Citation practices of L2 university students in first-year writing: Form, function, and stance

Joseph J. Lee [a, *], Chris Hitchcock [a], J. Elliott Casal [b]

[a] ELIP Academic & Global Communication Program, Department of Linguistics, Ohio University, 383 Gordy Hall, Athens, OH 45701, USA
[b] Department of Applied Linguistics, The Pennsylvania State University, 234 Sparks Building, University Park, PA 16802, USA

A B S T R A C T :

This study reports findings of an analysis of the citation practices of L2 undergraduate students in the context of first-year writing (FYW). Data consist of a corpus of 100 source-based research papers written by L2 students in a FYW course. Taking a multi-perspective analytical approach, we examine L2 undergraduate students' citation practices in terms of surface forms, rhetorical functions, and writer stance. Results indicate that L2 students use a restricted range of reporting structures, and they primarily use sources for attribution function to display their knowledge of the topics. Furthermore, as opposed to taking a strong positive or negative position, the findings show that L2 student writers mainly adopt a non-committal stance by merely acknowledging or distancing themselves from cited materials, suggesting that L2 students are inclined to show deference to the perceived authority of published sources. We conclude with pedagogical options for enhancing L2 university students' citation practices.

© 2018 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, there has been increasing interest in the citation practices of academic writers, as reference to other texts is considered one of the distinguishing features of academic writing (Thompson & Tribble, 2001). Citations in academic writing are central to persuasion, as they permit writers to engage in dialogue with source texts; provide justification and evidence for arguments and claims; demonstrate familiarity with the literature; show (dis)alignment with particular scholarship; and establish credibility (Hyland, 2000).

Researchers examining citations in academic writing have focused on the practices of professional writers of research articles (RAs) (e.g., Bloch & Chi, 1995; Charles, 2006; Hu & Wang, 2014; Hyland, 1999; Swales, 1986; Thompson & Ye, 1991) and first language (L1) and second language (L2) student writers of master's theses and doctoral dissertations (e.g., Coffin, 2009; Petrić, 2007; Thompson, 2005; Thompson & Tribble, 2001), as well as have conducted comparative analyses of L1 or L2 graduate student research writing and published RAs (e.g., Mansourizadeh & Ahmad, 2011; Samraj, 2013). These studies have revealed that differences exist in writers' citation practices. For instance, in his comparative analysis of RAs across disciplines, Hyland (1999) found variation in terms of citation integration, presentation, frequency, and reporting verb usage, with the greatest division between soft and hard knowledge fields. In their examination of RAs in applied linguistics and medicine, Hu and Wang (2014) show not only cross-disciplinary variation in citation practices but also ethnolinguistic differences within

---

the same disciplines. Furthermore, studies comparing RA and graduate-level writers show stark contrast in the way these two groups of writers use citations in their writing. These comparative analyses demonstrate that several factors, such as discipline, genre (and part-genre), and lingua-culture, interact in complex ways in the use of citations in student writing (Mansourizadeh & Ahmad, 2011; Samraj, 2013). While such studies have provided important insights into the citation practices of professional and student writers, researchers have pointed out that professional and student genres differ in terms of purpose, audience, scope, and evaluation (e.g., Lee & Casal, 2014; Petrić, 2007).

