

## Citation practices in EFL academic writing: The use of reporting verbs in Master's thesis literature reviews

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### ABSTRACT

Reporting belongs among key features of academic writing, and reporting verbs (RVs) are probably the most explicit way of attributing the content to other sources. For EFL learners, the correct use of RVs is often challenging. While most EFL studies focus on the functions of citation as used by novice researchers in research articles, Ph.D. theses, or university writing, fewer works are concerned with Master's theses, often students' first encounter with original scientific and academic writing. This study explores the use of RVs in EFL learners' Master's theses. Besides investigating the types and functions of RVs, the choices of the verb tense, voice, and the subject-agent in the reporting structures are explored. The research was performed on 82 Master's thesis Literature Reviews written in English by Czech economics and management students. To determine the types and functions of RVs, the study adopts Hyland's (1999, 2002) framework. First, the frequencies of RVs occurrence are counted, and RVs are discussed in terms of process categories and evaluative functions. Second, the choices of the verb tense, voice, and the subject-agent in the reporting structures are analysed. The findings show a predominant use of RVs conveying a neutral attitude towards the reported content and neutrally summarizing the previous research in the present simple active tense with named-author as the subject. Although the results confirm the trend common for novice researchers and soft discipline writers, we believe that the enhancement of appropriate use of RVs in academic writing courses is necessary. The findings might offer insights applicable to EFL contexts and contribute to the body of existing research on the citation.

Keywords: Academic writing; citation; EFL; reporting; soft discipline

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### INTRODUCTION

One of the identifying features of academic writing is reporting the work of others or references to previous research. Their importance in academic discourse lies in providing an appropriate context of persuasion, demonstrating how the current work builds on and reworks past utterances to establish inter-textual links to the wider discipline (Hyland, 2002). The use of reporting verbs (RVs) represents one of the most straightforward ways of attributing content to another source. The employment of RVs in academic discourse represents a significant

rhetorical choice (Hyland, 2014), allowing writers to report the source material and indicate their stance towards a quoted material (Ramoroka, 2014), and present their study persuasively (Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2015, 2016).

In an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, the understanding of academic writing conventions, such as the use of reporting structures, and RVs in particular, is often perceived as a daunting task, especially in the scholarly environment of scientific journals where an excellent command of academic English becomes

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an obligatory prerequisite (Suherdi et al., 2020). In university education, this becomes even more challenging as novice writers - second language (2L) learners - are required to produce their academic writing tasks in a foreign language in which they might not be fully proficient (Juliaty, 2019; Lo et al., 2020; Suherdi et al., 2020).

Besides essays, reports, or papers that can be termed under university writing (Lee et al., 2018), for many undergraduate students, Master's theses represent their first major academic and scientific writing before entering the world of research as Ph.D. candidates and/or novice researchers. While numerous studies (e.g., Agbaglo, 2017; Bloch, 2010; Jafarigohar & Mohammadkani, 2015; Thomas & Hawes, 1994) on RVs in academic discourse concentrate on their use in research articles (RAs) or in university under-graduate writing (Anas & Sukyadi, 2019; Lee et al., 2018; Liardét & Black, 2019; Ramoroka, 2014), relatively few works explore the use of citation, and RVs in particular, in Master's theses (e.g., Manan & Noor, 2015; Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2015, 2016; Samraj, 2013). Yet such findings may contribute to shaping up syllabi for academic writing courses as the usage and appropriate choice of RVs undoubtedly present a higher-level mastery of academic writing (Bloch, 2010).

This study aims to contribute to the research of citation practices in EFL contexts and academic writing classrooms. It explores the use of RVs in Master's theses written in English by 2L learners - Czech students of the Economics and Management programme. The study focuses on Literature Review sections of the Master's thesis. As Suherdi et al. (2020) point out, each section in a piece of academic writing, be it a RA or a thesis, has its writing norms. In a Literature Review section, students present, summarize, and report on the findings of other authors' academic works, such as curriculum-assigned textbooks, monographs, or RAs. It is this particular section of a thesis where citations are mostly found (Soler-Monreal & Gil-Salom, 2011), presenting background and concepts parallel with their research (Ridley, 2008).

