

A CORPUS-BASED STUDY OF REPORTING VERBS IN SHORT ESSAY

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ABSTRACT. The present research aims to analyze the use of reporting verbs in short essays written by undergraduate students of English major at a university in Indonesia. The study focuses on the frequency analysis of reporting verbs across four semantic categories, namely Argue verbs (e.g., argue, suggest, write, etc.), Find verbs (e.g., find, observe, discover, etc.), Show verbs (show, demonstrate, reveal, etc.) and Think verbs (e.g., think, assume, know, etc.). To achieve this, a mixed-method research design and a corpus-based approach are employed. The results show that the students predominantly use the Think verbs category, followed by Argue, Show, and Find verbs. It suggests that students may focus more on expressing their beliefs and opinions rather than providing evidence or confirming their claims. Moreover, the study highlights the implications of the finding, indicating that the overuse of verbs from the Think verbs category may indicate a lack of evidence-based reasoning in the students' short essays.

Keywords: reporting verbs; essay; corpus linguistics; English; academic texts

INTRODUCTION

An essay, an article, a research paper, a dissertation, a thesis, and other types of writing are all considered academic writing. Academic writing is a formal writing style employed in universities and scholarly publications. One academic writing style that encourages critical thinking is essay writing, which requires the writer to consider a problem and draw a conclusion. It forces students to evaluate many arguments in order to develop better viewpoints. It is a requirement for Indonesian English Studies students, specifically at Universitas Padjadjaran, to enrol in two writing classes (Paragraph Writing and Essay Writing), where the course materials include components of prewriting, research, and documentation, reading comprehension, creating questions, developing a draft, and producing cohesive writing to increase students' writing proficiency. As a second language, English in their writing might contain some errors and mistakes.

As a strenuous yet incredibly essential ability that "situates the writer within a disciplinary framework" (Liardét & Black, 2019, p.37) and positions their voice as a trustworthy or "informed insider," (Hyland & Jiang, 2019, p. 263), authors should utilize external sources to persuade target audience in order to generate evidence-based arguments. Successful academic argumentators must strike "a balance between introducing their perspective, acknowledging the existence of other perspectives, and estimating what their audience's assumed perspective will be" (Miller et al., 2014, p.108) when presenting their arguments against the backdrop of existing perspectives.

A crucial linguistic tool academic writers utilize to synthesize and incorporate materials into their writing efficiently is reporting verbs (RVs). It

is an essential component of more general citation techniques that students should learn for supporting arguments with evidence. Ineffective reporting techniques may reflect the author's inexperience and may lead to articles with poorly constructed or falsified arguments. Therefore, research into the use of reporting verbs in student essays can aid both instructional professionals and students in better understanding and addressing the difficulties undergraduate writers face (Kwon et al., 2018) Argue, Think, Find, Show.

Researchers have extensively explored the incorporation of reporting verbs in academic writing, focusing primarily on semantic categorization or evaluation (see Kwon et al., 2018; Uba, 2019), syntactic patterns (Jarkovská & Kučirková, 2021; Shaw, 1992 in Huang, 2022), types and functions across different populations (see Liardét & Black, 2019; Marti et al., 2019; Thompson & Ye, 1991; Yeganeh & Boghayeri, 2015) and disciplinary variations (see Hyland & Jiang, 2019; Uba, 2019). These studies have provided valuable insights into understanding the use of citations in scholarly writing. A common thread among them is the exploration of the semantic and functional aspects of reporting verbs, forming the basis for established taxonomies of reporting verbs.

In an initial effort to classify reporting verbs, Thompson & Ye (1991) conducted a study where reporting verbs were scrutinised in the introduction sections across various disciplines. Their work identified two clear categories: denotation (encompassing textual, research, and mental aspects) and evaluation (covering the writer's stance, the writer's interpretation, and the author's stance).

