made on the paper.

The manuscripts, referee reports, together with personal communications with the Spanish scholars constitute three "text histories" (Lillis and Curry 2006, 2010). By looking not only into the written products but also into the writing process, we will learn more about how texts are shaped for publication and how disciplinary and cultural rhetorical conventions may be imposed on scholars wishing to publish the outcomes of their research in international English-medium journals.

3. Results

3.1 Statements of contribution in published RA Introductions and Conclusions

Table 2 below summarises the number of statements of contribution found in the published RA Introductions and Conclusions.

Table 2. Statements of contribution in the corpus of published RAs

	Journal of Business Finance & Accounting	Journal of Banking & Finance	Total	Average per RA
Introduction	24	22	46	1.5
Conclusion	12	8	20	0.7
Total	36	30	66	2.2

At least one statement of contribution has been included in 22 out of the 30 RA Introductions and in 14 out of the 30 RA Conclusions in the corpus. The results are not significantly different in the two journals, even if the ranking of *Journal of Banking & Finance* is higher than that of *Journal of Business Finance & Accounting*. This lack of difference may indicate that the rhetorical convention is generally established in English-medium international journals in the discipline.

Statements of contribution tend to appear at the end of the Introduction, within Move 3 (Occupying the niche) and, as pointed out above, could be considered the realization of Step 6 "Stating the value of the present research" which is considered probable in some fields, but unlikely in others (Swales 2004). As results show, it is also quite frequent that scholars echo such statements in the Conclusion of the RAs:

1. Given the intertemporal nature of our approach, it is necessary for us to measure the precise amount and timing of cash injections and withdrawals over the complete life of the investment relationship. No other study has been able to do this in the past because of data limitations. In order to address these difficulties, we rely on a unique database that we created using the combination of information on PE and VC deals from Venture Economics and CEPRES. (JBF12-I)

> We merge data from Venture Economics and CEPRES to create a comprehensive, objective and accurate sample of 712 matched investments including 1549 financing rounds and 2329 precisely dated cash injections. (JBF12-C)

In some RAs several statements of contribution together seem to realize not just a step in Move 3 "Occupying the niche" (Swales 2004), but a new full move closing the Introduction.

2. This paper makes several contributions to the literature. First, this study adds to the relatively small amount of accounting research that examines whether firms change their economic activities in response to a change in accounting standards (Beatty, 2007). [...].
   Second, the results of this study help provide a better understanding of the importance that some managers place on [...]. Whereas previous research provides evidence that [...], this study reveals that such decisions also result from the desire to decrease the uncertainty of meeting or beating earnings targets.
   Finally, evidence of certain firms discontinuing economic hedges to avoid the volatility in accounting earnings may be of interest to [...]. (JBFA1-I)

3. This paper makes several contributions to the literature. [...]
   It is the first large scale non-US study to investigate the relevance of earnings volatility for forecasting future earnings
   Second, our paper supplements the vast body of fundamental analysis research that identifies a set of variables that improves valuation. [...]
   Finally, our approach is distinct from similar studies looking at the relation between investments and future earnings or uncertainty and future earnings. (JBF12-I)

As shown in the examples, it is important to ground one's research on previous literature, but there is a need to justify the research presented and, most importantly, to make clear what it adds to the discipline and how it differs from other previous similar studies it may draw on. That is, it is not only necessary to fill in the gap in the literature, but also to justify why such filling is necessary.

Following Lewin et al.'s (2001) analysis, the feature(s) and the particular realization of statements of contribution were looked into. The feature is systematically related to the authors' own research; it may be the paper, their study, or more specifically, their results, data or methodology that is highlighted as relevant for the advancement of the discipline. There seem to be three options to discursively render statements of contribution whether in the Introduction or in the Conclusion. First, it is most common to find the positive attitudinal verbs *contribute to*, *add to*, *extend*, *complement*, *supplement*, *augment* or *provide* (which acquires an attitudinal meaning through its complementation: *additional/new/... evidence*). Second, positive attitudinal adjectives and nouns are also commonly used to realize such a statement, mainly, *unique*, *extensive*, *comprehensive*, *distinct*, *first*, and *contribution, importance*, *understanding*, *novelty*. It is interesting to note that adjectives used in these statements are 'polarized' rather than 'centralized' (Swales and Burke 2003), that is, they are marked and are likely to be more emphatic than other centralized evaluative adjectives used throughout the rest of the RAs (e.g. *relevant*, *main*, *good*, *interesting*, *difficult*, *easy*, *(un)usual*, etc.). Third, a comparative structure may also be used to realize a statement of contribution, especially through the prepositions *unlike* or *in contrast to* or through the verb *differ*.

