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Common Referencing Errors Committed by Graduate Students in Education

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The purpose of this paper is to detect the common errors mistakenly formed by the graduate students in creating their reference list. These errors become the basis of the library's reference department to improve its Information Literacy Program and to collaborate with the schools in enhancing the teaching and learning of citation and referencing. This study employed citation analysis in tracking the current status and quality of the reference list. The paper analyzed 20 master's theses submitted in an open institutional repository. Results showed that there was an increase in error in 2019 compared with those theses submitted in 2018. Most common errors were found in the retrieval of information component of the reference list such as missing place of publication and/or missing volume or issue number. This case study shows us the current work of the librarians in Kazakhstan to ensure students learn how to respect academic integrity.

Keywords: referencing; common errors; academic integrity; Kazakhstan

Introduction

Referencing and citation errors continue to proliferate if not given proper attention. Based on a study conducted in 2018, submitted graduate theses had an error percentage rate of 84% in one of the leading schools in Kazakhstan when it comes to poor referencing practices (Yap, et al., 2018). Lee and Lin (2013) noted that citation errors include both bibliographic information and citation style errors. Incomplete references affect the integrity of the scientific communication and creates a loss of trust among peers in the scientific community (Azadeh & Vaez, 2013). Proper referencing also shows how strongly the university is committed to ensure that reference sources are accurately recorded. Walker and Taylor (1998) developed five principles of proper referencing that are applicable to all citation styles. The principles of intellectual property, access, economy, standardization, and transparency can be summed up to denote having a strong sense of academic

integrity once a literate person utilizes all of them. With this in mind, the library in collaboration with the stakeholders of the university (ie. the Writing Center, Teaching and Learning Committees, Research Methods courses), has a big role to play in building information literate professionals through properly citing references. Information Literacy is a competency expected from each graduate student. This competency prepares future scholars to be ethically and morally upright.

Objectives of the Study

This study identifies the common errors mistakenly formed by the students in their Master's theses. It focuses on the adoption of APA 6th edition as the main citation style used in referencing. It will detect the students' competency in following the APA reference citation style. This is an important study to understand the referencing practices of the graduate students, who are already practicing teachers in their field. Teachers must be able to practice what they preach. The study will measure the graduate students' capability in adapting to the citation style prescribed by the school. Generally, this must be an easy task, as they only need to follow the standardized format. Despite the research paper guidelines and workshops provided, they still commit errors. If proven significant amount of mistakes exist, a revitalized Information Literacy program needs to be improved. It will be a great challenge for the Subject Librarian to increase the awareness of these graduate students in terms of proper referencing. The study is limited to one department only to compare the quality of citations created from 2018 to 2019. The common errors are categorized according to the four essential components that make up a reference list. These four components include Author, Publication Date, Title of Source, and Retrieval Information. These components describe the elements necessary to cite and refer to information sources.

Review of Related Literature

In 2018, Yap et. al. traced, reviewed, and analyzed the reference lists of 77 graduate theses in Kazakhstan. Using the publicly available information extracted from the institutional repository, they found out that there were numerous errors unintentionally committed by the students. They mentioned that such mistakes would have been avoided had there been a proper guidance in the creation of a reference list. In APA citations, we can identify four main components. These are the author, date, title, and retrieval information (Santa Fe College, 2019). A sample illustration is given below.
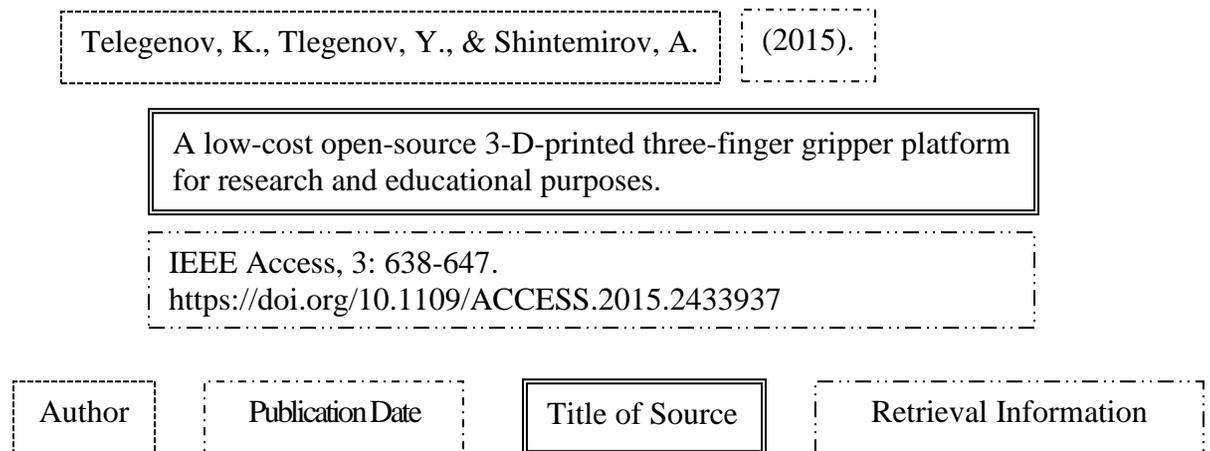
Telegenov, K., Tlegenov, Y., & Shintemirov, A.   (2015).

