

Source Text Use in First-Year University Students' Academic Writing: A Within-Subject Analysis of L1 Chinese and L2 English Citation Practice

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How to cite this paper: Mu, R., Zhu, X. H., Zhang, X. M., & Cheong, C. M. (2025). Source Text Use in First-Year University Students' Academic Writing: A Within-Subject Analysis of L1 Chinese and L2 English Citation Practice. *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics*, 15, 773-793.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/ojml.2025.155045>

Received: August 18, 2025

Accepted: September 22, 2025

Published: September 25, 2025

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Abstract

Citation in academic writing serves to provide evidence for arguments and demonstrate academic literacy. Previous research has largely focused on single perspectives, limiting insights into how source texts are used in citations. Furthermore, studies examining citation practices within the same bilingual writer's first language (L1) and second language (L2) are scarce. This study explores two key areas using a within-subject design from contextual, intertextual, and functional perspectives: 1) the similarities and differences in citation practices among 25 first-year undergraduate novice writers using source texts in L1 Chinese and L2 English, and 2) how these practices reveal the challenges faced in both languages. Results indicate that, contextually, information-prominent citations were more common than author-prominent ones in both languages. Students used more reporting verbs in L2 but struggled with their meanings. Intertextually, generalization was more prevalent in L2, reflecting its emphasis on instruction. Functionally, application and evaluation were more common in L1, while establishing links was emphasized in L2. These findings underscore the need for clear task requirements and standards in citation practices, which could enhance undergraduate students' academic writing success.

Keywords

Citation Practice, Undergraduate Students, L1-L2 Within-Subject Study, Academic Writing

1. Introduction

Practice of citation is considered one of the essential components of academic

writing. Many researchers (e.g., Hyland, 2000; Lee et al, 2018) have asserted that the role of citation within academic writing is not only to provide evidence for backing up the writers' assertions and demonstrating the validity of their claims using the work of others, but also to perform the writers' own evaluation of particular literature. By citing relevant studies, writers can develop ongoing conversation with existing scholarship and build in-depth knowledge in their field.

To produce a high-quality citation, it is essential not only to ensure format accuracy but also to consider how to effectively use the source texts, which, to novice writers, is difficult. Hence, previous studies have demonstrated that undergraduate novice writers often face difficulties regarding source text use in both their first language (L1) and second language (L2) academic writing (Gebriel & Plakans, 2009). Firstly, novice writers might face challenges in evaluating the reliability and usefulness of source texts they read due to their limited experience and unfamiliarity with academic standards. Secondly, they fail to connect the source texts with their own statements, and their own stance is not well-represented in academic writing (Coffin, 2009). Thirdly, at the beginning of their academic study, when novice writers fail to integrate content from different sources, they tend to resort to patch-writing (Li & Casanave, 2012), which may result in plagiarism or other forms of academic dishonesty. On top of this, for those navigating these complexities of writing in L2, mastering the source texts in academic writing can be even more challenging due to language proficiency. Overall, the challenges related to using source texts can greatly impact the quality of citations. This, in turn, can undermine the persuasiveness of the author's arguments, leading to a generally unsatisfactory level of academic writing. Therefore, it is essential to understand: 1) the similarities and differences in the citation practices of novice writers in L1 and L2, particularly regarding their use of source texts; 2) the challenges that novice writers face in using source texts in their citation practices in L1 and L2 academic writing. These insights can significantly enhance instructional practices across various subjects.

Most studies focusing on novice writers relied on textual analysis based on different parts (e.g., literature review, discussion) of an academic essay (Jalilifar, 2012; Samraj, 2013), in multi-disciplines (Charles, 2006; Hyland, 1999), and produced by either L1 or L2 writers. There is a lack of within-subject comparisons, that is, comparing related measures from the same writer in their L1 and L2 academic essays, which is a significant research gap. According to Cobey et al. (2012), one of the advantages of using a within-subject design is to control for individual differences. By using the same participants for all conditions, the variability caused by differences in characteristics such as age, gender, and baseline abilities is reduced, leading to more reliable and valid conclusions. Related to the unique language context in Hong Kong SAR, where language education policy targets trilingualism and biliteracy, students are required to converse in Cantonese, Mandarin, and English; in addition, to read and write in Chinese (L1) and English (L2) languages (Evans, 2011; Li, 2017). Although Hong Kong SAR students may have attained a

certain proficiency level in both languages, the linguistic and educational background between them may affect the citation use in academic writing in each of the languages (Geng & Wharton, 2016). This offers an opportunity to explore the comparison between the two languages in citation practices. Therefore, the current study examines the differences in these practices of undergraduate novice writers in using source texts for citation practices between L1 and L2 academic writing and provides evidence of the challenges that these writers face and offers insights into the reasons that shape citation behaviors among them.

