

Language of Attribution in Iraqi Students Master Theses

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Abstract

Citation in academic writing used to demonstrate the authors' knowledge to previous works in the same field of the study. Reporting verbs is one of the most fundamental components of citation in academic writing. This study investigated the frequency of the most used reporting verbs and their function in the Introduction sections of Master thesis written by Iraqi students. Francis (1996) verb groups and explanation were adapted to show the most used reporting verbs. The results show that the highest reporting verbs were found in using "Argue" group of reporting verbs, which suggest uncertainty or disagreement with the author's line of argument. However, it appears that master students limited to much extent using Think group of verbs in writing the introduction section of their theses, this may be attributed to the master student's tendency to use specific reporting verbs that did not allow to make a great degree of overlapping.

Introduction

Research, in academic writing is mostly concerned with academic writing in general. Scholars and authors like Ballard (1983), Carey (1992), Little (1996), Seyler (2008), Miller (2006), Callarman (2002), Dietsch (2003), Muller (2008), DeVito (2005), Cleary (2005) and Gonye et al (2012) flourish the research in academic writing, in terms of the quality and steps followed to create a successful written piece. However, as far as it can be ascertaining the issue of attribution; the subject of this study has rarely focused on particularly in Iraqi academic research [1]. Attribution is simply shows the writer's presentation to others work and contributions in the same or almost the same body of research. This inclusion assists the writer's argument and shows his/ her agreement or disagreement. The literature implies that academic writing presents an overabundance of challenges, since in the university, English considered very important in teaching and learning. However, most postgraduate students failed to address the full extent to which form of attribution are used while writing their thesis. It is crucial to maintain that the writer in presenting others work should show the readers his/ her dis/ agreement by using certain words/ phrases that demonstrate the writer's point of view. Hence, it is clear that this process of communication is shared and not just a one – way process.

Attribution is the language of writing employs by the writer to show the reader the external sources that support the author(s) investigations and/or contributions. This can be shown by using words or phrases in the form of attributive tags or verbs [2]. Ac-

ording to Seyler (2008), attribution is “. . . becoming skilled in ways to include source material in your writing while (still) making your indebtedness to source absolutely clear to your readers . . . These introductory tags or signal phrases give readers a context for the borrowed material, as well as serving as part of documentation of sources.” [1].

Literature suggests that academic writing presents great challenges in studying attribution specifically for second language learners (ibid). Hyland also distinguished academic writing from other genres, he states that "In some genres this may involve hearsay or attribution to a reliable source; [but], in academic writing it refers to a community- based literature and provides important support for arguments” [3]. In this vein, several studies such as; Cleary, 2005; Seyler, 2008; Miller, 2008.etc. have shown the most common verbs of attribution which include; says, states, argues, according to and views.

The language of attribution, according to Hunston (1995), can be used to “hedge a statement, to introduce information which corroborates the writer's own view, to indicate gap in research, or to set up a point of view against which the writer wishes to argue” [4]. Consequently, in academic writing researcher has often present their arguments by reporting, discussing, and evaluating previous research by using attributive verbs [5]. The present study investigates how postgraduate Iraqi students used the attributive resources in their thesis writing, beside that the study aims to explore if those students able to identify the function of each device

correctly. The results may be helpful to teaching of academic writing to Iraqi learners of English.

It is correct that every student faces many challenges when it comes to writing, particularly at Iraq universities, where English is a second language for the majority students [6]. Academic distinction is measured not only by what the student presented, but also by the usefulness with which the material is presented. According to the literature, academic writing poses a variety of challenges including attribution to postgraduate and undergraduate students as well. Nevertheless, the focus of this article does not address the full degree to which attributive verbs and phrases are used in English in general. The main priority is only on the links of attribution between the students work and other work.

Objectives

Hyland refers to “reference to prior research” as “the attribution of propositional content to another source” [7]. In this vein, this study aims to investigate:

1. how do master students refer to the work of others?
2. how are these references realized?

Hence, to suggest reasons beyond mis/use the attributive verbs and to suggest recommendations about how students can use attribution to present their ideas in a simple and concise manner.

Methodology

In this study, the Introduction and literature review sections of six theses produced by Master students in the University of Baghdad and Al-Mustansiriya University were chosen. The researchers chose the introduction and literature review sections because reporting verbs are usually found in the sections concerned (2012), since it includes the citation of previous work in the selected data [8]. There is also a lack of local studies that focus on how Iraqi students use attribution language in academic writing. The Master’s students were determined by their local names. In addition to the selection criteria, the theses were empirical in nature, not related to the literary analysis, and they use English as a medium of communication.

To achieve the aim of analysis, Francis verb groups and explanation were adapted Francis et al.

