

A Comparison of Citation Competence in English Academic Writing between Chinese Student Writers and Professional Writers

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Abstract

This study investigated the citation competence of Chinese English-major student writers in comparison with professional writers, and further explored how citation features differ between the Introduction and the Literature Review. Following Xu's (2016) framework grounded in the metafunctions of systemic functional linguistics—as operationalised by Li and Zhang (2021)—every citation was analysed for four features placed under three dimensions: content (ideational), function and writer's stance (interpersonal), and type (textual). A corpus of 3520 citations from 30 theses by Chinese student writers (802,026 words) and 1204 citations from 15 professional journal articles (122,968 words) was annotated, combining automatic software-based extraction and coding with manual verification. Results show that the professional writers cited significantly more densely (9.79 vs. 4.39 per 1000 words) and fulfilled the application and topic-relevance functions, and the source and reference types, significantly more than the student writers, with large effect sizes (Cohen's $d > 1$) for all these features. An analysis of reporting verbs showed that the professionals favoured factive verbs (find, identify, show) that endorse cited claims, whereas the students relied on non-factive attribution verbs (propose, point out, believe), the lexical basis of their covert, neutral stance. The student writers, for their part, relied predominantly on the supporting function and on a person-oriented, integral citation style. Further analysis indicates that the rhetorical function of each section shapes the distribution of citation features: in the student writers' texts, integral (naming) citations and citations of concepts and theories concentrate in the Literature Review, whereas the Introduction is dominated by non-integral source citations of research topics. The study offers implications for theorising L2 citation competence and for teaching academic writing to Chinese learners.

Keywords

Citations, Citation Competence, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Academic Writing, Chinese Student Writers, Professional Writers

1. Introduction

Citations are important rhetorical devices in research writing (Petrić, 2007). Over the past two decades, studies of L1 and L2 writers have demonstrated that using citations appropriately and effectively is a more challenging task for L2 learners, since cultural, psychological, and educational factors all play important roles (Bloch & Chi, 1995; Cumming et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2016). Citation competence—the ability to read, understand, and finally integrate the content of a source text into one’s own research writing (Davis, 2013)—is positively related to the quality of research writing (Ma & Qin, 2014; Petrić, 2012), enabling a writer to present the significance of a study convincingly and to align with a research community (Hyland, 1999).

When previous scholars analyzed citation features, they tended to focus on a single feature—citation function, type, or strategy—or on more than one feature without establishing connections between them (Petrić & Harwood, 2013). Such analyses cannot fully reveal a writer’s citation competence, because citation competence is a multidimensional construct (Xu, 2016). Drawing on the metafunctions of systemic functional linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), Xu (2016) argued that citation competence comprises three closely related dimensions—ideational, interpersonal, and textual—and that each citation reveals a writer’s competence in all three simultaneously. Li and Zhang (2021) expanded Xu’s framework to incorporate four features (content, function, writer’s stance, and type) and used it to compare master’s and doctoral writing, finding that the more experienced writers fulfilled the application and agreement functions significantly more often.

The present study applies this framework to a comparison that has received less attention: Chinese undergraduate student writers versus professional writers. Whereas master’s and doctoral students differ in degree of experience, the gap between student writers and published professionals is wider still, making the comparison a stringent test of how citation competence develops. In addition, because the rhetorical function of each section of a research text influences the use of citations (Thompson & Tribble, 2001), this study compares the two most citation-dense sections of student research writing—the Introduction and the Literature Review—rather than treating each text as an undifferentiated whole. The study addresses two research questions:

RQ1. To what extent do the citation features in Chinese student writers’ texts differ from those in professional writers’ texts across the ideational, interpersonal, and textual dimensions?

RQ2. To what extent do the citation features in the Introduction differ from those in the Literature Review of the student theses?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definitions and Evaluation of Citation Competence

Citation competence is an important rhetorical ability to position a writer's research in relation to previous work and to build connections between them (Ma & Qin, 2015; Wang et al., 2017). High citation competence enables a writer not only to integrate others' words or findings but also to present the purpose of the research convincingly and to show findings persuasively (Hyland, 1999; Mansourizadeh & Ahmad, 2011). Large-scale diachronic evidence confirms the centrality of this ability: citation in published research has grown steadily denser and more varied over the past five decades (Hyland & Jiang, 2019). For second language writers, integrating sources appropriately remains a well-documented challenge at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Doolan, 2021; Lee, Hitchcock, & Casal, 2018; Wette, 2017). Because citation competence is realised in concrete citation features, it can be evaluated by analysing those features in research writing. With reference to appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005), Coffin (2009) focused on the interpersonal dimension of citations and proposed three sub-dimensions—writer's stance, textual integration of the source, and the nature of the source. Hu and Wang (2014) applied and revised Coffin's framework to compare citation competence across disciplines. These frameworks, however, are based on the interpersonal metafunction alone.

Xu (2012, 2016) established a more comprehensive framework drawing on the ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions. In Xu's framework, the ideational dimension concerns citing "what" (the content of citations); the interpersonal dimension concerns citing "whom" (the function of citations and the writer's relationship with cited researchers); and the textual dimension concerns "how to cite" (the type and placement of citations). Compared with Coffin's interpersonal-only model, Xu's framework offers a more complete evaluation of citation competence and has yielded useful findings when applied to applied-linguistics theses (Xu, 2016). The present study, following Li and Zhang (2021), is based on and further extends Xu's framework.

