

Critical Citation and Intertextuality in Academic Writing

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Abstract Referencing and citation present significant challenges for novice academic writers, particularly for university students writing in English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL) across disciplines. This article investigates undergraduate students' referencing and citation practices through an analysis of their literature review texts, collected over two rounds of assignments from an EFL academic writing course at a Chinese university. The analytical framework adopted assesses both the quantity and contextual use of references, distinguishing between direct and indirect citations, while also examining how students employed references for confirmatory and critical purposes. The findings reveal a general tendency toward minimal use of direct and critical referencing, with few instances where citations were used for critique and comparison. These results suggest a need for writing instruction that promotes a deeper understanding of authentic intertextual citations with scholarly sources. Pedagogy in China and broader EFL/ESL contexts shoulders a responsibility of supporting students' development in using overt intertextual citations in writing more effectively, by addressing the current imbalance—namely, the overreliance on indirect quotation and the underuse of critical and direct citation practices for scientific intertextuality in academic writing.

Keywords: Critical Citation, Intertextuality, Indirect Citation, Direct Citation, Academic Writing

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1. Introduction

Referencing and citation practices have become a writing convention within the scholarly community across disciplines, where writing typically involves a body of relevant source literature—often referred to as references [1,2]. Citation of references is regularly integrated into written texts through paraphrases and direct citations in writing. Referencing and citation usually draw on a web of knowledge from sources such as published journal articles, academic books, conference presentations, and newsletters, all governed by a subject matter, a specific topic, or a research question [3,4,5,6].

According to Mavrogenis and Scarlat [7] [p.3011], citation indicates when and what writers are referring to someone else's work. It is defined as "an act of quoting" that is "to speak or write from another, usually with credit acknowledgment." Such skills of referencing and intertextual inscription, akin to science production, are increasingly becoming a focal point in academic writing curricula [8,9,10]. Many scholars often emphasize the importance of examining and incorporating sources as an integral part of the learning process [8,11,12,13]. For novice academic writers to understand the significance of referencing and citation in learning of academic writing to

endorse and claim their own writing, they need to critically evaluate and engage with the established knowledge [8,14,15].

Especially in the English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL) context, such as in most European and Asian universities, fostering student commitment to referencing and intertextual proficiency remains a critical objective (e.g., [6,9,10,16,17,18,19]). Teaching academic writing in these contexts extends beyond linguistic instruction, as many university students in such writing contexts have already moved beyond basic language acquisition [20,21]. Writing for various academic purposes and genres has become an integral part of their disciplinary studies [9,22,42]. In recent years, there has been an increasing emphasis on investigating how students write with citations in their learning of academic writing, particularly for genres like literature reviews, research papers, thesis proposals, and dissertations [11,14,18,19]. For many beginners, like undergraduate students, effectively incorporating source texts into their writing still poses a significant challenge due to a lack of critical evaluation and incomplete pedagogical integration of citations [5,23].

This paper explores how undergraduate students majoring in Computer Science and English Language and Literature at a prestigious Chinese university reference and cite sources while composing literature reviews in an

academic writing course. Our goal in this analysis is to shed light on and apply the current literature of citation studies from both science and critical pedagogy of writing to address the gaps in students' understanding of the usage of references, as well as the skills for scientific and critical citations [1,24]. Thereby, our research can provide a more holistic perspective on the key issues and strategic viewpoints by addressing the following two central research questions:

- What major challenges do university students face in their academic writing when conducting a literature review?
- How do university student writers develop and pursue accountability for references and citations through rhetorical and structural strategies in their writing of literature reviews?

