

Original Paper

A Corpus-Based Study on Reporting Verbs Used in Doctoral Dissertations by Chinese EFL Learners

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Abstract

Reference to previous studies is an indispensable component in the academic discourse. Based on a self-built corpus, this study aims to analyze the use of reporting verbs in doctoral dissertations written by Chinese EFL learners with both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The findings show that Chinese EFL learners show a preference for citing previous studies as Discourse Acts. The absence of certain subtypes of Research Act verbs and Cognitive Act verbs reveals the reluctance of Chinese EFL learners to convey a critical viewpoint or judge the cited materials as false or incorrect. In terms of tense, simple present tense is most frequently used in the corpus to refer to previous studies as accepted facts. As for voice, active voice plays a dominant role in the corpus with a high proportion of 92.14%. At the same time, a small percentage of passive voice is used by writers to emphasize the essential contribution of certain cited scholars.

Keywords

reporting verbs, doctoral dissertations, literature review, Chinese EFL learners

1. Introduction

In academic articles, reference to previous research is an indispensable element since a writer cannot discuss any academic topic without referring to or integrating the theories or findings of others. As Hyland (2002, p. 2) once stated, “Its importance in academic discourse lies in providing an appropriate context of persuasion, demonstrating how the current work builds on and reworks past utterances to establish intertextual links to the wider discipline”. By reviewing previous studies, the writer of an academic paper thus appropriately locates his or her research in the specific field, relates it to the significant work and comes up with original ideas (Gilbert, 1976; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995).

Swales (1990, p. 148) categorizes patterns of reporting into “integral reporting” and “non-integral reporting”. Integral reporting refers to the research report in which the name of the cited researcher appears as a sentence element and plays an explicit role in the syntax of the sentence, whereas non-integral reporting refers to the research report in which the name of the reported researcher appears in parentheses. Thus, the choice of one pattern over the other precisely indicates the writer’s intention to attach importance to certain cited information or scholar(s).

During the process of reporting, reporting verbs, or citation verbs, such as “argue”, “find”, and “show”, are often used to cite others’ work. As English academic writing is gaining more and more attention over the world, scholars have carried out a large number of theoretical and empirical studies on reporting verbs, especially in terms of syntactic features over the past few decades (e.g., Malcolm, 1987; Oster, 1981; Shaw, 1992; Hyland, 1999; Pickard, 1993a, 1993b; Thomas & Hawes, 1994, 1997). Relevant studies have been conducted from various perspectives, such as that of semantics (Hunston, 1993). The use of reporting verbs is considered to be an important rhetorical choice and one of the explicit means of conveying writers’ attitudes (Thomas & Hawes, 1994; Thompson & Ye, 1999).

Given the significance of reporting activity in the academic discourse and the large population of Chinese EFL learners, there are also many studies that focus on Chinese EFL learners. So far, most of the previous related studies focus on the contrastive analysis between the academic discourse written by Chinese learners and native English speakers (e.g., Hu & Jiang, 2007; Wang, 2011), with a purpose of revealing the differences between the two groups of writers. However, with multiple contrastive items, these studies fail to explore Chinese learners’ use of reporting verbs in detail. Therefore, in the current study, with a self-built corpus, we aim to conduct a relatively comprehensive study focusing on Chinese EFL learners, more specifically, high-level learners of Chinese Ph.D candidates majoring in Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics or English Language and Literature.

2. Theoretical Framework

Scholars have developed different typologies of reporting verbs. Thompson and Ye (1991) first divided reporting verbs into two types, denotation verbs and evaluation verbs. Then, Thomas and Hawes (1994) classified the reporting verbs into three main categories: discourse activity verbs, experimental activity verbs (or real-world activity verbs), and cognition activity verbs. Based on the previous framework, Hyland (1999, 2002) made a further development. In his modified classification, the reporting verbs are sorted into three distinct processes. It should be noted that the examples listed here are based on the primary aspects of the research process as a verb may be ambiguous between two processes or even involve with all processes. The definition of the three categories is as follows (Hyland, 2002, p. 6):

“Research (real-world) Acts. Verbs in this category represent experimental activities or actions carried out in the real world. They generally occur either in statements of findings (e.g., observe, discover, notice, show) or procedures (e.g., analyse, calculate, assay, explore, plot, recover).

Cognition Acts. These verbs are concerned with the researcher’s mental processes (e.g., believe,

conceptualize, suspect, assume, view).

