Citation problems of BA thesis written by Chinese students in English

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Abstract

As both a signpost and a fount of knowledge, citation of previous work in the research area is an important part of academic writing. The use of citations constitutes a great difficulty for Chinese BA students in English. Based upon a detailed study of a corpus of 110 BA theses written by Chinese students in English, the present study aims to find the main problems of this group of students in handling citations. Analysis in this study is carried out at two levels: citations on the move and realization of citation – grammatical or lexical features like reporting verb forms and verb tenses. Initial discourse-based analysis helps to know whether Chinese students realize the importance of reference to prior research as an indispensable rhetorical feature of academic writing introductions. Subsequently, corpus-driven analysis provides broader exposure to citation patterns and focus on linguistic features. The two types of approach involve different, but complementary types of work: in the discourse tasks, the focus is primarily on rhetorical function, whereas in the corpus-driven tasks, it is on form. This study provides the enriched input necessary for teachers and students to make the connection between general rhetorical purposes and specific linguistic choices of citations.

Introduction

Citation, as a fundamental feature in academic writing, is a rhetorical practice of source use in academic writing (Hyland, 1996). It is used by academic writers to position their current research within an existing state of knowledge, as well as to lend support for claims made in their academic writing. Many studies have been conducted on the essential role of citation in academic writing and several frameworks are proposed to introduce citation functions which have always been neglected by novice researchers. Researchers argue that tutors of academic writing course should raise students' awareness regarding the choices that are available to them when they cite or refer to others' work.

1 Corpora used in the study

Since there is no suitable existing learner corpus that can be used for the current study, I compiled my own corpus.

As can be seen from Table 1, Native English students' assignments are available in an electronic format (text files), collected from the MICUSP (the Michigan Corpus of Upper-level Student Papers) (Arbor, 2009) and the BAWE (British Academic Written English) corpus (see Alsop & Nesi, 2009).

Table 1 Computer corpora analysed in the study

Corpus	Variety	words	texts
NS	UK Academic US Academic	486,000	162
NNS	Chinese Academic	825,000	150

2 Results and Discussion

Table 2 shows citation density in different sections of the papers in the two sub-corpora. A total of 2,225 citations were identified in 729,445 words of Chinese BA linguistics research papers and 3,146 citations were identified in Native English writers' Applied Linguistics research papers.

Table 2: The number of citations in different sections of linguistics research papers

Sections	Number of NS corpus	Number of NNS corpus
Introduction	758	508

Literature Review	1434	1140
Methodology	593	393
Result & Discussion	361	184
Total	3,146	2,225

Table 2 also shows citation density in different sections of the papers. As can be seen from the table, in both sub-corpora, citation was densely used in the Literature Review section followed by Introduction and Results and Discussion, but was rarely used in the Methodology section. This finding corroborates with findings of other studies (e.g. Thompson, 2005) which have found that writers use citation more often in the Introduction section to position their study in the right context, summarize the literature and point to a gap for their own research. In the Discussion section, citation is also used more frequently in order to allow the writer to interpret the findings of the study in relation to the existing framework of knowledge.

In addition to the density of occurrences of citations in each section, another important factor is the differences in types of citations which have been employed in each section and in sub-corpus.

Table 3 The Number of Citations Types in NS and NNS corpora

Type of citation	NS number	NNs number
Attribution	1420	1290
Exemplification	189	89
Further reference	126	45
Statement of use	126	67
Application	221	156
Evaluation	128	22
Establishing link	726	445
Comparison	189	111
Other	31	0
Total	3,156	2,225

As Table 3 shows, in the Introduction section, both Chinese and English writers give great prominence to "attribution" and "establishing links between sources". In the "literature review" section, again, the "attribution" and "establishing links between sources" are the most commonly used functions though Chinese students used "establishing links between sources" much less than their English counterparts. Within the "methodology" section, after "attribution", which occupies the first rank in all sections, greater emphasis was given to "statement of use" and "application "function" in both groups, although these two functions

were rarely used in previous sections. It is worth mentioning that "Comparison of one's work with that of others" is used in English articles much more than Iranian ones. In the "result" section both groups tend to use "attribution", "application", "comparison of one's work with that of others", and "establishing links between sources". However, the use of "comparison of one's work with that of others", and "establishing links between sources" increased in "Discussion" section comparing to the "result" section. In the "Conclusion" section, Chinese writers preferred the "attribution" as their main function, While English writers used "comparison of one's work with that of others", and "establishing links between sources" along with "attribution", which seem can better fulfill the moves of "Discussion" section. Moreover, English writers tend to use more citation than the Chinese ones in this section. Chinese writers used 184 citations in this section while the English ones used 361 citations.

Bottom-up analysis also showed that Integral-verb controlling citation was over-used by Chinese writers when compared to their English counterparts, whereas Integral-naming citation was rarely used by them as shown in Table 4. This could be due to that integral-naming citation demands the use of nominalization or complex noun phrases which in turn allows the writer to provide more information in citing previous work.

Table 4 Types of citation (Thompson and Tribble's framework)

	NS	NNS
Non-integral	2,728	1629
Integral	427	595
Integral-verb controlling	207	495
Integral-naming	219	101
total	3,156	2,225

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