

Original Paper

A Comparative Study on the Use of Evaluative *That* Patterns in Abstracts by Expert and Novice Writers

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Abstract

This study investigates the differences in how expert and novice writers use evaluative that-complement clauses in abstracts. The research analyzed 150 research article abstracts and 100 master's thesis abstracts in the social sciences, applying the model of "evaluative that patterns" with the assistance of the MAXQDA annotation tool and ChatGPT retrieval mode. The analysis reveals that both groups often use this pattern to present their findings, typically attributing evaluations to abstract sources. They primarily express epistemic stances through verbal predicates. However, experts demonstrate significantly greater use of every element (entity, source, stance, and expression) of this feature. Experts are more inclined to use human resources and discourse act verbs and prefer to evaluate prior studies and methods, expressing more tentative stances to foster a dialogic space. These findings suggest that expertise influences rhetorical strategies for evaluating research materials. The study highlights pedagogical implications, offering valuable insights for novice writers in the social sciences to help them understand how to effectively use linguistic resources to convey evaluative claims and establish authoritative authorial stances.

Keywords

evaluative that patterns, experts and novices, academic discourse

1. Introduction

It is now recognized that academic discourse should not only present factual information but also include interpretive statements and evaluations with subjective judgment, utilizing various rhetorical strategies to engage the target audience (Hyland & Jiang, 2018). Evaluative *that* patterns are a powerful and effective method for expressing stance and judgment in academic writing, enabling writers to present their evaluations early and lead readers to accept their interpretation. Despite their clear

significance, evaluative *that* patterns are often neglected in the literature (Hyland & Tse, 2005b; Kim & Crosthwaite, 2019), especially in research comparing expert and novice writers.

Most existing comparative studies on the evaluative *that* patterns focus on disciplinary differences and the role of nativeness in its usage, with few exploring distinctions between expert and novice authors. Furthermore, in studies comparing evaluative discourse resources between experts and novices, researchers typically examine differences through scattered, micro-level discourse resources, such as stance markers (Qiu & Xu, 2019) or moves and steps (Jin, 2018), rather than through systematic rhetorical structures like the evaluative *that* pattern. Given this context, it is essential to compare how experts and novices use the evaluative *that* structure in academic writing within the same field.

The paper is structured as follows: The literature review section begins with the conceptualization of evaluative *that* patterns, followed by a review of relevant empirical studies. The methodology section describes the construction of the corpora and the analytical procedures used. The findings are then presented and discussed in detail. Finally, this paper concludes with a summary of the research, along with its limitations and implications.

2. Literature Review

2.1 An overview of Evaluative *that* Patterns

The model of evaluative *that* patterns, developed by Hyland and Tse (2005a; 2005b), describes how writers use complementing *that*-clauses to express evaluations of propositional information in academic writing. This model is powerful because it provides a comprehensive view of the evaluative properties of *that* constructions, distinguishing it from other models of interpersonal language features.

Figure 1 graphically illustrates the features of evaluative *that* patterns. In the basic form, a superordinate or matrix clause (e.g., *Many scholars believe*) includes both an evaluation and its source, while the complement clause (e.g., *that rural markets will eventually die out*) contains the “entity” being evaluated. This structure is a single evaluative unit with various parameters, including the source of evaluation, the evaluative stance, the form of the predicate, and the evaluated element. The significance of this structure is underscored by its frequent use in academic writing, with even short, supposedly neutral factual summaries in article abstracts featuring about seven instances per 1,000 words (Hyland & Tse, 2005a).

