Citation Practices: Insights from Interviews with Six Undergraduate Students at the University of Malta

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The present study is an attempt to provide insights into the underlying factors governing citation practices in three higher- and three lower-graded undergraduate dissertations in Education at the University of Malta. On the basis of the analysis of interview data, the study found evidence to suggest a distinction across the parameters of citation density, source type, forms of integrating report and textual voice. While all students interviewed acknowledged the importance of an adequate reference list, those producing higher-graded dissertations were more likely to make use of citations from journal articles, integrate source material into their texts using paraphrases and superimpose their textual voice. There is some evidence to suggest that two factors influencing preference across the above parameters are language competence and previous training in academic writing. The paper supports previous work documenting a relationship between citation use and dissertation grade and advocates more work on citation practices with particular reference to associated linguistic skills in the case of non-native speakers.

1. Introduction

The academic convention of attribution, defined by Groom (2000: 15) as "the use of a manifest intertextual marker to acknowledge the presence of an antecedent authorial voice" is generally understood to be a defining characteristic of academic writing. As such, formal acknowledgement that we 'stand on the shoulders of giants', as Google Scholar constantly reminds us, together with its textual consequences, have generated a keen interest among researchers, initially as an indication of the importance of the cited text (Chubin & Moitra 1975; Moravcik & Murugesan 1975; Swales 1986), but subsequently also as a reflection of the social context, in particular the disciplinary specificity, of the text itself (Hyland 1999, 2002).

Textual analyses of attribution as formalised in citation practices and associated linguistic conventions at first tended to focus on expert texts, particularly research articles, as models of academic writing (Thompson & Ye 1991; Hyland 1999, 2002, 2005; Zaleska 2003). However, although such accounts have undisputed value as descriptions of expert practices, their usefulness as a knowledge base for the teaching of academic writing to non-experts is questionable. Arguably, the rationale behind citation practices differs significantly in expert and non-expert texts. Although expert writers may use citation as "a kind of cooperative reward system" (Ravetz 1971, as cited in Swales 1990: 7), or as a way of demonstrating that their results are "new, important and true" (Gilbert 1977: 116), student writers tend to use citations primarily for knowledge display (Petrić 2007) and often struggle with basic issues such as understanding how to avoid letting citations govern their content (Campbell 1990). Such considerations have led practitioners and researchers in the field such as Thompson (1999) and Dudley-Evans (1999) to advocate more research into student-generated texts.

Accordingly, there has been a growing interest in citation practices with a clearer orientation towards non-expert texts. More recent work has concentrated on the analysis of citation practices in PhD theses, which can be considered non-expert at least in part, on the basis that "the thesis writer stands in a complex relationship to the community, which

necessitates the construction of a dual identity as both candidate and full member" (Charles 2004: 3). Thompson (2001) examined citation practices across two disciplines, exploring PhD thesis writers' use of source material and their positioning[1] with respect to source texts, audience and the writers' own findings, and found substantial variation across both disciplines on all counts. In a later paper, Charles (2006) examined phraseological patterns in reporting clauses used in citations in MPhil and PhD theses, identifying the key pattern *integral citation + human subject + present tense ARGUE verb + that* and interpreting its status as a function of its ability to indicate writer positioning.

Other studies have also examined citation practices at master's and undergraduate levels. Borg (2000) examined an initial, non-assessed assignment in his study of sixteen NS and NNS post-graduate students in Education at a British university. His findings suggest that although both native speakers and non-native speakers struggle with the conventions and underlying complexities of incorporating source material, these difficulties may be aggravated for non-native speakers by cultural factors, such as their language background. His results indicate that the non-native speakers were less skilled in establishing textual voice, especially in citations from secondary sources, where the multiple layering involved proved particularly challenging.

Groom also considered the issue of textual voice or 'positioning' and the difficulties it presents to student writers. In a largely theoretical paper, he points out that successful argumentative academic texts depend on the use of both attribution and averral to achieve "hierarchical *positioning* of textual and intertextual voices" (2000: 18) and that against this complex backdrop, student writers struggle to achieve success in developing and expressing distinctive positions of their own in relation to source material. In the light of the above studies, the present paper will carefully consier how textual voice is established in undergraduate writing.

