

# **Exploring the Writer's Opinion in Two Undergraduates' Written Reports**

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This paper provides a comparative description of two reports written by first year students in terms of their evaluative quality. It focuses on the Discussion section where students are often expected to analyse results obtained and to convey their judgements or interpretations on these facts before they make certain recommendations to the readers. By applying aspects from Hunston's framework of evaluation (Hunston, 1989, 2000), it examines the kinds of statements these students make and describes the linguistic clues that are used or misused to convey their judgements. Generally, there is a difference in the variety of statement types and the frequency of modifying elements used by the two writers. There is also a difference in the way evaluative devices are used in the organisation of their texts. These differences highlight the need for raising students' awareness about how writers can express their opinion in a report.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper seeks to explain the qualitative difference between two reports in terms of the evaluative language used by the writers. Report writing assignments are commonly used for assessment purposes in Business English courses as they are seen as authentic writing tasks that prepare students for actual report writing in the business setting.

The task description of report writing in this study shares some similarities with the description of case study writing tasks described by Connor and Krammer (1995). The goals of case studies are to identify problems, analyse causes and to propose viable solutions with the implicit question, "what would you do?" Similarly, in report writing tasks, the problems have been identified for the students but based on their analysis of a set of given data, they have to analyse the causes and make recommendations for

action to be taken. Therefore recommendations made and the reasons for making have to be communicated clearly.

In this particular course, English for Academic Purpose (Business), for first year undergraduates at the Faculty of Business Administration, National University of Singapore, the emphasis is on the writing proficiency of the students. As part of their module assignment, all students are required to write a report assessing the adequacy of facilities in Canteen 1 (a fictitious canteen) given a set of data. They write their report following the general superstructure of reports outlined by (Anderson, 1995). This superstructure consists of the following sections: Introduction, Methods, Facts, Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendation. These sections require slightly different styles in the presentation of appropriate content and students may have difficulties with managing one or more of the sections. However, students generally find the Discussion section most difficult as this is the section that requires them to both present factual information and to interpret the information in significant and relevant ways that will help justify the suggestions made in the next section – the Recommendation section. The Discussion section is the section where the writer's opinion and analysis is most pertinent and therefore students have to communicate their judgements clearly and rationally. Thus, besides presenting data in an objective way, the need to interpret data and to make position statements that are well-substantiated by the data are important writing skills required in report writing.

## **Writer's opinion**

Various terms have been associated with the concept of the writer's opinion as can be seen in the list below:

- Modality (Palmer, 1986; Stubbs, 1986; Halliday, 1994)
- Stance (Conrad & Biber, 2000)
- Hedges/ Hedging (Hyland, 1996)
- Evidentials (Chafe, 1986; Barton, 1993)
- Metadiscourse (Intaraprawat & Steffensen, 1995)
- Evaluation (Hunston, 1989, 2000)
- Appraisal (Martin, 2000)

This array of terms is concerned with the elements of writer's commitment and attitude to differing degrees. Though the contexts of investigation and the definitions may differ somewhat, the underlying assumption of texts as sites of interaction (Hoey, 2000) is inherent in each of these approaches to the writer's opinion. Also, terms such as modality, hedges, metadiscourse, evidentials and evaluation are similarly concerned with the element of the writer's commitment to the truth value of propositions made in the text.

In this study, the writer's opinion basically involves judgements of certainty towards propositions made – an area which has proven difficult for many ESL writers. Hyland & Milton (1997) attribute the particular difficulties ESL students face with probability expressions to several reasons, one of which is the varied ways in which epistemic meaning can be conveyed. The more explicit form of signalling such meanings is through modal verbs but other lexical devices such as adverbs (e.g., “certainly”) and adjectives (e.g., “certain”) do contribute to epistemic meanings too. However, textbooks and writing guides do not give much detailed treatment to the appropriate use of these complex devices (Hyland & Milton, 1997).

