Analyzing Verbs in the Discussion Section of Master's Theses Written by Iranian Foreign Language Learners

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Abstract

This study reports on the way nonnative Iranian writers make use of verbs in the discussion section/chapter of their master theses in the field of English Language Teaching. Although verbs have been studied extensively in academic writing, there has been little attention given to the verbs in the discussion of theses written by English Foreign Language (EFL) students. To fill this gap, sixty M.A. theses were purposively selected and analyzed. These theses were first categorized based on the research approach they had employed. There were three broad categories of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method theses. The verbs in these theses were analyzed with reference to their reporting and nonreporting status. Then, other linguistic features; namely, tense, aspect, and voice were examined. Descriptive statistics was exploited to reveal differences among the theses representing each research approach. The findings indicated that there are no differences between the theses written within the three research approaches regarding the verbs used, except for the use of progressive aspect for the reporting verbs in the qualitative theses and the use of passive voice for the nonreporting verbs in the mixed methods theses. Suggestions for further studies on the issue and a number of implications are given at the end of this study.

Keywords: Aspect, Reporting and Nonreporting Verbs, Research Approach, Thesis, Tense, Voice

1. Introduction

Numerous researchers confirm that grammar plays a pivotal role in language

learning and it is a simplistic view to just rely on vocabulary acquisition at

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the expense of marginalizing grammar. In fact, without sufficient knowledge of grammar, students' language development will be extremely influenced or even impeded (Lai, 2004; Myles, 2002; Sabzalipour, 2012). Most English language instructors underscore the importance of teaching and learning English grammar; hence, they suggest that teachers necessarily allocate a portion of class time to teaching grammar either explicitly or implicitly (Lai, 2004). However, in spite of the bold emphasis on English grammar and its significance in class instruction, a majority of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners still regard grammar a thorny area and difficult to learn. It goes without saying that in the process of grammar learning, learners make errors at different levels and domains ranging from phonetic segments to larger stretches of language like discourses (Biber, 2006; Chen, 2004; Myles, 2002; Reimerink, 2007).

Among the areas of difficulty in learning a new language, verb errors are the notorious part of grammar (Chen, 1979, 2004; Huang, 2001; Lee & Haseltine, 2001). EFL teachers and researchers have long noted that the use of appropriate tenses often appears to be a pervasive problem that can result in confusing text (Guiora, 1983; Riddle, 1985; Hawes & Thomas, 1997). According to Hinkel (1992, p. 557), "the meanings and forms of tenses are complex and often difficult for nonnative speakers to acquire." This problem is present all along the course of education from elementary to higher education, where students are supposed to submit theses and dissertations. The careful choice of verbs is regarded as a fundamental part in increasing the credibility of the research itself (Manana & Mohd Noor, 2014). Research indicates that grammatical mistakes abound in theses, dissertations, and even articles written by non-native EFL writers (Hawes & Thomas, 1997). A thesis is a formal document and there are rules that guide the way in which it is and should be written and presented (Hewitt, 2007; Paltridge, 2002;

Talebzadeh, Ghafar Samar, Kiany, & Akbari, 2013). It seeks answers and explanations, makes comparisons and arrives at generalizations which can be used to extend a theory. As well as explaining what can be done, it addresses the underlying question of why (Smith, 2003).

In this study, verbs are analyzed in theses written by nonnative EFL students to see what patterns and tendencies emerge. Comprising a number of chapters, theses and dissertations can correspond to sections and subsections usually found in research articles. Among these chapters, the discussion is of considerable significance, because in this chapter the findings are interpreted in light of previous research and the authors' argumentations are put forward as a major contribution to the related field of study. For this reason, the content and structure of the discussion have been explored in several studies (Atai & Falah, 2005; Basturkmen, 2012; Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Ershadi & Farnia, 2017; Hopkins & Dudley-Evans, 1988; Jalilifar, Hayati & Namdar, 2012; Holmes, 1997; Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2015; Nodoushan & Khakbaz, 2011; Peacock, 2002). Having reviewed these studies, however, the authors of the current study found little attention has been paid to how verbs are used in the discussions of M.A. theses. More specifically, the study tends to find out if there are any links between the type of verbs used in the discussions and the different research approaches, that is, qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods, employed by the EFL writers.