1.1. Source Text Use of Citation Practice in L1 and L2

Previous literature has classified citation practices concerning source text use into three primary perspectives. First, when writers refer to the findings of other scholars in their own work, they can choose between two formats depending on their contextual priorities: information-prominent citations and author-prominent citations (Weissberg & Buker, 1990). Author-prominent citations, also known as integral citations (Swales, 1986, 1990), feature the source author's name within the citing sentence, making it the subject and thereby emphasizing the reported author. Some studies indicate that, in author-prominent citations, the choice of verb (e.g., "argues" in the earlier example) can reveal the writer's stance toward the reported information (Jiang & Hyland, 2015; Martin & White, 2005). Building on earlier research by Chubin and Moitra (1975), Coffin (2009) identified four categories of reporting verbs that allow writers to acknowledge, distance themselves from, endorse, or contest the cited information. For instance, verbs like "discovered", "observed", and "found" suggest that writers endorse the citation, whereas the verb "claimed" signals a desire to distance themselves from the cited source texts.

In contrast, information-prominent citations, or non-integral citation (Swales, 1986, 1990), place the author's name in parentheses or indicate it by superscript numbers referencing a footnote or endnote, thus placing greater emphasis on the reported information. From a linguistic perspective, Samraj (2013) discovered that both expert and novice writers use information-prominent citations more frequently than author-prominent citations in L1 contexts. Additionally, Hu and Wang (2014) noted that students used more author-prominent citations in their Chinese L1 essays compared to their English L2 essays, attributing this difference to cultural beliefs and discursive practices, particularly the traditional Chinese focus on proper naming or the "rectification of names" (Chan, 1963: p. 18).

Furthermore, the writer must consider how to represent the useful content in their own work after reviewing source texts and deciding what to select. Hyland (1999) proposed four categories, naming direct quotes (three or more words), block quotes (extensive use of the original source, more than 40 words), summaries (summarize the main idea from one source), and generalizations (synthesize the information from two or more sources). These categories have been applied in multiple studies (e.g., McCulloch, 2012; Shi, 2008; Thompson & Tribble, 2001).

Additionally, several other studies have introduced the category of “paraphrase” (Plakans & Gebril, 2013). It is crucial to differentiate “paraphrase” from “summarize”: paraphrasing entails rewording a specific text while maintaining a similar length, whereas summarizing involves condensing the main points of a larger text into a concise overview. Using the concept of intertextuality from literary studies (e.g., Kristeva, 1980, 1986), the categories of “quotation”, “block quotation”, and “paraphrase” present “manifest intertextuality”, where the cited source texts are explicitly shown in the writing under analysis, while the categories of “summary” and “generalization” present “constitutive intertextuality”, which requires the configuration of discourse conventions (Fairclough, 1992). Previous research discovered that the percentage of direct quoting in L1 Chinese was significantly higher than that of L1 English (Shi & Dong, 2018; van Weijen et al., 2019). However, in L2, Lee et al. (2018) found a comparatively lower frequency of direct quotations when compared to paraphrasing and summarizing the cited source.

In addition to the two areas mentioned above, the writer must consider the role of the selected source text to ensure that it remains logical, coherent, and persuasive in its arguments. Petrić (2007) expanded Thompson and Tribble’s (2001) classification from four to eight functions (e.g., attribution, exemplification, further reference, statement of use, application, evaluation, establishing links between sources, comparison of one’s own findings or interpretation with other sources). Petrić’s refinement focused on how citations serve the writing goal and how writers handle citations that serve the same purpose. Among all the functions, “attribution” and “exemplification” are considered elementary rhetorical skills as they primarily serve descriptive purposes. On the other hand, functions such as “evaluating the cited sources”, “establishing links among sources”, and “making comparison between sources and own findings” serve to present information in a new and transformative manner, which are considered more advanced skills (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). These refined classifications have been widely adopted and validated in various studies (Lee et al., 2018; Petrić, 2012), and attribution was found to be the most commonly used function in both L1 and L2 writing (Mansourizadeh & Ahmad, 2011; Petrić, 2007). By attributing, writers acknowledge the source author of information or activity (Lee et al., 2018; Wette, 2017). However, there are differences in the patterns between L1 and L2 citation regarding its function. On the one hand, experienced L1 writers tend to employ cited materials to explain their findings and establish connections by comparing results (Samraj, 2013); on the other hand, L2 writers exhibit limited use of more complex citation types (Lee et al., 2018), as they may lack sufficient knowledge and confidence to compare and evaluate the information from sources (Wette, 2017). Furthermore, significant differences were identified between novice writers who mainly use citation in isolation to attribute, while experts are able to synthesize multiple sources and strategically justify their arguments (Mansourizadeh & Ahmad, 2011).

In conclusion, previous research has frequently examined citation practices from

a singular perspective, often neglecting the combined influences of contextual, intertextual, and functional aspects to provide a comprehensive view of writers' source texts use in their citation practice. Additionally, while existing studies have compared the frequency of citation use among novice writers in both L1 and L2, there is a notable lack of within-subject studies that investigate the differences between the two languages. Addressing these issues is crucial for deepening our understanding of novice writers' citation practices and effectively guiding initiatives aimed at enhancing their academic writing across different languages.

1.2. Students' Perception of the Difficulties of Academic Writing in L1 and L2

When students first enroll in university, they often encounter numerous challenges associated with writing in academic genres. Hence, studies have been conducted to unveil the challenges that students encounter. Challenges such as inadequate content knowledge of discipline (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Dalsky & Tajino, 2007; Islamiyah & Fajri, 2020; Lee & Tajino, 2008; Morton et al., 2015; Vyncke, 2012), difficulties in discerning and synthesizing relevant literature (Cumming et al., 2016; Islamiyah & Fajri, 2020; Wingate, 2012), and limited or inappropriate understanding regarding citation practices (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Lee et al., 2018; Wette, 2017; Vyncke, 2012; Wingate, 2012) are commonly reported by students.

