

## **CITATION IN STUDENTS' ESSAYS: TECHNIQUE OR CARD-STACKING?**

*Deo B. Ndoloi\**

...and yet the art of secondary citation cannot always be satisfactorily solved by vague allusions to the state of opinion. Scholarship flourishes through high specificity, not through shadowboxing; and yet too much specificity can bury an argument under a load of waste. This may be called the Great Dilemma of scholarly composition: *to quote or not to quote*. The Great Dilemma, in practice, can in most instances only be solved by delicate *compromise* [my emphasis]. Watson (1987:74).

### **Introduction**

Literature on *Communication Skills or Study Skills* at University or College places a lot of emphasis on writing skills, the essay being the most frequently assigned writing task. The pure sciences could boast of being exempted from this kind of task, but it is believed that even the short explanation to describe an experiment has to have clarity, organisation and a personal meaning built into it however objective it might be (see section on lessons learnt below). But the kind of essay which this paper pays more attention to is the 'typical essay' from the Arts or Humanities, where students would be given a writing task in which they would assume the role of 'a participant' and engage in an academic discussion. In carrying out relevant discussion, the students would be expected to add information of their own – that which is not found in sources – and at the same time integrate that which is found in sources in such a way that fair treatment is given to both the students' own opinion and the opinions of those they cite. This is what Bazerman (1985) calls 'composing', in contrast to just 'writing'.

This paper looks at attempts made by students while dealing with a problem-based task entailing speculation about solutions to an unresolved or controversial issue, reformulating and extending the material from sources in supporting a particular interpretation or point of view. Different approaches could be used to check out these attempts, like looking at the statement of intention through the students' essay introductions (Swales, 1981); carrying out analysis at the sentence level (Macdonald, 1992); looking at the knowledge claims made by the students (Myers, 1992) or identifying the different personae

---

\* Senior Lecturer, Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics, UDSM.

the students are assuming as they write (Ndoloi, 1994). All the above and many other authors have traced the 'struggles' that student writers go through as they try to compose academic texts.

In this paper, an attempt is made to trace the introducing verbs students use as they make different citations in their writing with a view to establishing whether they are using any overt strategy that gives them authority over their own writing, or they are citing only as a matter of academic routine. The latter has been referred to in this paper as '**card-stacking**', which simply means that the students are getting material from other sources and just piling it up without doing much with it. This is 'mild plagiarism', but the students can get away with this for the following possible reasons: first, because they are novice academic writers, and secondly, because they are 'genuine' enough to mention the source of the material they have used.

The thesis of the paper is that, by tracing the kind of verbs used in introducing citations and the way the students use these verbs, tutors would be able to teach their students how to synthesise information from other sources without the students either being scared off by the more authoritative publishable material, or losing the ownership of the writing task that they have been assigned.

After this introduction, a short description of how the data was collected is provided, followed by a brief analysis and observations. Later the implications this study has for writing are stated. The last part dwells on what tutors of different disciplines and tutors of writing ought to do in order to help their students cite while maintaining a 'critical stance' on what is being cited.

### **Procedure**

The data was derived from twenty essays written by first year students, University of Dar es Salaam, in the year 1996. This long essay, which is sometimes referred to as 'the project', forms part of the students' mark for their first year final examinations. Because it is normally written towards the end of the year, the students will have been taught how citations work in academic writing. Therefore, the main reason this kind of task was analysed was to ensure that whatever was observed would not have been influenced so much by the students' ignorance in citing but perhaps their inability to apply the higher order writing skills that are associated with citing, as will be explained later.

The twenty scripts were taken because they were produced by all the students who attempted this particular question; so taking all the scripts was believed to be random enough not to be affected by any sampling procedure

which might have been used. Secondly, to ensure that the nature of the problem-solving writing task was not affected by the structure and content of the question itself, only this one question was considered for analysis. Students had been given six questions from which to choose one, and there were thus six piles of answers. Only one pile was taken.

The question for the essay writing task read as follows: “*What is understood by the term Tuition within Tanzanian schools? Does it differ from normal classroom teaching? What are its merits and demerits? On what ground would the government efforts to stamp it out be justifiable?*”

This question constituted the kind of writing task which Greene (1991) refers to as ‘problem oriented’ because the students are not expected to be engrossed in mining for materials or meaning only, but also in solving a real-life problem which is familiar to them. Secondly, as Greene (citing Ackerman, 1990) rightly says, the ways students interpret a task can also affect the extent to which they include previously acquired knowledge or rely on the authority of texts as a source of information. It was therefore hoped that, because the students were all taking Education, they would have at least enough orientation to the kind of problem that the question was addressing – that of tuition – a notorious problem which Tanzania has been facing in recent years.