Discourse Acts. *These involve linguistic activities and focus on the verbal expression of cognitive or research activities (e.g., ascribe, discuss, hypothesize, report, state)."*

Tense and voice are also important elements that should be considered in the study of reporting verbs. Generally speaking, reporting verbs are commonly associated with three tenses. They are simple present, present perfect and simple past tense. According to Bitchener and Ferris (2012), simple present tense is often used to convey the current state of knowledge, to make a generalization and to present previous findings as accepted facts; past simple tense is used to refer to a claim or finding that has been made; and present perfect tense is used to emphasize the influence of prior studies. In addition to tense, voice is often analyzed together with tense-alternation (Malcolm, 1987; Oster, 1981; Shaw, 1992). Therefore, the analytical framework used in the current study is presented in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Analytical Framework

Classification basis	Type	Examples
Process function	Research Act verbs	demonstrate, find, show
	Cognitive Act verbs	think, believe, hold
	Discourse Act verbs	indicate, suggest, argue
Tense	simple present	believe
	simple past	believed
	present perfect	have/has believed
Voice	active voice	point/points
	passive voice	be (is am are) pointed

3. Corpus and Methodology

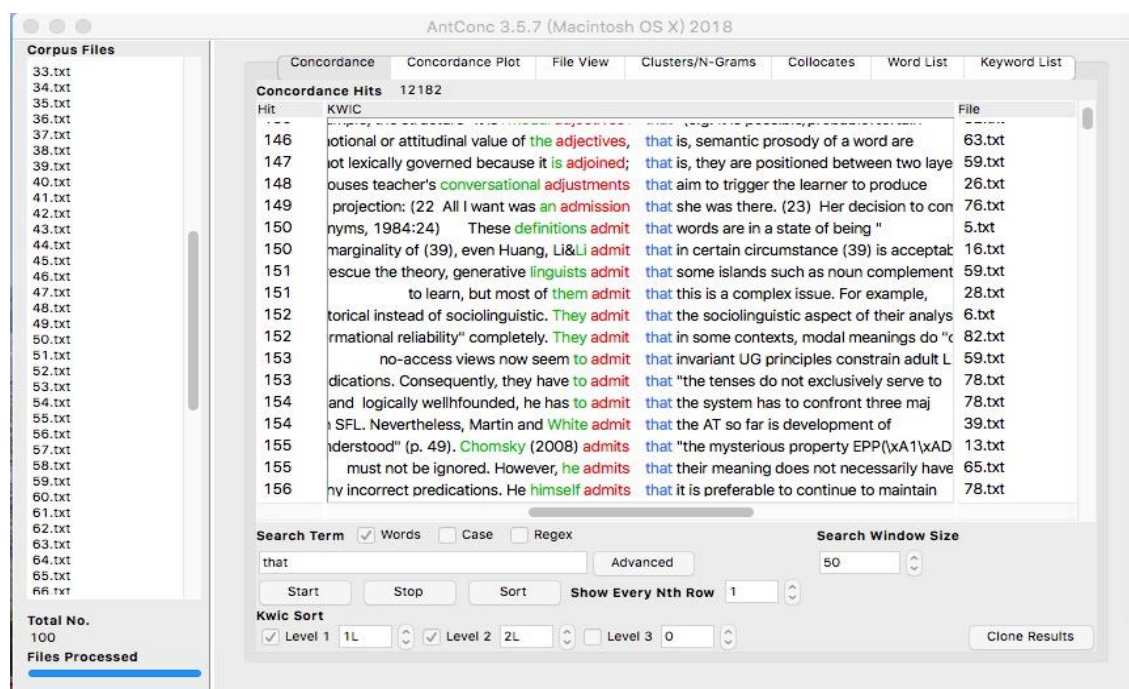
In this study, a *Corpus of Literature Review* (CLR) is constructed for analytical purposes. It consists of 100 literature reviews excerpted from doctoral dissertations written by Chinese EFL learners who majored in Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics or English Language and Literature. The source of the data is diverse as it covers a total of 17 different Chinese universities, such as Shanghai International Studies University, Northeast Normal University, Shandong University, Nanjing University, Xiamen University, Hunan Normal University and so on.

First, 100 doctoral dissertations were selected and downloaded from China National Knowledge Internet (CNKI). After deleting all the tables, figures, footnotes, and endnotes, the chapter of Literature Review was converted into TXT version. The structure of the CLR is presented in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 The Structure of CLR

Corpus	Resource	Text	Token	Word count
CLR	CNKI	100	5705863	1024257

Previous studies give rise to the hint that the reporting verbs are with the retention of *that* in standard academic writing (Biber et al., 1999; Stubbs, 1996). Therefore, in order to locate reporting verbs, we first retrieved *that* in the Concordance interface of the AntConc to obtain indexes of *that*-clause containing reporting verbs (see Figure 3.1). Next, based on the definition of reporting verbs in the current study, reporting verbs were manually identified from the result. Their categories, such as process types, tense, and voice were further recorded. Finally all the data were taken and collected for analysis.