It should be noted that, in the Chinese research context, citation has also been studied from a bibliometric and informetric perspective, in which the citation is treated as a unit for evaluating research rather than as a feature of writing competence. This strand includes the evaluation of the innovativeness of academic papers through their citing intention (Wei et al., 2023), the improvement of journal-evaluation methods from the perspective of single-paper citation (Wu et al., 2022), and citation-based topic clustering (Guo et al., 2020). Although valuable, these studies analyse citations for the purpose of research evaluation; the present study, by contrast, analyses citation as a realisation of a writer's competence, and therefore adopts the writing-oriented framework of Xu (2016).

2.2. The Three-Dimensional Framework and Its Expansion

Following Li and Zhang (2021), this study expands Xu's framework by adding the writer's stance to the interpersonal dimension, since stance shows the writer's at-

titute towards the cited text and is closely related to the relationship the writer builds with cited researchers. The expanded framework thus comprises four features—content, function, writer’s stance, and type—distributed across the three dimensions. The function of citations is analysed using the six categories proposed by Cumming et al. (2018), who also studied citations in the research writing of Chinese English-major students: supporting, defining, application, topic-relevance, agreement, and disagreement. The writer’s stance is analysed using Hyland’s (1999) widely adopted classification: acceptance, disagreement, positive, neutral, tentative, and critical. Apart from acceptance and disagreement, the other four are realised covertly, with the writer making the cited author responsible for the attitude. The reporting verbs that introduce integral citations are a central resource for this covert positioning, and their use has been shown to vary systematically across disciplines and genres (Charles, 2006).

2.3. Citations across Rhetorical Sections

Citation features differ across the sections of a research text because the sections perform different rhetorical functions (Flowerdew & Li, 2007; Thompson & Tribble, 2001). The Introduction establishes the territory and significance of a study and points out a niche, whereas the Literature Review builds a network of previous research, presents theoretical background, and positions the writer’s own study (Kwan et al., 2012; Mansourizadeh & Ahmad, 2011; Samraj, 2013). It is reasonable to expect that the densities and the distribution of citation features in these two sections differ. Although scholars have investigated citation features in single sections, fewer studies have made a detailed comparison between the Introduction and the Literature Review in the writing of Chinese students, which this study undertakes.

3. The Analytical Framework of Citation Features

The framework comprises four features under three dimensions, as shown in **Table 1**. **Table 1** presents the definitions and authentic examples of each feature, adapted from Xu (2012) and Li and Zhang (2021).

Table 1. The three-dimensional framework of citation competence.

CITATION COMPETENCE (Xu, 2016; Li & Zhang, 2021)			
Ideational dimension citing “what”	Interpersonal dimension citing “whom”		Textual dimension “how to cite”
Feature: Content	Feature: Function	Feature: Stance	Feature: Type
• research topics	• supporting	• acceptance	integral:
• concepts/definitions	• defining	• disagreement	• verb-controlling
• theories/models	• application	• positive	• naming
• methodology	• topic-relevance	• neutral	non-integral:
• results/findings	• agreement	• tentative	• source · identification
• viewpoints/explanations	• disagreement	• critical	• reference · origin

Adapted from Xu (2016) and Li & Zhang (2021); the writer’s stance was added to the interpersonal dimension.

3.1. Content of Citations in the Ideational Dimension

Following Xu’s (2012) division, the content of a citation falls into six categories: research topics (citing previous topics or concrete details), concepts/definitions/terms, theories/models (theories, models, frameworks, or constructs), methodology (research designs, instruments, or procedures), results/findings, and viewpoints/explanations (attitudes, evaluations, or explanations of concepts shown by previous authors).

3.2. Function and Writer’s Stance in the Interpersonal Dimension

The function of citations (Cumming et al., 2018) comprises supporting (presenting cited standpoints or findings to support the writer’s claim), defining, application (applying a cited construct, model or theory in one’s own analysis), topic-relevance (making comparisons with previous studies), agreement, and disagreement. The writer’s stance (Hyland, 1999) comprises acceptance and disagreement (explicitly presenting the cited information as true or false) and the four covert stances: positive, neutral, tentative, and critical, in which the writer makes the cited author responsible for the attitude.

3.3. Type of Citations in the Textual Dimension

The type of a citation (Swales, 1990; Thompson & Tribble, 2001) is either integral or non-integral. Integral citations are divided into verb-controlling (the cited author acts as the agent controlling a verb) and naming (the cited author functions as a noun phrase). Non-integral citations are divided into source (attribution of a proposition to a cited author), identification (clarification of an agent within the sentence), reference (introducing other texts to the reader, often with “e.g.”), and origin (indicating the originator of a concept or product) (Table 2).

Table 2. Definitions and examples of the four citation features in the three dimensions.

Dimension	Feature (categories)	Example
Ideational	Content: topics, concepts/definitions, theories/models, methodology, results/findings, viewpoints	Schmitt’s (1997) taxonomy of 58 items can be categorized as discovery and consolidation strategies. [theories/models]
Interpersonal	Function: supporting, defining, application, topic relevance, agreement, disagreement	To explore the research questions, the researcher seeks to build a picture based on informants’ ideas (Creswell, 1994). [application]
Interpersonal	Stance: acceptance, disagreement, positive, neutral, tentative, critical	Byram (1997) proposed a comprehensive framework of intercultural competence. [tentative]
Textual	Type: integral (verb-controlling, naming); non-integral (source, identification, reference, origin)	Fan (2003) further observed that students who scored higher employed more guessing strategies. [verb-controlling]

Examples are authentic instances from the present corpora.

