

**UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA**

**CRITICALITY IN APPLIED  
LINGUISTICS LITERATURE  
REVIEWS:  
A CORPUS-BASED CONTRASTIVE  
STUDY OF EXPERT AND STUDENT  
WRITING**

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## ABSTRACT

In academic writing, literature reviews play a crucial role in ensuring research quality, as they require writers to critically evaluate theories, claims, and propositions. However, many researchers especially student writers find this task challenging. In this study, criticality refers to how writers convey their evaluative stance toward reviewed literature through expressions of attitude and degrees of certainty or limitation, including personal evaluations and representations of knowledge status. This study investigates how expert and student writers express criticality in literature reviews within the field of applied linguistics. It examines the similarities and differences in their use of strategies, linguistic devices, and lexical bundles, and explores how these elements function in conveying criticality. The analysis involved two specialized corpora: one from literature reviews found in the introduction sections of published research articles in journals such as *English for Academic Purposes*, *English for Specific Purposes*, and *Language and Communication* (expert corpus) and the other from literature review chapters in master's theses from three Malaysian universities: Universiti Teknologi MARA, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, and Universiti Putra Malaysia (learner corpus). Using adaptation of several models and taxonomies, the linguistic devices and lexical bundles within the identified strategies were distinguished and analysed. The corpus-based contrastive study, conducted with Wordsmith Tools 6.0, revealed that both expert and student writers use five key strategies to express criticality: hedging, boosting, attitude markers, disclaim markers, and self-mentions. Expert writers demonstrated a higher frequency of these strategies, reflecting different preferences in word choice and lexical bundle variations. Both groups employed epistemic and attitudinal lexical bundles, predominantly four-word over five-word bundles. The expert corpus showed greater variation in lexical bundles, while the learner corpus revealed overuse of certain bundles, indicating limited expressive diversity. Notably, the *Attitudinal-Desire* sub-category was absent in both corpora, and the *Epistemic-Personal* sub-category was missing in the learner corpus. In the final phase, the analysis focused on identifying the functions of linguistic devices within lexical bundles and on those bundles containing these devices, particularly in their role as expressions of criticality in literature reviews. The findings highlighted several crucial functions of the five strategies for expressing criticality, demonstrating effective use of various linguistic devices and lexical bundles. This study highlights the value of a corpus-based contrastive approach in examining criticality in literature reviews of applied linguistics texts. By comparing expert and student writers, the analysis reveals significant differences and similarities in how criticality is constructed and articulated across the two groups. These findings contribute to both applied linguistics and academic writing research by advancing our understanding of learner language, and the strategies used to express criticality. Specifically, the study offers new insights into how Malaysian student writers show criticality in literature reviews and introduces an integrated framework for analysing such expressions, thereby enriching current work in stance and criticality studies.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

This chapter begins by introducing the background of the study, establishing the context necessary for understanding the research. It then presents the problem statement, outlining the core issues that the study aims to address. The chapter proceeds to explain the purpose of the research, detailing its objectives, research questions, and significance. Additionally, it introduces the scopes and limitations of the study and concludes by defining the key terms used throughout the research.

### 1.2 Background to the Study

Higher education in Malaysia strives to produce high-quality tertiary education, develop extraordinary individuals, and foster a prosperous nation. To achieve this vision, it is necessary to improve the quality of the Malaysian higher education system. One important initiative taken up by the government is the introduction of the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP). This plan aims to address the nation's human capital needs and transform Malaysia's higher education into an international centre of excellence (Zain et al., 2017). The NHESP comprises four critical phases: Phase One focuses on establishing the right foundation, Phase Two emphasises strengthening and expansion, and Phases Three and Four aim for excellence, glory, and sustainability. Research, development and innovation are prioritised, especially in Phase One, which aims to create a globally recognized centre of excellence in research and development (R&D) to establish internationally recognized research universities (Zain et.al., 2017).

The evolution of Malaysia's higher education landscape underscores the country's commitment to raising the standard of tertiary education and emphasises the central role of universities in promoting a culture of knowledge exploration, breakthrough discoveries, and effective commercialization through robust research, development, and innovation initiatives. Universities have recognised the importance of these priorities and promote a culture of research through various programmes. These