

From “Show” to “Focus”: Corpus Evidence of Reporting Verb Use and Academic Writing Development in ESL Student Writing

Ivy Jones-Mensah^{1*}, Angel Edward Kongo², Benjamin Amoakohene³ and Joseph K. Ocloo⁴

^{1*}University of Professional Studies, Accra, Ghana.

E-mail: ivy.jones-mensah@upsamail.edu.gh, Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6788-1020>

²University of Professional Studies, Accra, Ghana. E-mail: angel.kongo@upsamail.edu.gh,

³Department of General and Liberal Studies, University of Health and Allied Sciences, Ho, Volta Region, Ghana. E-mail: bamoakohene@uhas.edu.gh, Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2276-9393>

⁴University of Professional Studies, Accra, Ghana. E-mail: joseph.ocloo@upsamail.edu.gh,

Abstract: Reporting verbs are central to academic writing, as they serve to credit sources, express stance, evaluate, and argue. This study examined their frequency, syntax, semantics, and discipline specificity in ESL students' academic writing, utilising a corpus based linguistic approach. Drawing on schema theory, the constructionist view, and academic writing theory, the study analysed a corpus of student essays via frequency counts, concordance analysis, and syntactic and semantic examination. The results revealed that ‘focus’ (n = 1,131) and ‘show’ (n = 1,077) were the most frequent reporting verbs, accounting for more than half of all instances of reporting verbs in the corpus. Concordance analysis showed that ‘show’ was mostly used to introduce evidence and back up arguments, whereas ‘focus’ largely functioned as an organizational device to point readers' attention and organize discussions. Nevertheless, many occurrences of both verbs performed a descriptive or organizational function instead of performing the rhetorical work of the reporting verbs' attribution, evaluation, and stance-taking. Our findings suggest that students have some vocabulary, but lack the capacity to deploy reporting verbs rhetorically and critically. Explicit instruction on reporting verbs, genre pedagogy, and corpus-informed teaching may be required to improve academic writing skills and disciplinary literacy among university students.

Key Words: reporting verbs, academic writing, corpus linguistics, vocabulary knowledge, source attribution, background

(Received: 12 March 2026; Revised: 23 April 2026; Accepted: 18 May 2026; Published: 30 June 2026)

Introduction

Academic writing is a demanding communicative task that requires students to demonstrate their knowledge of content alongside their ability to use language to build, structure, and convey scholarly arguments. Vocabulary knowledge lies at the heart of producing good academic texts. Research has identified vocabulary knowledge as being amongst the strongest indicators of academic writing success because it allows writers to convey ideas clearly, create coherence, and engage deeply with disciplinary knowledge (Nation, 2022; Schmitt et al., 2021). In higher education Jovanović et al., (2025), students are required to draw on a broad range of academic and discipline-specific vocabulary to argue, synthesise, and convey academia. But knowing vocabulary is not enough to write well; students also need to know how lexis works within specific rhetorical and disciplinary spaces (Dang & Webb, 2023). Consequently, recent studies have therefore focused on how students deploy vocabulary resources in authentic academic writing

and how lexical choices influence writing quality and academic achievement (Kyle et al., 2021; Paquot & Granger, 2023).

Reporting verbs are linguistic items that represent a category of academic vocabulary. They are devices that enable writers to refer to a proposition, summarise, interpret, or evaluate the ideas and findings of other authors. Reporting verbs are essential for academic writing, as they allow writers to position their work within existing scholarship and demonstrate engagement with source materials (Hyland & Jiang, 2022). Examples such as argue, suggest, claim, demonstrate, show, and focus illustrate how writers construct knowledge and integrate the external voices into their essays while establishing their own authorial stance. Effective use of reporting verbs contributes to knowledge construction, source attribution, and the building of academic credibility. As Hyland & Jiang (2022) point out, “reporting verbs... serve not only grammatical functions but also as rhetorical devices, enabling writers to negotiate relations among themselves, other sources, and their audiences.” Used well, reporting verbs indicate a writer’s ability to contribute to ongoing scholarly debates and participate in disciplinary conversations.

These verbs serve multiple roles, as both signals of stance, evaluation, and argument and as attributive signals. Academic writing asks students to move beyond parroting sources; they need to evaluate evidence, convey levels of certainty or uncertainty, signal agreement or disagreement, and build compelling arguments. Reporting verbs help writers do all of this by signalling attitudes toward cited material and locating claims within wider academic literacy debates (Samraj, 2021; Yoon & Römer, 2020). For example, “argue,” “maintain,” and “assert” typically indicate a greater level of authorial commitment than a simple writer’s stance, while “believe,” “find,” and “claim” can indicate weaker commitments. Evaluative reporting verbs help writers to separate accepted knowledge from competing claims and emerging ideas. Research has shown that thoughtfully and meaningfully using reporting verbs shows how persuasively and maturely advanced academic literacies operate (Wang, 2023; Paquot & Granger, 2023).