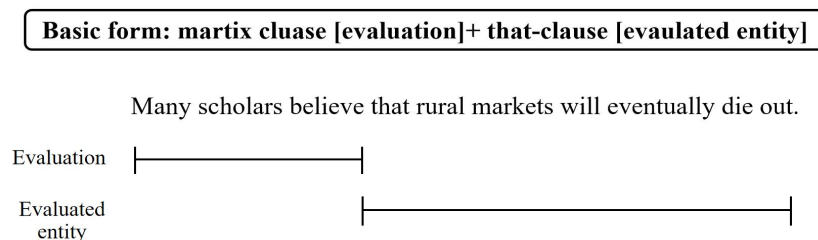


Figure 1. Illustration of the Evaluative *that* Patterns

The choice of subject in a matrix clause with a *that* complementizer is significant because it allows writers to accept, shift, or obscure the responsibility for an evaluation. Writers can convey subjective probability with expressions like “*I assume*” or indicate objective probability with phrases like “*it seems that*” in the superordinate clause containing the same proposition. Additionally, writers can express their attitudes toward the proposition in the superordinate clause. By projecting their epistemic judgment or attitudes in a complementing *that*-clause, writers can signal their stance, which may reflect the epistemology or belief system of their academic discipline. For academic writers, the advantage of using evaluative *that* structures is that they offer multiple evaluation options in the superordinate clause, as this structure can be categorized by various predicates, including verbs, adjectives, and nouns.

Several studies have investigated specific aspects of evaluative *that* patterns. For example, regarding evaluative sources, Marti *et al.* (2019) examined how these patterns are used to construct stances in applied linguistics research articles. They discovered that expert writers, whether native or non-native, consistently used a smaller set of reporting verbs compared to novice writers, who often relied on “*it*” subjects for elaboration.

Research has also focused on how evaluative *that* patterns vary across academic disciplines. Hyland and Tse (2005a) found that writers in the hard sciences tend to use research act verbs, while those in the humanities and social sciences prefer discourse-related verbs, reflecting the epistemological differences of each field. Similarly, Kim and Crosthwaite (2019) compared academic writing in medicine and business and found that business writers used them more extensively, emphasizing the explicit evaluation and interpersonal engagement common in business studies.

Studies on the impact of nativeness in academic writing have also been conducted. Deng *et al.* (2023) compared English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) writing with native English writing, finding that ELF writers displayed a stronger sense of epistemic certainty, aiming to legitimize their research outcomes and acknowledge prior claims. Wu and Pan (2024) compared L1-English and L2-English (Chinese L1) expert writers, highlighting significant differences: L2 experts used *that*-clauses more frequently but with a narrower lexical range, indicating a limited ability to express stance.

Despite these insights, only a handful of studies have directly compared expert and novice writers concerning evaluative *that* patterns. Hyland and Tse (2005b) analyzed dissertation abstracts by L2 postgraduate students and concluded that while student writers generally understand the appropriate use of evaluative *that*, experienced writers employ the pattern more effectively. Parkinson (2013a) also noted that the structure of *that*-complement clauses is a key grammatical pattern that helps novice student writers incorporate academic values into their writing. However, more empirical data is needed to further explore and confirm the similarities and differences between expert and novice writers in their use of evaluative *that* patterns.

2.2 Expertise Influences on Evaluation in Academic Discourse

The influence of expertise on academic writing has been extensively studied. As Swales (2004) pointed out, the most significant difference in academic writing is between experienced researchers and those

still learning the rules of their discipline. Expertise is often associated with writers of published research articles who have comparable disciplinary expertise and demonstrate expert performance (Tribble, 2017).

One major research area contrasts how experts and novices use linguistic resources to construct stances. Studies such as those by Crosthwaite *et al.* (2017), Qiu and Ma (2019), and Dong *et al.* (2022) suggest that novices struggle to express their stance as effectively as experts. For instance, Qiu and Ma (2019) found that master's students tend to be more cautious in making claims, using more hedges, boosters, and attitude markers but less self-mention compared to experienced writers.

Another strand of research has concentrated on rhetorical language strategies in academic discourse between experts and novices. Scholars have explored various linguistic features, including moves and steps (Jin, 2018), citation practices (Mansourizadeh & Ahmad, 2011), and lexical bundles (Zhang *et al.*, 2021). Jin's (2018) study of engineering journal articles revealed that experts tend to objectively assess their research, acknowledging both merits and drawbacks, while junior researchers often emphasize only the importance of their results.