Hunston et al. (1996) undertook a more concentrated effort to better understand the semantic patterns of reporting verbs. They expanded

their investigation into a COBUILD project and discovered four semantic categories of reporting verbs: Argue verbs, Find verbs, Show verbs, and Think verbs. According to Charles (2006) 1000 words in politics/international relations and 300,000 words in materials science. The findings show that both disciplines use significant numbers of these reporting clauses and that they most frequently occur as integral citations with a human subject. Following the work of [Francis, G., Hunston, S., & Manning, E. (1996), the classification is as follows:

1. **Argue verbs** (argue, suggest, propose, etc.) are concerned with writing and other forms of communication.
e.g. *In accordance with a previous study, we propose that ...*
2. **Find verbs** (find, observe, discover, etc.) are concerned with coming to know or thinking about something,
e.g., *Semantic features of noun elements together in the bi-dimensional space, we can observe which features could better distinguish each group.*
3. **Show verbs** (show, demonstrate, reveal, etc.) indicate a fact or situation,
e.g., *Findings show that ...*
4. **Think verbs** (think, assume, feel, etc.) are related to thinking, including having a belief; knowing or understanding; hoping or fearing,
e.g., *Addressing the findings in Uchida's research, we assume that learners at higher proficiency levels may start to be exposed.*

This classification has been widely employed to look at the patterns of reporting verb usage among various populations, primarily L1 English speakers. The L1 upper-level college writers and the forestry professionals, who discovered that students used more Show and Think verbs and fewer Argue verbs than professionals, were contrasted. Marti et al. (2019) investigated differences in applied linguistics based on levels of expertise (expert/novice) and nativeness (L1 English/Turkish). They found that while both native and non-native expert writers show little variation in their reporting practices, remarkable variation was found between non-native novice writers and the other groups. This research identified a number of important factors that influence the way reporting verbs are used, including disciplinary variety, degrees of knowledge, and native vs. non-native disagreement.

However, there is not much research on the reporting verb patterns used by EFL learners, particularly among L2 English college students. According to one study by Kwon et al., (2018) Argue,

Think, Find, Show, of the four categories in order of Argue verbs, Think verbs, Show verbs, and Find verbs, L2 student writers across majors in a first-year writing program generally preferred Argue verbs. The question of whether this trend will repeat itself across fields remains, however, unanswered. Despite not focusing on the patterns of reporting verbs, other studies have found that L2 writers in English tend to use a smaller variety of verbs than L1 professional writers do when reporting (Hinkel, 2003; Liardét & Black, 2019; Ramoroka, 2014); they also seem to favour the usage of conversational verbs (Granger & Paquot, 2009 in Kwon et al., 2018) Argue, Think, Find, Show, though learners deployed reporting verbs with similar variability as their L1 classmates (Liardét & Black, 2019).

With reference to the four reporting verb semantic categories proposed by Hunston et al. (1996), the present study, therefore, intends to investigate the semantic patterns of students' reporting verb (i.e., Argue verbs, Find verbs, Show verbs, Think verbs) usage in their short essays. This research specifically aims to investigate L2 students' reporting behaviours through the essays that undergraduate English majors write in language competence classes, specifically Essay Writing classes. Therefore, the study's research question is: How is the use of reporting verbs, out of the four semantic categories, in students' short essays in English Studies?

METHODS

To answer the question mentioned above, a corpus, namely the Essay Writing corpus, was compiled and processed via Sketch Engine. The corpus consists of 803 files of essay writing assignments written by the students majoring in English studies from 2017 to 2021. Before the lecturer collected the assignments to grade them, each one was double-checked. All students' first language is Bahasa Indonesia, meaning that they are non-native English speakers. In order to get a more specific result, all texts were cleaned and stored in an electronic form, and student names and any personally identifiable information were all removed. This corpus consists of 780,673 tokens and 697,273 words.

Word Frequency List. The frequency list obtained from a text is essentially nothing more than a set of clues about the nature of that text. According to Moon (see O'Keeffe & McCarthy, 2010), through a frequency list, one can reveal which words are employed in their texts and how frequently they are used. The frequency of occurrences of reporting verbs will be observed and accumulated for subsequent

analysis and it will be presented with percentage calculations in the discussion section of the research.

