

Academic Criticism in the Results and Discussion Section of MA Dissertations: The Case of ISLT Students of Applied Linguistics

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Abstract

Research on the Results and Discussion sections (DRs Hereafter) is still limited. As far as the dissertation genre is concerned, even fewer studies have addressed this particular part-genre. There is also relatively little research available about critical thinking and its realization in the Tunisian context. So far, critical thinking along with its linguistic and rhetorical realization has been considered a luxury rather than a necessity. This can be judged by the repeated complaints often made by Tunisian supervisors on many occasions such as in students' theses defenses. The study attempts to raise students' awareness about the importance of critical thinking (critical writing/reading) in Tunisian academia. It investigates the frequency and the linguistic realizations of the criticism move of MA dissertations' DRs written by graduate students at the ISLT (Institut Supérieur des Langues de Tunis). In addition, it analyzes the rhetorical move structure of this section in order to locate the criticism move. The research addresses also the issue of linguistic and cultural variability involved in enacting academic criticism on the basis of previous studies on the issue.

Key Words: Academic Writing, Critical Thinking, Results and Discussion Section.

I- Review of the literature

The term genre has been interpreted by a variety of approaches belonging to a number of Applied Linguistics research traditions. Hyon (1996) argued that in order to understand the concept of genre and its scope, there must be an understanding of how this concept has been developed in the three main complementary research schools: North American New Rhetoric studies, Australian Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The present study adopts the concept of ESP genre study as it concentrates on uncovering the communicative purposes and the organization patterns found in written texts such as dissertations.

As an essential skill for meeting the challenges of the competing academic world, the concept of 'Critical Thinking' (CT) has been extensively discussed and different definitions from several researchers have been proposed. The simplest definition was given by Beyer (1995, p.8) who said that "critical thinking means making reasoned judgments on statements, new ideas, arguments, research, etc". Barwani (2011), in his attempt to define critical thinking, stated that it is fulfilled through using existing knowledge and experience in order to scrutinize facts, produce or judge ideas, and express stances. Facione (1990) conducted an empirical project called the Delphi Project. It consisted of 46 experts that shared opinions and comments to reach consensus regarding critical thinking. They offered a conceptualization for it which was adopted throughout this study. This conceptualization is determined in terms of two dimensions: cognitive skills and affective dispositions. Scholars differ in defining critical thinking, but there is agreement about judgment, reasoning, and reflective thinking as the major components (Ku et al., 2010).

Academic criticism has indeed been receiving a massive attention and a number of labels emerged, most commonly 'academic conflict' (Burgess & Fagan, 2002), 'evaluative act' (Suárez, 2006), and recently 'critical act' (Moreno & Suárez, 2008). It is defined as the

implicit or explicit use of students' critical thinking. Though a critical comment may in theory be positive, in fact, most usages of this term refer to negative evaluations. Thus, 'criticism', in the context of this study, adopts Hyland's (2000a) definition which says that criticism is "an expression of dissatisfaction or negative comment" on a text (p. 44), i.e. it is defined as students' negative evaluation of the results that conveys some sort of disagreement/conflict and "a discrepancy between the stance of a researcher/author, on the one hand, and that of another researcher or the discourse community as a whole, on the other" (Cheng, 2006, p.280).

Students major problems concerning academic criticism may be related to the shortage of systematic training and methodology courses devoted to the writing of dissertations as they may need more information than they are currently provided. Prior (2001) elucidated the role of training and schooling especially composition pedagogies for the improvement of critical skills either by implicit or explicit instruction. Although the concepts of critical thinking and self-voice have been extensively discussed in second language writing, they are still neglected in EFL writing contexts (Mulnix, 2010), as those schools are mainly concerned with grammatical and lexical studies for examination' purposes. Teachers, on the other hand, may perceive themselves as disseminators of information rather than mediators of learning (Choy & Cheah, 2009) little feedback is given to students. Also, there is a lack of interaction and collaboration between them. They see themselves as responsible for controlling the teaching situation and providing information which make the learning of critical thinking skills from such teachers more doubtful.

Academic criticism has been approached from different perspectives. Most of the research on criticism has addressed a cross-cultural variability between English and other languages. In this respect, Itakura and Sui (2011) compared the use of criticism in Japanese and English book reviews in the field of linguistics. Duszak (1994, 1997) also approached CR

from a cross-cultural perspective. She mentioned that critical SAs are culture-bound when she found out that the German, Polish, and Czech' writings are characterized by the lack of judgmental and authorial presence unlike their English counterparts. Taylor and Chen (1991), on the other hand, pointed out that Chinese scientists writing in English tend to avoid the use of critical argument as well as mentioning gaps in literature.