2. Literature Review

The practice of referencing and citation has increasingly drawn researchers' interest in analysis, mainly centralizing on its applicability for scientific endeavors [1,24,25,26,27,28]. However, research indicates that referencing and citation are not always integrated for scientific purposes and tasks. Lyu et al. [24] [p.3256] address that the nonscientific purpose of citations and references in text creation can be conceptualized as being "tactical", driven by "tactical motivations", which in part is associated with "mercantile" roles [25] [p.625]. This implies that sometimes academic writers may cite sources for subjective and credential reasons. Similarly, Lin [26] [p.797] points out that almost a third of the citations in their study are "perfunctory," not essential nor critical. Scientific endeavors of citation that reflect scientific purposes in academic genres tend to prioritize citations with ethical reasons and scientific elaboration (e.g., [1,9,12] [25,24,26,27]). This scientific aspect goes beyond mere linguistically itemized referencing, aiming to establish an intellectual and ethical framework that guides scholarly writing through proper source attribution, thereby honoring academic authorship and scientific advancement [14,28].

Meanwhile, the study of citation in the context of writing pedagogy defines the scientific citation as cognitive "agency" and "rigor" [6] [p.109]. Failure to give references to prior knowledge is considered plagiarism [9,29]. Specifically, Humphrey & Holmes [30] [p.108] have explained the citation-related plagiarism as when someone "appropriates another person's ideas, processes, results, or words" without appropriate acknowledgment. Petrić [6] [p.111; see also 5,31,18] has identified a form of citational problem as "patchwriting," where borrowed content is presented as original, lacking explicit intertextual navigation of citations. Thus, effective citation and referencing necessitate not only linguistic unwinding of patchwriting, but also a dedication to scientific commitment that underlines the aesthetics of scientific textuality and the practice of academic writing [1,8,32,33,34]. Citation and referencing of academic writing and writing pedagogy require a comprehensive understanding for cultivating novice academic writers by informing their learning of such scientific values.

2.1. The Homogeneous Style of Referencing and Citation

Pears and Shields [2] [p.1] underscore the necessity of refining a "referencing style" that familiarizes academic writers with some essential rubrics regarding the use of citation for scientific purposes, which is always advantageous for both analysis and pedagogy (see also [13,24]).

The exploration of a writing style using citation and referencing can be pragmatic for academic authors to situate their topics or ideas with others, essential for constructing academic meaning and distinguishing scientific importance by identifying gaps, comparing facts, critiquing and arguing for ideas (e.g., [1,12,15,25]). These writing processes are essential as they help define "what it means to mean" in an academic text or a scientific style [28] [p.3]. Kellogg [35] [p.5] has speculated that "reference and purpose" entails meaning and believes that references are crucial to recognizing the intent and significance of writing. Meaning as reference provides a foundation on which writers build theories and narratives; as he said: "Through the construction of complex webs of reference, people order information in their world. Relationships and identity classes emerge through this form of meaning-making."

Kellogg's [35] understanding of meaning-making in academic writing depends on a network of references—familiar concepts and facts that facilitate new ideas by providing a foundation of priorly validated knowledge. Aveyard [3] echoes, practitioners or writers often read more than one report on a topic critically, so that they are unlikely to get misled.

Different pieces of research and evidence work together to build up a consistent picture of a particular area, one that readers would not get by looking at one piece of information only (see also, [4]). This perspective on academic meaning-making through referencing and references corresponds with the recent examination of citations utilized for scientific reasons (e.g., [1,25,24,26,36]).

Nonetheless, neither Kellogg's notion of academic meaning-making nor the recent analysis of scientific citations has provided the actual steps or a synthesized vision on how academic writers actualize scientific dispositions through the conduct of particular referencing and citation practice. Therefore, we deepen our review of literature to advance a conception of academic meaning-making with familiar ideas based on the act of citation and referencing through a notion of scientific debate for further illustration.

To understand the intricacy of citation in academic writing, Graff and Birkenstein [8] have proposed a specific style modeling scientific debate depending on the use of referencing and citation. Their primary model interconnects citations from prior scholarship (*They Say*) with the writer's interpretations for his or her voice (*I Say*). This model not only imitates conversations but also balances efficiently the objectivity of established ideas and critical appraisal of them via the chosen references (see also [28,26,24]). They argue that this dynamic placing of one's claims in light of existing assertions through referencing and citation lies at the heart of academic writing, stipulating a structure of written debates

with the writers' undertakings of references and citations [28]. Academic writers engage with carefully curated literature, fostering scientific dialogues that shape the distinctive discourse composed with citations.

