

Teaching Reporting Verbs to ESL Students

By Keith Taylor

The most common verbs we use to report what someone says are "say" and "tell". These are the verbs which students learn first when they learn reported speech. These are fine, of course, but there will come a time in your students' learning when they want to use other verbs to more accurately report what someone says.

We use many different reporting verbs in English, and the way we use them in a sentence varies, for example:

Verb + gerund: *James denied taking the money.*

Verb + preposition + gerund: *They apologized for arriving late.*

Verb + infinitive: *Susan promised to work hard.*

Task 1. Read the story and answer the questions using reporting verbs.

7 year old Adam was leaving school one afternoon when he saw a group of older boys, aged 8, smoking. One of them, Chris, said 'Hey, Adam, have a drag of this'. *What did Chris do?.....*

'No, I don't want to', Adam replied. *What did Adam do?.....*

'Go on. It's really good', said Chris, and then Trevor said 'I smoke 5 a day.' *What did Chris do? And Trevor?*

'Go on. You'll like it and you can join our gang', said Chris.

'Well, OK then', said Adam. *What did Chris do? And Adam?*

Adam coughed and coughed and he felt sick. On his way home he stopped to buy some mints to get rid of the smell. But when he got home Mummy was waiting for him and she gave him a big kiss.

'Adam. You've been smoking!' she said. *What did Mummy do?*

'No, I haven't.' *What did Adam do?*

'Tell me the truth Adam.'

'OK, I did smoke, but only a little.' *What did Adam do?*

'Adam, if you ever smoke again I'll tell Daddy.' *What did Mummy do?*

'No Mummy, please don't tell Daddy. I'm really sorry. I'll never smoke again.' *What did Adam do?*

'OK, Adam. You shouldn't listen to those naughty boys. Now, why don't you go upstairs and do your homework?' *What did Mummy do?*

Task 2. There are some reporting verbs. Divide them into columns according to the pattern they use.

remind	promise	blame	deny	admit
encourage	offer	congratulate	apologize	accuse
recommend	invite	refuse	advise	insist
suggest	threaten	warn	agree	decide
add	emphasise	affirm	argue	claim

verb object infinitive	verb infinitive	verb (that)	verb gerund	verb object preposition gerund	verb preposition gerund
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Task 3. A role-play. Work in the groups of 3 – 4. You are friends who share a house, but you have been living together for some time, and your habits are starting to annoy each other. You are going to have a house meeting to discuss your grievances!

If a student has slips of paper with, for example, "deny", "accuse" and "apologise", (s)he must deny doing something, accuse someone of doing something and apologise for doing something.

Model activity: "Mario, you're always leaving your laundry on the floor." "Elena, if you don't stop playing loud music at 2am, I'll throw your stereo out of the window." Ask the students what you said. (You accused David of leaving his laundry on the floor. You threatened to throw Elena's stereo out of the window.)

Reporting what others say

A Reporting verbs

Reporting what others say is a key aspect of academic English and you need a range of verbs to do this in an appropriate and varied way. Note the structures used with each verb.

In her latest article Morton **explains** how information technology is changing society.
Schmidt **describes** the process of language change.

Kon **suggests** that all poets are strongly influenced by their childhood. [says indirectly or tentatively]

Lee **states** that problems arose earlier than was previously thought. [says directly]

Uvarov **claims/asserts/contends/maintains/declares** that the causes of the revolution can be traced back to the 18th century. [says something is true directly and firmly, often used when others disagree]

Van Ek **implies** that other historians have misinterpreted the period. [suggests indirectly]

Patel **argues** that governments should continue to fund space research. [use of this verb suggests he gives reasons for his view]

Greenberg **emphasises/highlights/stresses** the importance of taking a liberal approach. [gives particular importance to]

Levack **observes/notes/comments/points out** that there are contradictions in Day's interpretation of the poem. [states but does not develop at length]

Kim **demonstrates/shows** how Bach's music draws considerably on earlier composers' work.

