Negotiating Academic Conflict in Discussion Sections of Doctoral Dissertations

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Abstract

This study explores how doctoral students negotiated academic conflict (AC) in discussion section of their dissertations and what engagement resources they utilized to convey academic conflict. To this end, discussion chapters of 30 doctoral dissertations in Applied Linguistics (15 samples by each writer group) were analyzed using Huston's (1991) academic conflict framework and Martin and White's (2005) engagement system of Appraisal Theory. The functional analysis constituted discovering components of academic conflict and engagement resources in the discussions. We found that components of academic conflict determined engagement values used to convey them. The linguistic background of the authors was less of an issue in resolving conflicts. The two writer groups managed academic conflict and related engagement resources more or less similarly in different components of academic conflict. They mainly expressed their novel contribution readily and identified the flaws of previous research; however, both writer groups showed little tendency to explain controversial points. The findings have pedagogical implications for academic writing courses highlighting the importance of developing awareness of AC and resolving the conflicts.

Keywords: academic conflict; engagement resources; discussion section; doctoral dissertations; academic writers.

1. Introduction

Making valid arguments and challenging existing viewpoints are the inherent property of any academic activity. In addition to advancing knowledge, evaluation functions to promote researchers' academic authority and credibility (Itakura & Tsui, 2011), Hence, understanding how authors approach knowledge in their respective fields and set the boundaries between innovative propositions and or reiterating the current ones is significant endeavor. Any attempt to novelty requires questioning and challenging the present knowledge claims (Kwan et al, 2012; Ravelli & Eliss, 2005; Salager-Meyer, 1999). In fact, writers are expected to integrate prior knowledge claims into their arguments to align themselves with specific disciplinary frameworks (Harwood, 2009; Thumpson & Tribble, 2001). Negotiating propositions and critiquing contradictory viewpoints is a distinguished feature of any specialized discourse (Gianonni, 2002; Salagers Meyer & Alcaraz Ariza, 2011) as all academic texts have the ultimate goal of convincing readers of the significance of specific knowledge claims (Hyland, 2001). Furthermore, criticizing existing propositions contributes to advances in the field by offering space for testing alternative interpretations, highlighting one's fresh findings, as well as stimulating original thoughts (Sadeghi & Alinasab, 2020; Swales, 1990).

Although taking a stance and negotiating alignment or non-alignment is a vital aspect of interaction between writers (Hunston, 1993; Mei & Allison, 2003), tackling the current claims is not a straightforward and easy task as writers are required to offer justifications for their contradictory claims and assertions (Hyland, 2000). Furthermore, in their effort to persuade the readership to accept the value of their claims, writers might get involved in some confrontation with the discourse community. This explicit confrontation is particularly noticeable in the wording of "negative or positive evaluative speech acts that target competing claims or research results" (Giannoni, 2005, p. 72). The act of making negative evaluations and offering controversy viewpoints is termed Academic Conflict (AC). Salager-Meyer (1999) defined AC as "rival, contentious, or conflicting knowledge claims" (p. 372). AC highlights the importance of making arguments and resolving the existing conflicts while legitimizing the novel claims. The significance of maintaining interaction while overturning existing knowledge claims connects enactment of AC to engagement system accentuating the importance of taking effective author stance in disciplinary debates (Cheng & Unsworth, 2016).

The way writers position themselves in creating new knowledge claims is associated with their epistemological perspectives, genre knowledge, and how they align themselves with disciplinary expectations. Yet, another significant factor shaping writers' stance and orientation in academic writing is cultural factors which highlights the significance of national value systems in the process of argumentation (Can & Cangir, 2019).

In the multidimensional act of academic writing, the significance of genre knowledge which equips writers with skills to make sense of academic discourse has been widely acknowledged (Askehave & Swales, 2001; Hyland, 2005, 2008; Ruiying & Allison, 2003). Doctoral dissertation as a high-stakes genre reflect students' capability to engage in academic discourse practices. In this scholarly task, researchers are required to convince supervisors, examiners and other community members of the novelty of their work as original contribution in their disciplinary activity (Hyland, 2012). In so doing, they will make use of disciplinary and genre-specific conventions and present their contribution to knowledge as part of an ongoing disciplinary conversation by resorting to previous research (Samraj, 2008). In the discussion section of theses, the authors are required to legitimize the knowledge claims presented in the results section of their dissertation. The argumentative nature of discussion section of any research study including doctoral dissertations creates a venue for academic confrontation with others in the field.

Research on the macro structure of dissertations as well as the significance of author stance, evaluation, and voice in doctoral dissertations has received considerable attention in the field (e.g. Anderson, et al, 2020; Gil-Salom & Soler- Monreal, 2014; Strafield & Ravelli, 2006; Thompson, 2012), yet, to the authors' knowledge, despite the functional role of AC in shaping dissertations, there is no study to focus on the significance of AC in doctoral dissertations. Inspired by Hunston's framework of AC, we believe this study can contribute to the knowledge base of AC in the discussion section of doctoral dissertations by novice embers of a discourse community. It also links AC to Martin and White's (2005) engagement system to discover the (dis)alignment of engagement resources with AC components in academic discourses of these writer groups. The result can help us discover how aspiring writers in a discipline engage with conflicting perspectives and knowledge claims and resolve controversies in their attempts to conform to disciplinary norms and win their readers' approval.