3.2. Statements of contribution in L2 English manuscript Introductions and Conclusions

As can be seen in Table 3, statements of contribution were included in the manuscripts drafted in English by the Spanish finance scholars. Indeed, their Introductions and Conclusions feature more such statements than the average mean in the published RAs. It, therefore, seems that they are aware of the rhetorical convention in the RAs of the journals at which they intend their papers to be published. It further shows –and was confirmed in personal informal conversations with them– that they try to adjust to such a convention to increase their chances of getting their papers accepted for publication.

Table 3. Statements of contribution in Spanish scholars' manuscripts.

	Manuscript 1 (JBFA)	Manuscript 2 (JBF)	Manuscript 3a (JBF)	Manuscript 3b (JBF)
Introduction	3	4	2	4
Conclusion	2	2	1	1

Whereas these are the only manuscripts they have submitted to these two journals, they have for a time tried to seek publication in other international journals (see Mur-Dueñas 2012). Reviewers have repeatedly suggested them that they should make their contribution clear. So, they now know that reviewers (and editors, for that matter, and possibly readers) expect to find an explicit statement of their contribution (i.e. what they have to offer) to the discipline. As a result, they discursively address such specific communicative purpose in their articles submitted to international English-medium publications.

The linguistic realisation of their statements of contribution falls within the lexico-grammatical options established above in relation to such statements in published RAs and they refer to the range of features determined (the authors' own research in general or particular aspects). The Spanish scholars used in their statements of contribution: an attitudinal verb, such as *contribute to*, *add to* or *provide insights* (*We thus contribute to financial literature by...; our study contributes to the growing [...] literature; we add to* *the literature; Specifically, we provide new insights into .... by examining*...). In some of their statements they also use the attitudinal noun *contribution* (*The main contribution of this paper is*...) and/or attitudinal adjectives such as *first* or *unique* (e.g. *As far as we know, this study is the first attempt to formally analyse*...). Finally, some of their statements of contribution are phrased drawing a comparison with previous research by means of the conjunction *whereas* (*Previous studies on ... focus on ... or ... whereas this paper pays attention to ... and therefore also includes ..., which adds to the literature*). They, therefore, seem to be aware as well of the particular lexico-grammatical realization of this key rhetorical step in the Introductory section of international English-medium RAs in their field.

The two rejection reports and the major revision report include explicit references to such statements of contribution in the submitted manuscript. Reviewers recognise that such a step is covered in the Spanish scholars' manuscripts. It may be inferred from this that had this not been the case, they would have probably required them to include it (as had happened so many times before in their first experiences drafting their RAs in English and submitting them to international high-impact journals). Nevertheless, they have objections to the authors' statements of contribution. The problem with manuscript 1 seems to be that the contribution the authors say they make is not judged to be so by the reviewer:

> The main potential contributions of the paper are threefold. First, the authors argue this is the first paper to [...]. Second, unlike most herding literature, the paper employs [...] . Third, the authors introduce an alternative [...] to overcome the limitation of the well-known and widely used [...].
>
> Unfortunately, the authors fail to acknowledge the recent literature on [...]. (rejection report – manuscript 1)

The problem with manuscript 2 seems to be that, although some contribution is noted and is "marketed" in the authors' submitted article, it is considered minor and, therefore, in the view of the reviewer, their research does not deserve publication:

> The paper makes only a minor contribution to the literature because empirical evidence [...] is available in the literature.
>
> I doubt that considering [...] provides us with deeper insights because the use of ... is less informative than [...]. (rejection report – manuscript 2)

Again, the problem appears to be in the scope of the contribution itself, which does not seem to be relevant and embracing enough. Spanish scholars do not appear to face a discursive or rhetorical difficulty to publish their research outcomes in English, but it rather refers to the relevance of its content and focus.

Finally, in manuscript 3, even if the scholars have indicated the contribution their research makes and it is judged reasonable and relevant, the referee also expresses some concerns –although of a lower importance– in that not enough links have been established with previous research.