Thompson & Ye (1991) stated that reporting verbs can be utilized by writers to present their ideas or claims while simultaneously indicating their stance towards the ideas of others incorporated into their writing. The first stage of the analysis involved compiling a master list of reporting verbs for the analysis. To efficiently identify the reporting verbs in students' short essays, the framework of semantic categories adapted from Hunston et al. (1996) detailing 53 reporting verbs consisting of Argue verbs, Show verbs, Find verbs, and Think verbs are used. The list of reporting verbs grouped by their semantic category in this study is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Semantic Category of Reporting Verbs

Semantic Category	Verbs
Argue verbs	argue, suggest, predict, write, explain, conclude, mention, admit, observe, accept, claim, imply, complain, point out, say, insist, maintain, propose, reply, speculate, stress, contend, state, report, postulate, acknowledge, talk about, assert, hypothesize, remark, posit
Find verbs	find, realize, observe, discover, establish, infer, recognize, identify, note
Show verbs	show, illustrate, indicate, demonstrate, confirm, mean, reveal
Think verbs	think, hold, assume, feel, hope, know

A comprehensive analysis, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative approaches, was carried out to investigate the academic reporting practices of second language (L2) learners. Initially, a comparative analysis was performed by assessing the overall frequency of each reporting verb type within four semantic categories in the corpus. Subsequently, each reporting verb was individually searched, and frequency data were extracted based on the master list in the corpus. The quantitative analysis aimed to examine the frequency of reporting verbs, identifying which ones were more commonly employed by students in their essay writing. On the other hand, the qualitative analysis delved into the meaning of the reporting verbs with the highest frequency in the corpus, exploring the differences compared to other referenced studies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section will first illustrate the overall frequency of reporting verbs across four semantic categories and then discuss the frequency of individual verbs in relation to these categories. The frequency data were presented in percentages for a clearer presentation and comparison.

Frequency of Reporting Verbs in the Essay Writing Corpus

Following the procedure stated before, the frequency data of reporting verbs in the corpus were retrieved and grouped by their semantic category. The result can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency of Reporting Verbs in the Essay Writing Corpus

Semantic Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Argue verbs	3.000	31.49%
Find verbs	980	10.29%
Show verbs	1.262	13.25%
Think verbs	4.248	44.97%
TOTAL	9.526	100%

From the table above, we can see that the argue verb category is not the highest semantic category in the data corpus, although it has 31 verbs. The semantics category that dominates is Think with six verbs, with a frequency of 4284, or around 44.97% of the total data analyzed. With these data, it can be said that the order of selecting reporting verbs categorized into four semantic categories according to Hunston et al. (1996) in the Essay Writing corpus is Think verbs in the first place, as previously mentioned, followed by Argue verbs with 3.000 hits or approximately 31.49%, then Find verbs with a frequency of 1.262 or around 13.25% of the total, and finally the Show verbs category with a percentage of 10.29%, which is 980 frequencies.

This is different from the results of the research conducted by Kwon et al. (2018) Argue, Think, Find, Show. An analysis of the use of reporting verbs in the L2 students' literature review section conducted by Kwon et al. (2018) Argue, Think, Find, Show shows that students more often use Argue verbs in the literature review section than the other three semantic categories of reporting verbs in the order Argue verbs>Show verbs>Think verbs>Find verbs. In addition, (Huang, 2022) particularly among three categories (Argue, Show, Find, who examined the use of reporting verbs in English majors' undergraduate thesis writing, found that the findings in the "Essay Writing" corpus are different from what he discovered. In his research, student thesis writing has the following order: Argue verbs at 36.5%, Find verbs at 15.5%, followed by Show verbs at 26.3%, and the lowest is Think verbs at 21.7%.

