A comparative study of reporting verbs used in the *Introduction* chapters of bachelor's theses and master's theses by Chinese English-majored students

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ABSTRACT

Reporting verbs (RVs), as rhetorical lexical devices, play a key role in academic writing because they enable writers to attribute content to other sources and allow them to convey both the kind of activities reported and their evaluation of the reported information. However, no study has been conducted on how RVs are used differently between bachelor's theses (BTs) and master's theses (MTs) in the Chinese context. Through corpus-based and comparative analysis, this study, therefore, aims to analyze and compare the use of RVs between 30 BT Introduction Chapters and 30 MT Introduction Chapters by Chinese English-majored students in terms of denotative potentials and evaluative functions based on Hyland's (2002) classification framework. The results reveal that RVs used by undergraduate students are smaller in amount and narrower in range compared with those used by master's students. Concerning the denotative potentials of RVs, a similar distribution of RVs was found in the two corpora. Both undergraduate and master's students prefer Discourse Act RVs and Research Act RVs to Cognition Act RVs. Regarding their evaluative functions, undergraduate students show a tendency toward non-factive RVs, while master's students tend to use factive RVs. These findings provide a valuable view of how Chinese English-majored students use RVs in their thesis writing, but their knowledge of the rhetorical functions of this device is still insufficient. The findings might increase thesis writers' knowledge on the significance of RVs and raise their awareness of using RVs appropriately and effectively in their thesis writing, or even in all kinds of academic discourse. This paper then provides some suggestions for thesis writing courses.

Keywords: Bachelor's thesis; Chinese English-majored students; Introduction chapters; master's thesis; reporting verbs

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing plays an indispensable role in a student's academic life at a tertiary level (Hyland, 2002; Yeganeh & Boghayeri, 2015). They are expected to learn to write essays, research proposals, research articles, theses or dissertations, or other texts, adopting a style of writing appropriate to their academic field and the genre they are writing. One of the most important features of academic writing is to cite or report other sources appropriately (Hyland, 2002; Liardét & Black, 2019; Jalilifar & Dabbi, 2012). It requires writers to construct a coherent and credible representation of themselves as well as their research and negotiate their relationship with the discourse community by attributing propositional content to the existing literature and demonstrating accommodation to the community knowledge (Hyland, 1999)[i]. To be more

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specific, writers should present others' claims clearly and concisely and evaluate them to demonstrate how the current work builds on or reworks past utterances. Reporting verbs (RVs), as the most important realization of reporting or referencing, can be used to introduce the work of other researchers.

RVs, as rhetorical lexical devices, allow the writers to clearly convey the kind of activities reported and precisely show an attitude to that information (Hyland, 1999, 2002; Thompson & Ye, 1991). In other words, RVs are used to achieve the rhetorical impact of an academic paper that often rests on the connections that writers make between their claims and others' claims (Hunston & Thompson, 2000; Hyland, 2000) Such connections are created through the writers' evaluation of and attitude toward the cited claims. Furthermore, academic genres, such as bachelor's theses (BTs) and master's theses (MTs), are by their nature rhetorical instruments whose main purpose is to interact with readers, aiming to convince them that the claims are justifiable and significant. As Hunston (2000) affirms, the use of RVs can require a great deal of exactness to establish the credibility of both the writer and the claims so that there is a greater likelihood that the reader will accept the position the writer is taking. It can be concluded that the use of RVs can provide an appropriate context of persuasion throughout the process of building "writer-author engagement" and "writer-reader engagement".

Given the significance of RVs in academic writing, a few studies on RVs have been conducted. Some of these studies have analyzed the use of RVs in research articles (e.g., Hyland, 2002; Jafarigohar & Mohammadkhani, 2015; Un-udom & Un-udom, 2020). Some studies have revealed how RVs are used in MTs (e.g., Jarkovská & Kučírková, 2020; Nguyen; 2017; Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2015a, 2015b). In addition, few studies have compared the use of RVs between different genres, for example, Jalilifar's (2012) comparative analysis of RVs used between MTs and research articles. Although those studies have contributed to the field of RVs, no study has revealed the tendencies of RVs used in BTs and MTs, that is, in the same genre but represent different levels of education. Writers of BTs and MTs might exhibit distinct preferences for different RVs due to the different roles they play in the academic community. Besides, undergraduate students and master's students might have different levels of control over and awareness of how to use RVs in texts. Therefore, the comparison of RVs used in BTs and MTs can shed some light on the features of RVs used by the two writer groups and mark their similarities and differences. Moreover, this study might provide a more standardized writing model and specification for undergraduate students and guide them to conform to the conventions of the discourse community. To the best of the present researchers' knowledge, no study has been conducted to compare the use of RVs between BTs and MTs in the Chinese context to date.