The primary challenge for novice writers typically arises from their unfamiliarity with a specific discipline and the conventions of academic writing concurrently. Japanese first-year university students reported that they struggled with the transition from high school practical English to university academic English, particularly in formal writing and understanding of the rules of academic writing (Dalsky & Tajino, 2007; Lee & Tajino, 2008). Students may perceive academic writing either at the semantic or structural level (Wolsey et al., 2012). This challenge was also encountered by other international students who write academic essays in English as L2 (Islamiyah & Fajri, 2020; Morton et al., 2015; Vyncke, 2012), typically and repeatedly reporting that they struggled with essay genre, argument clarity, and lacked subject knowledge (Vyncke, 2012). However, it was reported that as students became more acquainted with academic writing and deepened their understanding of their disciplines, they progressed from a semantic understanding to a more sophisticated grasp at the rhetorical level in both L1 (Wolsey et al., 2012) and L2 (Morton et al., 2015). Essentially, the issue of limited content knowledge led to the lack of capacity to filter, evaluate, and amalgamate information effectively, as evidenced in the interview reports of Indonesian Master's students (Islamiyah & Fajri, 2020). The task of synthesizing information from multiple sources is a complex undertaking that demands a high level of reading ability (Spivey, 2023; Wiley & Voss, 1999). Studies (e.g., Mateos & Solé, 2009) provided evidence through the analysis of writing production from source texts and think-aloud protocol that showed that producing syntheses poses a formidable challenge, even for university students exhibiting advanced proficiency in reading

and writing regardless of their educational level. In the synthesis study, the challenge of selecting appropriate sources for academic papers was consistently acknowledged in many studies (Cumming et al., 2016). Through the analysis of open-ended questionnaires and diary entries, it was discovered that certain L1 students may encounter challenges in being discerning and purposeful in their utilization of information in literature (Wingate, 2012). L2 writers also demonstrated restricted utilization (2%) of synthesis techniques (Doolan, 2021).

Research on the difficulties students face in citation practices is conducted within the realm of both L1 and L2 (Cumming et al., 2016). First-year undergraduates were reported to have incomplete, limited, or incorrect notions of arguments, indicating a lack of knowledge on how to formulate propositions supported by ground (Wingate, 2012). L2 participants tended to employ citations for a restricted set of rhetorical purposes, predominantly focusing on fundamental functions like acknowledging the source of an idea without providing any commentary or offering a critical appraisal (Islamiyah & Fajri, 2020; Wette, 2017). In L2, both postgraduate students (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006) and undergraduate students (Wette, 2017) exhibited a limited comprehension of the functions of citations. Sometimes students typically heeded their instructors' recommendations by using citing verb without a complete understanding of how these terms convey their position (Wette, 2017). Lee et al. (2018) also found that L2 students were limited in their use of more advanced citation. They hypothesized that this might be a result of their struggle in fully grasping the multifaceted purposes and rhetorical functions of citations in shaping arguments.

In L2, both difficulties in discerning and synthesizing relevant literature (Cumming et al., 2016) and superficial utilization of citation (Lee et al., 2018) were reported to be associated with linguistic fluency. Nevertheless, due to the limited number of papers, Cumming et al. (2016) state that attributing the challenge solely to language proficiency may be problematic, as it could be a universal difficulty shared by writers regardless of their languages. Hence, an L1-L2 within-subject study is more effective when participants share the same level of language proficiency. In comparing L1 and L2 writers, researchers (Doolan, 2021; Kobayashi & Rinnery, 2008) discovered that L1 writers tend to use sources to elaborate on their personal perspectives, whereas L2 writers often report information directly from source material and convey ideas clearly. While some research has involved participants utilizing either their L1 or L2 (Doolan, 2021) or explored the structural variances in arguments between L1 and L2 (Kobayashi & Rinnery, 2008), fewer studies have delved into the within-subject rhetorical distinctions between L1 and L2. Thus, a within-subject study should be conducted to examine the challenges that students encounter in both their L1 and L2.

1.3. Research Gap and the Current Study

Despite the valuable insights gained from previous research, several notable gaps continue to hinder a comprehensive understanding of citation practices among

novice writers. First, previous research has often analysed citation practices from a single perspective, neglecting the combined effects of contextual, intertextual, and functional factors, which limits the understanding of source text use in citations. Additionally, although previous studies often compare citation frequency from various perspectives among novice writers in either L1 and L2 contexts, the differences in the challenges associated with L1 and L2 academic writing have not been adequately addressed in the literature. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of within-subject studies that compare citation practices in Chinese and English. Such studies could provide valuable insights by controlling for individual differences, allowing for a more precise analysis of how language influences citation practices.