Other researchers such as Fagan and Martin-Martin (2004) have approached academic criticism from a cross-disciplinary perspective. They investigated writers' developments and rhetorical choices when making critical speech act in 50 RAs belonging to two disciplines: psychology (social) and chemistry (natural).

Academic criticism had also been undertaken from a diachronic perspective either with a cross-cultural or a cross-generic view. This perspective targeted the evolution of the frequency and the rhetorical formulation of academic criticism. Starting with the diachronic cross-cultural perspective, Salager-Meyer et al. (2001) demonstrated how 19th century and early 20th century Anglo-American scientists were more direct when expressing criticism than their late 20th century counterparts.

Hyland (2009) said that 'the question is not how language resources influence text, but rather how text reflects the value of disciplinary culture' (p.180). We can conclude, then, that cultural and linguistic landscape in which a dissertation is written and given shape strongly influences the critical voice of the writer. The frequency and type of criticism is affected by socio-cultural factors across languages.

The research of non-native speakers of English is characterized by its poor visibility in the world of academia (Canagarajah, 2003; Flowerdew, 2000; Labassi, 2009). In Tunisia, unfortunately, criticism is almost absent with the absence of sciences and knowledge i.e. the door of criticism is almost closed with the insignificance of writings and the absence of competition or clash between writers.

In many Arab countries including Tunisia, the educational system emphasizes writing for taking tests. For many students, the only reason to practice writing is to pass examinations or to get a good grade. This actually reduces the value of writing to developing a written product and receiving a grade from the teacher. This approach is not likely to make students interested in writing, which becomes decontextualised and artificial, giving them little sense of purpose or perspective of a target audience.

Tunisian novice academics seem to have little understanding of the function of each part genre when writing their first theses and cannot distinguish which linguistic features help them present their claims. Supervisors are not fully explicit on how novice students should react to what they write and read.

Tunisian authors are mainly publishing in newspapers and magazines; very few had entire books published due to the single-voiced, idealized discourse of the reality of the country as a whole. There are individual attempts, though, but not large-scale ones. In his article about the causes behind the poor visibility of NN academics such as Tunisian writers, Labassi (2009, p.251) stated that “once again, journals published in underdeveloped countries replicate the problems that researchers in the same environments face: the absence of an academic culture that encourages criticism and avoids censorship.”

After reviewing previous studies, to the best of my knowledge the issue of academic criticism in the Tunisian context, especially at the postgraduate level, has been unexplored. This study, however, tries to fill the gap in the literature as its goal is to answer questions about the frequency and the configuration of critical acts in the data and to show the way they are constructed and expressed.

II- Methodology

The data of this study consisted of MA dissertations written between the years 2004 and 2011 by Tunisian MA students enrolled in the MA programs offered by the ISLT University. The students were generally in their mid twenties, and had roughly the same educational and academic background as they had almost been trained in similar English curricula. Specifically, the corpus represented the Results and Discussion parts of MA dissertations. The selection was based on non-probability convenience sampling where subjects are selected because of their convenient accessibility and proximity to the researcher. It took into consideration the following factors: access, homogeneity, language proficiency, discipline, and format. With the criteria set for sampling procedures, ten DRs were obtained.

The word count for the ten discussions was 7816 word types. The average word count per discussion was 781.6 word types. The range was 667 with the shortest discussion consisting of 610 word types and the longest 1277 word types. The length of the DRs selected had no impact on the findings. After the required corpus was obtained, the sections were photocopied and each discussion was assigned a code (e.g. MD1, MD2, MD3, and MD10) with M standing for master and D for discussion as mentioned in the following table. Before the analyses, the discussion parts of the MA dissertations were compiled and saved electronically. Each discussion was saved as a *.txt file. The documents that could not be reached electronically were scanned and edited for misprints before they could be electronically stored. The following table will be a clear description of the corpus.

Table 1. Data Description

Text Code	Gender	Length of the dissertation in number of pages	Length of the discussion in number of word types	Research design	Date of submission
MD 1	Female	125	764	Experimental	2011
MD 2	Female	109	1130	Experimental	2008
MD 3	Female	96	1117	Experimental	2008
MD 4	Female	89	1277	Experimental	2007-2008
MD 5	Female	89	750	Experimental	2009-2010
MD 6	Female	98	832	Experimental	2010
MD 7	Female	124	969	Experimental	2010
MD 8	Female	90	644	Experimental	2011
MD 9	Female	115	610	Experimental	2009
MD 10	Female	93	1000	Experimental	2004

The analysis presented in this study was based on Yang and Allison (2003) framework, which was described for the analysis of Discussion section in the field of Applied Linguistics. This framework identified seven rhetorical moves that writers use in their discussions. It was based on the extension and modification of several other models, therefore it is considered as the most suitable model for this study. The model is outlined in the following table.