2.1 Hunston's Framework of Academic Conflict

Academic conflict has been approached from diverse perspectives. Some scholars tackled the concept of criticism from a general perspective focusing on Anglo-American academic discourse and suggested that todays' academic text is identified by use of epistemic modality or subtle hedging strategies as direct criticism restricts the free flow of information (Swales ,1990). Salager-Meyer, Alcaraz Ariza, and Zambrano (2003) addressed cross-cultural and diachronic dimension and reported that from 1990s on, Spanish writers' use of direct AC indicated a sharp decrease in frequency while French direct AC demonstrated a slow descent. Giannoni (2005) stressed cross-linguistic/cultural variations and found that overt criticism was more frequent in Italian papers compared to English papers. Dahl and Fløttum's (2011) examined the concept in different sub-disciplines and highlighted frequent use of personal and unhedged criticism compared to impersonal or hedged expressions in Economics and Linguistics RA Introductions.

Another stream of research into AC links it to the micro structure of research articles. For instance, a number of studies associated it with Swales' (1990) CARS model of introduction (Gil-Salom & Soler-Monreal, 2014; Kwan, et al, 2012). In the CARS model, *Move 2* (Establishing a Niche) opens a "niche" in the existing research which is to be filled through additional research (Swales, 1990). The author can establish a niche with making counter argument or opposing claim as well as finding a gap in the work of others (Hunston, 1993). Drawing on Swales' concept, Hunston (1993) proposed a framework of AC comprising three distinct components: proposed claims (PC), opposed claims (OC), and conflict resolution (CR). PC comprises an assertion of the thesis writer's claims or findings. OC is the opposing results obtained by previous researchers (Cheng & Unsworth, 2016). The proposed claim and the opposed claim are managed in such a way as to present a choice between them but to influence that choice in favor of the proposed Claim (Hunston, 1993). The CR consists of the writer's attempt to resolve the conflict and notice that the conflict is not necessarily between findings - it might be between interpretations. Through CR, the author tries to make sense of opposing results by offering a resolution for the existing conflict or disagreement. CR further comprises an important element, i.e. inconsistency indicator (II) which refers to linguistic devices that authors utilize to show contrasting claim. Cheng and Unsworth (2016) suggested that II can be identified as a separate component in the framework of AC. Accordingly, should all the components be used together in a particular paragraph they would construct an academic conflict unit (ACU) (Sadeghi & Alinasab, 2020).

Review of the above literature highlights a number of issues. First, in spite of the acknowledgment made by the scholars about the significance of AC, the rhetoric of AC in academic discourse has received scant attention (Sadeghi & Alinasab, 2020), and most of the studies so far have dealt with the issue disconnected from the main structure of the text by deliberating on manipulation of various linguistic means to approach others' work with mitigated or blunt tone of criticism (e.g. Martín-Martín & Burgess, 2004; Salager- -Meyer, 2000; Salager-Meyer & Alcarez Ariza, 2011). Second, only recently has the attention shifted to the realization of AC in different (sub)sections of research articles with emphasis given to its enactment in the moves of introduction section of research articles (e.g. Kwan et al., 2012; Lim, 2012; Pho, Musgrave, & Bradshaw, 2011). Third, surprisingly, there is scant literature on negotiating AC to justify one's novel contribution in the discussion section of dissertations. Accordingly, extending the scope of AC studies to rhetorical moves in various texts (Cheng & Unsworth, 2016), and particularly to discussion sections of dissertations can be beneficial in discovering how nascent knowledge is promoted, and how areas of conflict are negotiated through linguistic and rhetorical resources available to different writer groups across diverse disciplinary discourses.

2.2. Engagement System

The way writers position themselves in disciplinary discussions affects their recognition within the established discourse community. Any attempt to position one's own research in relation to prior literature requires manipulation of interactional strategies which opens up the gate for negotiations of contradictory positions among the researchers. The significance of maintaining interaction while challenging previous knowledge claims connects enactment of AC to engagement system accentuating the importance of taking effective author stance in disciplinary debates (Cheng & Unsworth, 2016). The engagement system within Appraisal Theory builds upon Halliday's (1994) Systemic Functional Linguistics, and Bakhtin's concept of Heteroglossia. It deals with how writers project themselves, incorporate, and manage different voices or sources of voices in the form of monogloss by implicit reference to other voices and indicating the writer as the source of the proposition or by signaling the existence of other voices in the text, aka heterogloss (Martin & White, 2005). Engagement system also addresses the extent to which writers acknowledge prior writers and the ways in which they engage with them, whether aligning with others' perspective or standing against them.
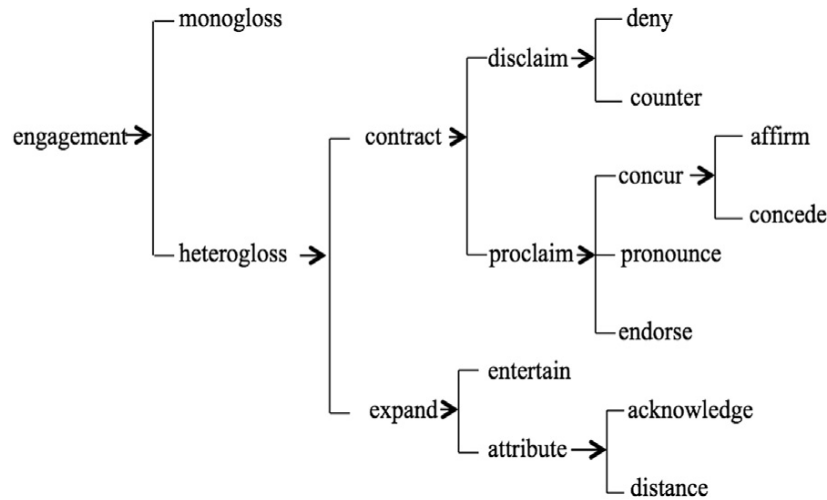
Figure 1. The engagement system (Martin and White, 2005, p. 134).