In China's tertiary education, as a foreign language learning context, writing a thesis in English is recognized as the last but most important task that English-majored students are required to fulfill in almost all universities. Thesis writing is seen as a critical factor to reinforce and test students' comprehensive abilities, scientific research abilities, and creation and innovation spirits. Importantly, thesis writing is regarded as an essential constituent of assessment since it is submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements to determine English-majored students' academic achievement for obtaining a corresponding academic degree. According to the *English Teaching Syllabus for English Majors* issued by Teaching Advisory Committee for Tertiary English Majors (2000), to graduate with a bachelor's degree, undergraduate students need to write a BT in English of 3,000-5,000 words with smooth language, clear idea, well-organized structure, and substantial contents within the final year in the university. To graduate with a master's degree, master's students are required to complete an MT in English around 20,000 words in length, which varies from university to university, within the final year in the university. In a word, thesis is regarded as a pivotal pass to graduation and culmination point in the whole tertiary study.

However, throughout their writing, the complex interaction between lexical choices and rhetorical purposes of RVs could pose challenges for Chinese English-majored (CEM) students, and they often find it difficult to choose appropriate RVs for reporting claims that can satisfy both the syntactic requirements and rhetorical effects (Cao, 2017; Lou, 2013; Wei & Liu, 2019). Firstly, CEM students possess insufficient knowledge about the functional features of RVs when composing a BT or MT because of the lack of systematic guidance and supervision on teaching how to use RVs (Cao, 2017; Lou, 2013; Sun, 2009). What is more, due to the restriction of learning resources, there are not enough authentic English materials and information on the latest academic trend in the university databases. As a result, CEM students always lack resources to learn RVs and learn how to make the subtle distinctions between syntactic features and rhetorical functions of RVs. Like the situation described in Hyland and Milton (1999), Chinese novice writers are often unable to distinguish the subtle relationships between syntactic features and rhetorical functions when reporting a claim. Furthermore, De Beaugrande (2001) confirms that relying on simple dictionary definitions is not always an effective strategy for expressing a writer's stance toward a claim since there is sometimes a

disconnect between the meanings of words found in a dictionary and how they are commonly used in actual rhetorical contexts. In this case, Bloch (2010) demonstrates that "even if the student can make grammatically correct choices, the rhetorical impact of their claims may suffer if the RV is not appropriate" (p. 220). Finally, students often seem concerned with varying their lexical choices by randomly choosing a RV or substituting one RV for another without adequate consciousness of the subtleties of language necessary for reporting claims (Bloch, 2010; Pecorari, 2008; Yeganeh & Boghayeri, 2015). Therefore, it is obvious that the difficulties it poses for CEM students in using RVs are one of the critical issues that need to be solved.

In search of a possible solution to the problems and realizing the need to minimize the research gap, this study aims to analyze and compare the use of RVs in the Introduction Chapter between BTs and MTs by CEM students, aiming to find out first how RVs are used in BTs and MTs and second their similarities and differences in using RVs. To be more specific, the issues in focus include (1) how the writers use RVs to report previous studies (denotative potentials) and (2) how they evaluate the cited information (evaluative functions) based on Hyland's (2002) classification framework. Accordingly, to fulfill the objectives of this study, the following research question would be investigated: What are the similarities and differences in the use of RVs in Introduction Chapters between BTs and MTs by CEM students?

METHODS
Research design
To achieve the goals of this study, a quanti-qualitative methodology (QQM) was employed, which integrated quantitative techniques into a qualitative method. It is believed that the use of QQM makes the research results more empirically transparent and permits the collection of richer and more multifaceted data (Grim et al., 2006). Specifically, the numbers of types and tokens of RVs and their percentages were calculated for the numerical analysis. Afterward, discourse analysis was adopted as the main research method to elaborate on the results from the quantitative (number) values.

Data collection
The data used in this study were compiled from two target sources: BTs produced by CEM undergraduate students and MTs produced by CEM master's students during the years 2018-2020. Thirty BTs were selected from a pool of 140 BTs collected from Kaili University which is a public university in Southwestern China, and 30 MTs were selected from 15 universities (two from each) in various regions of China by downloading them from *China National Knowledge Infrastructure*, a key

national online repository in China, including journals, doctoral dissertations, MTs, proceedings, newspapers, etc. The rationale for the selection of the two different corpora, regarding the incapacity of the first author of this paper, was to keep it manageable based on their accessibility and availability. In addition, these theses follow the Introduction-Literature Review-Methodology-Results and Discussion-Conclusion (ILrMRDC) format, ensuring consistency in structure. Furthermore, they were selected from the fields of Applied Linguistics and Teaching Methodology to guarantee consistency in register and subject. It is worth noting that the majority of theses written in these two fields follow the "ILrMRDC" format.

