

# Indicating Significance of Current Research: Pedagogical Implications of a Genre Analysis for Dissertation Writing

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**Abstract:** Effectiveness of supervising undergraduate and postgraduate students in dissertation writing hinges largely on a range of factors comprising not merely a supervisor's competence in an area of specialisation but also the supervisor's language awareness required for guiding a candidate through a difficult process of writing the dissertation itself. Using a corpus of management research articles and the methods for analysing the research genre, this paper examines how experienced writers use various rhetorical and linguistic strategies to highlight the significance of their research in the terminal portions of their papers. The findings of this study have important implications for the teaching of English for research purposes (ERP) particularly as they indicate how second language learners may be taught to highlight the strengths of their studies based on the findings reported. I will also discuss the extent to which supervisors and instructors can help students augment the acceptability of a dissertation by developing teaching materials that introduce various schematic and linguistic strategies intended to highlight the strengths of a candidate's research findings.

**Keywords:** Genre analysis, rhetorical moves, english for specific purposes, second language acquisition, discourse analysis, educational linguistics, dissertation writing, business management research.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Supervising students in the writing of dissertations may be an interesting and enjoyable experience for lecturers teaching in various faculties at tertiary levels. Nonetheless, supervision may occasionally become frustrating and demanding in cases where a supervisor finds that the dissertation is far from attaining a satisfactory level of scholarly rigour [1]. In fact, both undergraduate and postgraduate students need to be initiated into a process of inquiry that questions the significance of their own research findings and those reported in past studies. Students' weaknesses and inability to attain a desired level of scholarly rigour in writing dissertations may also be due to the possibility that a university has overlooked the importance of educating students in ways that can develop students' intellectual powers and independent judgments [2], which may involve some rhetorical and linguistic strategies in writing up their research. Such competence and readiness to write a dissertation normally come only after students have acquired sufficient experience in reading texts related to their dissertations. This means that students need to study texts cautiously through numerous background readings before they can be expected to develop ideas and grapple with them in their own emerging written texts [3, 4]. Novice writers are therefore expected to read relevant texts, particularly research reports and journal papers prudently and critically in order to achieve a level that can enable them to make independent interpretive judgments while writing their dissertations. More specifically, reasonable judgments of their own findings are particularly important in the terminal portions of their dissertations or research reports where the value or significance of their works may be

subjected to various forms of criticisms. Guiding students to highlight the significance of their research can therefore constitute an essential component of supervision.

As students may encounter numerous problems related to how the significance of their main findings should be indicated, it would be essential to conduct a study to find out the ways in which expert writers generally highlight it in certain disciplines in a research report. Given the need to investigate the strategies used by experienced writers in accentuating the positive contributions of their research, this paper aims to identify the rhetorical and linguistic strategies employed by experienced writers in showing the importance of their research findings in **business management** research papers. A study of the strategies used in these research papers may reveal to us how instructors and supervisors can guide students in highlighting the novelty of their studies in the final sections of a dissertation in various related academic disciplines, particularly psychology, education and sociology. This study may also yield relevant linguistic data that can be used to help second language learners overcome difficulties in demonstrating the noteworthy quality of their research. Such justification of the merit of their research findings may have a considerable impact on the overall impression that an examiner has of the dissertation. The extent to which a dissertation writer is competent in presenting the value of their research results may also have a bearing on the degree to which their findings are considered publishable at a later stage.

In order to see how significance of a study may occur as a rhetorical move in the research genre, it is necessary to review previous studies to examine the occurrence of this rhetorical category in various parts of a research paper. According to Weissberg and Buker [5] in their guidebook on writing up research, significance of a study may occur as one

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of the five information elements in the Introduction section. They labelled it as “value or justification for carrying out the study” (p. 22), which is generally indicated after writers have reviewed related previous research, provided the setting of the study, indicated a need for new research, or stated the purpose of the research being introduced. Interestingly, this category was not specifically mentioned as a rhetorical move or step by Swales [6] in his model for the Introduction section which included three major moves known as ‘establishing a territory’, ‘establishing a niche’, and ‘occupying the niche’. Swales [7], however, revised his Create-a-Research-Space (CARS) model and added “stating the value of the present research” as a constituent step of “occupying the niche” (p. 232).

The aforementioned value of the present research generally occurs in the Introduction section of a research paper in certain disciplines [7] or occasionally under a section known as ‘Significance of the Study’ in a research proposal or dissertation. Nonetheless, in other studies of the Introduction section, ‘significance of the research’ has not been specified as a rhetorical category in introductory sections in certain disciplines. In the medical research introductions analysed by Nwogu [8], for example, indication of the value or significance of the research did not constitute a rhetorical step in the move called “presenting new research” (p. 125). Likewise, in Kanoksilapatham’s [9] study of biochemistry research introductions, indicating the value or significance of the research was not identified as a step in her Move 3 (i.e. ‘introducing the present study’). The absence of such an important step in the introductory sections of research papers has brought out a need to investigate the extent to which significance of the research is indicated in other parts of research papers, particularly the Discussion sections which appear after writers have generally reported their findings.