Overall, existing studies on expert and novice writers often focus on specific linguistic resources, with few adopting a comprehensive framework to explore differences in constructing disciplinary knowledge and expressing evaluative concepts. Evaluative *that* patterns, which include dimensions like evaluation source and stance, offer a more systematic approach for investigating these differences. By combining evaluative *that* patterns with comparative research on expert and novice authors, this study aims to address current gaps and provide further insights into evaluation and interaction in academic writing.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Questions

This study adopts a corpus-based research method to investigate how proficiency in academic writing influences the mastery of evaluative linguistic rhetoric. By examining evaluative *that* patterns, the study aims to address the following research questions:

- (1) How are evaluative *that* patterns distributed overall in social science abstracts authored by expert and novice writers?
- (2) What are the similarities and differences in how expert and novice writers use evaluative *that* patterns?

3.2 Corpus

This study uses self-constructed corpora of abstracts from published journal articles and master's theses in the social sciences to represent expert and novice groups, respectively. To capture the main features of the social sciences, two disciplines were selected: sociology, representing a pure discipline aspect, and economics, representing an applied discipline aspect. All texts were published between 2020 and 2023, acknowledging that evaluative *that* patterns evolve over time (Hyland & Jiang, 2018).

The expert writer corpus was constructed from top-tier journals in sociology and economics. Only original research articles were included, excluding review articles, editorials, and theoretical articles. A total of 150 abstracts were selected using random sampling (every fifth paper) from each of the 10 journals, resulting in a corpus of 23,084 words. The list of journals is provided in the Appendix. The novice writer corpus was composed of master's theses in sociology and economics from a Double First-Class University in Northeast China. A total of 100 abstracts, with fifty from each discipline, were collected using the same random sampling technique as for the expert corpus, resulting in a corpus of 61,193 words.

Table 1. Corpora Composition

	Expert Corpus	Novice Corpus
No. of texts	100	150
No. of words	2,3084	6,1193

3.3 Analytical Procedures

To efficiently extract *that*-clauses with complement clauses from the dataset, a part-of-speech (POS) tagging scheme was employed to label each word in the corpus according to its grammatical category. POS tagging was performed using TagAnt (version 1.2.0, Anthony, 2015), which utilizes the TreeTagger engine (Schmid, 1995). After POS tagging, AntConc (version 3.5.9, Anthony, 2021) was used to search for all instances containing *that*-clauses with complement clauses. The search term “*that_IN/that*” was used specifically to extract *that*-complement clauses. Each concordance was manually reviewed to exclude cases where “*that*” functioned as a demonstrative or as a relative pronoun.

Notably, extracting instances of “*that* omission” using the TreeTagger system is not feasible. While there is a strong preference for retaining “*that*” in academic writing (Biber et al., 1999), instances of omission have not been thoroughly addressed in previous research. Consequently, this study employs a ChatGPT-assisted retrieval approach to identify omitted “*that*” instances. ChatGPT was instructed to batch search sentences omitting “*that*,” complete the structure, and present the concordance to the researcher, allowing for more precise statistical data. The data were then transferred to MAXQDA (2020), a qualitative text analysis tool, for coding each example based on a modified version of Hyland and Jiang's (2018, p. 146) evaluative *that* classification system, as shown in Table 2 and summarized below.

