

# Navigating Rhetoric and Rule: Analysis of In-Text APA Referencing in ESL Diploma Students' Problem-Solution Essays

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## ABSTRACT

Accurate citation is important to maintain academic integrity and effective communication. Yet, many students of English as a Second Language (ESL), especially those with diploma qualification, face considerable obstacles in accurately using referencing rules, including those outlined by the American Psychological Association (APA). This study, employing mixed methods approach, explores the in-text citation habits of twenty ESL students at diploma level (CEFR B1-B2) enrolled in an English for professional communication course, examining their 600-word essays that deal with problem-solving scenarios. The investigation focused on citation rates, accuracy of citations, and patterns of integration. A total of 91 citations were found, of which only 63% were completely correct. Common mistakes include omitting years of publication, improper application of conjunctions in place of ampersand (&) in parenthetical references, and failure to effectively integrate sources within solution-oriented parts of the essay. Qualitative insights indicate that these discrepancies arise from a limited, procedural understanding of citation, viewed as a mechanical requirement rather than a strategic rhetorical skill. This study argues that direct, genre-specific instruction on citations is important to help students move from mere technical compliance to strategically using sources to build credible arguments.

**Keywords:** in-text citation, APA citation, problem solution essay, sources, writing instructions

## INTRODUCTION

Academic writing asks students to do more than share opinions. They must read, use, and credit other scholars' ideas to show integrity and to build trust with readers. Studies indicate that numerous ESL writers employ citations in a limited manner. They frequently cite to attribute information but seldom to assess or link ideas, and they generally maintain cautious or neutral positions regarding sources (Lee et al., 2018; Zhang, 2022). This makes it hard to use APA correctly and causes common mistakes like forgetting dates, getting author details wrong, and making weak connections between citations and arguments. These challenges are well documented in studies of L2 citation form, function, and stance, as well as in classroom research on how students learn to use sources (Friedman, 2019).

The problem–solution essay raises the bar. In this genre, students must explain a real problem, analyse the causes, and support solutions with reliable sources. If citations are wrong or poorly integrated, the argument loses clarity and force. Prior research shows that even when students include quotation marks and references, the integration of evidence into their reasoning is often weak (Docherty, 2019). At the same time, corpus-based studies show that expert writers choose between integral and non-integral citation forms depending on rhetorical purpose—a choice that novice writers still struggle to master (Zhang, 2022). Together, these findings show why problem–solution writing is an effective context for studying how diploma-level learners apply APA rules to build strong arguments.

This study examines how ESL diploma students apply APA 7th in-text citation rules in problem–solution essays. A mixed-methods design was applied for this study. First, a quantitative look at how often citations is correct or incorrect, and then a qualitative analysis of how students use citation functionally, either to summarize, compare, or evaluate. Previous studies support this approach. Reading-to-write instruction has been found to enhance students' ability to synthesize sources and articulate their positions, rather than merely augmenting citation

frequency (Nikbakht & Miller, 2023). Research on genre awareness indicates that learners modify their language in different writing tasks, which may affect their citation practices (Yu Kyoung Shin & Won, 2024). Lastly, corpus analyses of reporting verbs and citation functions provide useful tools for assessing both accuracy and rhetorical suitability (Ahn & Oh, 2024). The goal of this study is to transform these insights into pedagogical strategies that enhance both rule adherence and rhetorical precision in APA in-text citation at the diploma level.