### **Theoretical Considerations and Literature Review**

In this paper, the term ‘citation’ has been used to refer to any instance where a student has mentioned another author or other material. Again, for clarity, the word ‘writer(s)’ has been used to refer to ‘student(s)’ and the word ‘author(s)’ has been used to refer to the names of those writers (sources) being cited.

In any academic writing assignment, students are supposed to assume the role of *participants* (Greene, 1991:1). They should also assume that their essay is about an on-going discussion and that other authors also have something to say. In practice, this is easier said than done because students are often reminded of ensuring ‘originality’; that is, the power of creating or thinking creatively. Even if they do not produce something out of the ordinary, they should at least be able to show that they are able to relate or apply what they are taught and what they read from different sources to new contexts. That is when they can boast of owning what they write, and claim they are writing with power (Fairclough 1989, Clark *et al.* 1990, Ivanič and Roach 1993).

Coon (1989) proposes that educators should give their students tasks that foster ‘independence’ and ‘responsibility’. These, he says, are open-ended questions that, although addressing specific issues, do not tie down the students

to particular approaches of tackling the tasks; these are the kind of tasks he calls *ethical questions*, questions that develop autonomy in students. Barras (1982:108), addressing students, warns: "do not extract paragraphs or even sentences from works by other people and then present them as your own, these should be acknowledged." Also the Communication Skills Unit Handbook, University of Dar es Salaam (1986), suggests to students that nobody expects them to be completely original all the time, and that what is important is, when they write, to say where they have obtained the information they have used. To underline originality in other ways, Clanchy and Ballard (1992) recommend that quotations should be used sparingly, focussing on the point one is making, and that the argument of the writer should not be interrupted by too much foreign material because, by so doing, the writer's text becomes nothing less than a collection of unrelated anecdotes.

But what is important in citation is not only the fact that writers can show where their materials have come from; what is of vital importance is whether writers can use the materials *appropriately*. While Muchiri (1993) thinks that citing is often deliberately or accidentally neglected by college students, it is the argument of this paper that this seeming negligence is most of the time a result of lack of authority either to challenge or to evaluate what they consider authoritative material. This is also the view held by Watson (1985) who writes that some students might feel that it would be presumptuous (because they are beginners) to disagree with an established authority and that everything in print should be believed.

Regardless of the fact that students may not be able to produce something better, as stated above, Watson (1985) and Shumbusho (1997) concur that a source is seldom wholly right or wholly wrong and, therefore, to argue is to show why it was right or wrong in the first place. It only has to be duly quoted and referenced to prove that the writer is arguing for or against a particular view. These quotations could either be primary quotations, when they are taken from the author or source that is itself the subject of the thesis; or secondary quotations, when they are taken from the writings of other critics and scholars who have cited a primary source.

'Criticism' as used in everyday language could mean disapproval or condemnation, but here it is being used to mean 'critical evaluation' (and this is taken positively) of cited information. What is of paramount importance is that two conditions must be observed whenever writers engage in criticism. One is that criticism should be impersonal, that is criticism of what has been written not of its author; and two, the argument of the opponent, however unfavourable,

must be fully and fairly represented (Bartholomae 1985, Watson 1985, Clanchy and Ballard 1992, Thompson and Yiyun 1992, Shumbusho, 1997). This failure of being critical and therefore 'fair' to the authors' viewpoints poses the greatest difficulty to writers when they are composing text. Students dread this 'arrogance' of equal encounters.

In order to be able to determine the students' proficiency in handling citations, all cases of citing from the sample texts were studied, especially the choice of the introducing verb of the citations. The interest was, first, to see the verbs with the highest frequency of occurrence; and secondly, to see how they were integrated into the rest of the text. Below is a table showing all introducing verbs in citations as used by the twenty students in the sample.

*Citation in Students' Essays: Technique or Card-Stacking?*

**Table 1: Distribution of Introducing Verbs in Students' Citations**

<b>Scripts →</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>TL</b>
Point out	1						1							5				4			<b>11</b>
Note	1		1																		<b>2</b>
Explain	1		2								1										<b>4</b>
Argue	2	1	2							4											<b>9</b>
Define		1																			<b>1</b>
Say					1					3	4									1	<b>9</b>
State					1	1										1					<b>3</b>
Suggest					1																<b>1</b>
Emphasise					1																<b>1</b>
According to					1						2										<b>3</b>
Comment					1																<b>1</b>
Report						1				1											<b>2</b>
Observe																			1		<b>1</b>
<b>Footnotes</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	-	-	-	1	-	-	3	-	-	14	-	-	<b>22</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	7	11	8	8	15	11	9	10	6	10	8	8	15	8	5	16	-	11	8	10	<b>184</b>

### **Observations and Discussion**

In Table 1, there are thirteen different introducing verbs that have been identified from the writers' essays. This is a good enough variety to indicate that at least the writers are well versed in the repertoire of verbs that are used to introduce cited material. What is rather curious for the purposes of this paper is the relatively higher frequency of the introducing verbs 'point out' (11), 'argue' (9), and 'say' (9). These will be discussed in turn.