Table 2: Yang & Allison's Model (2003: p. 374)

Yang & Allison ' Model (2003)	Steps
Move 1 —Background information	
Move 2 —Reporting results	
Move 3 —Summarizing results	
Move 4 —Commenting on results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Interpreting results - Comparing results with literature - Accounting for results - Evaluating results
Move 5 —Summarizing the study	
Move 6 —Evaluating the study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Indicating limitations - Indicating significance / advantage - Evaluating methodology
Move 7 —Deductions from the research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Making suggestions - Recommending further research - Drawing pedagogic implication

In the next step, a set of analyses were performed. This study employed both qualitative and quantitative data analyses methods, comprising frequency counts and text analyses of the corpus. For instance, in analyzing the move-step structure, text segments must be closely read. Apart from close readings, linguistic features such as lexical items and citations can confirm the identification of moves and steps, therefore hand-tagged analysis of the discoursal and rhetorical features of the texts was carried out.

The aim of this study was not to investigate whether students' Discussion sections conformed to Yang and Allison (2003)'s model, although this can serve as a study in its own right. Rather the model proved to be useful in targeting whether some of the moves deemed important for the exercise of critical writing. Therefore, the model would function as a heuristic for targeting moves such as comments on previous research emerging from results obtained, evaluating and explaining results, and comparison with other results.

For the identification and tagging of each evaluative act, texts were analyzed and searched through hand-tagging. Most instances of criticism were identified on the basis of lexico-grammatical features such as negative judgment and were given a code (CR) such as CR1 which corresponds to the criticisms extracted from MD1. The frequency and type of mitigation devices used to soften a critical comment were counted and analyzed.

The analysis of DRs was carried out based on close reading of the data's lexical, syntactic or modal items which are likely to add the writer's negative evaluation to the propositional content as sometimes it was difficult to distinguish between attitudinal and propositional content. In the next step, CR was investigated in terms of level of (in) directness. It was based on Itakura and Tsui's (2011) work on CR. It was categorized into direct and indirect criticism in order to account for the preferences of Tunisian MA students. The former refers to those instances in which there is categorical criticism whereas the latter refers to those cases in which the criticism is mitigated.

Indirect Criticism, for instance, is a polite mitigated criticism which is distinguished throughout this study, based on Itakura and Tsui (2011), by the identification of five linguistic devices. Three were drawn from Hyland's (2004) analysis: (1) 'praise-criticism pair', (2) 'hedging', (3) 'other attribution', and the fourth category was drawn from Meyers (1989) and Salager-Meyer and Alcaraz Ariza (2004): (4) 'emotionally charged expression' (or attitude markers). And the fifth strategy was the 'passives'.

After analyzing the data quantitatively by counting each instance of the authors' presence markers in the corpus, a computer-supported analysis of the lexico-grammatical features of the ten DRs was undertaken. Hence, there were instances which depended on context as they could not be noticed in a corpus-based study. A frequency count was performed through AntConc3.2.4 to identify the total number of words in each discussion and to help identify how frequent are those linguistic features. Word List tool and Concordance

tool helped in extracting the mitigating devices used in the CRs instances. The wordlist was employed in this study to show the frequency and the distribution of CRs' markers such as hedges and boosters throughout the instances extracted from the corpus. Then, the concordance was employed to check the context of those devices

VI- Results and Discussion

1. The rhetorical analysis

1.1. Move analysis

Table 3 provides a summary of the frequency of the move structure of the ten Results and Discussion chapters. This summary is presented in terms of Yang and Allison's (2003) model. As table 3 below indicates, a total of 876 moves were found in the whole corpus with an average of 87.6 moves per paper. The sections relatively followed the conventionalized moves of this sub-genre.

Table 3: General Overview of the Structure of the discussion sections

	Move Structure							
Text Code								
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	
MD1	17	23	3	15	7	3	1	
MD2	24	52	33	29	-	-	-	
MD3	41	51	7	33	1	-	2	
MD4	8	19	3	18	3	4	13	
MD5	16	20	1	18	3	-	-	
MD6	16	22	7	9	3	2	3	
MD7	19	45	6	18	-	3	1	
MD8	18	26	2	20	6	1	3	
MD9	13	9	4	7	5	4	3	
MD10	42	57	9	20	1	-	4	
Total	214	324	75	187	29	17	30	876
Percentage	24%	37%	9%	21%	3%	2%	4%	100%

M1: Background Information; **M2:** Reporting Results; **M3:** Summarizing Results; **M4:** Commenting on Results; **M5:** Summarizing the Study; **M6:** Evaluating the Study; **M7:** Deductions from Future Research.