Although reporting verbs are central to academic writing, using them effectively is challenging for many English as a Second Language (ESL) /English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writers (España, 2024; Qin et al., 2025). Research reveals that ESL/EFL students often default to a small pool of familiar reporting verbs, favouring neutral terms such as ‘show’, ‘say’, and ‘tell’ over more judgemental and field-specific synonyms (Yoon & Römer, 2020). This limited repertoire restricts students’ abilities to express evaluation, adopt an appropriate authorial stance, and interact with other texts. Furthermore, many students fail to grasp the distinction between the semantic and rhetorical roles of reporting verbs, leading to misrepresented sources and weaker arguments (Wang, 2023). The root cause was a lack of access to genuine academic language, inadequate guidance in disciplinary writing practices, and a failure to understand the pragmatic purposes of reporting verbs (Granger, 2024).

Corpus-informed research has confirmed that, even though students may comprehend the meanings of individual verbs, they encounter difficulty using them correctly within different disciplinary contexts. The problems include inaccurate source attribution, faulty stance taking, and improper rhetorical structure, all of which can impair the clarity and integrity of writing (Kyle et al., 2021). As universities stress the need for evidence-based writing and engaging critically with other sources, it is increasingly important to understand how students use reporting verbs in authentic writing tasks and how these lexical choices portray patterns of vocabulary knowledge and academic literacy. Analysing reporting verb use through corpus and concordance methods is likely to provide greater insight into the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and academic writing skills, and to inform pedagogical interventions designed to improve students’ disciplinary writing competence.

Problem Statement

Academic writing requires students to engage critically with existing literature by effectively using reporting verbs, which are essential for source attribution, stance expression, evaluation, and argument construction (Hyland & Jiang, 2022). Reporting verbs allow writers to position themselves in relation to cited authors and demonstrate critical engagement with disciplinary knowledge. Despite the recognised importance of vocabulary knowledge in academic writing, many ESL/EFL students continue to have trouble with the appropriate and effective use of reporting verbs (Yoon & Römer, 2020). Although students have some basic vocabulary, evidence suggests that they mainly depend on a restricted set of reporting verbs (RV) such as “show” and “say.” Reliance on such a narrow lexicon makes it difficult for students to convey stance, evaluation and source attribution (e.g., Wang, 2023; Granger, 2024). While studies have largely focused on reporting verb frequencies, less attention has been given to the syntax and meaning of RVs in real student writing across subjects. Addressing this gap is essential for developing targeted pedagogical interventions that enhance academic writing competence and disciplinary literacy among university students. Additionally, the problem is essential for creating the awareness among ESL/EFL students that relying on a limited range of verbs can weaken the quality of their writing and understanding how students use reporting verbs can inform targeted instructional strategies that improve academic writing competence, critical engagement with literature, and disciplinary literacy. As a result, the following research questions guide the study.

- What is the level of frequency and distribution of reporting verbs in student academic writing?
- What are the syntactic and semantic functions of reporting verbs?
- What is the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and academic writing performance?
- What are some of the disciplinary variations in the use of reporting verbs?

Academic Vocabulary and Writing Development

This section reviews the literature on reporting verbs and their significance in academic writing. It analyses the contribution of academic vocabulary to writing development and examines the functions of reporting verbs in source attribution, stance expression, evaluation, and argument construction. This chapter further explores the application of corpus linguistics and concordance analysis to examine genuine language use in student writing, before describing the theoretical lens guiding the study. Drawing on Schema Theory, the Constructionist Perspective, and Academic Discourse Theory, we clarify how students learn, process, and employ reporting verbs in academic discourse (Sing et al., 2026; Spiro et al., 1980).

Academic vocabulary is widely acknowledged as central to academic literacy and good-quality writing. According to Academic Vocabulary Theory, effective academic writing hinges not just on learners’ familiarity with common words but also on their facility with specialised academic and discipline-specific vocabulary, enabling them to convey sophisticated thoughts, create meaningful connections, and engage with scholarly discourse (Nation, 2022; Dang & Webb, 2023). Academic vocabulary supports the construction of arguments, integration of evidence, and display of disciplinary expertise. Research suggests that students with greater and more varied academic vocabulary knowledge can express abstract notions and meaningfully participate in academic communities (Granger, 2024). Accordingly, vocabulary knowledge has come to be seen as multi-dimensional, involving receptive and productive knowledge, collocational competence, and appropriate use, all of which make significant contributions to writing development.

An expanding body of corpus-based research has shown a strong correlation between lexical richness and writing quality. Lexical richness includes the range, sophistication, diversity, and appropriateness of words used in a text and is often used as a proxy for writing competence (Kyle et al., 2021). High quality academic writing is characterized by greater lexical variety, more sophisticated vocabulary, and better deployment of discipline specific lexis (Enayat, 2025; Qinet al., 2025). Writers who have a richer lexicon are better able to convey nuance, build an argument, and critique sources. Students with poorer lexical repertoires tend to fall back on repeated lexical phrases, which undermines rhetoric and argumentation. Recent research also shows that lexical sophistication makes an important contribution to writing above grammar accuracy, suggesting that vocabulary use reflects writing maturity and disciplinary literacies (Kyle et al., 2021; Crossley & McNamara, 2023).

