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## Assessing EFL Learners' Authorial Stance in Academic Writing: A Case of Out Theses and Dissertations Authors

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**Abstract:** This study was an assessment of authorial stance using engagement framework by Tanzanian EFL academic writers so as to reveal the linguistic resources that enable authors to present a stance toward the research they are reviewing and presenting. Specifically, the study sought to i) explore pattern of expanding and contracting in presenting authorial stance in the selected dissertations and theses, ii) assess the authors' linguistic resources for expanding moves, and iii) assess the linguistic resources for contracting moves by the authors. The study adapted [Martin and White \(2005\)](#) engagement system framework focusing on heterogloss. The study was conducted at the Open University of Tanzania. We analyzed the engagement of 20 EFL post-graduate theses and 20 Dissertations at Master's and Doctoral levels by the EFL candidates/authors and used document analysis as a sole tool of data gathering. In conducting analyses of these texts, each was first broken down into non-embedded clauses and analyzed based on the engagement system belonging to heterogloss categories then their respective sub-categories. Findings revealed that the dissertation/theses writers varied in their mode of registering their stances towards the subject matter and thence proven heteroglossic rather than monoglossic. In that way they were able to establish their authorial territory and claim their visibility or presence instead of being compilers or reporters of findings by others. It was further noted that author stance was more noticed in literature review and introduction chapters.

**Keywords:** Authorial stance; EFL; Academic writing; Engagement framework.

### 1. Introduction

One of the demands of reporting research results that challenges second language (L2) writers is representing their perspectives on a topic while engaging in assessment of the research that has already been reported in that area. This task confronts researchers as they introduce their studies and situate them in relation to other works in their fields. ESL pedagogy often offers only superficial or abstract guidelines or formulas, scattered sentence examples, or a focus on vocabulary out of its discursive context to writers who want to learn more about how to achieve an effective stance in presenting their research. Such approaches are inadequate in preparing writers to achieve the nuanced presentation of their views in relation to others that is needed to establish a research space and situate oneself within that space.

This study seeks to assess Tanzanian EFL learners' use of linguistic resources in showing their stance in their academic writing. Our analysis draws on the Engagement framework in systemic functional linguistics ([Martin and White, 2005](#)) and links the linguistic resources identified through that framework with Swales' moves ([Swales, 1990;2004](#)), to provide more detailed information about how authors achieve an authoritative voice. Each rhetorical move has a specific purpose that needs to be realized by appropriate linguistic expressions. For example, in transitioning from [Swales \(1990\)](#) first move, "establish a territory" of a study to the next, "establish a niche" in research, an author might choose to entertain a wide range of possibilities before contracting the argumentative space to highlight his/her stance. Alternatively, s/he might focus directly on what is already known in order to direct the readers' attention to their perspectives. In either case, the author can choose from a range of possible ways of entertaining or closing down options. Our focus here was assessing various ways the EFL learners use to present a stance in linguistic resources related to the rhetorical moves they make.

### 2. Introducing Research

When called upon to respond to disciplinary writing requirements that often remain implicit, novice L2 research writers, even those in post-graduate programs, can experience a gap between their disciplinary knowledge and their

ability to write about that knowledge in English (Hirvela and Belcher, 2001; Ivanic and Camps, 2001; Schneider and Fujishima, 1995; Silva, 1993) despite attending university writing courses (Carson, 2001; Hansen, 2000; Leki *et al.*, 2006; Raymond and Parks, 2002). Studies of learner corpora have shown both linguistic and rhetorical differences between L2 adult writers and their native speaker counterparts (Biber *et al.*, 1998; Granger *et al.*, 2002; Hyland and Milton, 1997; Hyland, 2006; Mauranen, 1993; Silva, 1993) that indicate that more thoughtful pedagogical interventions are urgently needed to help L2 writers tackle advanced academic writing. Hyland and Milton (1997) identified how weak L2 writing can reveal a “comparative lack of control” relevant to the projection of an authorial voice, manifest in the subtle deployment of assertion and doubt. This is true for novice L2 research writers even at post-graduate pursuits.