Specifically focusing on student writers, several researchers have explored not only how citations are constructed linguistically but also how they function within writers' texts. Thompson (2001) and Thompson and Tribble (2001), for example, studied surface forms and rhetorical functions of citations in doctoral dissertations. They found that discipline has an effect on both form and function of citations in doctoral student texts. Building on Thompson (2001), Petrić (2007) compared the rhetorical functions of citations in low- and high-rated master's theses composed by L2 graduate students across various European countries. She found that high- and low-rated theses differed contrastively in their use of citations. While the primary rhetorical function of citations in both groups was attribution (i.e., to attribute information to a source), high-rated thesis writers utilized citations for a greater variety of functions such as to evaluate sources, establish links between sources, and show connections between the work of the writer and sources. Writers of low-rated theses, in contrast, generally limited their use of citations to the attribution function, thus producing descriptive texts that overemphasize display of knowledge of the field rather than analysis of the literature. In addition to other dimensions, Coffin (2009) examined writer stance, or the affective position taken toward cited sources, in an L1 film studies doctoral dissertation. She found that this dissertation writer principally took a non-committal stance toward cited sources rather than taking a strong positive or negative position. This finding is not different from what has been discovered in RAs (Hyland, 1999), where writers of these texts also take a more neutral stance toward cited propositions. Unlike students, however, RA writers also tend to take strong evaluative positions toward cited sources. Further, dissimilar to students, when RA writers assume a strong negative stance, they are inclined to take "extreme care in making such a criticism" and the sources are generally not directly named (Bloch & Chi, 1995, p. 236).

Additionally, Ädel and Garretson (2006) and Swales (2014) examined the citation practices of university student writers in the Michigan Corpus of Upper-level Student Papers (MICUSP), an approximately 2.6 million-word corpus of A-graded student course papers across 16 disciplines, seven text types, and four student levels (senior undergraduate to first-year PhD) at the University of Michigan. Ädel and Garretson (2006) found marked disciplinary divisions in the way citations are used, similar to Hyland (1999), but also found disparities between MICUSP papers and Hyland's findings, especially in regard to citation integration. Ädel and Garretson (2006) suggest that one possible reason for these differences may be "the editing process and size restrictions of academic journals" (p. 278), which compel RA writers to use more non-integral citations (i.e., parenthetical or superscript citations). Exploring citations in the biology subcorpus of MICUSP, Swales (2014) found differences between subfields but no noteworthy disparity between undergraduate and graduate students. Both groups included the sources in the sentence grammar (i.e., integral citations) much more commonly than found in previous studies of both biology master's theses (Samraj, 2013) and RAs (Hyland, 1999). Supporting Ädel and Garretson (2006), Swales (2014) contends that learning to use non-integral citations takes not only more time and experience, but their use may also be dependent on factors such as writing experience, discipline, and genre (Ädel & Garretson, 2006; Hyland, 1999; Samraj, 2013). While these studies have revealed the surface forms and rhetorical functions of citations in high-rated disciplinary writers' texts, little is known about the stance student writers take in relation to cited sources. Yet, as Ädel and Garretson (2006) hypothesize, "stance is unusually integrated with attribution in student writing" (p. 280). Therefore, consideration of stance in the analysis of citations can contribute to a better understanding of how student writers evaluate multiple voices through citations.

Furthermore, while researchers have investigated L2 undergraduate student writers' use of sources, most of these studies have focused on the challenges that L2 students experience in integrating sources in their writing and the problems they have with source-based writing such as plagiarism and ineffective paraphrasing (e.g., Campbell, 1990; Keck, 2006; Shi, 2004, 2010). Few studies, surprisingly, have analyzed the surface forms and rhetorical functions of citations in undergraduate student writing, particularly in assessed L2 writing in the context of first-year writing (FYW), or the stance L2 FYW students take in relation to the sources they cite in their writing. Examining L2 university students' citation practices from multiple perspectives (form, function, and stance) offers a more comprehensive and representative understanding of not only the ways in which such students incorporate cited material but also the intentions realized by using citations and the affective position taken toward cited proposition. Further, gaining a deeper appreciation of these students' citation practices can provide composition teachers with valuable insight for assisting learners in developing resources and strategies to integrate sources more effectively in their writing.

Taking a multi-perspective analytical approach, this study investigates the citation practices of L2 FYW students in terms of surface forms, rhetorical functions, and writer stance.

Specifically, the following research questions were addressed:

1. What are the surface forms of citations in L2 FYW students' writing?
2. What are the rhetorical functions of citations in L2 FYW students' writing?
3. What writer stance do L2 FYW students take toward cited materials in their writing?