2. Review of the Literature
2.1 Background of the Study

A thesis or dissertation is an evidence submitted in for an academic degree or expert capability introducing the creator's examination and discoveries in an area of enquiry (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). In some contexts, the word thesis or a cognate is utilized for part of a bachelor's or master's course, while dissertation is ordinarily connected to a doctorate, while in different settings,

the reverse is valid. The expression graduate thesis is sometimes used to allude to both master's theses and doctoral dissertations. A thesis ordinarily investigates a research project or is concerned with an expanded investigation of a particular subject. The structure of the thesis or dissertation clarifies the purpose, the past research writing which encroaches on the theme of the study, the strategies utilized and the discoveries of the project.

In this study, thesis refers to a document submitted at the end of Master's level to receive a Master of Art (M.A.) degree or a Master of Science (M.Sc.) degree. Most world colleges utilize a variety of chapter formats, often the following are the typical chapters: a) an introduction, which presents the topic of the research, the methodology, and in addition its extension and centrality; b) a literature review, reviewing correlate literature and demonstrating how this has educated the research issue; c) a methodology chapter, clarifying how the research has been planned and why the research methods/population/data collection and analysis being utilized have been picked; d) a findings chapter, sketching out the discoveries of the research itself; e) an analysis and discussion chapter, breaking down the discoveries and talking about them with regards to the review of the literature (this part is regularly isolated into two—analysis and discussion); and f) a conclusion.

This study is primarily concerned with the verbs used in the discussions of theses. Verbs constitute the heart of a clause or a sentence. They are words that are naturally the syntactic focus of a predicate and communicate a demonstration, event, or method of being, that in different languages are conjugated for concurrence with the subject, for tense, voice, mood, or aspect. They commonly bear rather full descriptive meaning and describing quality, but they may at times bear none of these particularities when utilized as auxiliary or linking verbs (Crystal, 2004). Indeed, it is hard to fully comprehend a sentence or a question without a verb.

In this study, verbs are analyzed based on a major dichotomy of reporting and nonreporting, which will be explained later. The logic behind this choice has already been eloquently explained by Hawes and Thomas (1997). They point out that the choice of reporting and nonreporting verbs demonstrates discourse functions which interact with the rhetorical function of verbs in the reported activity. In addition, in this study, verbs are also analyzed on the basis of the tense, aspect, and voice. The reason why these three dimensions are chosen is that a cumulative description of all three aspects in a single section of theses has not received any attention in the literature.

Cowan (2008, p. 350) points out that tense "expresses the time that an action occurs in relation to the moment of speaking." She asserts that proper tense use has always been a problem for nonnative learners of English, as some tenses perform different functions from the learners' own language. The tenses are identified as present, past, and future. The aspect of the verb can be categorized into simple, progressive, and perfective. It "concerns the different perspectives which a speaker can take and express with regard to the temporal course of some events, actions, process, etc." (Kelin, 1994, p. 16). In other words, it indicates how the speaker views the act. Literature has shown that learners of English draw on avoidance strategies when they want to make use of perfective aspect because they are uncertain if the perfective aspect would represent what they intend to (Hinkel, 2004). The voice of the verb is either active or passive. This refers to the agent or the doer of the action; hence, shifting the attention to either the agent of the action or the recipient of the action. The improper use of active or passive voice is reported to result in an unbalanced sentence patterns that might look awkward (Williams, 2008). All these classifications are based on the surface structure and are only used to account for main verbs in main and dependent clauses. The types and tokens are counted in the present study; however, only

are the tokens of the verbs considered for the purpose of the study. The three dimensions, of the verbs (tense, aspect, & voice) play a significant role in constructing the meaning of a sentence, and additionally, they impose difficulties on learners of English as a foreign language (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000; Crystal, 2004; Williams, 2008, 2010; Wong, 1999, 2003).

Given that in this study verbs are considered in the discussions of theses; it is necessary to provide a description of this subgenre. It is usually the fifth chapter of the thesis and it is the part of the thesis that should address the questions raised in the introduction. Hopkins and Dudley-Evans (1988) identified nine communicative moves in the discussions of research articles of applied linguistics. Each Move functions in a particular way to convey pertinent coherent information in order for the readers to buy the authors' ideas and knowledge claims. The entire discussions of the theses are taken as the context of the present study; therefore, verb analysis are carried out across all the communicative moves. Comparing verbs across─communicative moves of the discussions can be an interesting area for further generic studies of this subgenre.