Generally, the tendency to present an inappropriately subjective persona is a characteristic of both L2 and L1 student writers. Using the Appraisal framework Martin and White (2005), Hood (2004) found that published writers used more linguistic resources for evaluating constructs and findings, (Appreciation), while student writers used more resources for presenting feelings (Affect) and opinions about people (Judgment). The student writers’ use of “Affect” and “Judgment” instead of “Appreciation” constructed their texts as more personal and subjective than the published academic texts.

In addition to using linguistic resources that enable the kind of impersonal stance expected in much academic writing, projecting an effective authorial stance also calls for the management of “prosody”, the presentation of a constellation of values to strengthen an argument. Lemke (1992) defines “prosody” as the recurrence of particular meanings in “realizations that tend to be distributed through the clause and across clause and sentence boundaries” (p. 47). From this perspective, the scope of any evaluation is not confined to one sentence or even a paragraph, but instead, “evaluations propagate or ramify through a text, following the grammatical and logical links that organize it as structured and cohesive text as opposed to a mere sequence of unrelated words and clauses” (p. 49). Hood (2006) argues that student writers are challenged in carrying through a consistent evaluative stance using appropriate linguistic choices. These writers are often found to fail in picking up and reinforcing values they have previously introduced as they develop their texts, or to use discordant values that weaken their arguments. This can result in presentation of a static or inconsistent perspective, whereas experienced writers are able to deliver a more dynamic and focused perspective by using multiple instances of interpersonal resources that accumulate and resonate with one another as the text unfolds (Chang, 2010).

Research in English for Academic Purposes has argued for the need to shift attention to discursive practice when advanced academic writing instruction is involved (e.g. Charles (2007); Flowerdew (1998); Hood (2004); Hood, 2006); Pho (2008). An area of discursive practice in writing that has been much-researched is the introduction to a research article, and a key contributor to our understanding of the discourse structure of introductions to research is (Swales (1990); Swales, 2004), who pointed out that introductions are always marked with an evaluative authorial voice. In his CARS (Create a Research Space) model for introductions, (Swales (1990); Swales, 2004) describes three major moves, “Establishing a territory”, “Establishing a niche” and “Occupying the niche” or “Presenting the present work” and steps for presenting those moves that include such active rhetorical actions as claiming, reviewing, counter-claiming, questioning, indicating, and announcing. Accomplishing these discursive activities rests heavily on the author-writer’s manipulation of language resources that create a convincing stance through a balance of assertion and concession. Swales notes that authorial comment is more frequent in the Introduction and Discussion sections than in other parts of a research paper (e.g. the Methods or Results sections).

However, the rhetorical moves and steps described by Swales offer only a general orientation to or guidelines for writing an introduction. Swales’ model, helpful in proposing explicit rhetorical guidelines for academic writing, can be enriched with the specific language features needed to achieve the expected rhetorical structure, as all these discursive activities in an introduction are closely tied to the presentation of an author’s stance.