Another interesting approach, particularly in relation to the investigation of citation practices at undergraduate level, is provided by Petrić's (2007) examination of the rhetorical function of citations in master's theses, as related to their success in terms of grade. Of the eight rhetorical functions examined, namely attribution, exemplification, further reference, statement of use, application, evaluation, establishing links between sources, and comparison of one's own work with that of other authors, that of attributing information or activity to an author was found to be predominant. However, the findings also indicate that the use of citation for non-attributive functions was higher in high-graded theses, thus identifying a possible link between citation function and success. This is also investigated in the present paper.

Although (as pointed out above) the difficulties undergraduate writers, particularly non-native speakers, face with respect to citation practices has to some extent been documented, there is need for more extensive research. In particular, research in this area needs to be extended methodologically to incorporate approaches that work towards "closing the gap between text and context in academic writing" (Lillis 2008: 1). This study is a small-scale attempt to narrow the gap by using interview data to gain insights into the underlying factors that govern citation practices in undergraduate dissertations. The research questions are the following:
- What insights into the parameters of citation density, source type, forms of integrating report and textual voice does the interview data provide?
- Does such evidence suggest a distinction between higher-graded and lower-graded dissertations across these parameters?

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[1] In this paper, 'writer positioning' or 'stance', as it is sometimes alternatively referred to in the literature, is understood to be a reflection of the writer's textual voice.

2. Methodology

2.1. Subjects

The study was carried out on six students from the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta graduating in 2008[2]. Table 1 gives details of their gender and age.

Interviewee	1	2	3	4	5	6
Gender	Female	Male	Male	Male	Male	Female
Age	25	22	22	27	25	23

Table 1. Interviewee gender and age.

The students were chosen on the basis of the grade obtained for their undergraduate dissertation (i.e. three higher-graded and three lower-graded dissertations), to allow for Research Question 2 in the research design stage. Details are given in Table 2.

Interviewee	1	2	3	4	5	6
Grade	A	A	A	D	D+	D
(Mark)	83%	90%	88%	45%	52%	50%

Table 2. Grade distribution across interviewees.

The students were contacted and agreed to be interviewed about citation practices in their dissertation. All were Maltese/English bilingual and had written their dissertation in English.

2.2. Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted based on a set of questions thematically ordered to cover the parameters under examination, supplementing these with questions on language background and previous training in citation practices. An initial question covering citation rationale was also included. Students were asked to fill in a sheet with their personal details and general information about their language background at the beginning of the interview. The meaning of basic citation terminology was clarified at the outset with the help of a sheet containing definitions and examples. Interviews were conducted in each interviewee's preferred language in an attempt to reduce any factors that might hinder fluency, clarity of expression and unhampered discussion of the facts. As a result, Interviewees 2, 3 and 5 were interviewed in Maltese. It was felt that the fact that the researcher was not a member of the interviewees' home Faculty helped the students to discuss their difficulties more openly. Importantly the interviews were carried out only after the students had graduated.

The dissertations were read before the interviews took place and relevant sections marked in preparation for the last part of the interview, which included a discussion of relevant excerpts. Interviews were recorded and are in the process of being transcribed and, where necessary, translated into English.

3. Findings and discussion

The findings considered here pertain to the rationale for citation and the four parameters under investigation, namely citation density, source type, forms of integrating report and textual voice. Language background and previous training in citation practices, which were also discussed in the interviews, will be considered in the interpretation of the findings.

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[2] One had graduated the previous year and was chosen to pilot the interview, but the data was subsequently considered appropriate for inclusion in the main study.