The objectives of this study are:

1. to categorize the types of APA in-text citation errors found in ESL diploma students' problem–solution essays.
2. to determine the frequency and distribution of correct versus incorrect in-text citations across the examined problem–solution essays.
3. to discuss pedagogical implications in teaching in-text citation to ESL diploma students.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In academic writing, the accurate use of in-text citations is a crucial competency for English as a Second Language (ESL) students. Citations help writers show where their ideas came from and how their work fits into the academic world. Utilizing sources in writing is an essential competency for students in higher education (Friedman, 2019; Wette, 2010). But a lot of ESL students have trouble using APA in-text citation rules correctly. They usually know the basic rules, but they have trouble using them in a way that makes sense and is clear. The task becomes even more challenging when the students have to incorporate in-text citation into their writing, especially one that requires the students to justify their opinion like a problem-solution essay. Since problem-solution essays are a form of argumentative writing (Amini Farsani et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2025), it necessitates that students articulate a position while proficiently using external evidence. Accurate APA in-text reference is essential in this process, assisting authors in managing the ideas of others while developing their own personal voice (Sun et al., 2022).

Numerous studies indicate that proper citation involves not only the recollection of rules but also the conveyance of meaning and perspective. Sun et al. (2022) and Lee et al. (2018) found that students often use citations to show what they know, but they don't use them very often to evaluate or connect ideas. This means that students see citation as a mechanical task, not a rhetorical one. Friedman (2019) asserts that students perceive citation as assessment regulation rather than a means of engaging in dialogue with writers of the source. Zhang (2022) also found that professional writers use different types of citations in each part of a research paper. For example, they use non-integral citations to introduce theories and integral citations to show how something is being evaluated. These results indicate that students must comprehend the interplay between form and purpose in citation usage.

A different set of studies looks at how reading, writing, and citing are related. Nikbakht and Miller (2023) state that teaching students to read helps them connect the ideas in their sources to their own writing better. Shi (2012) and Wette (2017) also show that problems like patchwriting and over-citation often happen when people don't understand what they read or don't have a lot of words. So, learning how to cite is not just about formatting, it is also about improving understanding.

### Common Types of In-Text Citation Errors

A significant issue is the manner in which ESL students manage their use of source texts, namely the gathering of words or concepts from these texts (Weigle & Parker, 2012). As a result, students often struggle to determine whether citation is needed (Shi, 2012). When they do attempt to cite, more often than not, they will commit either minor or major error.

The most common error is insufficient attribution. Errors at times stem from insufficient acknowledgment of the original author, referred to as attribution (Davis, 2013). More novice student writings typically include content taken from sources without appropriate citation (Weigle & Parker, 2012). Ahn and Oh (2024) and Wette (2010) reported other rule-based errors that can affect attribution such as missing publication years, incorrect use of et

al., inconsistent author names, and misplaced punctuation.

Another common oversight among students is rhetorical integration of source into their writing. As highlighted by Docherty (2019) and Baxter and Neumann (2023), poor integration of quotes, missed connections between sources, and lacking authorial standpoint. This problem often ties to patchwriting, when students replicate sentences from the source with little modifications due to inadequate vocabulary or cognitive abilities to paraphrase properly (Neumann et al., 2020; Shi, 2012). In relation to that, as stated by Atikhom Thienthong (2025) and (Lee et al., 2018), inaccurate verb tense in reporting verbs, which are the words used to introduce cited material like claimed, argued, and stated, can also affect the meaning and accuracy of the citation.

### **Frequency and Distribution of Citation Accuracy**

Research indicates that ESL students often possess a lower proficiency in incorporating references relative to experienced writers. Studies examining proficient and less proficient writers reveal distinct disparities. Baxter and Neumann (2023) discovered that students with high proficiency employed citations more accurately and established stronger connections to their ideas. Lee et al. (2018) also discovered that more robust essays exhibited greater diversity in citation functions, such as attribution, evaluation, and linking, while weaker essays relied solely on basic attribution. Amini Farsani et al. (2025) substantiated this trend in their analysis of 108 studies, indicating that high-quality essays integrated accuracy with rhetorical intent.

