

Engagement in Thesis Writing: An Appraisal Analysis of EFL Student Writers' Evaluation of Prior Academic Works

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Abstract

Writing a thesis in a foreign language is challenging. In this process, evaluation of prior academic works in the Literature Review has always been a painstaking task that poses challenges for writers. Due to a paucity of studies on how writers evaluate other scholars' works in their Master of Arts theses, this study aims to explore how Vietnamese postgraduate students in English Language Studies and English Language Teaching programs utilize the *Engagement* system within the *Appraisal* framework to navigate through scholarly discourse in their Literature Reviews. A corpus of extracts from the Literature Review sections of 20 Master theses written in English was accordingly analyzed, using the UAM Corpus Tool. The findings show that the linguistic resources of *Heterogloss* outnumbered those of *Monogloss*. Strategies of *Expand* category such as *Attribute*, particularly *Acknowledge*, were widely used to engage with external perspectives. Meanwhile, the remaining linguistic resources were employed with significantly lower frequency, implying either hesitancy or limited familiarity with these rhetorical tools. These insights illuminate the dialogic engagement practices of Vietnamese novice academic writers and simultaneously point towards the need for explicit instruction in the use of *Engagement* to foster critical evaluation and rhetorical effectiveness. Finally, the study comes up with pedagogical implications and substantive conclusions regarding the use of these resources.

Keywords: Appraisal theory, dialogic discourse, engagement, English as a foreign language, thesis writing

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Introduction

Writing research reports in a foreign language is never an easy task for writers, and evaluating other writers' arguments is even more challenging. It requires the writer not only a good command of the foreign language, but also an effective set of linguistic resources to express their position and persuade the audience. Research has proved that the writer's persuasiveness in making judgements is indicative of how they negotiate their opinions and attitudes with the reader, that is, the ability to make their position affective and reachable to the audience (Hyland, 2005; Lee & Deakin, 2016).

Xie (2016) argued that the *Appraisal* theory (Martin & White, 2005), an extension of Systemic Functional Linguistics, has been instrumental in analyzing how writers express their perspectives, opinions, and positions regarding various ideas or research subjects in their interaction with the audience. Associated with a system of evaluative language resources, the *Appraisal* theory provides an overarching framework to assess the writer's involvement in the text. Central to this framework is the concept of *Engagement*, which describes the linguistic mechanisms through which writers open or restrict the dialogic space to side with or counter opposing views. The framework, in this regard, offers a critical lens to investigate how writers navigate the dynamics between their arguments and existing academic discourse.

In a research report, the Literature Review (LR) section is seen as a rich source of evaluative language, where the writer takes account of the pros and cons of several related studies and justifies their work (Kwan, 2006; Kwan et al., 2012). Therefore, the LR has been investigated in much research in academic writing (Gil-Salom & Soler-Monreal, 2014; Naghizadeh & Afzali, 2018; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024). There is, however, a paucity of research on how students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), as novice academic writers, manage to judge others' views and persuade the audience of the arguments in their graduate theses. On the premise that a thorough understanding of the linguistic resources used by EFL writers can inform and improve academic writing instruction, the present study is conducted to examine how Vietnamese EFL students use the *Engagement* system within the *Appraisal* framework to evaluate prior academic works in LR sections of their Master of Arts (MA) theses. In so doing, it aims to shed more light on how novice academic EFL writers engage with scholarly discourse and thereby offers pedagogical implications for enhancing instruction in academic writing. The study, therefore, seeks answers to the following questions:

1. How do Vietnamese EFL students use Engagement resources in the evaluation of prior academic works?
2. What pedagogical implications can be drawn from the patterns of Engagement resource usage?

Literature Review

The Appraisal Theory

The *Appraisal* theory has been a powerful tool for the analysis of evaluative language. It constitutes part of a broader ecological understanding of language as a semiotic system that interactively engages with other systems, namely social, biological, and physical dimensions (Matthiessen & Teruya, 2023). Such arguments imply that the language being analyzed is not only as a tool for meaning-making but also as part of a dynamic system that interacts with various dimensions of human experience. Firmly rooted in interpersonal meta-functions posited in the Systemic Functional Linguistics, the *Appraisal* theory focuses on how language forges social

relationships and conveys attitudes. It comprises three systems of *Attitude*, *Engagement*, and *Graduation*.

Attitude is concerned with the lexical expressions of feelings, judgments, and values, including the categories that express emotions (affect), evaluations of behavior (judgment), and evaluations of objects or phenomena (appreciation). *Engagement* manages dialogic space, drawing on both lexical and grammatical resources to position the writer or speaker relative to other voices and viewpoints. *Graduation* focuses on scaling meanings, either by intensifying or softening evaluations (force) or sharpening and softening categorical distinctions (focus).