2.2 Review of the Related Studies

A large body of research has examined the general rhetorical structure of theses (Swales, 2004) as well as their generic structure (Hopkins & Dudley-Evans, 1988; Holmes, 1997; Samraj, 2002; Peacock, 2002; Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006, to name but a few). Corpus analysis and functional analyses have also contributed to the understanding of this genre and its subgenres (Pecorari & Petrić, 2014) through presenting distributional frequencies, whereby patterns of use and functions are associated. However, verbs and in particular the verb characteristics and their related aspects have received little, if any, attention from researchers (Hinkel, 2004; Williams, 2008, 2010). Given all the accounts on the lack of attention to verb use in the

theses written by EFL learners, our focus in this study is on how verbs are used in the discussion of theses written by EFL graduates of English Language Teaching.

The objective of discussion is to decipher and portray the noteworthiness of students' discoveries in light of what was at that point thought about the issue being researched (Moyetta, 2016), and to clarify any new understanding or bits of knowledge about the issue after students have contemplated the discoveries (Amnuai, 2017). The discussion normally interfaces with the introduction by method of research questions or hypotheses and the literature the writers review; however, it does not just rehash or improve the introduction; the discussion ought to dependably clarify how the writers' investigation has moved the reader's comprehension of the research problem forward from where they cleared out them toward the end of the introduction. Generally speaking, the importance of the discussion has clearly been stated by a number of researchers (Annesley, 2010, p.1472) as follows:

1. Most successfully exhibit their capacity as a researcher to contemplate an issue, to create inventive answers for issues in light of a sensible synthesis of the discoveries, and to figure a more profound, more significant comprehension of the research issue under investigation,
2. Present the basic significance of their research, note conceivable ramifications in different areas of study, and investigate conceivable enhancements that can be made with a specific end goal to additionally build up the worries of your research,
3. Highlight the credibility of their research and how it might have the capacity to add to or potentially help fill existing gaps in the field. If appropriate, the discussion is also where students state how the findings from their study revealed new gaps in the literature that had not been previously exposed or adequately described, and
4. Engage the reader in thinking critically about issues based upon an evidence-based interpretation of findings; it is not governed strictly by objective reporting of information.

Verbs have been the subject of many studies in academic written discourse. They have been investigated from different aspects. One strand of

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research concerns the reporting verbs in research articles. In this regard, Leech (1983) defines reporting as attribution of information to an external source using a reporting verb. It is worthwhile to note that there are other ways to report in which a reporting verb is not used. One type of study on reporting and reporting verbs is citation analysis, where the number of references to other researchers are taken as indications of the way researchers contribute to their field. Another line of inquiry is associated with genre analysts who take interest in the generic and rhetorical structure of academic articles. Swales (1981), for instance, analyzed the research article Introductions, looking at the communicative moves. One of these moves is *Reports of Previous Research.* He distinguished three types of reports to prior writers based on the orientation an author takes. Swales' subsequent work on citations (1990) makes a more general distinction between *integral* and *nonintegral* citations. Integral citations show the name of the researcher whose words are either borrowed or paraphrased while nonintegral citations indicate the name of the researcher in parentheses or by superscript numbers.

Some studies on reference to previous research have focused on the verb tenses used in the reporting sentences, for example, to unpack the relationship between tense forms and sentence function (Oster 1981; Lackstrom, Selinker, & Trimble 1972; Malcolm 1987; Shaw 1992), other studies have concentrated on verb voices and their ties with sentence function (Tarone, Dwyers, Gilette, & Icke 1981). Still other studies of citations have shed light on the choice of reporting verbs to communicate evaluation (Thompson & Ye, 1991).

Hawes and Thomas (1997) carried out an in-depth analysis of reporting verbs in medical journal articles and found that reporting verbs used in reporting statements or citations in medical journal articles exhibit discourse functions which associate with the rhetorical function of the report in which

the verb occurs, and the kind of activities involved in each section of the articles were basically discourse verbs, real-world verbs, and cognition verbs. They maintain that "cognition verbs correlate with reports of consensus views of the scientific community, tentativity (discourse) verbs with the conclusions of cited studies, and certainty verbs with reports of specific results and findings" (p. 147).

Reimerink (2007) examined the use of verbs in different sections of medical research articles. She selected a corpus of 30 texts and tagged them. Verbs were then classified according to their meaning in lexical domains. Her findings demonstrated that the lexical domains are distributed differently in each section of the article, reinforcing the rhetorical functions of each section. In another study by Tafaroji-Yeganeh and Boghayeri (2015) verbs were scrutinized in research articles since they were found to constitute a predicament for non-native writers. Tafaroji-Yeganeh and Boghayeri (2015) investigated the frequency of the reporting verbs and their function in the introduction and literature review s of research articles written by native and non-native writers. The results indicated that there are some differences in the use of reporting verbs between the two corpora with regard to tense, voice and function.