 Martin and White's (2005) model of engagement compromises four main hierarchical categories of *Disclaim, Proclaim, Entertain, Attribute*, each of which includes specific subcategories. Disclaim and proclaim fulfill contracting function which act to challenge and restrict the scope of dialogic interaction. Disclaim involves denying (e.g. *no, never*) and countering strategies (e.g. *although, yet*). Proclaim includes three categories of concur (e.g. *admittedly* & *certainly*), pronounce (*I contend that, the facts of matter are*), and endorsement (e.g. verbs such as *show, prove, demonstrate*). In contrast to contracting strategies, dialogically expanding formulations allow for alternative positions and voices in interaction. One category of dialogically expansive devices is entertaining (e.g. *it's likely that*, *it is possible*). Finally attribute as an expansive category consists of acknowledge (*believe, argue*) and distance (*claim, assume*).

Engagement system as a useful framework has been applied in a substantial body of research producing a good account of writers' stance, engagement with audience, judgments, and challenging alternative views (e.g. Loghmani, et al, 2020; Loi, et al, 2016; Mei, 2007; Miller, et al, 2014). The current study is the first attempt to uncover authors' utilization of engagement resources in different components of AC in the discussion section of doctoral dissertations.

Research Questions

1. How is academic conflict manipulated in discussion section of doctoral dissertations?

2. What engagement resources are utilized in specific components of academic conflict in the discussions?

3. Method

3.1. Materials

This corpus-based study constituted 40 PhD theses (20 theses from each group) in applied linguistics by Iranian and Anglo-American doctoral students. These theses had the traditional IMRD structure and were completed between 2004 and 2021 by Anglo-American and Persian writers. The Anglo-American writers' theses were extracted from the e-theses portals of University of Birmingham, Durham University, University of Liverpool, University of Exeter; University of Michigan, University of Lincoln, University of Leicester, Illinois State University, and Newcastle University. Further, the electronic databases of the top-ranking universities in Iran were targeted for the Iranian corpus. These included e-portals of University of Tehran, Kharazmi University; Allalme Tabatabai University; University of Mashhad; Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, and Azad University of Science and Research Branch which granted access to the theses by Persian graduate writers. The Anglo-American thesis writers were identified by checking their online CVs, Facebook, biographies, their first and last name origins, and background information they had provided in the acknowledgement sections altogether. Our sample Iranian doctoral students were all Iranian nationals who had graduated in applied linguistics and submitted their theses in English. Our initial screening of the discussion chapters showed that about 10 theses lacked instances of academic conflict. These were removed from the corpus. Our final corpus constituted 30 theses (15 from each writer group). The overall length of the discussion chapters amounted to 65000 tokens for English writers and 55000 for their Iranian counterparts. Average word length ranged from 3000-7000 tokens.

3.2. Data Analysis

Drawing on the works of Hunston (1993), and Cheng and Unsworth (2016), we identified instances of AC units in the discussion chapters (See Figure 2 as an example).

PC	In a preliminary analysis of the data, NS interlocutor English ability was found to have only a negligible correlation with gains on the DELE.

II	However, the results of the present study differ from

OC	those of Baker-Smemoe et al. (2014) and Dewey, Ring, Gardner, and Belnap (2013), especially with regard to NS interlocutor English ability.

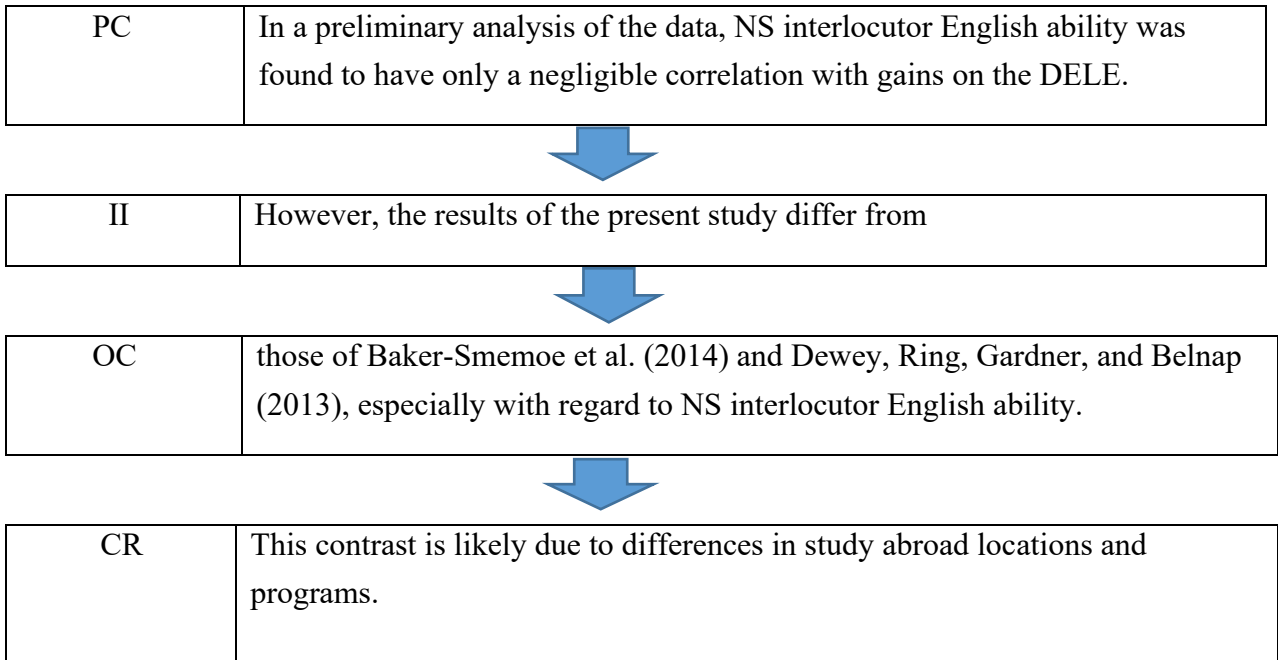| CR	This contrast is likely due to differences in study abroad locations and programs.