True, students' DRs conform to the proposed model of Yang and Allison (2003), however, the regularity of move sequencing was not present. The moves that constituted the ten DRs studied were found not following a linear pattern such as [M1-M2-M3-M5-M6-M7]. Indeed, a clear cyclical patterning in the novices' choice of moves emerged. Research studies in general have described the discussion section as characterized by the presence of repeated cycles of moves (Basturkmen, 2009; Holmes, 1997; Peacock, 2002; Yang & Allison, 2003).

Cycles aid thesis writers, in general, in realizing the texts' communicative purposes and help the writers to organize and sequence the context they wish to deliver. According to Yang and Allison (2003), move 4 (*Commenting on Results*) and move 6 (*Evaluating the study*) are the moves where writers make their claims and generalizations based on the results, point out the strengths and weaknesses of the study, and contrast them with previous studies. In this study, move 4 occurred in all discussions in the corpus.

It was the third most frequent move occurring 187 times out of the total 876 moves with 21% of the corpus. Each of move 4 '*Commenting on Results*' steps (*a. Explaining Results*, *b. Comparing Results with the Literature*, and *c. Evaluating Results*) and move 6 '*Evaluating the Study*' steps (*a. Indicating Limitations*, *b. Indicating Significance/Advantage*, and *c. Evaluating Methodology*) performed the communicative functions of establishing the meaning and the significance of the research results.

1.2. Academic Criticism in the Discussion Sections

The location of CRs within the moves was done by close reading as well as periodical reading as mentioned in the methodology chapter. Table 4 demonstrates the distribution of CRs throughout the data.

Table 4: The location of CRs within the corpus

Moves	Move4 'Commenting on results'	Move6 'Evaluating the study'	Total
Frequency of Criticisms	103	14	117
Percentage	88%	12%	100%

As expected, criticisms were present significantly in *Commenting on Results* (move 4) than in the other moves. It was the most heavily loaded rhetorical move.

Interestingly enough, *Evaluating results* outnumbered the other steps. It represented 63 instances out of 117 instances of CRs in the whole corpus. Indicating limitations and methodological flaws, on the other hand, were much less frequently present (with respectively 3 instances and 11 instances). Students did not expose the limitations of their studies in order to highlight the validity of their own claims. This result was in line with Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) who deemed that the underlying principle behind such weak frequency of *Evaluating methodology* may be that the research community shows general agreement on the accepted methods. Following Itakura and Tsui's (2011) taxonomy, criticisms were classified into *direct* and *indirect*. Table 5 presents the percentage of criticisms types within the corpus.

Table 5: Direct and Indirect CR recorded

Criticism	Direct	Indirect	Total CR recorded
Number	22	95	117
Percentage	19%	81%	100 %

The above table demonstrates that the percentage of indirect criticisms (81%) exceeded considerably that of the direct ones (19%) which proves, unexpectedly, that Tunisian students tend to remain uncommitted when expressing their stance. This finding rejects the aforementioned hypothesis which suggests that Tunisian students, influenced by the French writings, are more direct when evaluating results or mentioning previous research gaps or shortcomings. The obtained finding validates Salager Meyer's (2001) assertion claiming that criticisms in research papers are much less categorical and firm than those encountered in ED (Editorials) and RV (Review Articles). In fact, she indicated that avoiding direct criticism altogether and adopting a light-handed style of criticism also characterized the criticism practices in the field of applied linguistics. Examples from the corpus are presented below

(examples 1 and 2 represent instances of direct criticism while examples 3 and 4 represent instances of the indirect one):

Example 1: However, one should bear in mind the fact that the number of participants is very small and as a result it is not possible to draw any conclusions with certainty. [MD3]

Example 2: Indeed, these answers are confusing since it is illogical to agree on two contrary answers for the same question. [MD3]

Example 3: However, this finding does not completely endorse Balti's (2005) finding concerning attachment preferences in Tunisian Arabic and English. [MD1]

Example 4: However, it is imperative to consider that the offline results may be considerate inconclusive for the following reason. Attachment preferences in French and English were near 50%, which could be considered as cases of unclear preferences. [MD1]

The rhetorical strategies that Tunisian students used when expressing direct criticisms in the examples mentioned above were boosters (indeed, should), negation (cannot, should not), and negative adjectives (small, confusing, illogical, contrary).