Hinkel (2004) carried out a cross-linguistic comparative corpus study between essays written by non-native speakers and essays written by English speakers. The purpose was to come up with a pattern of uses of the three tenses (past, present, and future), two aspects (progressive & perfect), and passive voice in academic texts of L1 and L2 speakers. The study examined the essays written by writers from seven different language backgrounds; English, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, Vietnamese, and Arabic. Hinkel found that speakers of all languages, except Arabic, used past tense more than native speakers. Interestingly, Arabic speakers used fewer past-

tense verbs. The usage of past tenses comes along with narratives and the present tenses with formal academic prose Hunston (2002), thus the topic plays a key role in the occurrence of each tense. The results also showed even more advanced L2 speakers try to avoid the passive voice and the perfect aspect. Hinkel suggested that teachers pinpoint the use of the passive voice and encourage them to shy away from the avoidance strategy.

These studies were chiefly concerned with the reporting verbs and their functions in the different sections of research articles; however, as pointed out earlier, no study to the best of the authors' knowledge has cast light on the verb use and its specificities in the discussion of theses written be EFL student writers. This study aims to contribute to the understanding of the kind of verbs used in the discussion of theses by comparing and contrasting verbs in three different types of theses based on the approach to thesis writing (i.e., quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods). Investigating a couple of studies have shown that most of the theses lack the quality of an appropriate discussion (Paltridge & Starfield, 2007; Swales, 1990, 2004). It is surely true that in writing a well-developed and understandable discussion, the role of verb type cannot be ignored, because all statements and actions are expressed by verbs.

Regarding the difficulties reported by EFL students in writing theses, EFL student writers should figure out how to compose a decent thesis professionally. This study seems to have academic worth in the domain of thesis writing in that the findings may reveal what will be the best strategy in making and composing a good thesis. The importance of the current study also lies in its focus on verbs, and their use by Iranian EFL learners in the specific subgenre of thesis. Data about expert and more slender utilization of verbs in thesis may help the students, their educators and textbook writers to comprehend the proper or normal frequencies and function of verb use in

proficient thesis, and the deviations students go through away from the acknowledged exploitations. EFL students and teachers will also benefit from considering the implications of the findings for student needs in research writing. Based on the review of the previous works and the gap identified, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

> 1. What types of verbs are used in the discussions of quantitative, qualitative and mixed method M.A. theses written by Iranian EFL students?
> 2. What are the differences in the types of verbs used in the discussions of the quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method M.A. theses written by Iranian EFL students?

3. Method
3.1 The Corpus
The corpus used for this study consists of 60 theses written by Iranian M.A EFL students in ELT. To select the corpus for this study, a comprehensive list of all the theses published in the field of EFL in Ahvaz Science and Technology University from 2010-2016 was prepared. This time period was chosen on the grounds that the university website from which the files were retrieved offers theses within this period. Sixty ELT theses out of this list were chosen purposively based on the research approach employed in each thesis. From each thesis, the discussion section was printed to investigate how verbs are utilized in them. To make the corpus data comparable, all of the chosen theses were matched in approximate lengths. Needless to mention, a permission to enter the website and print pages of the theses was granted by the dean of the university after he was informed of the purpose of this study.

The decision on the type of approach adopted in each thesis was made based on the guidelines put forth by Creswell (2003), Dörnyei (2007), and Hashemi and Babaii (2013). According to Creswell (2003), a quantitative research design has to do with measurable and quantifiable variables where the effect of one or more variables on one or more other variables or the

relationships between them are detected. Dörnyei (2007) defines a qualitative research design as a method hinging on ethnographic interpretations and observations which hardly lends itself to quantification. Mixed methods research can be defined as "research in which the investigator collects and analyzes data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches in a single study or program of inquiry" (Creswell, 2003, p. 4). That is to say, high quality mixed-method research requires mixing throughout an entire study: from forming research questions, to sampling, to data collection, to analysis, and, finally, to interpretation (Hashemi & Babaii, 2013). The search for these types of theses was conducted until the criteria of twenty theses for each approach was met. This ended up in having twenty quantitative theses, twenty qualitative theses, and twenty mixed methods ones.

3.2 Procedure

After a permission to access the data center of Ahvaz University of Science and Technology was sought by the second author, 20 quantitative, 20 qualitative, and 20 mixed methods theses were purposively chosen. This was done based on the descriptions and criteria explained in section 3.1. The discussion of each thesis was selected, printed, and precisely read word by word in order to identify and locate the verb types and tokens. To sum up, in order to analyze the verbs, the following procedures were performed. First, the verbs were analyzed for being reporting or nonreporting. Then, they were analyzed for tense, aspect, voice. It is important to note that only the main verbs in the independent and dependent clauses were analyzed and other verbs including the verbs used in the examples were excluded. Next, a sample of 15 theses (five from each of the research approaches considered in categorizing the theses) was analyzed by the first author who is an academic member in ELT and is familiar with the purpose and framework of the study.

