
An Analysis on the Undergraduate Students' Citing Habit in Thesis Writing

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the students' habit in writing citation in their thesis. As a scientific paper, a thesis should be formatted according to the style allowed or accepted by the institution. By involving 83 thesis written by undergraduate students on an English program of a college in North Maluku, this descriptive qualitative study revealed that most students used APA style as required by the college. Moreover, the students made many mistakes in writing citation ranged from non-italicized book title to non-recorded quotation. Data from interview revealed that the students made these mistakes due to some factors that we assumed the causes of the students' citing habit. Overall, plagiarism has been noted as the main factor responsible for those mistakes.

Keywords: *citing habit, citation style, mistakes in writing citation, scientific paper*

1. Background

A scientific work is a text that presents scientific facts that follow the rules and methodologies that have been established by both the scientific community and universities. The purpose of writing scientific papers is to communicate or distribute scientific studies, research results, and ideas or knowledge in a field of study. In writing, a scientific paper must follow generally agreed standards (Zulmiyetri et al, 2019: 1).

In a university, every student is required to be able to produce scientific writings in various forms ranging from scientific articles to research reports or theses. Student activities in writing scientific articles are supported by certain subjects such as writing skills and research methodology. In these subjects, students are taught research procedures and writing research reports according to the style adopted by the university. One of the topics taught in these two subjects is the procedure for writing citations.

Citation writing is an important topic and skill for students to master if they wish to complete their studies through research. Without the ability to cite, students will face many obstacles in completing their studies. The reason is clear because to complete his studies, a student must write a research-based scientific work (thesis) and one of the characteristics of scientific work is the citation of relevant and responsible sources.

At the completion of our studies, we had the opportunity to conduct a review of the citation writing procedures found in many student theses. When the citation sheets were opened, we were concerned that the error rate in citation writing was so high even though we only judged it intuitively. The subjects of writing skills and research methodologies that should teach students to write citations properly and correctly are questioned. Supposedly, undergraduate students are able to minimize the percentage of errors in writing citations considering their graduation in these two subjects.

Positioning the teachers of these two subjects as individuals responsible for citation errors in student theses may be unfair in this context. We assume that the students, even though they have learned the citation procedure, have a habit of writing citations that stem from other factors that need to be considered. Therefore, we decided to study the habits of students in citing in thesis writing and outline the most likely factors that are the source of this habit.

This study aims to obtain an overview of students' habits in citation writing which in certain contexts outperform their knowledge of citations which they get from the subject of writing skills and research methodology. Thus, the level of accuracy in citation writing can be controlled so that errors in writing citations in the thesis do not become a legacy that is passed down from one student to another, considering the fact that students always use their senior's thesis as a reference to write their own thesis.

2. Theoretical Basis

Defining scientific paper

A scientific paper is an essay that presents proven scientific facts written using formal style and fulfills methodological requirements (Brotowidjoyo, 1985). It contains description, analysis, and explanation towards the data or information obtained through observation, interview, field research, which are arranged systematically, objective, and justifiable. The notion of *scientific* in the terminology implies that the paper discusses an interest of science and has a purpose to enrich knowledge related to the object of discussion. It belongs to a field of science and it is the scientist who is responsible as the author of it.

A paper is considered scientific if it meets scientific requirements and standards such as the completeness of the paper's elements and the structure of the writing. Standard elements that must be owned by a paper in order to be categorized as a scientific paper include title, author's name, author affiliation, abstract, introduction, method, results, discussion,



conclusion, and bibliography. The content of each of these elements is developed systematically and in depth so that readers can follow the flow of ideas and gain new knowledge from the paper.

A scientific paper is usually part of an original study carried out by an individual or group. Scientific paper is a report that contains the background of the research that contains research questions and objectives, hypotheses, theoretical basis, research methodology, data, results or data interpretation, discussion, conclusions, and a list of cited references. As part of an original study, a scientific paper should contain new knowledge. Novelty is one of the important elements of a scientific paper that determines the value and significance of a scientific paper.

A scientific paper, according to Widodo (2018:12), Suyanto and Jihad (2009:5), and Ahyar (2015:133), must have the following characteristics:

Theoretical: the discussion in a scientific paper must be based on relevant theories where these theories are the basis for thinking in discussing an object in a scientific paper.

Unambiguous: a scientific paper must be free from ambiguous expressions or the potential for multiple interpretations.

Objective: a scientific paper must not involve emotional elements that can distort the facts described in the discussion.

Systematic: a scientific paper is arranged systematically following a generally accepted format.

