The Study of Reporting Verbs Used in Academic Research Reports by Thai Undergraduate Students

การศึกษาการใช้คำกริยาในการเขียนรายงานวิจัยโดยนิสิตระดับปริญญาตรีชาวไทย

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Abstract

The present study investigated second language (L2) writer's employment of reporting verbs in the context of a Thai classroom. The researchers focused mainly on the frequency count of 40 research reports of third year students. The data from the introduction and literature review sections from selected studies were analyzed by using semantic categories of reporting verbs and their functions to answer the research questions of this study. The findings revealed the occurrences of reporting verbs (Argue, Show, Find and Think) types adopted from Francis et al. (1996, pp. 97- 101) and also the relation of the reporting verbs with their functions (textual reference, self as a source and uncited generalization). The result revealed that the Argue type was employed the most while the Think type was employed the least. This is in relation to their functions. Argue types were mainly used in textual references while the Think type used was found in self-referential function.

Keywords: Reporting verbs, EFL English report writing, Academic research reports

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้เป็นการศึกษาการใช้คำกริยาในการเขียนรายงานวิจัยโดยผู้เรียนที่เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาที่ 2 ในบริบทห้องเรียนในประเทศไทย ผู้วิจัยได้ให้ความสำคัญกับการนับความถี่คำกริยาที่ปรากฏในงานวิจัยจำนวน 40 ชิ้นของผู้เรียนชั้นปีที่ 3 ข้อมูลที่นำมาวิเคราะห์เป็นข้อมูลที่อยู่ในบทนำและการทบทวนวรรณกรรมซึ่งจะทำการวิเคราะห์โดยใช้รูปแบบการแบ่งแยกประเภทของความหมายและหน้าที่ของคำกริยา เพื่อข้อมูลที่ได้จะสามารถตอบคำถามงานวิจัยฉบับนี้ได้ จากผลการวิจัยพบว่ามีการใช้คำกริยา ประเภท Argue, Show, Find และ Think ซึ่งนำมาใช้จากงานวิจัยของ ฟรานซิสและคณะ (1996 หน้า 97-101) และความสัมพันธ์ของคำกริยาดังกล่าวกับหน้าที่ของคำ

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เช่นหน้าที่ในการอ้างอิงข้อความ การอ้างอิงจากตัวผู้เขียนเองและการกล่าวโดยรวมโดยไม่ได้อ้างอิงแหล่งที่มา ซึ่งผลการวิจัยแสดงได้เห็นว่า คำกริยาประเภท Argue มีการนำมาใช้มากที่สุด ในขณะที่ ประเภท Think ถูกใช้น้อยที่สุด และในด้านการใช้งาน คำกริยาประเภท Argue ถูกใช้เพื่อวัตถุประสงค์ในการอ้างอิงแหล่งที่มาของความรู้เป็นหลัก ในขณะที่ คำประเภท Think ถูกใช้ในการอ้างอิงผู้เขียนงานวิจัยเอง

คำสำคัญ : คำกริยาที่ใช้ในการเขียนรายงาน การเขียนรายงานวิจัยภาษาอังกฤษของผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศ รายงานวิจัยเชิงวิชาการ

Introduction

During the process of writing a research report, EFL undergraduate students learned to acquire academic writing skills that are essential in producing a piece of academic writing. They were assisted and became more proficient with the help from more experienced writers, and through writing skill courses. Summarizing and synthesizing are a couple of the most important activities in the academic writing courses as these students repeatedly learn to construct research-based discussions in their writing for their target readers by integrating information from several sources. As a result, their academic writing skills gradually developed as they transited into the postgraduate level. Constructing an argument by synthesizing information from various sources is a complex skill in academic writing, and if that piece of writing is well organized, the reader can follow the argument better. On the contrary, using source information incorrectly may have the writer appear unqualified and as one who is still developing their research and writing skills. Hyland (2000, p.202) mentions that writing academically is a process in learning that involves students developing their familiarity with the content, as well as the form and structure of writing. In order to be a successful academic writer, not only do students need to have a metacognitive awareness of those forms and content, but they also should familiarize themselves with discourse strategies, so that they can set achievable goals for their target readers. Cullip & Carrol (2003, p.23) reported that academic writing usually adopts specific conventions which follow unique techniques and styles for each of the writing genres. Therefore, non-English speaking researchers may have to deal with greater difficulties in order to succeed in their scientific discourse in their research articles (Paltridge, 1993). With the aforementioned issues in writing, instructors in writing courses can help students work more effectively by first guiding them to better usage of citations in their writing. Then they can help students make comparisons between students' work and other scholarly writers' writing. In this way, students and instructors will have a better understanding of the challenges many EFL writers have encountered during the process of summarizing and synthesizing sources of their information for their academic writing.