4. Methods

4.1. Corpus Description

The corpus consists of two sub-corpora. The Chinese Student Corpus (CSC) comprises 30 English-medium theses written by fourth-year Chinese English-major undergraduates, who conducted small-scale empirical studies in English language teaching and applied linguistics. The Professional Writer Corpus (PWC) comprises 15 articles published in leading international journals in applied linguistics, EAP, and second language writing (e.g., *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, *Journal of Second Language Writing*), including classic citation research (e.g., Petrić, 2007; Mansourizadeh & Ahmad, 2011) and recent empirical studies. The student theses were sampled exhaustively from a single institutional cohort: all available BA theses defended by English majors at one Chinese university in 2024 and 2025 were included, with one thesis being replaced by another from the same cohort owing to an unrecoverable file-conversion fault. The professional articles were purposively sampled against three criteria: (a) publication in peer-reviewed international journals in applied linguistics, EAP, or second language writing; (b) topical comparability with the theses (academic writing, English language teaching, and second language learning); and (c) availability of clean full text for annotation; topics in both corpora therefore fall within applied linguistics broadly defined. After cleaning (removal of titles, headers, footers, tables, figures, appendices, and reference lists), the CSC contained 802,026 words and the PWC 122,968 words. Individual texts averaged 26,734 words ($SD = 5,645$) in the CSC and 8198 words ($SD = 2071$) in the PWC. The Introduction and Literature Review of each text were identified from section headings; the cross-sectional analysis (RQ2) was conducted on the student corpus, whose theses have clearly demarcated Introduction and Literature Review chapters (Table 3).

Table 3. The corpus and its sub-corpora.

Sub-corpus	Texts	Total words	Citations	Density/1000
PWC (professional writers)	15	122,968	1204	9.79
CSC (student writers)	30	802,026	3520	4.39
Total	45	924,994	4724	-

Density = citations per 1,000 words of the cleaned corpus.

4.2. Analytical Tools

A combination of automatic and manual procedures was used so that the annotation could be applied consistently to a large corpus while preserving the interpretive judgement that the framework requires. Three complementary kinds of tool were employed to this end. First, purpose-built text-processing scripts cleaned the texts, segmented each text into rhetorical sections from its headings, retrieved every in-text citation together with its citing sentence, and assigned a provisional code for each of the four features. Second, AntConc was used as a

concordancer to inspect reporting structures and the immediate context of citations during manual verification. Third, the qualitative-analysis software NVivo was used to manage the coding scheme and to store, retrieve, and revise the codes for the four features. Frequencies were normalised as densities per 1,000 words; the individual text was the unit of analysis, the density of each feature in each text being computed as its raw frequency divided by the text's cleaned word count and multiplied by 1000; group comparisons were computed with independent-samples (Welch) t-tests on these per-text densities (PWC $n = 15$; CSC $n = 30$), so that degrees of freedom reflect texts rather than citations, and Cohen's d was calculated for each comparison as a measure of effect size (the magnitude of the difference), since statistical significance alone does not indicate how large a difference is. Because 24 feature-level tests were conducted, the Benjamini–Hochberg false-discovery-rate procedure (Benjamini & Hochberg, 1995) was applied across them at $q < 0.05$; all feature-level differences reported as significant below survive this correction unless explicitly noted, and given their number these comparisons are best read as exploratory. In addition, the reporting verbs introducing integral citations were extracted and classified by their evaluative loading—factive, non-factive, or counter-factive—following Hyland (2002), in order to examine the lexical realisation of the writers' stance. Each reporting verb was identified within the citing clause of an integral citation, lemmatised, and assigned its loading from a closed lemma list adapted from Hyland (2002) (factive, e.g., find, show, demonstrate, identify; non-factive, e.g., suggest, propose, argue, believe; counter-factive, e.g., fail, overlook); classification was thus based on the verb lemma alone rather than on its local discourse context. For the cross-sectional comparison (RQ2), the association between section (Introduction versus Literature Review) and the distribution of each feature in the student corpus was additionally tested with chi-square tests on the raw frequencies. Welch degrees of freedom are rounded to integers for reporting, and 95% confidence intervals (CIs) of the between-group differences are provided for the principal significant comparisons.

4.3. Annotation Procedure

The annotation followed a two-stage, software-assisted-then-manual workflow designed to maximise both consistency and validity. In the first (automatic) stage, the scripts assigned every citation a provisional value for each feature: citation type and integration were determined from surface patterns (author placement, quotation marks, single vs. multiple sources), while content, function, and writer's stance were assigned from explicit lexico-grammatical cues—reporting verbs, evaluative lexis, and contextual markers—operationalised from the definitions in Table 2. In the second (manual) stage, the researcher checked and, where necessary, corrected every provisional code against the framework definitions, using AntConc concordances to resolve context-dependent cases; the manually verified codes are those reported below. Explicit counting and dis-

ambiguation rules were applied: a parenthetical string citing several sources in support of a single proposition (author–year references separated by semicolons) was treated as one citation and coded once, its type recorded as reference; distinct propositions within one sentence, each supported by its own citation, were counted and coded separately; and where more than one content, function, or stance category was plausible, the category realised by the main clause of the citing sentence was coded (a primary-function rule, cf. Petrić, 2007), residual ambiguities being resolved by adjudication against the category definitions during the manual stage.