This was a measure to increase the reliability and validity of analysis. Finally, the findings were tabulated and analyzed. In cases where disagreement arose, a second round of discussion was carried out to reanalyze the data until a threshold level of agreement was reached.

4. Results

Regarding the first research question, frequencies and percentages are presented in this section. The word counts of the corpus gave the followings; quantitative theses contained 39013 words, qualitative 43122 words, and mixed methods 41237 words. These numbers indicate that variations in the length of the theses discussions in the three categories did not have a confounding impact on the findings since they are roughly close to one another. The average length of discussions was 1951 words in the quantitative theses, 2156 words in the qualitative theses, and 2062 in the mixed methods ones. This is again an indication of create no meaningful threat to the analyses. Table 1 shows the number of clauses and verb tokens and types in the discussions of the three broad categories of theses, i.e., the quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods respectively along with their percentages.

Table 1
Clauses and Verbs in the Discussions of Theses across Research Approaches

	Quantitative	Qualitative	Mixed methods
Independent Clauses	2366 (79.9%)	1972 (68.5%)	2070 (85.7%)
Dependent Clauses	594 (20.1%)	904 (31.5%)	345 (14.3%)
Verb token	2960	2876	2415
Verb type	2189	1203	1283

As Table 1 clearly shows, quantitative theses outnumber qualitative and mixed methods theses both in the number of independent clauses and verb tokens and types; however, the qualitative theses contained more dependent clauses than the quantitative and mixed method theses did. Proportionally, however, mixed method theses contained more independent clauses (85.7%)

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and fewer dependent clauses (14.3%), as compared to other two types of theses. Examples 1 and 2 illustrate the independent and dependent clauses as used in the discussion sections of the theses.

Example 1:
<u>**The researcher suggests**</u> <u>that conventional expressions should be taught to learners (Salahshoor, 2014)</u>
Indep. Cl.Dep. Cl.
Example 2:
<u>**Stern (as cited in Dashab, 2016) states**</u> <u>that for the purpose of developing an instructional policy</u>**,** *both explicit and implicit*
    Indep. Cl.   Dep. Cl. (for the previous clause), Indep. CL. (for the next clause)
Dep. Cl.
*strategies need to be combined***.**

In example 1, the author has used a dependent clause which is attached to a main independent clause to occupy the objective position. In example 2, there is one independent clause to which two dependent clauses are attached. Normally, the dependent clauses are more than one as in example 2; however, in a few cases, one can find a clause that functions as a dependently and, at the same time, independently. This is clearly shown in example 2 to demonstrate the process of clause identification in the study.

Verbs were also analyzed in relation to their reporting and nonreporting stance. This is illustrated in Table 2. It can be easily seen that qualitative theses constituted a different nature of reporting. In this type of theses, almost twice as many reporting verbs were used as the ones employed in the quantitative theses and three times as many as the ones found in the mixed methods theses. Obviously, the number of nonreporting verbs in the qualitative theses was less than other two categories of theses.

Table 2
Reporting and Nonreporting Verbs in the Discussions of Theses across Research Approaches

	Quantitative	**Qualitative**	**Mixed methods**
Reporting verbs	226 (7.6%)	429 (14.9%)	135 (5.6%)
Non-reporting verbs	2734 (92.4%)	2447 (85.1%)	2280 (94.4%)

The following examples show instances of reporting and nonreporting verbs as used in the thesis types. In example 3, the verb is a reporting one, as it directly renders the speaker or the writer's words. There are also indirect quotes reported by verbs that can be categorized as reporting. Thus, it is not the direct or indirect quotes that assign a verb a token of reporting or nonreporting, but the verb itself is the sole indicator that a person has said something. Some examples of reporting verbs are *say, tell, state, point out, suggest, recommend, assert, observe, claim*, etc. Take example 4, where the verb *examine* is used to show what the researcher did. This is not a reporting verb simply because it does not directly or indirectly report what somebody said, but refers to what they did.

Example 3:
Ellis (as cited in Anvari, 2013) **points out**, "We are now at a stage at which there are important connections between SLA theory and neuroscience of learning and memory" (p.229).