To fulfill the purposes of this study, only the Introduction chapters were chosen as the corpus since this chapter is regarded as a specific and crucial "part-genre" (Dudley-Evans, 1997, p. 5) and is the main place where writers review or evaluate what has been investigated or discovered by other researchers in previous related studies (Swales, 1990; Jalilifar & Dabbi, 2012). Therefore, the Introduction chapters, as one of the "reporting-dense chapters", are the best choice to examine the use of RVs.

Ultimately, 30 BT Introductions and 30 MT Introductions were drawn to build a corpus to investigate the use of RVs between BTs and MTs by CEM students. The resulting corpus of 30 BT Introductions consisted of 20,313 words and the total length of 30 MT Introductions is 41,892 words. For ease of reference and subsequent analysis, they were randomly coded from BTI01-BTI30 and MTI01-MTI30, separately.

Analysis framework
Hyland's (2002) classification of RVs was adopted as the framework for analyzing the RVs in this study since it is the most comprehensive taxonomy for classifying RVs, which has been applied in many previous studies (e.g., Agbaglo, 2017; Jarkovská & Kučírková, 2020; Nguyen, 2017; Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2015a, 2015b). It includes both the author's research activities and the writer's evaluative judgments, containing the key factors in the reporting process of academic writing. This framework is shown in Figure 1.

In terms of its denotative functions, Hyland (2002) classifies RVs into three distinguishable processes according to the type of activities they referred to: 1) Research (Real-World) Acts (verbs that represent experimental activities or actions carried out in the real world, e.g. *discover, notice, observe, show*), 2) Cognition Acts (verbs that are concerned with the researcher's mental processes, e.g. *assume, believe, conceptualize, suspect, view*), and 3) Discourse Acts (verbs that involve the verbal expression of cognitive or research activities, e.g. *ascribe, discuss, hypothesize, report, state*).

Figure 1

Hyland's (2002) Classification Framework of Reporting Verbs (p. 119)
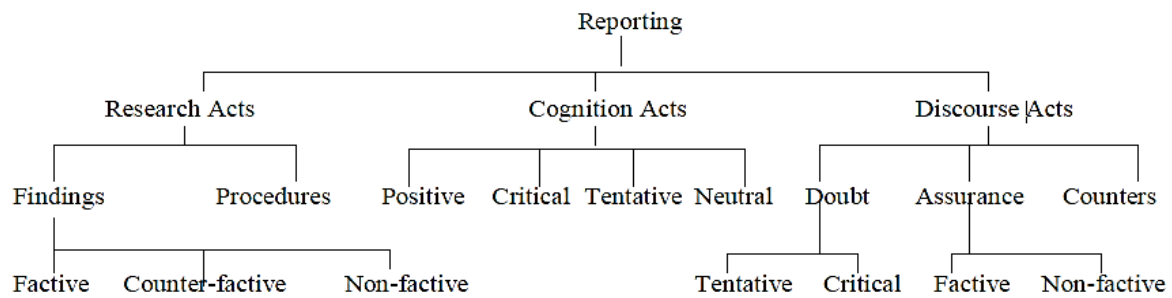
In terms of their evaluative functions, each of the process categories has a sub-set of evaluative options. Within the Findings category of Research Acts, writers can acknowledge their acceptance of the author's claims with factive verbs (e.g., *confirm, demonstrate, establish, show, solve*), portray the authors' judgments as false or incorrect to show a counter-factive stance (e.g., *fail, misunderstand, ignore, overlook*), or comment on research findings non-factively, giving no clear attitudinal signal as to their reliability (e.g., *find, identify, observe, obtain*). In addition, verbs that refer to the Procedure category carry no evaluation in themselves but simply report research tasks neutrally.

Cognition Act verbs can handle evaluation differently, not only allowing writers to take a personal stance on the reported information, but also attributing a particular attitude to the cited author (Hyland, 2002). There are four clear options. Writers can portray the author as having a positive attitude and accepting it as true or correct with verbs such as *agree, concur, hold, know, think,* or *understand*; as taking a tentative stance (e.g., *believe, doubt, speculate, suppose, suspect*); as having a critical view toward the reported matter (e.g., *disagree, dispute, not think*); or as holding a neutral attitude toward the reported proposition (e.g., *anticipate, conceive, picture, reflect*).