### 3. Current Study

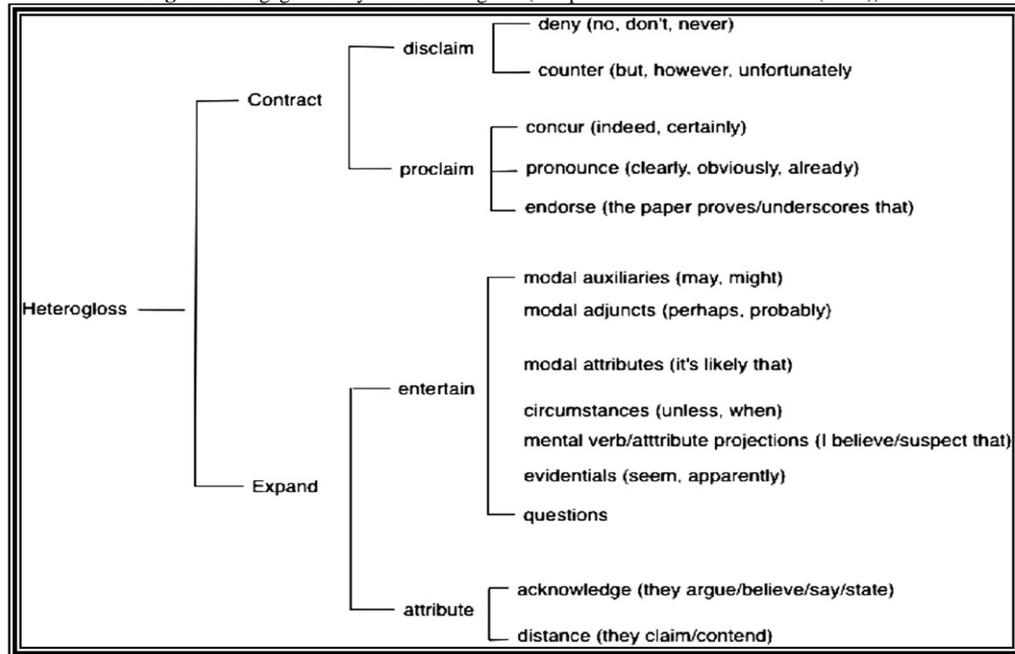
#### 3.1. The Problem

Since the introduction of Engagement framework by Martin and White (2005) the focus has been interpersonal meanings being realized in the interplay of two discursive voices, monogloss and heterogloss. In projecting an authoritative stance, writers need to display a fine interplay of assertion (e.g., when presenting the main argument and the rationale for the study) and openness (e.g. making room for acknowledging other perspectives and negotiating with readers). According to Martin and White (*Ibid.*), appropriate deployment of interpersonal evaluation can help display one’s disciplinary credentials by projecting “a professionally acceptable persona and appropriate attitude” (pp.13–14). This means the writers engage their colleagues by displaying respect and due regard for their views and reputations, constructing a subtle equilibrium between “the researcher’s authority as an expert-knower and his or her humility as a disciplinary servant” (pp. 13–14). The Engagement system therefore focuses on the deployment of voice and stance. It deals with how author-writers project themselves, incorporate and manage different voices or sources of voices in the form of monogloss or heterogloss. Based on this notion, engagement analysis investigates “the degree to which speakers/writers acknowledge these prior speakers and the ways in which they engage with them whether they present themselves as standing with, as standing against, as undecided, or as neutral with respect to these other speakers and their value positions” (p. 93).

In monoglossic assertions, no dialogistic alternatives are recognized, as they do not overtly reference other voices or recognize alternative positions (Martin and White, 2005). However, statements that are presented as monoglossic are often a focal point for discussion or argumentation, or include propositions presented as taken-for-granted and so assume a reader who shares the writer's position. A focus on the key linguistic resources that enable such positioning and assertive argumentation can help L2 writers recognize how to control the language that enables them to negotiate this challenging textual territory.

The main focus in the current study, however, was on the construal of heterogloss, and the engagement framework suggests that heterogloss statements can be categorized as either expanding or contracting. The difference lies in "the degree to which an utterance... actively makes allowances for dialogically alternative positions and voices (dialogic expansion), or alternatively, acts to challenge, fend off or restrict the scope of such (dialogic contraction)" (Martin and White, 2005). Figure 1 below presents these options and their sub-categories with examples of some of their linguistic realizations.

Figure-1. Engagement system: Heterogloss (Adapted from Martin and White (2005)).



The expanding options thus included 'attribute' (with sub-categories 'acknowledge' and 'distance') and 'entertain'. 'Attribute' resources open up dialogic space by referencing an external source, either acknowledging or distancing that source. 'Entertain' options include "wordings by which the authorial voice indicates that its position is but one of a number of possible positions and thereby, to greater or lesser degrees, makes dialogic space for those possibilities" (Martin and White, 2005). Contracting options, on the other hand, include 'disclaim' (with sub-categories 'deny' and 'counter') and 'proclaim' (with sub-categories 'concur', 'pronounce', and 'endorse'). 'Disclaim' resources shut down dialogic space by directly rejecting another view or saying it doesn't apply, and 'proclaim' resources confront, challenge, or exclude dialogic alternatives.

Taken as a whole, appraisal meanings are "integrated complexes of meaning" which can enable the presentation of a dynamic evaluative stance throughout the text (Hood, 2004; Martin and White, 2005). The current study therefore assessed the use of the engagement framework by Tanzanian EFL academic writers, using OUT as a case study, to reveal the linguistic resources that enable authors to present a stance toward the research they are reviewing and presenting and making these resources explicit.