By addressing these gaps, the current study aims to investigate two key areas using a within-subject design: 1) the similarities and differences in the citation practices of undergraduate novice writers using source texts in L1 and L2 academic writing, and 2) how these characteristics highlight the challenges they encounter in both languages. The insights gained from this exploration can greatly improve instructional practices across various disciplines and enhance the quality of citation practices and academic writing performance among novice undergraduate writers. Consequently, the following research question is addressed:

RQ1: What are the similarities and differences in the citation practices of undergraduate novice writers using source texts in L1 and L2 academic writing from the contextual, intertextual, and functional perspectives?

RQ2: How do these characteristics highlight the challenges the students face in both languages?

2. Methodology

A mixed-method design was conducted to strengthen the findings, which includes textual analysis of students' citation practice regarding source text use in their L1 and L2 essays, as well as qualitative analysis based on their interview statements.

2.1. Participants

This study involved the participation of 25 undergraduate students from two universities that are ranked within the top to medium range among the eight public universities in Hong Kong SAR. Participants were sampled based on the grade point average (GPA) they achieved in the first year of their course (5 students are excellent, 16 students are good, and 4 students are satisfactory). The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 25, with an average of 21.37 years old ($SD = 1.69$). There were 14 female (56%) students. The participants enrolled in programs in humanities and social sciences, including history, linguistics, literature, education, psychology, economics, and other subjects. All participants' first language is Cantonese, and their second language is English.

Out of the 25 students, 12 (anonymized as S1 - S12) attended the interview vol-

untarily. The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 23, with an average of 20.68 years old ($SD = 0.89$). There were 8 female (66.7%) interviewees.

2.2. Collection and Analysis of Textual Data

All participants were required to submit one essay in Chinese and one in English within the field of Humanities and Social Sciences, ensuring that the essays were comparable across L1 and L2. Teacher guidance included a rubric outlining key criteria such as thesis clarity, argument development, and use of evidence, ensuring consistency in expectations. The structure of the essays should include an introduction presenting the thesis, a well-organized body that supports the argument with academic sources, and a conclusion summarizing the main points. Additionally, all sources must be cited using the specified citation style (e.g., APA, MLA, Chicago). Due to the absence of white spaces between words in Chinese written language, we adopted a ratio of 1.6:1 between the number of Chinese characters and the number of English words according to McEnery et al. (2003). Consequently, the Chinese essay needed to be between 2,000 and 4,000 characters, while the English essay was required to be between 1,250 and 2,500 words. 25 Chinese essays (anonymized as C1 - C25) and 25 English essays (E1 - E25) were collected. Before analysis, all essays were scanned through Turnitin, a software tool that detects plagiarism by comparing student work with previously published material.

Citations in the essays were identified based on Hyland's (2000) criteria. Each occurrence of another author's name was counted as a citation, regardless of whether it was accompanied by the year of publication. Additionally, names referenced in footnotes were also considered citations. All citations were coded based on the framework (see Table 1) that encompasses the three perspectives regarding source text use (e.g., contextual, intertextual, and functional). The contextual perspective emphasizes the significance of the authors' contextual priorities when deciding whether to refer to the findings of other scholars using information-prominent citations and author-prominent citations. The intertextual perspective explores how authors represent the useful content in their own work, with the options of direct quotes, block quotes, paraphrases, summaries, and generalizations. Lastly, the functional perspective examines the specific roles that citation plays within an essay, analyzing how citations support claims, provide evidence, or address counterarguments, using Petrić's (2007) category. Together, these perspectives offer a comprehensive understanding of how novice writers engage with source texts in their academic writing. To ensure the rigor of the study, citation density, i.e., number of citations per 1000 words, was used when comparing between L1 and L2 essays (Petrić, 2007). We used a two-tailed t-test and a repeated measures ANOVA to calculate the p-values. We confirmed that the data met the assumptions of normality, as assessed by the Shapiro-Wilk test, and that the data were paired for the repeated measures analysis. No violations of assumptions were noted, ensuring the validity of our statistical findings.

Table 1. Coding framework.

Perspective	Category	Definition
Contextual	Author-prominent	Place greater emphasis on the reported author by including the source author's name within the citing sentence.
	Information-prominent	Place greater emphasis on the reported message by placing the author's name in parentheses or indicating it by superscript numbers that refer to a footnote or endnote.
Intertextual	Quotation	Direct quotes of 1 to 39 words.
	Block Quotation	Direct quotes of 40 or more words.
	Paraphrase	Reword a specific text while maintaining a similar length.
	Summary	Condense the main points of one source text into a concise overview.
Functional	Generalization	Synthesize the information from two or more source texts.
	Attribution	Attribute information or activities to source texts
	Exemplification	Exemplify the writer's statement using source texts, typically introduced by phrases such as "for example".
	Further Reference	Cite source texts that offer additional information on the issue, typically presented in brackets or footnotes and introduced by the word "see".
	Statement of Use	Indicate which works are used in the thesis and for what specific purposes.
	Application	Establish connections between source texts and the writer's work to serve the writer's own purposes.
	Evaluation	Evaluate source texts using evaluative language.
	Establishing Links between Sources	Make a comparison and contrast between or among different source texts.
	Comparison of Own Findings with Sources	Highlight similarities or differences between one's own work and the works of other authors.