Figure 2. Sample coding of AC components in the Iranian corpus

Further, it was important to discover how authors projected themselves in those units and took their stance. Hence, we adopted appraisal theory as "the most systematic analyzing tool that offers a typology of evaluative resources available in English" (Hyland, 2005, p. 174). It also equips researchers to identify not only lexico-grammatical realizations of evaluation, but implicit evaluative meanings at discourse-semantic level (Lin & Lau, 2021).

The initial phase of the analysis focused on identifying any occurrence of conflict between author findings and existing viewpoints in the literature. The paragraphs including controversial viewpoints were examined for instances of functional unit of AC as well as its individual components, namely proposing claims, opposing claims, inconsistency indicator, and conflict resolution. The analysis of the data was done manually in order to account for both functional and linguistic realizations of AC. The target paragraphs might include an overt indicator of conflict, coded as part of an AC unit, but the conflict might be expressed more covertly. For example:.....'

The second phase of the analysis involved coding the occurrences of engagement resources in relation to rhetorical components of AC. The frequency of engagement values in each specific AC

component was calculated. Further, the type of engagement categories in AC components was also identified.

Given the unequal length of the discussions, the frequency per 1000 words was reported for each instance of AC and engagement resources. The frequency of use of AC units and engagement resources by both writer groups was compared, using Mann-Whitney U test, to discover any significant differences.

To ensure the reliability of the coding in each phase, an additional expert in the field was asked to code the data. A detailed discussion was carried out until we reached agreement on conflicting cases. The Kappa coefficient of inter-rater reliability was found to be .85.

4. Results

4. 1 Employment of AC in the discussion sections of Ph.D. dissertations

The discrepancies between Anglo-American (English hereafter) and Iranian graduate writers in their tendency to utilize AC in their discussions was not marked (See Table 1). 21 instances of complete AC units, comprising all four elements, were found in the English corpus compared to 23 for the Iranian corpus. The frequency of use of OC was 59 and 56 for English and Iranian writers respectively which is an indication of the value of the conflicts writers made with other literature. Descriptive statistics for components of AC shows English doctoral students made the highest mean frequency of use of PC and OC components while their Iranian counterparts used II, CR, and ACU most frequently. An ACU consists of all the four distinguished strategies namely PC, OC, II, and CR. We have counted all these instances. As can be seen, not all instances of PC, OC, or other constituents are in an ACU. It is noteworthy that mean frequency of use of CR instances was considerably low among both writer groups which had a direct effect on the final count of ACU. To account for the spread of values in the data, the statistical range for utilization of specific components highlighted zero frequency of CR and ACU in some of the writing samples for both writer groups.

Table 1

Frequency and percentage of components of academic conflict in the corpus

Category	Frequency (*f* per 1000 words)	Mean (Std.)	Range

	EW	IW	EW	IW	EW	IW
PC	135 (2.07)	132 (2.4)	9 (1.43)	8.8 (1.95)	4-12	3-10
OC	59 (.90)	56 (1.1)	3.93(1.96)	3.73 (2.60)	2-6	3-8
II	48 (.73)	50 (.90)	3.27 (1.53)	3.33 (2.30)	2-5	2-6
CR	22 (.33)	27 (.49)	1.46 (1.24)	1.80 (1.89)	0-4	0-4
ACU	21 (.32)	23 (.41)	1.40 (.936)	1.53 (1.23)	0-4	0-5

Note: EW=English writers; IW= Iranian writers; PC= proposed claim; OC= opposed claim; II= inconsistency indicator; CR= conflict resolution; ACU= academic conflict unit (i.e. use of all the components of AC together).

To examine presence of significant differences in terms of AC use between the two writer groups, Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test (see Table 2) was used. No significant difference was found between the two groups in their frequency of use of AC and its respective components.

Table 2

Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test for AC components

Test	Mann-Whitney U	Standardized Test Statistic	Sig.(2-sided test)
The distribution of PC	120.500	.337	.736
The distribution of OC	104.500	-.337	.436
The distribution of II	114.000	.063	.950
The distribution of CR	115.000	.107	.915
The distribution of ACU	140.500	-.455	.334

Asymptotic significances are displayed. The significance level is .050.

