

## Analysis of Reporting Verbs in Non-Native English Academic Discourse

Tabassum Iqbal<sup>1</sup> Dr. Behzad Anwar<sup>2</sup>

1. Ph.D Scholar, Department of English, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan

### Abstract

*The prime focus of this research paper is to analyze how reporting verbs (RVs) are used by the non-native PhD scholars. Reporting verbs play an important role in academic discourse. This study also provides an overview of different functions of RVs in terms of their position i.e. weaker, stronger and neutral. In citation, the scholars use RVs to report other authors' views and ideas and to establish a link between previous claims and their own judgements. The data for this study comprised of twenty five PhD theses of social sciences written by English non-native scholars. The analysis showed that the RVs are used at different positions according to the function they perform in the text and also that non-native scholars use more discourse acts than cognition and research acts.*

**Key Words:** Academic Writing, Corpus Linguistics, Functional Analysis, Reporting Verbs

### Introduction

The choices made by the non-native scholars may hinder or facilitate their inclusion in disciplinary discourse communities (Pecorari, 2006). Due to this fact, Hyland (2000) believes that the understanding of the structural configuration of academic genres is imperative for the non-native research scholars to get aligned with the public contexts of writing. A research scholar may not thrive in the target research community, if he/she does not develop discourse strategies appropriate to the disciplinary community.

Therefore, the choice of linguistic resources is important to improve the effectiveness and the readability of the academic discourse. Reporting Verbs (RVs) are the lexical devices that help scholars to establish an association with the cited text (Hyland, 1999, 2002). The current study is an attempt to explore the use of RVs in the academic discourse of PhD theses produced by the Pakistani research scholars. When the non-native speakers write English, they “retain part of their culture-specific intellectual style” (Pérez-Llantada 2010, p. 64). Therefore, it is expected that the study of RVs in the non-native academic texts can help academic language teachers to develop the essential writing skills of the learners particularly who want to use English for Academic Purposes (Gilquin et al., 2007).

These reporting verbs help scholars to position their writings in other dominant research discourses of the same domain. In addition, the RVs also indicate the attitude or role of the author towards the texts cited. The current study is an attempt to discuss the different functions of RVs in academic discourse.

## Types of Reporting Verbs

Reporting verbs are very helpful in indicating the writer's position towards other scholars' work. Hyland (2002) discusses the following three types:

1. Weaker reporting verbs: these are used by the writer when he is hesitant but also wants to believe the results or claims of others. These may include suggest, imply, consider etc.
2. Neutral reporting verbs: these are used mainly to state what the writer wants to do but these verbs do not specify any judgmental comments on the part of the writer. Examples include focus, identify, demonstrate, assume etc.
3. Strong reporting verbs: they demonstrate the writer's strength when he stands on a strong ground and is confident of his argumentation. This group of verbs includes condone, determine, deny, emphasize, object to, presume, etc.

## Theoretical Framework

Hyland's (2002) taxonomy has the potential to categorize the authors in a more comprehensive manner on the basis of their attitude and stance for the cited text. This is the reason that the current study uses Hyland's (2002) model for RVs as theoretical framework. Only three main categories of the model have been used for the analysis namely;

