

## Writing the Literature Review: Analyzing Texts and Exploring the Context

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### Abstract

While analysing in-text citations, verbs, and metadiscourse, this study explored supervisors' perspectives on the writing of literature reviews by Arab doctoral students. The study involved investigating purposefully 20 literature reviews in two disciplines, namely Applied Linguistics (AL) and Information Technology (IT) and interviewing five supervisors. Systemic Functional Linguistics was utilized in analyzing the in-text citations, whereas individual interviews were conducted to retrieve the supervisors' perceptions on students' academic writing. The textual analysis was achieved manually using tables, whereas mind mapping, a hand analysis, and visual mappings were utilized in analyzing the interviews. The findings revealed the dominance of integral citations, finite modal operators, and material verbs 'processes'. Based on the interviews, Arab doctoral students' writing was characterized by lacking the depth of reading and insufficient information on using citations, L2 writing difficulties, and positioning. Consequently, they need an explicit emphasis on citation use through introducing discipline-specific teaching materials.

**Keywords:** Literature review, Academic writing, Discourse-based interviews, Systemic Functional Linguistics.

### Introduction

Students' academic writing has been the focus of higher education because of its great significance (Arkouids and Tran 2010; Coffin *et al.* 2003), as writing academically is a fundamental productive skill that is closely linked with students' academic achievement (Singh 2016). In other words, when a student experiences challenges in academic writing, it will likely lead to his or her failure, and such difficulties cannot be easily identified and highlighted (Lillis and Scott 2007). Compared with argumentative writing followed by students in their earlier stages, academic writing is distinguished in terms of its high degree of formality, whereby writers' style needs to be appropriate, correct, clear, rhetorical, and concise, utilizing specialized vocabulary, as well as complex clauses, and avoiding the authorial stance (Coffin *et al.* 2003; Swales and Feak 2012). Consequently, the formality of academic genres is a challenging aspect (Hyland 2006) since a research report would be rarely accepted to be published academically when

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written non-academically (Swales and Feak 2012). More specifically, in academic genres, using citations constitutes the basic feature (Feak and Swales 2009; Hyland 2009a; Petric' and Harwood 2013; Samraj 2013) that can be utilized in different types and functions (Swales 1990, 2014; Thompson and Tribble 2001; Jomaa and Bidin 2016).

Postgraduates pursuing their higher studies abroad have been increasing. Consequently, the classrooms of universities hosting these international students imply diversities in terms of their L1 linguistic background, ethnic groups, age (Coffin *et al.* 2003; Hyland 2006), cultural and social backgrounds, thereby causing varied identities, understandings, academic performance, and L2 learning strategies (Coffin *et al.* 2003). This variety results in challenges confronted by the university academic staff in general and students' supervisors in specific to meet the academic needs of these students. More specifically, non-native speakers particularly EFL learners are challenged in L2 writing represented mainly by their unfamiliarity with the academic writing style, technical form, and content (Singh 2016). Another emerging challenge is publishing in English which has become a necessity recently (Ferguson, Pérez-Illantada, and Plo 2011) to be able to submit their Ph.D. theses for final discussions. In other words, postgraduates have to familiarize themselves with the academic linguistic style adopted in academic genres arising from their personal choice or imposed on them as a regulation by the university (Tang 2012). Consequently, the findings will provide insights into EFL Arab students' use of citations, modality, processes, and academic writing. That is, exploring the context of academic writing and analysing FL students' L2 writings entail pedagogical and practical significance that could be exploited by L2 learners, writers, supervisors, and publishers.

In academic writing, using citations by EFL students seems to be a challenging issue. For instance, Rabab'ah and Al-Marshadi (2013) reported that Saudi students employed citations more compared with their native counterparts. Similarly, Vietnamese postgraduates (Nguyen and Pramoolsook 2016) lack linguistic competence in writing academically in general and using citations in particular. That is, EFL Saudi students could have the challenge of paraphrasing the cited information and integrating their own ideas into their writing. In using citations, Nguyen and Pramoolsook (2016) showed that EFL Vietnamese students are not aware of the rhetorical function and face difficulties in acquiring and/or learning the norms of citations implicitly. Their ignorance of citation is revealed clearly in their overuse of secondary sources, utilizing question marks (?) instead of using date and inventing unconventional ways of citations due to lacking sufficient guidelines on using citations.

In this regard, several factors can influence the use of citations with its two main types (integral or non-integral), namely disciplines (Hu and Wang 2014; Hyland 1999; Petric' and Harwood 2013; Shi 2012; Thompson 2002; Thompson and Tribble 2001), the language used in writing (Hu and Wang 2014; Monreal and Salom 2011; Rowley-Jolivet and Carter-Thomas 2014), familiarity with academic writing (Mansourizadeh and Ahmad 2011; Samraj 2013), and genres (Samraj 2013; Yang 2013). Subsequently, using citations is challenging (Charles 2006a; Jalilifar and Dabbi 2012) because writers cannot follow general rules that cannot be academically appropriate in certain contexts (Shi 2012). To illustrate, disciplines, such as chemistry, physics, mathematics, and medicine in the hard domain, follow rules of

cause/effect relations (Cohen et al. 2007) and writers in the science community emphasize more on the originality of the ideas, fact, as well as theories rather than words (Bouville 2008). Accordingly, Pecorari (2008) argues that the academic writing of each discipline necessitates learning specific skills.