4.2.1 Engagement values in specific components of AC in the discussion section of Ph.D. dissertations

An important finding was that different components of AC were found to be realized by particular engagement values (See Tables 3&4 below):

Table 3

Use of the engagement resources in AC components in discussion sections by English graduates

	Deny	Counter	Concur	Pronounce	Endorse	Entertain	Acknowledge	Distance	Total
	f (f/1000)	*f (f/1000)*	*f(f/1000)*	*f(f/1000)*	*f (f/1000)*	*f(f/1000)*	*f(f/1000)*	*f(f/1000)*	
PC	13 (.2)	19 (.29)	0	60 (.92)	0 (0)	15 (.23)	0 (0)	0 (0)	107
OC	7 (.10)	7 (.10)	0	0 (0)	7 (.10)	6 (.09)	40 (.61)	10 (.15)	77
II	16 (.24)	40 (.61)	0	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	56
CR	7 (.10)	6 (.09)	0	2 (.03)	4 (.06)	20 (.30)	12 (18)	6 (.09)	57
ACU	8 (.12)	28 (.43)	0	8 (.12)	4 (.06)	22 (.33)	13 (20)	3 (.04)	86

Table 4

Use of the engagement resources in AC components in discussion sections by Iranian graduates

	Deny	Counter	Concur	Pronounce	Endorse	Entertain	Acknowledge	Distance	Total
	f (f/1000)	f (f/1000)	f (f/1000)	f (f/1000)	f (f/1000)	f (f/1000)	f (f/1000)	f (f/1000)	
PC	22 (.4)	13 (.23)	0 (0)	61 (1.1)	0 (0)	16 (.29)	0 (0)	0 (0)	112
OC	5 (.09)	6 (.10)	0 (0)	0 (0)	7 (.12)	13 (.23)	50 (90)	9 (.16)	90
II	22 (.40)	31 (.56)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	53
CR	4 (.07)	7 (.12)	1 (.01)	0 (0)	3 (.05)	27 (.49)	10 (.18)	3 (.05)	55
ACU	10 (.18)	28 (.50)	2 (.03)	15 (27)	2 (.03)	30 (.54)	18 (.32)	4 (.07)	109

As can be seen, similar proportions of PC component were found between English and Iranian graduate writers. That is, PC was materialized over 6 times more through contracting resources than through expanding ones (f=92 vs f=15; f=96 vs f=16, for English and Iranian students respectively) in the whole corpus. As shown below, discussion writers used PC to publicize their distinct findings and opted for resources which show their confidence in making knowledge claims:

1. The results of this cross-disciplinary study have *revealed* (Proclaim, Pronounce) that the deployment of nominalized expressions in various genres of research articles is significantly different between Applied Linguistics and Physics writers (PC) (IR writer).

2. The analysis in this study *has demonstrated* (Proclaim, Pronounce) ways in which topic initiation plays a role in the process of 'doing RP' as an interactional activity (PC) (EN writer).

These graduate writers also integrated pronounce with other contracting strategies (e.g., counter and denial) in order to emphasize their distinct findings. In the following example, the writer preferred use of *counter* in line with pronounce strategy in order to mark the PC component:

3. This study has, *however* (Disclaim, Counter), *demonstrated* (Proclaim, Pronounce) that the delineation and identification of phases is carried out through explicit participant actions in these meetings (PC) (EN writer).

Interestingly, in some instances, these writers manipulated three distinct contracting resources including pronounce, denial, and counter in their attempt to introduce their novel knowledge contribution (examples 4 & 5).

4. The findings of the present study also *reveal* (Proclaim, Pronounce) that the main focus of the PDPs is *not* (Disclaim, Denial) on technical language skills *but* (Disclaim, Counter) rather on engagement, meaning making, and other more holistic aspects of language learning (PC). (EN writer).

5. One finding of the study was that as far as receptive vocabulary knowledge is concerned, high and low WTC learners and also high and low critical thinking learners did *not* (Disclaim, Deny) differ significantly; *but in contrast* (Disclaim, Counter) the gifted and non-gifted ones significantly differed and the former learners outperformed the latter ones (IR writer).

In some rare circumstances, the authors combined *expanding* and *contracting* resources in making their knowledge claims by opting for *entertain* resource in addition to different contracting devices (examples, 6 & 7).

6. The focus group transcripts concomitantly *revealed* (Proclaim, Pronounce) that students had *rarely* (Disclaim, Deny) been alerted to be accurate in using graphic features like commas from school time; therefore, it *seems* (Entertain,) impossible to revise this alarming trend within the training sessions that lasted only one semester (IR writer).

7. Participants in this study *appeared* (Entertain) to be more focused as their attention to the information was closely tight to the specificity of their disciplines (EN writer).

Opposing Claims were instantiated 2.5 and 4 times more by use of expanding resources than through contracting ones (f=56 vs f=21; f=72 vs f=18 for English and Iranian graduates respectively). Among expanding resources *acknowledge* was used 4 and 5 times more compared to distance in English and Iranian writings respectively (f=40 vs f=10 & f=50 vs f=9). As the discussion writers approach controversial viewpoints of others in opposing claim section, they

prefer using high range of expanding resources in order to open up the gate for mutual interaction with others and avoid any overt confrontation with them. In most cases, the authors avoided overt stance for the controversial claim under discussion by manipulating expanding resources in general and 'acknowledge' in particular (examples 8 &9).

8. It contradicts Jalilifar, White, and Malekizadeh (2017) *who reported* (Attribute, Acknowledge) the greater tendency among hard science writers to employ action nominalizations points to the power of nominalization as a lexicogrammatical feature which *can* (Entertain, Modals) differentiate academic registers (IR writer).

9. Peck MacDonald (1987) and Dillon (1991), *who believe* (Attribute, Acknowledge) that academic discourse is characterized by considerable diversity, competition and contention (IR writer).

In some instances, the writers clarified the existence of controversial points by using 'distance' strategy (examples 10 & 11).