Despite the recognised importance of academic vocabulary, many ESL/EFL learners still struggle to transfer vocabulary knowledge into effective writing practices. Research shows that while students may have some basic lexical knowledge, they often struggle to use vocabulary strategically to express evaluation, stance and disciplinary meanings in academic texts (Paquot & Granger, 2023). This gap between knowledge and usage suggests that writing needs something more than vocabulary – it requires an understanding of how lexical choices function rhetorically within disciplinary discourse communities. Lexical richness should therefore be considered both quantitatively (diversity of vocabulary) and qualitatively (writers' ability to use words effectively and purposively). Collectively, these studies suggest that academic vocabulary and lexical richness are central to writing development and that students need explicit instruction and sustained exposure to academic discourse to develop the sophisticated lexical repertoire needed for successful academic writing.

Reporting Verbs in Academic Discourse

As a class of lexis central to academic writing, reporting verbs allow writers to include, analyse, and judge other scholars' contributions while building their own arguments. Unlike general lexical verbs, reporting verbs serve important rhetorical purposes in signalling how writers relate to cited information and how readers should understand it (Hyland & Jiang, 2022). Using verbs like argue, claim, suggest, demonstrate, maintain, and reveal, writers convey different levels of certainty, authority, and stake in knowledge claims. Recent studies show that reporting verbs are crucial for structuring academic texts by helping writers achieve cohesion between their arguments and the literature (Wang, 2023). As such, reporting verbs function not just as citational tools but as discourse strategies that shape knowledge production, intellectual exchange, and field involvement. Skilled use of reporting verbs shows a writer's facility with academic practices and their critical engagement with sources.

One of the core functions of reporting verbs is to convey attribution and evidentiality (Allami, 2012). Attribution signals where information comes from, and evidentiality involves “linguistically express[ing] the provenance, validity, and trustworthiness of knowledge” (Aull & Lancaster, 2022, p. 864). Reporting verbs help writers separate their ideas from those of other authors, upholding scholarly honesty and bolstering argument strength. Some verbs imply stronger evidence and source reliability than others. For example, demonstrate, establish, and confirm are associated with strong empirical backing, whereas suggest, speculate, and propose indicate fewer firm claims (Hyland & Jiang, 2022). Corpus-based research has shown that skilled academic writers selectively choose reporting verbs to suggest subtle evidential meanings and faithfully portray the evidential status of cited information (Dimova, 2020; Wang, 2023), whereas novice and second-language writers commonly struggle to distinguish between these functions and tend to rely on a small number of uncommitted verbs that fail to convey sufficient certainty or authority over the material. This impoverished repertoire can undermine the forcefulness and clarity of argument.

Stance and evaluation, like attribution and evidentiality, are intimately linked in academic writing. As well as reporting what others have said, writers need to judge its worthiness, make sense of it and locate their own voices in conversation. Reporting verbs function as stance markers, allowing writers to show approval, disapproval, neutrality, scepticism, or endorsement of other's ideas (Hyland & Jiang, 2022; Lancaster, 2024). For instance, 'argues', 'contends', 'asserts' imply high commitment by the writer, whereas 'suggests' and 'indicates' signal hesitancy and doubt. Evaluative reporting verbs also enable writers to appraise the merits or deficiencies of previous work, contributing to the development of arguments and critique. Studies have demonstrated that the judicious use of evaluative reporting verbs correlates with greater writing competence (Xue, 2024). Yet many ESL/EFL students find it difficult to deploy reporting verbs effectively for nuanced evaluation, leading instead to descriptive writing.

Corpus Linguistics and Concordance Analysis

The corpus approach has become popular in writing research because it allows researchers to study language usage based on large bodies of texts. Unlike impressionistic approaches, the corpus methodology provides empirical data about the presence of words, collocations, grammatical structures, and rhetorical moves in academic texts. In relation to students' writing research, corpus methodologies allow detecting the repetition of linguistic strengths and weaknesses, such as limited vocabulary range, frequent usage of simple verbs, weak stance expression, and vocabulary related to certain academic disciplines. As shown in recent literature, corpus methodologies in the context of academic writing studies are especially helpful for investigating vocabulary, phraseology, lexical sophistication, and source-based writing since corpus approaches help detect some patterns not visible when manually analysing texts (Paquot & Granger, 2021; Kyle et al., 2021; Römer, 2022). Thus, corpus methodologies provide a basis for linking vocabulary knowledge to writing proficiency.

Concordance analysis constitutes an important method in corpus linguistics vocabulary research as it provides an opportunity for researchers to explore keywords through their immediate linguistic context. With the help of KWICs, scholars are able to analyse collocations, syntax, and semantic changes in the usage of the studied keywords in different contexts. The use of this method is particularly relevant in relation to reporting verbs since verbs such as show, argue, suggest, and focus might mean something else in various lexical contexts and in different disciplines. Concordance analysis takes the process of vocabulary research further by allowing for the exploration of how lexemes function syntactically, semantically, and rhetorically in real texts. As has been found out in learner corpus research, concordance analysis can reveal whether learners use their academic vocabulary productively and appropriately (Friginal & Hardy, 2020; Yoon & Römer, 2020).