This model of scientific debate through the use of citations, presents a mechanism for understanding the essential use of references, which is structurally evident in the use of direct quotations, not only by providing concrete information to support or contrast arguments, ideas or facts but also by strengthening the connection between the reference and the text in writing [6,22,25,37]. Petrić [6] [p.113] stresses that direct quotation is legitimized "borrowing" from source materials; it is a safeguard "to prevent inadvertent mistakes," emphasizing its role in ensuring accuracy and reinforcing scientific verbatim and concrete incrementation, rather than merely for tactical citations.

Academic genres, such as research articles or books and dissertations often necessitate a defined section known as a literature review with dense citations to position and create writing space for a topic to trace the development of ideas and identify the gap pertinent to a specific writing task for new ideas [4,5,11,38]. As highlighted by Chigbu et al. [4], numerous academic assignments mandate writers to conduct an evaluation and critique of relevant and existent literature as an essential holistic aspect of a specific topic to contextualize new positions for meaning-making (see also, [28]). Carefully selected literature includes important and related references that meticulously outline the evolution of an idea in relation to other writers, providing a theoretical foundation for justifying a research purpose or an argument [25,39].

Thus, the recent literature of citation for scientific reasons [1,11,24,26] and the mechanism of how it could be meaningfully organized and understood [8,35] afford us a macro structure for foreseeing a homogeneous referencing style of academic writing. Yet, some micro assets would solidarize its departure for analysis and pedagogy, Bordignon [1] [p.595] advocates, essential and "critical citation" as part of the writing style should be introduced in theoretical frameworks for citation analysis and studies.

2.2. Critical Intertextuality as Academic Aesthetics

Citation for scientific endeavors of academic writing has created particular textual phenomenon in forms of intertextuality, which has established the aesthetics and features of scientific discourse [1]. Without it, genre ambiguity or personal biases caused by lacking an overt intertextual deliberation or dialogue through critical citation would overshadow textual outputs [33,40]. Unlike journalistic or other technical writing, which often misses transparent citations of critiquing, the scientific style and the academic genre has created an idiosyncratic intertext form to signal references directly and indirectly through writing [19,32]. Accordingly, Plett [33] contends that the inherently intertextual nature of scientific texts is often a perceivable feature and can function as a directive movement for understanding academic writing where referencing is mandated to take place [8,33]. Plett [33] [p.17] has explained the idea how citation and referencing

are endorsed in assembling such intertextuality:

"Whenever a new text comes into being it relates to previous texts and in its turn becomes the precursor of subsequent texts. What can be said for the production of texts also applies to their reception. No hermeneutic act can consider a single text in isolation. Rather it is an experience with a retrospective as well as a prospective dimension. This means for the text: it is an intertext."

That is to say, existent texts of references are always subject to processes of reproduction in showing relations of validation or criticism (e.g., [1,25]), which "constitutes its intertextuality" [33] [p.17]. Academic genres epitomize rituals of critical intertextuality with cited materials [6,40] indicating that the quotation exemplifies a tangible type of intertextual materiality, a network of solid evidence [25].

The notion of intertextuality would suggest that a lack of quotations or proper documentation in academic writing may raise concerns about the writer's unexamined bias or scholarly integrity, indicating either a disregard of foundational ideas and contributors to the field or a failure to situate their work within an existing intellectual landscape. Such deficiencies can obscure the novelty of their argument and limit its credibility [1,24,25,26]. Otherwise, the writing might undermine the academic convention that aims for objectivity and scientific significance through not just the use of data but also the use of prior knowledge [39,41]. This may explain why Chigbu et al. [4] have pointed out that many challenges in scholarly writing arise from a poor understanding of scientific intertextuality and inadequate critique of existing literature in academic writing.

