The Frequency and Function of Reporting Verbs in Research Articles Written by Native Persian and English Speakers

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Abstract

Writing as a means of assessing and awarding admission to the writers’ disciplinary discourse communities is the most prominent learning activity. Learning to write academic genres involves students being familiar with its key features such as form and function. Citation as a rhetorical device of academic writing indicates authors’ understanding of the previous works. Reporting verbs is one of the most important aspects of citation in academic writing which non-native students often fail using them appropriately. Accordingly, this study investigated the frequency of the most used reporting verbs and their function in the Introduction and Literature Review sections of research articles (RAs) written by native and non-native writers. In so doing, a corpus of 60 articles in the field of SLA, 30 by native English authors published in International Journals and 30 by Persian authors published in National Journals, were selected and analysed. The results indicated that there are some differences in the use of reporting verbs between the two corpora. The attained results can be used to design tasks and materials for teaching writing focusing on not only grammar but also rhetorical structures as well as other genres of writing.

Keywords: Frequency and function of reporting verbs, research articles (RAs), native Persian and English writers, introduction and literature review sections;

1. Introduction

Writing is a main academic activity, an essential one for postgraduates and for those whose writing is the most prominent learning activity. It is a mean of assessing and awarding admission to the writers’ disciplinary discourse communities (Pecorari, 2006). Hyland (2000) believes that learning to write academic genres involves students being familiar with the issues of form and structure and with public contexts for writing. They should acquire a

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metacognitive awareness of these forms and contexts and a familiarity with the discourse strategies in order to achieve goals in the target community, if they want success. They should become aware of the discipline’s symbolic resources for getting things done by routinely connecting purposes with features of texts.

Citation is a key feature of academic texts by which authors refer to the disciplinary community to which they belong. Citation indicates the author’s understanding of the previous works, makes the author as a member of that disciplinary community, and helps him/her to promote his/her work (Hewings, 2010). It happens when a published work cites from another published work or directly refer to it, including the full reference within the reference list. Citation is a feature of journal articles, but it can be found in ‘grey literature’, including books, government publications, professional body documents, MSC and PhD theses, web articles, podcasts, newspapers and magazine articles. Presence and number of citation almost show the influence of a particular author, journal or field of research (Nightingale & Marshall, 2011).

2. Literature Review

Citation is a rhetorical device that plays a key role in academic writing. Citation shows how a piece of research is rooted in other literature. It makes the reader aware of previous works and enables the writer to refer to the large growing body of literature in order to give his/her work credit. In different academic fields in general and in Second Language Acquisition in particular, so many works have been run on different aspects of citation in different fields of study; such as (Hyland, 1999; Petric, 2007; Hyland, 2009; Mansourizadeh, 2011).

(Hyland, 1999) explored the way in which academic citation practices contribute to the construction of disciplinary knowledge. She argued that: “these differences in citation practices are related to the fact that the academics actively participate in knowledge construction as members of professional groups and that their discoursal decisions are influenced by, and deeply embedded in, the epistemological and social conventions of their disciplines”. In another study on citation Hyland (2009) found that students shared three common weaknesses in citation practice: vague references, patch writing and confusion of quotes and paraphrases.

(Petric, 2007) compared eight high- and eight law-graded master’s theses in the field of gender studies which were written in English as a second language. He identified rhetorical functions of citations as attribution, exemplification, further reference, statement of use, application, evaluation, establishing links between sources, and one’s own work with that of other authors.

Different functions of citation have been found by comparing scholars’ papers to those of novice academic writers within the same field. It was found that novice writers use citations in isolation but expert writers use them to synthesize several sources. Novice writers use citation to attribute while the experts use citations in order to provide support and justify their claims (Mansourizadeh, 2011).

According to the above literature, all scholars agreed on the importance of citation, but each of these studies has assessed different aspects of it in different fields of study. One aspect of citation is the appropriate use of reporting verbs. Since few studies have reported on instructional interventions that aim to assist students to master this complex academic literacy, this paper is going to investigate the most frequent reporting verbs used in SLA literature by both native and non-native authors, and their function.