Employing Discourse Act verbs allows the writers to convey an evaluation of the cited information by either taking responsibility for their interpretation, conveying their uncertainty or assurance of the correctness of the claims reported, or attributing a qualification to the author (Hyland, 2002). Discourse Act verbs, which express the writer's view directly, can be divided into Doubt and Assurance categories. Doubt verbs can be further separated into tentative verbs (e.g., *hypothesize, indicate, intimate, postulate, suggest*) and critical verbs (e.g., *evade, exaggerate, not account, not make point*). Assurance verbs introduce cited material by either neutrally informing readers of the author's position (non-factive) (e.g., *answer, define, describe, discuss, report, state, summarize*) or supporting the writer's own position (factive) (e.g., *affirm, argue, claim, explain, note, point out*). Counters, the final sub-category of Discourse Act

verbs, can be employed by writers to express the cited author's own reservations or objections to the correctness of the reported message instead of taking responsibility for the evaluation as in Doubt verbs (e.g., *attack, challenge, critique, deny, question, refute, rule out, warn*).

Data analysis

The compiled corpora were analyzed by AntConc software (Version 3.5.8) (Anthony, 2019), which can save time and energy for the present researchers and ensure the accuracy of the research results. Firstly, based on the list of RVs adopted from Hyland's (2002) study, 67 RVs were identified as target RVs that appear in the two corpora; therefore, they were entered in the search column of AntConc to retrieve RVs. Meanwhile, the Regular Expressions (Regex) was ticked to include all word classes of each RV sought for. For the concordance to search for all RVs that occurred in the two corpora, the Regex for the conventional ways of reporting clauses (e.g., APA and MLA styles starting with one or many authors' surnames, followed the year of publication or page in round brackets) was created. Secondly, thorough checking was conducted to eliminate those retrieved verbs that do not function as RV with the help of manual work. Thirdly, employing Hyland's (2002) classification framework, all retrieved RVs were classified into different categories in light of the types of activities and their evaluative functions. Finally, the occurrences of RVs in the two corpora were calculated, and then the gathered data were analyzed qualitatively to answer the research question.

To assure the reliability and credibility of the analysis, one inter-rater who has shared knowledge and expertise in the field of discourse analysis was invited to analyze the corpus data with the first author of this paper. The two raters analyzed the 30 BT Introductions and 30 MT Introductions independently and their identification of RVs was compared to determine their inter-rater reliability, noting agreements and disagreements on the presence and absence of each RV. The percentage agreement was calculated using the formula $A/(A+D) \times 100$ (A=the number of agreements,

D=the number of disagreements) (Biber et al., 2007; Dastjerdi et al., 2017). Accordingly, they achieved 91.7% agreement. However, as Swales (1990) states, some RVs are problematic since they can be read in two possible ways depending on whether they are interpreted as reporting or not. For the unsettled disagreements between these two raters, the second author of this paper with extensive experience in discourse analysis was consulted for a final decision.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
Overall features of the use of RVs
The overall picture of RVs used in 30 BT Introductions and 30 MT Introductions by CEM students reveals clear differences in the two corpora. As illustrated in Table 1, CEM undergraduate students used 29 types and 84 tokens of RVs in the BT Introductions in total, and master's students employed 69 types and 175 tokens of RVs in the MT Introductions. Since the sizes of the two corpora were not exactly equal, the raw frequencies (RFs) of occurrence of RVs and normalized frequencies (NFs) of the number of occurrences per 1,000 words are both given in Table 1. Accordingly, undergraduate students used 1.43 types and 4.14 tokens of RVs per 1,000 words, while master's students used 1.65 types and 4.18 tokens of RVs per 1,000 words. The findings reveal that RVs used by CEM undergraduate students were smaller in amount and narrower in range when compared with those by CEM master's students. It can be inferred that master's students have a wider range of linguistic options to draw on and they are likely to show a high level of knowledge in applying different types of RVs to report the works of other researchers. Moreover, it also shows that master's students have higher awareness to use RVs frequently than undergraduate students do during the process of composing their theses.

Table 1
General Distribution of RVs in BT Introductions and MT Introductions

Corpus	Type		Token	
	RF	NF	RF	NF
BT Introductions	29	1.43	84	4.14
MT Introductions	69	1.65	175	4.18

(Note: Type=the total number of different RVs; Token= the total number of RVs)

According to Hyland's (2002) classification framework, RVs can be classified into different categories. Regarding their denotative categories, *Discourse Act RVs* were used with the highest frequency, followed by *Research Act RVs* and the lowest frequency of *Cognition Act RVs* in both BT Introductions and MT Introductions. Concerning their evaluative categories, *non-factive RVs* were used the most in the BT Introductions, while *factive RVs* were found to prevail in the MT Introductions. Further discussion on the use of RVs in the two corpora is provided in the following sections.