In the Malaysian context, EFL international students have difficulties in L2 academic writing, resulting from the influence of the previous academic cultures, such as the possible influence of first language on second language in academic writing (Al-Zubaidi 2012; Jomaa and Bidin 2017; Singh 2016) and lacking sufficient instructions and guidelines on academic writing requirements (Jomaa and Bidin 2017). The ethnolinguistic impact on citations is explained by Hu and Wang (2014) because students' second language (English) in general and writing in specific are closely associated with the culture of the first language (Bian and Wang 2016; Hyland 2013). Citations-related difficulties are faced also by ESL students, including Malaysian students in Malaysia, whose use of citations is limited only to reporting previous findings and other methodological procedures, thereby lacking critical thinking. In other words, they do not try to synthesize and criticize the cited studies in the process of writing the literature review for their studies. That is, the attitude of most of the Malaysian students is characterized by neutrality without contrasting or advocating other researchers' findings (Manan and Noor 2014). It is worth mentioning that a significant feature of academic writing is to reveal the author's stance (Paltridge and Starfield 2007). Nonetheless, showing a stance in writing is challenging for EFL writers (Paltridge and Starfield 2007).

In their study, Jomaa and Bidin (2017) revealed that doctoral students have insufficient knowledge of using citations (in-text citations). This dearth of knowledge in citation use challenges them to write cohesively and debate strongly. In Malaysia, international students particularly EFL Arab postgraduates reported a deficiency in the basics of academic literacy skills (Al-Zubaidi 2012). Since paraphrasing is a vital skill in academic writing (Bailey 2003), it can be also a complicating issue for EFL writers (Al-Zubaidi 2012). To demonstrate, in writing different chapters of their theses and sections of their research articles, postgraduates need to cite information, such as findings, justifications, and recommendations from previous studies, and this demands obtaining the skills of paraphrasing, using diverse academic vocabulary considering maintaining the original meaning of the cited information (Bailey 2003). Furthermore, Shi (2012) emphasizes that non-native speaker writers are challenged in paraphrasing since it entails obtaining information about the content and familiarizing themselves with the linguistic purposes of using citations. Another issue is the lack of studies that have comprehensively examined and explored the use of in-text citations in English by non-native speakers of English. Therefore, this study is considered one of the few studies that have used two theories, namely Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and New Rhetoric Studies approaches to analyse qualitatively the literature reviews of 20 Ph.D. theses and explore the perspectives of students' supervisors on writing the literature review by EFL Arab doctoral students. More specifically, this study addresses the following research questions:

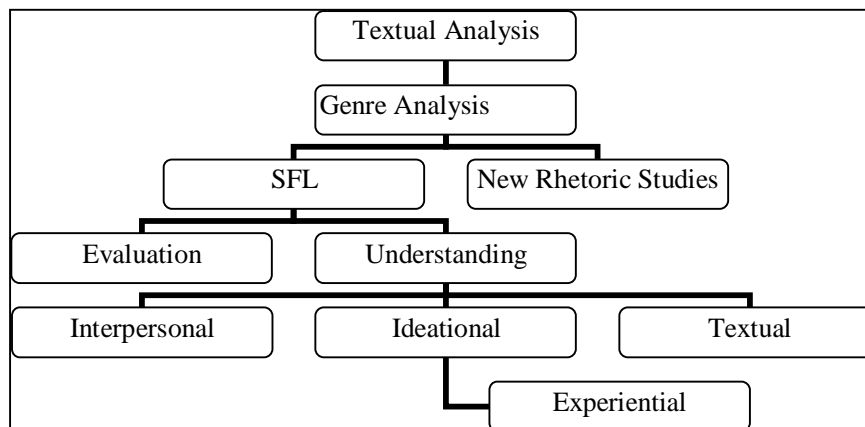
- 1- What are the types of citations used in the literature review chapters of Ph.D. theses by EFL Arab postgraduates?
- 2- How is modality realized in the citations of the literature review chapters of Ph.D. theses by EFL Arab postgraduates?

- 3- What are the types of processes 'verbs' in the citations of the literature review chapters of Ph.D. theses by EFL Arab postgraduates?
- 4- What are the perspectives of Ph.D. supervisors on writing the literature review chapters by EFL Arab postgraduates?

## Method

### *Research Design*

This qualitative study employed mainly two approaches: (SFL) and New Rhetoric Studies. The SFL approach was utilized to analyse the in-text citations based on Swales' (1990) taxonomy, which classified in-text citations into two types: integral and non-integral citations. In the integral citation, the name of the cited author/s is integrated with the structure of the citation, whereas in the non-integral citation, the name of the cited author/s is put in brackets. The emphasis was on identifying types of in-text citations and exploring the metadiscourse markers and the types of processes 'verbs' used in these in-text citations of the literature review of 20 Ph.D. theses in AL and IT by EFL Arab doctoral students at a public university in Malaysia. Under the New Rhetoric Studies approach, the Discourse-Based Interviews (DBIs) were carried out with five supervisors. DBIs imply having a sample of the postgraduate students' writing, whereby the supervisors were required to comment on their students' performance in L2 academic writing, mainly the literature review. The sample of students' writing included only those who were still preparing for their Ph.D. research proposals since their writing at this stage was not proofread or edited. Consequently, conducting interviews, as advocated by Patton (1990), could explore the supervisors' perspectives on their EFL postgraduate students' academic writing. As argued by Jomaa and Bidin (2017), applying the DBIs presents rich information on the use of citations. Hyland also demonstrates that conducting such kinds of interviews can reveal the variability and regularity of using disciplinary language in writing (Swales 2013). Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework followed in this study.