In examples 3 and 4, the writer attributed criticism to an outside and unnamed agent (this finding, it) and used hedging (may be) in order to soften the evaluation with a distant impersonal tone. Another observation was that students tended to leave the assessment of the results or of previous studies broad and ambiguous. In example 3, the student did not specify whether his finding is the correct one or that of Balti's. He just claimed that both results are not compatible with each other without giving his own interpretation. He only said that 'this finding does not completely endorse Balti's (2005) finding'. Indeed, numerous instances of this type of limited and vague evaluation were recorded in the corpus. Examples from the corpus are as follows,

Example 6: This result seems incompatible with a wide range of studies that found that gender did affect the frequency as well as the choice of strategies used (Politzer, 1983; Ehrman & Oxford, 1989; Green & Oxford, 1995; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). [MD4]

Example 7: This finding is surprising and contrast with previous study (Griffiths, 2003; Vann and Abraham, 1990, Wharton, 2003). [MD6]

Novice students distance themselves away from the results of their investigation and implicitly state that their results are the correct ones; the erroneous ones are, of course, those

of the other surveys. There were many instances where novice students did not detail their estimation of the results but just gave some hazy hints about their opinions. Indeed, a number of expressions of vagueness were found in CRs instances. In the example below, the student writer concluded that there are ‘some weaknesses in both statements of course objectives’ but he did not reveal what are those weaknesses nor how many are they. This can be assumed under a broad notion of epistemic hedging since it conveys a meaning which is unclear. In example 9 as well, the student stated that there are deficiencies in sampling methods, however, he did not elaborate his statement by exposing those deficiencies to the reader.

Example 8: As such, the researcher noticed that there are **some weaknesses** in both statements of course objectives. Consequently, it is preferable if not obligatory for the teachers of this course to decide on one specific set of course objectives in order to guarantee more clarity and avoid ambiguity. [MD3]

Example 9: Given the fact that **some sampling methods** cannot be easily conducted, it is recommended that the sample be large enough to mediate this sampling shortcoming. [MD4]

In example 10, the student mentioned ‘previous studies’ without indicating the exact reference of these studies. These scholars often consider criticizing others’ works as unnecessary and potentially face threatening strategy (Taylor & Chen, 1991). They are more prone to adopt a collaborative tone in showing how their studies confirm or enhance established knowledge (Ahmad, 1997).

Example 10: In this study, the mean scores also indicated the same pattern; however, unlike **previous studies**, no significant difference was found in overall strategy use between advanced students and less advanced students.

Thus, we can conclude that criticisms in the sample were very broad and not frequent compared to the relative large corpus studied. However, this lack of critical spirit among students might be attributed to: first students being novices in the research community and lacking experience, second to criticize others’ work in Tunisian academic setting might be a culturally unacceptable behavior, and third writing dissertation in the Tunisian context is given a very low rate as contributions to the academic discourse community.

Table 6 below presents the frequency of both direct and indirect criticisms in every section of the data separately.

Table 6: The frequency of CRs per MD in the corpus

	<i>Direct Criticism</i>	<i>Indirect Criticism</i>	<i>Total</i>
MD1	4	15	19
MD2	2	16	18
MD3	5	13	18
MD4	3	8	12
MD5	2	11	13
MD6	2	7	9
MD7	-	5	5
MD8	2	14	16
MD9	-	-	-
MD10	2	6	8
Total	22	95	117

As can be noticed a quite unpredicted finding was detected related to the fact that MD9 did not contain any instance of criticism neither direct nor indirect. Another surprising result was that MD7 contained only 5 instances of indirect criticisms i.e. no direct CRs were recorded as the table indicates. Therefore, even though criticism is an important feature which should reflect “a discrepancy between the stance of a researcher/author, on the one hand, and that of another researcher or the discourse community as a whole” (Cheng, 2006, p.279), its irregular presence shows that ISLT students are not consistent with its enactment. The critical process of writing is hard to accomplish especially by L2 learners let alone novices who are trying to get entrance into the academic community. In this study of ten students’ DRs, it was found out that novices took considerable care to soften criticism in a number of ways. Most often involved pairing criticism with praise to slightly soften the evaluation. Hedges are another way of toning done criticisms as their principal purpose is to mitigate the interpersonal damage of critical

