



Challenges faced by EFL students in making citations in the background section of the thesis introduction

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Abstract:

Citations play an essential role in academic writing as tools for acknowledging sources and building arguments. However, many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students still struggle to apply citations appropriately in their thesis writing. Using a descriptive qualitative research design, this study collected thesis proposals from undergraduate students of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Negeri Padang to identify the challenges, types, functions, and mistakes in making citations. The findings show that students mainly used integral citation forms (57.14%) and utilized substantiation and attribution functions (38.77%). Regarding accuracy, the most frequent errors were technical (32.65%), although 57.14% of the analyzed citations contained no mistakes. Interview results revealed significant difficulties in assessing source credibility, limited instructional guidance, a lack of vocabulary, and paraphrasing challenges. Overall, this study demonstrates that EFL students' citation practices are predominantly technical rather than rhetorical, shaped by linguistic, instructional, and cultural constraints.

Keywords:

Challenges, citations, background section, thesis, proposals, EFL students

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1. INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In the landscape of higher education, citation is far more than a mere formal obligation or a mechanism to avoid plagiarism; it functions as a fundamental rhetorical tool that situates a writer's work within the broader academic discourse (Coffin, 2009; Swales, 1990). Proper citation practices are essential to strengthen research credibility, demonstrate engagement with existing literature, and contribute to the evolution of scientific knowledge (Khamkhien, 2025; Rezeki, 2018). For undergraduate students, particularly English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners embarking on their thesis proposals, mastering these citation aspects is critical to establishing a solid reference framework that validates their arguments (Oranda & Novelyn, 2024). However, at Universitas Negeri Padang (UNP), EFL students frequently face complex challenges in applying these academic conventions, particularly in the background section of

their thesis introduction. Preliminary observations and academic writing evaluations at UNP indicate that many students struggle to move beyond mechanical copying, leading to frequent citation mistakes, such as technical errors, inappropriate reporting verbs, and weak rhetorical positioning. Understanding these challenges, specifically regarding citation forms, rhetorical functions, and common mistakes, is paramount for EFL students at UNP, as errors in these areas not only diminish the persuasive power of their thesis introduction but also reflect a deeper struggle in developing academic literacy and avoiding unintentional plagiarism.

As a persuasive technique, citations allow authors to demonstrate expertise, acknowledge prior contributions, and uphold intellectual honesty (Baring, 2023; Hunter, 2006). Within the "Create a Research Space" (CARS) framework, citations act as a strategic bridge between existing knowledge and new scholarly contributions, which is crucial for establishing a research territory and indicating a gap in the literature (Swales & Feak, 2012). Thompson and Tribble (2001) further categorize these practices into integral and non-integral forms, each carrying different rhetorical weights. Integral citations, where the cited author's name serves as a grammatical element in the sentence, actively highlight the authority and agency of the researcher. Conversely, non-integral citations place the author's name in parentheses or endnotes, thereby shifting the primary focus to the propositional information and empirical data itself. Beyond these formal structures, Coffin (2010) identifies various rhetorical functions that reflect a writer's critical stance and academic literacy. In academic writing, attribution is used to acknowledge the source of an idea, substantiation provides evidence to support the writer's claims, and evaluation allows the author to critically assess the validity of previous research. Mastering these functional nuances is highly complex for undergraduate EFL students; a failure to strategically balance these forms and functions often leads to critical citation mistakes, ranging from mechanical surface-level errors to serious problems with source integration and voice differentiation.

Despite its importance, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students frequently struggle with the complexities of citation. Previous research indicates that many novice writers suffer from "citation blindness," manifesting as over-citing unimportant data or failing to distinguish between general knowledge and citeable ideas (Pecorari, 2013). Studies by Jomaa and Bidin (2017) and Suntoro et al. (2023) highlight significant challenges, including difficulties in assessing source credibility, adopting a clear rhetorical stance, and low linguistic proficiency that hinders effective paraphrasing. Furthermore, many EFL students tend to use citations only for basic attribution, leading to writing that is descriptive rather than analytical (Petrić, 2007).