Plett [33] [p.8] has proposed an intertextual unit for "quotation proper" evaluation and support of scientific purposes. As Plett [33] [p.8] has acknowledged that "quotation represents a material kind of intertextuality" and then pinpointed a location that illustrates how intertextuality is authorized with at least one relevant text to illuminate a site of academic writing with references. This unit relies on three elements to form a convergence for authorizing and discerning a place of appropriate intertextuality: "1. the quotation text (T1), which is the text where the quotation appears (i.e., the target text); 2. the pre-text (T2), which is the source text from which the quotation is derived; 3. the quotation proper (Q)." Authorizing intertextuality requires at least one external source text or its information to be incorporated into the site of writing to constitute intertextuality with certainty. The third element--*the quotation proper*—serves as an invitation for judgment of their scientific compatibility. Within the target text, it acts as a crucial unit to reinforce the macro debate model of 'They Say/I Say' referred to earlier where the source literature of 'They Say' could be effectively assessed and incorporated critically about a topic or an idea in the writer's explicit voice [8]. However, Plett's [33] requests for proper citation needs further interpretation and understanding, where Bordignon [1] suggests critical citation should be incorporated to complete the theoretical framework for making critical analysis.

In approaches to intertextual formation and citation analysis with the debate model, Lin (2018) and Bordignon (2022) find that sciences and scientific citations can gain sustainable progress by encouraging more negational and questioning authorization with previous knowledge.

Bordignon [1] [pp.960, 969] has recently conceptualized this trend to be “critical citation”. She claims the definition of critical citation to be: “to criticize”, “to compare,” and “to question” the works cited through pertinent evaluation. Bordignon further finds that the trend is evolving from a default “positive polarity” to a pattern of more “critical citation” in scientific intertextuality and academic discourse.

Understanding scientific citation of writing as a textual process of critical intertextuality allows scholars and educators to recognize the knowledge patterns required for effective referencing and citation for both analysis and pedagogy (e.g., [1,8,9,18,19] [24,25,26,33]).

3. The Research

This research aims to incorporate this critical citation and intertextuality perspective to analysis, seeking to meet the increasing need for research that bridges the gap between studies of critical citation and their practical applications in understanding university students' writing practices. To achieve a better understanding of emergent academic writers' referencing and citation, we conducted this research. The purpose is to inform both analysis and pedagogy and to aid emergent academic writers' learning of academic writing.

Our analysis is based on 13 undergraduates and their assignment texts, including 4 students from the Computer Science (CS) and 9 from the English Language and Literature (ELL). The majority of the participants were in their second year of undergraduate studies. The data consisted of the 13 students' assignment texts of a literature review task, and their revised version that was part of a research paper required for their academic writing course, both submitted to an online platform provided by the university active since 2020. At the start of the course, students were informed for their consent of using their written assignments for research purposes. We randomly sampled students for the texts from each academic year between 2020 and 2024, with a population of 260 students. The sample texts were analyzed and quoted anonymously.

3.1. Analysis of Citational Performance: Quantity and Quality Variables

In processing the data, the first version of the literature review is coded as Draft 1 (D1), while the revised version that appears in the final course paper's literature review section is referred to as Draft 2 (D2). Each student's drafts were labeled from T1 to T13. In total, the corpus comprises 26 texts of D1 and D2, amounting to a corpus of approximately 30,000 words. The corpus of the pairs with D1 and D2 was evaluated for both quantity and quality of referencing and citations.

The analysis commenced with a general reading and quantification that incorporated several quality considerations. We constructed an analytical matrix for essential referencing variables [1,26] tallied the overall citations and highlighted two major functional axe pairs: direct and indirect quotation, positive and critical polarities of citations to evaluate students' accountability for both the quantity and quality of their referencing practices, including items of the average total sum of citations, the signs of quotation language and criticality, and the average sum of the source literature, as displayed in Table 1 with a disciplinary comparison between the sample texts of Computer Science students and of the students from English Language and Literature.

The variables listed in the table help bridge a research gap in existing literature, where citation analysis of university students' writing has largely centered on direct and indirect quotations (e.g., [5,6,22]), often disconnecting the analysis of more evaluative dimensions, such as practicing critical usage of citations.