Studies on metadiscourse (Intaraprawat & Steffensen, 1995) items show that good and poor essay writers make use of metadiscourse devices including validity markers differently. Following Van de Kopple (1985), they define validity markers as items which express the writer's commitment to the truth of the prepositional content. Validity markers consist of both hedges and emphatics. According to Intaraprawat and Steffensen (1995), both groups of writers used hedges frequently. For instance, good writers tend to use more modals and more grammatically complex structure to hedge while poor writers tend to use appended structures such as “I think...” or “I believe...”

Barton's (1993) work on evidentials clearly involves the writer's opinion. Using Chafe's (1986) definition, Barton (1993: 750) explains the concept of evidentials from a functional perspective as “a non-propositional word or phrase used to express an attitude towards knowledge.” In her comparison of expert and student writers of argumentative essays, Barton argues that the examination of student writing may be very much influenced by

expert writers' expectation of the way epistemological stance should be portrayed and conveyed through appropriate academic conventions. Thus it is important to understand how expert writers convey their stance towards propositional content and how students can be taught the acceptable ways within the academic context.

Hyland and Milton (1997) study qualification and certainty strategies in native and non-native student writers. Their study shows that non-native writers differ significantly from native speakers in the range of epistemic devices used and the manner in which they are used to make stronger or weaker assertions.

The notion of the writer's opinion or the writer taking a certain stance is very pertinent in the genre of academic argumentative essays. However, it receives far less attention in a genre such as the business report as a report is often seen to be an objective document based on factual information. Thus, the aim of this study was to explore the qualitative difference between two reports from an evaluation viewpoint.

## **Evaluation of status**

In particular, this study looks at the writer's opinion as evaluation. Hunston (2000: 5) defines evaluation as

a broad cover term for the expression of the writer's or speaker's attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, feelings about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about. That attitude may relate to certainty or obligation or any of a number of other sets of values. When appropriate, we refer specifically to modality as a sub-category of evaluation.

In Hunston's framework, there are three types of evaluation – the evaluation of status, value and relevance. The evaluation of status, which is the focus in this paper, assesses the level of writer's commitment along the certain-uncertain scale. It is identified by the writer activity, modified by ascribed source of the proposition and by other modification devices such as modal verbs, report verbs and meta-linguistic labellings.

The identification of status in propositions is exemplified in Text 1 below:

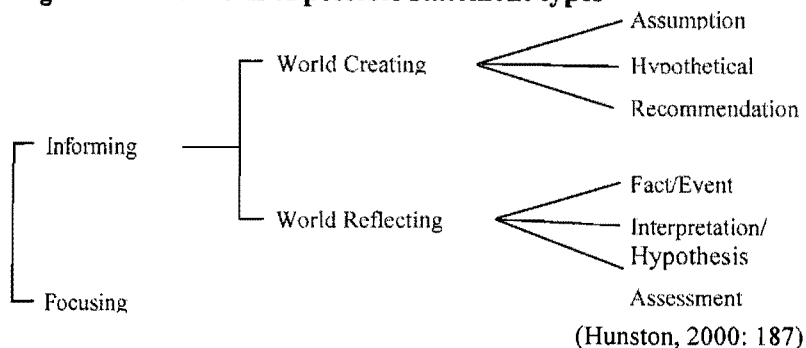
*Text 1*

1) Authors in the past have advocated using learners' beliefs and opinions as input for second language (L2) course design (e.g., Breen, 1984; Nunan, 1988). 2) Furthermore, many practising teachers assume that learners' beliefs and opinions about L2 courses constitute a viable basis for planning them. 3) Widdows and Voller (1991), for example, make strong claims about L2 curriculum reforms in Japan on the basis of learner opinions, 4) and similar claims are commonly made in conjunction with learner beliefs research. 5) However, these claims are usually based on an implicit assumption that learners' expressed learning preferences represent their actual learning needs. 6) This is of course, an empirical question that requires clarification.