A low-cost open-source 3-D-printed three-finger gripper platform for research and educational purposes.

IEEE Access, 3: 638-647.
https://doi.org/10.1109/ACCESS.2015.2433937

Author   Publication Date   Title of Source   Retrieval Information

Figure 1. Components of a Reference List.

These components combine to produce an accurate reference and to ensure the integrity of the manuscript.

Referencing Errors Committed by Students

Citation and referencing errors may happen intentionally or unintentionally. In any case, the authors are responsible for what they have written including the references and citations. Lee and Lin (2013) reported 20-24% error rates found in the theses of engineering graduate students in one of the universities in Taiwan. It was noted that a single reference might expose multiple

errors. Eleven percent of their study revealed that students committed both numerical errors (errors involving publication dates, volume, issue, pagination or edition number) and textual errors (errors involving author names and source titles). In a similar study, a review of a smaller sample of five Ph.D. psychology theses in India indicated that almost 40% of the references had major errors (Harinarayanaa, et al., 2011). Incorrect journal names and incomplete title articles are considered major errors in their study. This alarming case shows major errors in source titles and year of publication. They could have prevented these errors considering their Ph.D. status. Aside from the title errors, they committed year and pagination inaccuracies as well as volume and issue number inaccuracies. Jamaican graduate students are not exempt from referencing errors. There was a time where most students committed formatting and layout errors prior to introducing a thesis consultation (Robinson et al., 2018). In one of the university libraries in Jamaica, thesis consultation was offered by the library to decrease the number of referencing errors. It was a good approach to introduce thesis consultation as an effective way to reduce referencing errors. Azadeh & Vaez (2013) identified more than 50% flawed references with Iranian students. At that time, they found more errors in referencing authors' names. This creates challenges for retrieving the correct bibliographic information. Similar to the study of Harinarayanaa et al. (2011), there were also inaccurate references in Ph.D. dissertations. Just like any other university, they also provided workshops related to referencing and pointed out during the research methods course the proper and accurate referencing. Notable suggestions to improve the referencing skills of students are to include the correct number of references as part of the final grade and the continual assistance of librarians in providing consultations for writing the reference lists.

Methodology

This study employed citation analysis to track the quality of reference list. Although generally used in measuring the impact, influence, or quality of citations, citation analysis can be extended to references --as the reference list is a symbol of the content of the intellectual work (Hellqvist, 2009). The assumed quality of the intellectual output depends on the quality of the reference list.

The paper studied 20 master's theses with a total number of 1,432 references cited. These theses were submitted in an open institutional repository in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan. All the items are publicly available online. The theses were all uploaded in 2018 and were considered the best theses among their cohorts. Each thesis was assessed and analyzed carefully based on the four components of a reference list: Publication Date, Author, Title of Source, and Retrieval Information. The average number of references cited and average number of errors were calculated. Each thesis was given A unique number was assigned to each thesis and all its references were counted manually and assigned an identifier. References were categorized based on their source type. Each reference was reviewed for any error. A reference may more than one error. A comparison of 2018 and 2019 referencing errors were also analyzed based from the 2018 study of Yap et. al.