Most studies concerned with citation or RVs look at forms and functions of citation (Manan & Noor, 2015; Mansourizadeh & Ahmad, 2011; Samraj, 2013). The findings from the research performed on students' academic writing (Ramoroka, 2014) and Master's theses in particular (Manan & Noor, 2015) show that students are not always fully aware of how to use RVs appropriately. However, RVs are one of the most significant items in writing statements for academic writing (Hyland, 2014). For L2 learners, it is often difficult to choose the RVs that can both meet the syntactic requirements of the reporting sentence and, at the same time, express their attitudes toward the reported claims (Bloch, 2010). However, studies

concerned with the syntactic aspects of citation, such as the use of tense and voice, are rarer (Hawes & Thomas, 1997; Thomas & Hawes, 1994). Nevertheless, incorrect tense choices or the overuse of passive forms in citations are often the most significant challenges the L2 learners face.

Hence, besides investigating the use of RVs in Master's thesis Literature Reviews and determining their types and functions, the study also explores the use of the tense, voice, and the choice of the subject in the reporting structures containing the RVs. The results of the study aim to contribute to the existing body of scholarly literature on citation practice in EFL contexts. Moreover, the results may offer insights into improving academic writing courses curricula by enhancing the importance of RVs in academic writing both on a global and local scale. Two research questions have guided the study:

- 1) What types of RVs do students use in Master's thesis Literature Reviews?
- 2) What choices of tense, voice, and subject are made in structures containing the RVs?

#### **Classification of reporting verbs**

Swales (1990) makes a distinction between integral and non-integral citation. While the non-integral citation refers to the researcher only in parenthesis or by superscript numbers, emphasizing the reported message, e.g. (Swales, 1990), the integral citation contains the name of the reported researcher and an RV in the grammar of the reporting sentence, emphasising the messenger, e.g., Swales (1990) argued (Lee et al., 2018). Moreover, by employing an RV, the writer takes a stance towards the message reported on (Hyland, 2014).

Thomson and Ye (1991) classified RVs into three groups based on the processes RVs denote: textual verbs referred to a process in which verbal expression was a compulsory component (e.g., *state, write, challenge*), mental referred to mental processes (e.g., *believe, think, focus on*) and research verbs referred to the mental or physical processes that were part of the research work (e.g., *measure, calculate*). Thomas and Hawes (1994) classified RVs into three categories based on the activities they refer to or the processes involved. Their classification of RVs as experimental activities (e.g., *find, demonstrate*), discourse activities (e.g., *state, report*), and cognition activities (e.g., *think, believe*) shows consistency with Thomson and Ye (1991). Unlike Thomson and Ye (1991), who focused on RVs in signaling evaluation, Thomas and Hawes (1994) concentrated on discourse implications and rhetorical functions of reports containing RVs, subdividing the discourse and experimental verbs into minute subclasses based on report functions.

Hyland (1999) draws from both systems classifying RVs into three types depending on the

activity they refer. Research Acts verbs indicate experimental activity carried out in the real world (e.g. *observe, discover, show*). Cognition Acts verbs are associated with the researcher's mental processes (e.g., *believe, suspect, assume*). In contrast, Discourse Acts verbs are concerned with linguistic activities and focus on the verbal expression of cognitive or research activities (e.g., *discuss, report, state*). Hyland (2002) divided the three types of RVs into subsets of evaluative categories, based on the evaluative function of RVs. Writers can take either a supportive, tentative, critical, or neutral stance towards the reported claims. It can vary their commitment by employing verbs that imply a personal stance (e.g., *show, demonstrate*) or attribute a position to the original author (e.g., *accuse, believe*) (Hyland, 2002).

Jafarigohar and Mohammadkhani (2015) used Thompson and Ye's (1991) classification in a corpus-based study of RVs in applied linguistics RAs written by non-native and native English writers. Ramoroka (2014) investigated RVs in university students' writing, employing Thomas and Hawes' (1994) typology and focusing on discourse certainty informing and argument verbs. Applying Hyland's (2002) classification, Agbaglo (2017) found out that Discourse Acts RVs were mostly used in RAs written by university lecturers at the Department of English, as compared to less frequently used Research Acts and Cognition Acts categories. Contrastingly, Manan and Noor's (2015) study of Master's theses showed that the students were more familiar with Research Acts rather than Cognition or Discourse Acts verbs.