2.3. Collection and Analysis of Interview Data

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 students, each of about 40 minutes in duration. The essays they submitted were used to elicit their thoughts on citation practice regarding source text use. The interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim. Each of the transcripts was coded by two independent raters who used natural breaks in the transcript as cutting-off points, which typically indicate a change in topic (Corbin & Strauss, 2012). We assessed the inter-rater reliability for the coding process using Cohen's κ , which yielded a value of 0.85, indicating substantial agreement among coders. This complements the inter-rater reliability of 0.91.

3. Results

A total of 778 citations were identified in 110,212 words, of which 428 were in the L1 Chinese essays (66,780 words) and 350 in the L2 English essays (43,432 words).

Citation density is 6.41 in the L1 Chinese essays and 8.06 in the L2 English essays. The following presents findings related to the research questions that sought to explore the similarities and differences in citation practices using source texts in L1 and L2 academic writing, as well as the challenges reflected in the characteristics that students encounter in both languages and the underlying reasons for these challenges. This was addressed through an analysis of the essays, complemented by observations from interviews. **Table 2** compares the citation frequency in L1 and L2 essays based on the three perspectives of source text use.

Table 2. Comparisons between L1 and L2 regarding different perspectives.

		L1 Chinese			L2 English		
		Frequency	Citation Density per 1000 Words	Percentage	Frequency	Citation Density per 1000 Words	Percentage
Contextual	Author-prominent	29	0.43	6.78%	81	1.86	23.14%
	Information-prominent	399	5.97	93.22%	269	6.19	76.86%
Intertextual	Quotation	118	1.77	27.57%	54	1.24	15.43%
	Block Quotation	39	0.58	9.11%	9	0.21	2.57%
	Paraphrase	121	1.81	28.27%	142	3.27	40.57%
	Summary	150	2.25	35.05%	122	2.81	34.86%
	Generalization	0	0.00	0.00%	23	0.53	6.57%
	Attribution	331	4.96	77.34%	284	6.54	81.14%
Functional	Exemplification	55	0.82	12.85%	39	0.90	11.14%
	Further Reference	3	0.04	0.70%	0	0.00	0.00%
	Statement of Use	0	0.00	0.00%	1	0.02	0.29%
	Application	24	0.36	5.61%	0	0.00	0.00%
	Evaluation	7	0.10	1.64%	1	0.02	0.29%
	Establishing Links	5	0.07	1.17%	23	0.53	6.57%
	Comparison	3	0.04	0.70%	2	0.05	0.57%

3.1. Contextual Perspective

Compared to author-prominent citations, information-prominent citations are used significantly more often ($p < 0.05$), either in L1 (5.97, 93.22%) or in L2 (6.19, 76.86%), indicating that the novice student writers tended to place more emphasis on the information in the reported text instead of the author of the sources. When asked why they used information-prominent citations more frequently in their essays, students noted that these types of citations help condense information and keep sentences concise and direct. They also aid in maintaining the flow of argumentation and enhancing readability. For instance, S9 mentioned, “In my essay, I used information-prominent citations when discussing five-factor model (FFM). By incorporating citations without integrating them into the sentence structure, I was able to ensure a smooth flow of argumentation.

This approach allowed me to keep my sentences short and direct while still presenting key findings, making the entire piece feel more cohesive and easier to understand”.

However, the number of author-prominent citations used in L2 English essays (1.86, 23.14%) is about three times greater than in L1 Chinese essays (0.43, 6.78%). When questioned about the reasons for employing more author-prominent citations in English essays, a student provided the following explanation: “English teachers commonly provide us with recommended readings prior to writing, which is very useful. When I attempt to find references on my own, there is a risk of not discovering sufficiently authoritative literature, and I lack the ability to determine its credibility. The readings recommended by the teacher are generally reliable and convincing. Consequently, when utilizing external sources in my writing, I typically begin the sentence by mentioning the author’s name. This approach not only lends authority to my article, thereby convincing my readers, but it also serves as evidence to the teacher that I have diligently engaged with the recommended literature, which may help me to get higher grades” (S12). Hence, students benefited from the use of author-prominent citations to bolster the credibility and authority of their arguments, while also meeting their instructors’ expectations. Furthermore, the findings exposed a deficiency in the support provided by the Chinese teacher to first-year novice writers. The interviewees expressed that they were not taught or guided on citation practices in L1, as their programme teachers may have assumed that they were able to identify reliable reading sources and organize them.

In author-prominent citations, it is noteworthy that students employ a variety of reporting verbs such as “find out”, “advocate”, “discover”, “suggest”, and “demonstrate” (Example 1) to express clear endorsements of the source texts they cite in L2. In contrast, in L1 writing, students often reveal their position towards the end of the discussion, after presenting all the referenced statements, using predominantly neutral reporting verbs like “noted” and “indicated”.