Thompson and Yuyin (1992) call verbs like 'point out' or 'say' denotative; that is, they are used to simply show the origin of the cited material and they do not have any evaluative potential. So the students here are simply complying with the principle of 'ethics' which is a well known reason for making references; it strongly suggests that any author who may be considered the source of information should be given credit, at least by getting a mention. So although the students have not used the more evaluative verbs<sup>1</sup> or those which show the authors' stance like 'claim', 'accept/admit', 'believe', 'ignore', 'confuse' etc., they have been genuine enough to acknowledge the authors.

The verb 'argue', which appeared nine times, is one of the verbs with an evaluative potential rather than being merely denotative. This does not contradict the preceding argument that most of the verbs used are denotative. Looking at the specific examples in which this verb has been used, what is notable is that the statements in which this verb appears are not doing the function of evaluating at all. That further makes our argument stronger that, whenever the evaluative verbs are used, it is more a matter of chance than a deliberate strategy. The following examples taken from the scripts will make the explanation clearer.

Example from script 1: **Guranywa (1995) argued that the incompetence of teachers in science subjects is attributed to poor training.**

Example from script 3: **Msonge (1987) argues that good teachers must be conversant with the subject matter.**

What we note from the two examples above is that the writers are giving factual information as originally given by the authors, and these writers go

---

<sup>1</sup> Except for the verb 'argue'

further to say they agree with what they have cited. The most likely reason they are using the evaluative verb could be that they are incompetent in managing citations effectively.

What is even more interesting is what is noted from script 10. This writer uses the verb 'argue' four times, and each time this verb precedes a direct quotation, which might be considered a bit odd. The possible explanation could be that the student thinks this is the 'natural' verb for introducing direct quotations, or he/she could be acting randomly without paying too much attention on the choice of the introducing verb. Another type of this randomness is observed from script 5 where the student has spread the use of the introducing verbs, perhaps to 'attain variety'. He/she uses the following verbs, each once: 'say', 'state', 'suggest', 'emphasise', 'according to'<sup>2</sup> and 'comment'. Examining the sentences in which this student has used the verbs does not give obvious reasons why all these have been used the way they have. That is why one is bound to think that the variety is rather a matter of chance than strategy.

Again all the writers, except No.17, have provided a list of consulted material in their bibliographies, and the average is about nine bibliographical items per script. To the writing tutor this might be consoling in the sense that, although the students have not managed citations adequately, they have at least shown that acknowledging sources is obligatory in academic writing. The bibliographies have all been presented in the required format as in academic papers. So referencing as far as provision of the bibliography is concerned has no problem. Related to this is the use of footnotes. The following scripts (with the number of footnotes used in brackets) did make use of footnotes: script 8 (4), script 12 (1), script 15 (3) and script 18 (14). This is further evidence that, as far as ethical use of citing is concerned, the students do not have a problem, until it comes to the authoritative integration of the cited material in their texts. What is being emphasised here is the fact that being able to cite or make references for ethical reasons should be taken only as secondary; the primary reason should be citing authoritatively.

### **Lessons Learnt and Implications for Writing**

From the foregone discussion, the following implications could be deduced and a few lessons learnt by novice writers, but even more by both tutors of writing and specialist subject tutors.

---

<sup>2</sup> This one is a special case.