**Figure 3.1 The Interface of Antconc Retrieving Concordance of “that”**

4. Discussion

4.1 Overall Distribution of Reporting Verbs

Following the research procedure described above, all reporting verbs in the corpus are identified. As a result, the distribution of reporting verbs is tabulated as shown in Table 4.1. As we can see, the data show that writers use reporting verbs mostly as a kind of Discourse Acts, with 1454 cases (51.11%) belonging to this category. For the remaining cases, about half of them fall into Research Acts (722 cases, 25.38%) and half into Cognitive Acts (699 cases, 23.51%).

Table 4.1 Overall Distribution of Reporting Verbs in the CLR

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Research Acts	722	25.38%
Cognitive Acts	669	23.51%
Discourse Acts	1454	51.11%
Total	2845	100%

According to Hyland, writers can use Discourse Act verbs to show their own evaluation of the cited information and they can “either taking responsibility for their interpretation, conveying their uncertainty or assurance of the correctness of the claims reported, or attributing a qualification to the author” (Hyland, 2002, p. 8). Such a difference can be observed from examples below. In example (1), by using the reporting verbs “points (out)” and “proposes”, the writers manage to convey their own positions, while in example (2) they attribute them to the author.

(1) She **points out** that this self-repetition functions...persisted unnecessarily in the prior course of speech (Stivers, 2004). (CLR-33)

(2) Gass (2008) **claims** that negative evidence is neither frequent nor necessary for child language... (CLR-26)

Cognitive Acts verbs are related to the mental process of the cited author, through which the writers express a certain stance to the cited materials. Writers’ attitudes toward the cited work can be positive, tentative, critical and neutral (ibid). As shown in the examples below, the reporting verbs “agrees”, “believe” and “assumes” in example (3) to (5) show a positive, a tentative and a neutral attitude hold by the writers to the material. However, no case of “critical” stance such as “disagree” “dispute”, “not think” can be found in the CLR, which reveals that Chinese EFL learners hardly convey a critical viewpoint when citing materials.

(3) Grady (1999a) **agrees** that complex metaphor does not have a direct motivation in experience. (CLR-75)

(4) Zhang and Hu (2007) **believe** that repetition, reformulation and juxtaposition in courtroom discourse are different strategies... (CLR-23)

(5) For instance, Chomsky (1995, pp. 264-265) **assumes** that displacement is an instance of imperfections of natural languages... (CLR-53)

In the category of Research Acts, reporting verbs can appear either in the description of research findings or in the description of procedures. For those that appear in the research findings, they can be divided into factive, counter-factive and non-factive verbs in terms of the writers’ stance (Hyland, 2002). The two examples below are cases of factive and non-factive verbs in the CLR. In example (6), the writer demonstrates his or her acceptance of the cited material with the reporting verb “show” while in example (7), the writer does not show any personal attitude toward the cited material with the verb

“find”. In the CLR, we cannot find any counter-factive reporting verbs such as “fail”, “misunderstand”, “ignore” and “overlook”, which means that Chinese EFL learners hardly give judgement as false or incorrect on the cited materials.

(6) However, his findings *show* that listeners are able to...the final accent pattern in the cases where pre-focal accents may occur. (CLR-9)

(7) Gass et al. (1999), similarly, *find* that the group that watch the same video three times while... (CLR-28)

As shown in Table 4.2, we further summarized the top 20 high-frequency reporting verbs in the CLR. Among them, “argue”, “find”, “propose”, “point out” and “claim” rank in the top 5 with more than 200 tokens in the CLR, which together account for almost half percentage of all reporting verbs. Four of them, “argue”, “claim”, “propose” “point out” belong to the category of Discourse Acts, with the first two of them attributing a qualification to the author and the last two expressing the writers’ viewpoint. Besides, the top 2 reporting verb “find” is a Research Act verb, with which the writers cite the previous research findings non-factively.