Denotative categories
As shown in Table 2, in terms of denotative categorizations in the BT Introductions and MT Introductions, both two groups of writers preferred *Discourse Act RVs* (70.24% and 56.00%, respectively) and *Research Act RVs* (19.05% and 30.29%, respectively) to *Cognition Act RVs* (10.71% and 13.71%, respectively) when reporting previous works in thesis writing, among which *Discourse Act RVs* were used the most.

Table 2
RVs Used in 30 BT Introductions and 30 MT Introductions in Terms of Denotative Potentials

Category/Sub-category	BT Introductions		MT Introductions	
	RF	%	RF	%
Discourse Acts	**59**	**70.24**	**98**	**56.00**
Doubt	20	23.81	22	12.57
Assurance	39	46.43	74	42.29
Counters	0	0	2	1.14
Research Acts	**16**	**19.05**	**53**	**30.29**
Findings	10	11.90	19	10.86
Procedures	6	7.14	34	19.43
Cognition Acts	**9**	**10.71**	**24**	**13.71**
TOTAL	**84**	**100**	**175**	**100**

This trend in using RVs is in line with the findings of using RVs by Agbaglo (2017), Hyland (2002), Nguyen (2017), and Nguyen and Pramoolsook (2015a, 2015b). Hyland (2002) explains that this tendency characterizes the discursive nature of soft disciplines to which the fields of this target corpus, Applied Linguistics and Teaching Methodology, belong.

Firstly, as explained in Hyland (2002), the greater use of *Discourse Act RVs* is more

appropriate in an argument schema which more readily regards explicit interpretation, speculation, and arguments as "accepted aspects of knowledge" (p. 126). In addition, the use of *Discourse Act RVs* allows writers to expedite the verbal exploration of related issues, facilitating qualitative arguments that rest on finely delineated interpretations and conceptualizations. As illustrated in Examples 1-5, *Discourse Act RVs*, "explain, "indicate", "claim", "suggest", and "question", were employed to verbally report the claims of other researchers, which can construct factual reliability and establish a specific context of the knowledge.

(1) *Bao (2016) explained that attributive clauses are divided into restrictive attributive clause and non-restrictive attributive clause.* (BTI30) (Discourse Act Assurance Factive)

(2) *Jespersen (1924) claimed that "a language would be a difficult thing to handle if its speakers had the burden imposed on them of remembering every little item separately".* (MTI14) (Discourse Act Assurance Factive)

(3) *Liu (2016) indicates that in the process of implementing Task-based language teaching, teachers will set different ones according to different articles.* (BTI11) (Discourse Act Doubt Tentative)

(4) *Wang and Wang (2003) suggested that the content of academic English should be strengthened by setting up public English curriculum, increasing the training of listening and speaking skills, and cultivating students' abilities to communicate in English.* (MTI10) (Discourse Act Doubt Tentative)

(5) *However, Dörnyei (2005) questioned the applicability of integrativeness with the worldwide development of English.* (MTI06) (Discourse Act Counter)

The results also show that *Assurance RVs* were used with the highest frequency within the category of *Discourse Acts* in 30 BT Introductions and 30 MT Introductions (46.43% and 42.29%, respectively) (Table 2). The finding is consistent with the studies by Jarkovská and Kučírková (2020), Nguyen (2017), Nguyen and Pramoolsook (2015a, 2015b), and Un-udom and Un-udom (2020) where the predominant use of *Discourse Act Assurance RVs* was found. It demonstrates that these CEM students tended to introduce cited materials in more positive and conclusive terms as explained by Hyland (2002), which can directly bolster their views.

Secondly, according to the analytical framework employed in this study, *Research Act RVs* can be divided into two general categories in terms of the statements of findings or procedures. In terms of *Research Act RVs*, undergraduate students preferred to employ *Finding RVs* (11.90%) than *Procedure RVs* (7.14%). As can be seen in Examples 6-8, some *Discourse Acts RVs*, "show", "find", and "propose", were employed by undergraduate students to report the findings gained from the previous studies.