3.2. The Results

The analysis finds that the two disciplines share a citation pattern, with the average total number of citations across all the sample texts of their D1 and D2 ranges from 6 to 30. D2 featured seven additional references compared to D1. The two drafts do not differ significantly in the use of indicating phrases of citations such as “according to” or “as the author stated,” etc. The findings indicate that there are only numerical differences across the two disciplines concerning the variables demonstrated in Table 1. For example, the average source count is 10 for CS students and 14 for ELL students, while the average citation totals are 13 for CS and 15 for ELL. However, they do differ in their choices of topics for their course research reports. CS students tend to choose topics related to electronic or digital activities and attitudes, while ELL students favor topics of linguistics and educational inquiries. Generally, students of ELL utilize a greater number of citations and sources.

Now we focus on reporting our comparative analysis of direct versus indirect citations, as well as positive versus critical citations, across the corpus of the 26 individual texts of D1 and D2 produced by the student cohort, regardless of their disciplinary background. We illustrate the findings through two figures that unveil a referencing style of two polarizations: one characterized by prevalent indirect citation and the other by a notable lack of varied critical citation, for instance, to negate or question the existing knowledge.

Figure 1 presents the distribution of direct and indirect quotations for both D1 and D2, revealing a noteworthy pattern where paraphrasing and indirect citations are more widely used across the two disciplines and sample texts, while direct quotations appear far less frequently.

Table 1. Disciplinary Comparison of Citation Average

Sample Drafts by Discipline	Average Sum Quot.	Direct Quot.	Indirect Quot.	Critical Polarity	Positive Polarity	Quot. Signs	Sum Sources
CS	13	2.5	11	2.5	8	3	10
ELL	15	3	13	3	9	4	14