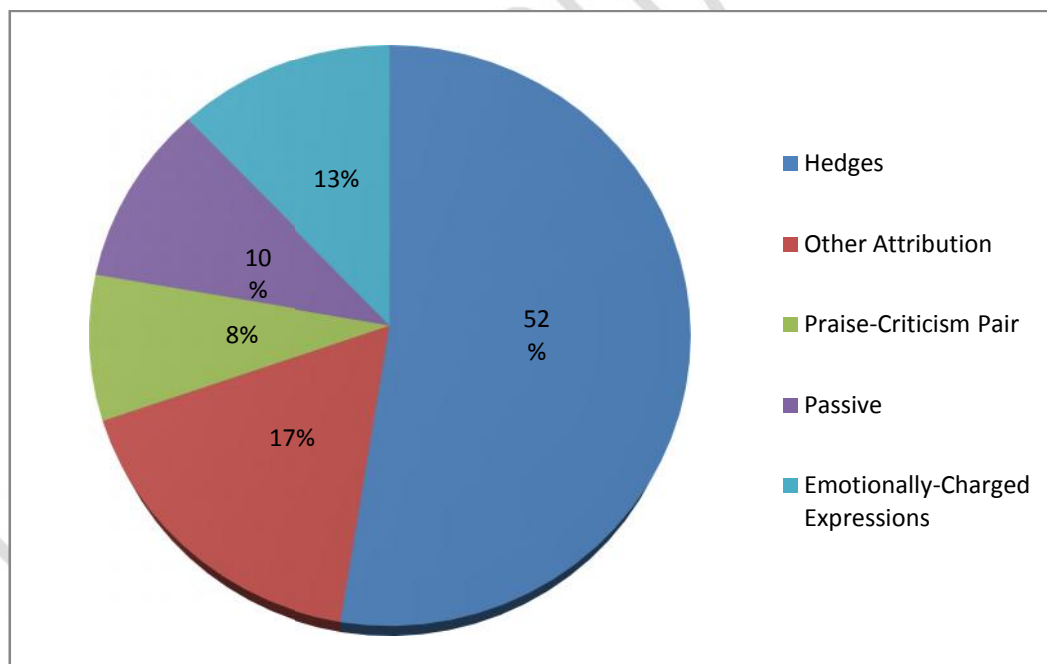
comments. Another way to mitigate negative commentary is to draw attention to the source of evaluation. Clearly one might express an evaluation by attributing it to someone else.

2. The linguistic analysis

2.1. The Linguistic Realizations of Indirect Criticism

As indicated in the Methodology, according to Itakura and Tsui (2011), three of the categories were drawn from Hyland's (2004) analysis of criticisms in book reviews: *hedging*, *praise-criticism pair*, and *other attribution*. The fourth category was drawn from Salager-Meyer and Alcaraz Ariza (2004): *emotionally charged expression*. The fifth and final category is *the passives*. Those categories are the most pervasively deployed categories by students. Figure 1 illustrates those categories along with their percentages.

Figure 1: The Distribution of Linguistic Categories



By far, the most favorite mitigating device among the study's participants is *hedges* as it represents more than half of the linguistic items used by students with 52% as indicated in the figure above. Placing themselves in the background, students chose 'responsibility

shifting' (Salager-Meyer, 2001) also called in the present study *Other Attribution* as the second frequent strategy following *hedges* at a large distance with 17%. Then, there were: *Emotionally-Charged Expression*, *Passives*, and *Praise-Criticism Pair* which were fairly accurate representing respectively 13%, 10%, and 8%.

2.1.1. Hedging Devices

Students strictly avoid personal attacks when challenging previously published research results which lead to the abundant use of epistemic modality or hedging strategies. Nivales (2011) argued that “ it is possible that the use of hedging in novice writers' articles may not be just because of their want for acceptability but perhaps a genuine representation of tentativeness or uncertainty” (p.42).

Criticism instances, then, were searched for hedge marker categories. Many hedging devices were found. The individual instances of each of these devices were identified. The most occurring ones were modal auxiliaries, full verbs, adjectives, and nouns. These devices are presented in the following table:

Table 7: The hedging devices in the corpus

<i>Hedges</i>	Criticisms									<i>Total</i>	<i>%</i>
	<i>CR1</i>	<i>CR2</i>	<i>CR3</i>	<i>CR4</i>	<i>CR5</i>	<i>CR6</i>	<i>CR7</i>	<i>CR8</i>	<i>CR10</i>		
<i>Modal Auxiliaries</i>	14	1	5	5	2	6	1	1	2	37	44 %
<i>Full Verbs</i>	2	0	2	1	0	0	0	3	0	22	26 %
<i>Adverbs</i>	1	0	3	2	1	2	0	2	1	15	14 %
<i>Adjectives</i>	0	0	0	0	5	0	1	1	1	8	10 %
<i>Nouns</i>	0	0	0	1	1	0	2	1	0	5	6 %
<i>Total</i>	17	1	10	9	9	8	4	8	4	84	100%

Table 7 shows that hedges appeared in criticism instances extracted from ten DRS with different frequencies: *Modal auxiliaries* were found to be the most frequent ones (44%) followed by *full verbs* with lower frequency (26%).

2.1.2. Other Attribution

It was the second most frequent linguistic realization of CRs (17%). This investigation is actually based on Salager-Meyer's claim (2001) saying that *other attribution* is only indirect and that this indirectness of CRs is embodied in the 'responsibility shifting' strategy in order to decrease its strength and soften it with a distant impersonal tone (Salager-Meyer, 2001). It was found, then, that *no writer mediation* exceeds by so far *reported criticism*. In fact, while *no writer mediation* was present in all the CR instances, *reported criticism* was present in three CRs.