However, a significant gap remains in the existing literature. While many studies (e.g., Agarwal et al., 2022; Khamkhien, 2025; Rezeki, 2018; Thompson & Tribble, 2001) have focused on technical citation errors or plagiarism in completed theses, there is limited research that specifically examines the background section of thesis proposals. On this high-stakes stage, students first attempt to justify their research. Moreover, few studies (such as Coffin, 2010; Mansourizadeh & Ahmad, 2011; Jomaa & Biddin, 2017) have combined meticulous document analysis with in-depth interviews. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by analyzing the citation forms, rhetorical functions, and common mistakes in the background sections of EFL thesis proposals. By identifying the specific technical, content, and linguistic challenges faced by undergraduate students, this research offers valuable insights into enhancing academic writing pedagogy. Specifically, it seeks to move the conversation from mechanical accuracy toward a more rhetorically-oriented approach to citation literacy.

2. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design to provide an in-depth exploration of EFL students' citation practices. As Creswell (2014) suggests, a case study allows for the investigation of a bounded system using multiple data sources. The "case" in this research refers to the citation behaviors of three final-year undergraduate students in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Negeri Padang. These participants were selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria: they had completed their thesis proposal backgrounds, their proposals had been approved in a seminar, and they demonstrated diverse citation practices suitable for analysis (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Data collection involved two primary instruments: document analysis and semi-structured interviews. First, the background sections of the participants' thesis proposals were analyzed sentence by sentence. This document analysis utilized a comprehensive checklist adapted from three established frameworks: Thompson and Tribble (2001) for identifying citation forms (integral and non-integral), Coffin (2010) for classifying nine rhetorical functions, and Agarwal et al. (2023) for detecting technical and content-related citation errors. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted to probe the underlying challenges that could not be captured through textual analysis alone. The interview guide was adapted from Jomaa and Bidin (2017), consisting of 18 open-ended questions covering themes such as credibility assessment, authorial stance, and linguistic difficulties. A stimulated recall approach was used during interviews, where students reflected on specific passages from their own writing to explain their rationale and struggles.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the research instruments were validated by an expert lecturer in the field. Furthermore, member checking was conducted by sharing verbatim interview transcripts with participants to verify the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations (Creswell, 2014). Following data collection, data analysis strictly followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), comprising data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. For the document analysis, the process began with data condensation, where the researcher carefully read through the background section of the collected thesis proposals to identify every instance of citation. These identified citations were then extracted and classified into their respective forms using Thompson and Tribble's (2001) framework, while the errors were categorized based on Agarwal et al.'s (2022) typology. In the data display stage, these categorized citations were quantified into percentages and presented in tables of descriptive statistics to highlight the frequency of specific forms and technical errors.

Meanwhile, for the qualitative data, the interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, thoroughly reviewed, and condensed through a rigorous coding process. The qualitative data were structurally coded and categorized into distinct themes representing the underlying factors behind the students' struggles, namely linguistic, technical, and rhetorical challenges. Finally, the researchers performed methodological triangulation by systematically comparing and cross-referencing the subjective challenges revealed in the interview insights with the actual structural and functional errors found in the physical documents. This systematic, integrated process allowed for a critical, multi-dimensional evaluation of the participants' overall citation literacy, transforming raw textual data into a holistic conclusion regarding the complexities of academic citation among EFL learners.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Finding and Analysis

The research findings present a comprehensive analysis of citation practices among EFL students, integrating empirical data from both the document analysis of thesis proposals and semi-structured interviews. The results are systematically categorized into four interconnected dimensions: citation forms, rhetorical functions, common mistakes, and the underlying challenges faced by the students. Quantitative evidence from the document analysis reveals a predominance of integral citation forms and a heavy reliance on basic rhetorical functions like substantiation and attribution, alongside a high frequency of surface-level technical mistakes. Complementing these textual findings, the qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews unpack the critical cognitive and institutional barriers that drive these patterns, such as difficulties in establishing an authorial stance and selecting appropriate reporting verbs. By synthesizing these dual data sources, this section provides a multi-dimensional perspective on how undergraduate EFL learners navigate the complexities of academic writing and source integration in their initial research proposals.

Forms of Citations

The analysis of 49 citations revealed that students employed both integral and non-integral forms, with a significant preference for the former. As shown in Table 1, integral citations dominated the background sections of the thesis proposals, accounting for 28 instances or 57.08% of the total data. In contrast, non-integral citations were utilized less frequently, appearing in 21 instances or representing 42.84% of the analyzed citations. This structural distribution indicates that undergraduate EFL students at UNP tend to heavily emphasize the author's prominence and direct authority within their sentences, rather than focusing solely on the synthesis of the empirical information itself.