The scheme's reliability was established in three ways, following Li and Zhang (2021). A pilot annotation of three texts from each sub-corpus was first carried out to refine the operational definitions and adjudicate borderline cases. The accuracy of the automatic stage was then assessed on a stratified random sample of citations by comparing the software-assigned codes with the researcher's independent manual coding; agreement was 78% for content, 88% for function, 88% for writer's stance, and 88% for type. These figures are comparable to the 91.7% inter-coder agreement reported by Li and Zhang (2021); the lower value for content reflects the difficulty of the fine-grained semantic judgment of what is cited, and all content codes were therefore manually verified. Third, because agreement between the automatic and the manual codes indexes the accuracy of the automatic stage rather than coder reliability, inter-coder reliability was additionally assessed on a random sample of 100 citations, re-coded independently and blind to the first-round codes (three detection false positives were identified and excluded, indicating a detection precision of about 97%). Raw agreement was 69.1% for type, 77.3% for stance, 66.0% for function, and 35.1% for content, and Cohen's κ was 0.59, 0.53, 0.23, and 0.21 respectively. Because κ is unstable when category distributions are highly skewed (Feinstein & Cicchetti, 1990), Gwet's (2008) AC1 was computed alongside it, yielding 0.64, 0.74, 0.62, and 0.24. The contrast between κ (0.23) and AC1 (0.62) for function indicates that its low κ chiefly reflects a prevalence effect—the supporting category accounts for roughly nine tenths of all function codes—rather than pervasive disagreement, with residual divergences concentrated at the supporting–defining boundary; for content, by contrast, all indices were low, with disagreements concentrated at the research topics–concepts boundary. Importantly, the two coding rounds converged on the core between-group contrasts: in the re-coded sample the non-integral share was 64.6% (PWC) versus 30.3% (CSC) under the first-round codes and 64.5% versus 33.3% under the blind re-coding, and the direction of the neutral-stance difference was likewise preserved. When the six content categories were collapsed into three broader classes (conceptual, methodological, and results-oriented), agreement rose to 79.4% ($\kappa = 0.42$); the content findings are therefore robust at this coarser level, while the six-way content results are best read as exploratory. All disagreements were resolved by consensus adjudication. The low-frequency categories—disagreement (function and stance) and origin (type)—were retained because they help distinguish the two groups of writers.

5. Results

5.1. Citation Features in Student and Professional Writing

The overall citation density of the professional writers (9.79 per 1000 words) was more than twice that of the student writers (4.39), and the difference was significant ($t(18) = 9.05, p < 0.001$). This indicates that the professional writers engaged with the literature far more frequently. The difference in mean per-text density was 5.27 per 1000 words (95% CI [4.05, 6.49]). A sensitivity check confirmed that the inclusion of one response article in the PWC did not drive this result: its density (7.94 per 1000 words) lies close to the PWC mean, and excluding it changes the mean per-text density only marginally (from 9.61 to 9.73 per 1000 words). The subsections that follow examine the ideational, interpersonal, and textual dimensions in turn.

Table 4 reports the density of each content category in the two corpora, with Welch tests and effect sizes.

Table 4. Content of citations (PWC vs. CSC).

Content	PWC M (SD)	CSC M (SD)	Significance	Effect (d)
Research topics	6.14 (1.68)	2.28 (0.69)	$t(16) = 8.51, p < 0.001$	3.45 (large)
Concepts/definitions/terms	0.23 (0.20)	0.28 (0.11)	$t(19) = -1.01, p = 0.326$	-0.38
Theories/models	0.99 (0.58)	0.66 (0.37)	$t(20) = 2.06, p = 0.053$	0.75
Methodology	0.79 (0.62)	0.47 (0.27)	$t(17) = 1.95, p = 0.069$	0.78
Results/findings	0.98 (0.61)	0.28 (0.26)	$t(17) = 4.27, p = 0.001$	1.72 (large)
Viewpoints/explanations	0.49 (0.37)	0.37 (0.27)	$t(21) = 1.04, p = 0.311$	0.37

Density per 1,000 words: Mean (SD); Welch t-test; d = Cohen’s d (small ≥ 0.2 , medium ≥ 0.5 , large ≥ 0.8). Significant differences ($p < 0.05$) are shown in the p column.

In the ideational dimension (**Table 4**), the professional writers cited research topics (6.14 (1.68) vs. 2.28 (0.69) per 1000 words; $t(16) = 8.51, p < 0.001$; 95% CI of the difference [2.90, 4.82]) and results/findings ($t(17) = 4.27, p = 0.001$) significantly more often than the student writers; differences for theories/models ($t(20) = 2.06, p = 0.053$) and methodology ($t(17) = 1.95, p = 0.069$) were not statistically significant. This indicates that, beyond a shared core of topic-oriented citation, the professional writers engaged more fully with the substance of prior work—above all, its empirical findings—rather than merely naming the topics it addressed.

(1) Academic vocabulary, encompassing words like “approach”, “infer”, and “notion”, is commonly used across various subject disciplines in higher education (Coxhead, 2020). [PWC, research topics]

Analysis: The professional writer cites a foundational source to establish the research territory; such topic-level citation is the shared core of both corpora but is used far more densely by professionals.

(2) Gu (2002) conducted a large-scale study with 645 university students in China and found significant differences between arts and science students. [PWC, methodology]

Analysis: Here, the citation reports the design and scale of a prior study, illustrating the professionals' fuller engagement with how earlier research was carried out—a content type on which the two groups did not differ significantly, though the professionals still used it more.