Each clause in Text 1 has been parsed and numbered for easy referencing. The status of clause 1 is that of a claim about course design said to have been "advocated" by a general source (authors in the past). This claim is validated by two cited references. The status of this belief has been modified by the reporting verb "advocated", which signals that it is probably not a position that is well established amongst the applied linguists circle yet. Also, it may signal that the writer excludes himself from this group of proponents. The source of the belief attributed to a non-specific group of past authors again affects the status in that less credibility is given to it than if the source was said to be a group of renowned linguists. Here we see that both the reporting verb "advocate" and the source signal the status of the proposition made in clause 1. In clauses 3 and 4, the writer labels the propositions made by Widdows and Voller and others as "claims" and "strong claims" respectively. Thus, the proposition in sentence (3) concerning "L2 curriculum reforms in Japan" is assessed by the writer as a "claim" or "hypothesis" as far as the statement type is concerned.

Hunston (1989) identifies a list of 19 statement types that are pertinent to the genre of experimental research articles. Hunston also provides a network of possible statement types found in the genre of persuasive texts (Figure 1):

**Figure 1. A network of possible statement types**

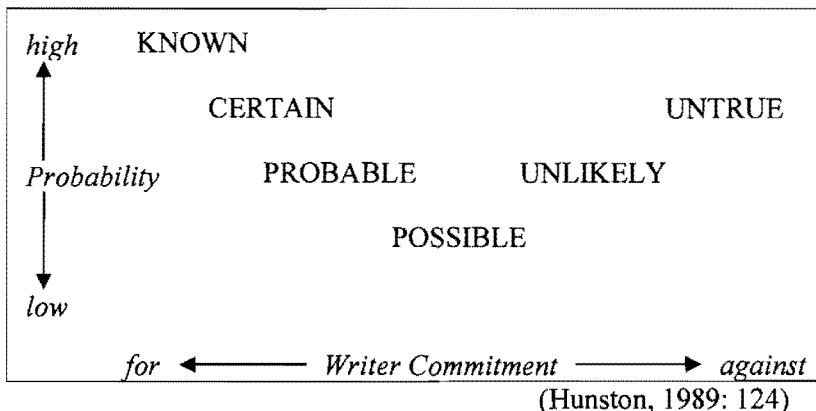


**Table 1. A description of statement types**

Statement types	Description
HYPOTHESIS (HYPO)	A HYPOTHESIS is a statement which expresses the writer's position on the issue that is being discussed. The writer proposes a certain way of looking at or explaining a contention.
INTERPRETATION-CAUSE (I-CAUSE)	Statements which highlight the writer's expression of the causal relationship between events/ situations/processes.
INTERPRETATION-SUPPORT (I-SUP)	Statements which make reference to data presented and highlight the effectiveness of that set of data in illustrating or supporting a prior proposition made.
ASSESSMENT (ASS)	Statements which express the writer's description of properties/ attributes of entities/ states/ events/ situations in terms that is usually not verifiable. This description is generally in attributive terms depicting the qualitative rather than the quantitative.
STATE REULLTS (SR)	Statements which make reference to facts and figures provided as data for the purpose of writing the report e.g. interview responses. These statements show no signal of interpretation.
FOCUS (FOC)	Statements which are used to organise the current text and includes statements involving the aims or organisation of the text.

Table 1 provides a description of the statement types found in the current samples. The configuration of statement types, source of statement and other modifying verbs modulate the certainty level of that proposition. Each clause can then be ascribed a certainty level depending on the above parameters. Figure 2 shows the network of possible certainty levels.

**Figure 2. A network of possible certainty levels**



## THE STUDY

The three main questions in this study are:

- 1) To what extent do the two reports differ in terms of the statement types used by the writers?
- 2) To what extent do the two reports differ in terms of the certainty levels used by the writers?
- 3) To what extent do the two reports differ in terms of the level of attribution used by the writers?

This study compares the evaluation of status of propositions within the Discussion section of two business reports that were graded A (Sample A) and C (Sample C) respectively. First year students in the School of Business, National University of Singapore, have to take an English Proficiency course if they do not have the required proficiency level. Their proficiency levels are determined by a diagnostic test administered earlier. The two reports were taken from a required assignment given to students in

this proficiency English course. Given a set of data about the conditions of a canteen, the students have to write a report to a supervisor giving his/her recommendations regarding the necessity for renovation to be done in that canteen.