Table 1. Forms of Citation

Forms of Citation	Subcategories	Frequency	Percentage
Integral	Verb-controlling	26	53%
	Naming	2	4.08%
Non-integral	Source	12	24.48%
	Identification	9	18.36%
Total		49	100%

The dominance of integral citations (57.08%) indicates that students preferred to include the author's name as part of the sentence structure. The verb-controlling subcategory was the most prevalent (53%), where reporting verbs such as "states" or "emphasizes" position the author as the grammatical subject. This preference suggests that novice EFL writers are more comfortable emphasizing the author's identity rather than focusing solely on the information.

Rhetorical Functions of Citations

In terms of rhetorical function, students predominantly used citations for lower-order academic purposes rather than engaging in higher-level critical debates. The comprehensive analysis of the 49 citations indicates that basic functional categories, specifically substantiation and attribution, heavily dominated the students' writing, with each accounting for 19 instances or 38.77% of the total data. Conversely, more complex rhetorical functions that require a high degree of evaluative stance, such as evaluation and disciplinary significance, were minimally employed by the undergraduate writers. This distribution reflects a common tendency among EFL learners to utilize citations primarily as a mechanical tool to support their own statements or safely attribute ideas to original authors, rather than to critically appraise, synthesize, or challenge existing literature.

Table 2. Rhetorical Functions of Citations

Rhetorical Function	Frequency	Percentage
Attribution	19	38.77%
Substantiation	17	34.69%
Substantiation + Attribution	11	22.44%
Establishing Links	2	4.08%
Total	49	100%

Citations served primarily for "Attribution" (38.77%), which involves acknowledging the source of information without further analysis, and "Substantiation" (34.69%), which supports or justifies a claim. This reliance on basic functions indicates that students used citations to state facts or borrow authority rather than to engage critically with the literature. This pattern aligns with Coffin's (2010) framework, which places novice writers in the "reporting stage" of citation use.

Citation Mistakes

The comprehensive document analysis identified various errors in students' writing, which were systematically categorized into technical, content, and language-related mistakes based on Agarwal et al.'s (2022) typology. Among the total data analyzed, technical mistakes, such as incorrect punctuation, faulty formatting, and inconsistent reference listing, emerged as a prominent issue, accounting for 16 instances or 32.65% of the errors. This high frequency of multi-dimensional errors demonstrates that undergraduate EFL learners still struggle significantly with both the mechanical conventions and the linguistic demands required to execute proper academic citations.

Table 3. Citations' Mistakes

Types of mistakes	Frequency	Percentage
No Mistake	28	57.14%
Technical	16	32.65%
Content	2	4.08%
Language	3	6.12%
Total	49	100%

Technical mistakes were the most frequent error type (32.65%), involving incorrect use of ampersands (&) in integral citations, capitalization errors, and the inclusion of unnecessary research titles within the text. Content mistakes (4.08%) included discrepancies between in-text citations and the reference list. These errors reflect a lack of detailed knowledge of referencing standards and a systemic instructional gap.

Challenges in Making Citation

The interview data revealed four main themes of challenges faced by students when citing sources in their research proposals. First, students frequently struggled with assessing the credibility of their sources, finding it difficult to distinguish between high-quality academic literature and unreliable online references. Second, they encountered a major barrier to adopting a critical authorial stance, which caused them to merely copy information without evaluating the ideas. Third, the participants possessed insufficient knowledge regarding proper citation rules, particularly in managing formatting systems and bibliography guidelines. Fourth, second language difficulties deeply hindered their writing process, especially when they attempted to paraphrase English sources and select appropriate academic reporting verbs.

1. Credibility in Selecting Sources

The first challenge identified from the interview data was the students' struggle with maintaining credibility when selecting academic sources. Students reported significant difficulty in distinguishing the scientific quality of research articles, often failing to differentiate between peer-reviewed journals and unverified online literature. Consequently, rather than prioritizing rigorous and reputable studies, they tended to rely heavily on data accessibility and convenience, selecting sources simply because they were open-access or easily retrievable on the internet. This behavior underscores a critical gap in their information evaluation skills, showing that undergraduate EFL learners frequently prioritize immediate access over academic validity when constructing the background section of their proposals.

"I find it hard to determine if a source is high quality. I usually just look at Google Scholar; if it appears there and seems relevant, I use it," (P2).