Productive: a scientific paper must have a novelty value that provides new knowledge or expands existing knowledge.

Formal: a scientific paper must use formal language where the use of informal language such as slang is not permitted.

Have a specific goal: a scientific paper must clearly state the specific purpose of writing (or research) and this goal must be achieved in the paper.

Based on data: although a scientific paper can be in the form of a literature review, a discussion involving data is one of the characteristics of a good scientific paper.

Easy to understand: a scientific paper should be understandable by any reader, even if they come from different scientific backgrounds.

Free from error: a scientific paper must be free from errors both in terms of content and format considering its function is to distribute knowledge.



A scientific paper, as mentioned by Suyanto and Jihad (2009:42), consists of two types, namely educational scientific papers and research scientific papers. Educational scientific papers are all scientific papers used for educational purposes such as textbooks or lecture papers. Meanwhile, scientific research papers are all scientific papers that are part of a research such as research proposals, research reports, recorded observations or interviews, and so on. Basically, all scientific papers are the same. What distinguishes it is the material, purpose, structure, and length of the paper.

A thesis as a scientific paper

A thesis is a scientific paper which on the one hand is included in the category of educational scientific paper and on the other hand can be considered as a research scientific paper. This is based on the notion of a thesis as a paper written by students in order to complete their education and the paper is a report on the research they have done (Hanfie and Halik, 2019:7).

A thesis is written with the aim of training students to develop effective writing and reading skills, express ideas, build a scientific ethos and academic tradition, and become a vehicle for transforming and transmitting knowledge (Hanafie and Halik, 2019). Although in some universities students can complete their education without writing a thesis, the thesis is still a product that must be considered to hone the academic skills and scientific spirit of students.

A thesis, whether written by a student of a bachelor's or master's program, should not only be seen as a mere fulfillment of graduation requirements. A thesis should be seen as evidence of a student's academic ability (Djuharie, 2010:17) which shows his readiness to enter the workforce. The ability to write a thesis is balanced with the ability to do research because a thesis is a report on a research even though both are manifestations of different scientific skills. The quality of a thesis is a reflection of the maturity of students' thinking and the adequacy of their knowledge. Therefore, a thesis is a scientific paper that is an indicator of how strong a student's academic ethos and scientific tradition are.

A student is a prospective scientist who still needs guidance and support from people who are able to assess his quality, which in this case is the lecturer. As a prospective scientist, a student has the potential to make mistakes both in conducting research and in writing his thesis. That is why a student, in writing a thesis, is guided by at least two lecturers to guide and monitor the research and thesis writing process. The quality of the student's thesis is then tested by at least four lecturers (including two supervisors) to find out how well the student can explain and defend his thesis. This is a proof that a thesis is not only a requirement for completing a student's education but also a scientific paper that must be accounted for (Jauhari, 2008).



In general, a student's thesis is written towards the end of his studies. Several programs at universities in the world require a student to start writing a thesis (research proposal) at the beginning of his study. A college needs to consider the depth of knowledge that students have before and when they write a thesis because writing a thesis requires a certain amount of theoretical knowledge about the object being studied, the research methodology used, and the writing skills that the student has. Therefore, in almost all undergraduate program curricula there are research methodology courses. However, not all programs have writing skills courses, so students need to study them separately. The scientific paper writing guide distributed by the department to students is almost the only reference that helps students in writing theses, especially those who do not have the opportunity to sit in writing skills classes.

In language studies programs, writing is one of the skills taught in a separate subject. The existence of this subject is expected to equip students to be able to write well and correctly, including writing a thesis. Armed with this course and guidelines for writing scientific papers and two supervisors, errors in thesis writing are still found. This is a fact that is concerning and leaves a trail. One of the most common mistakes found in student theses relates to writing citations which should be an easy part of writing scientific papers. Until now, there has been no satisfactory explanation for why citation writing errors are still often found even in the theses written by a language program student.

Citation writing in scientific paper

The quality of a scientific paper, including a thesis, can be measured from several aspects, including the relationship between the text and the level of honesty of the author of the scientific paper. These two aspects can be measured by looking at the citations contained in the paper. This is justified by means of citation as a way of informing the reader that certain material in a scientific paper comes from texts written by other authors.

The term citation also means an abbreviated alphanumeric expression embedded in the body of an intellectual work that denotes an entry in the bibliographic references section of the work for the purpose of acknowledging the relevance of the works of others to the topic of discussion at the spot where the citation appears.