Table 8: The frequency of 'Other Attribution' category in the CRs

	Criticisms									
Other Attribution	CR1	CR2	CR3	CR4	CR5	CR6	CR7	CR8	CR10	Total
No writer mediation	4	6	1	2	3	1	1	6	1	25
Reported criticism	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	4

No writer mediation is defined by Fagan and Martin Martin (2004) as “when the writer is syntactically absent from the critical speech act, the criticism seems to result from an outside or unnamed agent” (p.128). It is present in CR occurrences by 25 instances as table 8 indicates.

Example 11: However, **this finding** does not completely endorse Balti's (2005) finding concerning attachment preferences in Tunisian Arabic and English. [CR1]

Example 12: The obtained findings disagree with MacKinnon's (1999) and Bosacki's (2005) claims, when they stated that silence are a sign of active engagement in the learning process. [CR2]

Reported Criticism, is also defined by Fagan and Martin Martin (2004), as where “the author him/herself who made the criticism, but reported the criticism made by other authors” (p.128) i.e. students are trying to hide themselves behind well known figures and attribute their own critical view to them. Four instances were recorded in our data.

Example 13: Vandergrift et al. (2006), in fact, assert that listeners must learn to avoid using mental translation strategies if they want to become skilled listeners. [CR10]

Example 14: Hayes (1990) explains that the aim of the listening task is to do something with the results of the listening [...]. The activities covered in the present listening materials did not totally match the kind of activities to which Hayes refers.

In general, novices try to avoid personal involvement for two reasons: out of modesty and to minimize threat to discourse community they are eager to gain entrance into. Indeed, students chose these two subcategories i.e., *no writer mediation* and *reported criticism*, to highlight the distance with any proposition and reduce confrontation between them and the audience. In fact, in the ten DRs analyzed, only two examples were found where the students identified themselves with their humble involvement in the criticism (Exp 15, Exp 16)

Example 15: The results did run counter to **our** expectation. [CR8]

Example 16: However, it should not be considered a strong evidence since the difference in the percentages between silent males and silent females is not high and **I** cannot base the results yielded by these simple percentages on these claims. [CR2]

Novices' avoidance of self-mention might be attributed to: recommendations from style manuals, uncertainties about disciplinary conventions, culture-specific views of authority, and conflicting supervisors' advice (Hyland, 2002).

2.1.3. Emotionally-Charged Expression

Emotionally-charged expressions or ‘attitude markers’ are related to the writer’s “affective rather than epistemic” attitude to the material (Hyland, 2005a: p.180). Compared to other mitigating devices, it was the third used device (13%). The adverbs picked up in this section are distinguished from adverbs in the hedging section. This latter are labeled “epistemic modifiers” as they focus on the truth value and the limitations of the proposition

i.e. the writer's personal commitment to the truth of the proposition. However, the adverbs in this section are labeled "inferability indicators" as they indicate how the writer judges the proposition's content (Biber et al, 1999).). For example,

Example 17: Unfortunately, students were not good enough in simulating other learners' roles. [CR3]

The researcher found 22 instances of Emotionally-Charged Expressions in the CRs extracted. There were 10 attitude adverbs among those instances (*strikingly*: 1 token; *unpredictably*: 1 token; *surprisingly*: 1 token; *interestingly*: 1 token; *unexpectedly*: 4 tokens; *unfortunately*: 1 token). Attitude stance adverbs are found to be less common than epistemic adverbs (15 instances). This is in line with Nuyts (2001) who advocated that epistemic adverbs are much more common among all the types of stance adverbs and in all registers.

2.1.4. Passives

The primary rhetorical function of the DRs selected is to make claims about research findings (Salager-Meyer, 1994). Therefore, to report the limits of their findings, student writers tend to evade the risk of commitment by producing the noncommittal form of the passive voice. In the present investigation, *passives* represented 10% of the overall mitigating tools used in CRs. Participants tended to hide their persona behind the use of the 'objectivizing' passive voice (Meyer et al, 2004) as example 18 illustrate.