Example 1: Based on the research results, children can recognize the mood from music, which means that music will shape our cognition to a certain extent. Cevasco (2008) demonstrated that mother’s singing was beneficial for calming their infants and promoting mother-infant bonding. (E4, integral citation)

To determine whether the use of reporting verbs is related to the author’s attitude towards the cited source texts or influenced by other factors, we presented these examples to the interviewees, who responded as follows: “I feel that, at this stage, students rarely think carefully about these kinds of issues. I even feel that many of these verbs have similar meanings, and I seldom consider using a specific verb to express my opinions strongly or subtly. However, I do intentionally select different reporting verbs, but not to convey my viewpoint; instead, it’s to enhance my sentence structure and vocabulary. It seems we haven’t fully engaged with the academic realm yet; it’s more about making our assignments look good for the teachers”. Hence, drawing from the explanation from the interviews, it seems that

first-year students use a variety of reporting verbs in order to enrich their vocabulary and therefore achieve higher scores, but they do not fully understand that reporting verbs can indicate their attitude towards the source text. However, we also observed that students did not express disagreement with the cited materials in either Chinese or English writing. A student's statement during the interview might explain the reason behind this phenomenon: "I feel hesitant to openly criticize or refute other people's viewpoints, actively search for flaws in an article, or engage in critique" (S5). Therefore, for novice writers, they might lack the necessary critical thinking skills or awareness to evaluate the cited materials and identify potential flaws or raise objections.

3.2. Intertextual Perspective

In L1 writing, the top three methods to represent useful content are summary (2.25, 35.05%), paraphrase (1.81, 28.27%), and quotation (1.77, 27.57%), while in L2, the top three are paraphrase (3.27, 40.57%), summary (2.81, 34.86%), and quotation (1.24, 15.43%). Students possess a clear understanding of which information to directly quote and which to paraphrase or summarize, as S4 stated, "Usually, I paraphrase and summarize. I do not copy directly unless it is a famous quote that does not have to be changed. For general content, I will paraphrase, maybe summarize the main points. If those may be difficult to summarize, I will reorganize the different parts of the sentence, but the meaning is the same, so I avoid the problem of plagiarism".

Table 3. Students' summary/generalization in L1 Chinese and L2 English.

Language	Source	Summary/Generalization in Essay	Students' Comments in Interview
Chinese	Under feudal etiquette, the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" and the "Three Cardinal Guides and Five Constant Virtues" prevented women from appearing in public, walking in the center of the room, or exposing their bodies to strangers. As a woman in women's clothing, she correspondingly sacrificed herself as a seeker of beauty and the embodiment of beauty, and also lost the interrelationship between clothing and the human body... In the overall social environment, the existence of women is ignored, and the expression of women's curvilinear beauty is weakened, and all of this is attributed to the decisive role of Confucianism in the rites and rituals. (Original Chinese has been translated into English.)	C25: Under the influence of Confucianism, women's clothing has always been associated with modesty in ancient times. Women could not expose their bodies to strangers, so they often used clothing to hide their appearance. Loose designs weakened the curves of women's bodies, and regardless of the season, women were tightly wrapped and never bared their breasts or backs. (The original Chinese has been translated into English.)	This is one of the details in the article. It is said that before the Tang Dynasty, women were not allowed to be scantily dressed. I have summarized the Three Obediences and Four Virtues as Confucianism, and I have also reinforced this fact on the basis of the original text, for example, by using words such as "regardless of the season" and "absolutely".

Continued

English	<p>The findings show the negative relationships between high-stakes testing and children's learning, with major themes including skewed curricula, the spillover of major subjects, major subject-centered scheduling, undermining recess, exam-oriented pedagogy, endless homework and drilling, and overemphasis on grades. The findings also show that children's wellbeing is a matter of concern, with major themes including schoolwork as a source of conflict in the family, distant relationships with teachers, friendship used as comfort, no real leisure time, deprived sleep, enduring pressure and stress, and overall happiness being reduced by studying.</p>	<p>E24: Researchers found that children's wellbeing is jeopardized by a lack of leisure time, deprived sleep, and enduring pressure and stress from examinations and endless homework.</p>	<p>Because my viewpoint here is that high-stakes testing greatly affects the future development of students and they attach great importance to their academic results, I selected some of the disadvantages regarding academics from the source.</p>
English	<p>Source 1: In the era of neoliberalism, human beings are made accountable for their predicaments or circumstances... the context in which individuals define themselves is privatized rather than publicized; the focus of concerns is on the self rather than the collective... by inducing people to aim for "self-improvement".</p> <p>Source 2: Neoliberal governance operates on the assumption, therefore, that individuals are, above and beyond anything else, competitive beings who seek to gain advantage not only through participation in the economy, but also through all aspects of their lives... In line with this, individuals are seen by governments as "human capital", which must be invested in. Individuals are also expected to self-invest and take responsibility to nourish their productive potentials.</p>	<p>E20: As neoliberalism emphasizes competitiveness in society and believes people are accountable for their predicament, it creates a circumstance in which students have to earn as many advantages, become more productive, and actualize their potential to succeed.</p>	<p>This sentence was summarized based on sources from two articles. The first source was at the beginning of the article; I selected it because I think it is related to my topic. I did not read the rest of the article very carefully afterward. I built the correlation by myself after I read the second source, but I am not very sure if my understanding is correct.</p>

Table 3 demonstrates the differences between how they recontextualize information in L1 and L2. Two observations are worth mentioning. First, when citing in L1, the writers demonstrate a greater ability to extract additional details from the source text and maneuver the extracted information for use in their essays. They also exhibit a higher level of certainty in interpreting the author's intended message. As a result, they tend to expand upon the original source information based on their own understanding. In contrast, when citing in L2, writers tend to prioritize selecting the information they require while potentially leaving out parts that they may not fully comprehend. Hence, the comprehension level of the sources played a role in students' citation practices. Second, none of the writers generalized

information from two or more sources in their L1 essays, but this citation type was found in their L2 essays (0.53, 6.57%), as in E20 in **Table 4**. This slight variation suggests that students appear to have a greater awareness of synthesizing information from various source materials, even when it is the student's L2. One student mentioned in the interview that, "While composing this article, the English teacher provides us with preliminary background information, including some impact papers. Additionally, the teacher emphasized the importance of synthesizing the content from multiple articles and approaching the writing with a critical perspective. Moreover, the teacher supplies us with a title and guidance to serve as a reference" (S12).

