

Types and functions of reporting verbs in literature reviews of students' theses

Abstract:

This paper investigates the use of reporting verbs (RVs) in Master's theses written in English by Czech students of Economics and Management filed of study. Adopting one of the most elaborate frameworks to date (Hyland, 2002), the research performed on the second language learners' writing has concentrated on the types of RVs as one of the citation practices and their communicative functions in the academic discourse. The data were drawn from the corpus of 439,356 words, consisting of Literature Reviews, where other authors' research is summarized and commented on. The findings revealed that the majority of the RVs conveyed a neutral attitude towards the reported message and neutrally summarized outcomes of previous research. The study has pedagogical implications for academic writing in PhD courses at institutions of non-philological tertiary education and hopes to contribute to the existing body of research on the citation.

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Introduction

Reporting the work of others is one of the identifying features of academic writing. One of the most explicit ways of attributing content to another source is the use of reporting verbs (RVs) which represent a significant rhetorical choice (Hyland, 2002) allowing writers not only to report the source material but also to indicate their position or stance towards a quoted material.

Although RVs are not the only means of citation, by employing RVs writers can fluently synthesize reported material rather than list or summarize it while at the same time expressing their attitude towards it. The usage and appropriate choices of RVs in academic discourse undoubtedly present a higher-level mastery of academic writing. As Nguyen and Pramoolsook (2016) demonstrate, RVs help writers appropriately integrate other people's works and ideas into their writing and present their study persuasively.

Despite a high number of studies on RVs in academic discourse focusing on research articles (RAs) (e.g. Agbaglo, 2017) or university writing (Jomaa and Bidin, 2019), the number of studies concentrating particularly on Master's theses is relatively low (e.g. Manan and Noor, 2015). Yet Master's theses very often represent students' first major academic and scientific writing before entering the world of research and science as PhD candidates and/or novice researchers. It is particularly the Literature Review section of a thesis where citations are mostly found, presenting historical background, discussing theories and concepts, showing related research and clarifying terminology and concepts parallel with the context of the research.

This article examines the use of RVs found in citations of reported work by second language (L2) learners, students of Economics and Management at the Czech University of Life Sciences Prague (CULS Prague). The objective was to find out how frequently certain RVs categories and their evaluative functions occurred in English texts of the students and based on these results to provide us with better insight into the performance of students when writing their theses in English.

Materials and methods

Research site and data for analysis

The research was performed on 82 Master's theses written in English by Czech students of the English programme Economics and Management at the Faculty of Economics and Management of CULS Prague. The created corpus contained 82 Literature Review sections from Master's theses that met the following criteria: 1) the theses were available online - to meet this criterion only the theses no older than January 2017 could be considered, 2) were successfully defended between January 2017 and June 2019 - at the time of performing this research no newer theses were available, and 3) were written by Czech students as English L2 learners. The corpus consisting of 82 texts contained 439,356 words in total. The length of the texts varied from 3,899 to 6,401 words, amounting to 5,358 words per text on average.

Method of analysis

The present study employs Hyland's (2002) framework of categorizing RVs according to their evaluation of the process which the RVs describe or represent in the discourse:

Research Acts verbs refer to the research activity or experimental procedure. They occur in the statement of Findings (e.g. *observe, discover, show*) or Procedures (e.g. *analyse, calculate, explore*).

Cognitive Acts verbs portray the cited work in terms of mental processes, the writer having either a positive attitude to the reported material (e.g. *agree, think, understand*), a tentative view (*believe, doubt, suppose*), a critical stance (*disagree*) or a natural attitude towards the proposition (e.g. *conceive, reflect*).

Discourse Acts verbs are verbal expressions of both the research and cognitive activities, evaluating the cited material. They are divided into Doubt e.g. *hypothesize, indicate, postulate*), Assurance verbs (e.g. *describe, discuss, summarize*) and Counters (e.g. *deny, challenge, rule out*).

Results

As shown in Table 1, of all 837 occurrences of RVs Discourse Acts verbs were the most highly represented (68.5%), followed by a significantly lower occurrence of Research Acts verbs (20.8%) and even lower occurrence of Cognitive Acts verbs (10.7%).

RVs	Occurrences in the corpus	Mean occurrence per text
Discourse	573 (68.5%)	6.99
Research	174 (20.8%)	2.12
Cognition	90 (10.7%)	1.10
Total	837 (100%)	10.21

Table 1: Frequencies of RVs in the corpus and their mean frequencies per text

The results suggest a predominant use of non-factive Assurance Discourse Acts verbs which merely acknowledge reported communication rather than express a pronounced or critical stance. This may be caused by the fact that novice writers tend to attribute the reported content to the source rather than provide support for their arguments and justify their claims. The results further suggest a total lack of critical RVs in the corpus (0% of Counters in Discourse Acts and 0% of counter-factive verbs among Findings in Research Acts). Table 2 displays the most commonly used RVs with the frequency of occurrences ≥ 15 .

Category / RV	Frequency	Percentage
Discourse Acts	573	68.5%
<i>state</i>	75	13.1%
<i>point out</i>	69	12%
<i>claim</i>	63	11%
<i>define</i>	57	10%
<i>describe</i>	54	9.4%
<i>mention</i>	48	8.4%
<i>suggest</i>	27	4.7%
RVs ≤ 15	180	31.4%
Research Acts	174	20.8%
<i>add</i>	51	29.3%
RVs ≤ 15	123	70.7%
Cognition Acts	90	10.7%
<i>agree</i>	33	36.7%
RVs ≤ 15	57	63.3%
Total	837	100%

Table 2: Most common RVs with occurrences ≥ 15

Conclusion

The results showed that students had not been always aware of how to use different categories of RVs and their evaluative functions. The findings reported high use of discourse verbs in passing the information cited (e.g. *state, point out*), communicating generalized interpretations or conclusions. Much less frequent were verbs signifying different evaluative roles.

Although the use of discourse verbs seems to be predominant even in professional writings, the promotion of various RVs' types carrying a more pronounced stance in citations is still of great significance in L2 learners' academic writing courses. As a practical benefit of this study, the findings might help adjust syllabi of academic English courses at institutions where English is a non-native language.

References

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