Another way of examining RVs is by exploring their syntactic patterns. In further research performed on RAs, Hawes and Thomas (1997) found out that the leading choices for the verb in reporting sentences were the past tense in the active voice, followed by the present tense and present perfect active and passive. Moreover, the choice of the tenses correlated with the categorization of RVs into Discourse and Non-Discourse verbs (Thomas & Hawes, 1994). Citations with RVs in the past tense and with the name of the researcher as the subject have the discourse function of providing particulars for a previous generalization or a claim, while citations with the verb in the present tense communicate generalized interpretations and suggest the writer's commitment to the reported information. The present perfect tense in citations usually highlights the relevance of previous studies to the writer's research write-up (Hawes & Thomas, 1997).

#### **Genre studies in reporting and citation practice**

Many studies were performed on citation practice in RAs (e.g. Harwood, 2009; Thompson & Ye, 1991). Hyland (1999) found that non-integral citations were used more frequently in hard disciplines (e.g.,

chemistry, biology) as opposed to soft disciplines (social science and humanities), where integral citations (those with RVs and subject/agent) allow writers to show their stance and make an evaluation. According to Mansourizadeh and Ahmad (2011), non-native novice writers tended to use citations in isolation, while non-native expert writers from the same discipline were able to synthesize more sources and make use of non-integral citations. Jafarigohar and Mohammadkhani (2015) compared RVs in applied linguistics RAs. The findings show that native writers use direct quotations (direct quotes in inverted commas) more frequently than non-native writers, thanks to their linguistic skills to handle sources produced by other authors more effectively.

Lee et al. (2018) explored research papers written by university 1st-year L2 learners. The findings indicated a restricted use of reporting structures and adopting a non-committal stance rather than taking a strong positive or negative position towards a cited material. Similarly, Liardét and Black (2019) found out that, in their university assignments, English learners relied on using merely acknowledging structures such as *state* or *according to*, providing no subjective stance on the reported source. Analysing essays written by non-native university undergraduates, Ramoroka (2014) concluded that the students used informative RVs neutral in passing the information from the source to the reader rather than interpreting the information cited. Manan and Noor (2015), who analysed RVs in theses of Malaysian EFL Master's students, agree with other researchers (Petrić, 2007; Ramoroka, 2014) on emphasizing the importance of teaching RVs in English academic writing or research methodology courses and familiarizing students with evaluative functions of RVs.

In the EFL context, similar challenges are faced by doctoral students (Lo et al., 2020) who may lack more explicit information on the use of citations (Jomaa & Bidin, 2017, 2019; Thompson, 2005). The findings thus further indicate the necessity to raise students' awareness of citation types and functions at both the postgraduate (Jomaa & Bidin, 2017, 2019) and undergraduate level (Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2015; Samraj, 2013).

## **METHOD**

### **Corpus and data**

The research was performed on 82 Master's theses written in English by Czech students of the English programme of Economics and Management at the Faculty of Economics and Management of a university in the Czech Republic. The created corpus contained 82 Literature Review sections from Master's theses that met the following criteria: 1) the theses were available online, 2) were successfully defended between January 2017 and

June 2019, and 3) were written by Czech students as English L2 learners.

The corpus consisting of 82 texts contained 439,356 words in total. The length of individual texts varied from 3,899 to 6,401 words, amounting to 5,358 words per text on average. The texts in the corpus were carefully read and searched for the occurrences of citations containing RVs. Only reporting structures were analysed as in (1):

- (1) Daniela Pauknerová et al. also *state* that the manager should be able to influence the evaluation of workers. (MTLR11RV3);

or as a “by-adjunct” in the sentence structure as in (2):

- (2) The third reason *suggested* by Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick (2006) is to find out whether the program was effective and brings improvements and also how can the future programs be changed. (MT23RV2);

or where a generalized or certain meta-linguistic expression was used in place of the subject/agent as in (3):

- (3) The study *confirmed* a weak relationship between work satisfaction and the subjective feeling of nurses. (MTLR4RV6)

Each reporting structure was allocated a code - e.g., MTLR1RV1 - where MTLR1 stood for the Master’s thesis Literature Review, randomly coded from 1 to 82, and RV1 for the order of the RV found in that particular section.

### Data analysis

Altogether 837 occurrences of RVs were extracted from the corpus. First, the frequencies of individual RVs occurrences were counted. Frequencies are used to indicate how often a phenomenon occurs and are based on counting the number of occurrences (Seliger & Shohamy, 1990).

