The Study of Reporting Clauses in MA Theses

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Abstract. Citation plays a key role in academic writing. It enables writers to establish his or her own academic authority based on the current research state of the field. However, citation has challenged many novice writers, especially the L2 learners due to the complexity. The paper studies reporting clauses with that-clause complement and draws upon to MA theses in applied linguistics. The findings show that MA students use integral citations with a human subject most frequently. Compared with journal articles, they use too much Think verbs.

Introduction

Citation plays an important role in academic writing, which enables writers to establish his or her study based on previous studies. Besides, writers can not only display knowledge of the field, but also express his or her own stance and attitude to others’ opinions \cite{1, 2}. Citation has attracted many scholars’ attention due to the challenge to novice writers, especially the L2 writers \cite{3, 4}. The reporting clause in citation has been investigated, with several studies especially concerning reporting verbs. Many scholars focused on classifying reporting verbs into different categories according to their denotations and evaluation functions \cite{5, 6}. Due to the limited information revealed by reporting verbs, some scholars studied citing practices from the types of reporting clause and the phraseological patterns in reporting clauses. Charles studied the construction of stance in reporting clauses and proposed a network of source use by clause types \cite{7}. According to grammatical subject in reporting clauses, these three types of reporting clause are distinguished: a noun group with a human reference, a noun group with a non-human reference and introductory it followed by passive voice; Then, reporting clauses are distinguished according to whether the source is the writer or another person or entity: self-sourced reports and other-sourced reports; In terms of the citation forms, they can be distinguished these three types: integral citation, non-integral citation and general reference. There are also some studies about typical phraseological pattern and lexical bundles in reporting clause at home \cite{3, 8}. However, there is still a disagreement about the features of reporting clause used by L2 learners. And the existing results need more evidences to examine.

The paper mainly investigates the features of that-clause used in other-sourced citation and verb groups in reporting clause in MA theses by comparing with that in journal articles in applied linguistics. The study will be beneficial to guide MA students to cite more accurately and more appropriately. The research question: What are the features of that-reporting clauses used in MA theses? Is there any difference from the use in journal articles?

Data and Method

The data is drawn from two corpora which consist of 8 MA theses and 10 empirical journal articles in Applied Linguistics. Both of them have the same structure and whole texts are used except front matter, abstracts, bibliography and footnotes. The corpus of MA theses is about 149246 words and the corpus of journal articles is about 82047 words.

The software AntConc 3.3.4 was used to search the word that and finite reporting clauses were identified. A back check on three of the most frequent verbs in my corpora, argue, show and suggest confirmed this finding. Only other-sourced citations were collected, which meant that
distinguished markers to demonstrate that the source belonged to others. Finally, different citation forms (integral citation, non-integral citation and general reference), the presence of a grammatical subject (human subject, non-human subject and it) and verb groups with different tenses were identified.

Results and Discussion

Clause Type

In MA theses, there are 355 that-clauses used in citation; while there are 109 that-clauses in journal articles (as Table 1 shows). MA students use that-clauses in citation more frequently than experts. This may be because we just collect “V+that-“ and “it be V+that-“ reporting clauses, ignoring other forms of citation, such as the construction “as X said”. Expert writers may use more kinds of patterns to integrate others’ opinions. And we just collect other-sourced reports, which excludes the self-sourced reports.

Table 1. The Frequency of That- Reporting Clauses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clause Type</th>
<th>MA theses</th>
<th>Journal articles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of words</td>
<td>149246w</td>
<td>82047w</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normalized frequency(per 10000)</td>
<td>23.79</td>
<td>13.29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the grammatical subject, these other-sourced reports are distinguished these three types: human subject clause (Hyland; He; she); non-human subject clause (his study; Swales’s research); and it subject clause (it is argued that). There are three examples from the corpora:

Example 1: Martin & White (2008:36) state that Engagement is concerned with the ways in which resource such as projection, modality, polarity, concession and various comment adverbials position . . . . (MA 1)

Example 2: Previous studies on light verbs show that English learners may use inappropriate light verbs and overuse or underuse light verb+ noun structures (Kaszubski, 2000; Zhang, 2002; Deng, 2004). (MA2)

Example 3: It has been consistently argued that each academic genre displays “a distinct set of lexical bundles, associated with its typical communicative purposes” (Biber & Barbieri, 2007, p. 265). (Art 5)

Table 2. The Distribution of Reporting Clauses with Different Grammatical Subject (Per 10000).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clause Type</th>
<th>human subject</th>
<th>Non-human subject</th>
<th>It subject</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MA theses</td>
<td>55.21%</td>
<td>27.04%</td>
<td>17.75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal articles</td>
<td>70.64%</td>
<td>25.69%</td>
<td>3.67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows the proportion of different grammatical subjects in each corpus. We can see that human subject clauses are used most frequently, and followed by non-human subject and it subject clauses in the two corpora. The result is similar to that of Charles’ study where he studied reporting clause types in politics and materials [7]. Besides, Table 2 shows that expert writers use more human subject clauses than MA students and use less it subject clauses. We may explain that expert writers use less general reference and prefer to make the citation sources clearer. This may be because expert writers have more professional knowledge about the field than students.