Scholars such as Halliday and Martin (1993) and Swales (2004, 2014) assert that in order to develop a conventional semiotic system and create effective scientific discourse, research

articles and language styles used in the scientific field usually follow specific rhetorical, grammatical and stylistic patterns. One of the problems faced by students in their writing, which is related to this issue, is how they can make a citation of their claims and of other's, which requires the use of correct grammatical devices (Hyland, 1998, p.335). How the writers introduce, assess and question their claims, as well as express their opinions on each of the relevant issues can be reflected by the frequency of the use of reporting verbs, which is noted by Sakita (2002, p.341) to be a vital role in the process of writing. Furthermore, Hyland (1998, pp. 424 - 425) reveals that reporting verbs are an essential grammatical device used in an academic paper to express the writer's stance. The use of reporting verbs was also discussed by Thompson and Ye (1991, p.366) in that the writer may utilize them to cite their own claims, express their opinions, and also to criticize the claims of others. Knowing how to make correct grammatical choices when making claims is an essential part of becoming a competent academic writer, as it could have an impact on the credibility of the writer and stance of the claim (Bloch, 2010, p.219).

In relation to the citation process and conventions used in academic writing, reporting verbs are central to scholarly-based writing. Yet, not many studies have paid attention to how EFL undergraduate students or other novice writers use reporting verbs in their writing. Thus this study aims to diminish the gap in the research by describing the use of reporting verbs, their functions and trace their usages in the introduction and literature review assignments written by undergraduate EFL students to help them improving their academic writing tasks.

Research Benefits

This study aims to bring to light the reporting verbs and their functions used in English research report writing of Thai EFL learners since this area of study is still under limited and needs to be further investigated. The findings of this study will be beneficial to teachers and course developers who aim to promote the ability of Thai EFL learners' research report writing skills by emphasizing the use of each reporting verbs in relation to its functions in their teaching materials.

Literature Review

Citation is an essential tool when it comes to producing academic writing. It is used to refer to original literature. Readers can also track the previous works of the writer or other authors, all while the writer uses this tool to give credit to relating literature. In academic writing, the pattern of writing certainty requires reporting verbs to strengthen the claim in a report. Writers use reporting verbs as a tool to share their opinions with readers (Hyland, 2005, p.172). By using correct reporting verbs, writers can show their personality and assertions in their works (Charles, 2006). The use of reporting verbs to achieve writer creditability and strengthen their claims is also discussed in

Hunston (2000, p.177). Successful academic writers are required to use citations and reporting verbs effectively (Clugston, 2008: Davis, 2013; Swales, 2014).

Several studies on citation in different academic fields have been conducted. Kim (2012) reported the use of citations in 40 research articles on education psychology, half of which were written by English writers and the other half by Chinese writers. The results showed that English writers used more citations than Chinese writers fivefold in their introduction sections. He asserts the idea that educating Chinese students on citation could improve their academic writing skills.

Another study from Swales (2014) observes the use of citation and reporting verbs between undergraduate and graduate students in the field of biology. This study was divided into 4 aspects; the distribution of integrate and parenthetical citations, the choice of reporting verbs, the effectiveness of their citing systems, and the use of writer's first name in their writing. He concluded that there was no difference among the two groups.

The use of reporting verbs in Master's theses by English language students was examined by Manan & Noor (2014). By analyzing the choice of reporting verbs used, their frequency of use, and the impact these verbs employed in six theses, their study showed that students used reporting verbs more frequently from acts of research, than from acts of cognition and discourse. Instead of teaching different aspects of research in research methodology courses, they recommended providing students with more knowledge about reporting verbs may equip learners with a variation of using citation.