3.1. Citation rationale

Citation rationale was one of the parameters that distinguished between interviewees with higher-graded and those with lower-graded dissertations, although this was not clear-cut. The idea that citations are needed to support or substantiate arguments was expressed by Interviewees 2, 3, 4 and 5 and also (indirectly) by Interviewee 6, who said citations were needed to compare what other people had found out to what she had in mind. What is significant is that two out of three interviewees with higher-graded dissertations extended this rationale to include other functions, Interviewee 3 pointing out that citations are evidence of familiarity with the field, echoing Petrić's (2007) rhetorical function of 'knowledge display', and that we may also question what we cite. Interviewee 1 reflected the same view:

> so obviously citations <u>are</u> important because first of all they show that you <u>have</u> actually looked up other work, and more important I feel that you must also give your understanding of these texts as well, as in you have to give what you made out of them (..) and what you feel is important, and many times then obviously then it will lead to criticism and stuff (..) like that (.)

The introduction of the element of evaluation in the latter two functions is also significant because it may have implications for textual voice, considered at a later point in this paper. Interviewee 1 also explained that citations help to "include your own research within the stream", a rationale that would normally be considered advanced for an undergraduate student. In the data from interviewees with higher-graded dissertations, Interviewee 2 was exceptional in following a rationale that did not extend beyond that of substantiation.

3.2. Citation density

The interview data on citation density revealed that all interviewees were aware of the importance of the number of citations as a reflection of their familiarity with the field, Interviewee 4 remarking that there had been a negative comment on this aspect of his literature review and Interviewee 5 also feeling the need to justify the paucity of citations in his dissertation by explaining that he was more interested in the practical aspects of his topic. With the exception of Interviewee 6, all also commented that they believed other factors come into play when examiners consider whether the citation density of a dissertation is adequate. Paramount amongst these is the relevance of citations, followed closely by the breadth of the reference list, its updatedness, and the extent of development of the area under examination. A summary of the results can be seen in Table 3, which shows that the interviewees' reflections on citation density tend to follow the same pattern as those on citation rationale, in that the difference between interviewees with higher-graded and lower-graded dissertations seems to be one in which the former have extended their knowledge to reflect a broader spectrum of relevant issues.

Interviewee	Relevance	Author's significance	Breadth	Updatedness	Reliability	Use in text	Area
1	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	✓						
3		✓	✓	✓			
4	✓						
5							✓
6							

Table 3. Factors affecting citation density as reported by interviewees.

3.3. Source type

Interview data on source type also revealed some interesting aspects of undergraduates' use of sources. In essence, Interviewees 1 and 2 preferred to use journal articles, whereas the rest preferred books for various reasons. Of these, only interviewees with lower-graded

dissertations reported reasons related to the intrinsic qualities of journal articles, Interviewee 4 maintaining that their presentation was 'boring' and Interviewee 5 stating that journal articles are too short and not detailed enough. Interestingly, a good balance between level of detail and conciseness was one of the reasons given for Interviewee 1's *preference* for journal articles, the others being their "sense of purpose" and the fact that they "give you a picture of what's happening now".

The extrinsic reasons given for preferring books to journal articles were ease of access and difficulty in searching for journal articles (Interviewees 6 and 3) and in writing up the references (Interviewee 3). Here again, however, there is ostensibly contradictory evidence in that ease of access was also given as a reason for Interviewee 2's preference for journal articles.

In summary, the results reveal that interviewees with lower-graded dissertations preferred books to journal articles for reasons which are sometimes mentioned also by interviewees with higher-graded dissertations, thus resulting in a general preference for books. The tendency seems to be to prefer whatever source type is easier to access, rather than choose sources for their intrinsic value, Interviewee 1 being the notable exception in giving a number of intrinsic qualities for her preference for journal articles.

If such preferences are confirmed by actual use, one can draw the following implications. Firstly, that source type may be a factor influencing success, since none of the interviewees with lower-graded dissertations expressed a preference for journal articles, whereas two out of the three interviewees with higher-graded dissertations did. Secondly, that extrinsic problems may be impeding access to valuable source types, a factorthat needs to be taken into consideration when taking measures to rectify the problem on a pedagogical level.

3.4. Forms of integrating report

Concerning the generic distinction between quotations and paraphrases, the data reveals a clear preference for paraphrases in interviewees with higher-graded dissertations. In those with lower-graded dissertations, Interviewee 5 shows the strongest preference for quotations and Interviewees 4 and 6 report no clear preference for either.