Furthermore, a comparison with the findings of Kwon et al. (2018) Argue, Think, Find, Show shows differences with the present study. The same order as Huang (2022) particularly among three categories (Argue, Show, Find) repeated in his research with Argue verbs (38.08%), Show verbs (18.32%), Find

verbs (19.24%), and Think verbs (24.35%). Figure 1 shows the differences in the use of reporting verbs in this study as well as the two studies already mentioned.

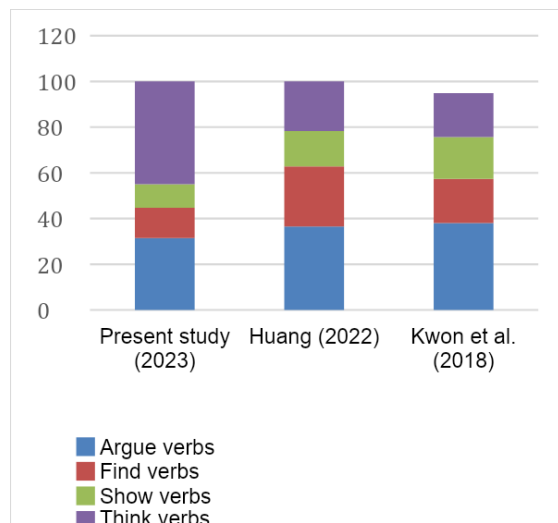


Figure 1. Cross-reference of RV Patterns with (Huang, 2022) particularly among three categories (Argue, Show, Find and (Kwon et al., 2018) Argue, Think, Find, Show

The similarities between the studies by Kwon et al. (2018) Argue, Think, Find, Show and Huang, (2022) particularly among three categories (Argue, Show, Find) may indicate that L2 students' citation practices may favor Argue verbs without "disciplinary specificity." However, the difference in the results of this study with the two references may indicate that the writing of the thesis and the literature review place more emphasis on confirming an opinion or finding by using various verbs from the semantic category of Argue verbs. Writing short essays for students may not require such a strong affirmation of the opinions conveyed. This is proven by the use of verbs from the semantic category Think verbs (i.e., think, hold, assume, feel, hope, know) to explain the contents of their essays.

The Use of Reporting Verbs in the Essay Writing Corpus

The concordance of reporting verbs consisted of 53 verbs that were later analyzed. This concordance analysis was carried out to see how each reporting verb is used in the Essay Writing corpus. This step was run by taking one sample of the concordance of selected verbs from each category.

The reporting verbs that fall under the category of Argue verbs in the Essay Writing corpus tend to be used to express or incorporate arguments or opinions from external sources beyond the author's own perspective. Data (1) provides an overview regarding the usage of the Argue verbs category in

the corpus. The verb 'claimed' in Data (1) indicates that 'the study' made a statement or assertion about the composition of dates, specifically mentioning minerals, amino acids, unsaturated fatty acids, and vitamins. Reporting verbs 'claimed' are used to report or convey information presented by a source, in this case, the study.

Data (1):

*"The study **claimed** that date consists of at least 15 minerals, a lot of amino and fairly good unsaturated fatty acids, vitamins, good for..."*

The category of Find verbs which consists of 9 reporting verbs is used to report or communicate the results or findings of a study, analysis, or investigation. Data (2) shows the use of 'discover' from the Find verbs category in the corpus. It conveys that the 2010 analysis made a finding about the reverse gender gap among unmarried, childless women under 30.

Data (2):

*"A 2010 analysis **discover** that among unmarried, childless women under 30, there's actually a reverse gender gap where ladies earn 8 per cent more..."*

Furthermore, third-placed as the most used category of reporting verbs in the corpus, 'confirmed', as a part of the Show verb category as can be seen in Data (3), indicates that the police officially validated or affirmed that the news was indeed a hoax. Reporting verbs in this category are used to report or convey information obtained from a reliable source.

