



Exploring Evaluation Language in the Conclusion chapter of MA Dissertations: Analyzing of Iraqi EFL Learners' Writings

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<https://doi.org/10.32792/tqartj.v5i46.599>

Received 21/2/2024, Accepted 28/3/2024 , Published 30/6/2024

Abstract

One of the most important functions of language for writers is to communicate their opinions or thoughts about people or things. Thus, in academic writing, a writer must be able to use evaluative and interactive language. In this study, we focus on the use of evaluative language, appraisals, in academic writings that were conducted by Iraqi EFL writers, as captured by appraisal theory (Martin & White 2005). We are interested in how those writers express evaluative meanings in their work. This study focuses on Attitude, one of the three subsystems of the Appraisal Theory. The results showed that Iraqi writers used more Appreciation resources than Judgment and Affect. This fact informs us that those writers chose to reveal less personal feelings and avoid clear ethical or moral evaluation.

Keywords: Evaluative Language, Attitude, Affect, Judgment, Appreciation





Introduction

One of the primary uses of language for writers is to express their opinions or attitudes about people or things. They build solidarity and alignment with potential or target readers through written content (Thompson, 2001). In fact, it has been claimed that lack of critical stance or the ability to use evaluative language, in academic writing can lead to the writers' failure to interact with their potential readers (Arsyad, 2000; Lee, 2006). Thus, in the context of academic writing, a writer must be capable of using evaluative and interactive language.

The importance of evaluative language in academic and other forms of writing is attested in the work of a number of scholars (e.g., Hyland, 2000a; 2002b; White 2002), partly due to the role that evaluative language can play in the textual construction of interaction between writers and readers. Contact in writing, or the use of evaluative language in writing, has become well established as a critical concept in accounting for the character of written material (e.g. Thompson & Thetela, 1995; Myers, 1999), particularly but not primarily in the case of academic writing.

Appraisal theory is a relatively new analytical framework drawn from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). It aims to identify the processes through which linguistic realization of interpersonal





meaning occurs when language is used. Appraisal Theory is one such instrument that is considered the “most systematic” since it “offers a typology of evaluative resources available in English” (Hyland, 2005a, P. 174).

Martin and White (2005) describe appraisal as the way that linguistic mechanisms that writers use to express emotions and taste are affected by the common feelings and values their society adapts. Those writers use evaluative language, or Appraisal, to create their text for potential and expected readers and how they present their identity and emotions in the text for their readers.

Since the establishment of a practical model that investigates the use of appraisal in a text by Martin (2000), there has been growing interest in investigating the use of appraisal in text. Many studies were conducted to investigate students' academic writing based on appraisal theory (e.g. Lee 2006; Mei 2007, 2008).

Jalilifar and Hemmati (2013) performed quantitative and qualitative analyses of high- and low-graded essays using appraisal theory as a framework for exploring the use of evaluative resources in the argumentative writings of 15 Kurdish-speaking MA students of TEFL. Quantitative and qualitative evidence typically supported that high-graded writers were able to successfully employ Attitudinal resources in crafting their academic writing argument. When compared to high-graded authors, low-graded authors used the Engagement tools less effectively. There was a small variation in how both sets of students used





Graduation material. The researchers recognized appraisal theory's value as an analytical framework for assessing students' academic writing abilities.

Lee (2010) considered the essays of six East Asian and six Australian students from an Australian university's Faculty of Arts. The primary appraisal was Engagement, which looked into how students used attribution in their writing. The study focused on the usage of explicit/manifest intertextual resources by high- and low-graded students in particular. It should be noted that the study did not include any special appraisal theory education. However, there were scaffolding sessions for students to clarify any potential difficulties during the course, in which participants were asked to produce four persuasive essays.

Wu (2008), for example, used Hunston's (1989) statement of evaluation status, instead of Appraisal theory, to examine the role of evaluative language in evaluating the statement types in high- and low-rated essays. Statements can serve two main purposes, according to Hunston (1989), informing and focusing, and can be used by the writer to express the meaning.

The findings of this study also showed that low-rated students used the fewest number of factual statements in their essays. Wu (2008) believes that this cannot be attributed to the students' lack of knowledge of academic writing. The findings supported the usefulness of using statement forms as an evaluative method for improving students' academic writing ability to generate argument or persuasion in a writing assignment. Since high-rated students were found to use





interpretation statement forms, it is suggested that academic courses meet the needs of students by raising their understanding of the use of interpretive language in academic genre writing. In fact, regardless of a student's level of academic writing experience, assisting undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate students in improving their understanding of written language statements can be beneficial to their academic performance, especially in the field of academic writing.