A study of the most frequently used reporting verbs in 60 articles in the field of SLA written by English and Persian authors was examined by Yeganeh and Boghayeri (2014, p.582). The study examined the introduction and literature review sections of articles in 30 International journals by English authors and 30 National journals by Persian writers. It showed a slight difference between the two groups.

Jafarigohar & Mohammadhani (2015, p.2490) investigated the differences between journal articles in applied linguistics written by non-native writers, and their native counterparts aiming to analyze the use of reporting verbs when they were used to quote another writer's work. In this research study, 63 research articles were selected from three scholarly journals in both fields of applied linguistics and language teaching, which were written by native and non-native English writers. The results showed that native English writers more frequently used direct quotations than non-native writers. This may due to their linguistic capability in dealing with linguistic material generated by other authors.

In a more recent study, Kwon et al. (2018) explored how second language (L2) writers practice their use of reporting verbs in a first-year writing program in North America. The researchers

utilize a literature review assignment from the Corpus and Repository of Writing (Crow) to examine the use of reporting verbs in an academic genre of the first-year undergraduate students. The students integrate various sources of information to describe a topic of their choice. The frequency of verb form usage was reported, as well as how these writers used particular verb forms to establish semantic categories and rhetorical functions. They concluded that the first-year L2 writers frequently used the same form chosen by upper-level undergraduate writers to attribute writing to outside sources.

According to the above literature, all scholars agreed on the importance of citation, but each of these studies assessed different aspects of it in different fields. One aspect of citation is the appropriate use of reporting verbs. Since few studies have reported on instruction that help students master this academic skill, this paper aims to look at reporting verbs and their functions. This will within the context of the introduction and literature review sections of EFL Thai university students. The study limits to investigate only the use of reporting verbs of the Thai EFL students excluding the study of content analysis, ideas, claims or arguments of the students since students are novice research report writers. They tended to show that they had difficulties in using reporting verbs when they applied the knowledge of other experts in their own work.

Statement of Problems

It cannot be denied that reporting verbs (e.g., argue, find, show, think) are an important linguistic tool that writers use to synthesize and incorporate sources into text. Appropriately usage allows writers to compose effective evidence-based arguments, and reflect their deep understanding of particular issues. As Kwon et al. (2018, p.89) mentions, reporting verbs mainly serves two functions: (1) self-reference (*I **found** this study to be useful*); (2) generalization (*People **think** that …*). The present study focuses on a broader definition of sources that refer to both self-reference (the writers themselves) and generalizations (formally documented citable materials) in order to provide a comprehensive picture of how reporting verbs are used in academic written discourse by EFL writers.

According to the previous sections and the objectives of this study, the following research questions will be answered:

1. What reporting verbs were used in the introduction and literature review sections of Thai undergraduate EFL students?

2. What function does each reporting verb have in the research reports within the scope of EFL?

Research Methodology

To achieve the goals of this study, an exploratory method will be applied. Therefore, the list of reporting verbs introduced by Hyland (1999, p.342), as well as verb groups and explanations adapted from Francis et al. (1996, pp. 97-101) will be employed. The analysis will be based on the data driven from the frequency of reporting verbs used in the academic research reports written by Thai undergraduate EFL students enrolled in an English writing course. Verb groups and explanations are adapted from Francis et al. (1996, pp. 97-101) as follows:

1. ARGUE verbs are concerned with writing and other forms of communication, e.g., argue, suggest, assert, and point out.

2. THINK verbs are concerned with thinking, which includes having a belief; knowing, understanding, hoping, fearing, e.g., think, assume, and feel.