(3) Ji (2011) proposed a comprehensive taxonomy that categorizes feedback by source, form, and focus. [CSC, theories/models]

Analysis: When the student writers moved beyond topics, they most often cited a theory or model to frame the construct under study, as here; theories/models were one of the few content types they used relatively frequently.

(4) However, in a previous study, it was found that immediate correction of oral errors was more desirable than correction after speaking (Dilek, 2015), which is different from this study. [CSC, results/findings]

Analysis: Although this student cites a prior empirical finding, results/findings content remained comparatively rare in the student corpus (0.28 vs. 0.98 per 1000 words), where topic-level citation predominates.

In the interpersonal dimension, two features—the function of citations and the writer's stance—were examined. **Table 5** reports the results for the function of citations.

Table 5. Function of citations (PWC vs. CSC).

Function	PWC M (SD)	CSC M (SD)	Significance	Effect (d)
Supporting	8.47 (1.83)	3.95 (1.08)	$t(19) = 8.86, p < 0.001$	3.31 (large)
Defining	0.17 (0.20)	0.17 (0.09)	$t(17) = 0.04, p = 0.971$	0.01
Application	0.50 (0.43)	0.12 (0.08)	$t(14) = 3.41, p = 0.004$	1.50 (large)
Topic-relevance	0.33 (0.23)	0.07 (0.08)	$t(16) = 4.17, p = 0.001$	1.75 (large)
Agreement	0.14 (0.21)	0.02 (0.04)	$t(15) = 2.02, p = 0.063$	0.89
Disagreement	0.00 (0.00)	0.01 (0.03)	$t(29) = -1.58, p = 0.125$	-0.35

Density per 1000 words: Mean (SD); Welch t-test; d = Cohen's d (small ≥ 0.2 , medium ≥ 0.5 , large ≥ 0.8). Significant differences ($p < 0.05$) are shown in the p column.

For function (**Table 5**), supporting was by far the most common function in both groups, but the professional writers used it far more densely (8.47 (1.83) vs. 3.95 (1.08); $t(19) = 8.86, p < .001$; 95% CI [3.45, 5.59]). More tellingly, the professionals fulfilled the higher-order functions of application ($t(14) = 3.41, p = 0.004$) and topic-relevance ($t(16) = 4.17, p = 0.001$) significantly more often, while the difference for agreement was not statistically significant ($t(15) = 2.02, p = 0.063$). This finding closely parallels Li and Zhang (2021), who likewise found application and agreement to separate the more competent writers: writers with greater competence are better able to apply previous models in their own research, to connect studies to one another, and to express direct agreement with cited claims, rather than merely presenting them.

(5) Following Egbert and Biber (2023), we considered Cohen's d values exceeding 0.2 to be the threshold for a meaningful effect. [PWC, application]

Analysis: The professional writer applies a cited criterion directly in the study’s own analysis—one of the functions that most clearly separates the two groups ($t = 3.41, p = 0.004$).

(6) Consequently, this paper uses the systematic evaluation method proposed by Cheng (2011) as the theoretical basis for evaluating textbooks. [CSC, application]

Analysis: When students did apply a source, they typically adopted a single framework in its entirety, as here, rather than integrating and adapting several—a narrower realisation of the same function.

(7) In keeping with the development of intercultural communicative competence, Kramsch (2014) broadened Byram’s model by introducing symbolic understanding as a necessary addition. [CSC, topic-relevance]

Analysis: This topic-relevance citation connects two studies to each other; the students used such connective moves far less often than the professionals (0.07 vs. 0.33 per 1000 words), reflecting a more list-like presentation of sources.

Table 6 presents the distribution of the writer’s stance across the two corpora.

Table 6. Writer’s stance (PWC vs. CSC).

Stance	PWC M (SD)	CSC M (SD)	Significance	Effect (d)
Acceptance	0.07 (0.15)	0.03 (0.04)	$t(15) = 1.02, p = 0.323$	0.44
Disagreement	0.01 (0.04)	0.00 (0.01)	$t(14) = 0.80, p = 0.434$	0.35
Positive	1.35 (0.52)	0.73 (0.41)	$t(23) = 3.99, p = 0.001$	1.36 (large)
Neutral	7.13 (2.06)	3.20 (1.00)	$t(17) = 6.98, p < 0.001$	2.74 (large)
Tentative	0.97 (0.79)	0.35 (0.22)	$t(15) = 3.02, p = 0.009$	1.29 (large)
Critical	0.08 (0.13)	0.03 (0.05)	$t(16) = 1.46, p = 0.164$	0.60

Density per 1000 words: Mean (SD); Welch t-test; d = Cohen’s d (small ≥ 0.2 , medium ≥ 0.5 , large ≥ 0.8). Significant differences ($p < 0.05$) are shown in the p column.

For writer’s stance (Table 6), the covert neutral stance dominated both corpora, again at a much higher density in the professional writing (7.13 (2.06) vs. 3.20 (1.00); $t(17) = 6.98, p < 0.001$; 95% CI [2.74, 5.12]). The professional writers also took a positive stance ($t(23) = 3.99, p = 0.001$) and a tentative stance ($t(15) = 3.02, p = 0.009$) significantly more often. The explicit stances of acceptance and disagreement were rare in both groups, and although the professionals adopted a critical stance more frequently, the difference was not significant. Overall, the student writers refrained from signaling evaluation, presenting cited material largely without committing to a position.

(8) Research targeting first-year university students in Hong Kong SAR has shown that these students find academic vocabulary to be challenging and overwhelming (Chung & Newton, 2024). [PWC, positive]

Analysis: The factive reporting verb “shown” aligns the writer with the cited claim, presenting it as established knowledge; this covert positive stance was the second most common in both corpora and significantly denser in professional writing.