Thus, a corpus-based methodology and a concordance analysis become a powerful tool to investigate the correlation between the use of vocabulary and the quality of academic writing. Although the frequency statistics show what words the students use the most often, the concordance analysis will help to discover the ways how those words are used in the context. The combination of these two methods proves to be useful in detecting the gap between the receptive knowledge of vocabulary of the students and their ability to produce academic writing (Batirovna et al., 2026). In other words, although students know the meanings of the reporting verbs, they cannot use them properly in attribution, stance, or evaluation. Corpus-informed research will be useful for pedagogical purposes since it will provide the learners with samples of disciplinary writing, as well as help the teachers to create exercises on vocabulary, sources, and rhetoric.

Theoretical Framework

This research applies Schema Theory, Constructionist Perspective, and Academic Discourse Theory in order to account for the students' usage of reporting verbs in their writing. Schema theory accounts for the application of lexically familiar words in the selection of reporting verbs, whereas the Constructionist Perspective focuses on vocabulary usage as a process of constructing meaning by interacting with academic texts. The third theory, namely Academic Discourse Theory, emphasizes the rhetorical function of reporting verbs in attribution, stance, and evaluation.

Schema Theory

The Schema Theory provides an explanation about the way the students learn and use vocabularies in academic writing from the cognitive perspective. According to Rumelhart (2017), the process of comprehending and producing language is determined by cognitive frameworks, also known as schemas, which comprise past experience and knowledge. Learning happens through assimilation of new information into already existing cognitive structures, according to Anderson (2000). In academic writing, students can use previously acquired lexical schemas to choose suitable vocabulary in order to express their thoughts, arguments, and respond to the sources. This approach to language acquisition correlates with the results of the present research, since the predominant use of reporting verbs was noted – mostly, show and focus. It means that the students prefer to use well-known vocabulary rather than various reporting verbs. Even though these verbs are known by the students and allow them to express themselves, the use of these verbs could be seen as indicative of poor vocabulary acquisition and lack of advanced vocabulary in the field of academia. This explains why schema theory can explain the choice of particular verbs by the students and why the students find it difficult to learn other verbs which need more advanced rhetoric ability. In addition, vocabulary development in academic writing depends on schema expansion and reorganization.

Constructionist Perspective

The Constructionist view is consistent with the Schema Theory, but it adds an element of meaning making through interaction with language instead of simple vocabulary acquisition. Language competence is achieved through interaction with language in real-world situations and by figuring out what different words mean in particular situations (Lantolf et al., 2021). It is achieved through experience of linguistic structures, discourse and contextual experience and not by meaning inherent in words themselves. In the context of academic writing, according to the Constructionist view, students learn how to use reporting verbs through observation of their use in scholarly articles and by trying them out in their own writing. The current research has found that although students know the meaning of reporting verbs, they find it difficult to use them rhetorically. The found discrepancy between the receptive and productive use of reporting verbs shows that learners have not yet been able to form a complete idea about the discourse function of reporting verbs. Their use of verbs like 'show' and 'focus' reveals that they prefer using vocabulary that is easy for them rather than precise and evaluative alternatives. The constructivist approach emphasizes the importance of contextual learning and involvement in real academic discourse. It shows that the knowledge of vocabulary alone is not enough to write effective academic texts.

Academic Discourse Theory

Discourse Theory of Academic Discourse enriches the framework with a socio-rhetorical perspective wherein the notion of academic writing is conceived as a situated act which involves a set of conventional practices, communicative objectives, and social expectations. According to Hyland (2002, 2005), academic

writing entails much more than the simple dissemination of information; rather, it involves negotiating meaning, establishing one's credibility, positioning oneself in relation to existing knowledge, and persuading readers of the validity of one's claims. Under this theoretical paradigm, reporting verbs play an important role since they enable writers to report information, provide evaluation and interpretation, and signal different levels of involvement with knowledge claims. The results of the current study reveal that students often use neutral reporting verbs and very few verbs for evaluation, interpretation, or criticism. It implies that most students lack a complete understanding of the rhetorical role of reporting verbs in academic writing. Although their writing might be effective at communicating information, their writing lacks the sophisticated stance-taking and evaluation that is typical of high-level academic argumentation. The theory of academic discourse is therefore a convincing account of the connection between reporting verb use, writing quality, and disciplinary knowledge. This theory claims that successful academic writing involves more than simply knowing vocabulary; writers need to know how language works to persuade, establish credibility, and engage in academic discourses. This means that the theory makes a solid theoretical framework for understanding the results of this research.