1. Research acts
2. Cognition acts
3. Discourse acts

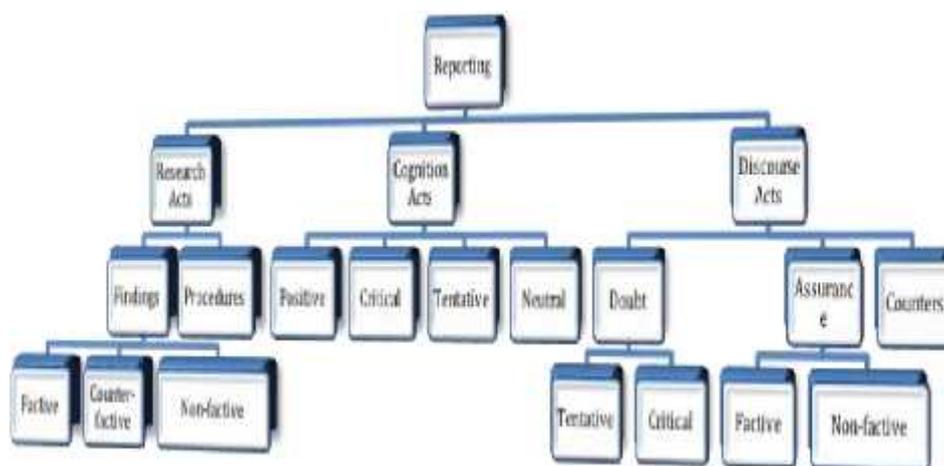


Figure 1: Hyland's (2002) Categories of RVs

It can be seen that Hyland's (2002) taxonomy is quite comprehensive. It divides Reporting Verbs into three major categories as "Research Acts", "Cognition Acts", and "Discourse Acts". These three major categories have further two tiers of sub-categories to classify different RVs that can be employed in an academic discourse for citation. However, keeping in view the scope of the study, the data has been analyzed in accordance with the three major categories.

### **Literature Review**

The section introduces the concept of academic discourse and the use of reporting verbs in authenticating the research document.

### **Reporting Verbs in Academic Discourse**

The speaker substantiates his / her thoughts and conclusions in written forms of scholarly debate by quoting the academic texts of other academics from the same or comparable area of discipline (Hyland, 2000, 2002). In this respect, it has intertextual connections with other academic texts. To enhance the authenticity of the academic texts and the author's reputation, intertextuality plays an important role. When an author incorporates a quotation to mark an attitude towards the cited texts, he/she uses such reporting verbs (RVs). There are many kinds of RVs that are chosen by the author. However, the RVs choices have a huge influence on the meanings of the texts cited.

The linguistic resources of RVs are therefore functionally important in the process of meaningmaking. The RVs are not only a way of disseminating information in academic debate, but also of assigning identity to the author by demonstrating his / her association with a particular group of debate (Rorty, 1979).

### **Overview of Research in Reporting Verbs**

The work of Swales (1990) is considered the pioneering research in the field of citation analysis. It marks an important structural difference in the citation practices as integral citation and non-integral citation. Here, integral citation refers to the practice of giving the name of the original author of a quote inside the sentence and non-integral citation refers to the practice of giving name of the original author of a quote at the end of the sentence. According to Swales (1990), the integral or non-integral forms of citation are the means of explicating the authorship claim by the writer.

Thompson and Ye (1991) have also introduced an important typology of RVs. They have divided RVs into three functional categories as textual, mental and research. Thompson and Ye (1991) argue that "textual" RVs perform the textual function of reporting the cited text. Their examples are claim, describe, say, etc. The "mental" RVs have the cognitive component in the verbs like think, consider, understand, believe, etc. "Research" RVs are those verbs that refer to some research-oriented practice or activity like, demonstrate, show, prove, explore, etc. Unfortunately, there exists a complex overlapping between the three types of RVs proposed by Thompson and Ye (1991). The most confusing category is the "research"

RVs, where the verbs used to refer to findings can be further categorized to show writer's agreement with the reported text of the research.

Charles (2006) explored the phraseological patterns in reported clauses by using the corpus of theses of two disciplines; Material Science and International Relations. The results of her study showed that the native speakers use reporting clauses in both disciplines and mostly these clauses occur with a human subject as an essential citation.

Yeganeh and Boghayeri (2015) examined the use of reporting verbs in the research articles produced by native English and non-native scholars. The research was confined to 'introduction' and 'literature review' sections. According to their findings, the writers of both varieties used reporting clauses frequently with a that-clause complement while reporting other's research.

