

Identity Negotiation in Second Language Academic Writing: the Role of Citation Practices

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Abstract. In the context of global academic exchange, second language (L2) academic writers face unique challenges in navigating disciplinary discourses, where writing is not just a linguistic task but a means of constructing and negotiating academic identities. Citation, as a fundamental practice in scholarly communication, carries multiple layers of meaning: it acknowledges intellectual predecessors, situates new research within existing conversations, and signals writers' competence and belonging in academic communities. However, existing literature has largely overlooked how L2 writers' citation behaviors interact with their identity formation, particularly across different educational stages. Undergraduates, in early stages of academic socialization, and postgraduates, with more advanced research exposure, likely develop distinct citation strategies that reflect their evolving sense of academic self. Additionally, the role of instructor feedback—both formal guidance and informal comments—in shaping these practices and, in turn, identity negotiation remains under-examined. This gap is notable given that feedback is a primary mechanism through which L2 writers learn disciplinary norms. This study thus explores these dynamics, aiming to clarify how citation practices mediate academic identity construction among L2 writers at different educational levels.

Keywords: Identity negotiation, cultural identity, citation practice

1. Introduction

Academic writing in a second language (L2) poses unique challenges, particularly in mastering citation practices, which poses both linguistic proficiency and disciplinary norm awareness [1]. Citation is not merely a technical skill; it plays a crucial role in positioning writers within the academic discourse community, shaping their identity as legitimate participants in scholarly conversations [2]. For L2 writers, this process often involves negotiating feedback from instructors while simultaneously developing their voice and academic identity [3].

This study investigates the intersection of citation practices and identity negotiation among six L2 writers from diverse academic disciplines. While existing research has predominantly focused on citation's technical aspects or generalized feedback mechanisms, this study employs a qualitative approach to explore how feedback influences citation strategies and academic identity construction [4]. By analyzing writing samples, instructor feedback, and interviews, this research aims to

highlight how L2 writers navigate academic expectations and negotiate their scholarly identities through citation practices.

2. Literature review

2.1. Citation and identity negotiation in L2 writing

Citation represents the act of acknowledging sources to validate arguments and integrate them into scholarly discourse [5]. Identity negotiation in L2 academic writing refers to the process by which writers construct and assert their academic identities while engaging with disciplinary norms and audience expectations [2]. L2 writers leverage citations to project authority and establish their position within their discipline [6]. This process reflects not only technical skills but also identity negotiation, shaping how writers are perceived in academic circles [7]. Building on Hyland's insights, L2 writers encounter distinct challenges in adopting citation practices, as cultural and linguistic factors significantly shape their academic identity [8]. Investigating variables such as educational level and disciplinary norms provides insights into how L2 writers connect with academic discourse, positioning this study as an important extension of the literature on citation practices in L2 writing.

2.2. Stance and engagement

Against the backdrop of growing attention to self-representation and reader engagement in academic writing, Hyland's stance and engagement theory provide a foundational framework for this literature review [8]. This theoretical construct how writers express their perspectives (stance) and connect with readers (engagement) in academic contexts. Stance refers to how writers convey their personal attitudes, judgments, or commitments, while engagement involves how writers position their readers, often inviting alignment or interaction [1]. This framework offers valuable insights into how L2 writers navigate self-representation and establish connections with readers, making it essential for analyzing identity negotiation through citation.

Research on stance and engagement has highlighted the complexities that L2 writers face when using stance markers to assert academic identity. For example, Martinez found that undergraduate L2 writers often adopt engagement markers that convey collegiality over assertiveness, reflecting a cautious approach to identity negotiation [9]. This tendency may be partly attributed to a lack of confidence or familiarity with disciplinary expectations. Similarly, Lancaster investigated stance marker usage among L2 graduate students in scientific writing, revealing that even advanced writers often hesitate to deploy markers that directly assert their viewpoints—likely to avoid potential challenges from disciplinary authorities [10].

These studies underscore that while L2 writers may attempt to engage their readers, disciplinary expectations and educational stages impose constraints on identity negotiation. Despite this focus on engagement, a critical gap remains in understanding how L2 writers adapt their stance and engagement practices across academic progression. Addressing this gap could provide valuable insights for supporting L2 writers' identity negotiation through targeted instruction on stance markers.

