Idea Sharing: Reporting Verbs in Research Writing: Lessons from Experts

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Abstract

Using reporting verbs in research writing seems to be a problem for graduate students (or novice researchers) when writing a research paper. The aim of this paper is to raise the awareness of students in using reporting verbs. The main argument in this paper is based on the comparison of reporting verbs used by two expert researchers and two Thai novice researchers in the field of applied linguistics. The comparison reveals that reporting verbs used by the experts tend to be both factive (i.e., the current researcher portrays the previous researcher as presenting true information or a correct opinion) and non-factive (i.e., the current researcher gives no clear signal as to his/her attitude towards the previous researcher's information/opinion), while those used by the novice tend mainly to be factive. The comparison also shows that the experts tend to use three tenses (present simple tense, present perfect tense, and past simple tense) whereas the Thai novice researchers tend to mainly use present simple tense. The paper

ends with a call for students to strive to increase their working reporting verbs, and to understand the differences in different reporting verbs and in the tenses of reporting verbs.

Keywords: reporting verb, research writing, Thai graduate students

Introduction

A reporting verb is an important element in writing a research paper in English. It mainly serves two functions. Firstly, it can be used "to give credit to other researchers and to use their work in the cumulative construction of knowledge" (Charles, 2006, p.326). Secondly, it is an important linguistic feature that indicates a writer's attitude towards the work of other researchers in a community (Hyland, 1999; Thompson and Ye, 1991).

Using a reporting verb effectively is an essential academic and research skill, but it seems to be a problem for graduate students when writing a research paper. This problem is, indeed, not uncommon, particularly for non-native English students such as Iranian (Yeganeh and Boghayeri, 2015), Malaysian (Manan and Noor, 2014), or Thai (Jogthong, 2001). Both Bloch (2010) and Pecorari (2008) have pointed out that students often cannot decide what verbs are suitable in certain circumstances which can lead to unintended reader interpretations of their sentences. It is perhaps this reason why Thompson and Ye (1991) assert that non-native English students tend to use a small range of reporting verbs, which, as Hyland (2002) has suggested, can limit their ability to engage with research and create arguments. This problem is also worsened by the lack of teachers' attention to reporting verbs during an academic writing class (Myers, 1996). To put it simply,

"insufficient knowledge of verbs that are typically used in academic written discourse is a serious handicap for learners as it prevents them from expressing their

thoughts in all their nuances and couching them in the expected style" (Granger and Paquot, 2009, p. 194).

In fact, not only does this problem exist in the field of applied linguistics (Jaroongkhongdach, in progress), but also in other disciplines. For instance, in the medical science, Jirapanakorn (2012) compared the use of reporting verbs in international journals and Thai journals, and found that there were fewer uses of reporting verbs in the Thai journals.

This paper then aims to call attention to the use of reporting verbs. Specifically, it aims to raise the awareness of Thai graduate students in using reporting verbs when writing a research paper in English. Hopefully, this paper can help the graduate students (or novice researchers) to be more precise in using reporting verbs, which can strengthen the arguments they are presenting in their research.

A look at experts' use and novices' use of reporting verbs

To look at this issue, we can take as a starting point the experts' use of reporting verbs. The experts' use is illustrated in Extracts A and B. Extract A was taken from work written by Alison Mackey, and Extract B was taken from work written by Ken Hyland. I selected these two academics mainly because they have extensive experience in publishing, and are among the foremost researchers in the field of applied linguistics. Then I will move on to look at the novices' use of reporting verbs exemplified in Extracts C and D. Extracts C and D were taken from work produced by two master's graduates in applied linguistics. (Note that I consider Extracts C and D to be the work of the novice researchers, although their papers were co-authored with their supervisor. This is because it is not clear how their use of reporting verbs was influenced by the supervisor. These two graduate students were Thai students who had very limited experience in research writing). I will then compare the differences between the experts' use and the novices' use of reporting verbs. Comparing the two groups of extracts can provide us with an

understanding of how the experts and novice researchers use reporting verbs in their writing. Any differences from the comparison could be points that novice researchers should keep in mind when writing their research.

Note that all the extracts consist of all the reporting verbs appearing in the introduction/literature review. The word lengths in the introduction/literature review of Extracts A and B are 600-900 words, and of Extracts C and D are about 400-500 words. For ease of discussion, a code and number (e.g. A1, A2) has been added into each sentence in the extracts, and reporting verbs have been bolded.

Let us now look at the experts' use of reporting verbs as shown in Extracts A and B below.