**Figure 1:** Conceptual framework (adapted from Hyland 2009b; Hyon 1996)

Under SFL, two aspects are involved: understanding and evaluation. Understanding includes interpersonal, ideational and textual meanings. First, students' use of modality, such as modalization and modulation, was explored based on the textual analyses of students' writing of the literature reviews. More specifically, students' authorial stance was identified in the writing process. This reflects the degree of awareness of students toward the interpersonal meanings. Second, ideational meaning, namely the experiential one was explored focusing mainly on types of processes 'verbs'. Third, as for the textual meaning, the analysis included identifying types of citations in which names of authors are either integrated or disintegrated with the linguistic structures of citations. To evaluate students' use of these lexico-grammatical issues, face-to-face individual interviews were conducted under New Rhetoric Studies. In the interviews, the students' supervisors commented on their students' use of modality, processes 'verbs', using citations, and academic writing in general.

### *Research Sampling*

In conducting the individual face-to-face interviews with the five Ph.D. supervisors, a purposeful sampling strategy was utilized since a qualitative research design typically includes a few cases (Creswell 2008). Regarding the textual analysis, it included the literature reviews of 20 Ph.D. theses selected purposefully in AL (soft domain) and IT (hard domain) written by EFL doctoral writers. These Ph.D. theses were written by EFL students whose first language is Arabic and they were originally from Arab countries, but they studied at one of the public Malaysian universities in two disciplines.

Table 1 shows the data related to the Ph.D. supervisors.

**Table 1:** Background information of Ph.D. supervisors

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Department</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Rank</b>
1	M	AL	55	Associate Prof.
2	F	AL	55	Associate Prof.
3	F	IT	38	Associate Prof.
4	M	AL	39	Associate Prof.
5	M	IT	49	Professor

In qualitative research, the participants can be only a few cases. For example, Petric` and Harwood's (2013) study involved only one L2 successful female student. A similar study was conducted by Harwood and Petric` (2012) which explored using in-text citations in academic writing by two L2 female students employing Discourse-Based Interviews (DBIs). The goal of qualitative studies, as argued by Creswell (2008), is not to generalize the findings but to obtain a deep and comprehensive explanation of a specific case or a certain phenomenon.

### *Data Collection*

Invitation letters were sent to the five participants (Ph.D. supervisors) via their official emails explaining the purposes of the study, the expected results, as well as the pedagogical implications. Open-ended questions were formulated with references to analysing the 20 Ph.D. theses in two disciplines at the university. The descriptions of the 20 Ph.D. theses are demonstrated in Tables 2 and 3.

**Table 2:** Literature review chapters of 10 theses in AL discipline

Participant	Nationality	Publication Date	Number of Pages	Number of Words
1	Iraqi	2013	35	9,031
2	Jordanian	2014	75	20,744
3	Jordanian	2014	87	21,661
4	Yemeni	2014	62	12,139
5	Yemeni	2014	35	8,990
6	Iraqi	2014	69	18,149
<sup>1</sup> 10	Jordanian	2013	88	21,541
11	Libyan	2014	89	22,080
12	Iraqi	2013	117	31,872
19	Yemeni	2015	79	19,000

**Table 3:** Literature reviews of 10 Ph.D. theses in IT

Participants	Nationality	Publication Date	Number of Pages	Number of Words
7	Syrian	2014	69	13,815
8	Iraqi	2013	73	18,526
9	Iraqi	2014	72	16,005
13	Jordanian	2011	65	14,743
14	Jordanian	2012	60	13,162
15	Palestinian	2012	37	8,547
16	Yemeni	2014	49	10,093
17	Jordanian	2011	54	12,702
18	Iraqi	2014	70	13,380
20	Jordanian	2012	107	27,410

A digital audio recorder was used in recording the interviews after making an appointment. The interviews were conducted at the office of each participant (supervisor) based on his/her own option after obtaining his/her consent. The English language was used in interviewing the participants.

#### *Data Analysis*

The textual analysis of the literature review was based mainly on firstly identifying types of in-text citations. When a sentence includes an in-text citation (a single in-text citation or multiple in-text citations), it is considered one in-text citation since the sentence is the unit of analysis. The processes 'verbs' and metadiscourse markers used in these citations were explored based on SFL Approach (Halliday 1985) and their frequencies were quantified to highlight the similarities and differences in language use. Regarding the interviews, the first step of data analysis involved transcribing every single word which represented a significant interpretative procedure as argued by Bailey (2008). An exploratory analysis was adopted to get a general idea about the content of the transcribed interviews. A hand analysis using colored markers, mind mapping, and visual mapping were used as strategies in analysing the data. The initial analysis resulted in varied codes that were grouped and reduced to represent four major themes. Obtaining only a small number of themes with deep details, as supported by Creswell (2008), is better than having a large number of themes with only general information.

Member checking was a strategy implemented to enhance the credibility of the findings related to the interviews by requesting a participant to check the accuracy of the findings. Member checking was achieved by returning both the interview transcripts and the emerging themes to one of the Ph.D.

supervisors to check the content and the thematic analysis. The findings were also enhanced by reporting some of the participants' quotes during the interviews as suggested by Creswell (2008).

## Findings

The findings of the current study involve two parts. Part one demonstrates the textual analysis using mainly the Systemic Functional Linguistic approach in analysing the citations focusing on types of processes 'verbs' and metadiscourse markers. As for part two, it illustrates the results related to the perspectives of the Ph.D. supervisors on the academic writing of EFL Arab postgraduates.