Building on the identified gaps, this study focuses on two research questions to investigate:

1. How do undergraduate L2 writers negotiate their academic identity through citation practices, and how do their strategies differ from those of postgraduate students?

2. How do L2 writers' citation practices reflect the construction of academic voice and confidence, and how does this evolve across educational stages?

3. Research methods and data analysis

3.1. Data collection methods

A qualitative approach was used to collect data from multiple sources, providing a rich and detailed understanding of how citation practices contribute to academic identity negotiation. Data were collected through four primary methods: questionnaires, writing samples, instructor feedback, and semi-structured interviews. This triangulation of data sources enabled a comprehensive analysis of L2 writers' citation practices, their negotiation of academic identity, and how these practices evolve across educational stages.

A 30-minute online questionnaire was administered to gather participants' initial perceptions and experiences with citation practices. The questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions, exploring participants' general understanding of citation, how they use citations to assert their academic voice, and their confidence in citation practices. The questionnaire included closed and open-ended questions, exploring participants' general understanding of citation, how they use citations to assert their academic voice, and their confidence in citation practices. It also asked participants to reflect on their citation strategies and instructor feedback received, providing a baseline for understanding their citation habits and self-reported challenges in building academic identity through citations. Writing samples were collected from participants at two time points: the first set of samples in Week 8, representing participants' initial drafts, and a second set in Week 9, after receiving instructor feedback. The writing samples were analyzed to determine how citations were used to construct academic identity and whether citations were used conservatively to support established knowledge or more assertively to critique existing research and project academic voice. A comparison of the two sets of writing samples allowed for an exploration of how feedback influenced citation practices and how these practices evolved over time.

Instructor feedback on citation use was analyzed, focusing on technical corrections and personalized guidance. The analysis aimed to understand how feedback shaped participants' citation practices and confidence in asserting their academic voice. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two participants—one undergraduate and one postgraduate—to gain a deeper understanding of how they negotiate their academic identity through citation practices. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and explored how participants decide which sources to cite, how they use citations to project their academic voice, and how they interpret and apply feedback to improve their citation strategies. Key interview questions included:

1. How do you decide which sources to cite, and what kind of citation do you use (e.g., direct quote, paraphrasing)?
2. How has instructor feedback influenced your citation practices?
3. Do you feel confident in using citations to assert your academic voice? Why or why not?
4. What challenges do you face when using citations in your academic writing?

3.2. Data analysis framework

The data from the questionnaires, writing samples, instructor feedback, and interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns in

qualitative data [11]. This approach was selected for its flexibility in uncovering complex relationships between identity negotiation and citation practices.

The first step in the analysis involved transcribing the interviews and compiling the data from the questionnaires, writing samples, and feedback. All data were coded inductively, meaning that the codes were derived from the data itself, rather than being predetermined. Citations were categorized as "supportive" when they were used to reinforce established knowledge, and "critical" when they were used to engage with or challenge existing research. Additional codes were developed to identify instances of academic voice and confidence in citation, which were key themes related to the construction of academic identity.

The study examined citation practices of L2 writers at different educational levels, focusing on academic voice, confidence in citation practices, feedback interpretation, and educational level differences. Key themes emerged regarding how L2 writers assert academic voice and negotiate disciplinary identities. Case studies were developed for two participants, one undergraduate and one postgraduate, to provide in-depth insights into how citation practices evolved in response to feedback and how each participant negotiated their academic identity through citations. A comparative analysis was conducted to examine differences in citation practices between undergraduate and postgraduate L2 writers, focusing on how feedback influenced their citation strategies. Undergraduates used citations more conservatively, often supporting existing knowledge, while postgraduates employed citations more assertively, critiquing existing research to project a more confident academic voice.

A comparative analysis revealed distinct citation strategies: undergraduates used citations conservatively to support established knowledge, while postgraduates employed citations more assertively—critiquing literature to project confident academic voices. Feedback was found to significantly influence these strategies. Disciplinary variations were also explored: humanities participants (e.g., English) used citations to assert critical engagement with sources, whereas science participants (e.g., Business Administration, Economics) prioritized citations for factual validation and claim support. These disciplinary differences were found to influence how participants navigated their academic identity and interacted with academic norms.