The Engagement System

Fundamentally, the *Engagement* system concerns itself with the interpersonal negotiation of sources, in close line with a dialogic perspective that examines how authors acknowledge, reject, or engage with alternative positions. This system categorizes utterances into two main subsystems: *Monogloss*, where authors present ideas without acknowledging other perspectives, and *Heterogloss*, where they introduce or consider alternative viewpoints. *Heteroglossic* utterances are further classified into two types: the *Dialogic Expand* type (extra-vocalization) or the *Dialogic Contract* type (intra-vocalization) (Martin & White, 2005). Figure 1 illustrates how the textual voice interacts with alternative voices and positions across these two dialogic types.

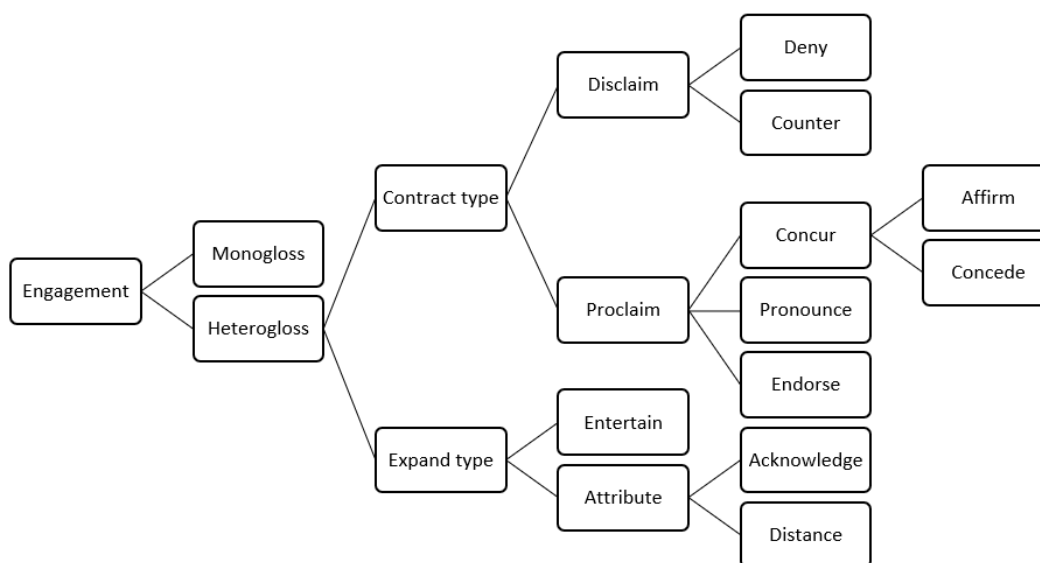


Figure 1. The Engagement system (Adapted from Martin & White, 2005)

In White's (2003) conceptualization, *Expand* pertains to the extent to which a locution allows for alternative viewpoints. Statements of the *Expand* type, such as "*some believe that*" or "*theorists propose,*" encourage audiences to entertain alternative perspectives. In contrast, *Contract* relates to how much the scope of alternative voices is constrained. Utterances of *Contract* type, such as "*everyone knows* or *it is a fact,*" work to restrict opportunities for valid dissent (Mori, 2017).

The subsystem *Heterogloss* comprises four key strategies for writers to position themselves dialogically in a text: *Disclaim* and *Proclaim* within the Contract type, and *Entertain* and *Attribute* within the *Expand* type. *Disclaim* is used to position the author's viewpoint as opposed to contrasting ones through *Deny* or *Counter*, as in the following examples from the corpus.

(1) There is **no** [deny] universally accepted definition of lexical sophistication, as researchers defined “sophisticated” words in different ways.

(2) **However** [counter], the analysis lacks the evidence to the researcher's finding which contributes a lot to his subjectivity of each character's representation.

Proclaim, including *Concur*, *Pronounce*, and *Endorse*, presents propositions as highly credible or valid and suppresses alternative perspectives.

(3) The use of corpus is **undeniably** [concur – affirm] useful in terms of we can make generalizations about spoken and written discourse as a whole.

(4) In general, almost every pupil expressed a wish to increase the variety of activities, [...]. **Nevertheless** [concur – concede], one shortcoming remained in the study.

(5) **It is clear** [pronounce] that the strategy is quite successful in enhancing students' speaking abilities.

(6) Comoglu and Dikilitas (2020) **unveiled** [endorse] that Turkish EFL PSTs could perform a deeper critical analysis [...].

Entertain creates dialogic openness by presenting propositions as subjective or contingent. *Attribute* invokes external voices, either neutrally (*Acknowledge*) or skeptically (*Distance*).

(7) **According to** [acknowledge] Cheung (2010), listening should be the first and most important skill to learn when learning a new language.

(8) He also **claimed** [distance] that a teacher who effectively integrates technology would be able to draw on extensive content knowledge [...].

As this study examines Vietnamese EFL students' use of *Engagement* in the evaluation of prior academic works, the linguistic resources of *Engagement* are central to the analysis of how they construct dialogic interactions with audience in their academic writing, specifically within the LR sections of their MA theses.

