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## Citations in Academic Writing of Undergraduate Students of National University of Lesotho

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### ABSTRACT

Citing other people's work is a convention in academic writing and it reflects the writer as someone who is aware of the trends or discussions going on in his/her field. It is through that awareness that writers are able to make a meaningful contribution to the existing body of knowledge. This paper examines the types, forms and functions of citations in the writing of National University of Lesotho undergraduate students. The data were collected from the discussion sections of the final year undergraduate students' research projects in six faculties at the university. Frequency counts indicated that students used a total of 374 citations. These consisted of both integral and non-integral citations. As regards to the forms, it was observed that the students used four citation forms- parentheses, source plus reporting verb phrase, footnotes and *according to X* structure. As regards the functions, it was observed that the students used citations mainly for attribution. That is, reporting what the cited authors said or did. They also used citations for other functions, such as comparison with other studies or establishing links between sources. The study concludes that using citations for these other purposes was an indication that students had advanced their reading and interpretive skills as they were able to establish differences or similarities between the different studies.

**Keywords:** citations, Lesotho, academic writing, research projects, undergraduate students

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### 1. Introduction

Citations are strategies used by writers to refer to their sources of information (Hyland, 2005:51). They are an important part of academic writing as they enable writers to provide links between their own arguments and the arguments presented in earlier research. By reporting on previous

research, writers not only display their knowledge of literature but also provide a context for their own research, either confirming or negating previous research or creating their own research space. Citations are therefore, as Hyland (1999:342) points out, "central to social context of persuasion"

and an effective strategy to establish authority and credibility.

Citations are classified into integral and non-integral. Swales (1990) indicates that this classification is based on what is foregrounded between the cited author and the reported information. In integral citations, the author is foregrounded, and his/her name occurs within the sentence. In non-integral citations, the emphasis is not on the author but on what he/she has done. That being the case, the author's name is placed outside the sentence, either in parenthesis or using the footnote system. In other words, the classification of citations into integral and non-integral is based on the syntactic position of the name of the cited author. While integral citations play an explicit grammatical role within a sentence, non-integral citations do not.

Several studies have been conducted on the use of citations, particularly in academic writing. Examples include Petrić (2007) in a study of functions of citations in high-rated and low-rated Masters Dissertations written in English by L2 speakers, Harwood (2009) in an interview-based study of functions of citations in expert academic writing, Azlan (2013) in a study of the use of citations in Masters dissertations, Maroko (2013) in a study of citations practices of humanities students and their science counterparts in public universities in Kenya and Ramoroka (2014) in a study of the use of citations in undergraduate essays at the University of Botswana. Some of the studies on citations are summarized below:

Petrić (2007) conducted a study of functions of citations in high-rated and low-rated Masters Dissertations written in English by L2 speakers from 12 countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Frequency counts did not yield significant differences between the two sets of dissertations. When

the dissertations were analyzed for functions, it was observed that, except for attribution, which was a function common in both sets, there were differences in the use of other functions, with the A-dissertations using more citations for rather complex analytical functions such as *Application, Establishment of Links Between Sources, Evaluation and Statement of Use*. In the B-dissertations, on the contrary, those functions were rarely used. The findings also indicate that students who scored A's were also more aware of the citation demands in the different sections of the dissertations than their peers who scored B's.

Another study was conducted by Harwood (2009). The researcher conducted an interview-based study of functions of citations in expert academic writing. The participants were from Computer Science and Sociology and had published articles or book chapters. They were asked to explain the functions of each of their citations. The quantitative analysis showed that Sociology authors used 66% of all citations. Three functions, Position, Supporting, and Credit were relatively frequent in both disciplines. Another study, which is fairly recent, was conducted by Azlan (2013). The researcher conducted a qualitative study of the use of citations in six Masters dissertations. Three dissertations were in MEd TESL while the other three were in MEd Visual Art Education. Findings in this study indicate that the students used both integral and non-integral citations and that integral citations were more frequent in both sets. With regard to the functions, it was observed that attribution was the most common function in both sets, thus supporting Petrić's claim that that attribution is the simplest citation function in students' writing because it only displays knowledge of the topic (Petrić 2007:249). However, some variations were



also observed in the two sets of dissertations. For instance, there was variation in terms of the frequency of citations between the two sets of students. TESL students used an average of 166 citations per dissertation while Visual Art students used an average of 61 citations per dissertation.