Table 2. Classification of Evaluative *That* Patterns (modified from Hyland & Jiang, 2018, p. 8)

Aspect	Sub-categories	Examples
<i>Evaluated</i>	a) the author's claim	I find that <i>an increase in the dispersion of firm</i>

entity	<i>productivity leads to a decline in the aggregate labor share, favoring firm profits instead.</i>	
	b) previous studies	Previous studies have indicated that first-generation students have lower completion rates in higher education compared to their peers.
	c) the author's goals	It is hoped that this study aims to address how to enhance the quality of community service.
	d) methods, models, theories, and hypotheses	This paper proposes the hypothesis that "the establishment of a social credit system alleviates corporate financing constraints."
	e) accepted knowledge	There is a widely held belief that poverty and crime are directly related.
	f) background information	It can be found that the impact of COVID-19 on China's financial markets appears to be less negative, demonstrating the effectiveness of China's epidemic prevention policies.
	g) measures	It makes suggestions that the system design needs optimization.
Evaluative source	a) Human — either the author or other humans	
	i. author	<i>We find that...</i>
	ii. others	<i>She further finds that...</i>
	b) Abstract entity — inanimate source	<i>The empirical results show that...</i>
Evaluative stance	c) Concealed — source not identified	<i>It is likely that...</i>
	a) attitudinal i. affect	<i>It is hoped that...</i>
	ii. obligation	<i>We should make efforts to ...</i>
	b) epistemic i. tentativeness	<i>It suggests that...</i>
Expression	ii. certainty	<i>I show that...</i>
	iii. neutrality	<i>It is concluded that...</i>
	a) Non-verbal	
	i. Noun predicates	<i>The conclusion is that ...</i>
	ii. Adjective predicates	<i>It is clear that...</i>
	b) Verbal predicate	

i.	research acts	The results <i>indicate</i> that...
ii.	discourse acts	The paper <i>proposes</i> that...
iii.	cognitive acts	It is <i>hoped</i> that...

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Frequency of Evaluative *that* Patterns in both Corpora

The frequency analysis highlights the importance of evaluative *that* patterns in academic writing, identifying 384 instances: 183 in the expert writers' corpus (EC) and 201 in the novice writers' corpus (NC), translating to approximately 4.56 occurrences per thousand words and 1.54 occurrences per abstract. This suggests that writers, regardless of expertise, use these patterns to express evaluations in research abstracts. However, the data reveal significant differences in the density of these constructions between expert and novice writers (Log-likelihood=71.14, $p<0.001$), with experts using approximately 2.4 times more *that*-clauses per 1,000 words than novices.

This finding supports Hyland and Tse's (2005b) argument that novice writers tend to be more hesitant in using strong evaluative language, possibly due to the risks of explicitly highlighting their judgments in a rigorously assessed genre. The reluctance to make evaluative commitments distinguishes novice writing, enabling experts to enhance their arguments' persuasiveness more effectively. This tendency extends to other interactive features like directives, questions, and the use of first-person pronouns, as noted by Hyland (2002).

Table 3. Frequency of Evaluative *that* Patterns in the Two Corpora

	Expert Corpus	Novice Corpus
No. of words	2,3084	6,1193
Raw frequency	183	201
Nominalized frequency (per 1,000 words)	7.93	3.28
Log-likelihood	LL=71.14, $p<0.001$	

4.2 Elements of Evaluative *that* Patterns in Research Abstracts

Table 4 presents the four main evaluative features of the patterns. Both novice and expert writers primarily use evaluative *that* patterns to assess their own claims (1-a). Published academics often use these patterns to express epistemic judgments about propositions (2-b) and less frequently to convey attitudinal meanings (3-a) compared to novices. Nuyts (2001) defines epistemic modality as an estimation of the likelihood of a certain state of affairs being true or false. In abstracts, writers use evaluative *that* patterns to comment on the accuracy or probable validity of their information. The evaluations primarily originate from abstract entities (3-b) in both groups, typically expressed through

verbal predicate forms (4-b). Although other evaluative forms may be used for the entities/sources mentioned in Table 4, this study focuses on the explicit use of evaluative *that* patterns for these elements.