Indicating significance of current research findings needs to be distinguished from the centrality or significance of a study that is usually presented in the Introduction sections mentioned above. As the centrality of a study is claimed at the beginning of a research article, no concrete results are usually presented to support the claim, and the centrality of a study is normally highlighted through some comparisons with prior research. This differs markedly from an indication of significance of the results, which is presented on the basis of the data that have been reported. This means that ‘significance of current research findings’ refers to the degree to which the results obtained may be considered as having a considerable effect on future interpretations of management concepts, ideas or theories.

The need to find out the prevalence of ‘indicating significance of current research’ in the Discussion sections in a social science discipline, such as management, is justifiable in that some past researchers have not specifically identified it as a rhetorical category. For instance, significance of the research has not been identified in the Discussion sections of drainage and irrigation research papers and dissertations [10], history, political science and sociology [11], and computer science [12]. Nonetheless, ‘indicating the significance of the specific outcome’ has been considered a major constituent step of ‘explaining specific research outcomes’, which is one of the three major moves in Nwogu’s [8] corpus of Discussion sections in medical research papers. This

means that significance of research findings may constitute a major component in certain academic disciplines as it is an important schematic unit that attempts to leave readers an overall impression of the novelty of their findings. More importantly, if significance of research findings constitutes an integral component of a discipline, it would be interesting and pedagogically relevant to investigate the rhetorical strategies employed by experienced writers in the discipline and how various linguistic means are used to meet the related communicative functions.

Given the objective and rationale for conducting this study in a social discipline, such as management, three research questions are formulated as follows:

1. To what extent is significance of research findings highlighted in the Discussion sections of management research papers?
2. What rhetorical strategies are used by experienced writers to highlight the significance of their research findings in the Discussion sections of management research papers?
3. What linguistic choices are used by experienced writers to highlight the significance of their research findings in the Discussion sections of management research papers?

On the basis of the research questions given above, the data collection and analysis procedures for this study will be reported in the ensuing section.

## 2. RESEARCH METHODS

Given that the focus of this study is on how significance of current research findings is indicated in the final portions of management research papers, a total of 20 management research papers were collected at random from two internationally refereed journals related to business management, namely *Academy of Management Journal (AMJ)* and *Journal of Management (JM)*. These journals were chosen for their clear and consistent editorial formats. The study focused on how writers highlight the significance of their research using different rhetorical and linguistic strategies.

In an attempt to minimise biases in the sampling procedure and to obtain adequate data from the sample, the aspect of representativity of the research papers was considered. The sample of 20 articles was selected using a technique of random-stratified sampling so as to indicate a higher degree of representativity and objectivity. Ten issues covered different subject areas comprising human resource planning, recruitment and job applications, attitudes and work ethics, training and organisational performance, organisational turnover, organisational performance and employees’ competence, performance appraisal, incentives, compensation and security, employer-employee relations, investment, and marketing strategies. The selection of Discussion sections was also done to meet the requirement that the subject matter covered by the research papers exhibits a wide range of linguistic choices used by writers to highlight the significance of their research.

With respect to data analysis procedures, attempts were specifically made to distinguish ‘indicating significance of current research’ from other related moves, particularly re-

search implications or recommendations for practical applications (which may include some positive contributions of the research) reported in past studies [4, 8, 13, 14]. Subsequently, the analysis focused on the extent to which indications of significance of research findings were related to other moves in terms of communicative functions. Occurrences of the rhetorical category were then marked in each text in order that its frequency could be identified. Typographical features and linguistic features found in the texts were used to determine the boundaries between rhetorical categories [8, 15-17]. The corpus was then analysed to find out how the communicative functions of indicating research significance were accomplished.

The linguistic choices associated with the functions were then analysed with respect to sentence structures, clause elements, categories of phrases, and parts of speech provided that they appeared as prominent features of the move. The analysis of salient linguistic choices was done on the basis of linguistic descriptions given by Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik [18], and Greenbaum and Quirk [19]. Given that the linguistic analysis was performed with the purpose of highlighting the language resources that might be of interest to instructors teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and supervisors of research projects, attention was mainly directed to an analysis of syntactic structures and lexical usage in relation to the ways of indicating significance of research findings.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Communicative Strategies

The analysis of the corpus has shown that indication of significance of research findings is unquestionably a prevalent rhetorical category used in 80% (16/20) of the Discussion sections of the management research articles. Several communicative strategies are frequently used by writers as mechanisms to claim that the study has certain strengths based on the results reported. The strengths of a study may be highlighted after a comparison of current findings with those reported in previous research. This may be done with the intention of convincing the editorial board concerned that the research paper submitted carries a considerable value that warrants attention and deserves publication in the journal. The data indicate that this move usually refers to the strength of a study even though it may occasionally be counteracted by some indications of past research limitations.