Methodology

The aim of the current study was to examine the usage of reporting verbs in students' academic writing in terms of their frequency and distribution, syntactic and semantic roles, association with vocabulary knowledge and academic writing ability, and variations according to the discipline. To accomplish the objectives of the study, a corpus linguistic methodology was chosen for several reasons. In particular, this methodology allowed analysing the authentic academic writing produced by students and obtaining empirical evidence of language use in natural academic settings. Such an approach helped obtain both quantitative and qualitative information on reporting verb usage through the analysis of lexical, contextual, syntactic, and semantic features within a corpus of students' essays. The present chapter describes the methodology of the current study and covers the research design, participants, sampling procedure, sample size, measures and variables, data collection methods, and analytical procedures. It also includes approaches to the enhancement of the validity and reliability of the results and ethics issues concerning the conduct of the study.

Participants

Participants in the study were students who had academic essays in the corpus. They belonged to four different fields, thereby making it possible for the study to look into reporting verbs in different disciplines.

Sampling Procedure

Student academic essays were intentionally chosen from different disciplines so that diversity in writing practices was taken into account. Having texts from various disciplines allowed for comparison of reporting verbs use and made it possible to look at disciplinary differences in the use of reporting verbs.

Sample Size Power and Precision

Corpus comprised academic essays written by students in diverse subject areas. The number of texts within the corpus was considered sufficient for finding out the regularities in the use of reporting verbs, calculating frequency distributions, and carrying out linguistic analysis. Having used the large corpus, the researcher was able to increase the accuracy of frequency calculations.

Measures and Covariates

Frequency and distribution of reporting verbs, their syntactic and semantic functions were the main tools used in this research to measure learners' lexical preferences (Le Bruyn & Paquot, 2021). Frequency and distribution were quantitative measures for measuring reporting verbs, while the syntactic and semantic analysis was the qualitative measure for determining the role of reporting verbs in academic discourse. The disciplinary affiliation of the students was regarded as the contextual variable of the research.

Data Collection

The data set included student essays written in different disciplines. The student essays served as a database of genuine academic texts to facilitate the analysis of reporting verbs in genuine academic environments. The use of the authentic text produced by students helped ensure ecological validity and gave a genuine representation of students' academic

Data Analysis

There were four interrelated phases of analysis used, namely, frequency analysis, concordance analysis, syntactic analysis, and semantic analysis. The frequency analysis allowed us to define the occurrence rate and distribution patterns of reporting verbs within the corpus and to make an estimation of the number of reporting verbs that students used and their lexical preference. The concordance analysis that was conducted using the Key Word in Context (KWIC) strategy allowed us to investigate the use of reporting verbs and their lexical contexts. The syntactic analysis enabled us to study collocations and grammatical patterns, as well as the position of reporting verbs within sentences and showed what syntactic functions the reporting verbs had and how the students incorporated the sources into their texts. The semantic analysis helped us to explore the meanings and discourse functions of reporting verbs such as attribution, evidentiality, stance, and evaluation (Hyland, 2005; Charles, 2006).

Inference Measures

Combination of quantitative measures of frequencies and qualitative measures of context, syntax, and semantics formed a robust methodological approach to answer the questions posed by the research. Analysis of frequencies produced estimations of the extent and distribution of reporting verbs use, whereas concordance, syntactic and semantic analyses allowed inferences about the roles performed by reporting verbs in academic writing. Considering diversity of reporting verb use and measures of academic writing performance and discipline, the design allowed making inferences on the connection between vocabulary knowledge and academic writing abilities as well as estimating differences in reporting verbs use by disciplines.

Results

Frequency of Reporting Verbs

Results of corpus analysis showed that 'show' and 'focus' verbs had the highest frequency among reporting verbs used by 3,000 students in their academic essays, having been used 1,077 and 1,131 times correspondingly. The total number of such verbs comprised more than 50% of all tokens of reporting verbs. This fact shows that students employed a limited selection of reporting verbs in order to form an argument and work with the material. High frequency of these verbs shows their significance as important lexis needed for presentation of evidence, focus of attention and organisation of information (Table 1).

Table 1: Reporting Verb

	Frequency
Focus	1,131
Show	1,077
Total	2,208

A careful examination of the concordance lines found that the word 'show' is most frequently used to give proof or evidence, to reveal something, and to argue some points. Some examples of this are "They clearly show the difference... ", "A combined reading shows that... ", and "Bentham sought to show..." As seen from these examples, the word is used in evidential reasoning as well as knowledge giving. Typically, the word appears in such constructions as adverb + show + noun and verb + show + that-clause, indicating its usage both in an academic way and within a specific discipline. It is clear from the frequency of this word that the students understand the denotation of this word as a verb of demonstration and presentation. Nonetheless, from the concordance it can be seen that there is a very little number of instances where the word is used as a real reporting verb for introducing authorial statements or claims from sources. Many times, there is no attribution at all, and the word just plays some general descriptive role, thus showing that 'show' is used as a common verb and not as a sophisticated reporting verb.