Table 4. Distribution Features in Evaluative *that* Patterns across the Two Corpora (per 1,000 words)

Feature	Expert Corpus	Novice Corpus
1. Evaluated entity	7.93	3.28
a) the author's claims	6.63	2.70
b) previous studies	0.61	0.11
c) the author's goals	0.04	0.07
d) methods, models, theories, and hypotheses	0.65	0.13
e) accepted knowledge	0	0.05
f) background information	0	0.11
g) measures	0	0.11
2. Evaluative source	7.93	3.28
a) human	3.34	0.37
b) abstract entity	3.60	2.09
c) concealed	0.99	0.82
3. Evaluative stance	7.93	3.28
a) attitudinal	0.09	0.13
b) epistemic	7.84	3.15
4. Evaluative expression	7.93	3.28
a) Non-verbal	1.09	0.21
b) verbal	6.84	3.07

4.2.1 Evaluated Entities in Evaluative *that* Patterns

Figure 2 shows that both experts and novices frequently evaluate the same categories in abstracts: the author's claims, research methods, and interpretations of previous studies, accounting for over 90% of evaluations in both groups. Novice writers, however, also use evaluative *that* patterns to address goals and additional information like common knowledge and background details, which experts do not include. In both groups, over 80% of evaluative *that* structures focus on the writer's claims and findings. This supports Hyland and Tse's (2005b) findings on the promotional nature of abstracts, where writers highlight their research to engage and persuade readers of its significance.

The expert corpus shows a higher frequency of evaluative *that* patterns compared to the novice corpus

when interpreting claims, previous studies, and research methods (all $p < 0.001$). This indicates that experts have more confidence and better critical thinking skills, using evaluative language to strengthen their arguments and enhance the scholarly value of their work.

Novice writers, on the other hand, include more evaluative information, such as background knowledge and research goals, reflecting different strategies. They may not yet know which information requires focused evaluation, leading them to evaluate a broader range of details. Experts, with more experience, focus on evaluating crucial information that supports their research and arguments. Despite this, novices show an awareness of the need to engage readers by providing additional context, even if their approach does not fully align with academic conventions. This indicates their willingness to participate in academic discussions.

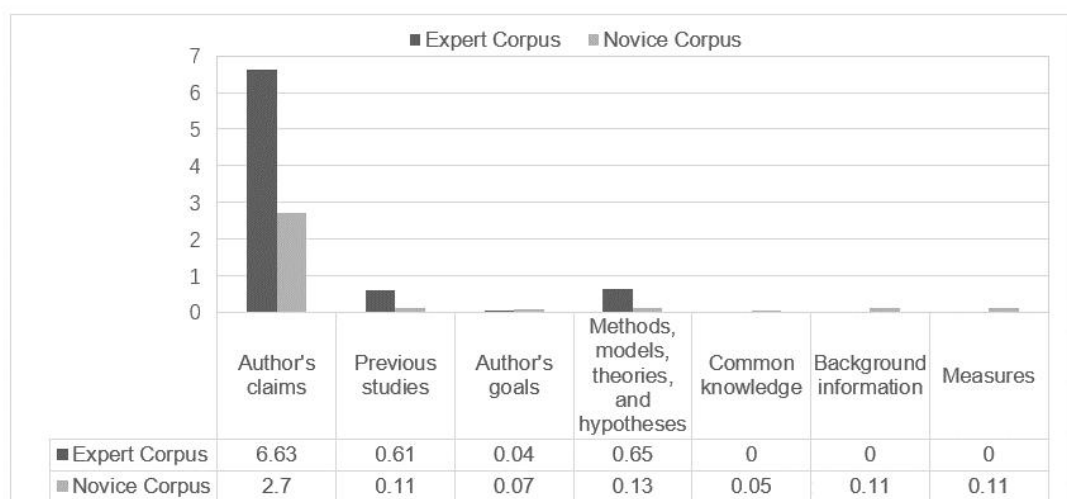


Figure 2. Evaluative Entities in Two Corpora (per 1,000 words)

4.2.2 Evaluative Sources in Evaluative *that* Patterns

Figure 3 compares the frequency of evaluative *that* patterns based on the sources cited by experts and MA students. Both groups primarily evaluate abstract sources, followed by human sources, and tend to explicitly state their sources. However, experts use significantly more evaluative sources than novices ($LL=71.14$, $p < 0.001$), particularly human sources, which account for 42% in the expert corpus (EC) versus 11% in the novice corpus (NC). This difference is notable when writers comment on their findings in *that*-clauses.