The present study employs Hyland’s (1999, 2002) framework of categorizing RVs according to the processes RVs describe (Hyland, 1999) and evaluative functions the RVs carry in each process category (Hyland, 2002). This framework was used as it enables the writers to express their stance towards (or evaluation of) the reported content, implied in their choices of RVs. Within the framework, RVs are divided into three process categories: Research Acts, Cognitive Acts, and Discourse Acts RVs. In each process category, the RVs are further classified as follows:

Research Acts verbs refer to the research activity or experimental procedure. They occur in the statement of Findings (e.g., *observe, discover, notice, show*) or Procedures (e.g., *analyse, calculate, explore*). Within the Findings subcategory, writers can acknowledge the reported results with factive verbs such as *confirmed* in (3). They can also

portray the author’s judgment as false or incorrect, adopting a counter-factive stance (e.g., *fail, misunderstand, ignore*). Or they can comment on research findings non-factively (e.g. *find, identify, observe, obtain*), “with no clear attitudinal signal as to their reliability” (Hyland, 2002, p. 7).

Cognitive Acts verbs portray the cited work in terms of mental processes. The writers have either a positive attitude to the reported material (e.g., *agree, hold, know, think, understand*), a tentative view (*believe, doubt, suppose, suspect*), a critical stance (*disagree, dispute, not think*) or a natural attitude towards the proposition (e.g., *picture, conceive, reflect*).

Discourse Acts verbs are verbal expressions of both the research and the cognitive activities. Hyland (2002) further divides those verbs that express Doubt into tentative (e.g., *hypothesize, indicate, postulate*), such as *suggested* in (2), or directly critical (e.g., *exaggerate, not account, not make point*). Assurance verbs, on the other hand, introduce the reported material more positively. They are further subdivided into non-factive verbs neutrally. They inform the reader about the author’s position (e.g., *describe, discuss, report, define, summarize*), such as *state* in (1), and factive verbs supporting the writer’s position towards the cited author (e.g., *argue, affirm, explain, note, point out, claim*). The last sub-category of Discourse Acts verbs are Counters, expressing reservations or objections towards the report, with the writer attributing the objections to the cited author (e.g., *deny, challenge, question, refute, rule out*).

After the implementation of the classification to the RVs, the structures containing the RVs were analysed in terms of the tense and voice used. Finally, the type and position of the subject/agent were discussed.

### FINDINGS

#### Types of reporting verbs

In the corpus, RVs occurred in all three process categories, however, rather disproportionately (Table 1). Of all 837 occurrences, Discourse Acts verbs were the most highly represented (68.5%), followed by a significantly lower occurrence of Research Acts verbs (20.8%) and even lower occurrence of Cognitive Acts verbs (10.7%). In total, the mean occurrence of RVs was 10.21 per 5,358 words, i.e., the mean number of words per text, with the minimal marginal occurrence at 0 (2 texts) and the marginal maximum occurrence at 26 (1 text). Discourse Acts verbs averaged out to 6.99 occurrences per text, Research Acts verbs to 2.12 occurrences per text, and Cognition Acts to 1.10 occurrences per text.

**Table 1**

*Frequencies of RVs in the Corpus and Their Mean Frequency Per Text*

RVs	Occurrences in the corpus	Mean occurrence per text
Discourse	573 (68.5%)	6.99
Research	174 (20.8%)	2.12
Cognition	90 (10.7%)	1.10
<b>Total</b>	<b>837 (100%)</b>	<b>10.21</b>

Within the most highly represented category of Discourse Acts (Table 2), it was the Assurance verbs that were by far the most frequent (95.3%). The non-factive verbs (56.6%), neutrally informing the reader of the author's position towards the cited material, were used more frequently than the factive verbs (38.7%), employed by writers to introduce the cited material in more positive or conclusive terms. The non-factive Assurance verbs were thus the most frequent sub-category not only within the Assurance verbs but also within the overall occurrences of the RVs used.

The Doubt category verbs (4.7%) appeared in 27 occurrences only, which can be attributed to the 27 occurrences of the only tentative Doubt verb *suggest* (4.7%) found in the corpus (Table 3). The Doubt category verbs, which are directly critical (0%) were not used at all. Similarly, the final category of Discourse Acts verbs, Counters (0%), referring to the author's reservations or objections to the correctness of the reported message, had no representatives in the corpus.