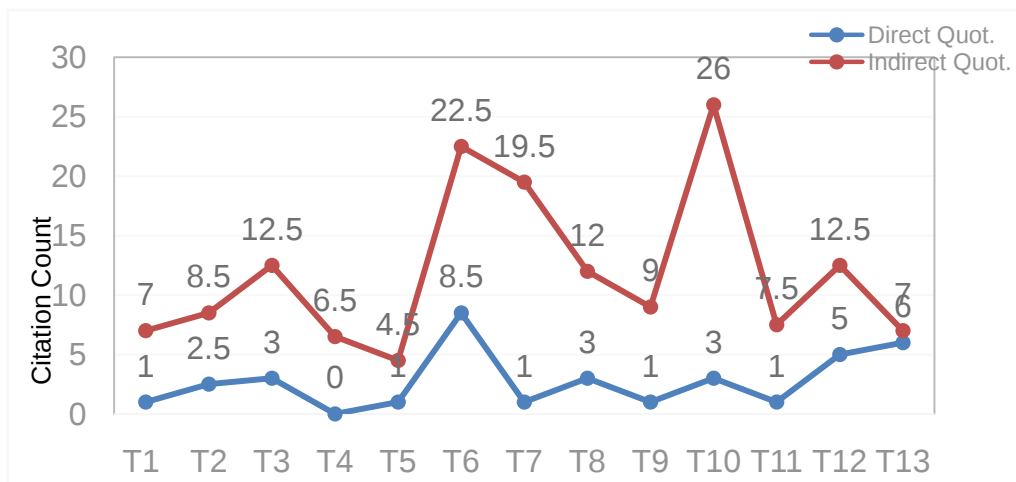


Figure 1. The Patterns of Direct and Indirect Quotations

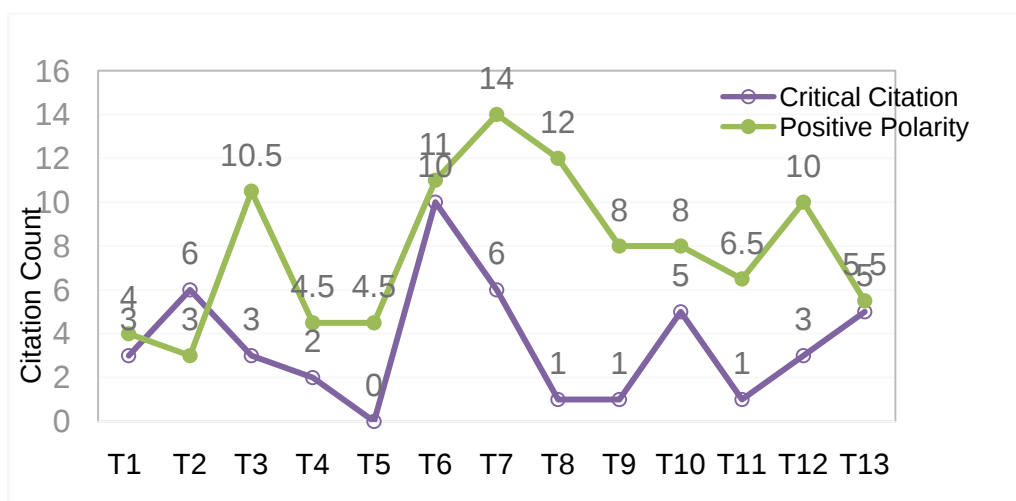


Figure 2. Polarities of Positive and Critical Citations

The upper pattern in red depicted in Figure 1 demonstrates that the average value presented on the vertical axis is 12 indirect citations across sample texts with all D1 and D2 considered (represented along the horizontal axis), which is nearly four times greater than the average for direct quotations presented by the lower blue line. That is to say, the blue pattern showing the direct quotation across sample texts averages 3. Notably, sample text T10 (D1 & D2) has the highest average sum of 26 indirect citations, while sample text T5 (D1 & D2) has the lowest for indirect citations, averaging 4.

Figure 1 reveals a distinct contrast between the use of indirect and direct citations, where direct citations are much less common, with a particular sample, T4, highlighting an absence of direct quotation in this instance, in which neither D1 nor D2 includes any direct citation. We find that indirect and paraphrased quotations are dominant in the students' use of references. In contrast, five more text samples are found to have only one direct quote, including the instances of a single word directly quoted, such as T7, where one word is directly quoted when the direct quote is counted in both D1 and D2:

"In the college level, educators used video games to help the teaching of mechanical engineering and found "playing" the video game in their homework is significantly more engaging than when working on homework in traditional way (Coller & Shernoff, 2009)."

Nevertheless, this presents a notable polarity of indirect citation. The following passage from sample T2 (D1&D2) exemplifies the common use of both indirect and affirmative citations by our evaluation:

"According to Kara Wolfe (2004), testing is employed to improve learning and teaching as it encourages students to dedicate more of their free time to the class topic and compels teachers to structure their teaching more effectively."

Indirect citations such as only mentioning the cited author's names and publication time in the literature review section, are frequently used to support their stances and choice of topics.

The analysis of affirmative and critical citations discloses other polarities, as illustrated in Figure 2 - Polarities of Positive and Critical Citations. The green line represents affirmative and confirmative quotes, dominating in student writing, referred to also as positive polarity in this study, while the purple line depicts critical citations. As shown in Figure 2, a distinct trend emerges: critical citations are significantly less common, with an average of only 3 across the samples and drafts, in contrast to affirmative or positive references, which average 9.

The lack of explicit critical engagement with sources possibly results from inadequate assessments of the chosen references when clustered in the places of indirect

quotations, potentially it causes confusion for readers, especially when the occasions of patchwriting occur. For example, the following sentence from T12 (D1) may refer to one study with two cited references:

“Over half of the students fail to recognize differences between the receptive vocabulary and the productive vocabulary (O’Dell, 1986; Ellis, 1989).”

Or it is possible that both cited references report a similar phenomenon. Occasions of this kind indicates that the student writer might have appropriated one of the references as the cited information means that it is from a particularly research result.