3. Statement of the problem

Scientific journal article genre is one aspect of academic written communication, which has received much interest in recent years (Hawes, et al., 1997). The identity of research article as a genre is based on having a clearly recognizable communicative goal (Swales, 1990). Some factors in the context impose the communicative purpose of the discourse community and constraints so that there are some relatively invariant features, while others vary based on the requirements of the particular situations in which they occur (Myers, 1989). In recent years a diversity of research perspectives has emerged as a result of genre analysis.

Citation is one of the typical features of RA [research article] which represents propositional content from a source article and encodes it in a later research article (Hawes, 1997). Using reporting verb in the act of citing and referencing to other literature is one of the most important aspects of citation in academic writing, though non-native students often fail to use them appropriately in their writing. They most often misuse them or use them
interchangeably. Consequently, the goal of this study is to characterize reporting by identifying the reporting verbs, their function, and trace their usages in the articles written by native and non-native researchers in order to identify the differences in their usage and help non-native students of SLA improving their academic writing tasks. Accordingly, the purpose of this comparative study is to prepare a list of reporting verbs, specifically in the field of SLA, their frequency, function, and the differences in using them between Iranian SLA and native authors. By doing so, non-native students become familiar with the most frequent reporting verbs’ function used in SLA literature and they may be able to use them appropriately in their academic writings.

According to the previous sections and the objectives of this study, the following research questions would be investigated:

1. What reporting verbs are the most frequent in SLA academic writing written by Iranian and native authors?
2. What function does each reporting verb have in both native and non-native context?

4. Method

To achieve the goal of this study, an exploratory method would be applied. In so doing, the list of reporting verbs introduced by Hyland (1999) as well as verb groups and explanations adapted from Francis, Hunston, and Manning (1996) employed and the analysis was based on the data driven from the frequency of reporting verbs used in the SLA articles written by native speakers of English and Iranian researchers.

Verb groups and explanations are adapted from Francis et al. (1996, pp. 97-101) as follows:

1. ARGUE verbs are concerned with writing and other forms of communication, e.g., argue, suggest, assert, and point out.
2. THINK verbs are concerned with thinking, including having a belief; knowing, understanding, hoping, fearing, e.g., think, assume, and feel.
3. SHOW verbs are concerned with indicating a fact or situation, e.g., show, demonstrate, and reveal.
4. FIND verbs are concerned with coming to know or think something, e.g., find, observe, discover, and establish.

4.1. The corpus

This paper drew on 60 English research articles (RAs), 30 of which written by native English speakers and 30 by Iranian researchers in the field of SLA. The focus was on the introduction and review of the literature sections of the RAs. The articles of the recent years, from 2000 up to now, were analyzed.

4.2. Procedure and Date collection

To fulfill the aim of this study, frequent reporting verbs used in both corpora identified and compared in order to prepare a list of the reporting verbs, their functions, and to identify the differences between their usages. So the procedure of this investigation consists of (gathering) reporting verbs frequency, identifying their function, and identifying differences in their usage.

4.3. Data Analysis

The gathered data in this study were analyzed quantitatively on the frequency of the reporting verbs in RAs in the field of SLA. Moreover, they were analyzed qualitatively in a way that each reporting verb used in both corpora accounted, and their function described. Then on the basis of these data, the reasons for Iranian SLA students' weaknesses in this area of academic writing described.

5. Results

To analyze the data, first the number of words in introduction and literature review sections of RAs was
calculated. Table 1 below provides the total number of the words in RAs of the discipline, SLA, in English and in Persian across the pertinent sections.

| Discipline        | SLA |
|-------------------|-----|
| Rhetorical Section |     |
| Introduction      | 17,302 | 18,469 |
| Literature Review | 34,289  | 35,871  |

The table shows that the number of words in English SLA RA introductions and literature reviews are 17,302 and 34,289 correspondingly as well as the number of words in Persian SLA RA introductions and literature reviews are 18,469 and 35,871 respectively.