(6) *Wen's (1996) study, finished by using qualitative research methods, showed that the main reason for the significant difference in students' English grades is that they use different learning methods.* (BTI16) (Research Act Finding Factive)

(7) *Yang (2017) found that an active classroom atmosphere can alleviate fatigue in class.* (BTI07) (Research Act Finding Non-factive)

(8) *Gardner (1985) and Lambert (1974) divided foreign language learning motivations into fusion and tool-based motivations.* (BTI21) (Research Act Finding Non-factive)

However, the situation is vice versa in 30 MT Introductions where master's students tended to use *Procedure RVs* (19.43%) more than *Finding RVs* (10.86%). In Examples 9-11, some of the *Research Act Procedure verbs* such as "analyze", "compare", and "explore" were employed to report what prior researchers have found, emphasizing the procedures conducted in the previous research.

(9) *Lantolf & Bobrova (2012) analyze the cultural variations in the dominant conceptual metaphors, their mappings and entailments, and modalities chosen in constructing metaphors.* (MTI05) (Research Act Procedure)

(10) *To have a clear idea of different WCFs' relative effectiveness, researchers have compared efficacy of direct feedback versus indirect feedback (e.g., Lalande, 1982; Thomas, 1986; Ferris, 2006...).* (MTI08) (Research Act Procedure)

(11) *Pu (2016) explores the similarities and differences in the modality arrangements and the influence of cultural convention.* (MTI05) (Research Act Procedure)

Regarding the differences in the use of *Research Act RVs* in the BT Introductions and MT Introductions, it can be inferred that undergraduate students, as novice learners of academic discourse, tend to use more *Finding RVs* to express their neutral stance toward the reported research. It also indicates that these undergraduate students avoid explicit judgment on previous research and their research processes. In contrast, master's students, as novice researchers, prefer employing *Procedure RVs* to refer to the procedural aspects of previous researchers' investigations, emphasizing their concrete objective research procedures.

Finally, *Cognition Act RVs* were employed far less than the other two categories in both corpora. In Examples 12 and 13, CEM students used *Cognition Act RVs* such as "believe" and "agree", to represent previous research as proceeding from the interpretive operations or verbal accounts of researchers, which can emphasize the role that

reasoning and argument play in the construction of knowledge.

> (12) *Goodman (1967) believes that reading is deemed as the perception of a range of words, which oversimplifies reading.* (BTI12) (Cognition Act Tentative)

> (13) *Cunningsworth (2002) and Ur (2000) agree that textbooks serve as a syllabus in some places where the learning and teaching objectives have already been set.* (MTI27) (Cognition Act Positive)

The infrequent use of *Cognition Act RVs* by these two writer groups can be attributed to two reasons. First, although this category of RVs has a great effect on personal interpretation in knowledge negotiation, they are employed to depict previous literature in terms of the cited author's theorizing and mental activities, thereby giving prominence to the role of human agency in constructing claims and in making misinterpretation often (Hyland, 2002). Second, Liu and Wang (2019) point out that Chinese writers' low frequency of *Cognition Act RVs* use might be related to the fact that the subjective feature of speculating on the mental process of the cited author does not conform to the requirements of academic writing with objectivity characteristics. Therefore, both CEM undergraduate and master's students were far less likely to employ *Cognition Act RVs* in thesis writing.

Evaluative categories

Regarding the evaluative functions of RVs, Table 3 provides an overview of the use of RVs in 30 BT Introductions and 30 MT Introductions.

Table 3
RVs Used in 30 BT Introductions and 30 MT Introductions in Terms of Evaluative Functions

Category/Sub-category	BT Introductions		MT Introductions	
	RF	%	RF	%
Discourse Acts	**59**	**70.24**	**98**	**56.00**
Doubt	20	23.81	22	12.57
Tentative	20	23.81	21	12.00
Critical	0	0.00	1	0.57
Assurance	39	46.43	74	42.29
Factive	20	23.81	49	28.00
Non-Factive	19	22.62	25	14.29
Counters	0	0.00	2	1.14
Research Acts	**16**	**19.05**	**53**	**30.29**
Findings	10	11.90	19	10.86
Factive	2	2.38	10	5.71
Counter-Factive	0	0.00	0	0
Non-Factive	8	9.52	9	5.14
Procedures	6	7.14	34	19.43
Cognition Acts	**9**	**10.71**	**24**	**13.71**
Positive	4	4.76	15	8.57
Critical	0	0.00	0	0
Tentative	5	5.95	9	5.14
Neutral	0	0.00	0	0
TOTAL	**84**	**100.00**	**175**	**100**

To be specific, in the 30 BT Introductions, *non-factive RVs* were employed the most, accounting for 30.14%, followed by *tentative*, *factive*, and *positive RVs* (29.76%, 26.19%, and 4.76%, respectively). This finding is consistent with those of previous studies (Hyland, 2002; Jalilifar, 2012; Jarkovská & Kučírková, 2020) in which *non-factive RVs* were found to prevail. As shown in Examples 14 and 15 below, RVs "*find*" and "*state*" were employed to report the previous message neutrally, giving no clear signal to express their stance toward the reported message. It can be concluded that the preference for *non-factive-RVs* can help CEM undergraduate students neutrally comment on the cited sources and inform the readers of the writers' positions to the reported information, providing an acknowledgment of prior research without appearing to corrupt it with personal judgment.