10. Our findings can be in contrast to Gray (2015) *who claims* (Attribute, Distance) that there exists a growing trend moving from soft disciplines to hard disciplines in terms of these linguistic resources (IR writer).

11. McGhee *claims* (Attribute, Distance) that it is around 'the age of about seven (on average), [that] children begin to be able to detect linguistic ambiguity and realize that there are two ways in which the key word makes sense (EN writer).

In OC component, the writers also integrated expanding resources with contracting strategies such as 'counter' and 'deny' in order to highlight the controversial claims (example 12 & 13).

12. This characteristic, *though*, (Disclaim, Counter) has been mentioned in previous studies, as *Bachman and Palmer (1996) proposed* (Attribute, Acknowledge) that taking and preparing for a test can affect students (EN writer).

13. Hinrichs and Szmrecsanyi (2007, p. 469) *contend* (Attribute, Acknowledge) that "genitive choice is dependent upon a complex mechanics of interlocking factors, *no* (Disclaim, Deny) single one of which *can* (Entertain) be held solely responsible for the observable variation".

As for inconsistency indicator, only contracting devices of *counter* and *deny* were employed. However, 'counter' strategy was employed 2.5 and 1.40 times more by English and Iranian graduates respectively. (f=40 vs f=16 for English group; f=31 vs f=22 for Iranian group). The discussion writers used these linguistic devices in order to accentuate contrast between proposing and opposing claims (see examples 14-17).

14. *However*, (Disclaim, Counter) Rodriguez and Arellano found that failure on an exam can demotivate students and lead to negative outcomes on subsequent scores (EN writer).

15. *In contrast with* (Disclaim, Deny) some previous studies reporting greater L2 gains for students with lower initial levels of proficiency (e.g., Baker-Sememoe et al., 2014; Davidson, 2010) (EN writer).

16. This *does not seem to be compatible* (Disclaim, Deny) with the literature on nominalization according to which nominalization deployment in academic discourse is believed to contribute to the lexical density of texts. (IR writer).

17. *Nevertheless,* (Disclaim, Counter) Noguera-Díaz and Pérez-Paredes (2018) suggest that excessively pre-modified constructions can create confusion and problems for language learners (IR writer).

CR was also realized through integration of contracting and expanding resources; however, expanding strategies were employed 2 and 2.5 times more by English and Iranian graduate writers respectively (f=38 vs f=19 for English group; f=40 vs f=15 for Iranian group). In examples 18 & 19, expanding resources were preferred in order to allow for potential other voices in resolving the conflicts.

18. The contradiction *seems* (Entertain) to be due to the fact that Vazquez Orta's (2006) study investigated the employment of nominalization in academic lectures (IR writer).

19. A *possible* (Entertain) explanation for this *could* (Entertain) be that since the experts are more experienced in their profession, they *would* (Entertain) exchange ideas with other experts in their discipline through research articles and books (IR writer).

In examples 20 & 21, the authors, however, preferred integration of contracting and expanding resources for dual purposes of allowing external contradictory voices and defending the appropriateness of their proposed claims.

20.… A *clear* (Proclaim, Concur) difference between the current study and the aforementioned research studies was the intent and aims of the stakeholders (EN writer).

21. The reason for the difference between Markham's results and the current study *could* (Entertain) be attributed to *the fact* (Proclaim, Pronounce) that UAE University female students are *not* (Disclaim, Deny) exposed to male speaking teachers until they enter the university, thus they are *not* (Disclaim, Deny), as *Markham (1988) speculates* (Entertain, Acknowledge) of the ESL students in his study, "gradually conditioned to be more attentive to male speakers as a result of gender-related status divisions in the speech community" (p. 404) (EN writer).

In ACU, both contracting and expanding devices were used; however, the value of contracting ones was higher for both writer groups. (f=48 vs f=38 for English group, f=57 vs f=52 for Iranian group). Example 22 highlights the writers' effort to manipulate the contracting and expanding resources in different components of ACU.

22. The study *has demonstrated* (PC, Proclaim, Pronounce) that the trainees in these feedback meetings are 'doing reflective practice'. The findings *stand in stark contrast* (II, Disclaim, Counter) to those of the small body of previous research that has considered the enactment of reflective practice through talk… *(Gray and Block, 2012; Copland et al.,* 2009) (OC). There are a number of *possible* (Entertain) reasons why the findings of this study differ from those of previous research; for example, differing methodological approaches. *However*, (Disclaim, Counter), I *would suggest* (Entertain) that the most persuasive is that the TESOL certificate courses (CR) …. (EN writer).

Dissertation writers used three distinct strategies in their attempt to resolve the existing conflicts with other research findings (See table 5 for details).

Table 5

The frequency of CR strategies by each writer group

CR	Frequency	
Strategy	EW	IW
CR through outlining the differences in study objectives and methodologies	11	9
CR through explanation of discrepancies in sample groups	4	6
CR through emphasizing differences in study contexts	6	8
Total	21	23

1. CR through outlining the differences in study objectives and methodologies: The following examples indicate thesis writers mostly associated the conflicting findings to the specific purposes of the studies and/or the methodological procedures of each study.

23. It may well be that differences in findings occurred between the present study and those cited above, not because two different meanings had to be attached to a single aural representation, but because two different meanings had to be attached to a single aural representation that was ambiguous (IR writer).

24. One key difference is that unlike all of the research mentioned above there is not a phase in the feedback meetings in this study for trainer evaluation (EN writer).