Studies of Evaluative Language in Academic Texts

There has been much research in evaluative language in non-academic domains of discourse such as journalistic discourse (Luo et al., 2022), political discourse (Goudong & Afzaal, 2023; Lian, 2018), and social media interactions (Ross & Caldwell, 2020; Yuliyanti, 2023). In academic contexts, its use has also been the subject of scholarly interest. Studies have been exploring evaluative language in undergraduate essays (McKinley, 2018; Mori, 2017), graduate theses (Geng & Wharton, 2016; Gil-Salom & Soler-Monreal, 2014), and research articles (Kwan et al., 2012; Naghizadeh & Afzali, 2018; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024; Zhang & Cheung, 2018). Given the scope of the present study, this review of literature concerns itself specifically with research on evaluation in academic texts.

Although several studies into the evaluative strategies in academic texts have shed light on how writers establish a research niche (Gil-Salom & Soler-Monreal, 2014; Kwan et al., 2012), they did not specifically explore linguistic resources within the *Appraisal* framework. Others that adopted the *Appraisal* framework often explored the systems of *Attitude* and *Graduation*. For example, Zhang and Cheung (2018) analyzed voice construction in the LR of research articles in computer networks and communications and second language (L2) writing through the lens of *Attitude* and *Graduation*. Pham (2024) later examined abstracts of research articles in economic fields based on the *Attitude* system of the *Appraisal* framework. Notwithstanding some insights into understanding evaluation across disciplinary writing, these studies did not address the *Engagement*. A few studies looked into the *Engagement*, but they steered their examination towards many different sections of academic texts, including introductions (Alotaibi, 2019; Chang & Schleppegrell, 2011), LRs (Amornrattanasirichok & Jaroongkhongdach, 2017; Naghizadeh & Afzali, 2018; Xie, 2016), discussions (Geng & Wharton, 2016; Loghmani et al., 2020), and conclusions (Loi et al., 2016).

Using Martin and White's (2005) *Engagement* system, Alotaibi (2019) investigated how authors in ranked and non-ranked journals in the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) used linguistic resources to construct authorial voice in research article introductions. They found that both groups predominantly employed *Heterogloss*, but non-SSCI journals employed more *Monogloss*. Employing the same frameworks, Chang and Schleppegrell (2011) investigated the linguistic resources used in research article introductions in the social sciences, qualitatively analyzing patterns of *Expand* and *Contract* options in educational research. They identified two patterns for each type: Expanding dialogic space, which uses resources like *Entertain* and *Attribute* to explore multiple perspectives and establish a research territory, and contracting dialogic space, which employs *Disclaim* and *Proclaim* to assert strong authorial stances, dismiss alternatives, and emphasize the study's significance.

Regarding the LRs, there were three notable studies. Amornrattanasirichok and Jaroongkhongdach (2017) explored the use of *Engagement* in LRs from Thai and international applied linguistics journals. The findings showed that *Heterogloss* was used mostly in the corpora of this study. In particular, the dialogic *Expand* prevailed, in which the use of *Acknowledge* was of highest frequency. Naghizadeh and Afzali (2018) also compared *Engagement* in LRs of research articles published in Iranian local and international journals and found that international journals favored *Expand*, while local journals relied more heavily on *Monogloss*. Xie (2016) analyzed evaluation in 25 Chinese English-major MA thesis LRs. The study found a high proportion of *Monogloss*. Within *Heterogloss*, the *Expand* slightly outweighed *Contract*, with *Acknowledge* being the most used. Besides, *Entertain* was used as a hedging strategy in students' works, but their lexical variety was limited compared to expert writers, which called for improved instruction in academic evaluation.

Engagement was also examined across sections in research articles (Fryer, 2013; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024; Loi et al., 2016). Fryer (2013) studied medical research articles and identified that *Expand* was used at twice the frequency of *Contract*, especially in the introduction and discussion sections, with *Entertain* being used most frequently. The most common *Engagement* strategies observed in this study were *Entertain* and *Disclaim*. It also noted a trend towards increased *Expand* in the discussion, while introduction sections frequently employed the *Counter* like 'however' and 'although'. In contrast, the *Contract* was dominant in the methods and results sections. The study by Nguyen and Nguyen (2024) revealed that Vietnamese authors prioritized

Contract over *Expand*, with *Disclaim* frequently used in introductions to highlight research gaps and *Proclaim* used in discussions and conclusions to affirm findings. The rarity of *Concur* and *Acknowledge* in the findings reflects a preference for asserting knowledge and minimizing external views. In a similar vein, Loi et al. (2016) analyzed the evaluative and dialogic stances in English and Malay research article conclusions using the *Appraisal* framework and genre analysis and they found that English conclusions employed more *Engagement* than Malay conclusions, and that Malaysian writers often employed *Contract*, which is arguably attributed to cultural and local academic influences.