- a) Following from Coon (1989), in order to help students write in a more authoritative way through the use of citations, the kind of writing tasks that these students are assigned must involve, to use Coon's own words, "ethical questions". These are questions whose arguments are based on the disciplines but, even more importantly, arguments that find relevance in the students' day-to-day life. Abstractions will make the students fail to contribute to the ongoing discussion in the writing tasks they engage in. It is worth noting here that, even for disciplines like Philosophy, a discipline that deals with a lot of abstractions, the tasks assigned could still be made to be ethical.
- b) It is also ethical on the part of the tutors not to trick the students at the level of the interpretation of the question especially where the language of the question is concerned. Failure to interpret the question assigned will definitely lead to failure to compromise between different opinions from cited material. The result will be citations which fail to give fair consideration of the other side of the picture, leading to 'piling up' citations or to use the word in the title of this paper – 'card-stacking'.
- c) Even for science subjects, where objectivity might be emphasised more than in the social sciences or humanities, writing tasks could be structured to invite some sort of evaluation of other authors' sources. Nash (1990), when writing about science, talks of 'popularising' academic writing. This, he says, is a technique of providing what is essentially highly technical in a way that people who may not be technically oriented could understand the knowledge. Hence, it would not be considered unscientific if writing assignments in the sciences would ask the students to do the following: 'Comment on the following ...'; 'Argue for or against .....'; 'Do you agree ....'. Certainly the students would find a way of chipping in their viewpoints, in relation to the viewpoints of other authors. It is also being suggested here that techniques like managing footnotes, endnotes, citations, bibliographies etc., is part of the academic requirement **whenever writing is done regardless of discipline**. It should in no way be regarded either as the sole responsibility of the students, or of writing tutors. Other subject tutors should help because most students will never come across specialised writing tutors in their entire writing lives at the university.
- d) It has not been the aim of this paper to suggest that the evaluation of an author's stance lies in the introducing verb *only*. It is obvious that the evaluation could lie in a full stretch of text, even a whole paragraph.

Rather what is being proposed is that student writers could be taught the techniques for citing with emphasis on the implications for choosing the introducing verbs that they use. They should be helped to realise that the verbs (even as they stand irrespective of the rest of the text) have a potential for putting writers in certain relationships with respect to the evaluation<sup>3</sup> of authors.

- e) It is important for university tutors and students to be made aware that composing styles at university attain credit from one's ability to defend one's position satisfactorily, supporting it with relevant examples and theories no matter how weird or out of the ordinary the position might be in relation to others' opinions. Once students get rewarded for doing this, they will gradually learn to be critical of authors' material that they could have initially dreaded to evaluate. Our students should find courage in Watson's bold proposition: **".... in scholarship there are no authorities: merely books and articles that have held the field until something better arrives"**. This simply means that what exists in print is only temporary, and it is available for altering if 'better' alternatives can be found.

### References

- Barras, R. (1982). *Students Must Write: A Guide to Better Writing in Coursework and Examinations*. London and New York: Methuen.
- Bartholomae, D. (1985). Inventing the University. In M. Rose (ed.). *When a Writer Can't Write*. New York: Guild Press, pp. 134-165.
- Bazerman, C. (1985). *The Inquiring Writer*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Clanchy, J. and Ballard, B. (1992). *How to Write Essays: A Practical Guide to Students*. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire Pty. Ltd.
- Clark, R. *et al.* (1990). Right and Obligations in Students' Writing. In R Clark (ed.) *BAAL Language and Power*, London: C.I.L.T for BAAL.
- CSU (1986). *Communication Skills for Arts and Social Sciences*. University of Dar es Salaam, Communication Skills Unit: DUP.
- Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and Power*. London: Longman.
- Greene, S. (1991). *Writing from Sources: Authority in Text and Task*. Technical Report No. 55, Centre for the Study of Writing, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

---

<sup>3</sup> It is important to realise that 'evaluation' could be either positive or negative.

- Coon, A. C. (1989). Using Ethical Questions to Develop Autonomy in Student Researchers. *College Composition and Communication*, Vol. 40: 85-89.
- Ivanič, R. and Roach, D. (1993). Academic Writing, Power and Disguise. Paper presented at the BAAL Conference on "Language and Power", September.
- Macdonald, S. (1992). A Method of Analysing Sentence Level Differences in Disciplinary Knowledge Making. *Written Communication*, Vol. 9/4.
- Muchiri, M. N. (1993). *Communication Skills: A Self-study Course for Universities and Colleges*, Nairobi: Longman Kenya.
- Myers, G. (1992). 'In this Paper we Report .....': Speech Acts and Scientific Facts. *Journal of Pragmatics*. No.17: 295-313. Scholar: Studies
- Nash, W. (1990). The Writing in Academic Discourse. *Written Communication Annual*. Vol. 3.
- Ndoloi, D. B. (1994). Writing like Tanzanians at University: Investigating the Writing of First Year Students at the University of Dar es Salaam. Unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation, Lancaster University, UK.
- Shumbusho, G. N. (1997). *Basic Academic Writing: A Reference Guide*. IDM Mzumbe: Research, Information and Publication Department.
- Swales, J. (1981). *Aspects of Article Introductions*. Birmingham: Aston University.
- Thompson, G. and Ye, Y. (1990). *Evaluation in the Reporting Verbs in Academic Articles*. Department of Linguistics, University of Liverpool.
- Watson, G. (1987). *Writing a Thesis: A Guide to Long Essays and Dissertations*. London and New York: Longman.