The frequency of reporting verbs was calculated and distributed based on their categories. Table 2 presents the results of the reporting verbs categories across the introduction and literature review of English and Persian research articles in the field of SLA.

| Verb group | Frequency per 20,000 words | % of total | Verb group | Frequency per 20,000 words | % of total |
|------------|---------------------------|------------|------------|---------------------------|------------|
| Argue      | 40.5                      | 88.5       | Argue      | 23.3                      | 54.7       |
| Think      | 3.2                       | 6.9        | Think      | 7.3                       | 17.2       |
| Show       | 1.6                       | 3.5        | Show       | 1.0                       | 2.3        |
| Find       | 0.5                       | 1.2        | Find       | 11.0                      | 25.8       |
| Total      | 45.8                      | 98.9       | Total      | 42.6                      | 100        |

According to Table 2, the highest percentage of reporting verb groups for both English and Persian refer to the ARGUE verb group, 40.5 and 23.3 respectively. In other words, in both corpora, then, there is a tendency for a human subject to co-occur with an integral citation and an ARGUE verbs. The results also indicate that native Persian writers have a tendency towards using FIND verbs as their second priority, while English authors shows this tendency towards THINK verbs. As it is evident there are significant differences in the application of reporting verbs’ groups by Persian and English RA writers.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

As Thompson and Ye’s (1991) ground-breaking study shows, the choice of reporting verb is a key feature which enables the writer to position their work in relation to that of other members of the discipline. Thompson and Ye distinguished three categories of reporting verbs according to the process they perform: textual verbs, in which there is an obligatory element of verbal expression (e.g., state, write); mental verbs, which refer to mental processes (e.g., think, believe); and research verbs, which refer to processes that are part of research activity (e.g., find, demonstrate). Later studies such as those by Thomas and Hawes (1994) and by Hyland (2002) also employed this three-way distinction, although Hyland uses the terms discourse and cognition for Thompson and Ye’s textual and mental verb categories.

It is worth noting that if we take the ARGUE group as equivalent to discourse verbs and FIND/SHOW verbs as equivalent to research verbs, figures related to English authors confirm those given by Hyland (2002), whereas, results of the Persian counterparts only partially confirm them. As in Hyland’s data, the percentage of ARGUE verbs is higher in the social than in the natural science, while the percentage of FIND/SHOW verbs is higher in the natural than in the social science in the writing of native scholarly researchers. As the results of the present study suggests, in Articles written by native English and Persian speakers, the ARGUE group is slightly more frequent than the three other verb group. However, English writers use the ARGUE group more than Persian writers. On the
other hand, the second preference of Persians, FIND verbs which are more frequently used by native writers in natural sciences, shows the difference in the use of the appropriate verb groups which are more common in the discipline by Persian authors.

The study also shows that for both corpora there is considerable use of reporting clauses with a that-clause complement in reporting others’ research. Although, there is some evidences of differences in grammatical subject and verb choice, the most frequently occurring pattern is common to the two corpora: an integral citation, a human subject and a present tense ARGUE verb. It can be suggested that one of the prime functions of this pattern is to moderate potentially face-threatening comments on other researchers, particularly in situations of conflict or uncertainty. This function stands in contrast to that of the other patterns identified: an integral citation, a human subject and a past tense FIND verbs in articles written by native Persian speakers. This function allows the writer to give credit to other researchers and to use their work in the cumulative construction of knowledge, which is more common in natural sciences.

A reporting verb with that-complement is most frequently used in integral citation with a human subject. In integral citation, the attribution is highly specific and the author by consequence highly visible. Hence, this type of citation tends to be associated with comment on an individual study rather than with generalizations about a number of studies. Given both the length of the research articles and the necessity to display knowledge, writers may choose this type of citation because it lends itself to extensive comment on the cited research. It is possible that research article writers tend to deal with the literature by discussing individual papers at some length, rather than by subsuming a number of papers under a single comment.

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