### Part One: Textual Analyses

Concerning the first research question related to identifying types of citations used in the literature review chapters of Ph.D. theses by EFL Arab postgraduates, the literature reviews written by Arab doctoral students included three types: integral in-text citations, non-integral in-text citations, and a third type in which both the integral in-text citation and non-integral in-text citation were employed in one sentence.

In the integral in-text type, the name/s of the author/s is/are integrated with the structure of the in-text citation functioning syntactically as one of its syntactic constituents, as in example (1).

- (1) "According to Biber et al. (1998), language is distinguished by structure and use.(LR.2/AL/JO)"

In the non-integral type, the name/s of the author/s is/are not integrated; they are put in parentheses, as in Example (2).

- (2) "People use language to express feelings and elicit meaning (Lyon, 1968, p. 424). (LR.1/AL/IR)"

The use of in-text citations involves a mixed type, whereby both the integral and the non-integral types are employed in one in-text citation.

- (3) "In spite of the fact that her classification of the five categories seems to be overlapping and not quite distinct, Salager-Meyer's study is quite revealing in showing the different distribution of hedging categories (Crompton, 1997).(LR.4/AL/YE)"

**Table 4:** Citations in the literature reviews of AL and IT

Types of Citations	Literature Review/ Applied Linguistics	Literature Review/ Information Technology	Total
Integral Citation	2350 (66.40%)	1184 (54.58%)	3534
Non-Integral Citation	1079 (30.48%)	917 (42.27%)	1996
Mixed Type	96 (2.71%)	60 (2.76%)	156

Table 4 shows that despite the disciplinary differences between AL and IT, the integral citation dominated both. On the one hand, this finding seems to be in line with the norms of the soft domain represented by AL, whereby the emphasis is on the cited author/s. In contrast, the overuse of the integral citation in the literature review chapters of Information Technology seems to contrast the principles of writing in the genres of the hard domain in which the emphasis is on the information itself rather than the name/s of the cited author/s. This could reveal that EFL Arab doctoral students are unaware of the implied evaluation of using in-text citations, thereby resulting in randomly using them.

Table 5 answers the second research question related to how modality is realized in the citations of the literature review chapters of Ph.D. theses by EFL Arab postgraduates.

**Table 5:** Modality in writing the literature review of AL and IT

<b>Modality</b>	<b>Literature Review/ Applied Linguistics</b>	<b>Literature Review/ Information Technology</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Finite/Modalisation	419	298	may, can, could
Finite/Modulation	136	68	will, must
Modal Adjuncts/ Probability	102	29	probably
Modal Adjuncts/ Usuality	26	13	Always, sometimes
Mood Adjuncts/ Varied Meanings	310	181	approximately
Comment Adjuncts	182	69	importantly

Table 5 illustrates the use of metadiscourse markers in writing the literature review by EFL Arab doctoral students. The literature reviews of AL have more evaluative expressions represented by modal adjuncts, mood adjuncts, finite modal operators, and comment adjuncts compared to the literature review chapters of Information Technology. This finding may show the diverse effects of academic disciplines. In other words, academic genres of the soft domain depend on the strength of the argument, thereby resulting in higher frequencies of words and expressions of probability, certainty, and usuality. On the other hand, academic genres of the hard domain are based on facts. Therefore, words and expressions of probability are less used. In addition, the high frequency of the finite modal operators in both Applied Linguistics and Information Technology implies that EFL postgraduate students depend heavily on modal verbs to express probability, certainty, and other authorial stances. Consequently, EFL postgraduate students may lack enough vocabulary related to the use of academic authorial voice.

Table 6 answers the third research question focusing mainly on exploring types of processes ‘verbs’ in the citations of the literature review chapters of Ph.D. theses by EFL Arab postgraduates.

**Table 6:** Processes ‘verbs’ in the literature reviews of Applied Linguistics and Information Technology

<b>Process</b>	<b>Literature Review (Applied Linguistics)</b>	<b>Literature Review (Information Technology)</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Material	4225 (55.40%)	3398 (44.60%)	analyse, conduct
Mental	975 (70.80%)	402 (29.20%)	think, feel
Verbal	2086 (72.40%)	796 (27.60%)	say, argue
Behavioral	67 (76.14%)	21 (23.86)	notice, observe
Relational	2221	1148	
R. Intensive	1557 (65.30%)	827 (34.70%)	is, are
R. Circumstantial	27 (69.23%)	12 (30.77%)	last, date back
R. Possessive	517 (66.37%)	262 (33.63%)	have, has
R. Causative	120 (71.85%)	47 (28.15%)	make, cause
Existential	97 (58.80%)	68 (41.20%)	there is/there are

Table 6 clarifies the types of processes and their frequencies in the literature reviews of both AL and IT Ph.D. theses. AL and IT are from two different domains of knowledge; nevertheless, material verbs (processes) are dominantly employed. This finding is in line with the conventions and norms of the academic genres in the hard domain represented by Information Technology, whereby the emphasis is on



methodological procedures. On the other hand, the high occurrences of the material process in the literature review of Applied Linguistics are contrasting the linguistic principles of writing in the soft domain in which the emphasis is on the strength of the arguments. That is, verbal processes should be utilized more than other processes. This linguistic performance suggests that EFL postgraduate students lack sufficient guidelines on using the academic verbs ‘processes’.

### Part Two: Thematic Analyses

The fourth research question explores the perspectives of Ph.D. supervisors on writing the literature review chapters by EFL Arab postgraduates. As revealed by the supervisors of the Arab doctoral students, significant findings are related to the difficulties in writing the literature review while preparing their Ph.D. research proposals. Table 7 describes the findings derived from the perspectives of Ph.D. supervisors.