3.3. Research ethics standards

This study adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. All participants were informed of the study's purpose, and their participation was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured that their identities would remain confidential. They were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

4. Findings

4.1. Undergraduate L2 writers' negotiation of academic identity via citation practices

The analysis indicates that undergraduate L2 writers primarily used citations in a conservative manner, mostly to reinforce established knowledge rather than critically engage with existing research. Citations were often employed to validate the authority of instructors, textbooks, or existing academic sources, reflecting a cautious academic identity. As noted in interviews, this conservative citation practice suggests that undergraduate writers tend to prioritize compliance with academic norms over developing their own scholarly voice.

For instance, Liz, an undergraduate participant, explained:

“I cite what my instructors or the textbook say because I’m not confident enough to say something different. I don’t want to be wrong.”

This statement highlights the lack of confidence and hesitation often found in undergraduate writers, particularly in the early stages of their academic careers. Their citation practices reflected their reliance on external sources of authority rather than asserting their own critical stance.

In contrast, postgraduate L2 writers exhibited a more assertive use of citations, often employing them to critique existing research and establish their academic voice, which underscores the difference in identity negotiation between undergraduate and postgraduate students.

4.2. Postgraduate L2 writers’ negotiation of academic identity through citation practices

Postgraduate L2 writers exhibited a more dynamic and assertive approach to citation practices, leveraging citations not merely to support established knowledge but to engage critically with existing research. This approach reflected a more confident academic voice, as these writers frequently used citations to present counterarguments or establish independent perspectives, thereby projecting authority within their fields.

For example, Noah, a postgraduate participant, shared:

“While Hu and Wang emphasize undergraduate caution in citation, my analysis suggests disciplinary expectations may amplify this trend.”

This use of citations illustrates how postgraduate writers actively engage with literature, using citations not merely for validation but as a tool for positioning themselves within academic discourse [12].

4.3. Construction of academic voice and confidence through citation practices

Academic voice and confidence manifested differently across educational stages. Undergraduates used citations passively to support others’ ideas, reflecting limited confidence to challenge the literature. Postgraduate learners, by contrast, leveraged citations to critique scholarly work—evident in Noah's feedback-induced transition from mere summarization to critical analysis: "Feedback pushed me to contribute, not just summarize." This developmental shift mirrored their evolving academic autonomy.

4.4. Evolution of citation practices across educational stages

The study highlighted how citation practices evolve as L2 writers progress through their academic education. Undergraduate L2 writers used citations primarily to support existing knowledge, demonstrating a cautious academic identity. Postgraduate L2 writers, on the other hand, were more likely to use citations to critique and challenge existing research, thereby asserting their academic voice and confidence.

For instance, undergraduates like Liz were primarily concerned with validating knowledge, while postgraduates like Noah showed a more critical stance, frequently using citations to engage with and challenge established ideas.

This shift in citation practices reflects the academic growth of L2 writers as they gain more experience and confidence in their academic voice. The role of feedback was pivotal in this evolution, with postgraduate participants receiving feedback that encouraged them to move beyond summarization and engage more critically with the literature.

5. Conclusion

The study's findings highlight that citation practices are central to academic identity negotiation among L2 writers. Undergraduate writers tend to use citations conservatively to reinforce existing knowledge, reflecting a more cautious academic identity, while postgraduate writers are more likely to use citations to critique existing research and assert their academic voice. Feedback, particularly formal feedback, plays a significant role in encouraging the development of a more confident academic identity. Disciplinary norms also shape citation practices: humanities students engage critically with sources, while science students prioritize citations for factual validation.

These findings contribute to the broader understanding of how L2 writers' citation practices evolve across educational stages and disciplines, providing insights into how they negotiate their academic identities through citation strategies. The study underscores the role of feedback and disciplinary expectations in shaping these practices, offering valuable implications for writing instruction and academic support for L2 students.

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of citation practices in L2 writers' academic identity negotiation, several limitations should be acknowledged. The data collected from only six participants may not be sufficient to draw generalizable conclusions across all L2 writers, and the literature reviewed could be more comprehensive to include a broader range of studies on citation practices. Future research could investigate the influence of informal feedback, such as peer reviews or mentor feedback, on L2 writers' citation practices. Longitudinal studies might also trace how citation practices develop as L2 writers transition from undergraduate to postgraduate levels and influence their long-term academic identity construction.

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