##### 3.1.1. Justifying Research Procedures

Among the different communicative strategies for indicating strengths of the findings is writers' attempt to highlight the reliability and validity of the research procedures that appear to be the most prominent. Even though justification of research procedures can also be found as part of (i) the descriptions of data collection procedures and data analysis procedures in the preceding Method sections, and (ii) the brief mention of research conditions in the Results sections, the research procedures are often justified in the Discussion sections with the intention of leaving a final positive or favourable impression of the entire study. Alternatively, contributions of the findings may also be highlighted as significance of the study as exemplified below:

- (1) **Documentation** of fit at the pre-hire stage is **important** because many of the dimensions upon which fit is presumed to be based (particularly values such as achievement and fairness) are **relatively stable** and **unlikely to be changed by organizational socialization practices** (Ravlin & Mehilino, 1989). (RA 1: 546)
- (2) These results **underscore the importance** of distinguishing between the various consequences of fairness in order to understand the value of voice to individuals. (RA 2: 665)
- (3) Our **analysis**, a discrete-time event history analysis, is a **robust** one for use in examining this problem ... (RA 5: 536)
- (4) Despite more than thirty years' research, executive compensation remains **a fertile area of academic inquiry**. (RA 5: 537)
- (5) Most important, the present study was able to explain the goal-pay interaction as well as the main effects. (RA 6: 555)
- (6) **The present study**, however, makes several **noteworthy contributions** to management research and practice.. On the research side, it is the **first** investigation, to the author's knowledge, **to examine** how two dimensions of mood are related to both absence and actual turnover... (RA 9: 892)
- (7) **By empirically testing** whether certain combinations of activities are associated with higher manufacturing performance, **this study** provides **one of the first pieces of empirical evidence** with which to evaluate the prescriptions in the human resource strategy literature. **Many authors have called for such evidence** ... **this study provides future researchers** with some **empirical evidence** supporting **a promising new perspective** with which to study important human resource and organizational outcomes. (RA 11: 685)
- (8) **Although much has been written** about the implications of choosing a particular absence metric (e.g. Chadwick-Jones *et al.* 1971), **the current data suggest that** attention to other data management considerations may be **equally critical**... (RA 13: 1630)
- (9) **Our study** is the **first to test the predictions** agency theory makes about relationships between risk, pay, and firm performance, but it is not without limitations. (RA 14: 294)
- (10) The **empirical findings** and the approach adopted provide **a new understanding** of, and **a new method** for, identifying and describing what constitutes human competence at work. (RA 16: 20)
- (11) A **primary contribution** of **this study** is its application of the organizational capabilities approach to multinational entry strategy in combination with more traditional perspectives... (RA 20: 318)
- (12) **Our analysis** pointed to an **important temporal component** in the foreign entry strategy of Japanese firms. (RA 20: 319)

The examples presented above show that writers may justify the research procedures by linking the procedures with positive contributions derived from their findings. This explains why they frequently use positive adjective phrases indicating prominence or acceptability (e.g. 'important', 'relatively stable', 'robust', 'equally critical', etc.) or *adjectival clauses* carrying positive connotations (e.g. 'unlikely to be changed by organizational socialization practices', 'able to explain the goal-pay interaction as well as the main effects', 'first to test the predictions', etc.) in which an adjective is ensued by an infinitive complement. When some of the adjectives occur attributively, they are usually used as premodifiers of noun phrases carrying positive connotations related innovativeness (e.g. 'the first investigation', 'one of the first pieces of empirical evidence', 'a new understanding', 'a new method', 'a promising new perspective', etc.) or a positive and optimistic outlook based on the research findings (e.g. 'a fertile area of academic inquiry', 'several noteworthy contributions to management research and practice', 'an important temporal component' etc.). These attributive adjectives are used to leave the presumed readership an impression that the studies were well-designed, original, innovative, or full of potential for further research.

### 3.1.2. Highlighting Overall Contributions

An alternative way to indicate strengths is to highlight the overall contributions of the study by underscoring its new characteristics, ideas, or insights through the employment of predicator-object (P-O) combinations carrying positive connotations. Instances of such phrasal combinations are presented as follows:

- (1) At a theoretical level, the obtained links between the dispositional factors and attributions concerning absence shed some light on the meaning of voluntary versus involuntary absenteeism ... (RA 4: 855)
- (2) This finding makes sense when considering that members of Cluster 4 believed that they would need to be absent approximately 28 days before being penalized, and they tended to experience the lowest health complaints ... A strength of our study lies in the use of control variables and reliance on employees in a work context. Also, collecting data from three sources should mitigate problems due to common method variance. Another strength is based on our duplication of some of the scenarios in order to assess the reliability of participants' ratings. Finally, our advance promise of confidentiality and explicit informed consent should have reduced the chance that participants provided socially desirable responses to questions. (RA 4: 858-859)
- (3) This study identified absence-inducing events about which employees make attributions, and these results add insights into the meaning of voluntary and involuntary absence to employees. Also, the results demonstrated the importance of dispositions as a source of attributions employees make concerning absence. (RA 4: 859)
- (4) The present study provides additional evidence with respect to a different type of incentive, namely, money. (RA 6: 556)

- (5) We included potential productivity characteristics especially pertinent to Hispanics as controls, such as knowledge of language and culture. The stratified sampling strategy, use of personal interviews rather than questionnaires, and the option for respondents to be interviewed in Spanish enhanced the representativeness of the sample and the quality of data relative to much past research. The methods of statistical analysis, such as analysis of interactions as a group (Cohen & Cohen, 1975), provided more pertinent information than has some previous research. (RA 12: 875)
- (6) Since managers still face decisions about the appropriate mix of pay, and risk remains an important contextual condition, we believe our study can inform managers and researchers. (RA 14: 294)
- (7) Furthermore, the mediation focus of our study allows substantial insight into how interdependence is related to team performance when teams engage in conceptual tasks... (RA 17: 144)
- (8) The findings from this study make several contributions to the literature. First, this was a field study that supplements the few laboratory studies that have also shown benefits of cultural diversity. (RA 18: 172)
- (9) Although most research has measured diversity at the group level, this study extended the level of analysis to the organizational level. (RA 18: 172)
- (10) Our research extends previous studies by explicitly examining two mechanisms by which experience affects entry strategy. (RA 20: 319)