As far as data sources are concerned, a number of studies looked into dissertations at the doctoral level. For example, Loghmani et al. (2020) examined how native English-speaking Ph.D. students in TEFL used the *Engagement* in their dissertation discussion sections. The findings showed these students relied more on *Contract* to assert authority and limit dialogic alternatives, in which *Counter* and *Deny* were the most frequently used. Less common resources, such as *Endorse* and *Acknowledge*, reflected the formal and dialogic nature of academic writing. Geng and Wharton (2016) investigated the *Engagement* in twelve discussion sections of doctoral theses written by first-language (L1) Chinese and L1 English writers. The findings revealed no statistically significant differences between the two groups in their use of *Engagement*. In addition, the use of *Heterogloss* was realized by the dominance of *Contract* type over *Expand* one. Within *Contract*, *Disclaim* was more common than *Proclaim*, whereas *Entertain* was the most frequently used within *Expand*.

This review discloses that how MA students make use of *Engagement* in their theses has captured little attention in research. The present study, therefore, addresses this gap by examining the use of *Engagement* within the LR sections written by MA students to enhance the understanding of dialogic strategies in academic writing and provide pedagogical recommendation for the teaching of academic writing within the EFL context.

Methodology

Context and Design

In Vietnam, postgraduate programs in English Language Studies (ELS) and English Language Teaching (ELT) are offered in English to broaden students' knowledge in the English language and provide them with knowledge and skills in ELT. As students must write a thesis on a relevant topic as part of the program requirements, they are provided with a course in Academic English with a focus on thesis writing. Nonetheless, due to the short duration of the course, there is little practice and their theses are arguably their first product of professional writing. To gain an in-depth understanding of the nuances of *Engagement* usage in their theses, the present study adopts a descriptive qualitative research design along with quantitative support from UAM Corpus Tool. This design is essential to achieve the goal.

The Corpus

The corpus comprises 20 MA theses by students majoring in ELT and ELS (submitted during 2022–2024) with approvals from the thesis writers. The data source ensures temporal relevance that reflects current academic writing practices in a particular context in Vietnam. The LR sections were then extracted, anonymized by assigning each LR to an identifier (LR1 to LR20), and converted to plain texts, which totaled a corpus of 115,214 words ($M = 5,760.7$; $SD =$

2,216.94). The corpus was built with meticulousness to ensure that the integrity of the data remained intact.

Data Processing and Analysis

Once the data source was shaped, the annotation and quantification of the *Engagement* system posited by Martin and White (2005) was conducted. This process was supported by the UAM Corpus Tool, which has been utilized in previous studies in the *Appraisal* framework (Fryer, 2013; Gheng & Wharton, 2016; Ngo, 2013), with the most updated version 6.2j as of 2023. Some linguistic realizations outlined by Naghizadeh and Afzali (2018) were also used to complement the *Engagement* realizations in Martin and White's (2005) work, which they acknowledged as not exhaustive. To ensure credibility, the annotation process strictly adhered to the *Appraisal* framework, and authors as coders regularly discussed and resolved discrepancies, if any, in coding to achieve a consensus on classifications.

As Martin and White (2005) pointed out, a challenge of Appraisal analysis is that the potential change of a word under the influence of co-textual factors. In this study, however, this challenge was overcome by meticulous examination of the co-text to ensure that the *Engagement* is categorized and analyzed accurately. Tabulation was also provided for a clear overview of the findings to facilitate further analysis.

Results

This section presents the findings, with the quantitative data being aggregated metrics for the entire corpus, then local subtypes of the *Engagement*. Reporting data this way can minimize misleading interpretations and obtain a more balanced overview of the data because some categories with limited occurrences might appear disproportionately significant when viewed in isolation as local percentages.

The distribution of Monogloss and Heterogloss

Statistically, the use of *Heterogloss* in LR of Vietnamese EFL students' MA theses (78.8%) is strongly dominant over *Monogloss* (21.2%). Such an outstripping dominance demonstrates the preference for the *Engagement* in academic discourse. The findings resonate with those from studies by Amornrattanasirichok and Jaroongkhongdach (2017), who observed a relatively similar proportion of *Heterogloss* (79.58%) and *Monogloss* (20.42%) in LR of local and international journals, and Naghizadeh and Afzali (2018), who also reported that both Thai and international research articles in applied linguistics favoured *Heterogloss* (67% and 83% respectively) in LR.

Most *Monogloss* in this study's corpus was used when writers reported studies or research methods as facts, uncontested information. In (9) below, the proposition is presented as a factual report of the study's focus, with no acknowledgment of competing interpretations or additional perspectives. Similarly, (10) asserts methodological details without inviting dialogic alternatives, emphasizing the factual nature of the information.

(9) The study by Rahmat and Dianita (2024) focuses on [monogloss] analyzing [...].

(10) In this study, a descriptive design and a mixed-methods approach were used [monogloss].