3. SHOW verbs are concerned with indicating a fact or situation, e.g., show, demonstrate, and reveal.

4. FIND verbs are concerned with coming to know or think something, e.g. find, observe, discover, and establish.

Apart from the frequency of reporting verbs used, this study also identified the functions of each reporting verb served in the students' report by employing the framework adopted from Kwon, Staples and Paltridge's study (2018, p. 90)

Table 1 Coding system for functional analysis taken from Kwon, Staples & Paltridge's study (2018, p.90)

Code	Functional categories	Descriptions and examples
R	Reporting from a textual source	To connect information to textual sources *The authors argue that….*
S	Self as source	To express the writers' own actions or opinions *Through reading, I found that….*
U	Uncited generalization	To offer other-sourced, general information or position without corroboration *Students think that….* *It is often said that….*
O	Other	For purposes other than those listed above (e.g., as part of a narrative summary without any direct textual reference) *Low income parents explained that….*

The corpus

This study drew on 40 English academic research reports written by third-year English major students who enrolled in a 2018 research report writing course at Naresuan University, in the country of Thailand. The focus will be on the introduction and literature review sections of the research reports.

Procedure and Data collection

To fulfill the aim of the present study, frequent reporting verbs used in both corpora were identified and compared to: prepare a list of the reporting verbs, their functions, and to identify the differences between their usages. Hence, the procedure of this investigation consists of gathering reporting verb frequency, identifying their function, and identifying differences in their usage. The data was counted and coded according to their functions and was examined in terms of frequency per 1,000 words to normalize the raw frequency counts. Also, inter-raters reliability technique were employed. The two researchers rechecked the data coding to see if the coding was correct.

Data Analysis

The gathered data in this study was analyzed quantitatively on the frequency of the reporting verbs found in the academic research reports. Moreover, they were also analyzed qualitatively in a way that each reporting verb used in both corpora was accounted for, and their functions were described. Based on the collected data, the reasons for the weaknesses of this area of academic writing in Thai undergraduate EFL students was described.

Research Results

First, the findings of the overall frequency of reporting verbs across the semantic categories described in the methods above are presented. Later on, the findings of the reporting verbs' functions are reported.

The Argue category is used the most among the EFL writers, followed by Show, Find, and Think, as shown in the Table 2 below.

1. The frequency of semantic category

Table 2 The overall occurrence of reporting verb types

Semantic category	Reporting verbs count (raw)	Reporting verb frequency (per 1,000 words)
Argue	65	38.23
Show	23	13.52
Find	20	11.76

Semantic category	Reporting verbs count (raw)	Reporting verb frequency (per 1,000 words)
Think	18	10.58
Total	126	74.09

The table 2 shows the variation of reporting verbs used in overall occurrences. As can be seen, the Argue type was used the most followed by Show, Find and Think respectively.

Table 3 The 10 most frequency reporting verb used in this study

Words	Semantic category	Raw count	Normed frequency per 1,000 words
State	Argue	18	10.58
Find	Find	16	9.41
Say	Argue	15	8.82
Mention	Argue	13	7.64
Point out	Argue	10	5.88
Indicate	Show	8	4.70
Report	Argue	7	4.11
Show	Show	6	3.52
Think	Think	5	2.94
Total		98	57.6

Table 3 goes into more detail about the 10 most frequency used words EFL learners used when they refer to the source work while writing a research paper.

The results of Tables 2 and 3 above show that EFL learners used the Argue verb (65 times) type to refer to the source work in previous studies when they cited other scholarly works. This showed that they demonstrated their ability to synthesize the data they reviewed. Also, the writers highlighted the findings from other sources by using the Show verb type (23 times). This is followed by the Find verb type. Learners showed the findings of literature they read. However, the variety of Find verb choices was still limited. Learners used the verb “Find” 16 times out of overall 20. Finally, the EFL writers referred to the thoughts of other authors and themselves by using Thinking verbs 18 times.

2. Functions of reporting verbs

In this section, the raw data and normed counts of reporting verbs used by rhetorical function showed as shown in Table 4 below and excerpts of the findings, are shown as an example of the data analysis.

The data from the coding system showed that students used reporting from a textual source the most, followed by uncited generalizations, and other and self as a source respectively. There are times when the writers generalized ideas by not referring to earlier studies and making claims without referencing the source work.