ESL writers use a more limited variety of citation techniques and a limited set of narrative formats (Lee et al., 2018; Mu, 2024). They may produce an acceptable number of correct citations, but a significant portion of their source use may still be problematic or below the expected standard for academic work (Wette, 2017). Wette (2010) stated that this indicates that while ESL students can grasp the fundamental rule and components of citation, they have difficulties with the more intricate and nuanced features of it. The majority of ESL students can accurately use APA style after lessons, however only a handful can utilize citations to demonstrate synthesis or perspective. Such trends indicate that while accuracy improves with practice, rhetorical control develops at a more gradual pace (Wette, 2017; Allagui, 2023).

### **Pedagogical Implications for Teaching In-Text Citation**

The challenges encountered by ESL students indicate that training should emphasize both technical requirements, such as APA format, and more profound rhetorical abilities. Several studies offer useful teaching strategies for improving citation skills.

Firstly, teaching citation should be seen as an attempt at academic socialization. Teaching students how to cite sources should be seen as a way to help them join the academic community (Friedman, 2019). The objective is to advance students from merely dropping a citation after a borrowed idea (Petrić, 2007) to cultivating an authorial voice that governs and integrates the source material (Sun et al., 2022).

Secondly is to integrate different skills in the instructions. Since source-based writing is an integrated task that combines reading and writing (Zhu et al., 2021; Xie, 2023), enhancing reading skills is a crucial pedagogical approach. Similarly, Neumann et al. (2020) and Nikbakht and Miller (2023) found that reading-focused instruction helped students connect ideas from multiple texts. Studies show that focused reading instruction or a focus on vocabulary growth and reading comprehension can help students a lot with their ability to put together information from different sources (Neumann et al., 2020; Nikbakht & Miller, 2023).

Lastly, direct instruction on the rhetorical purpose of citations is also useful. Tools like corpus technology can help new writers learn how to use reporting verbs more accurately and in different ways for different purposes in their literature reviews (Yan & Ma, 2024; Atikhom Thienthong, 2025). Atikhom Thienthong (2025) recommends showing how reporting verbs (e.g., argues, suggests, demonstrates) indicate stance. Teachers should not only instruct students on how to cite but also elucidate the rationale behind specific citation methods, emphasizing that citation content can concentrate on theoretical, research, or methodological concepts (Chan & Kwan, 2024). The comparison of citation styles such as APA, MLA, and others emphasizes the necessity for explicit guidance on particular formatting regulations (Kumar & Madhusudhan, 2024).

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study adopted an explanatory and sequential mixed-method design. Numerical data and analysis were used to determine how often support materials were cited and the accuracy of its incorporation. Afterwards, a qualitative examination based on whole-text review and teacher insights were conducted in order to examine the characteristics and conceptual origins of the recognized mistakes.

### Participants and Context

Participants were 20 diploma-level students (aged 18–19) enrolled in an *English for Professional Communication* course at a Malaysian public university. Their English proficiency was assessed to be in the range of CEFR level B1 to B2. The essays were submitted as a continuous assessment task focusing on essay writing capabilities, focussing on problem and solution essay specifically. For the essay, the students must produce a 5 paragraphs essay with a minimum of 3 instances of in-text citation from valid and reliable sources, incorporated using the latest APA citation formatting (7<sup>th</sup> edition). The citations are expected to be incorporated in the 3 body paragraphs as a way to provide credible support to their proposed solutions to the problem the students want to solve.

### Writing Task and Data Collection

Students were required to write a five-paragraph problem–solution essay of approximately 600 words and use at least three cited sources following the latest APA format (7th edition). All referencing was completed manually by the students as no citation software was permitted.

For the process of data analysis, a 3-step process was implemented. Firstly, to calculate and determine the frequency and accuracy of the citation present in the essay, each essay was examined manually for the total number of in-text citations and assessed against APA 7th edition rules. The next step is coding. Once the citations in the 20 essays have been identified, both in-terms of frequency and accuracy, they are given specific code to identify them as. Citations were coded into three categories:

1. Accurate: Fully correct author–date format, punctuation, and confirmed match in the reference list.
2. Partially Accurate: Contained minor errors in punctuation, extra spacing, minor abbreviation issues, and others.
3. Inaccurate: Contained major errors like missing year of publication, wrong author, significant mismatch with the reference list.