Results and Discussion

The mean number of references used by a graduate student is about 67.4. There were a total number of 1,432 references retrieved with at least 850 errors noted. In the 2019 data, the highest number of references used in a thesis was 145 with a 14% error rate in the reference list.

The lowest number of references used in a thesis was 37 where each reference contains mistakes that bring those to a 100% error rate (Table 1).

Table 1. References and Error Data.

Thesis Number	Number of References Used	Number of Errors in the Reference List	% of Error
1	55	52	95%
2	55	35	64%
3	76	49	64%
4	56	46	82%
5	145	21	14%
6	92	37	40%
7	111	46	41%
8	115	106	92%
9	62	27	44%
10	72	40	56%
11	75	49	65%
12	71	48	68%
13	64	64	100%
14	57	37	65%
15	45	18	40%
16	55	42	76%
17	81	26	32%
18	68	33	49%
19	40	37	93%
20	37	37	100%
Total	1,432	850	
Mean	67.4	42.5	

The highest number of errors are based on the total number of errors per thesis divided by the total number of references used. Two of the theses had a 100% error rate. The first one had 37 references and the other had 64. On the average, there was a 42.5% rate of errors in the reference list based on the 20 theses reviewed in 2019.

Table 2 gives us an idea of the increase of references cited between the studied years of theses publication as well as the mean number of errors found. It is alarming that the number of errors increased in the most recent year studied despite the introduction of a thesis manual and the introduction of citation and referencing during the orientation program. On the part of the library, we have made our Information Literacy program known to the schools to support the research needs of the students as well as to make them familiar with the citation styles. Many things have to be done to make a concerted effort in improving the citation skills of students.

Table 2. Errors in a Reference List.

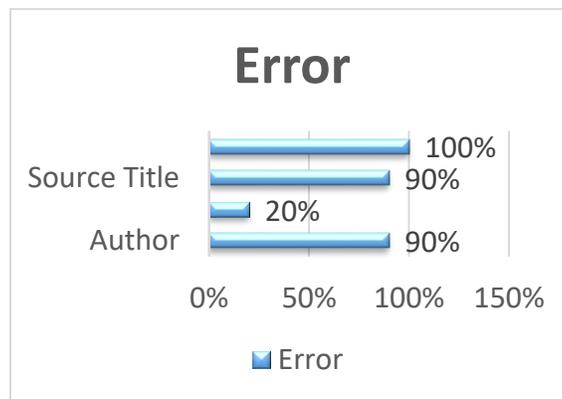| Year	Number of graduates	Number of theses uploaded in the repository	Number of theses reviewed	Average number of references cited	Average number of errors found
2018 and below	224	36	18	56.17	31.22
2019	90	20	20	67.4	42.5
Percent of increase				20%	36%

Common Errors Found per Component

Figure 2. Percentage of Component Errors.

Apparently, students have not followed the APA citation guide. There is a very high error rate in retrieval information component--ie. 90% error rate in both source title and author components, and a 20% error rate in date component (Figure 2). Table 3 is a summary of common errors found in reference lists. These are actual mistakes noted in the submitted theses. The most common error is when students forget to convert the uppercase letters of a common noun into lowercase letters. These students failed to give full attention to the format and just utilized the cite tool function of the discovery service without reviewing the citation format.

Table 3. Common Errors Found.

Author	Date	Source Title	Retrieval Information
Incomplete author details	Incomplete publication date details for magazines and other source types	Forgot to italicize titles	Missing place of publication (Figure 6)
Names not inverted	Wrong placement of month and year for magazine / newsletter sources/ online articles (Figure 4)	Forgot to name the title of the source / Missing title of the article (Figure 5)	No volume or issue number
Corporate (group) author not spelled out (Do not use abbreviations in the reference list)		Abbreviated or incomplete journal titles	No DOI shown
No need to mention the first names of the authors unless there are two different authors with the same surname and first name initials.		Journal titles are written in lowercase letters Incorrect use of uppercase and lowercase letters	Wrong permalinks or incomplete URL
			Date of retrieval unnecessary

Incorrect use of 'and' instead of '&' for multiple authors (Figure 3)			ISBN unnecessary Incomplete Pagination Exclusion of "pp" to indicate page numbers for edited books

Examples

Darrell M. West and Joshua Bleiberg (2013) retrieved from

https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/five-ways-teachers-can-use-technology-to-

help-students/

Figure 3. Wrong use of connector "and" instead of "&".