Students often feel that they lack clear criteria for evaluating the credibility of sources, resulting in a reference selection process that is primarily based on ease of access and keyword suitability in search engines. This is supported by document analysis, which shows the dominance of secondary sources and dependence on national journals with unverified reputations, indicating that students' information literacy is still limited to the search stage, rather than quality evaluation.

2. Adopting a Stance toward Citation

The second theme derived from the interviews relates to the students' difficulties in adopting a critical stance toward citations. There are psychological barriers in the form of academic self-doubt that make undergraduate students highly reluctant to express their personal opinions or critically appraise the work of established experts. Because they view themselves as novice researchers, they assume they lack the intellectual authority to question, synthesize, or find gaps in the existing literature. Consequently, this lack of confidence forces them to adopt a passive writing role, causing the background section of their proposals to become overly descriptive and overcrowded with borrowed ideas rather than a balanced academic dialogue.

"I feel hesitant to give my own opinion after a citation because I don't think my ideas are as strong as the experts'," (P1)

Students feel they lack the scientific authority to respond to experts' ideas, so they choose to be passive to avoid the risk of misinterpretation. Document findings reinforce this through the use of reporting completely neutral verbs (such as states, says, explains). No evaluative verbs were found, indicating that students' writing primarily reports ideas without the author's critical voice.

3. Insufficient Knowledge

The third theme emerging from the interviews concerns the students' insufficient knowledge regarding academic citation guidelines. Students reported that the formal instructions and training they received during their coursework were very limited and brief in nature, focusing primarily on basic plagiarism avoidance rather than tactical source integration. This pedagogical gap made it exceptionally difficult for them to determine exactly when and how to effectively include citations to support their background claims. Consequently, this lack of structural guidance left many undergraduate writers feeling unprepared, leading to frequent formatting confusion and mechanical errors when they attempted to execute citations independently.

"I only got a brief explanation in early semesters, so I'm often unsure where to place the citation. If I've cited it at the beginning, can I cite it again, or do I need a different structure?" (P2 & P3).

The lack of in-depth practical guidance led students to lack self-regulation in planning their line of argument. This uncertainty made students feel they had to relearn citation rules independently when writing their theses and led them to simply imitate the format of their seniors' theses to avoid being considered wrong by their lecturers. The conclusion of the document analysis confirms this technical ignorance and failure of self-regulation through consistent patterns of errors (32.65%), such as the incorrect use of the ampersand (&) symbol in integral citations, the inclusion of redundant research titles, and inconsistencies in punctuation in abbreviations (e.g., et al.).

4. Second Language Difficulties

The fourth and final theme identified from the interviews highlights the critical role of second language difficulties in academic writing. Language barriers emerge as a dominant

challenge for undergraduate EFL learners, specifically when they struggle to find appropriate academic synonyms and manipulate grammar structures, such as shifting sentences from active to passive voice during the citation process. Due to these linguistic limitations, students often feel anxious and uncertain about whether their paraphrased sentences accurately preserve the original meaning or inadvertently distort the source's ideas. Consequently, this persistent self-doubt forces them to heavily rely on translation and paraphrasing technology, using these digital tools as a primary mechanism to safely rewrite information and mitigate the severe risk of unintentional plagiarism.

"The hardest part is the words. I use AI like ChatGPT to find synonyms and simplify complex academic sentences, so I don't change the original meaning," (P3).

Students admit that their limited English vocabulary makes them feel threatened by accusations of plagiarism, so they use AI as an instant solution to paraphrase sentences. Document analysis evidence shows semantic anomalies and rigid, repetitive sentence structures. The inappropriate use of synonyms in some parts confirms that AI-assisted paraphrasing is done more mechanically, lexically, than through meaningful idea transformation.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that students' citation practices are predominantly technical and descriptive rather than rhetorical and critical. This pattern is not merely a series of individual errors but a manifestation of intertwined linguistic, instructional, and psychological factors, as evidenced by the strong triangulation between document analysis and interviews. Therefore, universities need to provide better writing support to help students overcome these combined challenges and improve their citation skills.

The document analysis reveals a heavy reliance on lower-order functions, specifically *substantiation* (34.69%) and *attribution* (38.77%). This objective data is strongly triangulated with the psychological barriers identified in the interviews. P3's admission that she "cannot create her own definition" and the general feeling of "hesitancy to critique experts" explained in Finding 4 directly result in the absence of evaluative or contrastive citations in their proposals. This confirms Coffin's (2010) "reporting stage" and Petrić's (2007) observation that novice writers use citations to borrow authority rather than to engage in interpretive synthesis. The students' writing thus provides physical evidence of their cultural deference to authority; they act as "messengers" rather than independent researchers.