In the same vein, 'focus' was found to be the reporting verb that occurred most frequently, a total of 1,131 times in the corpus. Analysis of concordances showed that the reporting verb was used mainly in the form noun + focus + on to signal thematic orientation and direct the readers' attention to certain parts of a discussion. Common expressions like 'This section focuses on...' and 'The analysis focuses on...' are examples of how students used the reporting verb to organise information and establish the direction of an analysis. This demonstrates the students' awareness of the necessity of topic emphasis and coherence in academic writing. It is worth noting that the reporting verb 'focus' changed its form very frequently and alternated from verbal to nominal. This is evident from several occurrences of the reporting verb as a noun and not as a reporting verb. Therefore, it is clear that the students used 'focus' more as an organising word than a reporting one for source attribution and evaluation purposes.

It is clear that the heavy use of 'show' and 'focus' corresponds to earlier research findings suggesting that academic novices tend to resort to a narrow selection of familiar reporting verbs and fail to use an extended repertoire of evaluative, interpretive, certain and position-taking verbs (Hyland, 2002; Charles, 2006). In the light of schema theory, the repetitive use of reporting verbs implies that learner's resort to familiar lexical schemas stored in the memory when writing academic papers. Likewise, the use of these verbs from the point of view of constructionism means that learners construct meaning using language elements gained through repeated exposure to academic discourse. While this methodology ensures effective communication, it limits students' ability to use more sophisticated reporting verbs like argue, assert, maintain, contend and demonstrate. In general, it can be claimed that the results obtained are strongly related to the issue of vocabulary knowledge and academic writing; however, they prove that learners have a narrow range of reporting verbs at their disposal.

Syntactic Patterns of Reporting Verbs

According to the results of concordance analysis, the reporting verbs 'show' and 'focus' demonstrated their presence in repetitive syntax structures, which are related to the functions of these words in students' academic writings. Although these reporting verbs were common in the whole corpus, there were distinct differences in the grammatical structure and functions of these verbs in discourse. Concurrences have

revealed that these reporting verbs were widely used by students for presentation of evidence, organization of an argument, and structuring the discussion.

The Reporting Verb Show

The reporting verb ‘show’ occurred in two main syntax structures:

- Adverb + show + noun
- Verb + show + that-clause

These syntax structures were widely used by students for presenting evidence, supporting their claims, and establishing the relationship between concepts. The syntax structure adverb + show + noun was often used with evaluative adverbs, like clearly. For instance:

- *"They clearly show the difference..."* (AU)
- *"The phenomenon of the resolution shows..."* (DSU)

Similarly, the *verb + show + that-clause* construction was employed to introduce propositions or conclusions supported by evidence. Examples include:

- *"A combined reading shows that a coup..."* (AU)
- *"Bentham sought to show that an exposition of law would not depend..."* (AU)

These examples illustrate that the students tended to use ‘show’ as a verb in order to provide demonstration and explanation. Yet, through concordance analysis, one can note that many cases acted as general descriptive verbs rather than reporting verbs. While these structures illustrate the knowledge of the evidence presentation, at the same time they point to the fact that the students depend on ‘show’ to fulfil different rhetorical purposes and rarely use reporting verbs like argue, claim, assert, or demonstrate.

The Reporting Verb Focus

Reporting verb usage involved a restricted number of syntactic patterns, which appeared in the following form:

- Noun + focus + on

This structure was used constantly in order to create thematic orientation and direct the readers’ attention to certain aspects of the discussion. Some examples that could be found from the lines of concordance include:

- *"This section focuses on the rights of the accused..."*
- *"The analysis focuses on contractual obligations..."*
- *"Jennings’ investigation focuses on evaluating legal notions..."*

The repeated occurrence of this structure demonstrates how the students apply focus merely as a means of organising their work in terms of setting boundaries for the analysis and maintaining coherence of the text. As opposed to the verb ‘show’, which frequently is used in presenting evidence or conclusions, focus leads the reader through the text. The analysis also identified cases where *focus* shifted from a verbal to a nominal function, as in *'Keshen's focus on the Grundman...'*, showing flexibility in its grammatical use. However, the predominance of the *noun + focus + on* structure suggests students associate the verb mainly with thematic direction rather than source reporting or evaluative commentary. As a result, focus works more as a discourse-organising resource than as a conventional reporting verb in the corpus. The syntactic patterns of show and focus indicate that students have productive knowledge of these lexical

items and can use them effectively to organise information and present ideas. Still, the limited structural variation suggests a restricted reporting verb repertoire, highlighting students' reliance on familiar linguistic patterns in academic writing.

Semantic Interpretation

The corpus analysis revealed that *'show'* and *'focus'* were the most frequently occurring reporting verbs in students' academic essays, with frequencies of 1,077 and 1,131 occurrences, respectively. Together, these two verbs accounted for more than half of all reporting verb tokens identified in the corpus. These results indicate that students relied predominantly on a limited set of reporting verbs when constructing academic arguments and engaging with disciplinary content. The presence of show and focus means that these verbs operate as core lexicons that students can use in order to express themselves when conveying evidence, drawing attention, and organizing information in academic papers. High frequency of these verbs is also an indication of the understanding of the communicative purpose of reporting verbs especially their usage for explaining ideas, showing results, and guiding readers throughout the arguments in academic papers. However, concentrating reporting verbs on only two verbs can be an indicator of a narrow range of reporting verbs and poor lexical variety (Table 2).