2. CR through explanation of discrepancies in sample groups: In many instances, the particular characteristics of study groups explained the arguments thesis writers developed.

25. In explaining this contrast, it is necessary to look at some of the more detailed findings from past studies. Wall and Alderson (1993) wrote that ―many teachers are unable, or feel unable, to implement the recommended methodology... In the current study, though, there were few if any mentions of an inability to properly prepare students for the GMATE using appropriate methodology. (EN writer).

26. A possible explanation for this could be that since the experts are more experienced in their profession, they would exchange ideas with other experts in their discipline through research articles and books (IR writer).

3. CR through emphasizing differences in study contexts: In some instances, the conflict was attributed to features of each study context which resulted in different findings and the writers applied this as a useful strategy to resolve the conflict they observed between their own study and the previous studies.

27. However, an important characteristic of the research context in this study is that the teacher participants were all from outside Korea, while in the aforementioned paper the teachers were teaching in their home countries (EN writer)

28. The reason for the difference between Markham's results and the current study could be attributed to the fact that UAE University female students are not exposed to male speaking teachers until they enter the university. (EN writer).

In ACUs which involved concurrent use of all the four components of AC, we noticed approximately similar proportion of contracting and expanding devices in the whole corpus. (f=48 vs f=38 for English group; f=57 vs f=52 for Iranian group).

29. Frequency analysis *showed* (PC, Proclaim, Pronounce) that action nominalization was employed quite frequently in the sample introduction and discussion sections of sample RAs from both hard and soft science RAs (Figure 1). The findings *contradict* (II, Disclaim, deny) Vazquez *Orta (2006) who reported* (OC, Attribute, Acknowledge) a higher frequency of nominalizations in humanities and social sciences compared with physical and health sciences. *The contradiction seems* (CR, Entertain) to be due to the fact that Vazquez Orta's (2006) study investigated the employment of nominalization in academic lectures (IR writer).

30. The first finding of this study *showed* (PC, Proclaim, Pronounce) the outperformance of the input group in IP in both target structures. The outperformance of the input group is in *contrast* (II, Disclaim, deny) *with Swain's (2000) claim* (OC, Attribute, distance) that "acquisition-rich-input" (p. 99) *does not* (Disclaim, deny) push the learners beyond their current level of interlanguage. Of course, *swain's argument may* (CR, Entertain) be supported by the performance of the participants in DP *which showed (*Proclaim: Endorse) that the effect of input-based treatment *will not* retain over time (EN writer).

4.2.2. *Comparisons between the two graduate writer groups in their employment of engagement resources in AC components*

Comparison of contracting and expanding resources in particular AC components showed that, despite some differences (Table 6), none of the expanding and contracting resources across AC units were statistically meaningful between the two groups (Table 7).

Table 6

Descriptive statistics for contracting and expanding resources in AC components

Category	Contracting Mean/SD		Expanding Mean/SD	
	EW	IW	EW	IW
PC	2.60 (2.2)	2.60 (2.31)	.33 (.82)	.46 (.61)
OC	.66 (.82)	1.03 (.899)	4.6 (2.48)	4.4 (2.76)
II	3.53 (1.5)	3.56 (2.32)	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)
CR	.93 (.94)	1.06 (1.162)	2.13 (1.30)	1.63 (2.03)
ACU	4.26 (3.51)	4.50 (4.165)	4.73 (2.59)	3.96 (4.38)

In order to account for the existing differences between English and Iranian writers in terms of use of engagement resources in different components of AC, Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test was applied. No significant difference was found between the groups in their use of engagement values.

Table 7

Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test for utilization of engagement resources in AC components

Test	Mann-Whitney U	Standardized Test Statistic	Sig.(2-sided test)
The distribution of Contracting in PC	109.500	-.129	.898
The distribution of Expanding in PC	94.500	-.896	.370
The distribution of Contracting in OC	58.500	-2.359	.118
The distribution of Expanding in OC	123.500	.461	.645
The distribution of Contracting in II	99.000	-.569	.570
The distribution of Expanding in II	112.500	.000	1.000
The distribution of Contracting in CR	92.500	-.872	.383
The distribution of Expanding in CR	145.500	1.415	.157
The distribution of Contracting in ACU	100.500	-.503	.615
The distribution of Expanding in ACU	128.500	.670	.503

Asymptotic significances are displayed. The significance level is .050.

5. Discussion

We found that writer group differences in AC use and its components was not marked. This indicates that graduate students' ability to dialogically position their text in relation to other voices is uniquely subject to genre knowledge thus has no strong bearing with their linguistics background. It further proves the complexity of language knowledge and supremacy of 'small culture' over 'national value' system or 'native speakerism' (Holliday, 2010). The results chime in with current research on English and Iranian writers' AC practices in the discussion section of research articles by expert writers (Sadeghi and Alinasab, 2020).

Surprisingly, both writer groups documented very low references to AC units, i.e. 21 vs. 23 for English and Iranian doctoral student writers. Compared to Cheng and Unsworth's (2016) study of AC in discussion section of professional research articles, we notice very low rate of AC use in

the discussion section of doctoral dissertations. Writers' growing expertise seems to augment their tendency to dispute ideas and challenge their community members in academic discussions hence greater references to AC units by article writers compared to dissertation writers. Such differences between Ph.D. dissertations and journal articles have been reported in the of use of attitude markers, hedging, and stance features (El-Dakhs, 2018; Kawase, 2015).