### 3.2. Research Objectives

The proposed study seeks to attain the following objectives:

- i) To find out pattern of expanding and contracting in presenting authorial stance in the selected dissertations and theses.
- ii) To assess linguistic resources for expanding moves by the authors of the dissertations and theses, and
- iii) To assess the linguistic resources for contracting moves by the authors.

### 3.3. Methodology

#### 3.3.1. Documents under Analysis

The current study involved analyzing the engagement of 20 EFL post-graduate theses and 20 Dissertations at Master's and Doctoral levels by the candidates/authors of the Open University of Tanzania students.

In conducting analyses of these texts, each was first broken down into non-embedded clauses and analyzed based on the engagement system as presented in Figure 1. Each clause was assigned to either monogloss or

heterogloss, and then sub-categories of heterogloss were identified. After each non-embedded clause was so categorized, we looked at the linguistic resources each author had used in each clause and across the text to achieve particular authorial stance.

### 3.3.2. Instrumentation and Data Handling

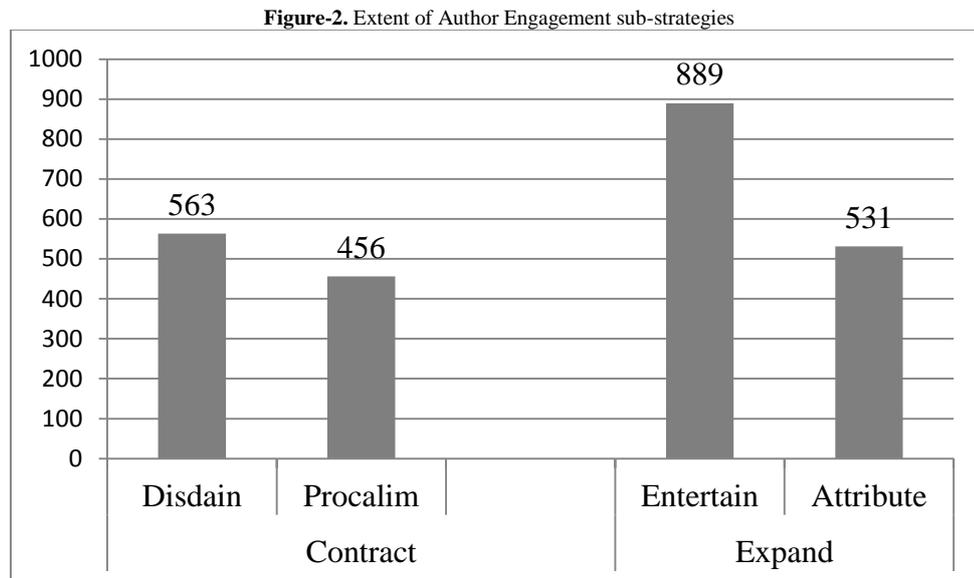
We used content analysis as the sole tool for data collection. Holsti (1969) offers a broad definition of content analysis as, “any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages” (p. 14). Under Holsti’s definition, the technique of content analysis is not restricted to the domain of textual analysis, but may be applied to other areas such as coding student drawings (Wheelock *et al.*, 2000), or coding of actions observed in videotaped studies (Stigler *et al.*, 1999). This tool is the sine qua non for this study, since, as Stemler (2001) puts it, content analysis can be a powerful tool for determining authorship such as examining the authors’ prior writings, and correlate the frequency of nouns or function words to help build a case for the probability of each person’s authorship of the data of interest.

The resulting data were handled both quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative data were frequencies of the engagement resources while qualitative data will be the ‘voices’ or examples of excerpts extracted from the theses and dissertations for exemplification.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Summary of Findings

The two main kinds of stance; namely, contract and expand strategies, were in focus, each with two sub-strategies which are disdain and proclaim, and entertain and attribute for contract and expand, respectively. The differing extents of use of the four sub-strategies of author stance are as summarized in figure 2 below.



