

Idea Sharing: Ten Mistakes to Avoid When Writing A Literature Review

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Ten mistakes to avoid when writing a literature review

Writing a quality literature review is important for success in publication and graduate studies, but it is a difficult task for many novice researchers and graduate students to achieve as noted by several scholars. For instance, Boote and Beile (2005) assert that “most literature reviews [in dissertations] are poorly conceptualized and written” (p. 4), and Onwuegbuzie and Daniel (2005) report that many literature reviews of manuscripts for publications are underdeveloped and have problems with unsupported claims. These problems seem to be common in various disciplines such as education and social studies (see e.g., Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008; Zorn & Campbell, 2006).

In the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), a recent study by Jaroongkhongdach, Watson Todd, Keyuravong, and Hall (2012) reveals that compared to the literature reviews of the articles published in international journals, most literature reviews of the articles written by Thai ELT researchers are of lower quality in several aspects. These problematic aspects include coherence, informativeness, reflection, strength of literature review as foundation, and strength of justification (see brief explanations of these problems in Jaroongkhongdach et al., 2012 and more extensive explanations in Jaroongkhongdach, 2012). These problems can be an indication that beginning researchers and graduate students in ELT are likely to have problems in writing a quality literature review.

While the study from Jaroongkhongdach et al. (2012) is useful in pointing out what the problems are, offering a broad explanation of issues contributing to the problems such as the issue of face, and attempting to suggest solutions to the problems such as “encouraging a more critical attitude toward knowledge” (p. 202), it does not address any tangible suggestions on how to avoid or lessen the problems. In this article, I aim to supplement Jaroongkhongdach et al. (2012) by suggesting ten mistakes to avoid when writing a literature review. By calling attention to the ten mistakes, I also hope to raise the awareness of Thai beginning researchers or graduate students in ELT of issues that are likely to affect the quality of a literature review.

Why do I talk about ‘ten mistakes to avoid’ rather than ‘ten things to do’?

There are two reasons why I am suggesting ‘mistakes to avoid’ rather than ‘things to do’. Firstly, there is already a wide range of books suggesting how to write a literature review (e.g., Hart, 1998; Paltridge & Starfield, 2007; Ridley, 2008). Generally, these manuals provide good examples of ‘how to’ write a literature review, but rarely point out mistakes when writing a literature review. With one-sided examples, it is possible that many may not be able to understand what they should avoid when writing a literature review. Secondly, it is difficult to delineate how to write a quality literature review given that there is no standard format. The format of the literature review is determined by the research focus which can dictate the research argument in the literature review. Therefore, a checklist of things to avoid no matter what the format is can be helpful.

Ten mistakes to avoid when writing a literature review

The ten mistakes are 1) a mismatch between claim and support, 2) illogical reasoning, 3) an inconsistency of terms/concepts, 4) a questionable assumption, 5) a lack of awareness of implications of terms/concepts, 6) a narrow view, 7) a one-sided argument, 8) an over-reliance on previous authors, 9) a simple reporting, and 10) a weak justification. These mistakes are partly grounded on literature and partly derived from the data of the study by Jaroongkhongdach et al. (2012). Note that these ten mistakes are related to the five problematic listed above. Nos. 1-5 are related to the problem of coherence, Nos. 6-7 concern the problem of informativeness, Nos. 8-9 are related to the problem of reflection, No. 9 is relevant to the problem of the strength of the literature review as a foundation, and No. 10 affects the strength of the justification.

To illustrate the ten mistakes, examples which are taken from literature reviews of research articles written by academics in ELT in Thailand are given below. Some amendments have been made to certain extracts for ease of explanation.

1. A mismatch between claim and support

Extract 1A

A review of recent literature on metacognition and reading comprehension shows an interaction between strategy use and reading ability (AAA, 1984; BBB, 1987; CCC, 1990; DDD, 2005; EEE, 2008; FFF, 2009).

In Extract 1A, we can see a mismatch between the term “recent” and a cited source dating back to 1984. It should be noted here that using an old source is not a problem in itself. The problem is that the use of a reference that is dated back to 1984 does not give a sense of something that is ‘recent’. A concept of ‘recent’ literature generally refers to a source that is published within five years prior to the time the current research is conducted.

Extract 1B

Writing skills are important for graduate students...AAA (2002) conducted a study investigating the English proficiency of Thai graduates who plan to further their studies, both in the country and abroad. It was found that the English proficiency of graduates from Thailand was lower than the international standard.