Another recent study of citations was conducted by Maroko (2013). He examined citations practices of humanities students and their science counterparts in public universities in Kenya. The humanities dissertations were from Sociology and History while those from science were from Chemistry, Engineering and Botany. He observed that humanities dissertations employed more citations.

As can be seen, most studies focused on advanced student writing in the form of dissertations and theses and professional academic writing in the form of research articles. There is not much research about citations in undergraduate students' writing, particularly in the research report, which is a genre similar to dissertation/thesis and research article in a number of ways. This study, in contrast to the others mentioned, focus on citations in undergraduate students' research projects.

### 1.1 Justification

Most universities offer courses to undergraduate students, especially first year students, to help them develop their academic writing skills in order to write in the manner acceptable to the academic community. As citation is one of the key conventions of academic writing, lecturers in institutions of higher learning put more emphasis on them and expect students to incorporate them in their writing. This is because, as Ramoroka (2014:2) rightly puts it, "The effectiveness of students' arguments is judged by their ability to build on what other people have said." The

National University of Lesotho [NUL], through the Communication and Study Skills Unit, offers a compulsory year long course on Communication and Study Skills [CSS] for all first year students. The aim of this course is to equip students with effective study and academic writing skills that conform to the conventions of academic discourse. These include citations.

Against this background, this paper examines the use of citations by undergraduate students at the National University of Lesotho. Specifically, it seeks to examine the types and functions of citations in the writing of National University of Lesotho final year undergraduate students.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 The Corpus

Data for this study were the discussion sections of students' research projects. In the arts cluster of faculties (Faculty of Humanities, Faculty of Education and Faculty of Social Science), the projects were selected from the departments of Historical Studies, Language and Social Education and Political and Administrative Studies. In the Science cluster of faculties, the projects were selected from the departments of Agricultural Economics, Nutrition and Biology.

Ten projects were randomly chosen from each of the identified departments. This sample was not based on statistical procedures because as Du Plooy (2001) rightly points out, the validity, meaningfulness and insights generated from qualitative design have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected than with the sample size. From the projects, the discussion sections were considered for analysis. They produced a corpus of 108,653 words. The decision to focus on the discussion section was

influenced by the fact that the discussion section is one of the most important sections in any research as it is argumentative and persuasive. It is in the discussion section that writers explain and justify their results, relate them to the research aims and objectives, compare them to previous studies and account for observed differences. For these reasons, the discussion section was deemed to provide a suitable context for the study of students' use of citations.

### 2.2 Method of Analysis

Using Hyland's (2005:219) list of possible instances of citations, citations in the students' texts were identified and counted with Wordsmith Tools Version 5-a text analysis and concordance program. The Concord tool provided lists of all occurrences of the search items together with the context of use. The functions of the citations were then interpreted. It is important to highlight that these two methods of analysis, the computer-assisted search and the manual analysis to interpret the functions, complemented each other. While the software enabled the researcher to conveniently and quickly identify citations, it could only present them as concordance lines. Their interpretation depended on human judgment and it was imperative that the researcher went through the texts to determine the functions of the expressions used in the contexts of use.

### 2.3 Ethical Considerations

As regards ethical considerations, it is to be noted that the students' projects used in this study were in the public domain and therefore not dependent on ethical constraints. This is in view of the fact that they were put in the library, which is a public place, and so anyone could have access to them without having to seek permission of the authors. However, to protect the identity of the students whose

projects were used, the researcher ensured that the students remained anonymous as explained below:

A coding system was devised to identify the faculties of the students and the projects. Thus, projects from Agricultural Economics were identified as FOA (which is the official abbreviation for the Faculty of Agriculture) to represent the faculty and the ten projects chosen were labelled 1-10. For instance, the first project was identified as FOA-1 and the fifth FOA-5. This was the same for all faculties. Language and Social Education projects which belong to the Faculty of Education were identified as FED; Nutrition projects which belong to the Faculty of Health Sciences were identified as FHS; Historical Studies projects which belong to the Faculty of Humanities were identified as FOH; Biology projects which belong to the Faculty of Science and Technology were identified as FOST and Political and Administrative Studies projects which belong to the Faculty of Social Sciences were identified as FSS.