Based on the meaning and function of citation above, it is not an exaggeration to assume that citation is one of the mandatory elements in a scientific paper. Therefore, citations are always found in scientific papers in various forms and lengths. The degree of citation in every scientific paper is the same because it has the same meaning and performs the same function. The problem is that novice thesis writers still leave many mistakes in writing citations and this has consequences for evaluating the quality of their thesis.

As we understand, errors in writing citations are one of the reasons why a scientific paper is rejected by a journal so that it is not published. This is another fact that reflects how important citation writing is in scientific paper writing.



Undergraduate students are producers of scientific papers with the most citation errors. Did this happen because of a lack of socialization regarding the procedure for writing citations? Meanwhile, each university has provided guidelines for writing scientific papers to each student. Furthermore, the writing of scientific papers (thesis) is carried out under the guidance of lecturers who are tasked with guiding and monitoring the writing process. If that's not enough, there are so many programs made to help students write citations and references properly and correctly. Unfortunately, these supports are not really empowered by many undergraduate students so that it forms a habit of writing less promising citations.

There are at least four popular citation styles used in various colleges such as APA, MLA, Chicago, and IEEE. The most popular of these are the APA and MLA styles especially in colleges in Asia. In general, a university uses only one style of citation so that the citations in all scientific papers written by students at the university must be the same. However, our search indicates that even in a scientific paper there is still more than one style of citation so that it is considered inconsistent in the writing format.

Errors made by undergraduate students in citation writing are not only found in the reference section but also in in-text citation writing, while even in in-text citations there are differences between citation styles. Thus, we need to see citation errors (by undergraduate students) as a problem that must be dealt with immediately. Of course, we need to find the potential causes that lead to the tendency of students to make mistakes in citation writing even though they have a lot of support to avoid it. Therefore, we do not see citation errors as a form of lack of knowledge but a habit formed through these unidentified factors.

3. Methods

This study involved randomly-chosen 83 theses written by undergraduate students of English program in a college of teacher training and education in North Maluku. 50% of the students-writer (already graduated) were interviewed using non-structured interview; only 50% of them were available to be involved in the interview. Both data from text and interview were interpreted using thematic content analysis. The purpose of analyzing the theses was to see the dominant citation style used and the mistakes in writing citation the students made the most. Whereas, the interview was conducted to figure out the potential factors that shape the students' citation writing the way they did (their citing habit). When available, some descriptive statistics are used in term of percentage. Based on the way this research was accomplished, by following Moleong (2006) and Sudaryanto (1993), this research is a qualitative descriptive study.

4. Discussion

The dominant citing style

The English program where the data of this study were taken from required the students to write their scientific paper using APA format or citing style. It has been found that the



students' thesis were written by following this format, most of them. However, certain notes were taken from this as can be seen in the table below:

No	Style	%
1	MLA	0%
2	APA	89,9%
3	Inconsistent	10,1%

There were no theses written by using MLA or other citation styles while 10.1 % of the theses were found containing inconsistent citation style. By inconsistent, we mean that the theses contains multiple citation styles and therefore cannot be categorized under a certain style. Including in the inconsistency is the use of incorrect citation formats that don't belong to any known style.

Some minor mixed styles were also found in the 89.9% above. It was found that the MLA citation styles in APA-styled theses were caused by verbatim citation. The students cited the MLA-styled article directly without paraphrasing the passages. They cited along with the citation cited by the author while the source text was styled in MLA.

It was our observation that concluded the APA as the dominant citing style because the overall citations were written in the APA format by following the guide provided by the college. The APA style used in the citation also contained some major mistakes as discussed below.

Mistakes in citation writing

The students used APA style in writing the citations. Therefore, we used APA standard to test if the students had cited correctly both in the body of the theses and the reference section. By using the APA standard, we list at least six types of mistakes in their citation writing, namely: non-italicized book title, false indentation, non-bracketed year, non-alphabetical sorting, non-recorded quotation, and quotation misplacement.

Non-italicized book title

It was found that some students didn't italicize the book title in their theses bibliography. According to APA standard, the book title must be printed in italic style while if it is a journal article then the journal title must be italicized. The following are the samples taken from the theses:



Alsa, Asmadi (2003). *Pendekatan Kuantitatif dan Kualitatif Serta Kombinasinya dalam Penelitian Psikologi*. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar.

Mikulecky, Beatric S. (1990:2) *A Short Coursein Teaching Reading Skill*. New york: Addison Wesley publishing Company.

Richard, J. (2001). *Curriculum Development in Language teaching* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univerdity Press.