The last step is the qualitative insight. The instructor of the course provides reflective notes on the process of before, while, and after writing that the students undergo in order to see its impact towards the teaching and learning process. Along with that, thematic overviews gathered from discussion sessions following the submission of the written assignment with the students was utilized to investigate how students view the function and significance of citation in their writing.

## FINDINGS

Across the 20 essays, a total of 91 in-text citations were identified and coded.

### Citation Frequency and Rhetorical Placement

All 20 essays met the minimum requirement of three citations, with the total number ranging from 3 to 7 per essay. This indicates that students understood the requirements for the essay writing assessment as well as need for external evidence being incorporated into the essay that they produce.

However, the positioning and context of references was frequently lacking in rhetorical strength and power. Although sources were commonly found in the introduction paragraph to provide context and description to the

problem as well as the earlier section of the body paragraphs to introduce the proposed solution to the problem, only 25% of the essays included citations in the explanation and elaboration of the solutions in the body paragraphs. This indicates that students mainly add citations to clarify the problem or indicate what the proposed solutions are, but do not recognize its importance in verifying the feasibility or credibility of suggested solutions.

Table I Frequency of In-Text Citations per Essay (N=20)

Essay Code	Number of Citations
E1	3
E2	4
E3	5
E4	6
E5	3
E6	4
E7	3
E8	7
E9	4
E10	5
E11	4
E12	6
E13	4
E14	4
E15	5
E16	5
E17	6
E18	5
E19	3
E20	5
<i>Mean per Essay</i>	4.55

### Citation Accuracy Overview

Of the 91 total citations, 57 were fully accurate, equating to an overall accuracy rate of **63%**. The remaining 37% (34 citations) contained minor or major errors.

Table II Citation Accuracy Across All Essays

Accuracy Level	Frequency (N=91)	Percentage	Issues
Accurate	57	63%	Correct author–date match and punctuation
Partially Accurate	21	23%	Minor spacing or misplaced commas



Inaccurate	13	14%	Missing year, wrong author, or mismatch with reference list
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### 4.3 Common Error Types

The most common error was missing or incorrect reporting of publication years, indicating challenges in finding comprehensive bibliographic information from the support materials the students want to use as reference for their essay. Furthermore, the misunderstanding about the use of ampersand (&) highlights failure to fully understand the correct APA citation guidelines and the ability to distinguish between narrative and parenthetical citation convention.

Table III Common Citation Errors by Type and Frequency

Error Type	Frequency (Number of essays out of N=20)	Percentage (of total essays)	Example
Missing or incorrect year	11	55%	(Organization, n.d.) instead of (Organization, 2023)
Incorrect use of ampersand (&)	7	35%	(Ali and Rahman, 2021) instead of (Ali & Rahman, 2021)
Wrong punctuation or spacing	9	45%	Extra spaces or misplaced commas.
Mismatch with reference list	5	25%	Citation in text was absent from the reference list.

### Source Integration Patterns

A clear preference was observed towards parenthetical citations (78%) compared to narrative citation (22%). For example, this choice of using (UNICEF, 2022) rather than telling “According to UNICEF (2022)” results in sources rarely being woven into discussions. This decision makes the essays to resemble collections of information being shared rather than coherent arguments being presented in engaging manner. This trend suggests that although students understood the technical obligation to include references in their writing, they did not fully value the rhetorical importance of incorporating sources in their own statements properly.

### Qualitative Observations on Student Understanding

Instructors noted several consistent misunderstandings concerning the function and significance of referencing. A key observation was a mechanical view of citations that often appeared completely separate from their intended role. Students repeatedly expressed the view that referencing is primarily an act of compliance in order to adhere to the assessment guideline and requirement. This emphasis on superficial compliance meant that the role of the citation as evidence or support was often ignored. For example, in feedback provided after submission, students commonly chose to copy and paste the simplest elements of the citation (author and year), rather than ensuring that the paraphrased content accurately reflected the authority of the source.