**Table 2**

*Frequencies of RVs in Different Evaluative Functions in the Discourse*

Category/Sub-Category	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Research Acts</b>	<b>174</b>	<b>20.8%</b>
<i>Findings</i>	66	37.9%
Factive	36	20.7%
Non-factive	30	17.2%
Counter-factive	0	0%
<i>Procedures</i>	108	62.1%
<b>Cognitive Acts</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>10.7%</b>
Positive	63	70%
Critical	0	0%
Tentative	6	6.7%
Neutral	21	23.3%
<b>Discourse Acts</b>	<b>573</b>	<b>68.5%</b>
<i>Doubt</i>	27	4.7%
Tentative	27	4.7%
Critical	0	0%
<i>Assurance</i>	546	95.3%
Factive	222	38.7%
Non-factive	324	56.6%
<i>Counters</i>	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>837</b>	<b>100%</b>

Among Research Acts, Procedures verbs (62.1%) were more frequent than Findings verbs (37.9%), thanks to the 51 occurrences of *add* (Table 3). Both the factive (20.7%) and non-factive Findings verbs (17.2%) contained a variety of verbs usually found in three or six occurrences only. The

frequency of the factive verbs (20.7%) was slightly higher than that of the non-factive verbs (17.2%) thanks to *confirm* which had 9 occurrences, unlike the other verbs in the Research Acts category that recorded in 3 or 6 occurrences only.

Of the least represented Cognitive Acts it was the positive Cognitive Acts verbs (70%) that occurred in abundance, mainly thanks to the 33 occurrences of *agree* representing the author as having a positive attitude to the reported material (Table 3). They were followed by neutral verbs (23.3%) representing the author as having a neutral attitude toward the proposition and tentative verbs (6.7%) represented by *believe* in 6 occurrences. Cognitive verbs presenting the author as taking a critical stance (0%) toward the cited message were not found.

Table 3 displays the most commonly used RVs with the frequency of occurrence  $\geq 15$ . The non-factive Discourse Acts verbs *state* and *point out* informing readers neutrally of the authors' position were found in 75 and 69 occurrences each, amounting to 13.1% and 12% of all Discourse Acts verbs. The verb *claim* (11%) supporting the reported information was the most frequent factive Assurance verb found in 63 occurrences. Other most frequently used Discourse Acts verbs were non-factive Assurance verbs *define* in 57 occurrences (10%), *describe* in 54 occurrences (9.4%) and *mention* in 48 occurrences (8.4%).

The lowest frequency  $\geq 15$  is ascribed to *suggest*, tentatively expressing doubt about reported claims, which occurred 27 times (4.7%) and was the only RV in the Doubt sub-category of Discourse Acts Verbs (Table 2). The remaining 60 occurrences can be attributed to various Assurance Discourse Acts verbs found in frequencies  $\leq 15$  and amounting to 31.4% of all Discourse Acts verbs found.

Besides *add*, recorded in 51 occurrences (29.3% of all Research Acts), other verbs reporting either on the statement of findings or researchers' procedures occurred in a rather abundant variety (70.7%). However, each in the frequency  $\leq 15$ . A slightly higher frequency of factive Findings verbs over non-factive Findings verbs (Table 2) is attributed to *confirm*, which occurred 9 times, as opposed to other Findings verbs which, similarly to other procedures verbs of Research Acts category, were recorded in 3 or 6 occurrences only. Among the Cognitive Acts verbs, the most frequent was *agree* in 33 occurrences (36.7%), representing the author as having a positive attitude (Table 3). The other 30 occurrences of positive Cognitive verbs

(Table 2) comprised verbs that occurred three or six times only, thus contributing to the remaining 57 occurrences (63.3%) of the Cognitive Acts verbs that occurred  $\leq 15$  times. Verbs portraying the author as holding a neutral attitude towards the cited claim were recorded in 21 occurrences (Table 2) with 3 or 6 occurrences per each verb. The only tentative Cognitive verb found in the corpus was *believe* in 6 occurrences, illustrating the author as having a tentative view of the reported matter.