**Table 7:** Supervisors’ perspectives on writing the literature review

	Major Themes	F (%)
1	Lacking the Depth of Reading	3 (60%)
2	Using in-text Citations	5 (100%)
3	Skills in L2 Writing	5 (100%)
4	Positioning (Stance)	5 (100%)

#### *Lacking the depth of reading*

Based on the supervisors’ perspectives, EFL doctoral students face several challenges when they start their Ph.D. studies, and such obstacles are represented by lacking research skills including scarce information in research and a dearth of depth of reading. Three supervisors reveal that their EFL doctoral students do not have the depth of reading while citing information from other sources in the process of writing the literature reviews. More specifically, EFL doctoral students do not internalize when reading varied related sources. Consequently, their understanding of their research area does not match the Ph.D. level.

*"All my Ph.D. students, irrespective of whether they are Arabs or Non-Arabs, usually come with a lack of reading. They are very interested in doing research, but usually, they do not have the depth of the reading and the depth of understanding about the area. (Supervisor 1/AL/M)"*

However, this has nothing to do with the issue that Arab doctoral students do not read while writing their research studies. Rather, the main challenges could be attributed to their inability to read good and reliable sources, or they read sources that are unrelated to their research areas. This usually leads to writing irrelevant literature reviews to the research topic. Thus, the writing style they follow is not advanced and acceptable by the academic community. For instance, Supervisor 5 reports that Arab postgraduates follow paraphrasing mainly in writing their literature review chapter. However, the skill of paraphrasing is not appropriate unless critical reviewing of the sources is employed.

*"They do not internalise the things; they need to digest the things...That is, when I refer to the word correctness just now. Sometimes, they just pretend to be critical, but they do not internalize it. (Supervisor 5/IT/M)"*

In the same domain, Supervisor 4 adds that the literature review written by EFL Arab doctoral students has many unrelated research studies.

*"It is not directed toward his or her research questions; it is like everything is there. Only a few parts of the literature review can be related to the research questions (Supervisor 4/AL/M)"*

Supervisor 3 reveals that EFL Arab doctoral students could be challenged in getting the correct sources for reading. As a result, writing their literature review chapters does not focus on the domain of the research area related to their study.

*"I do agree to some extent that some students are not lucky enough. Maybe they do not get the correct readings. (Supervisor 3/IT/F)"*

Based on the above discussion, it seems that lacking the depth of reading and students' failure to comprehensively understand the varied sources could lead to reading and writing irrelevant studies in the literature review. In this regard, reading correctly is closely associated with the correct use of in-text citations. That is, reading more deeply could result in effective writing of the literature review.

### ***Using in-text citations***

Another challenging issue faced by EFL Arab doctoral students is the use of in-text citations when writing the literature review. Postgraduates in Applied Linguistics discipline use (author, date) style in their in-text citations, whereas postgraduates in IT discipline use either (author, date) or numbering. Because Arab postgraduates are not completely exposed to APA style guidelines, as revealed by some of their supervisors, they utilize incorrect in-text citations in writing their literature review chapters. Doctoral students who follow the numbering system style also have mistakes in using in-text citations, such as utilizing numbers as references in in-text citations, and these numbers are assigned grammatical roles (e.g. [1] analysed the data....). All the supervisors 5 (100 %) demonstrate that Arab doctoral postgraduates experience difficulties in using in-text citations and related aspects. This entails the necessity to equip postgraduates with sufficient materials on how to use in-text citations in their writing.

*"Some of them still use different conventions, that are not APA standard, or from another standard. So, I think they are not exposed to the handbook or manual, APA manual. (Supervisor 4/AL/M)"*

Similarly, one of the supervisors in IT discipline adds that Arab doctoral students have problems using the numbering system style appropriately; they use this style together with other styles for the in-text citations in the same academic genre.

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*"For me, this is not correct; this is not the correct style of writing in IEEE. I said, if you want to stick to IEEE, you have to master the style of writing in IEEE. If you want to use APA format, you have to master the style of writing in APA. (Supervisor 3/IT/F)"*

The two important skills, namely paraphrasing and quoting, are closely associated with using in-text citations correctly. However, according to one of the supervisors, Arab doctoral students' capability to paraphrase the cited information correctly is limited. They overuse quoting instead of paraphrasing with no acknowledgment of the source of the cited information.

*"I noticed when students finally cannot paraphrase, of course, they use the quotations to take the easy way out. They just quote, and there should not be too many quotations. Yeah, there should be more paraphrasing than quoting. (Supervisor 2/AL/F)"*

Quotations devoid of acknowledging the name/s of the cited author/s are also mentioned by another supervisor, and such a practice entails plagiarism unintentionally.

*"They have problems in paraphrasing; sometimes they quote without citing. They did not know how to cite. Some Arab students also have problems in terms of whether borrowing other people's work should be also cited, so should that be acknowledged? They believe it should not be because they believe that other people's work is like their work too; it should be shared by everybody. (Supervisor 1/AL/M)"*

Plagiarism while paraphrasing is another challenging issue as added by one of the supervisors due to a lack of L2 writing skills.

*"Of course, most of the students, do not do that intentionally, but since they have no idea, they are not aware actually of plagiarizing because they do not have the skill to do that. (Supervisor 4/AL/M)"*

Doctoral students' struggle in paraphrasing is linked to the shortage of abundant words and vocabulary or their low proficiency in the English language. As a result, quotations are used repetitively, particularly in the literature reviews of AL. Another possible reason is the disciplinary influences. To illustrate, Applied Linguistics is categorized under the soft domain, in which arguments are used depending on the strengths of exact vocabulary related to each field. Consequently, postgraduates in this domain tend to use quotations from sources written by expert writers to argue, justify, and support their claims.