This mechanical perspective directly resulted in a notable trend where students inserted citations only after the main ideas of their essays had already been established. This trend is evident in the high percentage of parenthetical citations (78%) as opposed to narrative citation (22%). For example, Essay E12 included the phrase: “The only way to ensure the long-term survival of marine life is to impose higher fines and encourage biodegradable packaging (UNICEF, 2022).” The absence of a reporting phrase, for example, “UNICEF indicates that...” or “According to UNICEF...” reflects the student’s avoidance of the challenging task of grammatically and structurally incorporating the source into the argument in their writing, thus treating the citation as merely an addition to fulfil a formatting obligation for the assessment.

Another related issue involved a significant misunderstanding regarding the requirement of sources. Students regularly face difficulties in distinguishing between "common knowledge" that does not require citation and factual claim or specialized information that demands full attribution. For example, in essay E8, a source was incorrectly cited after the statement "Plastic pollution is a serious global environmental issue", which is widely recognized as common knowledge. In contrast, many of the essays neglected to reference specific high-impact data, such as "more than 50% of the local population does not have access to clean water", which were important to demonstrate the extent of the problem. This inconsistent application indicates a failure to evaluate the rhetorical significance and need for scholarly support for particular pieces of information.

Finally, there was a noticeable use of obsolete guidelines, particularly APA sixth edition practices. The most obvious example of this was the inclusion of conjunctions and parenthetical citations for references involving two authors. For example, the incorrect example from Table 3, (Ali and Rahman, 2021). This method is correct as of APA 6th, yet it has been replaced by the use of the ampersand (&) in parenthetical citations in APA 7th edition. In the seven essays featuring this specific mistake, which is 35% of all essays, the evidence clearly indicates that possibly inadequate instructions were given by the instructor to the students or outdated citation reference is hindering understanding of current required guidelines. This underlines the need for up-to-date teaching source that addresses outdated formatting practices.

## DISCUSSION

### Citation as a Rhetorical Tool in Reasoning

The findings indicate that ESL diploma students may achieve basic citation frequency. Yet, they often encounter difficulties with the procedural accuracy and rhetorical comprehension necessary for the efficient integration of materials. This significantly influences the problem-solution writing approach, as readers anticipate a coherent, research-based rationale.

Similar patterns are reported in studies of L1 and L2 source-based writing, where students can insert citations but have difficulty integrating them in ways that support their own argument (Doolan, 2021; Davis, 2013; Neumann et al., 2019). Research on rhetorical citation functions also shows that high-rated texts tend to use citations not only for attribution but also for exemplification, evaluation, and contrast, whereas lower-rated texts rely mainly on simple attribution (Petrić, 2007; Docherty, 2019). In the present study, many students demonstrated this same "attribution-only" pattern, especially in their problem sections, and then dropped citations altogether in the solution paragraphs.

The inadequacy in supporting suggested solutions with reliable references, as highlighted by the absence of citations in the solution sections, leaves students' proposed solutions as mere personal opinions rather than being supported by research. Studies of citation content and location indicate that where a citation appears in the text shapes how readers interpret the strength of a claim (Chan & Kwan, 2024; Wette, 2017). Furthermore, new research on "counterfeit" or erroneous citations indicates that improper or fabricated references may significantly undermine the trustworthiness of academic work (Camp et al., 2025). ESL students must recognize that appropriate citation transcends just adherence to norms and fulfilment of evaluation criteria.

Citation serves as a rhetorical mechanism that is important for demonstrating the validity and significance of the identified problem and for rationalizing the logic and feasibility of the recommended solution. Longitudinal and classroom-based studies have shown that as students gain experience and targeted instruction, they become more able to use sources to build a logical chain of reasoning rather than simply "dropping in" quotations (Davis, 2013; Wette, 2017). As stated by Petrić (2007), skilled referencing transforms an author's content from mere claims into active participation in academic discourse. The present findings suggest that ESL diploma students are at an intermediate stage: they recognize the need to cite but still need support to use citation as a rhetorical tool for argument, especially in the solution part of the essay.