[3]. These groups of verbs are introduced as follows:

1. *Argue* verbs are concerned with writing and other forms of communication, e.g., argue, suggest, assert, state, and point out.
2. *Think* verbs are concerned with thinking, including having a belief; knowing, understanding, hoping, fearing, e.g., think, assume, believe, maintain, express, know, and feel.
3. *Show* verbs are concerned with indicating a fact or situation, e.g., show, demonstrate, define, illustrate, identify, study, report, inform, and reveal.
4. *Find* verbs are concerned with coming to know or think something, e.g., find, observe, discover, conclude, realize, and establish.

The first step of analysis includes calculating the number of words in the introduction and literature review sections (78684 words). Then, a comprehensive reading to the introduction and literature review sections of the six thesis to identify the category of report-

ing verbs in the three groups which are defined according to the groups of verbs adapted from Francis (1996), then highlighted the selected verbs with different colors [3]. Finally, the frequency of occurrence was counted manually and the percentage was calculated.

Results and Discussions

By analyzing the data based on the groups of verbs proposed by Francis, it was found that Master writers used all the three kinds of attributive verbs [3]. The following table (1) show the number and frequency occurrence of these verbs in the introduction and literature review sections of the six theses.

Table (1): The number and frequency percentage of reporting verb groups across introduction and literature review sections.

Reporting group	No. of occurrence	Frequency per 10000
Argue	162	20.58
Think	30	3.81
Show	129	16.39
Find	42	5.33
Total	216	46.13

According to Table 1, the highest percentage of reporting verb groups refer to the Argue verb group (20.85 per 10000). The results also indicate that writers have a tendency towards using Show verbs (16.39 per 10000) as their second priority, then Find groups (5.33 per 10000). The less incidents are related to Think groups where (3.81 per 10000) found in the selected data.

According to literature, the choice of reporting verbs enables the writer to position her/ his work in relation to the work of others in the same discipline. Writers according to Thompson and Ye (1991) when they used verb like (think) to perform mental activity, which later Hyland (2000) to as ‘Cognition acts’, and considered as a higher level of reporting verbs as they need critical thinking about the other previous studies. From the selected data, it appears that master students limited to much extent using Think group of verbs in writing the introduction section of their theses, this may be attributed to the master student’s tendency to use specific reporting verbs that did not allow to make a great degree of overlapping. In other words, NNS insistence to avoid uncertainty in citing the previous studies they refer to, lead them to choose the reporting verbs he/ she considered as appropriate [9]. The same is true about the Find group where according to literature, researchers in academic writing refer to previous knowledge, including research activities such as; ideas and findings. The following example show how the student as writer cited a reference by using the reporting verb “believe” in order to express his own opinion regarding the reference being cited:

Williams and Tedesco (2006:67) believe that in 2004 political web ads became significant contributor to the weaponry of candidates, parties, independents groups, parties, and individual voters.

The highest reporting verbs were found in using “Argue” group of reporting verbs, which suggest the presence “a counter-argument

to the proposition being cited" [6]. In other words, it shows uncertainty about or disagreement with the author's line of argument. The choice of argue only considers the claim to be an argument rather than a fact. As is shown in the following example:

Furthermore, Bradac (1983: 15) argues that it is difficult to conceive a human relationship that doesn't depend on talk, which is mainly based on verbal communication and only few relationships non-verbally communicated.

Additionally, this group of verbs indicates the source thinks something is possibly important but needs further investigation [10]. In the following example, the student as writer cited another source suggestion. The verb "Suggest" in literature falls under verbs called non-factive verbs. These verbs indicate that the source gives no clear signal about the attitude towards the previous researcher's information or opinion [11].

Different authors, including Hinck and Hinck (2002); Dailey, Hinck, and Hinck (2008); Garcia-Pastor (2007), and others, have suggested various scenarios for what constitutes appropriate and desirable communication in presidential debates.

Finally, according to literature the large number of Argue group usage as reporting verb was a reference to the author as the subject and often used to report the claims of the other authors than of the writer itself, except when the writer disagreed with another author's opinion [12].

Conclusion

To conclude, the purpose of this study was to investigate how Master's students from University of Baghdad and Al-Mustansiriya University used reporting verbs in writing their theses. It is also looked into the kind of reporting verbs that the majority of students used in their theses, as well as the frequency and possible goals of reporting verbs mostly utilized. The results show that the highest reporting verbs were found in the "Argue" group of reporting verbs, which express doubt or disagreement with the author's line of reasoning. However, it appears that master students employ the "Think" group of verbs in the introductory section of their theses much less. This could be because master students' tendency to use specific reporting verbs that did not allow much overlap. This work, like any other academic research, contributes to the body of knowledge about academic discourse in general and citation in

particular. The importance of this study will be realized, particularly Iraqi students. As a result, this study will be useful as a starting point for further research.

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