(9) Ranalli (2021) asserts that a host of variables, including trust, can frame

learners' use of technology. [PWC, critical]

Analysis: "Asserts" covertly signals a critical stance, making the cited author responsible for a contestable claim; such evaluative positioning was more available to the professionals than to the students.

(10) Graham and Harris (1989) proposed that self-efficacy essentially boils down to students' assessments of their own capabilities in successfully executing a given writing task. [CSC, tentative]

Analysis: "Proposed" conveys a tentative stance, but instances like this were the exception; the students overwhelmingly defaulted to a neutral stance rather than taking graded positions on their sources.

(11) When it comes to English literature education, Xu (2021) asserts that teachers must craft activities that align with key competencies, particularly cultural awareness. [CSC, critical]

Analysis: This rare student instance of a critical stance shows that the linguistic resource is available to the student writers, yet it was seldom deployed—the students largely refrained from evaluating the sources they cited.

Table 7 reports the density of each citation type in the two corpora.

Table 7. Types of citations (PWC vs. CSC).

Type	PWC M (SD)	CSC M (SD)	Significance	Effect (d)
Verb-controlling	0.67 (0.44)	1.02 (0.53)	$t(34) = -2.31, p = 0.027$	-0.68 (medium)
Naming	1.97 (0.90)	1.61 (0.63)	$t(21) = 1.40, p = 0.176$	0.50
Source	4.12 (1.63)	1.37 (0.78)	$t(17) = 6.20, p < 0.001$	2.44 (large)
Identification	0.01 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	$t(31) = -0.91, p = 0.370$	-0.28
Reference	2.81 (1.68)	0.32 (0.34)	$t(15) = 5.70, p < 0.001$	2.50 (large)
Origin	0.03 (0.08)	0.01 (0.02)	$t(15) = 0.66, p = 0.516$	0.28

Density per 1000 words: Mean (SD); Welch t-test; d = Cohen's d (small ≥ 0.2 , medium ≥ 0.5 , large ≥ 0.8). Significant differences ($p < 0.05$) are shown in the p column.

In the textual dimension (**Table 7**), the two groups differed most clearly in their use of non-integral citation. The professional writers used the source type (4.12 (1.63) vs. 1.37 (0.78); $t(17) = 6.20, p < 0.001$; 95% CI [1.81, 3.69]) and the reference type ($t(15) = 5.70, p < 0.001$) significantly more often, emphasizing the cited content and introducing readers to multiple related texts. The student writers, by contrast, used verb-controlling citation—in which the cited author is the grammatical subject—more than the professionals (1.02 (0.53) vs. 0.67 (0.44); $t(34) = -2.31, p = 0.027$, uncorrected; this difference does not survive the false-discovery-rate correction), foregrounding the authority of the cited researcher rather than the proposition. This pattern echoes the finding that more competent writers favor non-integral citation to assert their own voice (Ma & Qin, 2014; Thompson, 2005).

(12) Cultural tools objectify culturally developed knowledge as they are interpreted and used in interaction (Wittek et al., 2017). [PWC, source]

Analysis: The non-integral source citation places the author outside the sen-

tence, foregrounding the proposition rather than the researcher—the concept-oriented style used by the professionals far more than the students (4.12 vs. 1.37 per 1000 words).

(13) Unlike technical vocabulary, academic vocabulary is typically not the primary focus of instruction in subject-area courses (Dang, 2022; Nation, 2022; Skoufaki & Petrić, 2021). [PWC, reference]

Analysis: The reference type bundles several sources to introduce a body of work to the reader; the professionals used it roughly nine times as densely as the students, reflecting a broader command of the literature.

(14) Entwistle (2000) and Ramsden (2003) developed the concept and theory of deep learning and surface learning. [CSC, verb-controlling (integral)]

Analysis: Here, the cited authors are the grammatical subjects that control the verb, giving them prominence over the proposition—the author-prominent integral style that the students used significantly more than the professionals.

Because integral citation is realised through reporting verbs, a closer analysis of these verbs refines the interpersonal findings (Table 8).

Table 8. Reporting verbs introducing integral citations (PWC vs. CSC).

Measure	PWC (professionals)	CSC (students)
Reporting-verb tokens (per 10,000 words)	14.31	12.90
Distinct verb types	35	50
Top-5 verb concentration (%)	42.6	46.5
Factive verbs (%)	52.8	34.2
Non-factive verbs (%)	46.0	64.6
Counter-factive verbs (%)	1.1	1.2
Five most frequent verbs	find, identify, show, note, report	propose, point out, believe, argue, find

Evaluative loading follows Hyland (2002): factive verbs present the cited claim as true; non-factive verbs attribute it without commitment; counter-factive verbs portray it as flawed.

The two groups used reporting verbs at a broadly similar rate (14.31 vs. 12.90 tokens per 10,000 words), but they used them very differently. The professional writers favoured factive, research-oriented verbs—such as find, identify, report, and show—which present the cited claim as an established finding that the writer accepts; 52.8% of their reporting verbs were factive. The student writers instead relied on non-factive, discourse-oriented verbs—above all propose, point out, believe, and argue—which attribute a view to the cited author without committing the writer to its truth; only 34.2% of their verbs were factive, while non-factive verbs accounted for 64.6%. Even though the larger student corpus contained more verb types in absolute terms (50 vs. 35), the students concentrated more heavily on a few high-frequency verbs (their top five verbs covered 46.5% of all tokens, vs. 42.6% for the professionals), and three of those five—propose, point out, believe—are precisely the non-committal attribution verbs that realise a covert neutral stance. Counter-factive verbs (e.g., fail, overlook) were marginal in both groups

(about 1%), confirming that neither group frequently contested its sources. The reporting-verb data thus provide the lexical mechanism behind the stance results in **Table 6**: the students' narrow, non-factive verb repertoire is the concrete means by which they maintain distance from evaluative commitment.