According to Supervisor 5, using in-text citations by EFL Arab doctoral students is characterized by simplicity, whereby one or two paragraphs are written using the non-integral in-text citation at the end of the paragraph/s.

*"At the end of the paragraph, they put the brackets. If you look into the various previous literature that they do, at the end of the paragraph, they put the brackets. And I keep asking them, why you put the brackets at the end of this. It seems that everything in the whole paragraph refers to that particular person. (Supervisor 5/IT/M)"*

As Supervisor 2 states, their use of in-text citations makes it difficult for the reader to identify which information represents the cited author/s' ideas and which information belongs to the writer's own expressions.

*"Yeah, sometimes, you do not know which part comes from the author, and you have two paragraphs or one paragraph, and suddenly, the citation is there at the end. So, you do not know which part comes from the author. (Supervisor 2/AL/F)"*

The in-text citations used by Arab doctoral students are also characterized by limited and repetitive types of processes 'reporting verbs'. More specifically, postgraduates usually depend on common reporting verbs, namely 'claim, state, show, conduct'. They also utilize other conversational reporting verbs rather than academic ones, namely 'say, tell'. Consequently, employing such reporting verbs may indicate subjectivity that is not accepted by the academic community.

*"They use the word which is not academic like 'says'. They would say, 'says' and they would repeat some of these reporting verbs, simple reporting verbs, like 'shows', 'says', 'said', and I would not find a very good reporting verb like 'argued'. I could not find 'emphasize', 'stress'. (Supervisor 1/AL/M)"*

According to Supervisor 5, such reporting verbs do not reflect a high level of thinking in critically evaluating the varied sources they read and cite.

*"If we relate this to the bloom level, maybe at the beginning of their studies, the level of thinking is not high; it is not of a higher level. So, they tend to actually say something like that, oh, this one 'proposed', 'state that'. Those are not of the level of arguing, the level of judging. (Supervisor 5/IT/M)"*

### **L2 writing skills**

While reading varied sources and citing information from them to integrate the cited information into their own ideas and writing the literature review, Arab doctoral students are faced with challenges in L2 academic writing. The 5 supervisors (100%) emphasize that Arab doctoral students have problems in writing academically in English. As stated by Supervisor 1, Arab doctoral students struggle with grammatical errors and the use of punctuation. For instance, these students lack knowledge related to the use of a full stop, thereby leading to long sentences.

*"The students have problems, trying, struggling, to write using correct grammar. They even have problems with punctuation, especially for Arab students. They have*

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*a problem with punctuation. They do not know where to put the stop; the sentences are very long. (Supervisor 1/AL/M)"*

Writing academically in English is really challenging for EFL Arab doctoral students as revealed by Supervisor 3. As a result of the low proficiency in English academic writing, supervisors find it difficult to understand the writings of their supervisees.

*"I think the first problem for most Arab postgraduates is English. I feel that most of them, whether the ones that I supervised or the ones I was the examiner, do not have good skills in English to communicate or use writing. So, I feel like they need to improve their English, so that is easier for the supervisors or the examiner to understand what they are trying to say. Sometimes, I would ask them, what do you mean by this paragraph? Because, maybe, the way you write your sentences is influenced very much by your native language which is Arabic. I have to look at the content, and I have to help my students in terms of grammar as well. (Supervisor 3/IT/F)"*

Arab doctoral students' L1, namely Arabic, could have an impact on their L2 writing, especially in the use of long structures. A possible reason for the use of long structures in English could be attributed to the similarities between the two languages: Arabic and English language, particularly conjunctions which are called relative pronouns in Arabic, such as 'that', 'which', 'if', and 'when'. As a result, doctoral students' writing in English is challenging for their supervisors who need to check the syntactic, structural, and grammatical errors to understand the content of their writing.

The low expertise in academic writing by Arab doctoral students is also evident in their lack of flow of their ideas due to utilizing mainly the daily common cohesive conjunctions. This leads to disjointed content that requires synthesis. That is, Arab doctoral students do not have the ability to synthesize the cited information and their own ideas together.

*"It is disjointed; the sentences are disjointed and the content itself is disjointed. It is just what other persons have said what this topic, what this area... there is no synthesis. (Supervisor 2)"*

Arab doctoral students' unadvanced level in L2 academic writing and the influence of their first language (Arabic) could contribute to diverse deficiencies in their L2 academic writing in general and the literature review in particular, represented by using long sentences, incorrect use of grammar, incorrect use of punctuation marks, and lacking synthesis of their in-text citations.

### **Positioning**

Academic writing by Arab doctoral students is characterized by either the use of a strong claim while interpreting and reporting the significance of their findings or the absence of an authorial attitude. Lacking hedging markers in students' writing could lead to such strong claims. The 5 Ph.D. supervisors (100 %) declare that Arab doctoral students are challenged in adopting an authorial stance, as revealed by Supervisor 2:

*"I think in the PhD theses, you should not be too strong; it is like you show enough, like Arab students. They like to say 'no research has been conducted'. So, most Arabs say that. They would say lack of research, and there is a lack of research in this field. So, I think they should use some of these, of course 'possibly, probably'. (Supervisor 2/AL/F)"*

Supervisor 2 adds that EFL Arab students have limited use of using hedges.