It is important to bear in mind that there is evidence to suggest a consensus amongst staff at the Faculty of Education that students should keep quotations to a minimum, as the following (Interviewee 1) reveals:

> =whenever we asked everybody said that (.), you know (.), any lecturer that we asked, how many *da-*[3], they used to say *iħem*[4], quotations, you don't need to have too many quotations (.), you know (.), like, one is enough (..). *Issa*[5] I don't know whether it's true or not(.), but that's the way (..) *għalina*[6] it was a dogma like (.), you know (.), you don't put more than one or two quotations

In a scenario where students are made aware that quotations are dispreferred, it is fair to assume strong reasons for a choice in their favour, an assumption which makes the data from Interviewee 5, indicating the clearest preference for quotations, significant:

> I prefer the quote to be there (.), then I can always write underneath it (.) in my own words (..) you know (.) rather than going ahead and writing something in my own words (.) without being able to see the quote (..). it's like it's important (.) even the person who is reading can say (.) ah, so that's what he said ... it makes the argument stronger

The feeling that the full strength of an original writer's support is best given through a quote

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[3]   Meaning unclear.
[4]   Maltese for "listen".
[5]   Maltese for "now".
[6]   Maltese for "for us".

is echoed in the data for Interviewee 2. The conviction seems to be that a writer's original words are irrefutable. It is interesting to note, however, that Interviewee 2 is much more sparing in his use of quotations and generally prefers to paraphrase, indicating that other factors may be affecting his preference.

One possible factor may be language proficiency. Unlike the other interviewees, Interviewee 5 stated he had problems with English to the extent that it was sometimes hard for him to understand academic texts, let alone rewrite them in his own words, an admission further supported by the fact that he was the only interviewee not to have passed the standard Proficiency Test in English[7]. Interviewee 2, on the other hand, said he had no problems paraphrasing because he felt quite comfortable writing in English, even though there was always the added worry of making sure he did not change the 'sense' of the original. This concern was also mentioned by Interviewee 4, who said he fluctuated between quoting and paraphrasing because he was not always able to put in the required effort. A possible correlation between language proficiency and forms of integrating report is supported by Campbell (1990: 224), who found that "language proficiency affects the use of information from background reading texts in academic writing".

A second possible factor affecting choice is previous training. The only two interviewees to have been given specific training in academic writing were Interviewees 1 and 2, both of whose preference for paraphrasing is based on the freedom it allowed them to put their own timbre on material taken from an original source, as well as on the fact that paraphrases integrate better into current texts. It is therefore possible that training heightened Interviewee 2's awareness of a number of factors that should be put in the balance when considering forms of integrating report, an awareness that was not shared by Interviewee 5.

Apart from the reasons given above, Interviewee 6 reflects an unmotivated use of both forms of integrating report, explaining that she was not really conscious of making a specific choice in favour of either; she probably just took care she had a balance of quotations and paraphrases.

The results therefore suggest that students' ability to report background reading appropriately may affect grade, and that language proficiency and training in academic writing are possible determining factors in the appropriate use of source material.

3.5. Textual voice

In relation to textual voice, the interviewees were asked questions based on the assumption that within citation environments, a writer's textual voice becomes evident as a form of evaluation of the original text through writer positioning or stance. Some interesting insights were revealed. In particular, the data shows what may be a widespread understanding at the Faculty of Education that evaluation of sources in the Literature Review section is considered inappropriate. In answer to the question "When you cite, do you give any indication in the text as to your position in relation to what you cited, that is do you indicate whether you agree or disagree with the original writer on the particular point/issue you are citing about?", Interviewee 6 answered that she had been given the impression that:

> ...in the literature review I don't think (.) you're not supposed to mention like where you (..) what you think and where you stand (.) no?