Gray **proves** there is a link between obesity and genes. [shows that something must be true]

In the book Dean **mentions** some new research in the field. [refers to briefly]

McIntosh **pinpoints** the key features of the period in question. [focuses in on]

Vaz **advances/puts forward/proposes** a new theory. [used with idea, theory, hypothesis]

Davidson **casts doubt on** previous research in the field. [suggests it is inaccurate]

Gerhard **questions** previous interpretations of the play. [expresses doubts about]

B Reporting nouns

Academic writing also frequently uses nouns rather than verbs to report others' ideas (see Unit 1). Notice the corresponding nouns for some verbs in A. Note how these nouns often head long phrases (underlined below) which can be either the subject or the object of the verb.

Morton provides an explanation as to how information technology is changing society.

Schmidt gives a description of the process of language change.

Kon's suggestion that poets are influenced by their childhood is uncontroversial.

Lee's statement that problems arose earlier than previously thought has been challenged.

Uvarov's claim/assertion/contention that the causes of the revolution can be traced back to the 18th century is worth considering in some depth.

Van Ek's implication that other historians have misinterpreted the period has caused some controversy. [suggests indirectly]

Patel's argument that governments should continue to fund space research is convincing.

Greenberg's emphasis/stress on the importance of taking a liberal approach is not new.

Levack's observation that there are contradictions in Day's interpretation of the poem has been supported by a number of other scholars.

Kim's demonstration of the way in which Bach's music draws on the work of earlier composers is fascinating.

Gray's proof of the link between obesity and genes is of considerable interest.



According to is used when reporting others' viewpoints rather than one's own. For example, **according to** Greene and Willis ... but **in my opinion** ... NOT **according to me**.

Exercises

32.1 Fill in the missing verbs and nouns.

noun	verb	noun	verb
implication			describe
	observe	statement	
argument			emphasise
assertion			explain
	contend	demonstration	

32.2 Rewrite the sentences using nouns instead of the verbs in bold and beginning as shown.

- 1 Harkov **contends** that continued population growth will be a more serious problem than global warming, but this is not accepted by many scientists. (Harkov's ...)
- 2 'Global symmetry' **states** that the laws of physics take the same form when expressed in terms of distinct variables. ('Global symmetry' is ...)
- 3 The report **implies** that no individual government will ever be able to control the internet. (The report makes ...)
- 4 Dudas **demonstrates** how dangerous genetic modification might be. (Dudas provides ...)
- 5 Groot **emphasises** the role of schools in preventing teenage drug abuse. (Groot puts ...)
- 6 Lenard **observes** that women use expressions such as 'you know' in English more than men but this was later proved to be inaccurate. (Lenard's ...)
- 7 Plana **explained** the possible origins of the pyramids in Guelcoga but this has been disputed by Ruiz. (Plana's ...)
- 8 Wilson **describes** the ancient alphabet of the Guelcoga people. (Wilson gives ...)
- 9 Wu **argues** that daylight-saving time should be extended throughout the year. (Wu puts ...)
- 10 The President **asserts** that he cares about fighting poverty. (The President makes ...)

32.3 In each sentence two of the options in italics are possible and one is not. Which is not?

- 1 The author *notes / observes / pinpoints* that commodity prices change depending on the season.
- 2 Grey *puts forward / proves / advances* a controversial theory to explain climate change.
- 3 Philipson *claims / questions / challenges* the accuracy of Malwar's figures.
- 4 Trakov *stresses / emphasises / asserts* the importance of pilot testing before carrying out a survey.
- 5 Ripoll *advances / demonstrates / shows* how large-scale urban planning can go wrong.
- 6 Thompson's *assertion / contention / description* that no member of the committee was informed of the director's plan is incorrect.
- 7 Evans *declared / cast doubt / maintained* there was no causal link between the events.

32.4 There is one mistake in each of these sentences. Find and correct it.

- 1 According to me, courses in academic writing should be compulsory for all new students.
- 2 It has not yet been proof that the virus can jump from species to species.
- 3 Richardson emphasises on a number of weaknesses in the theory.
- 4 Taylor mentions to several studies which have looked at the problem in the past.
- 5 Pratt's suggest that the poet may have suffered from depression is an interesting one.
- 6 Our latest results cast doubt to our original hypothesis.

FOLLOW UP

Find some examples of reporting what others say in an academic article or textbook in your own field. Do they use language from this unit? Copy out any interesting examples.