### Pedagogical Implications

The results also show that numerical mistakes, such as omitting the year of publication or using an incorrect organization of author and date, reflect ESL students' limited understanding of the processes behind accurate

APA citation. Similar mechanical mistakes are recorded in studies concerning rewriting, paraphrasing, and borrowing from source texts, whereby students often concentrate on superficial alterations while neglecting more profound concerns of attribution and precision (Shi, 2012; Weigle & Parker, 2012). Qualitative insights in the current research underscore this problem, indicating an urgent need to transition instruction from seeing APA as simply formatting for students to learn, to recognizing APA as a framework for facilitating thinking.

It is essential for students to understand that each citation plays a communicative role. It describes, supports, illustrates, or contradicts different pieces of information in relation to the points the students are making, which in this context refer to either the problem or the solution. Studies on source integration have shown that learners who receive explicit instruction on the functions of citation, for example, “showing cause,” “supporting a solution,” or “signalling limitation”, tend to produce more coherent and persuasive texts (Neumann et al., 2020; Wette, 2010). Research on students’ use of outside sources also shows that learners frequently feel uncertain about how much detail to include, how to connect the source to their own sentence, and how to avoid over-reliance on direct quotation (Neumann et al., 2019; Docherty, 2019). These challenges match the patterns found in the present corpus of problem–solution essays.

Therefore, instruction during lessons should focus on how citations contribute to the overall structure of the writing, either in the problem section or the solution section. Studies on source-based tasks and L2 argumentative writing indicate that when citation work is intricately linked to genre transitions, such as “describing the problem,” “explaining causes,” and “justifying a solution”, students gain a clearer understanding of the rationale behind citing a specific study at a given juncture (Mochizuki, 2025; Amini Farsani et al., 2025). This adjustment in how we educate helps students become more academically literate by improving their citation abilities in terms of technical, conceptual, and rhetorical components at the same time as meeting assessment standards. Studies on mindset intervention in L2 writing also show that when students are encouraged to see challenges with citation as opportunities to develop expertise, their engagement and performance in writing tasks improve (Rong et al., 2025). In turn, ESL students are more likely to persist through the complexity of APA and ultimately produce higher quality academic work.

### **Recommendations for Genre-Integrated Instruction**

The findings of this study open the door for instructors, as well as curriculum planners, to structure their lessons in a more objective and directed manner. The first suggestion is to explicitly include citation instruction, moving it from a separate, stand-alone technical lesson to a core aspect of genre-focused teaching of the problem–solution essay. Evidence from EAP and source-based writing courses shows that integrated units on “writing using sources” help students connect citation choices with the moves of the genre and with the expectations of academic reading (Wette, 2010; Doolan, 2021). Rather than only offering a list of APA guidelines, the lesson given by the instructor should be tied directly to the rhetorical purpose of a particular paragraph within a problem–solution essay.

For example, when teaching how to write body paragraphs for a problem–solution essay, the instructor can demonstrate how a narrative quotation style that includes the author’s name and a reporting verb, such as “Smith (2022) claims that...,” supports the main idea of the solution and how this move reinforces the student-writer’s stance. Studies of citation functions and content show that such choices influence whether the reader sees the writer as merely reporting information or as using evidence to build an argument (Petrić, 2007; Chan & Kwan, 2024). This narrative method actively combats the passive, late-in-text parenthetical citation style found in the students’ essays.