Example 4:
Safarian (as cited in Faraji Birjandi, 2012) **examined** the nature of the association between intelligence, inductive reasoning and language learning in general.

The reporting and nonreporting dichotomy has further been intersected at the tense, aspect, and the voice of the verbs. As demonstrated in Table 3, collectively, an overwhelming number of reporting and nonreporting verbs were used in past tense, dominating the discussions of the three types of research approaches. This is followed by nonreporting verbs in present tense and at last nonreporting verbs in future tense. If we look at each research approach separately, we will notice that the qualitative theses included the most past tense reporting and non-reporting verbs in comparison to other categories. The qualitative theses also encompassed the least number of future tense reporting and nonreporting verbs. Quantitative theses, on the whole, contained the most future reporting and non-reporting verbs.

Alternatively, if we look at the table horizontally, it can be noted that the nonreporting present tense in quantitative theses were more frequent than the nonreporting present tense in other two research theses while the reporting past tense verbs in qualitative and quantitative theses respectively outnumbered their counterpart verbs in the mixed methods theses. As it can also be clearly seen, the non-reporting future tense verbs in the quantitative theses were the most in comparison to the other two categories.

Table 3
Tense in the discussions of Theses across Research Approaches

		Quantitative		**Qualitative**		**Mixed methods**	
		Reporting **(100%)**	Nonreporting (100%)	Reporting (100%)	Nonreporting (100%)	Reporting (100%)	Non-reporting (100%)
Tense	Present	92 (40.7%)	1317 (48.1)	198 (46.1%)	996 (40.7%)	78 (57.7%)	1056 (46.3%)
	Past	118 (52.2%)	1386 (50.6%)	228 (53.1%)	1446 (59%)	48 (35.5%)	1194 (52.4%)
	Future	16 (7.1%)	31 (1.3%)	3 (0.7%)	5 (0.3%)	9 (6.8%)	30 (1.3%)

The following examples are but a few cases illustrating how verb tenses interact with the reporting and nonreporting status across the three thesis types. Example 5, taken from a quantitative thesis, demonstrates a verb in the present tense in a nonreporting fashion. It seems the writer intended to show that the fact is true over all times and across all circumstances. Example 6 illustrates a verb in the past tense in a nonreporting status, which showcase an analysis which holds true for the past. Example 7 displays a future possibility by employing a future tense verb in a nonreporting status.

Example 5:
*(Present)*The degree of conscious awareness of one's learning **plays** an important role in the clarity of learning (Nourozi Larki, 2013).

Example 6:
*(Past)*This analysis **showed** the range of effectiveness of tasks in extracting a scope of pragmatic meaning from native and nonnative speakers (Maleki, 2010).

Example 7:
*(Future)*Intentional learning **will influence** learner's proficiency because it is more likely to lead to explicit than implicit knowledge (Shamiri, 2014).

Another dimension of verbs that is of concern in this study is the aspect of the verb. It deals with the writers or speakers' view of an action or a state. It has been suggested that many nonnative speakers have doubts about usage of perfective verbs, and a graver situation has been reported to prevail in academic writing where writers draw on avoidance strategies. In this study, the frequency of the occurrences of verb aspects were surveyed. Table **4** provides information on the use of different verb aspects across theses written based on the three research approaches targeted at in this study. Another interesting line of inquiry would be to detect and cross-tabulate the interplay between tense and aspect which is not the concern of the current study.

Table 4
Aspect in the Discussions of Theses across Research Approaches

		Quantitative	Qualitative			Mixed methods	
		Reporting (100%)	Nonreporting (100%)	Reporting (100%)	Nonreporting (100%)	Reporting (100%)	Non-reporting (100%)
Aspect	Simple	208 (92%)	2632 (96.2%)	390 (91%)	1965 (80.3%)	120 (88.9%)	2226 (97.6%)
	Progressive	4 (1.7%)	10 (0.4%)	3 (0.6%)	30 (1.2%)	3 (2.2%)	21 (0.9%)
	Perfective	14 (6.3%)	92 (3.4%)	36 (8.4%)	452 (19.5%)	12 (8.9%)	33 (1.5%)

It is obvious that the simple aspect is dominant in the three types of theses. Moreover, except for the mixed methods theses, the percentages of reporting and nonreporting verbs in the simple aspect are proportionally close to one another. Progressive aspect does not form a significant share among other aspects. This can be testified by looking at the low percentages it represents. Perfective aspect also featured much less than the simple aspect; however, in the qualitative theses, there were many cases of non-reporting

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verbs in perfect aspect. The following examples show how the aspect of the verb interact with the reporting and nonreporting status.