> (14) *Lv and Tu (1998) found that each student used different reading strategies.* (BTI16) (Research Act Finding Non-factive)

> (15) *Catala (2018) stated that language education in the two regions of Valencia demonstrates the importance of the introduction of culture in Valencia language teaching and the cultivation of intercultural communicative competence.* (BTI20) (Discourse Act Assurance Non-factive)

In the MT Introductions, *factive RVs*, which accounted for 33.71% of RVs, were found to prevail, followed by *non-factive*, *tentative*, *positive*, and *negative RVs* (19.43%, 17.14%, 8.57%, and 1.14%, respectively). It is worth pointing out that although

the finding of the MT Introductions contradicts the results from BT Introductions and those studies by Hyland (2002), Jalilifar (2012), and Jarkovská and Kučírková (2020), it accords with the study by Nguyen and Pramoolsook (2015b) who also attributed the prominent use of *factive RVs* in the Introduction Chapters of MTs. The finding reveals that these CEM master's students tend to take an explicit stance toward the cited sources through their preference of *factive RVs* in both describing the findings and supporting their own argument by attributing a high degree of confidence to the proposition by the original author. In Examples 16 and 17, master's students employed *factive RVs* such as "*demonstrate*" and "*point out*" to show their positive attitude toward cited prior research, signal their acceptance of them, and directly bolster their views on the reported claims.

> (16) *According to Richard and Nunan (2000), from the perspective of cognitive domain, they <u>demonstrated</u> that high cognitive level questions need recall the knowledge, understanding and application, while low cognitive level questions require analysis, comprehension and revaluation.* (MTI11) (Research Act Finding Factive)

> (17) *Xu (2015) also <u>points out</u> that more exploration can be done in the comparison of academic texts between domestic and foreign academic groups.* (MTI14) (Discourse Act Assurance Factive)

It is noteworthy that, in terms of evaluative functions of RVs, the differences in the use of RVs between BTs and MTs in their Introduction Chapters may be due to the different roles undergraduate and master's students play in the academic community. In the Chinese context, BTs are regarded as the first piece of disciplinary writing, and they are also students' first attempt at stepping into a field. Therefore, undergraduate students, as novice learners of academic discourse, prefer to employ *non-factive RVs* to neutrally report previous research to avoid expressing an explicit judgment toward the cited sources, which is potentially a less challenging form of criticism. In addition, the preference for *non-factive RVs* reflects that these novice learners tend to attribute the reported content to other sources rather than express their stance (Jalilifar, 2012; Jarkovská & Kučírková, 2020). On the contrary, master's students, who have completed an undergraduate study and are undertaking further study at a more advanced level in order to raise their academic level of learning and specialized knowledge, have a greater awareness of and better control over using effective RVs. In addition, master's students address a much greater and more diverse discourse community with more complex expectations, so they need to construct factual reliability of their own claims by reporting the works of other researchers, and at the same time

express their own views toward the reported message to show they are prepared to stand behind their words. Therefore, the outcome of the preference for *factive RVs* can help them signal their acceptance of the cited works and directly position their own views on the reported claims.

Finally, both CEM undergraduate students and master's students avoided explicit rebuttal or direct confrontation with previous researchers as seen through the limited use of negative RVs, such as *counter-factive RVs* (in *Research Act RVs*), *critical RVs* (in *Cognition Act RVs* and *Discourse Act RVs*), and *counter RVs* (in *Discourse Act RVs*). The findings show that no negative RVs were found in the BT Introductions and only three instances of negative RVs were found in the MT Introductions. The findings are in accordance with previous studies (e.g., Agbaglo, 2017; Hyland, 2002; Jarkovská & Kučírková, 2020; Nguyen, 2017; Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2015a, 2015b) where negative RVs were used with the lowest frequency or even absent. As Hyland (2002) states, the explicit rebuttal of other researchers is "a serious face-threatening act in academic writing, and such violation of interpersonal conventions is likely to expose the writer to retaliation or the disapproval of publishing gatekeepers" (p. 128). As shown in Example 18 below, one *Discourse Act Counter RV* (*rebut*) was employed to attribute the position of responsibility for the evaluation to the cited author's own objections to the correctness of the reported information. However, in Example 19, the writer employed the verb (*not regard*), which belongs to the *Discourse Act Doubt verb*, to express that she held a negative attitude toward the reported information, and then to support her own view on the reported topic (academic discourse).