**Table 3**  
Most Common RVs with Occurrence  $\geq 15$

Category / RV	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Discourse Acts</b>	<b>573</b>	<b>68.5%</b>
<i>state</i>	75	13.1%
<i>point out</i>	69	12%
<i>claim</i>	63	11%
<i>define</i>	57	10%
<i>describe</i>	54	9.4%
<i>mention</i>	48	8.4%
<i>suggest</i>	27	4.7%
RVs $\leq 15$	180	31.4%
<b>Research Acts</b>	<b>174</b>	<b>20.8%</b>
<i>add</i>	51	29.3%
RVs $\leq 15$	123	70.7%
<b>Cognition Acts</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>10.7%</b>
<i>agree</i>	33	36.7%
RVs $\leq 15$	57	63.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>837</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Tense, voice and subject-agent in structures with reporting verbs**

The major choice for the tense and voice in the reporting structures was the present active (78.8%), with the mean occurrence of 9.16 per text (Table 4).

Besides the past tense or present perfect tense, the present tense can be used with verbs of communication regarding the past, with the implication that the information communicated as the result of past communication is still operative, as illustrated on a discourse verb *describe* in (1):

- (1) Beer (1984) *describes* HRM in a broader view as every managerial decision or action that affects the relationship between employees and the organization. (MTR22RV1)

**Table 5**  
Tense and Voice Choices in Correlation with RVs Categories

Verb tense and voice/ Category	Research Acts		Discourse Acts		Cognitive Acts	
Present active	123	70.7%	450	78.5%	87	96.7%
Past active	45	25.9%	69	12.0%	3	3.3%
Present passive	0	0%	36	6.3%	0	0%
Present perfect active	6	3.4%	9	1.6%	0	0%
Past passive	0	0%	9	1.6%	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>174</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>573</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>100%</b>

Regarding the past tense, the student-writers used the past tense form for Research Acts verbs in a higher percentage (25.9%) than for Discourse Acts (12.0%) or Cognitive Acts verbs (3.3%). This was

Much less frequent was the past tense in the active voice (14%). Its use implies a greater distancing of the writer from another author's reported message and less relevance to the writer's research. Or, as in (2), the procedural Research Acts RV describes a past process with significance to a current study:

- (2) Bart Victor and John B. Cullen (1987, 1988) *discovered* a typology of ethical climate. (MTR23RV2)

**Table 4**  
Tense and Voice Choices in Structures with RVs

Tense and Voice in Reporting Structures	Frequency	Percentage
Present active	660	78.8%
Past active	117	14%
Present passive	36	4.3%
Present perfect active	15	1.8%
Past passive	9	1.1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>837</b>	<b>100%</b>

The present perfect active was used even more sparingly (1.8%). Citations with the present perfect verb help set up a current situation that was created by previously reported research, as seen in (3), where the Discourse verb comments on the past research resulting in a present situation:

- (3) Milan Půček et al. (2005) *have described* several definitions of satisfaction at work in their work, which are related to the satisfaction of different groups, such as citizens, customers and employees. (MTR24RV1)

Regarding the voice, the majority of verbal phrases in the citations were in the active form, including those in the present perfect. Only 36 verbs in the present tense (4.3%) and nine verbs in the past tense (1.1%) were in the passive form, as in (4):

- (4) The relationship between motivation and job satisfaction *was also described* by Michael Armstrong (2007). (MTR15RV3)

Verbs in the present active were in the majority in all three categories, accounting for 70.7% of all Research Acts verbs, 78.5% Discourse Acts and 96.7% of all Cognitive Acts verbs (Table 5).

probably because the writers felt distanced from the other authors' research when reporting on their past findings and, similarly, they felt compelled to use the past tense forms when commenting on past

procedures with some relevance to their present research. Whereas with Discourse Acts verbs, which are a mere linguistic expression of reported findings, procedures, and mental processes, the writers opted for the present tense forms to emphasize the significance of the reported messages to their studies. A higher percentage of the present perfect active forms was recorded for the Research Acts verbs (3.4%) than for the Discourse Acts verbs

(1.6%). Cognitive Acts verbs (0%) were not recorded in the present perfect at all. It was only the Discourse Acts verbs that occurred in both the present (6.3%) and the past passive (1.6%).

Interesting findings come to light when analysing the choice of the agent in correlation with the tenses or verbal forms used (Table 6). In the passive forms, present or past, the agent - author was expressed as a by-adjunct (see example 4).