Determining whether a reference serves a critical function, or merely supports a claim, or just play a perfunctory role in analysis, can be even challenging. In our evaluation, to classify a citation as critical, we consistently referred to [1], which state that a reference must fulfill one of the roles of comparing, criticizing, or questioning. The critical citations we classified primarily served a comparative function, typically involving a minimum of two external sources, as illustrated in the subsequent example also from T12 (D1):

“In Wang’s study (1998), he found that most college students did not believe in learning the words naturally, but they were more likely to entertain the idea that they need specific time to recite the words. However, Wu and Wang (1998) had different ideas by questionnaires.”

Regardless that this citation contains a grammar problem where double subjects (“Wang” and “he”) are used to refer to the cited author (see also [18] [p.69]), the two references cited are meant to contrast the difference which presents an example of a citation of comparison. Here, we present one more example (T3, D1) that we have identified as a citation also for comparison through only one cited reference at the following site:

“Arranging the attitudes of different countries and institutions on e-game management, Heere (2018) finds a trend combining the two views and adopt the point of old research, which stated that e-game management should be defined through its usage.”

In our analysis and assessment, this indirect reference presents a critical comparison by referencing to Heere’s work, implying some difference from the information juxtaposed in the first half of the sentence, even though it conveys a similar idea regarding the management of e-games. This comparison made by using one reference is sensible with insight. However, rare instances of questioning or criticism of previous literature are identified.

3.3. Discussion

This study reveals notable polarizations in the cross-analysis, in variables of indirect versus direct citations, and affirmative versus critical citations. The samples brought forward an unquestionable positive polarity prominent with indirect quotation contrasting critical and direct citations, evident with samples across the two disciplines, with polarities in the frequency averaging 12 indirect citations per sample, contrasting an average of direct citations of 4, and critical citations of 3. This pattern of positive polarity of indirect citation provides us an upfront answer to address our research questions about the

significant challenge students face and how they cope with it in writing of literature reviews in particularly and in academic writing in general while learning to conduct research and writing a report. That is, direct and critical citation—recognized as essential components for constructing scientific discourse [1,6,24,25,26]—pose an important objective for student learning of writing academic genres, specifically, in the Chinese context. Samples with minimal or no direct and critical quotations highlight a significant challenge faced by student writers, indicating a lack of awareness or experience regarding the importance of scientific verbatim intertextuality.

The citation pattern uncovered in this analysis aligns with the positive predominance in the work of published researchers and scientists, as observed by Bordignon [1] and Lin [26]. Confirmative and positive citations are predominant, whereas critical citations—those that used to question or critique existing knowledge—are infrequent, despite their recognized value in advancing scientific development [1]. The infrequency of critical application of existing literature found in this analysis in particular goes beyond concerns about individual students’ citational practice, potentially echoing broader pedagogical obligation, especially in relation to the instruction of academic writing [13,18,19].

Yet, pedagogy may need to perform different tasks in addressing the use of citations accordingly in different contexts. Our finding contrasts with the research of Petrić [6] and Docherty [22], who have inspected the divergence of direct quotations in university students’ writing. Their analyses reveal a tendency towards greater sufficiency in the use of direct quotations in students’ writing. Petrić [6] attributes this tendency to the perceived simplicity of using direct quotation compared to paraphrasing or summarizing, which needs special pedagogical effort as it involves synthetical skills. As she explains [6] [p. 102]:

“Direct quotation is considered relatively undemanding in comparison to paraphrasing, summarizing, or generalizing from multiple sources, since it does not require any textual modification of the appropriated material.”

The limited use of direct quotations and the predominance of indirect citations revealed in our study, however, may reflect underlying influences from the Chinese students’ prior textual experiences—particularly those shaped by their learning of the monologic textbooks or little training of how to make explicit or overt use of sources for scientific purposes (see also [19]). This challenge is further intensified when students are required to write in English, whether for English-medium instruction, English degrees, dual degree programs, or partnerships with institutions in English-speaking countries.

It is important to note that indirect citations in our analysis do not preclude critical engagement with references. On the contrary, they can facilitate it. Notably, the scarcity of direct quotations does not imply that indirect ones are inherently less critical or analytical. The following excerpt from sample T8 (D2) exemplifies a citational site of confirmation of a critical view through indirect referencing:

“At first, it (essays) was a natural way of expressing one’s ideas, but since it was introduced into education as a tool of scoring, it was decisively skewed by that of the examination system and became some articles of anxious

words (Womack, 2010)."