The instances given above show that verb-object combinations (e.g. 'shed some light', 'make sense', 'should mitigate problems', 'add insight', 'demonstrated the importance of dispositions', 'provides additional evidence', 'allows substantial insight' 'reflects the actual number of adoptions', 'enhanced the representativeness of the sample and the quality of data', 'provided more pertinent information', 'can inform managers and researchers', 'extended the level of analysis', 'extends previous studies', etc.) may also be employed to indicate the strengths of a study. (Note: The predators are underlined to illustrate how verb phrases are combined with noun phrases to indicate the significance of a study.) What appears interesting is that these P-O combinations are often preceded by nominative noun phrases containing deictic signals referring to the study or the finding being reported (e.g. 'this finding', 'our study', 'the present study', 'this study', 'we'). These signals are similar to those used in 'occupying the niche' of the Introduction sections where the writers advance to the present study after indicating some weaknesses in past research.

### 3.1.3. Indicating Past Research Limitations

Indicating weaknesses in past research may also become a prominent semantic component of 'indicating significance of current research'. While the indication of weaknesses in past research and the attempts to overcome the shortcomings were considered as separate moves (i.e. 'highlighting a need for more research' and 'advancing to the present research') in the Introduction section, it is more appropriate to consider

these text segments bearing such features in the Discussion section as those falling under ‘indicating significance of current research’. This is because in the preceding Introduction, Method and Results sections, the writers have already answered the present study by fulfilling the objectives, answering the research questions or finding answers to the hypotheses. Hence, in the final Discussion section, any attempt to reiterate how the research has managed to overcome certain weaknesses in past research should be more appropriately considered as one that is intended to highlight the strength of the study. The instances given below show that indication of the significance of a study may be done sequentially, with the weaknesses of past research being mentioned first, followed by the strengths of the current research. The weaknesses may come in a form that is similar to ‘indicating a niche’ also called Move 2 in Swales’ [7, 8] analyses of the Introduction section. A lack of previous studies in the field may be reiterated as a shortcoming. Examples of this transitional strategy are given in Fig. (1).

The instances presented above show that a gap in past research may first be described as a weakness, as indicated in the left column. The descriptions of these gaps in past research are characterised by negative expressions indicating a void or lack of investigation into certain research areas (e.g. ‘has been without an examination’, ‘one of only a few’, ‘has received little attention’, ‘rarely studied in organizational research’). The subsequent clauses or sentence(s), however, use (i) deictic signals to refer to the current studies or results (e.g. ‘this study’, ‘our results’, ‘ours’), and (2) nominative and positive noun phrases (e.g. ‘strengths of the research’, ‘consistency of our results’, ‘methodological strengths’, etc.) or predicator-object combinations (e.g. ‘help to fill an important gap’, ‘raise concerns’, ‘will contribute to filling this void’, etc.) that highlight the contributions of current research.

Apart from focusing on contributions made by current research in occupying the gap left by foregoing studies, another common way of signalling strengths of the research is to highlight the limitations of past studies. Instances of text

segments that fulfil this communicative intention are listed as follows:

- (2) **The failure of previous studies** to consistently find mediators of the main effects of incentives may be attributed to their **failure to use multiple trials**. Single trial periods typically **do not allow the opportunity to measure changes** in performance, goals, self-efficacy, and commitment that may occur as a result of feedback regarding progress. (RA 6: 555)
- (3) Although **some of the studies** investigated the effects of demands made by an authority figure on setting of higher goals, most of them have focused on increasing the level of campaign goal in a united fund environment and all of them **failed to combine such demands** with the effects of monetary incentives...(RA 10: 1279)
- (4) **We** suggest that **typical interpretation of agency theory tells only part of the story**. That is, principals might act to align agents’ behaviours through the use of incentive pay schemes, but their effect on the agents’ behaviour may be **more complex than typically assumed**. **We** have suggested that greater risk may impose greater uncertainty on the entire employment relationship and that firms reduce (rather than increase) variability in pay to offset this increased risk (Simon, 1951). (RA 14: 293)
- (5) Second, **past research** has been **unable to operationally define race** to the extent achieved in this study. Many studies have put racial minorities in one group and whites in the other group, a division that **does not fully capture** the diversity of racial groups....(RA 18: 172)

The instances illustrate that limitations of past research may be indicated by (i) negative expressions highlighting failure or inadequacy of past research (e.g. ‘failed to combine such demands’, ‘unable to operationally define race’, etc.), and (ii) phrasal combinations conveying an implicit message that the current research has taken into considera-