These examples highlight how *Monogloss* serves to establish the credibility of the review by presenting background studies and methods as uncontested knowledge. The usage ensures clarity and avoids overcomplicating the discourse, especially in contexts where presenting foundational information is essential for building the LR.

The use of Heterogloss

Among 1,874 instances of *Heterogloss* used in the corpus, *Expand type* (60.0%) was favored over *Contract type* (18.8%). Vietnamese EFL students, in this regard, primarily create space for alternative perspectives and engage more flexibly with prior academic works.

Table 1. *The distribution of Heterogloss*

Contract 446 (18.8%)		Expand 1428 (60%)	
Disclaim 133 (5.6%)	Proclaims 313 (13.2%)	Entertainment 39 (1.6%)	Attribute 1389 (58.4%)

These findings were consonant with those reported in previous studies (Amornrattanasirichok & Jaroongkhongdach, 2017; Fryer, 2013). Nevertheless, it is observed in other studies (Loghmani et al., 2020; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024), that *Contract type* was preferred. This pattern was also evident in Geng and Wharton's (2016) study, where *Contract* realizations outnumbered *Expand* ones in the discussion sections of doctoral theses written by L1 Chinese and English writers. Such contrast can be attributed, in part, to writers' academic levels. For instance, Loghmani et al. (2020) and Geng and Wharton (2016) analyzed discussion sections written by doctoral candidates. At this advanced level, the writers might have aimed to assert their authority, emphasizing their original contributions, and thus probably relying more on *Contract* strategies.

The use of Contract types

As shown in Table 1, *Disclaim* accounts for 5.6% of the total *Engagement*, while *Proclaim* makes up a larger proportion of 13.2%. In the corpus, *Disclaim*, comprising 1.8% of *Deny* and 3.8% of *Counter*, was primarily used to establish research gaps. These figures resonate with the patterns observed in Nguyen and Nguyen's (2024) study, where a high frequency of *Disclaim* resources was used in the introduction sections of Vietnamese research articles to pinpoint research gaps. However, the findings contrast with results from Geng and Wharton's (2016) study, which found that *Disclaim* resources were slightly more common than *Proclaim* resources. The findings suggest that Vietnamese EFL MA students rely more on affirming and aligning with propositions rather than challenging alternative views in their LRs. This usage may reflect the students' attempt to build credibility by aligning with existing studies rather than overtly contesting them.

Table 2. *The breakdown of Disclaims and Proclaims*

Contract Subtypes		Occurrences	Percentage
Disclaim	Deny	43	1.8%
	Counter	90	3.8%
	Concur (Affirm/Concede)	11	0.5%
Proclaims	Pronounce	6	0.3%
	Endorse	296	12.4%

Table 2 provides a close look at the distribution of these two subtypes of *Contract* in the corpus, which reveals that these two types of *Disclaim* are often used in combination to establish

research gaps or point out weaknesses in previous studies, suggestive of a key rhetorical strategy in academic writing among the MA students. They primarily used *Deny* to place an explicit emphasis on the absence of specific studies or limitations in existing research and *Counter* to introduce their critique or alternative perspectives.

A combined use of *Counter* ('*nonetheless*') and *Deny* ('*little*') to highlight a research gap is evident in (11). The writer counters the implicit expectation that there has been significant research in this area while simultaneously denying the existence of sufficient studies. This rhetorical strategy effectively positions the writer's work as addressing a critical gap in the literature. In a similar fashion, in (12), *Deny* ('*without*') is used to critique a methodological oversight, while *Counter* ('*although*') accentuates this critique with an acknowledgment of other considerations. This combination demonstrates an elaborate evaluation when contributions and specific weaknesses in the cited research are recognized at the same time.

(11) [...] **Nonetheless** [counter], **little** [deny] research delved into [...].

(12) TK items in Lux et al.'s (2011) research were written **without** [deny] examining technological affordances of technologies, **although** [counter] TK items were considered in various dimensions.

The breakdown of *Proclaim* in Table 2 shows that *Endorse* stood out as the most frequently used (12.4%). *Concur* and *Pronounce* were much rarer, with only 0.5% and 0.3% occurrences, respectively. Both *Affirm* and *Concede* within the *Concur*-type make up only a humble share of 0.5% of the corpus. Examples (13) and (14) are extracted from the corpus, illustrating their uses.

(13) **It is not surprising** [affirm] that Pajares (1992) considers beliefs as a messy construct.

(14) **Undoubtedly**, the researches [*sic*] on TPACK, as aforementioned, have been increased in recent years, but [concede] very few studies that have been done in the world [...].

In (13), the phrase "*it is not surprising*" subtly affirms the cited author's perspective, suggesting that the writer aligns with this established understanding. In contrast, the expression "*undoubtedly... but*" in (14) acknowledges the progress in TPACK research while shifting the focus to an evident research gap. The use of the adversative conjunction *but*, combined with the explicit limitation noted in the expression "*very few studies*," positions the writer's research as addressing a critical and underexplored area. The use of *Pronounce* is even rarer, with only six instances identified:

(15) **There is no doubt** [pronounce] that teachers' beliefs play a pivotal role in [...].