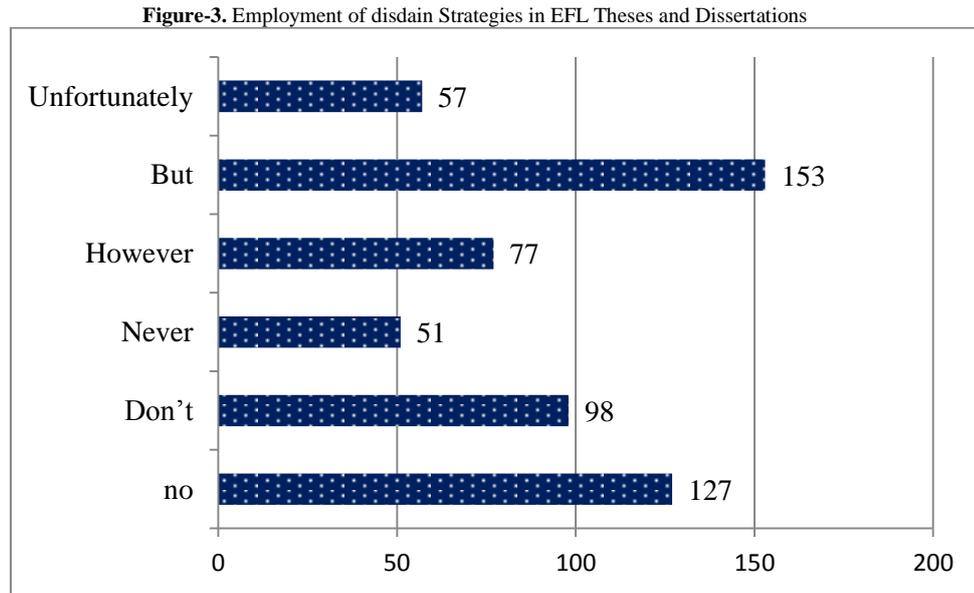
Data in figure 2 above illustrate that the authors’ engagement strategies in registering their stance in their academic writings were not homogenous. The overall findings show that their engagement strategies were more in expanding ideas, assertions, and arguments of findings of other authors or even their own than in contracting such ideas. In other words, the authors favored paraphrasing in providing comments and assertions by others to reducing or summarizing their own or others findings, as will be defined in subsequent sections. More specifically, entertain sub-strategy was the most dominant, with 889 occurrences, which is similar to 36% of all the occurrences. This was followed by disdain sub-strategies which are with contract sub-strategies) with 563 occurrences, similar to 23% of all occurrences. The least used sub-strategies were proclaim (also within contract strategies) with 456 instances, which is similar to 19th of all occurrences. In short, the expand sub-strategies ranked first and third whereas contract ones ranked second and fourth.

### 4.2 Contract

The term ‘contract’ or more precisely dialogic contraction is as proposed Martin and White (2005) and defined by Chatterjee (2008) as referring to instance of textual engagement where a writer can disdain or proclaim a proposition or assertion. White (2003) has it that contraction category contains wordings that acknowledge the existence of possible alternative viewpoints but at the same time act to close down or ‘contract’ the dialogic space for theses.

### 4.2.1 Disdain

This is also known as countering or negative response to the proposition (Chatterjee, 2008). The use of this sub-strategy of reader engagement is as summarized in figure 3 below.



The use of contrastive conjunction but dominated as disdain strategy by registering 153 frequencies of occurrences (equal to 27% of all 563 frequencies of disdain sub-strategies). This was followed by no, with 127 frequencies similar to 23 of all occurrences). The two are commonest conjunctions in both plain and technical English which the speakers or writers use to register their disagreement or counter prior argument. It is therefore logical that EFL academic writers in this study favoured them over others. No in academic writing (which was also noted in the surveyed theses and dissertations) is common in turn-initial or sentence initial positions.

Examples in surveyed theses and dissertations are:

- “No evidence exists to prove the claim...”
- “No justification has been provided (5 times)
- No reasons were given...

However, both but and no were prevalent in sentence-medial position serving adverbial coordinating functions as in:

- The scholars have strong case but no coverage in Tanzania....
- “The findings are comprehensive enough but they fail to capture the essence of gender”

Don't was used 98 times (similar to 17% and all in sentence medial positions as a form of authorial counter-arguments to prior argument in the same sentence or previous sentence as in:

- “These studies don't cover rural Tanzania.”
- “Arguments presented don't include the grassroots majority”.