*"In a limited way, they can use. 'Can' is one of the modal verbs, and they would use 'can' or 'might', or sometimes, 'may', but, 'possibly' and 'probably', 'hardly', 'probably' yeah but no 'hardly'. They just go for the common ones like 'can', 'might', but many of them leave out these modal verbs; they do not even use them. (Supervisor 2)"*

Arab doctoral students attempt to reveal the strengths of their argument by employing strong claims, particularly in the interpretation of the research findings, and it is possibly followed to persuade the readers, the examiners, and the supervisor of the significance and the rationality of their research studies. Their unfamiliarity with the use of hedges could be a reason for employing strong assertions. The other reasons are attributed to the lack of necessary guidelines on the research area of their studies. In other words, their low level of academic knowledge does not assist them to position themselves in the domains of their academic community.

*"It is very difficult for beginner students to be critical because at the beginning of their research before they got their data. Because they are still unclear about the directions, about what they want, so it takes time (Supervisor 4/AL/M)"*

*"I have supervised students who can and students who cannot yet before the viva. Ok, for the students who can, these are really hardworking students, good students. So, they can express their opinion within a year of duration of study, because they have read a lot. So, when you read a lot, you get a lot of information, a lot of different opinions on a certain aspect or different comments that other researchers shared in the article. So they can use that to put a stance. So, I would say that it is very much on the students, how much they read. (Supervisor 3/IT/F)"*

Failure to adopt an authorial stance in L2 academic writing in general and research proposals in specific could be associated with novice researchers who have not been entirely aware of the domain of their studies. In this regard, showing a stance toward a piece of information is not an easy task. Rather, it necessitates much reading of varied good sources.

According to Supervisor 5, the discipline of the research area is a factor that influences the use of an authorial stance. That is, in disciplines of hard domains such as IT, the truth is ultimately sharp compared

with arguments in the soft domain. As a result, the use of adverbs and modal verbs as hedging devices is not accepted.

*"If you have the simulations, and you know that the outcome of this analysis led to this type of the work, so it is very explicit, and you can decide it clearly. So your judgment needs to be very sharp. So, these in IT works are more in this clarity type, and in between these two is not really. Well, it is there, the fuzzy part of it, but it needs to be stable; the stance must be clear. (Supervisor 5/IT/M)"*

In brief, citing information and integrating it into one's writing, the use of grammar and punctuation, lacking the depth of reading, unavailability of sufficient instructions and guidelines on the use of in-text citations, the weak level in L2 academic writing skills, and the failure to adopt an authorial stance towards the materials read pose varied challenges for EFL Arab doctoral students.

## Discussion

This study utilized the New Rhetoric Studies approach to explore the context and SFL Approach to analyse the in-text citations. Under the New Rhetoric Studies approach, Discourse-Based Interviews (DBIs) emphasized the challenges of Arab doctoral students in academically writing literature reviews based on the perceptions of the supervisors. The finding showed several difficulties, namely the lack of depth of reading, low levels of L2 writing skills, random use of in-text citations, and adopting an authorial stance. More specifically, students' low proficiency in academic writing led to utilizing non-academic expressions and the lack of the flow of ideas. Consequently, Arab doctoral students used frequent quotations since they were unable to paraphrase and keep the meaning of the cited pieces of information at the same time (Jomaa and Bidin 2017). This challenge is faced by almost the majority of non-native writers of English (Shi 2012) which could be associated with their limited expertise in English in general and academic writing skills in specific (Liu 2005) and the influence of L1 (Arabic language) on their L2 (English) academic writing (Pudin, Storey, Len, Swanto, and Din 2015). The (DBIs), as highlighted by Hyland (2011) and Lancaster (2016), are important in eliciting significant aspects of writing. In the context of the academic community, novice writers lack information about academic writing norms (Swales and Feak 2012). As revealed by one of the supervisors, Arab doctoral students use non-academic verbs, words, and linguistic expressions. What makes academic writing more challenging is the disciplinary difference in the academic style of each discipline, whereby each discipline has its ideological and epistemological linguistic style (Hyland 1998; Charles 2006b). To illustrate, although Ph.D. candidates in IT attended the academic writing course with other students from social sciences, postgraduates in IT are provided with discipline-specific courses related to academic writing, thereby resulting in inappropriate use of in-text citations. As a result, Al-Khasawneh (2010) suggested developing specific discipline academic guidelines and materials because Arab doctoral students are challenged in register vocabulary.

The correct use of punctuation has a significant impact on producing coherent texts (Swales and Feak 2012). In this domain, Pecorari (2006) stated that the attempts of students to learn the characteristics

of a published text are classified as an appropriate style by the academic community members as well as the (supervisors) advisors' feedback (Riazi 1997) and these are the only sources to learn how to write academically. Nonetheless, using in-text citations and non-academic reporting verbs randomly indicates that learning the disciplinary norms implicitly through reading academic sources is not sufficient (Mansourizadeh and Ahamd 2011; Loan and Pramoolsook 2016). Consequently, literacy practices and teaching materials should focus more on the use of in-text citations and other related issues (Hu and Wang 2014; Loan and Pramoolsook 2016).