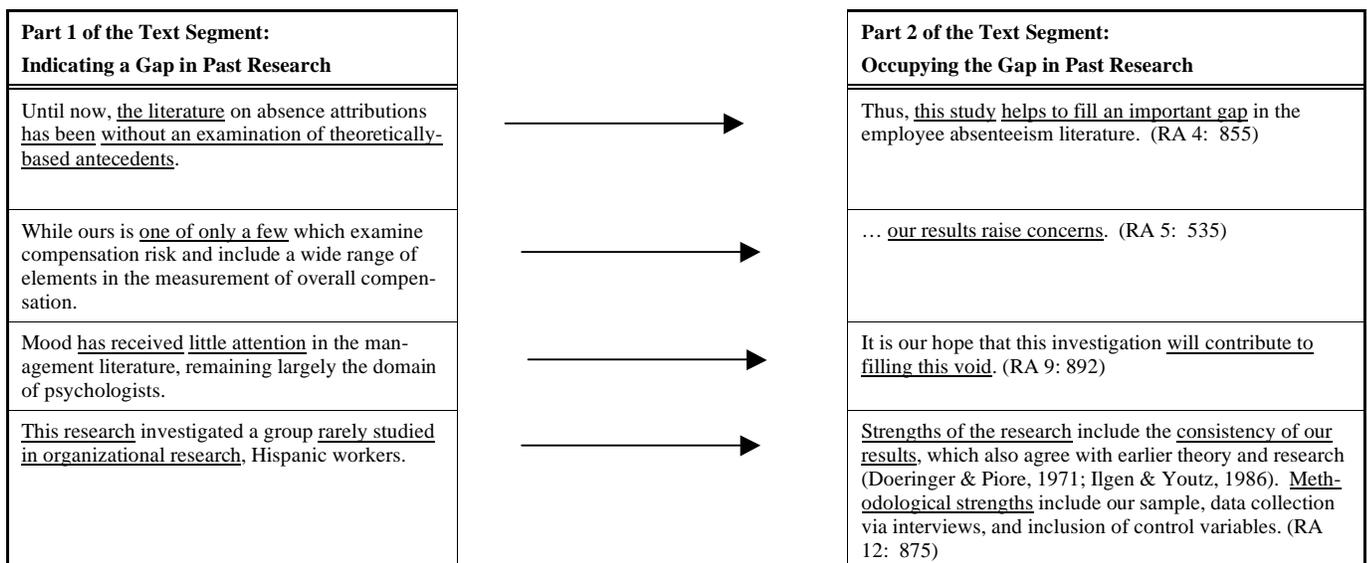


Fig. (1). Occupying a gap in past research (highlighted as strengths of current studies).

Table 1. Distribution of Linguistic Features Used in Indicating Research Significance

Rhetorical Strategy	Linguistic Features	Examples
Justifying the re-research procedures	Positive adjective phrase indicating prominence or acceptability	'important', 'relatively stable', 'robust', 'equally critical', etc.
	Adjective phrase occurring attributively as the premodifier of a noun phrase carrying positive connotations related innovativeness	'the <u>first</u> investigation', 'one of the <u>first</u> pieces of <u>empirical</u> evidence', 'a <u>new</u> understanding', a <u>new</u> method', 'a <u>promising new</u> perspective', etc.
	Adjective phrase occurring as the premodifier of a noun phrase with positive and optimistic outlook based on the research findings	'a <u>fertile</u> area of academic inquiry', 'several <u>noteworthy</u> contributions to management research and practice', 'an <u>important</u> temporal component' etc.
	<i>Adjectival clauses</i> carrying positive connotations (with the adjective ensued by an infinitive complement)	' <u>unlikely</u> to be changed by organizational socialization practices', ' <u>able</u> to explain the goal-pay interaction as well as the main effects', ' <u>first</u> to test the predictions', etc.
Highlighting overall contributions	Predicator-object combination carrying a positive connotation	' <u>shed</u> some light', ' <u>should mitigate</u> problems', ' <u>add</u> insight', ' <u>demonstrated</u> the importance of dispositions', ' <u>provides</u> additional evidence', ' <u>allows</u> substantial insight', ' <u>enhanced</u> the <u>representativeness</u> of the sample and the quality of data', ' <u>provided</u> more pertinent information', ' <u>extended</u> the level of analysis', etc.
Indicating past research limitations and/or present research strengths	Negative expressions indicating a void or lack of investigation into certain research areas	'has been <u>without an examination</u> ', 'one of <u>only a few</u> ', 'has received <u>little attention</u> ', ' <u>rarely studied</u> in organizational research', etc.
	Noun phrases or adjective phrases indicating uncertainties and failures (containing a nominal/adjectival lexeme indicating a limitation)	' <u>failure</u> to recognize the complexity of the phenomenon', ' <u>mixed</u> effects', 'this scholarly <u>reticence</u> ', 'the <u>lack</u> of any real basis', 'understandably <u>skeptical</u> '),
	Negative expressions highlighting failure or inadequacy of past research	' <u>failed</u> to combine such demands', ' <u>unable</u> to operationally define race', etc.
	Phrasal combinations indicating some relevant aspects overlooked in past research	e.g. <u>may be more complex</u> than typically assumed', ' <u>does not fully capture</u> the diversity of racial groups', etc.
	Predicator-object combinations indicating past failures or uncertainties	' <u>has produced</u> mixed effects', ' <u>offers</u> little concrete evidence', ' <u>have failed to show</u> that absenteeism's psychometric properties affect validation outcomes', etc.
	Predicator-object combinations highlighting the contributions of current research	' <u>help to fill</u> an important gap', ' <u>raise</u> concerns', ' <u>will contribute to filling</u> this void', etc.
	Preceding noun phrases indicating foregoing studies, researchers or their findings	'research on participation in performance appraisal', 'evidence', 'the absence literature', 'absence researchers', 'a number of earlier absence studies', etc.
	Deictic signals referring to current studies/results	'this study', 'our results', 'ours', etc.
	Nominative and positive noun phrases	'strengths of the research', 'consistency of our results', 'methodological strengths', etc.
	Subsequent noun phrases containing deictic signals referring to the current study	'the findings of this study', 'the current study's partial correlation analysis', 'we', etc.
	adjectives carrying positive connotations	'appropriate', 'successful', 'feasible', etc.
	Predicator-object combinations highlighting the strengths of present studies	' <u>help to untangle</u> some of this complexity', ' <u>noted</u> disparity in pay', ' <u>extends</u> this earlier work', etc.
	Concessive adverbial clauses or concessive conjuncts acknowledging shortcomings	' <u>While</u> the analysis <u>was probably hampered</u> by the <u>relatively low number of adoption events</u> in our sample', ' <u>Although</u> these results should be seen as <u>preliminary</u> because of <u>data limitations</u> ', 'In spite of its limitations', etc.