In Extract 1B, there is a claim that “writing skills are important for graduate students”. Having read the statement or a claim, we would expect an explanation that reveals how writing skills are important. What follows, however, does not seem to support or further explain how or why the skills are important for the students.

A mismatch between the claim and the support which in some occasions can be taken as an unsubstantiated claim is one main problem that affects the coherence of argument in a literature review.

2. Illogical reasoning

Extract 2A

Critical thinking skills are important and suitable for being in the information age since education is an important tool for developing students' abilities.

In Extracts 2A, the use of a linking word “since” between the clauses means that the reader is expecting the second clause to be a valid reason for the first clause. However, it is difficult to see how the idea in the second clause (education is an important tool) logically supports the idea in the first clause (critical thinking skills are important and suitable).

Extract 2B

There seems to be very little research that takes a closer look at writing problems as well as writing attitude toward English writing encountered by the Thai students. This study aims to explore problems and writing strategies associated with L2 language learners.

From Extract 2B, we learn that the purpose of the study is to investigate “writing problems and writing strategies”. However, the reason for the purpose which is grounded on insufficiency of research that looks into “writing problems as well as writing attitude” seems to be illogical. This flaw of reasoning can seriously weaken the coherence or the logic of the argument that is being put forward.

3. An inconsistency of terms/concepts

Extract 3

[S1]The ultimate goal of reading is reading comprehension. [S2]Reading comprehension is the process through which readers use their own syntactic, semantic, rhetorical and prior knowledge as well as necessary cognitive skills to analyze, interpret and understand the writer's thoughts and ideas conveyed through the printed text.

What we see in Extract 3 is the use of the phrase “reading comprehension” in two sentences (see S1 and S2). In S1, the meaning of “reading comprehension” is “the ultimate goal” or, in other words, “the product” of reading which is likely to refer to the

understanding or comprehension of meaning from what is read. However, in S2, “Reading comprehension” refers to “the process”. It is then possible for the reader to get confused with “reading comprehension” whether it refers to “the product” or “the process”. This confusion from the inconsistency of terms/concepts can lead to the problem with a break in coherence.

4. A questionable assumption

Extract 4

Since this study aims to identify the needs of the students and teachers as well as attitudes towards the way of ELT environment in which they find themselves facing, questionnaires were used for this investigation.

At first sight, we may not see any problem with Extract 4. Given that it seems to be a normal practice for researchers to use “questionnaires” when investigating attitudes, it is not surprising that the author of the article may have assumed that the questionnaire is the only research instrument to study the attitudes. However, other types of research instruments such as a test or an interview can also be used to look at attitudes. Thus, such an assumption seems to be questionable.

It should be emphasized here that although the mistake may appear to be caused by illogical reasoning, as some may argue, it is more likely to be caused by an assumption which is less explicit than a reason. An assumption may be a fact or a belief that is taken for granted in presenting an argument, and is not stated whereas a reason is generally stated (see Cottrell, 2005 for further explanation).

5. A lack of awareness of implications of terms/concepts

Extract 5

[In the literature review section] Reading strategies refer to those specific actions which readers employ before, during and after reading in order to understand most efficiently what they read...[3 pages later in the method section]...This study employs “think aloud” as this method allows the researcher to understand the process reading.

In Extract 5, we learn that the researcher aims to investigate reading strategies by using “think aloud” which is a common research instrument for studying reading strategies.

Using “think aloud” in exploring reading strategies in itself is not a problem, and the definition of “Reading strategies” in itself is not a problem. Nonetheless, the problem is the mismatch between the definition of “Reading strategies” which refer to “those specific actions which readers employ before, during and after reading” and the use of “think aloud”. In using “think aloud”, Gass and Mackey (2007) assert that “learners are usually asked what is going through their minds as they are concurrently solving a problem” (p. 55). Given that “think aloud” is an instrument that looks into a current cognitive process, it is inappropriate to be used to investigate “actions which readers employ before, during and after reading”. This suggests that the author of the article may not be aware of the implication of “think aloud” which can lead to a problem with the logical relationship or coherence in the literature review. (Note that I use an example which is across sections, the literature review and the method sections, to show that there is a close relationship between terms/concepts reviewed in the literature review section and issues discussed in other sections such as the methodology or the discussion.)