The sentences within the section were parsed into T-unit for analysis. Hunt's (1970: 4) definition of a T-unit as "one main clause plus any subordinate clause or non-clausal structure that is attached to or embedded in it" was used. Each T-unit was categorised for its status. Only the main clause in both samples were analysed for their status levels. Table 1 provides a list of possible sentence type found in the samples. These statement types are basically a sub-set of the types identified by Hunston (2000) shown in Figure 1. However, the definitions of the statement types have been modified to suit the type of data analysed in this study. A sample of the analysis done is shown in Appendix 1.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Table 2 presents the results of the analysis of independent T-units in Samples A and C. As far as statement type is concerned, Samples A and C show the biggest difference in their use of the category of STATE RESULT. In terms of certainty level, the biggest difference lies in the category of statements given the status of KNOWN. Samples A and C also differ in their levels of attribution as there is a difference of 20% in the statements attributed to sources in the two samples.

### **Statement types used by writers**

In terms of statement types, Sample A differs markedly from Sample C in all categories except the category of ASSESSMENT. The most significant contrast is in the occurrence of STATE RESULT with 37.5% for A and 73% for C. Both have almost equivalent percentages of ASSESSMENT. Examples of STATE RESULT and ASSESSMENT taken from Sample A are provided below:

Besides, 26% of staff and 46% of students are having lunch there 3-4 times per week. (STATE RESULT)



**It can be said** that Canteen 1 is most crowded between 1pm and 2pm as shown in the VA2. (ASSESSMENT)

**Table 2. A status comparison between Samples A and C**

	<b>Sample A</b>	<b>Sample C</b>
<b>STATEMENT TYPE</b>		
STATE RESULT	18/48 (37.5%)	11/15 (73%)
ASSESSMENT	12/48 (25%)	4/15 (26%)
INTERPRET	7/48 (14.5%)	0 (0%)
HYPOTHESIS	2/48 (4.1%)	0 (0%)
FOCUS	8/48 (16.6%)	0 (0%)
EXTRAPOLATION	1/48 (2%)	0 (0%)
<b>CERTAINTY LEVEL</b>		
KNOWN	16/42 (38%)	12/15 (80%)
CERTAIN	15/42 (35.7%)	3/15 (20%)
PROBABLE	8/42 (19.1%)	0 (0%)
POSSIBLE	2/42 (4.7%)	0 (0%)
<b>SOURCE</b>		
ATTRIBUTION TO DATA/ RESPONDENTS	17/42 (40.4%)	3/15 (20%)

Sample C has no occurrence of INTERPRETATION, HYPOTHESIS, FOCUS and EXTRAPOLATION. It presents predominantly factual results that were given to the students as data for analysis. An attempt to assess the data was evident only in the occurrence of ASSESSMENT where for instance, the size of the canteen was described qualitatively rather than in terms of the facts and figures on the patronage level. Other than this, it is not clear what the writer's hypothesis on the issue is as there is no HYPOTHESIS present.

Also, the linguistic items used are not indicative of the writer's interpretation of data. Compare this to Example 1 in Sample A (see bold print) where certain clauses are used to indicate the writer's interpretation of the results to support his proposition that the canteen is crowded daily:

*Example 1*

This is **proven** in the survey's result, VA 1, which **shows** that 60% of staff and 32% of students are usually have their lunch at canteen1 5-6 times per week.

Also, Sample A has one occurrence of an **EXTRAPOLATION** where the student states that

*Example 2*

It is **estimated** that the number of the potential users of canteen1 in year 2000 is 335 persons, which is 135 persons more than the canteen's capacity.

In Example 2, the student qualifies clearly that the figures given are his own estimation and this therefore indicates one form of writer's opinion.

Sample A also has **FOCUS** statements (Example 3) that are meant to guide the reader in the unfolding of ideas in the text. Though these statements are not evaluative, they act as signposts to make a text more reader-friendly.

*Example 3*

How frequent do interviewees having lunch at Canteen 1?