Thiers, N. (June, 2017) Making Progress Possible: A Conversation with Michael Fullan.

Retrieved from http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-

leadership/jun17/vol74/num09/Making-Progress-Possible@-A-Conversation-with-

Michael-Fullan.aspx

Figure 4. Wrong placement of month and year.

Missing title of the article

Wermke, W. & Salokangas , M. (2015). *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy,*

1(2). 1-6. http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/nstep.v1.28841

Figure 5. Missing title of the article.

Arkoudis, S., & Doughney, L. (2014). Good Practice Report – English Language Proficiency. The
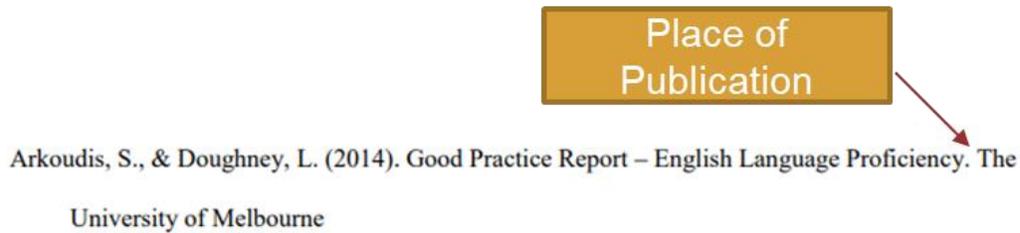
University of Melbourne

Figure 6. Missing place of publication.

Conclusions

The number of errors that increased from 2018 to 2019 implies that there is a continued need to review the competencies of students when it comes to the use of APA for citation/referencing. The majority of the students neglected to use proper reference format as they appeared to focus more on the content of their work. These errors affect their future as their theses are already digitally available as part of their online footprint. Such errors also impinge the image of the university. These practicing teachers must be able to apply proper referencing first for themselves in order to say, "Practice what you preach", to their students. The errors suggest that there should be an intensive collaboration between the schools, the writing center, and the library to achieve a common goal in honing the research and academic integrity values of students. The results of the study induce review and revitalization of our IL program (Figure 7) within the library as the errors rose up. The Nazarbayev University Library has a module devoted for citations and referencing. Although our department has only taken up referencing seriously in 2018, we continue to engage the schools and the students to be aware of the best practices in referencing.

Figure 7. IL program of NU Library.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen the IL program through collaboration with the faculty members teaching research and literature review/literature search (research seminar/methods class).

2. Collaborate with the Writing Center in an ongoing discussion on how to improve the citation and referencing practices of the students. It is expected that the result of this partnership will lessen the errors made by the students.

3. Improve the IL module content on citing and referencing by adding more concrete examples. Module 3 of the IL program is about citing and referencing (Appendix 1).

4. Create a LibGuide devoted for common errors in APA citation.

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Appendix 1. Module 3 of the NU IL Program.

Module 3: Citing Sources

Learning Outcome

Search, collect, manage, refer and cite reliable information as evidence.

At the end of the discussion, the students are expected to:

- Be responsible authors/scholars;
- Be aware of the different and available citation tools (reference management software);
- Learn how to cite internet sources such as blogs, online videos and social media sites.

Sample Lesson Topics (but are not limited to the following):

- Discuss available citation formats (APA, Chicago, Harvard, etc.)
- Introduce citation management tools like Endnote, Mendeley, and Zotero
- Practical application of these tools

Assessment

- Identifying parts of a reference list

The full module can be accessed here: https://nu.kz.libguides.com/infoliteracy/program