Similarly, Interviewee 2 explained that he was told the literature review was not the place to discuss one's opinion about cited work, but to report what other people had said. Comparable data is also found in a similar discussion with Interviewee 4, who said he wanted to but was told to avoid giving his opinion about source material in his dissertation. However there is evidence suggesting that the feedback students were given about the inappropriacy of

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[7] This is a written test administered by the Institute of Linguistics to test the language competence in English of students entering the Faculty of Education.

evaluation in the literature review is confined to the Faculty of Education, since interviewees whose supervisors were not members of the Faculty pointed out they had received other forms of instruction. Further investigation is needed to clarify the issue.

What is also interesting is the fact that in spite of the above situation, the findings suggest that higher-graded dissertations are the ones with the strongest textual voice. Interviewees 2 and 3 both reported they discussed the work of authors they disagreed with and refuted their arguments. In the case of Interviewee 3, this was done on the basis of his conviction that his dissertation should reflect his point of view. Interviewee 2, on the other hand, had to be persuaded to do so by his supervisor, against his personal conviction that he could not realistically present all points of view and discuss them at length in view of the word limit (10,000-13,000 words including footnotes, references and bibliography). This point was also mentioned by Interviewee 3, who felt his holistic approach was partly the reason why he faced problems of length.

Interviewee 2 also expressed the feeling that as an undergraduate he was 'a nobody' and did not have the status required to criticise published writers, a perception shared by Interviewee 1, who stated, however, that she was nevertheless present in her work indirectly, for example, through her linking of sources. These findings support those in Petrić (2007), indicating that the use of citation for non-attributive functions, of which evaluation and linking constitute a part, is considerably higher in higher-graded than in lower-graded theses.

The reluctance on the part of interviewees with lower-graded dissertations to evaluate their sources was explained by them in different terms. The most articulate on this issue was Interviewee 4:

> Researcher: did you sometimes refer to sources you didn't agree with, for example?
> Interviewee 4: no (.) not in particular (..) because as much as possible I tried to (.) I tried to keep with what I'm doing (..) ...
> Researcher: Is there some reason for this (.)? I mean did you feel more?=
> Interviewee 4: =because I felt that if I'm going to use their (.) ehm (.) these particular quotes (.) or ehe these particular quotes (..) I would feel that I would be going out of point

Interviewee 6, on the other hand, explained that time was a problem, and that she therefore found it difficult to look up and consider authors with whom she did not agree, whereas Interviewee 5 found few instances where he felt the need to disagree with his sources.

It is clear from the data that from a pedagogical point of view, the issue of textual voice is probably the one presenting the greatest challenge. Students with dissertations at both ends of the grading spectrum seem to struggle with the problem of evaluation, albeit for different reasons. This is in line with Groom's (2000) observation that given the textual complexities involved in establishing stance, it is not surprising that student writers find difficulty in mastering these skills. Furthermore, Borg (2000) has also pointed out that these difficulties may be exacerbated in the case of non-native speakers, a particularly relevant point in relation to the present study.

4. Conclusions

This study has attempted, through the use of interviews, to provide some insights into citation practices in undergraduate dissertations in Education at the University of Malta. It has examined the possibility that citation practices, particularly across certain parameters, could be factors contributing to overall academic success. Clearly, the number of subjects in this study is too limited for generalisations to be drawn. However, the purpose of conducting in-depth interviews is to provide insights that may act as pointers for further research in the area. The following findings are therefore worthy of note:
1. Whereas all the students interviewed acknowledged the importance of having an adequate reference list, those producing higher-graded dissertations were more likely to

make use of citations from journal articles, integrate source material into their texts using paraphrases and superimpose their textual voice.

2. There is some evidence to suggest that two factors influencing students' ability to master the above skills are language competence and previous training.

Given that citation practices tend to be discipline specific (Hyland 1999; Thompson 2001), it would also be interesting to see whether similar investigations yield corroborating evidence in other disciplines, particularly hard disciplines that have been shown to vary in their use of citations in softer fields such as Education (Hyland 1999).

At the risk of echoing Petrić (2007), an obvious implication for practice is that citations be given more attention in academic writing. The contribution suggested by this study would be to give particular attention to associated language skills in the case of non-native speakers (such as Maltese students), particularly in cases where there is evidence of inadequate levels of language competence.

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