An analysis of the dependent structures in Sample A shows that out of the 14 additional clauses, eight of them were **STATE RESULT**, two **INTERPRETATION** and three of them were **FOCUS**. Here it may be interpreted that the writer is rather strategic in presenting known facts in less prominent dependent structures while the writer's **INTERPRETATION** is made more salient in the main clause. Example 4 illustrates this point:

*Example 4*

It can be said that Canteen1 is most crowded between 1pm and 2pm **as shown in the VA2**.

In Sample C, the writer used mainly simple sentences. Thus, the dependent clause analysis yielded only one more clause expressing **STATE RESULT**.

As far as the statement type analysis shows, it seems that the better grade given to Sample A could be a result of the way facts

are used to support interpretations made by the writer – the presence of both categories is important. Also, a clear statement of position and the presentation of results in a more qualitative manner (ASSESSMENT) may have contributed to clearer expression of the writer's judgement in Sample A, which is important in such texts. When appropriate, the extrapolation of data helps to show the student's opinion about the significance of trends in the figures too.

### **Certainty levels**

In terms of certainty levels, both students had propositions that are predominantly assertive (i.e. KNOWN and CERTAIN). However, Sample A has propositions adjusted for certainty at appropriate junctures. For instance, in the statement of the ASSESSMENT of the interviewees' response, the writer is careful to indicate epistemic possibility through the use of "it can be said" (see Example 5).

#### *Example 5*

**It can be said** that the interviewees are generally not satisfied with the seating capacity of Canteen1 as 68% of interviewees claimed that the seating capacity there is very poor in meeting users' need and the rest also gave a poor rate on this point.

Also, in the statement of his HYPOTHESIS, the writer indicates again that this is one possible position to take on the issue (see Example 6).

#### *Example 6*

From the response of interviewees, VA5, **we can conclude** that the users are fairly satisfied with the canteen's hygienic environment as 81% of them claimed that the hygiene in canteen1 is above middle rate, which means good.

### **Level of attribution**

In terms of attribution, Sample A shows a stronger tendency to attribute STATE RESULT to sources such as "data" or "respondents" whereas Sample C had only three instances where the writer makes references to the respondents as a source of data. In the case of the former, it becomes clearer to the reader when the

writer is switching from making a personal proposition to one that is attributed to other sources. The contrast makes the notion of the writer's opinion more discernable and therefore significant.

Besides these differences, there are some linguistic features in both samples that perhaps are indicative of the learning process when these students learn to evaluate appropriately. In both samples, there were instances of grammatical errors such as in the use of modals with inflected verb forms which are more likely to be learner's error rather than oversight as seen in the Example 7 below:

*Example 7*

and this **may causes** the canteen become crowded, as is complained by users before.

The other aspect is the choice of reporting verbs which, as we have seen, conveys evaluation. This is seen in the Examples 8, 9, 10.

*Example 8*

It can be said that the interviewees are generally not satisfied with the seating capacity of Canteen1 as 68% of interviewees **claimed** that the seating capacity there is very poor in meeting users' need

*Example 9*

VA5, we can conclude that the users are fairly satisfied with the canteen's hygienic environment as 81% of them **claimed** that the hygiene in canteen1 is above middle rate, which means good.

*Example 10*

The contractor **claimed** that the tables and chairs in the canteen are thoroughly wiped, canteen floor I swept and mopped at 6pm everyday.

In Examples 8 and 9, the writers are making position statements in the main clause and the dependent structures are used to present factual data to substantiate those position statements. However, both writers use the reporting verb "claim" as they present the respondents' interview responses. This reporting verb presents the results of the interview in a tentative manner. A better choice of word perhaps would be "affirmed", so that the position

statements can be said to be strongly substantiated by the interviewees' affirmation rather than claim. Similarly in Example 10, the writer is reporting an interview response but the use of the reporting verb "claim" again adds a sense of doubt as to whether this response is meant to be debated upon by the writer or whether it is used to affirm some other propositions.