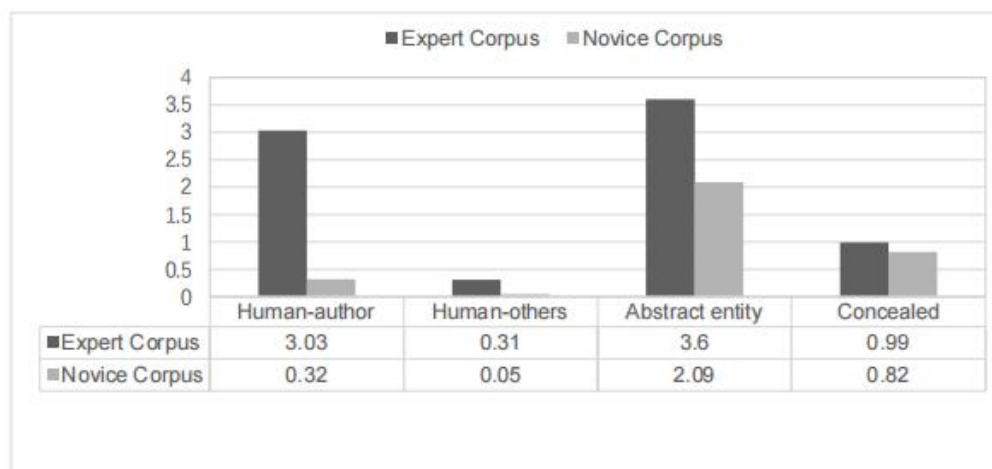


Figure 3. Evaluative Sources in Two Corpora (per 1,000 words)

Novice writers show a strong preference for abstract entities, which account for 63.72% of their evaluative sources. This may be due to guidance in writing textbooks that recommend removing the authorial self to maintain objectivity in abstracts (Cao & Xiao, 2013). Additionally, novices might not fully recognize the increasing importance of human sources, including first-person pronouns, in academic discourse (Hyland, 2004; Hyland & Tse, 2005a).

Hyland and Tse (2005b) suggest that omitting the writer as the evaluation source can strengthen claims by avoiding implications of personal interest, thereby enhancing rhetorical credibility, especially in humanities and social sciences. Another technique to maintain objectivity is using concealed sources, such as dummy “*it*” subjects, prevalent among novice writers. This strategy generalizes the comment source, making claims more authoritative and less open to negotiation.

4.2.3 Evaluative Stances in Evaluative *that* Patterns

Figure 4 reveals an overall trend in both corpora towards assessing epistemic values rather than expressing emotions, although students appear less reluctant to adopt attitudinal stances than professionals. This shows that writers in the social sciences field prefer projecting their epistemic assessment of writers by employing either hedging (e.g., “*suggest*”) or boosting (e.g., “*show*”) devices in *that*-clauses.