A significant triangulation is observed between the 32.65% technical error rate in the documents and the "limited guidelines" reported by participants. The document analysis identifies consistent patterns of error, such as the incorrect use of ampersands (&) and redundant information (including full research titles in-text). These are not random lapses; they are the direct outcome of the "brief and procedural" instruction reported by P1, P2, and P3. Because they felt the instructions were "easily forgotten," they resorted to an imitation strategy, copying formats from senior theses. As Agarwal et al. (2023) and Jomaa and Bidin (2017) suggest, when systemic instructional gaps exist, students treat referencing as a mechanical guessing game rather than a standardized academic practice.

The "uncertainty" and "confusion" expressed by students regarding when and where to cite (Finding 4) are visibly manifested in the documents through "reference clustering." For

instance, P1's interview claim of being "confused about whether every argument needs a backup" is triangulated by the document analysis, which shows a dense cluster of sources at the beginning of a paragraph followed by several sentences of unsupported claims. This inconsistency provides empirical proof of what Jomaa and Bidin (2017) the findings of this study reveal that students' citation practices are predominantly technical and descriptive rather than rhetorical and critical. This pattern is not merely a series of individual errors but a manifestation of intertwined linguistic, instructional, and psychological factors, as evidenced by the strong triangulation between document analysis and interviews. Therefore, universities need to provide better writing support to help students overcome these combined challenges and improve their citation skills.

The triangulation between linguistic challenges and document quality, which is perhaps the most prominent. Students admitted to using AI tools because they doubted their own ability to maintain the original meaning while paraphrasing (P3). The document analysis confirms this "linguistic insecurity" through sentences that either mirrored the source structure or contained semantic oddities from AI-driven synonym replacement. This phenomenon supports Shi's (2004). Shi's claim that EFL writers prioritize grammatical correctness over semantic transformation. Consequently, as Coffin (2010) suggests, they remain in the "knowledge telling" stage because their language proficiency acts as a barrier to "knowledge transforming."

4. CONCLUSION

This study investigated students' citation practices in the background section of thesis proposals, focusing on citation forms, rhetorical functions, technical mistakes, and the underlying challenges faced by EFL learners. Based on the triangulation of document analysis and semi-structured interviews, several key conclusions can be drawn. The findings clearly indicate that while students frequently use integral citation forms to support their writing, they still struggle with linguistic barriers, insufficient formatting knowledge, and a lack of confidence in expressing their own critical voice.

First, students' citation practices are characterized by a procedural rather than a rhetorical approach. The dominance of integral forms and lower-order functions, such as substantiation and attribution, indicates that students primarily cite sources to borrow authority and support their claims mechanically. This practice is directly linked to the psychological challenges identified in the interviews, where students expressed a deep hesitancy to critique or question established experts. Consequently, their writing remains at a basic descriptive stage, where citations are used merely as factual anchors to avoid plagiarism rather than as active tools for building critical arguments.

Second, there is a strong connection between instructional challenges and technical inaccuracies in student writing. The frequent formatting mistakes, such as improper punctuation and incorrect referencing details, are a direct result of the limited guidelines and insufficient feedback that students received during their studies. Because they lack formal training to properly navigate academic citation conventions, students often experience confusion and anxiety. Consequently, this instructional gap forces them to depend heavily on imitation and digital tools to format their citations, rather than understanding the rules independently.

Third, linguistic barriers and difficulties in self-regulation significantly limit students' ability to write critically. The uneven distribution and crowding of citations in certain sections show that students are genuinely confused about when and where to include sources effectively. Furthermore, their insecurity in using academic English forces them to rely heavily on translation and digital tools. As a result, instead of using citations to build and develop their

own research arguments, students treat citing sources merely as a formal requirement and mechanical routine to pass their proposals.

In summary, students' citation difficulties are a result of interrelated linguistic, instructional, and cultural factors. To address these challenges, pedagogical shifts are necessary. Instruction must move beyond technical APA formatting to emphasize the rhetorical purpose of citation, providing explicit training in evaluative writing and critical source management to help students develop a legitimate authorial voice.

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