(16) **The results offer valuable proof** [endorse] that dialogic exchanges during group projects are essential [...].

In (15), the writer uses *there is no doubt* to present an authoritative stance on the importance of teacher beliefs. This explicit emphasis eliminates room for alternative interpretations, a signal that the writer is confident in the assertion. Meanwhile, *Endorse* claims the highest proportion within *Proclaim* resources. To illustrate in (16), the phrase *the results offer valuable proof* explicitly aligns the writer with the cited findings. Such alignment with external evidence lends credibility to the writer's claims, which highlights the importance of dialogic exchanges in L2 acquisition.

The use of Expand types

Within *Expand*, the occurrences of *Attribute* overwhelmingly dominated with 58.4%, while *Entertain* makes up a much smaller proportion (1.6%), as displayed in Table 3. The high proportion of *Expand* types reflects the writers' strong preference for opening dialogic space and engaging with multiple perspectives in their academic writing.

Table 3. *The breakdown of Entertainment and Attributes*

Expand type		Occurrences	Percentage
Entertain		39	1.6%
Attribute	Acknowledge	1632	57.3%
	Distance	27	1.1%

Albeit very infrequent, *Entertain* was used by Vietnamese EFL students to primarily introduce propositions as subjective, tentative, or open to alternative interpretations.

(17) However, the findings from this paper **may be** [entertain] stereotypical.

In (17), the writer used “*may be*” to acknowledge potential weaknesses in the findings and ultimately to leave room for alternative interpretations or critiques. It also demonstrates how *Entertain* enables writers to maintain a cautious stance in the discussion or interpretation of the findings that may be subject to variability or critique. The low frequency of *Entertain* in this corpus may indicate a more cautious approach in engaging with tentative or speculative statements in comparison to the doctoral theses analyzed by Geng and Wharton (2016).

Regarding the use of *Attribute*, there was an asymmetry between *Acknowledge* (57.3%) and *Distance* (1.1%). This result implies students' strong preference for neutrally reporting external perspectives rather than expressing skepticism or doubt. *Acknowledge* as the leading *Attribute* type, including 57.3% occupied more than half of the total *Engagement* instances. It allows the writers to neutrally report the claims, arguments, or findings of other scholars without explicitly evaluating or questioning their validity.

(18) Newmark (1988) **further refined** [acknowledge] the concept of CST by differentiating [...]. He **argued** [acknowledge] that [...].

The use of “*further refined*” and “*argued*” reflects the writer's reliance on authoritative voices to ground their discussion without making evaluative judgments. This acknowledgment is instrumental for defining key concepts and establishing the context for the writer's research, implying agreements without critique. Obviously, the *Acknowledge* strategy is significant in neutrally incorporating external voices into students' academic conversation. Avoiding overt alignment or critique can be a strategy to ensure that their tone remains objective and scholarly, which is crucial in the early stages of argument development.

Distance, on the contrary, was rarely used, reflecting students' cautious approach to overtly critique or question established views. For example, the use of the verb “*claim*” in example (19) to introduce the author's conclusion signaled that the writer is reserved about its generalizability or applicability.

(19) The author **claimed** [distance] that professional development has a limited impact on [...].

Discussion

How Vietnamese EFL students use Engagement resources in the evaluation of prior academic works

These consistent findings suggest that academic writers, whether novice or professional, commonly place a priority on *Heterogloss* engagement in their LR sections. In the examination of introduction sections of research articles, Alotaibi (2019) also noted a predominance in usage of *Heterogloss* in both SSCI-ranked and non-SSCI-ranked journals. This consistency may further show that the writers have their preference on dialogic *Engagement* across different sections of scholarly texts and publication contexts. However, Chinese EFL students were in favor of *Monogloss* (56.1%) over *Heterogloss* (43.9%) in their MA theses (Xie, 2016), which may reflect variations in academic writing practices where Chinese writers assert propositions with greater confidence, potentially at the expense of dialogic interaction. By comparison, Vietnamese EFL students in this study demonstrate a stronger inclination towards engaging with multiple perspectives. The difference might be due to the influence of pedagogical practices that emphasize dialogic *Engagement* and critical evaluation. However, more empirical evidence is required to reach a substantive conclusion as to the different EFL academic writing practices between Vietnamese and Chinese MA students.