> The availability of such a dataset for research purpose is to my knowledge new. However, I miss a clear motivation and positioning of the paper. (major revision report – manuscript 3)

In response to the referee's major revision report, the Spanish scholars made many changes to their manuscripts, among which the addition of two statements of contribution in the introduction of their paper, as a result of the above comment:

1. Our paper contributes to this evidence by using monthly portfolio holdings to compare disclosed and undisclosed information and testing the potential interaction between public debt allocations and portfolio disclosures. (manuscript 3b)

2. Furthermore, our work is unique because it examines window dressing not only from an aggregate perspective but also for each bond fund separately, therefore testing the individual significance of this phenomenon. (manuscript 3b)

It can be inferred from these comments by the reviewers that statements of contribution can influence their decision to accept or reject a paper, and as a result they have become an essential step at least in the Introduction of RAs in top finance journals. The second reviewer has actually traced the particular statement of the scholars' in their manuscripts and quotes their own words to make his/her claim against it. Nevertheless, as has been shown through the analysis of the text histories, it is not only important that scholars appropriately introduce and phrase such a contribution but also that referees judge it valuable and convincing.

4. Concluding remarks

This study has aimed at analysing the extent of inclusion of statements of contribution and their lexico-grammatical realization in Introductions and Conclusions taken from RAs published in finance high-impact English-medium journals and from manuscripts written in English by Spanish scholars. Such comparison was carried out to explore the extent to which adjustments to the prevailing rhetorical conventions in published RAs is likely called for. The analysis of the Spanish scholars' manuscripts was supplemented with the study of the referee reports they received and with personal conversations with the informants, constituting three text histories (Lillis and Curry 2006, 2010).

Statements of contribution are considered to be positive evaluative comments of the scholars' own research intended to justify its relevance and appropriateness in terms of its link to previous research and its worthiness for disciplinary knowledge building. As such, they can be considered to realize Swales' (2004) step 6 "Stating the value of the present research" in Move 3 "Occupying the niche" of the Introduction. These statements have also been found, although to a lower extent, in the Conclusions. They appear to respond to the increasing numbers of RAs written and submitted to indexed journals, at least in certain fields –and the subsequent competition to get one's research published– possibly as a result of the current academic reward systems adopted by higher education institutions that favour such publications. An analysis of their features and realization has revealed that statements of contribution systematically refer to their own research in general, or to the scholars' methods, data, etc. in particular and that they are commonly realized by: 1) an attitudinal verb, 2) an attitudinal noun or "polarized" (Swales and Burke 2003) adjective, and/or 3) a comparative structure.

The analysis has shown that statements of contribution are frequently included in the published RAs in the corpus of high-impact finance journals and seem to be deemed necessary by the reviewers as can be gathered from their direct reference to them in the small sample of reports studied. Nevertheless, the study has highlighted that while complying with this rhetorical strategy is necessary, it further needs to be judged valid by gatekeepers in the light of the research presented.

The findings provide evidence that the RA is indeed a dynamic genre (Swales 2004; Bhatia 2004) which evolves and shapes itself to respond to new communicative needs and purposes of scholars in particular disciplines. It would be interesting to see whether statements of contribution feature to the same extent in other disciplines and cultural contexts. It may be hypothesised that, because it seems to be the consequence of an increase in competition to get one's research published, it would be more commonly included in hard science disciplines and in certain social sciences (as shown here with finance) than in the humanities. Likewise, it may be the case that statements of contribution are not included to the same extent in national lower-impact publications. Further research needs to be undertaken to test these hypotheses. In a similar vein, there may be other ways in which the RA may be evolving as a result of the pressing need of scholars to publish in high-impact sites and the resulting increase in the number of RAs submitted to these very commonly English-medium journals. Further genre-analysis will have to confirm if that is the case.

The present study has important pedagogical implications for EAP writing instruction. The findings here could inform guidelines and resources aimed at scholars in the discipline of finance using English as a Lingua Franca for publication in high-impact journals. Such materials should make them aware of the new communicative purposes of RA Introductions in English-medium international journals. They could trace where and how those purposes are answered in authentic examples. In addition, referees' reactions to statements of contribution and other (marketing) rhetorical conventions as encoded in their reports could also be discussed so as to better equip scholars with the rhetorical tools and heighten their chances of reaching international visibility via publication in indexed English-medium journals.

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