3.3. Functional Perspective

Table 2 illustrates that attribution and exemplification are the two main rhetorical functions of citations in both L1 and L2. According to the interview, most students mentioned that attribution sets up background information of the topic by integrating views of multiple sources (e.g., "One purpose of citations is to provide background information by weaving together different perspectives and sources. This establishes the context before highlighting my own viewpoint", S10), while by exemplification, the sources serve as examples to make the writer's own viewpoints more convincing (e.g., "Once I have developed my own viewpoint, I will reference articles from more influential journals to strengthen and bolster my argument", S12). In addition, we found that students were more willing to evaluate cited work (evaluation) and borrow arguments, concepts, terminology, or procedures from the cited work and relate them to their own writing (application) in Chinese (1.64%; 5.61%) than in English (0.29%, 0%). For example:

Example 2: The author believes that Zhan Bohui's "respect for science and the principle of following the present and the public" is the most reasonable, and the "science" referred to here is the use of the syllable of the Guang Yun as a reference, and the conventional pronunciation is primarily used. (C6, original Chinese has been translated into English)

During the interviews, a number of students provided insights into the reasons behind this phenomenon. They attributed their higher confidence and better understanding of the Chinese language to it being their native language. This is evident in the responses of two students: "In English articles, I usually just report directly and would not dare to evaluate other people's viewpoints, because I feel that my English comprehension is not good enough and my understanding of other people's viewpoints may not be correct. However, in Chinese writing, I tried to comment and find the shortcomings of past literature, but of course, sometimes my comments can be rather shallow as I do not have enough content knowledge in this field" (S5), and "Since English is not my native language, I am already having great difficulties in selecting the sources to use while reading. I don't think about evaluating others' works, because sometimes, I am not sure about the writer's real meaning, but in Chinese, that is not a problem" (S10).

Establishing links and comparisons is used to express both agreement and disagreement. Students frequently employ establishing links for the purpose of combining examples conveying similar meanings or juxtaposing examples conveying different meanings. Establishing links involves the skillful combination of citations in order to reinforce the citations used for this purpose. For example:

Example 3: By selecting more students from humble backgrounds, the scope and openness of the imperial examinations were broadened, expanding the foundation of the Song dynasty's rule and greatly strengthening centralized power. (C14, original Chinese has been translated into English)

There are distinctions in frequencies between L1 and L2 citation use in Establishing links. **Table 3** reveals a higher frequency of its occurrences in L2 (23, 6.57%) compared to L1 (5, 1.17%). As in L2 texts, establishing links serves an additional purpose of indicating that similar experimental or statistical results occurred to reinforce arguments. For example:

Example 4: High-Speed Rail (HSR) has a clear competitive advantage over civil aviation; when the transportation distance is greater than 1000 km, civil aviation has an obvious competitive advantage; transportation distances of 600 - 1000 km represent an important market for HSR to compete with civil aviation (Hu et al., 2015; Martín & Nombela, 2007; Wan et al., 2016). (E14)

Comparison is predominantly employed by students to establish agreement or disagreement with a general conclusion or the author's standpoint. Participants in this study cite only a few for this purpose in both L1 (3, 0.7%) and L2 (2, 0.57%), mainly to support or challenge the main ideas put forth in this academic text. For example:

Example 5: However, on the other hand, in markets with more than 3 hours of HSR operation, HSR has occupied less than 50% of the market share, and also, when the distance increases, the market share occupied by HSR gradually decreases (González-Savignat, 2004). (E14)

4. Discussion

Table 4 presents the summarized version of the answers to the research question, indicating: 1) the similarities and differences in the citation practices of undergraduate novice writers using source texts in L1 and L2 academic writing; 2) the challenges students are facing, as revealed in these characteristics.

Table 4. The summarization of similarities and differences in citation practices between L1 and L2.

Perspectives	Similarities	Differences	Challenges
Contextual	Information-prominent citations are used significantly more. Disagreement with the cited source is rarely expressed.	The number of author-prominent citations used in L2 is about three times greater than in L1. A greater variety of reporting verbs is used in L2 than in L1.	Inability to identify sufficiently authoritative literature and assess its credibility. A limited understanding of reporting verbs may indicate their attitude toward the source text.