Although there are some studies wherein the researchers have focused on different aspects of academic discourse, the functional distributions of reporting verbs in Pakistan have not been explored yet. This study aims to fill this gap by taking into account the functional analysis of reporting verbs in PhD theses produced by non-native scholars.

### Material and Methods

In this study, corpus linguistics approach will be used to identify the reporting verbs in PhD theses produced by the non-native scholars. Corpus is in the form of electronic text and its techniques "provide attested examples of recurring language patterns, which are based on empirical data rather than introspection or gathered through elicitation techniques" (Flowerdew 2004, p. 12). In the past the studies of qualitative and descriptive nature in English as a second language (ESL) heavily depended on anecdotal evidence (Bautista and Gonzales, 2006), or sociolinguistic data collected manually (Schreier, 2003). But now with the help of corpus and softwares the representative collections of text can be used for qualitative and quantitative analysis. Therefore, the researchers have compiled a corpus of 25 PhD social sciences theses written by the non-native scholars. The data has been collected from HEC PhD theses repository. The following table illustrates the scheme of the data.

**Table 1**  
**Scheme of the Data**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Discipline</b>	<b>No. of theses</b>	<b>Words (Approximately)</b>
Pakistani PhD Theses	Social Science	25	1.5 million

### Data Collection

As the purpose was already in the mind of the researchers, thus purposive sampling has been used for the data collection. Twenty five theses were selected from social sciences. Five subjects were selected from social sciences namely English,

Education, Psychology, History and Political Science. Five theses from each subject were selected from the HEC website.

The data was in PDF format and as corpus needs a text format thus the data was amended to a “txt.” format and was entered in the “File corpus” column one by one. All the words in the corpus, with their frequency of occurrence were listed with the help of the Word List tool. To get an accurate frequency of the verbs, (\*) was used with the main verb to get all kinds of verbs used in the corpus. However, as Antconc gives only number of verbs used and cannot distinguish whether it is used for citation purpose or not, this task was done manually. For further analysis the researchers used Hyland’s (2002) classification of reporting verbs. The list of reported verbs by the University of Adelaide was used to categorize them accordingly.

### Data Analysis Tool

Antconc (2004) was used for the quantitative analysis of the data. This software helped the researchers to identify the frequency the use of RVs found in PhD theses of the non-native scholars. Furthermore, key word in context (KWIC) and concordance functions were used to analyze each instance of the use of RVs qualitatively.

### Results and Discussion

For the purpose of analysis, 24 reporting verbs were selected from the list provided by the University of Adelaide (2014). The frequency and the occurrence of the reporting verbs is presented in the following table:

**Table 2**  
**Frequency of Reporting Verbs**

S. No.	Reporting Verbs	Frequency	S. No.	Reporting Verbs	Frequency
1	Add	21	13	Assures	3
2	Advise	4	14	Interprets	4
3	Admits	4	15	Justifies	5
4	Supports	15	16	Asserts	27
5	Concludes	29	17	Believes	51
6	Expresses	4	18	Insists	4
7	Accepts	3	19	Argues	58
8	Agrees	3	20	Emphasizes	19
9	Confirms	52	21	Proves	15
10	Finds	6	22	Claims	12
11	Studies	32	23	Declares	5
12	Praises	3	24	Warns	4

The above table shows that the most frequent reporting verb used is *argues* with 58 occurrences. Other verbs that follow this include *believes*, *studied*, *concludes* etc. The least frequently occurring reporting verbs include *accepts*, *agrees*, *praises* etc. with the frequency of 3 only. Now according to the list of reporting verbs

provided by the University of Adelaide (2014), the position of these verbs is shown in the following table:

**Table 3**  
**Distribution of Reporting Verbs and Their Position**

S. No.	Reporting Verbs	Frequency	Position	S. No.	Reporting Verbs	Frequency	Position
1	Add	21	Neutral	13	Advise	4	Neutral
2	Admits	4	Weaker	14	Accepts	3	Neutral
3	Agrees	3	Neutral	15	Confirms	52	Neutral
4	Praises	3	Stronger	16	Supports	15	Stronger
5	Assures	3	Neutral	17	Emphasizes	19	Stronger
6	Proves	15	Stronger	18	Warns	4	Stronger
7	Asserts	27	Stronger	19	Insists	4	Stronger
8	Believes	51	Neutral	20	Claims	12	Neutral
9	Declares	5	Neutral	21	Expresses	4	Neutral
10	Concludes	29	Neutral	22	Finds	6	Neutral
11	Studied	32	Neutral	23	Interprets	4	Stronger
12	Justifies	5	Neutral	24	Argues	58	Neutral

This table shows that majority of the reporting verbs are placed at the neutral position. According to Hyland (2002) verbs at the neutral position do not specify any judgmental comments on the part of writer. Whereas other verbs in majority show that they occupy a stronger position. At this position, the author is sure about his arguments and thus his claims or logics are more authentic and he stands at a more profound ground. There is only one verb used at weaker position; this position according to Hyland shows doubts of the author. Thus it is clear that in non-native academic writing reported verbs are used mostly at neutral position than at weaker or stronger. This may also imply that the authors while citing other writers, are not judgmental about other scholars' work and thus they remain neutral in their opinions and claims.

Table 3 shows that out of 24 reporting verbs that were selected for from the data, 15 were used at neutral position, 08 at stronger position and 01 at weaker position. The results suggest that non-native scholars while citing others mostly use neutral stance i.e. they are neither in favor of their claims nor against.

**Table 4**  
**Positions of RVs**

S. No.	Position	Reporting Verbs
1	Neutral	15
2	Stronger	08
3	Weaker	01

For the second part of the analysis, three broader categories of Hyland (2002) were used. This includes; research acts, cognition acts and discourse acts. In the following table the selected reporting verbs are classified into three main categories of Hylands (2002) model along with their frequency in the corpus.

**Table 5**  
**Classification of Reporting Verbs According to Hyland's Model**

S. No.	Verbs	Frequency	Category	S. No.	Verbs	Frequency	Category
1	Add	21	Cognition	13	Advise	4	Discourse
2	Admits	4	Research	14	Accepts	3	Cognition
3	Agrees	3	Discourse	15	Confirms	52	Discourse
4	Praises	3	Discourse	16	Supports	15	Discourse
5	Expresses	4	Discourse	17	Concludes	29	Research
6	Warns	4	Discourse	18	Asserts	27	Discourse
7	Claims	12	Discourse	19	Declares	5	Discourse
8	Insists	4	Discourse	20	Believes	51	Cognition
9	Finds	6	Research	21	Studied	32	Discourse
10	Assures	3	Discourse	22	Interprets	4	Research
11	Justifies	5	Discourse	23	Argues	58	Discourse
12	Emphasizes	19	Discourse	24	Proves	15	Discourse

In line with Hyland's (2002) model, it was found that the scholars used RVs in varying proportions. The most used category by the scholars was discourse category. Discourse Acts verbs are used to report the claims of other authors. This category includes the verbs like; *supports, confirms, agrees, declares, expresses and declared* etc., the second most used category was research acts and the least used category was cognition acts. Below are extracts from the data analyzed which shows how discourse verbs were used.