Data (3):

*"That news is later **confirmed** by police as a hoax. One day after the tragedy, Sumedang Police Department held a mediation between the two conflicting..."*

Having the highest frequency among other categories, Think verbs in the corpus are used to relate to an act of thinking, believing, knowing or understanding about something. As illustrated in Data (4), the words 'think' and 'assume' are used to report opinions, beliefs, or assumptions attributed to a group of people. Although the subject described by the verbs has no clear corroboration, it conveys that some people hold the belief or make the presumption that introverts are socially anxious.

Data (4):

*"Some people also **think** and **assume** that introverts are socially anxious. In fact, that is really wrong. Introverts just can not handle social situation..."*

Frequently Used Reporting Verbs in the Corpus

A further analysis was conducted by summarizing the top 10 used reporting verbs in the corpus as can be seen in Table 4. A full list of frequencies of all 53 RVs in the corpora can be found in Table 5. From 53 reporting verbs analyzed, four verbs from the Argue category, i.e. contend, postulate, hypothesize, posit, turn out to have zero hits in the corpus, thus there are 47 verbs in the corpus with the highest hit reaching 1500, that is feel verb, and the lowest only have 1 hit, i.e. speculate, assert, remark.

Table 4. The 10 Most Frequent Reporting Verbs in Short Essay

SC*	RVs**	F***	Percentage
Think	Feel	1.500	15.75%
Think	Know	1.247	13.09%
Argue	Say	1.168	12.26%
Think	Think	1.168	12.26%
Find	Find	806	8.46%
Show	Show	451	4.73%
Show	Mean	429	4.50%
Argue	Write	313	3.29%
Think	Hold	258	2.71%
Find	Realize	238	2.50%
TOTAL		7.578	79.55%

*Semantic Category; **Reporting Verbs; ***Frequency

These top 10 reporting verbs nearly account for the majority of all counts of reporting verbs (80% respectively), thus making further analysis reasonable. A close examination of the favourite reporting verbs in the Essay Writing corpus suggested a rather restricted repertoire of colloquial verbs in L2 students' writing practice (e.g. think, feel, know, say, etc).

In addition to the previous point, the majority of the top 10 verbs on the list belong to the Think category with feel, know, think, and hold verbs. These four verbs on the corpus reached almost half of the total occurrences in the corpus with 43.81%. On the other side, the other three semantic categories of reporting verbs, namely Argue, Show, and Find verbs are relatively less common with only two occurrences in the top 10 list. Of these categories, Argue verb (say, write) has the highest contribution with 15.55% followed by Find verbs (find, realize) with 10.96% and Show verbs (show, mean) with 9.23%.

As previously discussed, Think verbs are associated with cognitive processes such as holding beliefs, comprehension, and emotions such as hope or fear, while Argue verbs are used for communication purposes like writing (Charles, 2006)000 words in politics/international relations and 300,000 words in materials science. The findings show that both

disciplines use significant numbers of these reporting clauses and that they most frequently occur as integral citations with a human subject. Following the work of [Francis, G., Hunston, S., & Manning, E. (1996). The different ways these two types of verbs are used may indicate that L2 students prefer to convey their thoughts or understanding using means other than argumentation. Alternatively, it could suggest that their use of reporting verbs does not conform to their conventional semantic functions.