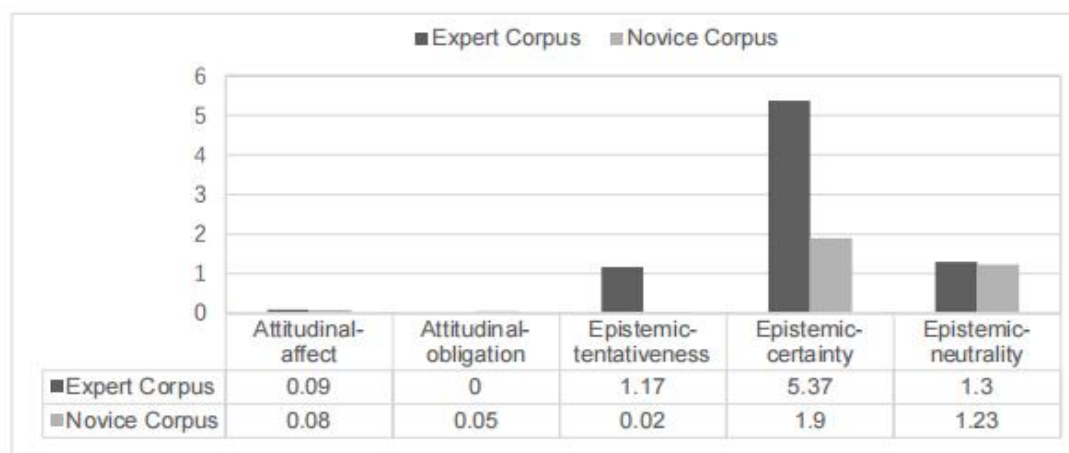


Figure 4. Evaluative Stances in Two Corpora (per 1,000 words)

The epistemic stance of certainty is the most prevalent in both corpora, with 5.37 instances per 1,000 words in the Expert Corpus (EC) and 1.90 in the Novice Corpus (NC). This stance accounts for over 50% of epistemic stances, reflecting students' efforts to show confidence in their theses, a genre marked by examination power dynamics. Published academics use certainty to promote their findings and persuade their communities to validate their claims.

While both groups display high certainty, the EC shows significantly more epistemic tentativeness than the NC ($LL = 56.65$, $p < 0.001$). This contrasts with Qiu and Ma's (2019) findings that experts use fewer tentative stances than MA students in Applied Linguistics. This difference may be due to disciplinary variations: social science academics often present interpretations as suggestions or assumptions.

Additionally, this phenomenon can also be explained from the perspective of genre differences: experts write for specialist audiences, using tentativeness to show scholarly humility and foster interaction with readers. In contrast, novices, writing for supervisors or evaluators, focus on demonstrating certainty to ensure successful degree completion, often avoiding uncertain findings.

4.2.4 Evaluative Expressions in Evaluative *that* Patterns

The final aspect of evaluative *that* patterns I examined focused on how writers typically signaled their evaluations. As can be seen from Figure 5, the overall trend is largely similar between expert and novice abstracts, regarding each grammatical category taking evaluative *that*-clauses. Compared to their verbal counterparts, non-verbal predicates only accounted for a small proportion with a higher frequency of noun predicates. Among verbal predicates, research-focused predicates were most frequent in both corpora, followed by a discourse verb grouping, and lastly, a cognitive grouping.

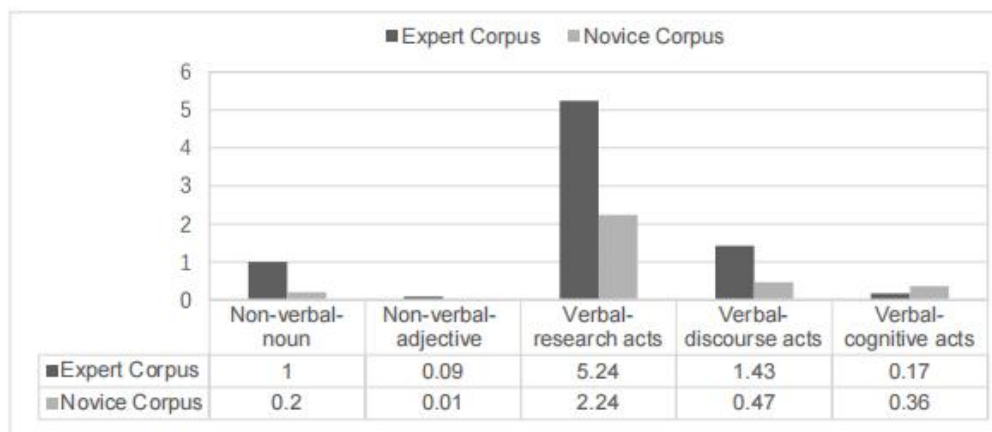


Figure 5. Evaluative Expressions in Two Corpora (per 1,000 words)