Table 4 Raw and normed counts of reporting verbs functions

Reporting verb types	Textual reference (R)	Per 1,000 words	Self-referential (S)	Per 1,000 words	Uncited generalization (U)	Per 1,000 words
Argue	50	29.41	2	1.17	13	7.6
Show	17	10	-	-	6	3.52
Find	12	7.05	-	-	8	4.70
Think	7	4.11	4	2.35	7	4.11
Total	106	48.81	6	3.52	34	19.93

As shown in Table 4, there were clear patterns associated with the semantic categories in association with Argue verbs. This is present when students refer to source work followed by the uncited generalization which are claims they made when they write their literature reviews. However, writers used reporting verbs as to refer to themselves the least. This may be because learners tried to limit referring to themselves when writing a research paper. Examples of each functions are shown below.

2.1 The use of textual references

The textual reference category identifies what the researchers expected to find in this study. The credit to a source text is crucial to writing an introduction and literature review, so this is the most prevalent category. The main function of reporting verbs is to refer to or explain information from texts. The examples below illustrate the functions of textual attribution across the two most frequent semantic categories: Argue and Show.

Excerpt 1

Kurt and Atay (2007) and Latif (2007) also *claimed* that the use of prepositions in English writing is the most difficult thing for EFL students. (Argue/ R)

Excerpt 2

Bennui (2008) *showed* that there are three levels of L1 interference, namely words, sentences and discourse influencing the English writing of Thai learners when writing an English paragraph. (Show/ R)

EFL writers used a variety of Argue and Show verbs to refer to textual references, while Find and Think were used to a lesser extent.

2.2 The use of Self

Self as a source indicates the reporting verbs that the learners used to refer to themselves as the source of action or information. The researchers do not use many reporting verbs in this section since the learner as a writer of the paper should appear neutral. However, there were some examples of learners inserting their own reflections of themselves in their writing as shown below.

Excerpts 3

After reading earlier literature, I *think* the useful information from the recent study can be employed as a framework in this study. (Think/ S)

Excerpts 4

The researcher *found* it important to review literature in the Thai context. (Find/R)

Referring to one's own interpretation of the texts seems to in part be a response to the requirements of the genre. These excerpts from their literature reviews show how to prepare students to write subsequent reviews that support their own assertions. However, learners can make their own interpretation more implicit by indirectly stating the self as source.

2.3 The use of uncited generalizations

There were 34 occurrences of uncited generalizations. This is higher than the researcher expected because the EFL writers should be aware of how to quote others correctly. The 34 occurrences of uncited generalizations were coded as statements appealing to general knowledge, interpretation, or beliefs without citing a specific source. This seems to be typical for novice writers. The excerpts below are examples of uncited generalizations found in this study,

Excerpts 5

Error analysis is a famous area of research in the L2 context. Many people *claimed* that knowing errors may lead to the way to correct the errors and improve students' writing. (Argue/ U)

Excerpts 6

Even though many EFL teachers are aware of the importance of using technology in the L2 classroom, many teachers found it unnecessary to utilize technology in the classroom. (Find/ U)

Discussion and Conclusion

Findings from this study showed that not only do EFL learners used several types of reporting verbs, but they also employed the verbs for various functions when they referred to

knowledge from textual sources. The finding was in compliance with finding of Kwon et al (2018) that showed novice writers are able to establish semantic categories and rhetorical functions when they cited source information. There was also evidence of self-mentioning elements in their research report writing. Instructors can contribute to research report writing classes by teaching learners to implicitly interpret their data or information. Likewise, in this study, there are several pieces of evidence that demonstrate that learners used reporting verbs for uncited generalizations. This can be a lesson to teach learners that making a general claim makes the statement less convincing without supporting evidence to their claim. Teachers can also help learners by teaching them how to use more reporting verbs, and bring the importance of citation to light. The researchers share the same belief with earlier studies that highlight that EFL learners may have limited knowledge of using reporting verbs. As Granger & Paquot (2009, p.194) stated that "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". Therefore, the semantic category of reporting verbs and their functions should be taught explicitly in the research report writing courses. However, this study employed data gathered from a single group of the sampling. Therefore, future studies may consider incorporate the comparison of data gathered from different sampling or writing production from different contexts.

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