Another notable difference is between our corpus and Geng and Wharton's (2016). The lower frequency of the *Engagement* in our data could be accounted for the different academic genres analyzed. While we focused on LR sections, Geng and Wharton (2016) investigated discussion sections of doctoral theses, which are evaluative and argumentative, and thus more intensive in the use of *Engagement*. The LR section is arguably more inclined towards presenting prior studies and establishing research contexts rather than engaging in detailed argumentation or critique. Another plausible explanation is that novice academic writers' texts often exhibit a deficiency in evaluative elements (Chang & Schleppegrell, 2011; Xie, 2016). In addition, the writer's proficiency also hinders the frequency of *Engagement* usage. The writers in Geng and Wharton's (2016) study are doctoral-level, whereas those in our study are MA students.

Regarding the use of *Heterogloss*, however, the Vietnamese MA students in the present study might have a less advanced academic writing level than those of doctoral candidates or professional researchers. Therefore, they may rely more on the *Expand* strategies to engage with prior works and create a less assertive stance, possibly due to limited confidence in claiming authority or less exposure to advanced writing practices. This is in line with Liu's (2013) argument that novice writers' texts are characterized by a limited use of intra-vocalizing (*contract*) resources.

Notably, there were contradictory patterns in studies with different groups of Asian writers. While Thai writers use a wide range of *Expand* type, (Amornrattanasirichok and Jaroongkhongdach, 2017), Chinese and Vietnamese writers preferred using *Contract* type in applied linguistics research articles and theses (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024; Geng & Wharton, 2016). These disparities possibly stem from differences in the specific subfields within applied linguistics, as well as the sections of academic texts under investigation. Arguably, the complexity and variability of *Engagement* usage is more evident, even within the same discipline. Further intradisciplinary studies are therefore needed to explore these differences in greater detail.

Having a closer look at the *Contract* type, the combined use of *Deny* and *Counter* strategies in the corpus underlines their critical role in constructing academic arguments since highlighting research gaps or weaknesses in previous studies using these resources helps writers justify the relevance and necessity of their research. The relatively higher occurrence of *Counter* compared

to *Deny* indicates that Vietnamese EFL MA students tend to critique prior research by opposing or replacing ideas rather than outright rejecting or negating them. In this regard, their critiques possess a sense of elaboration with a balance between the identification of weaknesses and recognition of contributions or strengths in the cited studies. It also reflects their effort to establish their research focus without being overly dismissive, thus maintaining scholarly credibility and fostering dialogic *Engagement*. However, the overall occurrence of *Disclaim* in this study is significantly scarce, only 5.6% of all the *Engagement* in the entire corpus. Therefore, although the previous research findings showed interesting patterns in how *Disclaim* strategies were employed, the limited frequency of their use means that these conclusions are unnecessarily overarching, but rather indicative of tendencies within this specific dataset. Further research with larger corpora should be necessary to draw more substantive conclusions. Meanwhile, the usage patterns of *Endorse*, *Concur* and *Pronounce* indicate an ability to manage rhetorical *Engagement* in academic writing. The higher use of *Endorse* suggests that Vietnamese EFL MA students prioritize external validation to support their arguments, a rather prudent approach for establishing credibility in scholarly discourse. However, their highly occasional use of *Pronounce* and *Concur* reveals a rare willingness to explore more assertive and critical engagement strategies, albeit cautiously. This usage pattern points out the status quo of their academic writing, where they balance deference to established knowledge with an inactive authorial presence. Over time, as these writers gain confidence and experience, their use of rhetorical resources might evolve further. To gain a deeper understanding of how these practices may develop over time or respond to targeted pedagogical interventions, future research could benefit from longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of students' rhetorical strategies across their academic careers. Alternatively, experimental studies could explore the impact of specific instructional approaches on their use of rhetorical resources to shed light on how these strategies can be fostered and enhanced.

Considering the use of *Expand* resources, Vietnamese MA students employ them more extensively to engage with external perspectives and create a dialogic space for scholarly discourse. While *Attribute* was the primary tool for them to reference prior research, the rare use of *Entertain* was still a signal of their awareness of the need to present claims cautiously and leave room for alternative viewpoints. Within the *Attribute*, the high frequency of *Acknowledge* in this study resonates with Xie's (2016) results, suggesting that the MA students, possibly due to their novice status, rely on the strategy that situates their research within existing literature and demonstrate familiarity with authoritative sources. However, the sparing use of *Distance* hinted at students' hesitancy to engage critically or challenge established views. In general, the use of *Attribute* uncovers students' effort to express neutrality, signaling their caution in asserting an evaluative stance, likely due to their novice status and a lack of confidence in navigating complex academic arguments. Jalilifar et al. (2013) explained that their MA experience might be lacking in academic engagement training, which could result in limited familiarity with strategies for critical evaluation and dialogic interaction in academic writing.

Implications for Teaching Academic English

This study's results have underlined significant pedagogical implications. First, academic English instruction should place greater emphasis on cultivating critical thinking skills regarding how to question, critique, and propose alternatives to existing literature. The limited application of *Pronounce* and *Distance* indicates that students in this study did not critically engage in scholarly discourse. Inadequate teaching instruction has caused a lack of stance in students' writing (Chang & Schleppegrell, 2011). Managing the degree of personal voice is crucial for the formation of a

persuasive argument, which can be achieved through fostering interactive relationships with their readers, critically assessing their topics, and situating their perspectives within the context of alternative viewpoints (Hyland, 2005). In line with this perspective, activities such as debate-style assignments, peer reviews, and critical literature evaluations can be of great use.