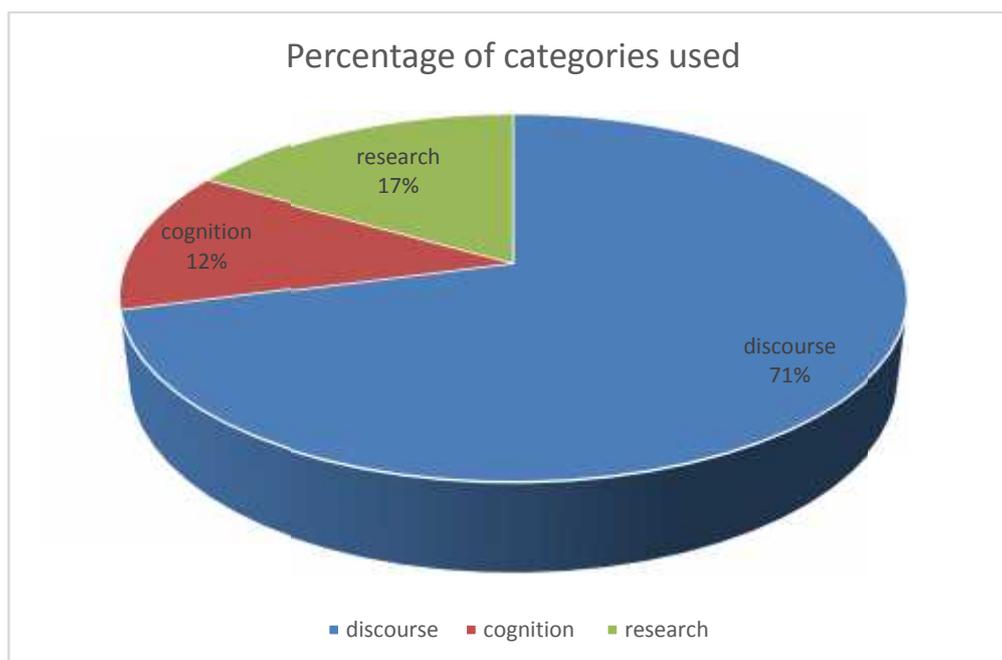


Figure 2 Percentage of Categories

According to the above figure, the most frequently occurring verbs fall in the category of discourse which implies that non-native scholars use discourse category more frequently than any other category. However, discourse verbs in Hyland's (2002) model permits the writer to carry an appraisal of the cited information either

by claiming responsibility for his/her interpretation by conveying their confusion or assurance that the statements recorded are right, or by attributing the author a qualification. From this figure it is clearly shown that 71% RVs belong to discourse category. 17 % falls in the category of research acts. Research verbs are used to portray a research activity based on the writer's interpretation. This may include verbs like *find*, *demonstrate* whereas 12% belong to cognition acts RVs, as the word cognition is used here refers to the mental process. Thus these verbs refer to the "cited work in terms of mental process, are found to handle evaluation rather differently" (Hyland 2002, p. 119). By using this class of verbs the writers show a specific attitude towards the cited work instead of giving a personal stance on the reported information. The following table shows the exact number of the verbs and their division into the categories.

**Table 7**  
**Division of Total Number of RVs**

<b>Total No. of RVs</b>	<b>Discourse Acts</b>	<b>Cognition Acts</b>	<b>Research Acts</b>
24	17	3	4

This table gives a clearer picture regarding the classification of reporting verbs into different categories. Out of 24, 17 were used as discourse acts, 3 as cognition acts and only 4 were used as research acts.

### **Conclusion**

In academic writing particularly at M.Phil/Ph.D level thesis writing is a compulsory requirement for the degree and for that purpose the scholars need to refer to different works or previous studies as a point of reference. They use different reporting verbs for this purpose. The use of RVs at right place is very important, as it performs different functions at varying positions. The results of the study show that mostly the non-native scholars use RVs with neutral stance. According to Hyland (2002), RVs at different positions show opinions about the others' works. At stronger position they are used to see whether the comments and claims of the others are true or not and the writer himself is also sure of his arguments. At neutral position, the verbs tell about the accuracy of the previous studies (neither true nor false). Verb at a weaker position implies that writer is not very much assertive about the others' ideas. The findings of the study can be used to equip the scholars with the techniques to use these RVs effectively to make their stance more convincing and logical because the non-native scholars are mostly not aware of employing those RVs in an effective way.

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