5.2. Citation Features in the Introduction and the Literature Review

The student writers' citations were heavily concentrated in the Literature Review, consistent with its rhetorical function of building a network of prior research. Within-section percentages reveal how the function of each section shaped the distribution of citation features. **Table 9** shows the distribution of content categories in the two sections.

Table 9. Content of citations in the introduction and literature review (student corpus, %).

Content	Introduction (%)	Literature Review (%)
Research topics	66.28	53.95
Concepts/definitions/terms	2.68	8.09
Theories/models	10.34	15.04
Methodology	5.75	8.2
Results/findings	6.51	4.96
Viewpoints/explanations	8.43	9.77

Within-section percentages.

In the ideational dimension (**Table 9**), research topics accounted for a larger share of citations in the Introduction (66.28%) than in the Literature Review (53.95%), whereas concepts/definitions/terms (2.68% vs. 8.09%) and theories/models (10.34% vs. 15.04%) made up a larger share in the Literature Review. The overall association between section and content distribution was significant ($\chi^2(5) = 22.59, p < .001$). This is consistent with the Introduction's role in establishing the topic and the Literature Review's role in engaging with concepts and theoretical frameworks.

Table 10 shows the corresponding distribution of citation types in the two sections.

Table 10. Type of citations in the introduction and literature review (student corpus, %).

Type	Introduction (%)	Literature Review (%)
Verb-controlling	17.24	27.66
Naming	25.67	39.18
Source	48.28	25.27
Identification	0.38	0.35
Reference	8.43	7.3
Origin	0	0.23

Within-section percentages.

In the textual dimension (Table 10), the contrast was sharpest. The non-integral source type accounted for nearly half of the Introduction citations (48.28%) but only 25.27% of the Literature Review citations, whereas integral naming citations rose from 25.67% in the Introduction to 39.18% in the Literature Review, and verb-controlling citations increased from 17.24% to 27.66%. The association between section and citation type was likewise significant ($\chi^2(5) = 67.78$, $p < 0.001$, $N = 2821$). In other words, the student writers foregrounded cited authors (integral citation) precisely where they reviewed and organised the literature, while using more compact, content-focused source citations to establish the research territory in the Introduction. This mirrors Li and Zhang's (2021) finding that integral, verb-controlling citation is more frequent in literature reviews.

Examples (15)-(17) illustrate this section-sensitive shift in the student writing. In the Introduction, sources are typically realized as compact, non-integral source citations that establish the research territory (15), whereas in the Literature Review the same writers foreground cited authors through integral naming (16) and verb-controlling (17) citations as they organize and engage with the literature.

(15) Existing studies have pointed out that deep learning is the basic path to developing students' core competency (Cui, 2019). [CSC, Introduction—non-integral source]

Analysis: In the Introduction the source is placed in parentheses to establish the research territory economically; source citation accounted for almost half (48%) of the student writers' Introduction citations.

(16) Bloom (1956) divides cognitive goals into six dimensions in his book *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation*. [CSC, Literature Review—integral naming]

Analysis: In the Literature Review, the same writers bring the cited author into the sentence as a naming element, giving the source greater prominence; naming rose from about 26% of Introduction citations to 39% in the Literature Review.

(17) In the realm of practical research, Long (2018) merges the Activity-based Approach with the technique of continuation writing. [CSC, Literature Review—integral verb-controlling]

Analysis: This verb-controlling citation, in which the author is the acting subject, likewise concentrates in the Literature Review, consistent with that section's function of organizing and attributing prior work.

For function and stance, the distributions were more stable across the two sections: supporting and the covert neutral stance dominated both, indicating that—regardless of section—the student writers tended to present sources to display knowledge rather than to evaluate or apply them.

6. Discussion

The findings reveal a developmental gap in citation competence that is consistent across all three metafunctional dimensions and, crucially, large in magnitude. Every difference that remained significant after the false discovery rate correction

was accompanied by a large effect size (Cohen's $d > 1$), and the largest gaps—for research-topic content ($d = 3.45$), the supporting function ($d = 3.31$), the neutral stance ($d = 2.74$), and non-integral reference ($d = 2.50$) and source ($d = 2.44$) citation—were very large by conventional benchmarks (Cohen, 1988). The overall citation density of the professionals was more than double that of the students (9.79 vs. 4.39 per 1000 words; $d = 3.44$). The gap between student and professional citation practices is therefore not a matter of subtle stylistic preference but a substantial difference in how the two groups use sources, one that renders the comparison pedagogically instructive.

In the ideational dimension, the professionals cited a denser and more varied range of content, differing most sharply on research topics (6.14 vs. 2.28 per 1000 words; $d = 3.45$) and empirical results (0.98 vs. 0.28; $d = 1.72$); theories/models and methodology showed non-significant differences in the same direction. Citing prior findings, rather than merely naming topics, requires the writer to have read and understood earlier studies well enough to relate them to the present work; the students' low use of results-oriented content thus points to a shallower engagement with the literature they cite. This is consistent with Petric's (2007) observation that lower-rated theses rely on citation to display knowledge rather than to build on it.