tion some relevant aspects overlooked in past research (e.g. may be more complex than typically assumed', 'does not fully capture the diversity of racial groups', etc.). Table 1 illustrates the instances for each of the rhetorical steps explained above. The examples, nonetheless, do not state explicitly how a study has taken a step forward in overcoming limitations and weaknesses of past research. It is therefore necessary to analyse the shifts from past research limitations to current research strengths in the ensuing section.

**3.2. Shifts from Past Research Limitations to Current Research Strengths**

In order to understand how some linguistic choices are employed to link previous research limitations to the strengths of a study being reported, it would be essential to analyse the two-part text segments that illustrate both the limitations of previous studies and the ways of tackling their limitations. Instances of these text segments are presented in Fig. (2). The examples given in the left-hand column show that limitations of past research are usually related to (i) previous researchers' failures in identifying certain aspects of their studies and (ii) some uncertainties which have resulted from such failures. While the first part, which refers to past research, is normally characterised by noun phrases indicating foregoing studies, researchers or their findings (e.g. 'Research on participation in performance appraisal', 'evidence', 'the absence literature', 'absence researchers', 'a number of earlier absence studies'), the second part is marked by noun phrases containing deictic signals referring to the current study (e.g. 'The findings of this study', 'The current study's partial correlation analysis', 'we', etc.).

The most distinct signals indicating strengths of the studies are, however, those which indicate (i) limitations or failures of past research, and (ii) how the limitations have been overcome. Such descriptions of past failures are characterised by predicator-object combinations that indicate failures or uncertainties (e.g. 'has produced mixed effects', 'offers little concrete evidence', 'have failed to show that absenteeism's psychometric properties affect validation outcomes', etc.). Equally prominent are noun phrases or adjective phrases indicating uncertainties and failures (e.g. 'failure to recognize the complexity of the phenomenon', 'mixed effects', 'this scholarly reticence', 'the lack of any real basis', 'understandably skeptical'), each of which contains at least a nominal or adjectival lexeme indicating a limitation.

In the second part of the text segment, adjectives carrying positive connotations (e.g. 'appropriate', 'successful', 'feasible', etc.) may be used to describe the strengths of current studies. More interestingly, the writers may use predicator-object combinations that highlight the strengths of present studies (e.g. 'help to untangle some of this complexity', 'noted disparity in pay', 'extends this earlier work', etc.). The central elements that indicate the significance of these studies appear to be the predicators (e.g. 'helps to untangle', 'noted', 'extends', etc.) that connote the positive contributions made by the research.

While the text segments illustrated above show that **limitations of past research** may be described before the strengths of current studies are highlighted, it is essential to point out at this juncture that **limitations of current research** may also be described immediately before the

