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Analysis of reporting verbs in Master's theses

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Abstract

Reporting verbs are one of the crucial components in academic writing. Most of the researches have focused on analyzing the reporting verbs in doctoral theses, students' assignments, research articles, and journals; however few have focused on Master's theses. Thus, the purpose of this research is to investigate (1) which reporting verbs are mostly used by Masters students in their theses, (2) the frequency of the reporting verbs used, and (3) the impact(s) of the reporting verbs employed in the theses. Hyland's (2000) framework is used as a guideline in this document analysis. Six theses completed in 2012 were selected randomly, and they were written by local, Malaysian students who did their Masters in the ELS programme of UKM. A checklist was used as the instrument to identify the groups and the functions of the reporting verbs. The findings showed that Masters students were more familiar with the reporting verbs from the research acts category, as compared to cognition acts and discourse acts. The findings also revealed that the verbs found from the research acts category are the most widely used, while states from the discourse acts category are the most frequently repeated reporting verbs found in Masters theses. The suggestion to consider is to equip the Masters students with the knowledge of using reporting verbs in a Research Methodology course, instead of the structure and the content of the research itself. Our findings are then used to indicate the areas that we need to focus on in academic writing courses.

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1. Introduction

Writing at tertiary level is not the same as producing a piece of written work during secondary level. It requires certain conventions, special techniques, and a specific style of writing which is a daunting task and may give a "traumatic experience" for most of the students (Cullip & Carrol, 2003). Some of the written texts that the

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students have to produce at university level are research reports, research papers, thesis, or dissertations depending on the institutions. Producing a thesis, particularly, requires the students to construct and arrange all the ideas carefully in order to make the points run smoothly. Through observations and experiences, it can be seen that this is the most critical moment for the students to choose the most suitable words and produce coherent sentences, thus conveying the meaning to the readers.

In general, thesis is a student's work that concerns the research on a certain issue or topic that the students are interested in. Usually it is produced in the form of a book and is kept by the students, library, and the university itself for future references. Some universities demand the final year students of a college to produce a thesis as partial fulfillment of the requirements at their degree program. The types of theses may revolve around empirical theses, literary analyses and book reviews.

There are different sections in a thesis, which are Introduction (Chapter 1), Literature Review (Chapter 2), Methodology (Chapter 3), Findings and Discussion (Chapter 4) and Conclusion (Chapter 5). Above all chapters, citations are generally found in a literature review (Soler- Monreal & Gil- Salom, 2011). This particular section provides an overview of one's research, presents the historical background of the research, discusses the related theories and concepts, shows the related research in which one intends to indicate gaps as well as clarifies the terminologies and definitions parallel with the context of the research (Ridley, 2008). The gap can be said as the less focused area where the research that is conducted will add new knowledge to the existing one. In every chapter, students can include their own voice into their writing; however, it must be supported with the "established" statements, in which citations are used to strengthen their own ideas.

Reporting verbs allow the writer to show his/her responsibility towards the statement made (Charles, 2006). By using reporting verbs, the writer is able to use the most appropriate words to relate to the source which they have found convincing and suitable to support their claim. This will directly contribute to the recognition from other members from the discipline itself. Bloch (2010, p. 221) mentioned that non- native English speakers (NNES) always have the difficulty in choosing the reporting verbs that can "satisfy both the syntactic requirements of their sentences and, perhaps more importantly, to express their attitudes towards the claims". In this case, they may lack comprehension in terms of the subtleties of the appropriate reporting verbs to be used to convey their message.

A numbers of studies on reporting verbs have been conducted. Some of the studies that are to be highlighted are Charles (2006) who conducted a study on the construction of stance in reporting clauses, in which she compared theses in social science and material science. Zhang (2008) also studied the reporting verbs of citations in eight disciplines (social sciences: psychology, philosophy, economics, history; and physical sciences: biology, physics, electronic engineering, chemistry), while Bloch (2010) did a concordance-based study on the use of reporting verbs as rhetorical devices in academic papers. Few samples of written works and articles are taken from students' assignments as well as *Science*, a journal that contains articles from physical and biological sciences, engineering and social sciences. However, it is hard to find the research done in the Malaysian context related to reporting verbs. From here, it can be seen that more research in reporting verbs, particularly in English Language Studies (ELS) needs to be done. This is important as much previous research has focused on other fields and less attention has been paid to the Malaysian setting. Realizing the need to minimize the gap, it is the interest of this present study to analyze the reporting verbs in Master's theses of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) specifically in English Language Studies.

2. Statement of the problem

UKM students are required to produce a thesis as a requirement of their degree, be it Bachelor's, Master's or Doctoral degrees. They are taught in a Research Methodology subject according to their levels where they will learn about all the necessary elements needed for conducting research, including how to cite previous studies. As a whole, it can be said that UKM students have been exposed to the vital elements needed in conducting a study. However, based on the observations, the use of reporting verbs in citations need to be further exposed to the UKM students, particularly Master's students in the field of ELS. This is because the careful choice of reporting verbs is regarded as a fundamental part in increasing the credibility of the research itself. This is supported by Hyland and Milton (1999, p. 147) who claimed that the appropriate use of reporting verbs will provide "maximum interpersonal and persuasive

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