At other junctures, the writer amplifies the sense of assertion too strongly through the choice of words as seen the Example 11:

*Example 11*

This is **proven** in the survey's result, VA 1.

In interpreting data to support a proposition, the writer uses the word "proven" to add validity to the proposition. However, casual remarks obtained from other communication skills lecturers seem to indicate that it is too strong a word as one cannot prove the validity of the proposition through a single interview response. One should point to the fact that the response "shows" something "clearly" without asserting that a proposition has been proven true.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

Although reports are based on facts, the element of interpretation of results and assessment of propositions are very important too. 73% of the statements in Sample C were used to state factual data gathered from the survey. There is an acute lack of the interpretative element in this report. Students should be made aware of the need for their opinion in writing a report. Also, they need to learn how to convey these evaluations in an appropriate manner. The sense of evaluation can be expressed through the correct use of certain linguistic items such as modal verbs or certain class of adverbs and adjectives. Exposure through language practice in the use of such items would help them gain more confidence (Hyland & Milton, 1997).

Besides the use of modal constructions, reporting verbs also convey evaluation. Students should be made aware that the choice of reporting verbs will influence how they position themselves towards a proposition made (Pickard, 1995). As shown in the Discussion section, when using respondents' interview data to

support his/her claim, the writer's use of the reporting verb "claim" instead of "affirm" actually weakens the rhetorical effect of the data presented as evidence. With exposure to a wider range of possible reporting verbs and the meaning they entail, students may be better able to select the correct items for use in their writing.

In terms of the attribution of propositions to relevant sources, students can be encouraged to differentiate between ideas that are attributed to others and self as clearly as possible (Scollon, Tsang, Yung, & Jones, 1998). This will help readers to understand the writer's position more clearly. Besides the use of reporting verbs, students should be taught how to make clear references to sources other than themselves in a variety of ways so that they can make appropriate selections that are pertinent to their specific assignments.

## CONCLUSION

Evaluation is a very important aspect of writing. As can be seen in this study, just as the presentation of factual results is important in report writing, how the writer makes use of the facts to substantiate his position is equally important. However, this is an exploratory study on a small scale into the evaluative devices used by two writers only. A larger scale study might be able to reveal more interesting details in the way students attempt to convey their evaluation of ideas.

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### Appendix 1. Analysis of statement type, certainty level and source in Sample A

CLAUSES	WRITER ACTIVITY	CERTAINTY	SOURCE
1. How frequent do interviewees having lunch at Canteen1?	FOC		
2. a) Interviewees are having lunch very often at the canteen b) and this <b>may</b> causes the canteen become crowded, as is complained by users before.	ASS I-CAUSE	CERTAIN PROBABLE	
3. This <b>is proven</b> in the survey's result, VA 1, which <b>shows</b> that 60% of staff and 32% of students are usually have their lunch at canteen1 5-6 times per week.	I-SUP SR	CERTAIN KNOWN	ATT
4. (a) Besides, 26% of staff and 46% of students are having lunch there 3-4 times per week (b) and the rest are having lunch there 1-2 times per week.	SR SR	KNOWN KNOWN	
5. What time do the interviewees normally have lunch?	FOC		
6. <b>It can be said</b> that Canteen1 is most crowded between 1pm and 2pm as <b>shown</b> in the VA2.	ASS FOC	PROBABLE	ATT
7. For the other period, the canteen's capacity is enough to meet the users' need.	ASS	CERTAIN	
8. How many people are the potential users of canteen1?	FOC		
9. The number of first year business students registered is increasing from year to year, starting from the year 1997 to year 2000.	ASS	CERTAIN	
10. <b>It is proven in the data</b> given by registrar office of RP as shown in VA10, which <b>shows</b> that the number of students registered in 2000 (258 persons) is more than double of the figure in year 1997 (109 persons).	I-SUP SR	CERTAIN KNOWN	ATT (DATA)

ASS	Assessment
ATT	Attributed
EXT	Extrapolation
FOC	Focus
HYPO	Hypothesis
I-CAUSE	Interpret-Cause
I-SUPP	Interpret support
SR	State results/ facts