Extract A:

[A1] Long's interaction hypothesis (Long 1983, 1996, 2006) **proposes** that... [A2] The majority of these studies **have reported**... [A3] A few studies **have suggested** that...[A4] Lyster and Ranta (1997), for example, **investigated**...[A5] Ellis et al.(2001a, 2001b), for example, **used**...[A6] They **reported**...[A7] Studies using a pre-test, post-test design **have** also **reported** positive effects... [A8] Mackey and Philp (1998), for example, **examined** the effect of recasts... [A9] Ellis (2001) also **provides** a definition of form-focused instruction...[A10] Ellis **describes** form-focused instruction...[A11] Ellis et al. (2001a) **have called** for triangulation...[A12] As Gass and Varonis (1994) **explain**...[A13] Gass and Mackey (in press) **note** that... [A14] Schmidt (1995, 2001) and Robinson (1995, 2001, 2003) **argue** that ... [A15] Tomlin and Villa (1994) **point out** that...

[Source: Mackey, A. (2006). Feedback, Noticing and Instructed Second Language Learning. *Applied Linguistics*, 27(3), 405-430.]

Extract B:

[B1] Albert Einstein (1934, p.113), for example, **wrote**,...[B2] Lachowicz (1981, p.111) for example, **argues** that...[B3] Rowntree (1991), for example, **advises** caution...[B4] Spencer and Arbon (1996, p.26) **recommend**...[B5] Ivanic (1998, p. 32) **has made** clear...[B6] Kuo (1999) **points out** that...[B7] Chang and Swales (1999, p. 164), for instance, **observe** that...[B8] Cadman (1997) **argues** that...

[Source: Hyland, K. (2001). Humble servants of the discipline? Self-mention in research articles. *English for Specific Purposes, 20*(3), 207-226.]

From looking at both extracts, we can see some differences and similarities. One main difference is the number of reporting verbs used. Extract A consists of 15 instances of reporting verbs from the 12 reporting verbs ('reported' is used 3 times). Extract B has eight instances of reporting verbs from seven reporting verbs ('argue' is repeated once). However, there are two similarities. Firstly, the meanings of these reporting verbs in each extract seem to be varied. Examples include 'proposes', 'reported', 'suggested', 'investigated'. Secondly, three tenses (i.e. present simple, past tense, and present perfect) are used as shown below.

[A1] Long's interaction hypothesis (Long 1983, 1996, 2006) proposes that...
[A2] The majority of these studies have reported...
[A4] Lyster and Ranta (1997), for example, investigated...

[B1] Albert Einstein (1934, p.113), for example, wrote,...
[B2] Lachowicz (1981, p.111) for example, argues that...
[B5] Ivanic (1998, p. 32) has made clear...

Let us now consider the novices' use of reporting verbs in the Extracts C and D.

Extract C:

[C1]Dickinson (1987) **states** that… [C2]Gower et al. (1995) **suggest** that… [C3]Watson Todd (1997) **supports** the idea that… [C4]Ur (1996) **adds**… [C5]Freiberg & Driscoll (2000) **mention**… [C6]Watson Todd (1997) **adds**… [C7]Furthermore, Ur (1996) **supports** the idea that questioning can…[C8] Richards & Lockhart (1994) **state**… [C9]Watson Todd (1997: 69-70) **says**…

[Source: Teerakornvisatpugdee, N., & Srimavin, W. (2008). Questioning Techniques and Student Participation, *rEELections*, 11, 28-39.]

Extract D:

[D1]Nunan (1992) **defines** research as…[D2]Stringer (2004: 14) **explains…** [D3]Nunan (1992) **summarizes**… [D4]McCutheon & Jung (1990) **say**… [D5]Kincheloe (2003) **states**… [D6]Kervin et al. (2006: 14) **give** a rough idea… [D7]Kervin et al. (2006) **explain**… [D8]For teachers, Stringer (2004) **explains** further… [D9]Padkate (2005),…,**found**… [D10]Nunan (1992) **studied** the problems… [D11]Bell & Opie (2002) **recorded** the research experiences… [D12]Stringer (2004**) explains**… [D13]Burns (1999) **reports…**

[Source: Chanateepakul, J., & Srimavin, W. (2008). Teachers' Attitudes towards Doing Research*, rEELections*, 11, 52-62.]

Extracts C and D differ and share common characteristics. They are different in the number of reporting verbs. Extract C contains nine instances of reporting verbs from seven reporting verbs ('add' and 'state' are each repeated once). Extract D has 13 instances of reporting verbs from 10 reporting verbs ('explain' is used four times). However, their shared traits are twofold. The first is that the meanings of these reporting verbs seem to be limited (as can be seen from the repetition of verbs and as implied from the synonymous meanings such as 'mention' in C5, 'state' in C8,

and 'says' in C9). The second is that all the reporting verbs in Extract C and most of the reporting verbs in Extract D are in the present simple tense. In Extract D, there are three instances of past simple tense from the 13 instances, but there is no instance of present perfect tense.