Table 5. Full List of Reporting Verbs in Short Essay

SC*	RVs**	F***	Percentage
Think	Feel	1500	15.75%
Think	Know	1247	13.09%
Argue	Say	1168	12.26%
Think	Think	1168	12.26%
Find	Find	806	8.46%
Show	Show	451	4.73%
Show	Mean	429	4.50%
Argue	Write	313	3.29%
Think	Hold	258	2.71%
Find	Realize	238	2.50%
Argue	Accept	203	2.13%
Argue	Maintain	166	1.74%
Argue	Talk about	163	1.71%
Argue	Explain	143	1.50%
Argue	State	125	1.31%
Argue	Mention	123	1.29%
Argue	Conclude	100	1.05%
Argue	Argue	85	0.89%
Think	Hope	60	0.63%
Find	Recognize	57	0.60%
Think	Assume	51	0.54%
Argue	Report	49	0.51%
Argue	Suggest	48	0.50%
Argue	Complain	48	0.50%
Find	Discover	45	0.47%
Argue	Admit	38	0.40%
Argue	Observe	36	0.38%
Find	Observe	36	0.38%
Argue	Stress	35	0.37%
Find	Establish	35	0.37%
Argue	Claim	34	0.36%
Show	Reveal	32	0.34%
Argue	Reply	31	0.33%
Show	Indicate	31	0.33%
Show	Illustrate	26	0.27%
Find	Identify	24	0.25%
Argue	Propose	21	0.22%
Argue	Acknowledge	19	0.20%
Find	Note	19	0.20%
Argue	Insist	17	0.18%
Argue	Predict	15	0.16%
Argue	Imply	11	0.12%
Argue	Point out	6	0.06%
Show	Confirm	6	0.06%
Show	Demonstrate	5	0.05%
Find	Infer	2	0.02%
Argue	Speculate	1	0.01%
Argue	Assert	1	0.01%
Argue	Remark	1	0.01%

Argue	<i>Contend</i>	0	0%
Argue	<i>Postulate</i>	0	0%
Argue	<i>Hypothesize</i>	0	0%
Argue	<i>Posit</i>	0	0%
TOTAL		9.526	100%

*Semantic Category; **Reporting Verbs; ***Frequency

Referring to the table above which explains more clearly the order in which the 53 reporting verbs appear in the Essay Writing Corpus, it also clarifies the use of verbs in the writing of English literature study program students in their short essays. As previously explained, the sequence above indicates the possibility that students are more focused on pouring their knowledge, beliefs and opinions on the topics discussed without further confirming these matters. The presence of four Argue verbs with occurrences of 0 in the corpus (contend, postulate, hypothesize, posit) further clarifies this. In addition, the Argue verb with 31 kinds of verbs in it actually has a lower total percentage than Think with only 6 verbs (i.e. think, hold, assume, feel, hope, know). This may indicate that the semantic category of verbs with a large number of verbs does not guarantee the high use of these verbs in writing. Note that in this corpus there are four Argue verbs that have 0 hits.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to emphasize that the dataset of essay writing employed in this research encompasses a range of genres, such as narratives, descriptive, cause and effect, and argumentative compositions. As a result, the variations in findings between the present study and the two referenced studies could be ascribed to this diversity in essay genres.

CONCLUSION

Based on the categorical semantics of reporting verbs proposed by Hunston et al. (1996), this study was conducted to analyze the semantic pattern of short essays by English literature study students in Indonesia with Indonesian as their first language. Frequency analysis to see the order of dominant verb usage shows that of the four existing categories, the Think category occupies the highest. Feel, know, think, and hold are dominant in the Essay Writing corpus with a percentage of 43.81% although the occurrences are not aligned four at a time. Furthermore, a comparison between the results of this study and two other studies that were used as references was made due to differences in findings with research conducted by Kwon et al. (2018) Argue, Think, Find, Show and Huang (2022) particularly among three categories (Argue, Show, Find who analyzed the use of reporting verbs in literature

reviews and student theses undergraduate. The two studies show that the highest use of verbs is from the Argue verbs category. This difference might indicate that the writing of the thesis as well as the literature review places more emphasis on confirming an opinion or finding by using various verbs from the semantic category of argument verbs.

In addition, the placement of the four highest positions by the verbs feel, know, think, and hold which are part of the Think verbs category also means that their usage of reporting verbs was incongruous with the traditionally intended semantic roles of the chosen verbs, or that L2 students tend to convey their belief or knowledge about something in replacement of disputing.

However, it is important to underline that the essay writing data used in this research comprises various types of essays, including narrative, descriptive, cause-and-effect, and argumentative texts. Therefore, the differences in outcomes between the current study and the two reference studies may be attributed to this diversity in essay types.

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