In our reading, there are up to 48% of the theses have this mistake. The students didn't italicize the book title in their bibliography. In copying the sample to the box, it was also found that another mistake was found in the excerpt; one of the reference put unnecessary number after the year which probably the page cited in the text which should not be there.

False indentation

It is a consensus that the second line of a reference list must be tabbed some points to the right while we found at least 51 references in the students' thesis are not correctly indented. Here are some examples:

Safitri, isnaini N. (2012). *Improving Grade XI Students Reading Comperhension by Using Collaboratif Strategic Reading (CSR) in SMAN 1 Sewon in The Academic Year od 2011/2012*. Thesis. Yofyakarta: English Education Departement, FBS, UNY

Miccoli, Laura (2010). *English Trough Drama for Oral Skills Develomant*. <http://biblioteca.ugroo.mx> hemeroteca/elt.journal/203abril/570122.pdf.

The indentation applied in the reference aims to mark that a line is a part of a reference list and is important to be used in a long reference. Without indentation, it is easy for the readers to misread the reference. The indentation and space are two interrelated style that must be used in citation writing.

Non-bracketed year

This is the most mistakes found in the students' thesis. There are up to 100 citations written without bracketed year. The students didn't put the year in the bracket while it is a rule in APA style that the year must be placed inside brackets.



The MLA style, of course, does not apply bracketed year but the position of the year is at the end of the line. Therefore, it is not an excuse for the students to use non-bracketed year since the position of the year is at the beginning of the line (after the author's name) since they use APA style. Here are some samples:

Nunan, D. 1992. *Language and Languages-Study and teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press.

Sugiono. 2005. *Metode Penelitian Bisnis*. Bandung: alfabeta

Non-alphabetical sorting

It has also been found, though less than other mistakes, that the students did not sort their references alphabetically while it is required in almost all citation style. Here are some samples (we reduced the lines because we just focus on the sorting):

Turck, C. (2003)_____

Bachmanan. (2009)_____

Chaney. (1998)_____

Sparrt. (2005)_____

Brown. (2001)_____

We found 2% of the thesis has this kind of mistake while the rests were sorted alphabetically. It seems like the student-writers did not aware of how to sort the references in the word processing program they used in writing the theses. Sorting the text alphabetically is indeed quite tricky without using automated program especially with a long list of reference. Nevertheless, since sorting the references alphabetically is a requirement, then the non-alphabetical sorting is considered as mistake.

Non-recorded quotation

We found many quotations cited in the students' thesis but are not listed in the reference section. The in-text citations were found without any mistakes but are not recorded as cited works. Here are some samples:



David Wilkins, quoted by Thornbury (2002), concludes the importance of studying the vocabulary ...

According to Whitney (1960), the descriptive method is a fact-finding with the right interpretation...

This kind of mistake is usually found in non-original paper that is plagiarized from a source. When the students only copy passages from certain sources without correctly citing, they are not aware that the citation must be recorded in the reference section. We categorize this mistake as non-recorded quotation.

Quotation misplacement

The last, and perhaps the worst, mistake found in the students' thesis is what we call quotation misplacement. In this mistake, instead of writing reference, the students put the quotation in the reference section. Here are some samples that are not found in in-text citation but in the reference section:

Cheng, (2007). state that effectiveness drama are language learning activities in wich each student in the class takes a distinct with specific goals.

Muarifin, (2011). Salah satu faktor keberhasilan berbicara adalah penguasaan bahan materi.

There is no way to tolerate this kind of mistake while we found this mistake in up to 27% of the thesis. The lines we show above were found among the correctly-written reference lists which show that the students know how to write reference section. However, it is limited to an assumption that the students might do plagiarism or did not find the correct reference of the cited works.

Interview results

We interviewed 50% of the student-writers using non-structured interview. The interview was done face-to-face and via social media because some of the student-writers were working in different places. The questions asked related to the availability of the scientific paper writing guide, supervisor performance, and the thesis writing process. From the interview, we figured out several themes that may be the clues to the factors of their citing habit. The student-writers' names are coded after their translated responses.



Lack of writing skill

The students confessed that their writing skill are low and they did not know how to write citation well. Although they attended the writing skill course, they seem not to practice well. Here are what they said:

“Yes. I attended the writing class but I didn’t practice well. The writing task given to me were accomplished but my grade was low. (EL).”

“I don’t know how to write the citation correctly even until now. (NF).”

“I remember that my lecturer had told me about this [how to cite] but I forget. (PFA).”

“I was confused. Now, I know that I made mistakes but I couldn’t revise them. (BS).”