The interpersonal dimension offers the clearest evidence of what distinguishes the two groups, and here the function, stance, and reporting-verb data converge. Although supporting and the neutral stance dominated both corpora, the professionals fulfilled the higher-order functions of application ($d = 1.50$) and topic relevance ($d = 1.75$) far more often, while agreement did not reach corrected significance ($d = 0.89$)—that is, they applied cited models in their own analysis, connected studies to one another, and expressed direct agreement with cited claims, the hallmarks of “knowledge-transforming” writing (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Li & Zhang, 2021), whereas the students' concentration on supporting reflects a “knowledge-telling” orientation. The reporting-verb analysis reveals the lexical basis of this contrast: the professionals' verbs were disproportionately factive (52.8% vs. 34.2%)—find, identify, report, show—presenting cited claims as established findings the writer endorses, while the students leaned on non-factive attribution verbs (64.6%)—propose, point out, believe, argue—that report a view without committing to it. The students' almost complete avoidance of the acceptance, disagreement, and critical categories, together with this non-factive verb repertoire, indicates a reluctance to take an evaluative position that is widely reported among L2 and East Asian student writers and is variously attributed to limited linguistic resources, cultural norms of deference, and a perception of academic writing as face-threatening (Hu & Wang, 2014; Hyland, 2002).

In the textual dimension, the professionals' markedly greater use of non-integral source (4.12 vs. 1.37) and reference (2.81 vs. 0.32) citation, against the students' greater use of integral verb-controlling citation (1.02 vs. 0.67; $d = 0.68$, uncorrected $p = 0.027$), is more than a formal preference. Non-integral citation fore-

grounds the cited proposition and, by extension, the writer's own argument; integral citation foregrounds the authority of the cited researcher. The students' author-prominent style therefore both reflects an L1 academic culture that emphasizes deference to named authorities and enacts a still-developing ability to subordinate sources to an argument of one's own—the same competence that non-integral citation and the application function presuppose. The reference type in particular, which bundles several sources to introduce a body of work, was almost absent from the student writing (0.32 per 1000 words), consistent with their limited use of generalization across multiple sources.

Finally, the cross-sectional analysis (RQ2) shows that citation competence cannot be assessed without reference to the rhetorical function of each section. The same student writers varied their practices systematically between the Introduction and the Literature Review: they established the research territory with compact, non-integral source citations of topics (source: 48% of Introduction citations), then built the review with author-prominent integral citations of concepts and theories (naming rose from about 26% to 39%). That the students already command this section-sensitive variation—the very pattern [Li and Zhang \(2021\)](#) documented for postgraduates across literature reviews and discussions—suggests that their difficulties lie not in an inability to vary citation at all, but in the narrower functional, evaluative, and integrative repertoire documented under RQ1. Instruction can therefore build on an existing, if implicit, rhetorical awareness.

7. Conclusion and Implications

Using [Xu's \(2016\)](#) three-dimensional framework as expanded by [Li and Zhang \(2021\)](#), this study compared the citation competence of Chinese student writers and professional writers, and examined how citation features vary between the Introduction and the Literature Review. The student writers cited less densely and from a narrower repertoire, relied on the supporting function and a covert neutral stance, and favoured integral, author-prominent citation; the professional writers cited more densely, applied and connected sources more often, and preferred non-integral, content-prominent citation. Within the student corpus, the type and content of citations varied systematically with the rhetorical function of the section.

Pedagogically, these findings suggest that citation instruction for Chinese learners should go beyond reference formatting to address the three dimensions of citation competence directly: widening the range of content cited (especially results/findings), teaching the higher-order functions of application and topic-relevance, expanding the repertoire of reporting verbs and stance markers so that students can evaluate as well as report, and raising awareness of how non-integral citation can be used to foreground the writer's own argument. Corpus-informed instruction offers a practicable route to these goals, since guided hands-on work with corpora of expert writing has been shown to help EAP students appropriate

such conventions over the long term (Charles, 2014). Because students already vary their citations by section, instruction can usefully be organised around the distinct demands of the Introduction and the Literature Review.

Several limitations should be noted. The two sub-corpora differ in genre (undergraduate theses vs. journal articles) and size; although density per 1000 words and within-section percentages mitigate the size difference, genre may independently affect citation use. The student corpus is drawn from a single disciplinary area at one institution. Finally, the content, function, and stance codings rest partly on automated lexico-grammatical heuristics; though validated against a manual sample, they are approximate, particularly for the fine-grained content categories and the rare evaluative categories. Inter-coder reliability was likewise only fair for the fine-grained content feature, whose six-way results are accordingly exploratory, although robust at the three-way level; and the evaluative loading of reporting verbs was classified from the verb lemma alone rather than from its discourse context. Future research could extend the comparison to postgraduate writing, add disciplinary contrasts, and complement the corpus analysis with interviews.

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Conceptualization, S-X.L.; methodology, S-X.L.; software, S-X.L. and W-L.F.; validation, S-X.L.; formal analysis, S-X.L.; investigation, S-X.L.; resources, S-X.L. and W-L.F.; data curation, S-X.L. and W-L.F.; writing—original draft preparation, S-X.L.; writing—review and editing, S-X.L.; visualization, S-X.L.; supervision, S-X.L. and W-L.F.; project administration, S-X.L.; funding acquisition, S-X.L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

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

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