Table 2: Reporting Verb

	Frequency
Focus	1,131
Show	1,077
Total	2,208

However, the analysis of concordance lines showed that the verb was used mostly to demonstrate something and present the results. The examples like "They clearly show the difference...", "A combined reading shows that...", and "Bentham sought to show..." prove this purposeful usage of the verb in evidential reasoning and knowledge presentation. Often the verb appeared in the context of adverb + show + noun and verb + show + that-clause combinations. This is explained by the fact that 'show' is the word that is actively used in academic writing and subject-specific genres of writing. The widespread use of this word shows students' comprehension of the denotative meaning of the verb. Nevertheless, the analysis of concordance lines also proved that the reporting function was performed in only several cases. There were numerous examples that had no explicit attribution and fulfilled general descriptive functions, which proves that show was used as a lexical verb by students.

In a similar manner, the most prevalent reporting verb was found to be focus, which appeared 1,131 times within the entire corpus. From the analysis of the concordances, it could be seen that the reporting verb typically occurred in constructions such as noun + focus + on, whereby it referred to thematic orientation of the discussion and guided readers to particular elements of the text. Examples like "This section focuses on..." and "The analysis focuses on..." were widely used by the students in the corpus, thus indicating that they used the reporting verb to guide the flow of the discourse. It can be seen from this that the students understand the necessity of indicating the thematic orientation of the texts and maintaining coherence in the writing process. However, at the same time, it should be noted that the reporting verb focus was often used both as a verbal and as a nominal construction, which indicates that the students usually use the reporting verb not for its reporting purposes but rather as an organising device.

Their excessive use of show and focus indicates earlier research showing how novice academic writers prefer to rely on a narrow set of reporting verbs known to them rather than a broader selection of reporting verbs which would allow them to express evaluation, interpretation, certainty and authorial position

(Hyland, 2002; Charles, 2006). Based on the theory of schema, the frequent use of these verbs implies that students are guided by the familiarity of lexical collocations which are part of their cognitive schemata while writing academic papers. Similarly, in terms of constructionism, these findings indicate that students use linguistic means to construct meaning which they obtain from exposure to academic discourse. While this approach makes it possible for them to convey their ideas successfully, it limits them in using more complex reporting verbs like argue, assert, maintain, contend and demonstrate. In conclusion, this study has shown a close link between vocabulary knowledge and academic writing, however, the results imply that students' reporting verb inventory is still quite limited.

Discussion

Restricted Reporting Verb Repertoire

These results suggest that students overwhelmingly use a small number of reporting verbs, such as show and focus, which constituted more than half of the total occurrences of the reporting verbs in the corpus. These uses imply that students primarily make use of a very limited number of lexical items which are familiar to them while forming an academic argumentation and citing the sources. Such use of verbs is consistent with Hyland's (2002) assertion that novice academic writers prefer to make use of neutral and common reporting verbs, failing to make use of other reporting verbs with evaluative and disciplinary features. It has been shown by recent corpus-based researches that non-native writers also tend to use verbs like show, say, and indicate as these verbs are semantically clear and rhetorically uncontroversial (Hafner et al., 2023; Yoon & Römer, 2020). While verbs of this kind allow learners to convey information and ensure coherence in their texts, using too many of them prevents the possibility of making sophisticated interpretations and engaging critically, as well as situating oneself within the text. According to some research, the extensive use of common verbs of reporting could be an indicator of academic competence, rather than poor competence, especially in those authors who are learning to write discipline-specific language (Wang, 2023). However, in the current study, the restricted range of verbs found in the corpus does not permit this possibility.

Vocabulary Knowledge Versus Writing Competence

The results further demonstrate that the acquisition of vocabulary knowledge is not necessarily associated with the development of academic writing ability. Although students exhibited knowledge about the meaning of the word's "show" and "focus," the analysis of concordances shows that many of them do not work as true reporting verbs because they lack correct source attribution, evaluation and/or stance expression. This demonstrates the difference between vocabulary knowledge and its effective use. According to Dang et al., (2023), knowledge of vocabulary entails receptive and productive knowledge, which presupposes a deeper knowledge about the contexts, rhetorical and disciplinary functions of words. The same idea is shared by Paquot & Granger (2023), who believe that although learners recognize the meaning of academic words, they have difficulty using them strategically. This research further backs up this claim by proving that students often resorted to using the verbs 'show' and 'focus' as general terms rather than sophisticated reporting tools. The conclusions drawn from the research are in line with those obtained by Aull and Lancaster (2022), who claimed that successful academic writing cannot rely only on lexical knowledge, but rather should include source integration, marking evidentiality, and establishing authorial voice. Thus, the research proves that vocabulary knowledge is not enough for academic writing development and that learners should have adequate rhetorical skills to apply lexical knowledge appropriately. In fact, knowing a word is not enough for proper academic application.