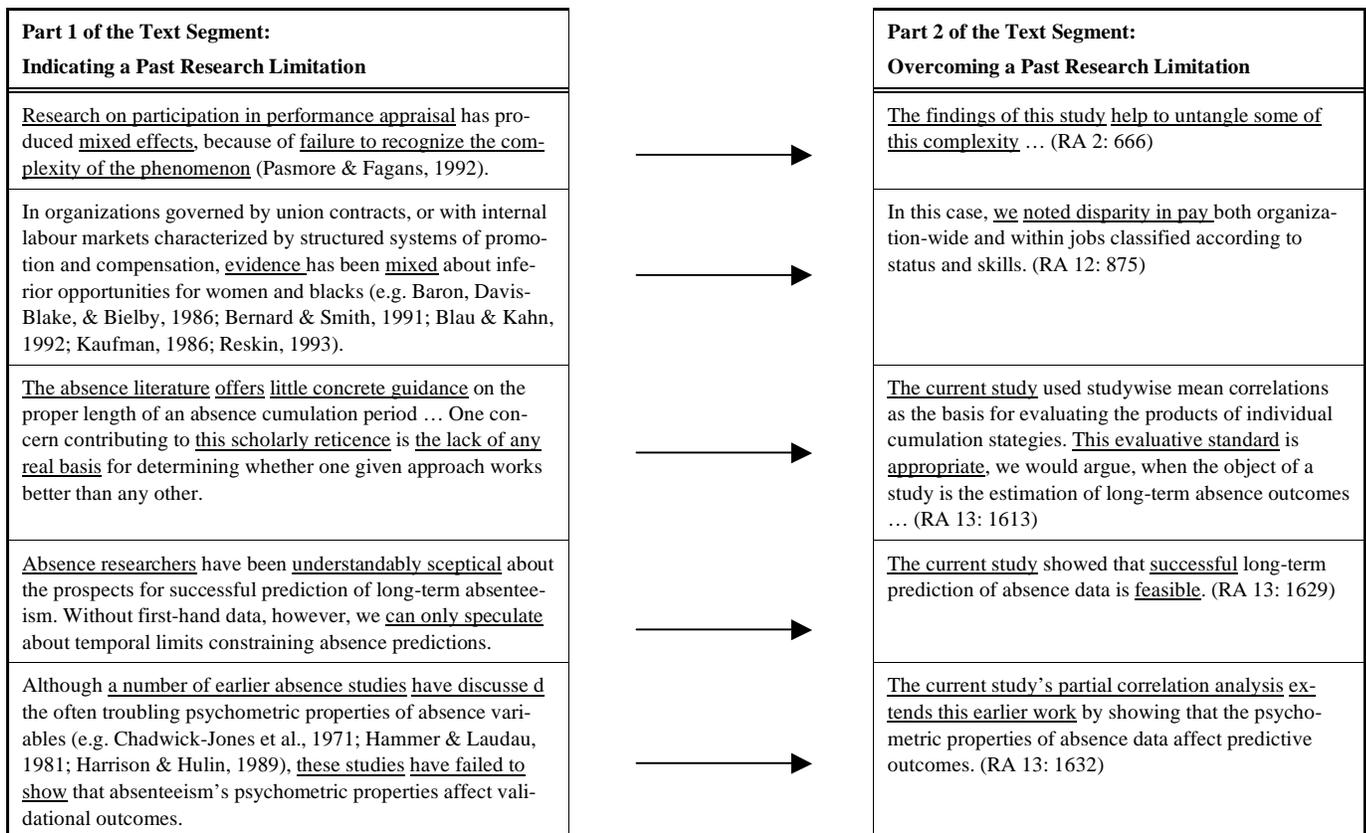


Fig. (2). Overcoming limitations of past research (highlighted as strengths of current studies).

strengths of current research are given. These are the cases in which a limitation of past research is merely embedded in a subordinate clause or phrase that constitutes part of the sentence describing the strength of a new study. Instances of such an embedment are illustrated in Table 2 which shows that instead of pointing out the strengths of research procedures in a straightforward manner, some writers may opt to acknowledge the limitations of current research by using adverbials placed at sentence-initial positions. With the exception of the last instance in the table, these adverbials usually appear as concessive adverbial clauses acknowledging shortcomings (e.g. ‘While the analysis was probably hampered by the relatively low number of adoption events in our sample’, ‘Although these results should be seen as preliminary because of data limitations’, etc.) or a *concessive adjunct* (e.g. ‘In spite of its limitations’) in sentence-initial positions before justifications are made for the current research in the matrix clause (e.g. ‘that number reflects the actual number of adoptions that occurred during the 1980s for our sample firms’, ‘this study provides future researchers with some empirical evidence supporting a promising new perspective with which to study important human resource and organizational outcomes’). (Note: The words underlined in the instances have been identified as those carrying positive messages about the research procedures.) In this case, a useful rhetorical strategy used by writers to highlight strengths of the current research findings is to tie uncertainties or weaknesses in foregoing research to an achievement in the current study. This means that some moves may not be characterised by distinct linguistic features highlighting the strengths of a study, yet the significance of the research findings can be perceived implicitly through an acknowledgment of the limitations downplayed in the same research being reported.

**4. CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR DISSERTATION WRITING**

To sum up, the results presented above have revealed that ‘indicating significance of current research’ is an important

principal move found in most (80%) of the management research articles. Given that this move is prevalent in management research papers, ESP instructors and supervisors of research projects may find it necessary to develop novice writers’ awareness of the useful rhetorical and linguistic strategies employed to highlight the strengths of the research being reported. These strategies involve a reiteration of research centrality, a contrast of past and present research methods, and sequential shifts from limitations to strengths of a study. More precisely, the first rhetorical strategy has to do with the writers’ reiteration of the research centrality mentioned in the Introduction section. With regard to this strategy, supervisors may need to enlighten novice writers on the difference between (i) the centrality highlighted in the Discussion section which is based on the actual findings obtained and methods that have been attested in the new research being reported, and (ii) the centrality claimed in the Introduction section which is merely based on a review of past research findings and methods.

In guiding undergraduate and postgraduate dissertation writers, it may be important to show them how strengths of a study are emphasised through justification of their own research methods or reiteration of the reliability and validity of the research procedures employed. Despite the fact that research procedures have been justified in the preceding Method section, they are often given emphasis again in the terminal portion to leave the readers a favourable impression of the research. Likewise, novice writers may opt to focus on the overall contributions of a study by underscoring its new characteristics, ideas, or insights through the employment of predicator-object combinations carrying positive connotations reported in this study.