Example 18: As previously indicated, the present results **are formulated** by simple percentages and thus, **could not be considered** a strong evidence for such claims. [CR2]

2.1.5. Praise-Criticism Pairs

Exposing the shortcomings of their results or of others is inherently difficult for novices. They often consider criticizing others' works as a potentially face threatening strategy (Taylor & Chen, 1991). Looking for acceptance of the discourse community's members, novices try to highlight the significance of their findings and not the opposite. Consequently, they tend to precede any kind of criticism by praising. Praise-Criticism pair was the least used device

representing 8% of the overall linguistic devices for expressing CRs. Such statements could tone down the negative criticism. Most of the instances begin with *despite* (3 tokens) or *although* (6 tokens), which indicates that after the first half of the sentence, a critique follows. For instance,

Example 19: Despite the fact that the majority of the answers were correct, the results shown in Table 4.10 are not satisfactory overall. [CR3]

2.2. The Linguistic Realizations of Direct Criticism

This study clearly shows that direct CRs (22 instances) are in general much less frequent than indirect ones (95 instances) in the critical moves studied. Throughout the analyzed direct instances, students were found to be, although direct, self-effaced and apparently humble writers. They wrote direct CRs in a voiced, categorical and assured way but without emotionally involving themselves. Frequent interpretative rhetorical strategies found in direct criticisms are: the use of boosters, negation, and the use of negative verbs and adjectives. First, the use of boosters or intensifiers: '*actually*' (2 tokens), '*in fact*' (3 tokens), and '*indeed*' (1 token) was to increase the illocutionary force of the author's involvement. Moreover, these boosters are quite frequently accompanied by negative verb or adjective.

Example 20: Indeed, these answers are **confusing** since it is illogical to agree on two contrary answers for the same question. [CR3]

Undoubtedly, the presence of a deontic modal such as '*should*' (3 tokens) in CRs renders the criticism even more persuasive and convincing.

Example 21: However, it **should** not be considered a strong evidence since the difference in the percentages between silent males and silent females is not high and I cannot base the results yielded by these simple percentages on these claims. [CR2]

Then, the use of negative verbs such as '*refute*' (2 tokens), '*lack*' (2 tokens), '*controvert*' (1 token) and '*contradict*' (3 tokens) is one of the features indicating overt (direct) expression of evaluating the results obtained.

Example 22: However, the students' answers to Question Eleven in the questionnaire **controvert** with these results. [CR3]

Direct CRs were also realized through the use of negative adjectives. For instance,

Example 23: Indeed, these answers are **confusing** since it is illogical to agree on two contrary answers for the same question. [CR3]

Negation was also used by students to express their evaluation of their results in a direct and categorical way.

Example 24: On the other hand, students 'responses **did not provide** the researcher with any additional information about the main weaknesses of the model lessons. [CR3]

For instance, even though direct, all of the instances detected were with no further analysis nor taking sides; just mere broad criticism. Unfortunately, none of the DRs contained any explicit CR of specific studies or specific names.

V. Conclusion

The analyses presented above have shown that the move analysis framework proposed by Yang and Allison (2003) was generally compatible with the DRs written by Tunisian students even though there were some moves that were not regularly present (optional moves). The participants were found to follow the moves predicted by Yang and Allison's (2003) model. This study, though, provided some insights into how thesis discussion section was written up.

Tunisian postgraduates in this study were assumed to be proficient in English as they had been chosen among the elite of the university and this is good proof of their academic expertise. However, the sporadic presence of criticism, which had also caught the attention, was a surprising result, which can be due to the fact that the realization of academic criticism might be sensitive to the socio-cultural and linguistic background of the student (Hyland, 1994). This issue needs to be further investigated. Indeed, criticisms in the sample were very broad and not frequent compared to the large corpus studied. While

acknowledging the proportional existence of criticism in the field, Tunisian postgraduates in our study do not have access to a good repertoire of linguistic realizations of CRs which conforms to the fourth hypothesis. Advanced academic communicative competence involves more than language proficiency in the traditional sense. It also involves the ability to contribute to knowledge and to respond and write critically.

As the results of this study have indicated, it is obvious that avoiding direct criticism and adopting the indirect one characterized the criticism practices in the study sample. CR is a universal notion occurring in all languages, however, its use, whether direct or indirect, may differ from one culture to another and from one language community to another. These differences emerge not only from individual preferences but also from the factors governing the use of this intentional style, mainly the degree of imposition of this act in specific cultures i.e. the degree of directness allowed in one culture, could be seen as offensive in another. Finally, after acknowledging the value of such CR, it is important to emphasize students' status as novice writers who are still trying to gain entrance into the research community.

IV. Recommendations and Future research

Further research needs to be done based on the results of this study. One of these studies will be to contrast and compare the configuration of criticism move of these ten dissertations' DRs with other ten dissertations' DRs written by native speakers and the results would be very beneficial for the field of intercultural rhetoric. It would be helpful to investigate if the strategy of criticism is applicable to other languages and if the use of this evaluative act is attributed to national culture or the rhetorical conventions of the disciplines or just a question of writer's rhetorical choices. Another important research would be the analysis of such important stylistic device i.e., negative criticism in other sections of MA or

PhD dissertations such as literature review section. The analysis of positive along with the negative criticism would also generate significant findings i.e., praise and criticism such as in Hyland's (2005) work on book reviews.

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