**Table 6**  
*Subject-agent in correlation with tense choice*

Tense/Subject-agent	Present Active		Past Active		Present Perfect Active	
Named author	627	95.4%	99	84.6%	9	60%
Single-named author	477	76.1%	63	63.6%	0	0%
Pronominal( <i>he, she</i> )	42	6.7%	6	6.1%	0	0%
Multiple-named author	108	17.2%	21	21.2%	9	100%
Pronominal ( <i>they</i> )	0	0%	9	9.1%	0	0%
Meta-text term	30	4.6%	18	15.4%	6	40%
<b>Total</b>	<b>657</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100%</b>

Named author (95.4%) as the subject by far prevailed over meta-text terms (4.6%) in the present active. A closer analysis revealed that the named author was exceedingly expressed by a single-named author (76.1%), replaced by a pronominal subject (6.7%) in several citations. Multiple-named author (17.2%), i.e., more than two authors followed by a plural verb, was used in 108 instances of the total of 657 citations in the present active tense only.

In the past active the choices of the subject-agent seem to be slightly less marginal, with the named author (84.6%) again exceeding over the meta-text terms (15.4%). Besides the single-named author (63.6%) and its pronominal subject replacement (6.1%), the multiple-named author (21.2%) was also replaced by the pronominal subject (9.1%) in the past tense, but not in the present active (0%).

Of the total of 15 RVs in the present perfect tense, nine were used with the named author as subject (60%) and 6 with meta-text terms (40%). The named-author subjects were expressed by multiple-named authors (100%). The choice of multiple agents or meta-text terms (e.g. *several studies, several authors*) in place of the subject enhances the notion of the present situation. It resulted from previous research carried out by various scientists - reported authors - or studies whose content not only bears significance to the writers' present research but describes it as effective now.

**DISCUSSION**

This study explored the types of RVs used by EFL learners - the Czech students of Economics and Management - in the Literature Review sections of their Master's theses written in English. From the corpus of 439,356 words in total, 837 occurrences of RVs were extracted. To classify the RVs, Hyland's

model of RVs categorization was applied (Hyland, 1999, 2002). Another aim of the study was to investigate the tense forms used in the citations and other aspects, such as the voice and subject-agent.

The findings revealed a significant predominance of Discourse Acts verbs over the other two categories, Research Acts and Cognition Acts verbs, with the verbs in the latter category the least frequent. The findings thus contradict those of Manan and Noor (2015) whose analysis of Literature Reviews in Master's theses showed that the Master's students were more familiar with Research Acts verbs rather than Cognition or even Discourse Acts, which were the least frequent. Such diverse results may be caused by different corpora in terms of size and research material as well as initial language background knowledge of the students whose writing was analysed. According to Manan and Noor (2015), the most widely used RV was *state* from the Discourse Acts category followed by *found* from Research Acts, which is partially consistent with the present study. While *state* was the most common and most frequently used RV in the corpus followed by *point out* belonging to the same process category, the use of *found* was scarce with 18 occurrences in all. The results of the present study are thus more consistent with those of Agbaglo (2017), in whose analysis of RA Literature Review sections written by lecturers from the Department of English, Discourse Acts verbs prevailed over the Research Acts and Cognitive Acts category. Such contradiction may be attributed to different levels of education involved, the former (Manan & Noor, 2015) performed on undergraduate students of applied linguistics and the latter (Agbaglo, 2017) on the experts in the field.

The results of the present study further indicate a predominant use of non-factive Assurance Discourse Acts verbs merely acknowledging reported communication rather than expressing a

pronounced or critical stance. The findings are consistent with Ramoroka (2014), whose investigation of RVs in university students' papers confirms a high frequency of non-factive Assurance verbs. This may result from the fact that novice writers tend to attribute the reported content to the source rather than provide support for their arguments and justify their claims. The comparison of citations in novice and expert RAs by Mansourizadeh and Ahmad (2011) also confirms the claim. The firm reliance on reporting structures attributing the knowledge to outside experts in novice writing is also supported by Liardét and Black (2019). They, in line with the findings of the present study, also mention *state* as one of the most highly recorded citation structures.