Example 8:
(Simple) People **learn about** the thinks that they pay attention to and do not learn much about the things do not attend to (Azimi Tabar, 2012).
Example 9:
(Progressive) The zone of proximal development **was transforming** to the zone of actual development (Rafiee Samani, 2012).
Example 10:
(Perfective) Ellis (as cited in Toulabi, 2014) asserts that intentional learning **has been proved** to be more effective than incidental learning for both vocabulary and grammar.

The last dimension examined in this study was the voice of the verbs. Many researchers find mastering this dimension as an obstacle to language learners (Hinkel, 2004; Williams, 2008). In this study, the instances of occurrence of the active and passive voice were considered in the Discussions of three types of theses with regard to the research approach they have employed. This analysis tended to reveal if there exist any associations between the voice of verbs and research approach guiding the thesis. Table **5** shows the frequency and percentages of active and passive verbs across research approaches.

Table 5
Voice in the Discussions of Theses across Research Approaches

		Reporting (100%)	Nonreporting (100%)	Reporting (100%)	Nonreporting (100%)	Reporting (100%)	Nonreporting (100%)
Voice	Active	190 (84%)	2278 (83.3%)	417 (97.2%)	2007 (82%)	117 (86.6%)	1860 (81.3%)
	Passive	36 (16%)	456 (16.7%)	12 (2.8%)	440 (18%)	18 (13.4%)	420 (18.7%)

As shown in Table 5, the use of active voice is much more frequent than the use of passive voice in all the three types of theses. Looking at frequencies, there seems to be an equal distribution of active and passive verbs in the nonreporting verbs across the three types of theses; however, in terms of the reporting verbs, the qualitative theses contained a proportionally

larger number of active verbs than the other two types of theses. The following examples show the instances where the voice of the verbs intersects with the reporting and nonreporting status of the verbs across the three these types. Example 11 represents an action whose the doer of the action is known; hence, an active voice is chosen to highlight the agent of the action, while example 12 is stated in passive voice to highlight the action itself and downgrade the doer of the action. In these two examples, the verbs are nonreporting.

Example 11:
*(Active)*Chan and Liou (as cited in Ebrahimi, 2016) **conducted** a survey focused on collocation learning through Web-based concordance.

Example 12:
*(Passive)*Correlation analysis **was done** in order to examine the relationship between grammatical knowledge and pragmatic knowledge (Abroshan, 2014).

5. Discussion

The difficulty most native and nonnative novice writers face when they want to write a discussion for their theses or articles is acknowledged in the literature (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006). As a partial contribution to the studies on this section of theses, this study attempted to cast some light on the way nonnative writers go about composing this section by focusing on the verbs and verb characteristics across three different types of theses based on the approaches they adopted. Initially, the type of clauses (i.e., main and dependent, were proportionally compared). The results of analysis indicated no difference among the thesis types. Next, verbs were analyzed based on the reporting and non-reporting polarity. Each type of theses had an overwhelmingly larger number of nonreporting verbs than reporting ones. Thesis types were then compared on the basis of this dichotomy where there was no difference found between the quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods too. The findings of this study are in accord with previous studies (Shaw 1992; Thompson & Ye, 1991), in which both confirm the dominance

of nonreporting verbs in the discussions of RAs. However, there was a difference in the percentage of reporting verbs of the qualitative theses (14.9%). This percentage is higher than the reporting verbs in other types of theses. This can be explained by the nature of qualitative work where narratives and interpretive language overrides other genres of writing. Another reason can be the marginal appeal the writers of this thesis type make to refer to previous literature in the discussion.

A second concern in this study was to analyze the syntactic and semantic subtleties of verbs; viz tense, aspect, and voice, in the discussions of theses across the three research approaches. In terms of tense, the past tense was the most common tense in the discussions of the three types of theses. This is followed by the present tense and future tense respectively. Once again the qualitative theses formed a shade of difference in terms of frequency. It was found in the qualitative theses; the present tense is less common than the past tense in comparison to other types of theses. This difference, however, did not constitute a meaningful significant difference. The supremacy of the past tense has already been confirmed by Swales (1990) and Hinkel (2004). The simplest interpretation for this trend is that theses are generally reports on what the students have accomplished in the past. For one thing, the past tense is the prototypical tense of theses and RAs. The rather large percentages of the present tense in the discussions of theses can also be attributed to well-documented, all-accepted facts that writers draw on to support their findings (Tafaroji-Yeganeh & Boghayeri, 2015) The future tense was the least common among the tenses, as the discussion is more concerned with reporting past actions or phenomena. The only uses of the future tense were to suggest further areas of research. This move is usually found in the conclusion sections, but a few writers included this move in the discussion of their thesis (Swales, 1990, 2004). Our findings do not support previous

concerns about tense use by EFL learners (Guiora, 1983; Hawes & Thomas, 1997; Riddle, 1985). This is because students who are supposed to write a thesis in English have mastered tenses and often receive feedback from their supervisors to correct their mistakes.