While the two strategies explained above may be optional, the third strategy has to do with a cautious sequential indication of the shortcomings or limitations of past research. This means that in supervision or ERP lessons aimed at raising learners’ consciousness of the strategies involved, instructors need to prepare teaching materials that incorpo-

**Table 2. Acknowledging Limitations while Highlighting Strengths of the Study**

Part 1 of the Text Segment: Acknowledging Limitation/s of Current Research	Part 2 of the Text Segment: Highlighting Strengths of Current Research
[While these results are tempered by limits of single source data collection and correlational design]	they underscore the importance of considering different expressions of voice to the design of appraisal systems. (RA 2: 667)
[While the analysis was probably hampered by the relatively low number of adoption events in our sample]	that number reflects the actual number of adoptions that occurred during the 1980s for our sample firms. (RA 5: 536)
Our data do not provide unequivocal answer to this question	but do suggest some possibilities. First, at the end of the experiment, we measured the degree to which the subjects had memorized the calculation formula used to perform the task. (RA 6: 556)
In spite of its limitations	this research shows that a number of insights can be gained through the use of a human resource strategy perspective and methodology. (RA 11: 684)
[Although these results should be seen as preliminary because of data limitations]	this study provides future researchers with some empirical evidence supporting a promising new perspective with which to study important human resource and organizational outcomes. (RA 11: 685)
[Although the current study’s month-frequency scale did little more than crudely approximate standard absence frequency measures]	it nevertheless performed on a par with its better known counterparts. (RA 13: 1630)

rate a paradigm of *shifts* in linking different text segments [4]. In this case, writers may highlight a gap which has yet to be filled in past research before shifting to a statement of the achievements that eventually occupy the niche concerned. As it involves criticising past research methods and pointing out the failure or inadequacy of past studies, this strategy has to be used with much caution in order to stifle potential criticism that may reduce the acceptability of the study being reported. The shift from a past research limitation to an achievement in the current study differs markedly from the fourth strategy that involves a transition from an acknowledgement of limitation in the study being reported to a relatively desirable strength of the same research.

It needs to be pointed out at this juncture that the aforementioned strategies are generally inter-connected, and ERP instructors may not always be able to isolate one strategy from the others as they might often be used simultaneously in the same text segment. It is pedagogically more important to ensure that learners have a range of useful strategies at their disposal while considering ways of highlighting the significance of their research. As such, supervisors may have to deal with novice researchers, particularly second language writers, who have yet to acquire sufficient knowledge of the language to convey their messages using the various strategies mentioned above. This explains why it is essential to tie linguistic choices closely to the various communicative functions involved in indicating the significance of their research findings. The linguistic items found in a text may activate a schema that helps learners make sense of the written discourse [20]. To be specific, supervisors and ESP instructors may have to come up with exercises requiring the use of specific vocabulary items, phrasal combinations, and syntactic structures for accomplishing the communicative functions involved. To highlight significance of their research, learners need to be familiar with positive adjective phrases indicating centrality or reliability or *adjectival clauses* carrying positive connotations in which an adjective is followed by an infinitive complement. It also appears vital to include instances which involve the use of noun phrases with positive pre-modifiers pertaining to innovativeness, and those exuding a positive and optimistic outlook based on the research findings as exemplified above.

Aside from the aforementioned expressions involving a range of adjectives related to originality, novelty and innovativeness, it is possible to highlight strengths using predicator-object combinations carrying positive connotations. This is a case illustrating the necessity to establish an interface between reading and writing activities because learners can become more competent in writing certain text segments if they are able to identify related segments that fulfil similar communicative functions in the process of reading other published texts in the same genre [21]. In this perspective, if learners have been exposed to the common P-O combinations that are frequently preceded by nominative noun phrases containing deictic signals referring to the study, they might be in a better position to highlight the research significance mentioned above.

As indicating gaps in past research stands out as a useful strategy to accentuate the significance of a new study in the final sections of a research paper, it appears necessary to familiarise learners with (i) some negative expressions indi-

ating a void or lack of investigation into certain research areas, (ii) negative expressions highlighting uncertainty, failure and inadequacy of past research, and (iii) phrasal combinations illustrating how the current research has taken into account some important aspects overlooked in past research. This writing activity may require learners to use two-part text segments that distinctly demonstrate how different linguistic choices may be used to point out limitations of foregoing studies (in the first part) and the ways of tackling their limitations (in the second part). Likewise, it may be helpful to show learners common instances illustrating how they can use *concessive adverbial clauses* or *concessive adjuncts* in sentence-initial positions to acknowledge limitations of their own study before justifying their research in the matrix clause. Such a linguistic device that involves an initial acknowledgment of a limitation may be introduced as a relatively subtle and implicit way of highlighting the strength of a study.

In brief, if we are cautious enough to examine the ways in which research papers are presented, we may realize that their 'scholarly rigour' may hinge not merely on the amount of technical knowledge shared by the researchers, but also on their writing strategies pertaining to rhetorical organisation and linguistic mechanisms used to espouse ideas and highlight the significance of their studies. As such, supervisors and ESP instructors need to ensure that students acquire some of these strategies and language resources through sufficient reading and analysis of related academic texts. Prior knowledge of these rhetorical structures, syntactic patterns and lexical usage will significantly enable them to develop the schema required to highlight the originality, potentiality, innovativeness, and overall significance of their research.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like thank the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur for providing me with a research grant without which it might not have been possible to complete this pedagogically motivated study.

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Received: March 31, 2008

Revised: September 10, 2008

Accepted: September 24, 2008

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