Lee et al. (2018) conclude that the undergraduate L2 learners are inclined to show deference to the perceived authority of published sources. At the same time, they may have problems with evaluation as they are not at an appropriate cognitive or intellectual level to do so. The lack of critical RVs in the corpus (0% of Counters in Discourse Acts and 0% of counter-factive verbs in Research Acts) was already observed in previous studies (Hyland, 2002; Manan & Noor, 2015). However, the student-writers take a neutral rather than critical stance towards cited material. It might not be considered significant, especially if this stance is most frequent in soft discipline texts (Agbaglo, 2017; Hyland & Jiang, 2017), where Discourse verbs are predominant even in professional writing (Hyland, 2014; Hyland & Jiang, 2017).

Regarding the tense and voice choices, the citations in the present active (78.4%) highly exceeded those in the past active (14%) and the present perfect active (1.8%). The use of active voice was also exceedingly higher than the passive (3.2% for the present passive and 1.8% for the past passive). The findings thus contradict Hawes and Thomas (1997), who found out that it was mainly the past tense and the present perfect tense in the active form that was preferred over the present tense in medical RAs. Of the three tenses, it was the present perfect, which was the most frequent in the passive (Hawes & Thomas, 1997). This again contradicts the present study findings where the present perfect was used sparingly and in the active only. The contrary findings may be attributed to different sizes of the corpora and materials analysed. The infrequent use of the past or present perfect in the present study may also suggest the lower ability of the student-writers to provide the basis for a claim or highlight the direct relevance of the previous studies to the writer's research. Yet the fact that the present active was the most frequent might again not be surprising. As Swales and Feak (2004) indicate, in RAs introduction or literature review sections, this tense is predominant.

Hawes and Thomas (1997) further argued that the present tense verbs with named researcher as the subject were always discourse verbs and never non-discourse verbs, while past tense verbs with named researcher as the subject were from both categories. Although this line of research was not pursued in this study and the choice of the subject was discussed in terms of the tense choice only, high preference for Discourse verbs (67%) in the present tense (78.1%) with the named author as subject (95.4%) may at least partially support the claim (Hawes & Thomas, 1997).

Hence, seemingly, the students' citation practices are not very different from other soft discipline writers. Despite the results, we believe that it is still important to emphasize the existence of different types of RVs and make student-writers aware of the variety they have at their disposal when synthesizing other authors' findings and taking a stance towards cited messages. L2 learners should be aware of the choices they have in terms of tense usage in citation structures and their practice should not miss on English academic writing course curricula. In line with Nguyen and Pramoolsook (2015, 2016), we propose introducing a clear focus on the lexical, grammatical aspects of citation in terms of accurate structures and appropriately used RVs into the academic writing classroom. Combining the information on different types of RVs in academic writing textbooks with authentic materials from students' and experts' writing would not only be beneficial for student-writers. However, it would also be essential for the implication of the findings into the context of academic writing courses (Jomaa & Bidin, 2019).

## **CONCLUSION**

The paper investigated the use of RVs in EFL learners' writing using the corpus of Master's thesis Literature Reviews written in English by Czech students of Economics and Management. The results showed that students had not always been aware of how to use different categories of RVs and their evaluative functions. The findings reported high use of discourse verbs in passing the information cited (e.g., *state, point out*), in the present active, with the named-author as the subject, communicating generalized interpretations or conclusions. Much less frequent were verbs signifying different evaluative roles and the use of the past tense verb forms, providing a basis for a claim or preceding generalization, as well as the present perfect forms serving to highlight the relevance of the previous research to the writer's write-up. Although the use of discourse verbs seems to be predominant even in professional writing (Hyland, 2014; Hyland & Jiang, 2017), the promotion of various types of RVs carrying a pronounced stance in citations is still of

great significance in L2 learners' academic writing courses.

The research addressed one discipline only, a soft discipline, economics and management field of study, and was conducted on a relatively small corpus of 82 Master's theses, to consider the findings conclusive. The findings were limited to types and functions of RVs as well as their characteristics, i.e., the tense and voice, and the choice of the subject in the structures containing RVs. Despite these limitations, however, we believe that the study truly reflects the use of RVs in Czech EFL learners' writing, and thus offers insights that might be globally applicable to other ELF learning contexts. Hence, as a practical benefit of this study, the findings might help design syllabi of academic English courses at institutions where English is a non-native language, enhancing students' understanding of the elements of academic writing and the use of RVs in the citation.

In the context of EFL academic writing, the use of RVs is not without challenges. To what extent it is influenced by the 2L learners' native language interference might be a useful incentive for further research in this realm.

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