The second suggestion is to focus on prioritizing model analysis and guided practice to develop rhetorical consciousness in ESL students’ writing. Research indicates that when students analyse real examples of how citations are used in high- and low-rated texts, they become more aware of how citation type, location, and reporting verbs work together (Davis, 2013; Amini Farsani et al., 2025). This method asks students to study examples from different types of writing and think critically about why the author chose a given citation style, either narrative or parenthetical, and why the citation is in that location. It is essential for students to examine and understand how citations play different roles when used to highlight the seriousness of a problem, for



example by using statistical evidence, compared to justifying the practicality of a solution, for example by referencing case studies or expert opinions (Neumann et al., 2019; Mochizuki, 2025).

The third suggestion is the use of targeted practices to address the mechanical mistakes and reasoning shortcomings uncovered in the analysis of the ESL students' problem-solution essays. Exercises can focus on restating the original material, such as transforming parenthetical references like "(Li & Chen, 2023)" into a narrative style "Li and Chen (2023) noted that..." forcing the learner to practise using reporting verbs and grammatical blending. Research on paraphrasing and rewriting indicates that such transformations facilitate learners' transition from mere copying to more adaptable use of sources (Shi, 2012; Weigle & Parker, 2012). Students may also do more focused editing of in-text citations and reference list entries to make sure that the author and date are consistent and that they follow the fundamental rules of APA 7th edition (Wette, 2010; Neumann et al., 2020). Task settings, including how many sources are needed, also show that carefully structuring the source load may help both performance and self-efficacy (Allagui, 2023).

Finally, the fourth recommendation is related to how the assessment is designed. There is a need to modify the evaluation criteria to incentivize effective work with sources rather than merely punish mistakes. Present evaluation methodologies often confine citation assessment to a single "formatting" area inside scoring rubrics, only identifying mechanical mistakes (Wette, 2017). Marks for clarity, coherence, and logic should also look at how effectively sources are used to back up statements and make them more credible. By rewarding students who use sources well, for example, by always using citations to back up their proposed solutions, education changes from just teaching technical skills and following rules to teaching students how to write better academically (Neumann et al., 2019; Amini Farsani et al., 2025).

## CONCLUSION

This study examined how ESL diploma learners use APA in-text citations in their problem-solution essays. Although students met the required frequency standards, their accuracy was at a moderate rate of 63%. The students' ability to integrate citations rhetorically was also limited, as shown by their heavy use of parenthetical citations and their failure to support the solutions they proposed. The main difficulty lies in their conceptual understanding. A lot of ESL students still think of citation as a strict guideline they have to follow in order to pass the assessment, and not as a rhetorical and ethical responsibility that helps them demonstrate what they know, develop credibility, and interact with academic sources.

This result aligns with other studies about beginner academic writers. One research involving Thai students and professional writers indicated that student writers used a more limited variety of citation formats and primarily employed references for attribution rather than for articulating viewpoint or assessment (Attapol Khamkhien, 2024). One corpus-driven research of first-year students in Hong Kong revealed that better-scoring problem-solution essays had a more proficient and appropriate use of academic language, which was strongly associated with overall writing competence (Chung & Wan, 2025). Research on approaches to engagement in argument chains has shown that poorly performing EFL writers rely on a restricted array of engagement resources, hence impairing its ability to link arguments, evidence, and possible counterarguments (Geng et al., 2024). Similarly, study on verb argument constructions has shown that Asian L2 writers with lesser proficiency utilize fewer and less complex construction patterns, which may make their written arguments less strong and clear (Li & Yu, 2024). Taken together, these studies support the present finding that both linguistic resources and rhetorical control are needed for students to use citations effectively, especially in solution paragraphs.

The results therefore call for a teaching approach that integrates citation practice directly into genre-based writing lessons. Instruction should emphasise how sources support different parts of an argument and how writers can choose citation forms purposefully, rather than focusing only on mechanical accuracy. This approach can help ESL learners develop the academic literacy needed for future study and professional communication.

Future studies should broaden this investigation by including other academic fields or comparing different proficiency levels to track how citation literacy develops over time. In-depth interviews may also offer clearer insights into how ESL students understand academic integrity, author authority, and their responsibilities as developing academic writers.

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