In another study regarding the same field of interest, Lee (2008) gathered data from 12 EAP students at an Australian university's Faculty of Arts to conduct an analytical study on their use of Attitudinal tools in persuasive writing. Lee used appraisal theory (Martin, 1992, 1997; Martin & White, 2005) as an analytical approach to examine the students' essay writing during the course, in which each student was required to write four assignments in the form of a persuasive or argumentative piece of writing. The students' writings were examined for the subcategories of Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation to see how well they might use those evaluation expressions in forming their argument or persuasion. The findings revealed substantial differences in how high- and low-graded students used Attitudinal resources.

Lee (2008) claimed that because high-graded writers used more evaluative language in their argumentative writing, these students' writing should be argumentative rather than descriptive. High-graded writers used a variety of





interpersonal resources to explain their point of view in order to make a judgement to build their argument.

Liu (2013) investigated the application of Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation resources in Chinese EFL students' writing, based on the complete framework of appraisal theory. According to the holistic rating, the pupils were separated into high- and low-graded writers, with the linguistic elements not being reviewed by the study's two raters. The comparison of high- and low-rated essays revealed similarities and differences in the way they used evaluative tools in their argumentative writing. When comparing the two groups of students' use of Attitudinal resources, it was discovered that both groups preferred Appreciation resources over Affect and Judgment, indicating that the students' writings were more likely appreciative than personal, which could be due to the Internet topic. Textual analysis verified high-rated writers' skillful use of Affect resources. Liu also found that “in the high-rated essay, there was a lower frequency of Engagement occurrences but a higher frequency of Monoglossic resources” (Liu, 2013, p.51). In high-rated essays, the use of Graduation resources was also noted, in the sense that the writers were able to create a meaningful interplay between the usage of Attitude and Graduation interpersonal instances.

Inspired by appraisal theory, Bahmani et al. (2021) investigated the influence of using evaluative language on high- and low-graded post-graduate students' academic writing in an EFL context across male and female groups. The findings





demonstrated that using evaluative language can help post-graduate students improve their academic writing skills, with no significant difference between the male and female groups. In terms of academic writing, high-graded students performed significantly better than low-graded students. The study's findings demonstrated that evaluative language can assist post-graduate students to develop a critical stance in academic writing, allowing the writer to engage in a dialogic engagement with the reader.

All these studies used appraisal theory in deferent contexts, However, few researchers investigated the use of Appraisal by MA theses EFL writings. Furthermore, no study has been conducted to show the usage Evaluative language resources by Iraqi EFL writers in their writings and in what percentages they use Affect, Judgement, and Appreciation.

Method

In this study, we have explored appraisal in the discussion section in the MA theses of both Iranian and Iraqi students. The reason for choosing this section is that writers have more freedom in expressing themselves within this section. In this section, we can read the writer's own voice and within the text the probability of using evaluative language and interpersonal expressions is high.

The study has examined the use of appraisal in Thirty EFL writings from the discussion section of MA theses. We chose those sections from Iraqi EFL MA



theses who came from various Iraqi universities. We started collecting our samples from graduated MA students from the ELT field. When we had collected all the necessary samples, we assigned a number for each discussion section (e.g. Dis1.... Dis30).

Each discussion section has been analyzed individually to identify and quantify the evaluative and dialogic linguistic resources used by its writer to convey his/her Attitudes towards the text itself and towards his/her audience, expand or contract the dialogic space for the negotiation of alternative value positions, and up/downscale/sharpen/soften various Attitudinal resources. We used the Attitudinal system of appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005) to collect the attitudinal resources of the text. Attitudinal resources include Affect, Judgement and Appreciation resources.

Each discussion section has been read repeatedly by the researcher for the identification and codification of explicit evaluative linguistic resources its author had used to construct his/her text, negotiate meanings with possible readers and engage in other voices.

Result

Table.1 demonstrates that among the three subsystems, the Discussion sections contained more Appreciation and Judgement items (with a total proportion of 72%) than Affect items (28%) based on the inscription of attitudinal values. The



use of attitudinal resources in this pattern is considered as characteristic of the argumentative genre (Lee, 2006; Liu & Thompson, 2009). Also, the idea that Appreciation resources (39%) were used more than Affect (28%) and Judgement (33%) resources show that the writers revealed less personal feelings and avoiding clear ethical or moral evaluation.

Table1. Attitudinal Frequencies in The MA Writings.