Table 4.2 Top 20 High-Frequency RVs in the CLR

Rank	RVs	Token	Percent	Rank	RVs	Token	Percent
1	<i>argue</i>	391	13.91%	11	<i>think</i>	83	2.95%
2	<i>find</i>	289	10.28%	12	<i>state</i>	72	2.56%
3	<i>propose</i>	228	8.11%	13	<i>maintain</i>	68	2.42%
4	<i>point out</i>	217	7.72%	14	<i>indicate</i>	63	2.24%
5	<i>claim</i>	208	7.40%	15	<i>say</i>	59	2.10%
6	<i>suggest</i>	159	5.66%	16	<i>observe</i>	52	1.85%
7	<i>hold</i>	130	4.63%	17	<i>assume</i>	44	1.57%
8	<i>believe</i>	129	4.59%	18	<i>note</i>	39	1.39%
9	<i>conclude</i>	109	3.88%	19	<i>demonstrate</i>	39	1.39%
10	<i>show</i>	84	2.99%	20	<i>explain</i>	35	1.25%

4.2 Tense and Voice of Reporting Verbs

Having examined the distribution of reporting verb, we now take an analysis of its tense and voice. Table 4.3 shows the frequency and percentage of different tenses and voices forms attached to the reporting verbs in the CLR.

Table 4.3 Distribution of Tense and Voice of RVs in the CLR

Tense/Voice	Subtype	Frequency	Percentage
	Present simple	1976	69.92%

Tense	Past simple	205	7.25%
	Present perfect	645	22.82%
Voice	Active voice	2589	92.14%
	Passive voice	221	7.86%

As we can see, the majority of reporting verbs appear in the simple present tense, which makes up 69.92% of all tenses. With 645 cases, the present perfect tense takes up 22.82 % and the past simple only 7.25%. As mentioned above, present simple tense is often used to refer to previous studies as accepted facts. The high proportion of present simple tense in the CLR shows that Chinese EFL learners tend to cite materials that are established facts and acknowledge their status in the field. Moreover, the use of present perfect tense indicates that what has happened before may still be influential in the present. As example (8) shows, instead of writing “observe”, the writer here uses “have observed” to highlight the contribution of the two scholars and also paves the way to describe the influence of their findings on the current study.

(8) Indeed, Lightbown and Spada (1990) *have observed* that English as a second language (ESL) teachers who tended to focus on form on the fly, without interrupting the flow of communication. (CLR-47)

Regarding the voice of these reporting verbs, based on the data, we can conclude that active voice plays a dominant role in the reporting activity, with a high percentage of 92.14% compared to merely 7.86% of passive voice in the CLR. It is understandable as active voice is the unmarked voice in the system of English language. In English grammar, passive voice means that the grammatical subject is the target or recipient of the action, with emphasis on the cited author. Example (9) is a case of the reporting verb “claim” in the passive voice. In this example, instead of writing “Maja (2009) claims that ...”, the writer uses the passive voice to stress on the contributor of the following cited information. This allows writers to place the information they would like to emphasize in the subject position.

(9) It *is claimed* by Maja (2009) that the function or use of one of absolute synonyms would gradually become unnecessary or unmotivated and, as a result, it would soon be abandoned or dropped. (CLR-5)

5. Conclusion

To sum up, in this study, with a self-built corpus, we examined the reporting verbs in the chapter of literature review of 100 doctoral dissertations written by Chinese doctoral students majoring in Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics or English Language and Literature, with the aim to analyze the use of reporting verbs in high-level Chinese EFL learners.

First, the overall distribution of reporting verbs and the top high-frequency reporting verbs were discussed. According to the data, we found a total of 2845 frequencies of reporting verbs in the CLR. In terms of the categories of verbs based on Hyland’s (2002) typology, Discourse Act verbs occupy the

largest proportion (1454 cases, 51.11%), Research Act verbs the second (722 cases, 25.35%) followed by Cognitive Act verbs at last (669 cases, 23.51%). Therefore, Chinese EFL learners show a preference for citing previous studies as Discourse Acts. For Cognitive Acts, no case of “critical” stance such as “disagree” “dispute”, “not think” can be found in the CLR. Similarly, when it comes to Research Acts, no counter-factive reporting verbs such as “fail”, “misunderstand”, “ignore” and “overlook” can be retrieved in the CLR. Such an absence of certain subtypes of reporting verbs reveals the reluctance of Chinese EFL learners to convey a critical viewpoint or to judge the cited materials as false or incorrect. As for the tense of the reporting verbs, simple present, simple past and present perfect tense are examined in the present research. With the highest proportion of 69.92%, simple present tense is the most frequently used tense in the CLR to refer to previous studies as accepted facts while the simple past tense is the least frequently used tense in the corpus accounting for only 7.25% of all the three tenses. Besides, present perfect tense takes up 22.82%, which allows writers to emphasize the influence of cited materials in the present. Regarding of the voice, 92.14 % of the reporting verbs appear in the active voice and only 7.86% of them in the passive voice. The active voice has a leading position as naturally it is unmarked tense in the English language system. However, writers would also use passive voice to emphasize the contribution of certain cited scholars.

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