Differences between the experts' use and the novices' use of reporting verbs

Now that we have looked at the use of reporting verbs in each group (experts and novices), we can now move on to see the difference between the two groups. It should be emphasized here that the number of reporting verbs reported in this idea sharing paper is from only four research articles. Care needs to be taken when interpreting the differences from the comparison. Given that the word lengths of the four articles are different, and there are small differences between the two sets of the extracts, any interpretation from such differences seems not persuasive and is thus reserved from further discussion. There are then two aspects to discuss: the meanings of the verbs and the tenses.

Considering the meanings of these verbs, we can see that the meanings used by the novice seem to be more limited. This suggests they may have limited options to express ideas more clearly, and, at the same time, may be restricted in their level of engagement with the previous literature. This engagement, which can be partly seen from the meanings of the verbs used, can be merely general engagement or critical engagement.

To explain more about general engagement and critical engagement, I will refer to Thompson and Ye's (1991) work. They have proposed three types of reporting verbs. The first type is related to general engagement and the remaining two types are concerned with critical engagement. The first is factive – that is, the current researcher portrays the previous researcher as presenting true information or a correct opinion such as acknowledge, bring about, identify, demonstrate, notice, or point out. The second is counter-factive – the current researcher portrays the previous researcher as presenting false information or

an incorrect opinion such as disregard, or ignore. Note that this category is "rarely chosen by the reporting writer" (1991, p.372). The third is non-factive – that is, the current researcher gives no clear signal as to his/her attitude towards the previous researcher's information/opinion such as believe, claim, examine, or propose.

From Extracts A and B, we see reporting verbs used by the experts tend to fall into both factive (e.g. 'explain', 'point out') and non-factive (e.g. 'proposes', 'suggested', 'examined', 'argues') However, from Extracts C and D, we can see that most of the reporting verbs fall into factive (e.g. 'define', 'summarises', 'explain'). The higher use of factive reporting verbs implies that the novice may be reserved in revealing critical aspects of their thinking towards the previous researcher/author, an indication of limited critical engagement with the previous literature.

The last aspect is the tenses. From the comparison of the two groups of extracts, we can see that the tenses seem to be more varied in the experts' use. Generally, we may think tense is related to time. However, it is clear in the examples that such selection of tense is not just a matter of time. It is not surprising that "Tense choice in reviewing the previous research is subtle and somewhat flexible" (Swales and Feak, 1994, p.182). Gunawardena (1989) has further explained that certain factors influencing tense choice are the writer's attitudes towards the importance of events, the degree of generality of the research reported, or the particular context within the discourse. Thus, Salager-Meyer (1992) warns that we need to be careful in selecting one tense choice over the other as different tenses serve different functions.

Selecting what tense to use can be a problem for many non-native English researchers, especially for the novice. The limited use of tenses as shown in Extracts C and D can be explained by Jogthong (2001 p.84) who has reported that "Thai writers employed only a few reporting verbs with no tense differences which is due to tense-less aspect of Thai language"

However, although selecting tenses to use is a subtle issue, for the novice researchers (or the Thai graduate students) to

understand more about the use of the three tenses, Bitchener (2010) suggests that 1) present simple tense can be used to convey the current state of knowledge, make a generalization, and present earlier findings as accepted, 2) past simple tense can be used to refer to a claim or finding that has been made, and 3) present perfect tense can be used to refer to the currently accepted state of affairs. Bitchener's explanation provides a starting point for understanding of what tense to use, even though this suggestion can be seen as tendencies not rules (Thompson, 2001).

Practical suggestions

We have learned from the comparisons in this study that the experts tend to use both factive and non-factive reporting verbs whereas the novice researchers tend to mainly use factive reporting verbs. We also have learned that the experts tend to use three tenses (present simple tense, present perfect tense, and past simple tense) while the Thai novice researchers tend to use only present simple tense.

From this understanding, I would like to make two suggestions. Firstly, non-native English graduate students or native English speakers with limited research writing experience should be encouraged to expand their knowledge of reporting verbs, and to study the meanings of reporting verbs, especially the non-factive ones, used in research articles. This can be done by carefully reading each reporting verb in the writing of experts and trying to interpret its meaning in context. Secondly, students and novices should be encouraged to notice how experts use tenses of reporting verbs in their research articles. This noticing, I believe, will gradually help strengthen their understanding of the use of tense choice.

Concluding remarks

Using reporting verbs in research writing appropriately and effectively seems to be a problem for graduate students, especially non-native English speaking students. The limited understanding of how to use reporting verbs can limit their ability to engage with

previous research and to create arguments. This paper has attempted to raise the awareness of graduate students in applied linguistics in reporting verbs. By comparing the experts' use and novices' use of reporting verbs, we can see that experts' use of reporting verbs tend to be more varied in their meaning and in the choice of tense. Therefore, to improve their use of reporting verbs, the students should attempt to expand their range of reporting verbs, understand the differences in meanings of different reporting verbs, and understand the three simple rules of tense selection.

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