Unlike Larsson's (2016) study, where the "*it be V ADJ that*" pattern is common, both corpora in this study contained few non-verbal forms, primarily nouns. This may be because "*it*" subjects limit verbal options. Writers prefer nouns over adjectives to maintain impersonality, as nominalization is a common technique in research writing. Notably, experts used significantly more noun predicates than novices ($LL=22.25$, $p<0.001$), demonstrating their writing proficiency, as nominalization enhances precision and logical structure (Hyland, 2004).

Verbs are generally preferred due to their versatility in conveying the epistemic meanings that dominate abstracts, enabling writers to express confidence in the reliability of their information and to fine-tune their judgments to emphasize specific aspects of activity (Thompson & Ye, 1991). Writers commonly use research-related verbs like "*show*", "*find*", "*indicate*", and "*demonstrate*", reflecting the increased use of these verbs in soft knowledge fields (Hyland & Jiang, 2018). Additionally, when using the discourse verb '*argue*,' published academics often employ first-person pronouns ("*I*" or "*we*") to express certainty, a practice not observed in the novice corpus.

5. Conclusion

This paper employed a corpus-based approach to analyze the evaluative *that* patterns in abstracts in the field of social sciences by expert and novice writers, exploring in detail the frequencies, functions, and forms of the patterns with which writers make evaluations. The analysis uncovers both similarities and differences in the use of this linguistic feature between the two groups. Both groups of writers often use evaluative *that* patterns to present their findings, usually attributing their evaluations to abstract sources. Moreover, they primarily express epistemic stances, mostly through verbal predicates.

Differences arising from varying academic proficiency are evident, with expert writers demonstrating significantly greater usage of every element of this feature. Experts are more likely to use human resources and discourse act verbs to introduce evaluative *that*-complement clauses. Additionally, experienced academics prefer to evaluate prior studies and methods in their work, expressing more

tentative stances to create a dialogic space. These subtle differences across the four elements indicate that expertise influences the rhetorical strategies for evaluating research materials.

Equally important, this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on evaluative *that* patterns by employing a ChatGPT-assisted approach to identify omission *that* cases that have been overlooked in previous research. One of the advantages of this method is that it allows researchers to easily identify omitted instances by providing prompts to the AI, which is considered an efficient retrieval technique.

While this study provides useful insights, future research on the differences in the use of evaluative *that* patterns between expert and novice writers should aim to select materials that more accurately reflect the features of each group by standardizing the genres (for example, comparing research articles by novices with those by experts), a factor not addressed in this study. Moreover, when analyzing abstracts written by L2 authors, researchers should consider whether the abstract was written by the author directly or translated using AI, as this could influence the study's findings.

Although more research is needed, this study provides valuable pedagogical insights into English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teaching and learning. Evaluative *that* patterns allow writers to structure their discourse systematically, providing a nuanced way to express evaluations and emphasize stances, helping readers recognize key findings and contributions. By learning effective rhetorical practices in academic writing, novice writers can develop awareness of and adherence to the conventions of their academic community, deepening their understanding of academic writing. Furthermore, teaching these patterns in EAP courses can enhance students' ability to engage critically with source material and articulate their positions more effectively. Instructors might focus on helping students identify evaluative *that* patterns in authentic texts and practice using them in their writing to convey their arguments and findings more effectively. This approach can empower students to participate more fully in academic discourse, fostering their development as proficient academic writers.

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Appendix: A Journal List

Sociology

American Journal of Sociology

The British Journal of Sociology

American Journal of Economics and Sociology

The Sociological Quarterly

Sociological Science

Economics

American Economic Review

Econometrica

Journal of Political Economy

Quarterly Journal of Economics

Journal of Economic Literature