It is the evidence of the scarcity of critical citation as shown in Figure 2, and the pattern those indirect citations reproduced positive predominance, that has conjured up our concern about the effective critique of literature. We come to recognize a continual imbalance regarding insufficiency in critical engagement with prior knowledge in the Chinese educational setting, which indeed reflects broader educational concerns and request of relevant pedagogy within the discussion of academic writing in higher education [10,18,19]. Incorporating references can be daunting to student academic writers, particularly when they feel a sense of accountability required by the course assessment regarding citational intertextuality with a range of references. When the pressure of accountability of writing with overt intertextuality using references comes from the instruction, students might cope with quantifiable occurrences; yet, still need to learn about the various functions of citation, especially the essential citations of critiquing the existing knowledge through rhetorical engagement and reinforced mechanism.

Our examination of critical citation within student writing finds that comparative citations were more predominant than the other two dimensions—criticizing and questioning [1]. Particularly, we did not observe any significant instances of *questioning* in the samples. While a few examples of criticism emerged, these were often not pointed out explicitly with the cited sources. Instead, the references were predominantly employed to support the authors' arguments or to identify gaps in the literature that reinforced their research aims. This pattern suggests a tendency toward affirmation rather than a critical interrogation of source materials.

The experienced academic community is increasingly advocating for a more critical stance in citation performance for scientific purposes [1,18,19,24,41,42]. The advancement of sciences with critical citation by enhancing intertextual depth is not merely a stylistic shift; it represents a developmental imperative for novice researchers and emergent writers to acquire. Developing the ability to engage critically with a textual network enables student writers to meaningfully situate, challenge, and validate their ideas and research with prior knowledge. This form of scientific debate is central to producing writing that contributes to—rather than merely echoes—the scholarly conversation. With confidence, we advocate for pedagogy to address the imbalance—namely, the *positive indirect citation predominance* by facilitating both critical engagement and effective use of direct citations.

4. Conclusion

This study focused on examining the challenges and accountability related to referencing practices of Chinese university students from the fields of Computer Science and English Language and Literature. This investigation is informed by theoretical perspectives for critical citation and scientific intertextuality [1,8,24,33]. As academic writing becomes increasingly important across disciplines and universities in non-English-speaking regions [20,23], varied citation behaviors are emerging, shaped by complex intersections of language, culture, and

educational experience. Referencing and citation continue to present challenges for novice student writers, especially in the Chinese EFL/ESL context.

We argue that the practices of critical citation—such as questioning and elaborative criticism (e.g., [1,25,26])—should be emphasized as early as possible in university students' learning of academic writing [9,10,13,14]. A pedagogy of scientific intertextuality must therefore play a central role in guiding students' writing across academic genres. Such a pedagogy should help students develop the ability to evaluate source literature critically and to write with explicit intertextuality, drawing on direct quotation and adopting analytical positions through mechanical and rhetorical means. Crucially, it should encourage them to do so in unambiguous ways that challenge and scrutinize established knowledge. Teaching must make clear that critical citation involves more than simply referencing other authors' names; students need to engage with the ideas and arguments of others directly, integrating sources in ways that are erudite and relevant to their own writing tasks. In this way, students come to recognize that sources can not only support their claims but also offer contrasting perspectives. Most importantly, they should learn to question and critique taken-for-granted source literature in order to advance scientific knowledge.

We also call for future research to integrate the rhetorical emblems—whether to focus or posit citations [17,32] into a broader framework for academic writing scholarship, encouraging for more precision of rhetorical specifications to convey to readers the critical application of cited references to avoid problems such as patchwriting and plagiarism [1,8,33]. The scientific functions of not only debating, but also elaborative citation to compare, critique, and question the existent knowledge can be further investigated in both future research of student writing and writing pedagogy [6,19], particularly by employing an explicit intertextual viewpoint for accountability of critical and effective citations in making and disseminating scientific discourse.

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