The lower frequency of AC in the corpus could be attributed to students' preoccupation with content knowledge which might restrict their capability to concentrate on communication tools while assessing other claims (Soliday, 2005). Analysis and critique is a process of illumination or reconstruction of social phenomenon, rather than mere act of finding particular patterns in the data (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). In order to evaluate critically, students need to manage linguistic resources, pragmatic issues, discourse knowledge as well as disciplinary expectations of the community members (Qiu & Jiang, 2021). Lack of expertise in one of these areas might directly affect novice writers' ability to evaluate critically and appropriately. It is also possible that students' inadequate knowledge of the community's epistemological conventions, disciplinary expectations, and the rules of social interaction affect their ability to challenge others. Further, doctoral students' awareness of their lower position in academic community makes them downplay their role and avoid speaking as authority (Hyland, 2002).

Considering the components of AC, both writer groups demonstrated a strong tendency to use PC. This particular strategy assisted writers to gain visibility in the field and meet the expectations of others. However, we should take into account that although dissemination of scientific knowledge claims is one of the central moves of discussions (Parkinson, 2011) and serves as a useful tool for communication among researchers (Jalilifar, Hayati, & Namdari, 2012), writers' overreliance on this move challenges the overall objectives of established communities by restricting the space for interaction with other voices, which, consequently, affects the persuasive force of the academic discourse.

One striking finding of the study was the low frequency of CR component as both English and Iranian graduate students exhibited inadequate skill in resolving and justifying the arguments they developed in relation to other claims. Despite CR being recognized as a central component in AC (Hunstone, 1993), we noticed that doctoral students announced their own research and identified the flaws in other texts but did not elaborate the circumstances which attributed to the controversial

outcomes. This can be attributed to limited awareness of disciplinary conventions in their field or lack of content knowledge to back up their arguments.

A combination of contracting and expanding resources were utilized in particular AC units. Both groups, however, employed high counts of contracting strategies including pronounce, deny, and counter in AC units. It could be that the very act of criticism requires writers' capability to take an evaluative and authoritative stance throughout the text (Hyland, 2000; Hunston & Thumpson, 2000). When called upon to make critical evaluation, authors are challenged to manipulate meaning-making resources which reinforce their disciplinary values and social engagement rules in the venue of negotiation. By employing contracting values, these writers tried to restrict the imposed pressure of external voices or alternative values in their argument which helps promote the merit of their established claim and evaluate in a contrastive manner (Logmany, Ghonsooly, and Ghazanfari ,2020).

Our findings provide strong evidence that the functional role of particular AC components had significant bearing on the choice of engagement values in that component. For instance, PC was realized with dominant use of contracting resources which can be directly related to the nature of this move. To achieve the objectives in a discussion and claim scholarly contribution in the discourse community, writers exploited various contracting resources (especially pronounce) in order to restrict the potential role of other voices in representing their new knowledge claims and convince the readers to accept their work as warrantable (Cheng & Unsworth, 2016). Contrarily, in OC component the writers preferred expanding resources with high rates of 'acknowledge' in their arguments. It is justifiable that writers take an analytical stance to welcome alternative observations while aiming to identify the limits of previous research. At this stage, expanding strategies might assist to mitigate the potential threat to the other authors. In the II component, the writers needed the linguistic devices to display contrast with parallel knowledge claims which may explain the high count of contracting resources in this component of AC. The writers limited the space of negotiation by calling upon 'counter and deny' values in order to highlight their developed argument. These rhetorical options serve as valuable tools to introduce the writers' novel contribution in the study. The use of these linguistic elements have been associated with the direct act of criticism in which the writers assumed the responsibility of controversial content under discussion (Salager-Meyer, Alcaraz Ariza and Zambrano, 2003). These linguistic devices also

serve as powerful tools to accentuate a counter claim and establish a research niche for writers' own contribution (Gil-Salom & Solar-Monreal, 2014)

Finally, in their strategic attempt to resolve a conflict, both groups approached expanding resources more frequently than contracting ones. The writers seem to be aware that a range of contributing factors explained the existence of controversial viewpoints and providing a warrantable and valid picture of their new knowledge claims requires acknowledging diverse perspectives on the topic. Consequently, they were inclined to include various expanding resources (e.g. acknowledge and entertain) to illustrate their original contribution as well as acknowledge the significance of multiple interpretations in the topic. Indeed, this rhetorical practice allowed them not only provide a logical explanation for the controversial viewpoints, but also denote their solidarity with the readers.

6. Conclusion

The current study demonstrated doctoral students' limited repertoire of rhetorical and linguistic devices in resolving conflicts. They readily expressed their novel contributions and identified the flaws and controversial aspects of previous literature; however, were not intent to provide justifications for the existing problems. This inadequacy to offer explanations and convincing evidence for their arguments can have an adverse effect on their knowledge production and evaluation skills. They also tried to take a defensive guard by applying more contracting resources while they were engaged in evaluating alternative positions. Academic writing courses should make students aware of the generic structures and rhetorical patterns of discussion section in doctoral dissertations. Mastery of structural moves and strategies to achieve communicative purposes boosts writers' ability to produce valid knowledge claims and at the same time be able to defend the legitimacy of their viewpoints.

We analyzed the rhetorical practice of AC in discussion sections. We did not explore how the writers approached other works and evaluated them in other sub-genre of dissertations, e.g. in literature review chapters. Exploring doctoral students' evaluation of knowledge in these two sections would provide a more coherent picture of their writing orientation and evaluation skills. Moreover, integrating other research methodologies including think aloud or interviews with text producers would assist in discovering their metalinguistic understanding of evaluation.

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