Continued

Intertextual	A significant proportion of the citations are presented as paraphrases and summaries. Students possess a clear understanding of which information to directly quote and which to paraphrase or summarize.	When citing in L1, writers extract more details from the source text and expand on the original information based on their understanding, while in L2, writers prioritize selecting necessary information and may overlook parts they do not fully comprehend. None of the writers generalized information from two or more sources in L1, but this citation type was found in L2.	Writers' self-perception as having low L2 proficiency hindered their understanding of the source texts. Limited guidance from the teachers regarding synthesizing content from multiple sources.
Functional	Attribution and exemplification are the two main purposes of citations.	Results reveal a higher frequency of occurrences of establishing links in L2 compared to L1. Students evaluated more cited work in L1 than in L2.	Not very clear about the various purposes of using citations in the article. Lack of content knowledge in the related field.

These results unveiled a few issues worthy of discussion. Firstly, the effective use of citations necessitates strong coordination between reading and writing skills. In addition to the range of writing challenges (e.g., grammar mistakes, limited vocabulary) highlighted in previous literature (Lee & Tajino, 2008), which are attributed to L2 language proficiency and limited content knowledge of the subject, the scarcity of advanced rhetorical skills and the characteristics observed in recontextualizing the source texts in both languages clearly indicated the inadequate capability of students to effectively engage with and comprehend existing literature. In both L1 and L2, approximately 90% of the citations were used for attribution and exemplification by lifting words from the source texts individually, and only a few writers demonstrated the ability to synthesize information from various sources and provide evaluations. Studies (e.g., Mateos & Solé, 2009; Spivey, 2023) proved that synthesizing information from various sources, and establishing connections or making comparisons between them, requires a high level of reading proficiency, which may be challenging for novice writers. Essentially, the deficiency of such skills hinders the cognitive engagement of writers from reading-to-write (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987). Specifically, for L2 novice writers, language barriers unquestionably impede reading comprehension and limit their capacity in using citations to engage in academic discourse (Gao et al., 2021). In terms of rhetorical function, participants tend to employ more factual descriptions in L2 writing, while in L1 writing, they are more willing to attempt evaluation. Hence, this “unaverred voice” (Groom, 2000), where students merely summarize different scholarly perspectives without distinguishing between them and consequently lack critical analysis, may be more prevalent in L2 writing. Therefore, there is a need for a

clearer understanding of “source use” in synthesis writing. Researchers call for a more detailed conceptualization, such as the three-step model by [Uludag and McDonough \(2022\)](#), to enhance clarity in research and improve instructional methods for students ([Yoo, 2025](#)).

Similar to prior studies highlighting challenges like insufficient content knowledge ([Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006](#); [Dalsky & Tajino, 2007](#); [Islamiyah & Fajri, 2020](#); [Lee & Tajino, 2008](#); [Morton et al., 2015](#); [Vyncke, 2012](#)), literature selection and synthesis ([Cumming et al., 2016](#); [Islamiyah & Fajri, 2020](#); [Wingate, 2012](#)), and limited understanding of the function of citations ([Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006](#); [Lee et al., 2018](#); [Wette, 2017](#); [Vyncke, 2012](#); [Wingate, 2012](#)), our interviews uncover specific challenges including a limited understanding of reporting verbs. In line with findings where L2 students often followed their instructors’ advice regarding citing verbs ([Wette, 2017](#)), our results focus on reporting verbs and indicate that students lack an understanding of how these verbs can assist them in expressing their stance and further expand these results in both L1 and L2. Students also highlighted the lack of sufficient guidance from teachers on how to synthesize content from various sources, emphasizing the need for increased instructor attention in this area. Teachers are urged to promote students’ critical thinking skills in synthesizing multiple texts ([Wolsey et al., 2012](#)) and to integrate Strategy Instruction and Strategy-Based Writing Instruction to improve students’ writing abilities ([Masrul Gunadi et al., 2023](#)). Also, as instructors who possess a greater awareness of the fundamental reasons behind their students’ challenges, it is suggested that they should assist students in identifying the cause of specific difficulties ([Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006](#)).

5. Limitations, Implications, and Conclusion

It is important to acknowledge several limitations. Firstly, it is worth noting that citation practices can vary across different academic disciplines. In the present study, the 25 participants consisted of students from humanities and social sciences majors. Initially, we conducted separate analyses for each group (i.e., humanities major students and social science major students); however, no significant differences were observed. Consequently, future studies could enhance the depth of findings by recruiting participants from more diverse academic backgrounds, such as science and engineering majors. Furthermore, it is important to consider that citation practices among novice undergraduate writers may exhibit variations across different countries and regions. Conducting future studies that include participants from diverse geographical contexts would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. Such studies would also enable meaningful comparisons with the citation practices observed in the context of Hong Kong SAR, thereby enriching the results.

To conclude, this study revealed very limited rhetorical functions of citations and a lack of ability to synthesize reading materials in both Chinese (L1) and English (L2) novice writers in the context of Hong Kong SAR. While the difference in

linguistic proficiency levels between their L1 and L2 affected other aspects of academic writing, there is no significant difference in their citation practices. Indeed, the instruction provided played a critical role when the students received guidance from their English L2 academic writing instructor. Nevertheless, students still face linguistic constraints in understanding the literature to be able to cite properly. In conclusion, it is crucial for students to not only improve their second language reading comprehension skills, but also to build awareness of the role of citation practice in representing one's evaluation of previous research in both the first and second languages.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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