Based on Swales, citation can be divided into integral citation and non-integral citation [9]. Because we collected that-clauses in citation, general reference would be included. With different grammatical subjects, they can be distinguished these patterns: clause with human subject referring to the reports with no clear attribution, such as writers think, people believe; clause with non-human
subject including *studies show that, research indicates that*; most clause with *it* subject followed by passive voice, such as *it is often argued that*. We can see the proportion of these three types of clause in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Integral citation</th>
<th>Non-integral citation</th>
<th>General reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MA theses</td>
<td>62.25%</td>
<td>20.28%</td>
<td>17.46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal articles</td>
<td>69.72%</td>
<td>13.76%</td>
<td>16.51%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 3, we can see that both expert writers and students use integral citation most frequently, and the non-integral citation and then the general reference. Maybe the result is a little different from the previous study [3]. It may be explained that only *that*-clauses are analyzed in the study. The author also found that expert writers would add the attribution to every source while MA students would not, which shows that MA students are not as professional as expert writers.

In terms of the pattern, there are 9 kinds of patterns in reporting clauses used in citation according to Charles[7]. They are integral citation with different grammatical subjects, non-integral citation with different subjects and general reference with different subjects. In this study, the author only concerns the most frequently used pattern, integral citations with a *human* subject. We find that the pattern accounts for 46.76% in MA theses and 64.22% in the journal articles.

**Verb Groups and Tense**

Francis, Hunston & Manning distinguished semantic groups according to the grammatical pattern associated with the verb. Generally, the most frequently used verbs are those four groups, Show verbs, Find verbs, Argue verbs and Think verbs. 1. Argue verbs are concerned with writing and other forms of communication; 2. Show verbs are concerned with indicating a fact or situation; 3. Find verbs are concerned with coming to know or think something; 4. Think verbs are concerned with thinking[10].

Reporting verbs by semantic category were proposed by Francis et al [7, 10]. And because the word believe was used frequently in my data, we added the word in Think groups. The normalized frequency of verb groups can be seen in Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Argue verb</th>
<th>Show verb</th>
<th>Find verb</th>
<th>Think verb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MA theses</td>
<td>8.11</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>2.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal articles</td>
<td>5.73</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 4, we can see that both expert writers and students use Argue verbs most frequently, followed by Show/Find verbs and Think verbs. Maybe that is because papers in Applied linguistics need to cite more others’ opinions which has the common with other “soft” disciplines such as politics [7]. And we can see MA students use more Think verbs which have more subjective sense. Meanwhile, the author finds that students prefer to use finite verbs frequently and repetitively. There are several examples from the corpora:

Example 4: Lado (1957) believes that the role of the native language takes on great significance, because it appears to be the major cause for lack of success in L2 learning.(MA7)

Example 5: Duchêne, Moyer, and Roberts (2013) point out that while “the discourses of globalization and neoliberalism are ones of ‘mobility,’ ‘flows,’ ‘flexibility’ and ‘de-regulation,’…… (Art 1)

Example 6: The study also showed that learners from different L1 backgrounds had different performances under the L1 influence.(MA2)
We all know that the tense of verbs also reflects writers’ attitudes to the cited information. These three types of tense have different functions in citation: past tense, used to refer to a specific previous study; present tense, referring to the current research status; and present perfect tense, referring to a research field[9]. The transferring of tense, from past tense to perfect present tense, and then to present tense, reflects the importance and relevance of the source. However, the author finds that some students have few knowledge about the difference, because some students use only one type of tense through the whole paper. For example, one participant in my study only used present tense in his paper, without past tense or present perfect tense. And another one only used past tense of reporting verbs in his paper. The distribution of verb tenses can be seen in Table 5:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Present tense</th>
<th>Present perfect</th>
<th>Past tense</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MA theses</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal articles</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 5, we can see that past tense and present tense are used frequently, and present perfect tense is rarely used in two corpora. There are some examples:

Example 6: and by 2006, Cummins argued that investment had emerged as a “significant explanatory construct” (2006, p. 59)....(Art1)

Example 7: Willey and Tanimoto (2012, 2013, 2015) found that NES editors with a health-care background were more effective than NES English teachers when editing a medical abstract by a Japanese author,.…..(Art 4)

**Conclusion**

The paper mainly investigates the feature of that- clauses used in citation in MA theses, including grammatical subject of the reporting clauses, citation forms, verbs and tense, by comparing with that of journal articles. The findings show that MA students use integral citations with a human subject most frequently. Compared with journal articles, they use too much Think verbs. Teachers should teach students the difference of verb tenses in citation and encourage them to use different reporting verbs.

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**References**