Another dimension regarding the verbs in the discussions was the aspect. It was revealed that the simple aspect was the most typical among the three verb aspects in English, followed by perfective and progressive aspects respectively. An interesting finding was that there was an equal distribution of aspects between reporting and nonreporting verbs within discussions of each thesis type. This means that there was a sheer dominance of simple aspect and a blatantly insignificant number of verbs in perfective and progressive aspects. This is justified by reference to the completed actions the writers intend to describe rather than ongoing actions or incomplete events. The perfective aspect, though very much rare in comparison to the simple aspect, was most often used to describe actions that had a causal link to the present actions. This has already been verified by other researchers (Hawes & Thomas, 1997; Hinkel, 2004; Tafaroji-Yeganeh and Boghayeri, 2015; Thompson & Ye, 1991).

A final point of concern in this study was the voice of the verbs. The raw frequency counts showed the dominance of the active voice both in the reporting and nonreporting verbs within the discussions of each type of theses. Across the theses types, the active nonreporting verbs stood up and above the reporting verbs in the three thesis types. When the raw data were subjected to inferential statistics, a significant difference was found in the mixed methods theses with reference to the distribution of active and passive voices, as compared to the other two types of theses. However, due to the low frequency of the passive verbs in the whole corpus, the difference cannot be used to make a comprehensive generalization. The reason why writers in the

categories predominantly made use of active voice can be attributed to the descriptive and argumentative nature of the discussions. Writers topicalize the findings and use evaluative expressions to make the utterances more convincing. The evaluative apparatus is used either to detach writers from the propositions they have put forth or boost the relevance of the findings in the eye of the readers (Hyland, 2000). The findings of this study are in consistence with the findings of previous research (Hinkel, 2004; Tarone et al., 1981), in which an assertion is made about a general tendency among writers for exploiting active voice in the discussion of RAs and theses. The passive voice however is often used in the method section where writers describe the procedures and other related aspects (Holmes, 1997; Swales, 1990)

6. Conclusion

This study intended to investigate the nature of verbs in the discussion of theses written based on three main research approaches, that is, quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. Descriptive statistics was utilized to reveal any differences among the three types of theses with regard to clause types, the reporting status of verbs, verb tense, aspect, and voice. No difference was found except for the use of progressive aspect for the reporting verbs in the qualitative theses and the use of passive voice for the nonreporting verbs in the mixed methods theses. The findings of this study lend support to Myles (2002) and Lai's (2004), who view attention to grammar and teaching it essential even at higher levels of proficiency due to the functional meanings attached to certain forms.

Despite the claims made by Huang (2001), Lee and Haseltine (2001), and Chen (2004) in connection with errors in verb usage at advanced levels in EFL settings, it is fortunate that within the corpora investigated in this study

very few errors in verbs were detected and this is probably because of the process of reviews that a thesis undergoes before it is accepted.

This study is not without its limitations. First and foremost, although significant the differences in the study found, they do not allow for generalizations. Another limitation is that this study was exploratory in nature and it did not present qualitative accounts of the data. This can be taken up by other similar studies in which both quantitative and qualitative measures would conjoin to reveal better pictures of the genres under study. Another line of enquiry can be a comparative study of native and nonnative corpora in relation to the variables considered in this study. Furthermore, investigating whether these written by EFL learners aspire to emulate native-like norms is arguably an important question to be addressed. A further area of research can investigate the interplay between the variables of this study. This means, for instance, the interaction of voice with aspect and tense at the same time. This was not pursued in this study due to space limitation. In addition, further research which includes a focus on analyzing verbs on PhD dissertations would lead to a more complete picture of tense use.

The findings of this study can be contributive to the field of ELT and help those who want to write a thesis or publish in a scholarly journal gain an insight into the verb mechanisms in constructing a sound discussion of results and/or findings. The conclusions drawn from the analyzing the nature of verbs in M.A. theses have helped identify some of the elements that are important for the teaching and learning of tense in academic discourse. Knowledge of the various tenses in different genres and disciplines can help teachers or textbook developers decide where to focus their limited class time and resources.

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