The least used disdain strategy was never, with only 51 (9%) frequencies. This is probably due to tis being too strong in terms of author commitment, which implies no room exists for an alternative viewpoint.

Generally, the most favoured disdain sub-strategies of contraction author stance were coordinating conjunctions while inter-sentential contrast markers were not as popular in OUT theses and dissertations.

### 4.2.2. Proclaim

This sub-strategy involves the author showing agreement with or endorsement of subject matter or argument (Chatterjee, 2008). Different proclamation dialogic engagement words used are summarized in Table 1 below.

**Table-1.** Types of Proclaim Stance

S/n	Stance	Frequencies
1	Indeed	11
2	Certainly	49
3	Clearly	119
4	Obviously	82
5	Already	29
6	The paper proves	63
7	The paper underscores that	103

Proclaim stance sub-strategies are grouped into two: adverbs and clausal assertive. Clearly was the most dominant with 119 occurrences which is 26% of all 456 occurrences, followed by the paper underscores that which was employed 103 times, equal to 22.6% of occurrences. Obviously and the paper proves ranked third and fourth with 82 (11%) and 63 (8%) occurrences, respectively.

Overall, proclaim stance sub-strategies that were of adverb category were more dominant with a total of occurrences of 290 (63.6%) when compared to clausal assertive with 166 (36.4) occurrences.

Most of the sub-strategies that were used belong to a category which [Salichah et al. \(2015\)](#) refer to as emphatics which emphasize the size of force of writer's certainly in the message. It is worth-noting commonality of proclaim reader engagement strategies with boosters which, according to [Vazquez and Giner \(2009\)](#), are strategies by academic writers to show their confidence in the truth of a particular proposition.

### 4.3 Contract

Also known as dialogic expansion, it refers to the act of opening up 'the space of alternative positions' (Martin and White 2005: 140). [Chatterjee \(2008\)](#) observes that dialogic expansion is signaled by use of reporting verbs such as 'claims' 'argues' and some grammatical and semantic cues. This category of authorial stance was variously employed in the two subcategories of 'entertaining' and 'attributing as described below.

#### 4.3.1. Entertain

This, according to [Martin and White \(2005\)](#), refers to an authorial articulation of opinion with regard to the truth-value of the proposition. These sub-strategies involved 12 forms of authorial stances the frequencies of use of which are summarized in [Table 2](#) below.

**Table-2.** Types of Entertain Author Stance Strategies

S/n	Stance	Frequencies
1	May	76
2	Might	85
3	Perhaps	94
4	Probably	128
5	It's likely that	71
6	Unless	66
7	When	157
8	I believe	11
9	I suspect	17
10	Seem	38
11	Apparently	21
12	Wh-questions	125

As [Table 2](#) indicates wh-questions dominated all other entertain strategies by registering 125 frequencies equal to 14% which is second to the use of 'when' followed by probably for the third for having 157 (18%) and 128 (12%) frequencies, respectively. Wh-questions are particularly good case of articulation of opinion by their information-seeking nature and interrogating of facts function. These were mostly found in research questions and in statement of the problems. A few others were noted in literature review where the authors expressed their doubts about some aspects of the findings or expressed procedural flaws.

When was mostly used as a subordinator author registering their opinion not about temporal concerns of the assertion but to register their aversive outlooks; as in

- When one sees this argument one understands....
- This is not quite true when you take a different view point...