Disciplinary Influences on Reporting Verb Choice

The results of the analysis indicated that disciplinary contexts have a significant influence on the choice of reporting verbs and their functions. The verbs *show* and *focus* were most common in legal and professional genres, performing different functions such as evidential reasoning, thematization, and explanatory reasoning. For example, the verb *show* was mostly used for presenting legal interpretation and evidence, while the verb *focus* determined the focus of legal arguments. These results are consistent with studies on how the choice of vocabulary depends on the conventions and communicative norms of the discipline (Hyland & Jiang, 2022; Wang, 2023). Different disciplines have different approaches to engaging with knowledge, which leads to different uses of reporting verbs. According to the choice of reporting verbs varies across different disciplines due to different ways of presenting evidence and reasoning. The findings of the present study support this view by showing how the students employed *show* and *focus* in order to meet the discourse requirements of their disciplines. On the other hand, it was found through the analysis that it was difficult for the students to distinguish between general academic functions and the discipline-specific functions, hence creating an overlap in the functions of description, organization, and reporting. The implication from this finding is that the disciplines determine the reporting verb choice but its use is dependent on the purposes of its use.

Implications for Academic Writing Development

The findings from this study have a profound impact on academic writing development in relation to the choice of reporting verbs, acquisition of vocabulary, and literacy. Corpus-based analysis showed that the students made use of the verbs *"show"* and *"focus"* most often, where in many cases these verbs were used not as reporting verbs but as general vocabulary. The findings demonstrate the need for explicit instruction in order to enable students to distinguish between the meanings of reporting verbs and add to their vocabulary *"argue," "assert," "maintain," "contend,"* and *"demonstrate."* Furthermore, the findings show the need for genre-based instruction as the use of reporting verbs by the students varied according to the academic and discipline-specific context, demonstrating the need for teaching reporting verb functions in specific disciplines and genres. Through exposure to authentic discipline texts, students can see how experts use reporting verbs to make arguments, integrate sources, and express evaluation. Moreover, it is important to note that the current research highlights the benefits of corpus-based approach to instruction, as it will help students to gain familiarity with authentic use of reporting verbs due to such activities as concordance, frequency analysis, and collocation searches. In other words, with the help of these approaches, it is possible for students to see the use of reporting verbs in authentic context and increase their awareness regarding lexical choice, source use, and rhetorical positioning (Hyland, 2022; Römer, 2022).

Pedagogical Implications

Some pedagogical implications for enhancing students' academic writing proficiency based on the results of this research can be proposed. First of all, the explicit teaching of the vocabulary of reporting verbs is necessary at the stage of curriculum development. As students tend to use *show* and *focus* verbs excessively, special attention needs to be paid to presenting various other types of verbs and their functions when attributing, evaluating, and staking one's position. The verbs of arguing, asserting, contending, maintaining, demonstrating, and suggesting have different rhetorical value and involve various degrees of author's commitment. Second, the integration of sources and stance expression should receive more attention within academic writing classes. These results suggest that students find it hard to go beyond descriptive reporting in order to engage in analysis and evaluation. It is important to make these skills an

integral part of the writing process. In addition, this research shows the importance of using corpus-based learning as a means of implementing such a pedagogical approach in practice. Using concordance exercises, students will be able to look at authentic examples of the use of reporting verbs, to see collocations, and to see how arguments are constructed by professional writers in various disciplines. In addition, vocabulary exercises will help learners gain knowledge about semantic fields, conventions of different disciplines, and the rhetorical purpose of reporting verbs.

Conclusion

This study focused on the utilization of reporting verbs in students' academic writing through a corpus-based approach using authentic discipline-specific essays. From the analysis of the results, it was clear that students preferred to make use of the reporting verbs "show" and "focus," which formed the majority of all the reporting verbs in the corpus. Despite the fact that they effectively contributed to the presentation of evidence, organization of arguments, and directing readers' attention, such preference demonstrates a lack of variety in the use of reporting verbs in academic writing and also low lexical variety. It was also found that students frequently used these verbs in similar syntactic structures and tended to treat them as general lexis and not as complex reporting verbs for source referencing. Although students were aware of the meaning of the words 'show' and 'focus', they found it difficult to use these verbs correctly when integrating sources, positioning themselves, and making judgements about their work. It is also clear from the study that the usage of reporting verbs is dependent on the field of discourse as students use these lexical items to satisfy the communication needs of certain disciplines. This highlights the need for explicit instruction, which includes instruction in reporting verbs, genre-based approach to writing, and corpus-enhanced learning, so that students could increase their vocabulary of reporting verbs and develop skills of engaging with sources.

Acknowledgements

We appreciate Dr. Tabiri O. Michael for being ready to help us always in our data collection process.

Declaration of Conflict Interests and Ethics

We state that there is no conflict of interest (financial and any other type) that might have affected the design, conduct, analysis, and reporting of the results. The study has been conducted in line with ethical considerations where all necessary permissions have been sought for proper data management and use.

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