6. A narrow view

Extract 6

A self-access centre is...a place where language learners come to take charge of their own learning...Gardner & Miller (1999) indicate that a self-access centre has two major functions...(1 section)... According to Gardner & Miller (1999), the task of management is...Gardner & Miller also state that...(1 section)...Gardner & Miller (1999) clarify the management of resources as the manager's responsibility to find a way to collect...

In Extract 6, all of the cited sources are from the same authors, suggesting that the author of the article may mainly rely on a single source. In fact, citing extensively from a single source is not a problem in itself, but authors should be aware that it may inhibit them from seeing the issue they are discussing from different perspectives.

7. A one-sided argument

Extract 7

Model ABC has been proved to be effective in teaching writing. Several studies show that after using Model ABC, students' skills in writing have improved significantly... (2 paragraphs discussing only the benefits of the model)

In Extract 7, we can see only the benefits of the model, and not much criticism of the model. This suggests that the author's argument is partial. This can be seen as a problem as, according to Mackey and Gass (2005), the argument should take into account all sides of an issue.

Note that the problems with a narrow view and a one-sided argument may appear to be similar. The difference between the two is that while a narrow view is likely to depend on a single source or a few sources, a one-sided argument may refer to a large number of sources. Nonetheless, both can reduce the informativeness of the literature review.

8. An over-reliance on previous authors

Extract 8

Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 140) define prediction as "a matter of using an existing knowledge of a pattern or system in order to"....As mentioned by Vaughan and Estes (1986, p. 105), comprehension emerges from an integration of new understanding and prior awareness... According to McWhorter (1987, pp. 55-63), three types of skimming may be employed to build speed...The first...The second...The third... McWhorter (1987) introduces the general process of skimming as...

It is clear in Extract 8 that the current author tends to depend on previous authors in providing the background of the study. While incorporating previous literature in the current study is encouraged in writing a literature review, an over-reliance on previous authors may be viewed negatively as it is difficult to see the current author's position toward the literature. Also based on this extract (also seen in Extract 6), we can probably say that the current author gives great importance to the previous authors themselves rather than to the ideas being cited. This can be seen as the lack of authorial voice of the current author.

9. A simple reporting

Extract 9A

*Portfolio assessment is a type of alternative assessment...Portfolio assessment is also known as a systematic assessment...(AAA, 2001)
Another definition of portfolio is the systematic use of student self-assessment... There are five stages of portfolio development: (1)...(5)...*

In Extract 9A, the author provides three definitions of portfolio assessment, one of which is based on a citation. It is however not clear how the author makes use of the definition from the previous research in the current research paper. Simply said, the problem is that the previous literature is not used. Without a clear relationship with previous literature, the current study can be taken as having a weak foundation. Indeed, ‘a simple reporting’ can be seen a main problem in writing a literature review as

“the major weakness of many literature reviews is that they cite references (often many references) without indicating their relevance or implications for the planned study” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008, p. 620)

To have a better idea of how to avoid this mistake, an example of how to make use of the previous research is given in Extract 9B.

Extract 9B

Wray (2002: 9) defines a formulaic sequence as words...This definition of formulaicity encompasses...(6-7 lines)... As the present research is concerned with collocation, this ‘inclusive’ definition of a formulaic sequence provides a useful starting point...

From Extract 9B, we can see a clear relationship between the previous literature and the current study. The author of the article uses Wray’s definition as a starting point for the current research.

10. A weak justification

Extract 10

The task-based approach has been used in Teaching English for about two decades...In the Thai context, AAA (1996)....All these studies tended to

suggest the task-based approach was successful in their educational contexts. However, no research has been conducted with an intensive ESP course in Thailand.

In Extract 10, it is clear that a gap for research is identified but it is not clear why it is important to conduct research. Simply mentioning that there is a gap is not sufficient. In addition to indicating a gap, the justification needs to show that the gap is worth investigating. Thus, a justification such as “no research has been conducted” in a certain context as seen in Extract 10 can be taken as a weak justification, especially for international publication.

Conclusion

In this article, I have focused on ten mistakes to avoid when writing a literature review. By avoiding these ten mistakes, authors will be less likely to have problems with the literature review reported by Jaroongkhongdach et al. (2012). Looking at the other side of the coin, authors will be more likely to write a quality literature review which fulfills its two main functions: to contextualize the current research, and to justify the current research.

It is my hope that the ten mistakes listed here are a helpful checklist for those aiming to improve their skills in writing a quality literature review. These ten mistakes, however, are neither absolute nor comprehensive, and so I would be happy to see them further discussed in the ELT community, especially in the ELT academic community in Thailand.

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