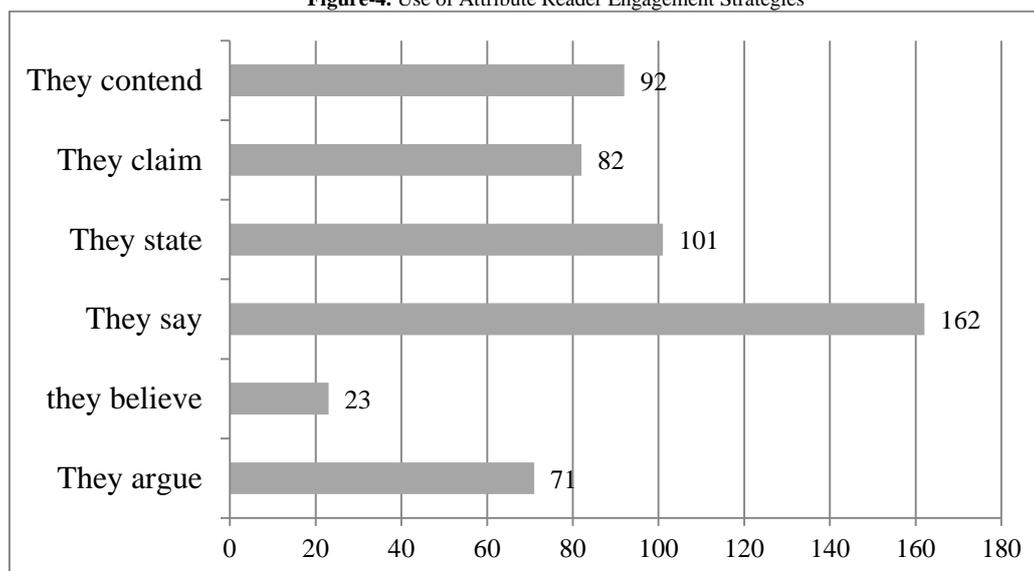
As for perhaps, which is categorized as a 'hedge' and which, according to [Serholt \(2012\)](#), refers to expressions which alternates the strength of illocutionary force by reducing the writer's commitment. This was observed mostly in literature review and in discussion of the findings.

However, I believe entertain strategies was the least employed by having only 11 (1%) instances of use. This also belongs to the category of hedges. Unlike perhaps, they communicate writer's level of personal belief system about the subject matter. Also, less popular and which shares characteristics with I believe, is I suspect which had 17 (1.9%) occurrences.

#### 4.3.2. Attribute

Attribute is an expansion authorial stance sub-strategy in which the writer expresses his/her attribute toward propositions by author scholar ([Martin and White, 2005](#)) 'Attribute sub-strategies employed and their frequencies are summarized in [figure 4](#) below.

Figure-4. Use of Attribute Reader Engagement Strategies



As figure 4 testifies, the most dominant attribute was they say which had 162 frequencies of occurrence, which is equal to (30.5%). This sub-strategy is in use of plain English word 'say' which lack attitudinal inclination in the sense that, while it partly communicates detachment, its co-occurrence with they-which is an othering pronoun-shows an attribute of not belonging to same viewpoint. This was followed by the verb state, which also has fair neutrality in it in terms of author attitude but with the use of they before it. It, too, communicates author detachment from whatever was stated. This occurred 101 times (equal to 19%) of all 531 occurrences of attribute. The most disfavored attribute in the current study is they believe which shows strong conviction but only not shared by the author. This was used only 23 times (similar to 4%).

Overall, the use of they occurring with the attributes in the current study suggest author distancing himself/herself from the claims or assertions made. These attributes were predominant in literature review chapters of theses and dissertations, in which scholarly attributions are a norm.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The current study sought to assess various ways the EFL learners use to present a stance in linguistic resources related to the rhetorical moves they make. The current study has shown that EFL writers vary in their mode of registering their stances towards the subject matter. They have therefore proven heteroglossic rather than monoglossic. In that way they have been able to establish their authorial territory and their claim their visibility or presence instead of being compilers or reporters of findings by others. This proves that the academic writers under study were not as novice as Hyland and Milton (1997) who revealed a lack the projection of an authorial voice, manifest in the subtle deployment of assertion and doubt. These studies also showed that author stance was more noticed in literature review and Introduction Chapters, unlike Swales (2004) that authorial comment is more frequent in the Introduction and Discussion sections than in other parts of a research paper.

In the light of the findings presented and conclusions drawn, we recommend that:

- i) Authorial engagement strategies be made part of academic writing in the Open University of Tanzania in particular and Tanzanian universities in general.
- ii) EFL academic writers, in the course of supervision, be made aware of other forms of author visibility such as self-mention.
- iii) The university students be made aware of a wide range of attitudinal and evaluative verbs in making review of literature since they prove to have only a few of them.

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