Arab doctoral students revealed a lack of adequate knowledge of the use of evaluative linguistic words and expressions and the challenge of implementing an authorial stance, especially during writing the Ph.D. research proposals. According to Dunleavy (2003), a thesis writer needs to address the expectations of the readers and academic community members since the English language is 'writer-responsible'. In other words, in English, the writer has to clarify and organize the notions and ideas to make his/her writing easily understood by readers (Hinds 1987). A significant issue in acknowledging their roles as writer-responsible is through using the metadiscourse markers (Dahl 2004) to organize the text and interact with readers. These metadiscourses reveal the academic voice that is rather challenging for non-native speakers (Jomaa and Alia 2019). However, teaching L2 composition ignored how to equip L2 students with devices of arguments (Bloch 2010) which resulted in limited use of mood adjuncts, whereby the writer's claim is essential and should not be too strong nor too weak. These challenges in writing the literature review were evident because citation competence is an inter-textual skill that incorporates cognitive proficiency in the use of sources, academic reading and writing, and citing motivation (Ma and Qin 2017).

Concerning the Transitivity System, Arab doctoral students employed material, relational, verbal, mental, existential, and behavioural verbs. As stated by Halliday (1985), the field is a register variable that could influence the use of verbs 'processes'. Although AL and IT are from two different fields, a similarity existed in the use of reporting verbs in writing the literature review. This could be attributed to two reasons. First, Arab doctoral students are possibly unaware of the use of appropriate verbs in in-text citations. Therefore, they used them randomly. Second, other unexplored variables could affect the use of verbs in in-text citations. As a result, the findings of this study show clearly the benefit of focusing on texts in contexts through SFL and the contexts of the texts through the New Rhetoric Studies (Gardner 2012).

The findings could imply important implications pedagogically associated with several characteristics of the academic writing skills that need emphasis by researchers, supervisors, and the students themselves. In this regard, Coffin *et al.* (2003) stated:

*Student's academic writing continues to be at the centre of teaching and learning in higher education, but is often an invisible dimension of the curriculum; that is, the rules or conventions governing what counts as academic writing are often assumed to be part of the 'common sense' knowledge students have, and are thus not explicitly taught within disciplinary courses. (p.3)*



## Conclusions

The results of this study are derived from analysing the text in context and the context of the student writers. Such findings are applicable in the field of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teaching (Gardner 2012). The huge number of international students studying abroad has resulted in a similar increase in the number of EAP instructors and academics. However, instructors of EAP internationally are non-native speakers of English, and their needs are different from the needs of native speaker teachers. As a result, new modifications in EAP materials and training courses for EAP instructors have emerged (Hyland and Hamp-Lyons 2002). This necessitates training instructors and equipping them with the skills and components of academic language to address the challenges faced by FLLs in academic writing (Aguirre-Muñoz, Park, Amabisca, and Boscardin 2009). Thus, employing the SFL approach to academic language skills implies deconstructing the linguistic characteristics and linguistic structures to meet the linguistic expectations of the academic language.

For instance, researchers in ESP/EAP have the possibility of exploring the application of learning theories from SFL, NR, and ESP (Cheng 2006). More specifically, typical ESP genre-based writing classes for non-native learners and novice researchers could lead postgraduate students to identify the specific characteristics of each genre and the disciplinary norms employed in writing articles and Ph.D. theses. These practices are an effective tool for developing skills in L2 academic writing (Cheng 2006). In this context, one of the approaches to the skills of academic language is impacted by a genre-based literacy program (e.g., Christie 1992, 1999; Martin and Rose 2008) which is grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday 1985; Halliday and Matthiessen 2014). In other words, a genre-based pedagogy explicitly advocates teaching registers of academic writing needed by the students (Aguirre-Muñoz, Park, Amabisca, and Boscardin 2009).

Although this study is limited to analysing the literature review focusing mainly on the use of in-text citations, verbs, and metadiscourse devices as well as identifying the supervisors' perceptions towards the challenges faced by Arab doctoral students in writing the literature review, the findings highlight significant issues that cause problems in achieving the required academic writing. Therefore, conducting more studies on Arab postgraduates' L2 writing can enrich the body of literature related to the effectiveness of explicitly teaching academic registers to students.

## كتابة الدراسات الأدبية: تحليل النصوص واستكشاف السياق

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### الملخص

حلت هذه الدراسة الاستشهادات في النص، الأفعال، والتعابير الشخصية بالإضافة إلى استكشاف وجهات نظر المشرفين حول كتابة الدراسات السابقة من قبل طلاب الدكتوراه العرب. تضمنت الدراسة تحليل 20 فصل للدراسات السابقة في تخصصين، وهما اللغويات التطبيقية (AL) وتكنولوجيا المعلومات (IT) وإجراء مقابلات مع خمسة مشرفين. تم استخدام اللغويات الوظيفية النظامية في التحليل النصي، بينما أجريت المقابلات الفردية لمعرفة تصورات المشرفين حول الكتابة الأكاديمية للطلاب. تم إجراء التحليل النصي يدوياً باستخدام الجداول، بينما تم استخدام الخرائط الذهنية والتحليل اليدوي والتخطيطات المرئية في تحليل المقابلات. كشفت النتائج عن هيمنة الاقتباسات المدمجة، والأفعال المساعدة وكذلك الأفعال المادية. بناءً على المقابلات، اتسمت كتابات طلاب الدكتوراه العرب بافتقارها إلى عمق القراءة وعدم كفاية المعلومات حول استخدام الاستشهادات، وصعوبات الكتابة في اللغة الثانية وإظهار آراءهم. وبالتالي، فهم بحاجة إلى تركيز واضح على استخدام الاستشهادات من خلال تقديم مواد تعليمية خاصة بها.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الدراسة الأدبية، الكتابة الأكاديمية، المقابلات المبنية على النصوص، اللغويات الوظيفية النظامية.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The coding was done based on the time of having access to each thesis; therefore, coding both groups of Ph.D. theses should be considered.

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