> (18) *Facing the shocking conclusion made by Truscott (1996), scholars represented by Ferris (1999) <u>rebutted</u> that Truscotf's speculation is premature.* (MTI08) (Discourse Act Counter)

> (19) *Nevertheless, in the opinion of some discourse analysts during the past few decades, they do <u>not regard</u> that the academic discourse should be regarded as completely objective (Hunston & Thompson, 2001).* (MTI14) (Discourse Act Doubt Critical)

In general, the similarities and differences in the use of RVs in BTs and MTs can reflect the following points. Both CEM undergraduate students and master's students realize the importance of using RVs to report previous works in their thesis writing which can indicate the writers' understanding of the previous works, make them members of that disciplinary community, and help the writers promote their works. However, master's students have a better mastery in the use of RVs than undergraduate students who are novice learners of academic discourse. Meanwhile, master's

students have a greater tendency to establish strong support for their claims and make their research more persuasive within the text by employing appropriate and effective RVs to report the works of previous research and use them in the cumulative construction of knowledge. Undergraduate students tend not to evaluate the reported information in their BTs but to report it using a large number of neutral RVs due to a general lack of vocabulary development and low level of language proficiency. Accordingly, it might lead to ignoring the rhetorical and discursive level of reporting.

The present study suggests that the existing rhetorical similarities and differences in reporting practices in the BT Introductions and MT Introductions mark the underlying tendencies of the writing contexts in the two texts of the same genre but in different levels of education.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to analyze how RVs are used in the Introduction Chapters of BTs and MTs written by CEM students and then identify their similarities and differences. Meanwhile, this study aims to provide a broad view of different writers' tendencies in the use of RVs in BTs and MTs, which belong to the same genre but represent two different levels of education. The findings of this study could be drawn to the following conclusions. Firstly, regarding the overall features, RVs used in the BT Introductions were smaller in amount and narrower in range when compared with those in the MT Introductions. Secondly, based on Hyland's (2002) classification of RVs, in terms of their denotative potentials, the *Discourse Act RVs* were the most prominent, followed by *Research Act RVs* and *Cognition Act RVs* in both corpora. However, regarding the sub-category of *Research Act RVs*, undergraduate students tended to give greater prominence to *Finding verbs* while master's students preferred to use *Procedure verbs*. Thirdly, in terms of evaluative functions of RVs, *non-factive RVs* were found to prevail in the BT Introductions while *factive RVs* were the most prominent in the MT Introductions. Finally, both undergraduate students and master's students avoided using negative RVs to refute or criticize previous research.

Our findings can provide solutions to help thesis writers and teachers use and teach RVs in the Chinese context or other similar EFL contexts in several ways. For thesis writers, this study can enhance their understanding of what lies behind the RV choices and equip them with increased knowledge on the importance of RVs in academic writing. These writers can become familiar with the lexical features and rhetorical functions of RVs and then raise their awareness of using RVs appropriately and effectively throughout the whole process of writing since accurate and appropriate

use of RVs is a cost-effective way to increase their writing credibility among the discourse community members. In addition, the similarities and differences identified in RV practices in BTs and MTs shed some light on the features of RVs used by CEM undergraduate students and master's students. At the same time, it provides undergraduate students with a broad view of how RVs are exploited by those more advanced students, and they can recognize the gap between them and write to confirm to more standardized writing model and specification. Furthermore, this study could also benefit teachers who are teaching or supervising English-majored students' thesis writing since studying the use of a particular language in a natural setting can lead to a reliable resource for instruction tools or teaching materials. With the increasing attention to RVs, teachers might realize that explicit instruction on the use of RVs should be introduced into the classroom, and emphasis should be placed on teaching the usage of RVs that have various functions and rhetorical effects on academic writing. Correspondingly, teachers can use the materials to capture how RVs are used in the specific rhetorical environment they teach and to illustrate to the thesis writers the processes of choosing an appropriate and effective RV to express their intent, rather than providing isolated and decontextualized sentences alone. Besides, a better understanding of the use of RVs in BTs and MTs can help teachers find out the problems or difficulties that students have. At the same time, teachers can adjust their ways of BT or MT instruction and provide effective guidance and supervision on their thesis teaching.

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[i] Following the convention established by Thompson and Ye (1991), "writer" refers to the person who is citing the previous research, and "author" is the person who is being cited.