Research on academic writing has also shown consistency in its emphasis on the *Engagement* in effective academic communication (Pham, 2024). The incorporation of explicit instruction on *Engagement* is paramount. Given the predominance of one category over the other (e.g., *Pronounce* versus *Endorse*, *Acknowledge* versus *Distance*) in this study, academic writing courses should explicitly familiarize students with the function and application of the *Engagement* to enable them to diversify their evaluation strategies in academic writing. Importantly, given that Vietnamese L1 writing is also rich in evaluative language, as suggested by Chung et al. (2022), instructors are encouraged to leverage positive L1 transfer by recognizing and integrating appropriate L1 rhetorical features into L2 academic texts.

Furthermore, the results of this study have proved the utility of corpus tools for analyzing linguistic patterns in academic writing. Therefore, educators should incorporate corpus-based instruction so that students can analyze examples of the *Engagement* in authentic academic texts, including their writing. Such activities may help students recognize the rhetorical impact of different *Engagement* strategies and fine-tune their use of these resources in other sections of their theses. To this end, tailored word banks, including phrases for *Appraisal*, as suggested by McKinley (2018), or concordance in Kwan's (2006) words, should be used to tap into linguistic representations of each category of the *Appraisal* framework, all of which is to strengthen students' ability to construct appropriate writer identities. In parallel with corpus-assisted instruction, Kara (2024) demonstrated that visual tools like infographics, when embedded into EFL writing classrooms, not only enhance students' organization and coherence in essay writing but also foster broader rhetorical and critical thinking skills. Our study suggests this teaching method since these visual tools can complement text-based instruction by helping students conceptualize complex argument structures, identify contrasting viewpoints, and represent authorial stance more effectively. Such corpus-assisted and multimodal approaches can thus offer a solid foundation for students' writing ability.

In addition, L2 motivation research also shows the significance of course relevance in shaping learner engagement. For example, Altalib (2019) found that students in English for Specific Purposes courses reported significantly stronger ideal L2 selves and more positive learning experiences than those in English for General Purposes courses. This study points to the potential of aligning academic writing instruction with students' disciplinary interests and long-term goals, which may foster not only motivational development but also deeper investment in critical engagement practices.

Last but not least, since LR is among the most challenging sections for novice researchers, particularly those whose mother tongue is not English (Uzuner, 2008), we suggest scaffolding approaches in writing instruction. Evaluation should be first instructed, not during the writing of LR, but rather during the reading process. Educators and facilitators of academic writing must recognize that training in evaluation cannot be an afterthought but a foundational step in a student's educational journey. Embedding evaluation skills into the reading process early on is crucial (Kwan et al., 2012) because it equips students to approach scholarly texts with a critical lens. It also enables them to construct well-informed and evaluative arguments in their academic

writing. This proactive approach is arguably essential for fostering not only effective academic writing but also deeper intellectual involvement in the literature.

Conclusion

This study investigated the use of *Engagement* resources in the Literature Review sections of Vietnamese EFL students' MA theses. The findings indicate that Vietnamese EFL students tend to engage dialogically in their LRs, gravitating toward *Heterogloss* resources rather than *Monogloss* resources. Among the former, *Expand* reigned dominant over *Contract*, suggesting a greater focus on opening dialogic space. Among the *Expand* resources, *Attribute* strategy was employed most, with *Acknowledge* being of the highest frequency. This result elucidates the students' reliance on neutrality when reporting external voices to situate their research within established literature. Besides, the scant use of *Deny*, *Counter*, *Concur*, *Pronounce*, *Entertain*, and *Distance* is indicative of either a hesitancy to exercise critical dialogic *Engagement*, an amount of caution, and a lack of confidence in employing these rhetorical strategies, or a potential unfamiliarity with their usage due to insufficient academic writing training.

Naturally, limitations are inevitable. First, the study's small sample size of 20 theses may not capture the whole spectrum of Vietnamese EFL students' academic writing practices. Additionally, focusing solely on the LR sections excludes other thesis components that may exhibit distinct *Engagement* patterns. The reliance on corpus-based analysis limits insights into the cognitive and instructional factors influencing students' rhetorical choices. Accordingly, future studies could expand the sample size and include theses from various disciplines and linguistic backgrounds to enhance generalizability and provide a more comprehensive view of students' writing practices. Nevertheless, this study is still significant as it elucidates how Vietnamese EFL students employ *Engagement* in LR sections of their MA theses and offers actionable pedagogical implications regarding the use of *Engagement* in particular and *Appraisal* in general in the EFL context that empower students to engage more actively with scholarly discourse.

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