The students’ responses to this question are similar so that we only display four of the responses. Based on the responses, it can be seen that the students did not practice well especially in writing citation. Since writing citation has rules to be followed, without practice in proper exposure, although the students are good enough in creative or fiction writing, they will fail in scientific writing especially in writing citation correctly.

This can be seen as an alarm to the writing teachers especially in college where thesis writing is a requirement for graduation. They should assist the students in citing practice or their students will do the mistakes we outlined in the previous section.

Unavailability of scientific paper writing guide

It is common that a university or college has one or more scientific paper writing guide distributed to their students. This writing guide contains writing rules and format used or accepted around the college. Based on this assumption, we addressed a related question to the interviewees and surprisingly 75% of them responded that the writing guide was unavailable for them.

“I don’t know anything about that guide. (AM).”

“They promised to give me the guide but I didn’t have it. (M).”

“I asked the administrator about the guide after my supervisor told me about it but he said that they were out of stock. (BS).”

Most of the students responded that they didn’t know anything about the guide and some of them said that they ever heard about it but they didn’t have it till they graduated. The writing guide is of the most important guide for the students because it helps the students in writing their thesis. The unavailability of the writing guide made the students dealt with difficulties to refine their thesis especially in formatting and writing style.



Low supervisors' performance

The lecturers were assigned to supervise the students' thesis. Each student got two supervisors who duties are to guide and monitor their research and thesis writing process. The first supervisor was said to be responsible of the thesis content and the second one was said to be responsible for formatting and writing style. One of the shared duties that the supervisors are responsible of is the corrections towards the mistakes the students make during the thesis writing process. When given a related question, the interviewees said:

“I was said to correct some mistakes, including the citing format, but my supervisor didn't tell me how to correct them. (PFA).”

“My supervisors only left me confusing marks. (HB).”

“My supervisors told me to use computer in writing citation but I didn't know how to operate it. (BB).”

“He [the supervisor] was so busy to check my manuscript. I just met him twice. (SH).”

From the students' responses above, we can see that the supervisors' performance was low and this led the students to produce low quality thesis. The low of supervisors' performance could due to the number of the students they must supervise and the time they had to check and assist the students to correct or revise their manuscript.

The “confusing marks” in HB's response above refer to the strokes on the paper that might (or might not) be explained by the supervisors but the students missed it. Sometimes, the supervisors might trust that the students know what they should do while the students do not know what they should do. This should be make the lecturers (as supervisors) to be alerted that their input should be followed by proper explanation because there is no way to know whether the students can implement the input or not. Supervisors need to be aware that in the ESL/EFL classrooms, most of the students prefer to have feedbacks from the teachers than their peers (peer feedback) or by themselves (self-feedback) as noted by Zainurrahman (2021:19).

Plagiarism

The difficulties that the students faced during the thesis writing made them dragged into plagiarism. This can be seen from their responses:

“Most of my thesis content were copied as it is. (RJ).”

“Honestly, I didn't know what to do so I took a published thesis and replaced some parts in it. (HB).”

“I copied my seniors' thesis. (ZW).”



“I copied the text along with the citation within it. (RJ).”

Most of the students confessed that they plagiarized other texts because they had no idea of what to do. This is a part that the supervisors should take into account to avoid students plagiarizing texts. Nevertheless, since the supervisors’ performance was low, the students found that plagiarism was an alternative to complete their thesis.

The RJ’s response, like what most of them said, is the answer why the students’ made many mistakes in writing citation. It is so because they copied the citation from other text without paraphrasing the quotation. It is also seemed that the students followed (or copied) the thesis of their seniors, which contain the same mistakes and therefore the citing mistakes, endure from time to time.

Plagiarizing articles written in different citing styles can be identified very easily because mixed styles will be found in the text. This can be the factor why we found inconsistent citing styles in the students’ thesis. This is the last factor that we revealed from our interview and this is what most of the students did in the completion of their thesis.

5. Conclusion

Provided with the short discussions above, it can be concluded that the students’ thesis applied APA citation format although some of them were found inconsistent where mixed styles were found in single thesis. The students’ citing habits, which were far from what they were taught, led them to produce theses with a lot of mistakes in writing citation both in the in-text citation and reference section. There are some factors that made the students’ citing habit ranged from lack of writing knowledge and skill to low supervisors’ performance. However, the most important factor here is plagiarism. Students tend to plagiarize other texts because they dealt with many difficulties in the process of thesis writing. Plagiarism, in the case, is a “shortcut” that the students took to complete their thesis due to the time limit they had.

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