### 3. Findings and Discussion

Frequency counts indicate that students used a total of 374 citations. These consisted of both integral and non-integral citations. It is interesting to note that the students used four citation forms, namely parentheses, source plus reporting verb phrase, footnotes and *according to X* structure as exemplified below:

1. It has been acknowledged that people in low quality marriages have greater health risk as they experience marital problems that lead to development of stress (Baker 2000).[FHS-5]
2. Sheikh (1990) indicated that excess accumulation of iron is rare and desirable limits range from 2 to 10ppm.[FOA-4]
3. The LHWP has provided an impetus for tourism development in the Lesotho mainland areas. The Ministry of Tourism has acquired sites that belong to the LHWP with the intention of transforming these



sites into holiday villages, guesthouses and lodges and to include entertainment facilities<sup>19</sup>. [FOH-4]

4. According to Gabriele (1995) the loss of employment opportunities and a decline in food production may also lead to a direct decline in the number of people employed in agriculture and result in people being deprived of their entitlement to sufficient food. [FSS-1]

The table below shows the frequency counts for each of the citation forms:

*Table 1: Citation forms used by the students*

Citation Form	Frequency	Percentage
Parentheses	162	43%
X + reporting VP	97	26%
Footnotes	91	24%
According to X	24	6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>374</b>	<b>100%</b>

As can be observed from Table 1 above, there was a clear preference for non-integral citations as these forms (parentheses and footnotes) accounted for two-thirds of all citations. This choice of non-integral citations might suggest the students' conscious effort to concentrate more on arguments and not who proposed them. This is in line with the CSS instruction that academic style is impersonal.

With regard to the use of integral forms, it was observed that students relied mostly on structures involving reporting verbs. These structures constituted 81% of integral forms. The students used fifteen different verbs: *argue, find, hold, indicate, maintain, mention, observe, point out, reflect, report, show, state, stipulate, support* and *say*. The verbs that were most frequent were *indicate* (22 occurrences), *state* (19 occurrences), and *find* (10 occurrences). Other verbs occurred infrequently, sometimes only once.

As regards the functions, it was observed that, generally students in all faculties used citations for *attribution*, that is, to report what the cited authors did or said. There

were 325 citations used for this purpose. This translates to 87% of all uses. These are examples:

5. According to Hill (1992), the amount of fecal coli forms is 200-1000 per 100ml is acceptable if used in crops for human consumption.[FOA-3]
6. Witney, Cataldo, and Rolfes (2002) indicate that in elderly, fingers often lose strength and dexterity, making it difficult to peel vegetables. [FHS-3]
7. The African potato plant has been reported to have an ability to stimulate the pancreas to release insulin, which removes excess glucose from the blood and converts it to glycogen (Lukhele, 2004). [FOST-10]

The next most frequent function was *comparison with other studies*. There were twenty such cases. The students however seemed to prefer to report on those studies to which their studies were similar. Of the eighteen citations, fourteen showed similarities. These are examples:

8. The majority of the farmers mentioned the problems of diseases and parasites. Nsoo et al (2000) observed a similar situation in Botswana. [FOA-7]
9. The experimental data obtained in this study indicate that *Hemerocallidea* does possess chemical constituents with hypoglycemic effect on the blood glucose levels of normal and diabetic rats. These findings are in agreement with the works of Zibula and Ojewole (2000) and Ojewole (2005). [FOST-2]

A few students also showed the differences between their study findings and other researchers' findings. There were only four such cases:

10. From the results, a greater percentage of farmers used the formal channel for the disposal of their produce, which is really encouraging. On the contrary, Mochebelele (1990) found that despite the establishment of the dairy plant and the milk collection centres, the volume of milk sold through this channel remains low.[FOA-5]

Another function was *providing support for claims*. There were 14 citations for this purpose. Students supported their statements in two ways. The first way was to make claims and then, to substantiate them, summarize what authorities in the fields had said on the same issue as shown below:

11. Loss of a spouse may cause depression and this is a significant cause of loss of appetite and thus low food intake. Witney, Cataldo, and Rolfes (2002) support this by indicating that when a person is suffering the heartache and loneliness of bereavement, cooking meals may not seem worthwhile. [FHS-5]

Another kind of support involved cases where one student in the FOA supported his/her conclusions by making reference to the criteria used by the authorities in his/her field. The student relied on the criteria set by the National Academy of Science to make conclusions about his/her findings:

12. The pH is within the acceptable limits according to criteria used by National Academy of Science (1973). [FOA-4]

Another function was *establishing links between sources*. There were 14 citations used for this purpose. The students cited works that were similar.

13. Eaton and Greenberg (1998) used the discoloration of algae to evaluate the effect of bioworld on algae. Also Harris and Hoffman (2002) used color discoloration of algae to evaluate the effect of 500 revives on algae. [FOA-6]

They would also attribute one statement to several sources as shown in the examples below:

14. Hypoxishemerocallidea has been reported to contain phytosterols, glycosides, sitosterol, rooperol, sterols and some sterolins (Drewes et al., 1984 and Van Wyk et al, 2002). [FOST-2]

In some cases, they showed differences of views, as the following examples illustrate:

15. Sheikh (1990) found calcium ranging from 25 to 100ppm after the biological treatment of wastewater while Davis (1972), observed calcium amount of 1 to 25ppm in the biological treatment of wastewater. [FOA-6]

These findings indicate that NUL students have not yet acquired adequate skills to position themselves and take a stance towards the information they gathered. As seen earlier, the students used a very limited range of verbs to report on the information. These verbs belong to the category labeled informing verbs (Thomas and Hawes, 1994). They are verbs that merely report on what the cited author said or did. The writer does not comment on or interpret the information.

The finding about the students' reluctance to intrude into their texts to evaluate the information they gathered was not surprising because scholars elsewhere observed that merely passing information without commenting is typical of student writing. For instance, Barton (1993:761) noted that, "Student writers generally maintain a neutrality in the use of citation: the source authors (or the source, passage) *state, say call, refer to, believe and write*, [these are] evidentials of citation which do not incorporate the perspective of the student writer". Ramoroka (2014) also observed that the most common reporting verbs in the undergraduate students' essays she examined were *say, point out and state*. The structure '*According to*' was also common.

To this end, it could be concluded that the students' reluctance to make their voices heard may be a result of their academic immaturity. Being non-native English speakers and still at undergraduate level, the students are inexperienced and lack advanced reading and writing skills to



synthesize information to the level required. This is echoed by Rabab'ah and Al-Marshadi (2013) who observed that non-native students have problems with effectively incorporating citations into their work and that when they do, their citations lack analysis and synthesis because they do not adequate language skills (p85).

#### **4. Conclusions and Suggestions**

This study has established that using citations for background information was the students' main concern. However, the fact that these students, who were writing research projects for the first time, attempted to go further by using them for other purposes (e.g. comparison with other studies or establishing links between sources) is an indication that they were trying to imitate the writing of experts. To this end, it can be concluded that using citations for these other purposes was also an indication that students had, although to a very limited extent, advanced their reading and interpretive skills. There is therefore a need for the Communication and Study Skills Unit of NUL to reinforce the teaching of citations. In addition to the teaching of variations and general patterns in the use of citations, students need to have knowledge of the rhetorical purposes unique in their own disciplines and the range of citation features available for each function. Finally, it is recommended that a more in-depth study be carried out to include other sections of reports, notably the introduction and literature review as these also tend to contain a lot of citations.

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