Attitudinal	Affect	Judgement	Appreciation
appraisal			
Positive Attitude	12	25	41
Negative Attitude	21	13	4
Total	33	38	45

Table 2. shows that Appreciation values were largely encoded as Valuation in MA theses, with a proportion of 60%. That is, the writers employed Valuation (Val) more than Composition (Comp) (36%) and Reaction (Reac) (4%) together. This suggests that the majority of Appreciation values in MA theses were devoted to the explicit evaluation of the significance of objects or occurrences (Liu, 2013).

In example 1 the writer employed Valuation (Val) to show a positive attitude toward his study has been valuable.



Example 1

the current study already has a very valuable (+Appreciation, Val) analytical solution.

Table2. Appreciation Frequencies in The MA Writings.

Appreciation	Reaction	Composition	Valuation
Attitudes			
Positive Attitudes	2	14	25
Negative Attitudes	0	2	2
Total	2	16	27

Valuation was also employed in example 2 to show a negative evaluation of the performance of his experimental group.

Example 2

the difference in the performance of the experimental group in the post – test has turned out to be statistically insignificant (- Appreciation, Val)





In terms of JUDGEMENT, Table 3. shows that MA Writings used more Social Esteem values (76%) than Social Sanction values (24%). This suggests that additional Social Esteem values were encoded in these works in order to express the writer's assessment of people's intellectual capacity and behavior. As a consequence, it appears that the primary emphasis of these works was not an ethical and legal judgment of people and/or people's behaviors.

Table3. Judgement Frequencies in The MA Writings.

Judgement	Social Esteem			Social Sanction	
	Normality	Capacity	Tenacity	Veracity	Propriety
Attitude					
Positive	4	15	1	2	3
Attitude					
Negative	3	5	1	3	1
Attitude					
Total	7	20	2	5	4





Table 4. also reveals that there is a pattern of distribution of Judgement values in the writings, with Capacity accounting for the greatest percentage (53%) of the total, which is similar to previous research on other EFL works (e.g. Lee, 2008; Wu & Allison, 2003). We can see this usage of Capacity Judgement in example 3 where a positive attitude was used toward a study that it would show insight into the agency of teachers working in Iraqi classroom.

Example 3

research is expected to provide insight (+ Judgement, Cap) into the agency of teachers working in Iraqi classrooms.

An example of social sanction judgement can be found in (example 4) in which Propriety (Prop) was used to show a positive attitude toward literature.

Example 4

Literature encourages ethical attitude (+ Judgement, Prop) when learners are to travel abroad.

The Iraqi MA writers used Affect Attitude on several occasions, as seen in Table 4. With a proportion of 43 percent, In/ Happiness was the most common Affect Attitude, followed by Dis/satisfaction, Dis/ Inclination, and In/ Security with percentages of 30 percent, 18 percent, and 9 percent, respectively. Example 5 shows the way one of the writers shows his unhappiness or a negative attitude about power abuse by authority forces





Example 5

It analyzes how the abuse (- Affect, Hap) of authority enforces, replicates, and articulates social inequality and dominance.

Another writer expresses his satisfaction with a book by stating that the majority of his students are pleased with that book.

Example 6

that only 2 out of 20 students were not satisfied (+ Affect, Sat) with the book.

Table 4 Affect Frequencies in The MA Writings.

Affect	In/	Dis/Satisfaction	In/ Security	Dis/Inclination
Attitude	Happiness			
Positive	2	4	2	4
Attitude				
Negative	12	6	1	2
Attitude				
Total	14	10	3	6





Conclusion

Appreciation resources were the most used attitudinal resource by the writers which implies that they chose to reveal less personal feelings and avoiding clear ethical or moral evaluation. Regarding Appreciation, we found the Iraqi writers used valuation(Val) the most with the percentage of (58%) and (60%) respectively. This suggests that the majority of Appreciation values in the Iraqi MA theses were devoted to the explicit evaluation of the significance of things or events.

With their use of Judgement resources, the Iraqi writers used more social esteem than social sanction. This suggests that these works encoded more Social Esteem values to express the writer's assessment of people's intellectual capacity and conduct rather than an ethical and legal judgment of people and/or people's actions. Regarding Affect, the Iraqi writers used In/ Happiness the most with a proportion of 43 percent.

The findings of the study can help EFL teachers use appraisal theory as an educational strategy to help students, particularly graduate and post-graduate students, enhance their critical awareness of academic writing and interpersonal resource literacy. However, in order to apply appraisal-based instruction in an EFL classroom, teachers must have sufficient knowledge about evaluative resources and how students should use them to write critically.



For future studies, a study can be conducted to address the effect of evaluative language on high- and low-graded post-graduate students' academic writing ability across gender in the Iraqi context.

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