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An Analysis of Citation Errors of Undergraduate EFL Students at Misurata University

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Abstract

Academic writing involves integrating information from other sources into the original essay. EFL students often experience difficulties when citing these sources in their own essays. This study aims to identify the citation errors committed by undergraduate EFL students and explore the contextual patterns surrounding these errors when they write their academic essays. The participants of this study are a sample of 18 English major students enrolled in an academic writing course, spring semester 2026, at the Department of English, Faculty of Languages and Translation, Misurata University. The study follows a mixed-methods descriptive research design. The data for this study consisted of students written essays. The data were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. The findings suggest that students were generally able to identify appropriate points at which external sources could be incorporated to support their arguments, but they face a systematic barrier in managing the technical mechanics of source integration. Therefore, citation instruction should focus on explicit and contrastive modeling that clarifies why mechanics matter and provides procedural scaffolding to reduce cognitive load during textual integration.

Key words: *Citation errors, source integration, paraphrasing, quoting.*

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1. Introduction

Academic writing is one of the core requirements for university EFL students, and an important means through which they can participate in scholarly discourse. Academic citation is one of the foundational elements that help EFL students to be successfully in scholarly discourse while maintaining academic integrity. To illustrate, proper in-text citation gives credit to original authors and establishes the credibility of the writer's argument in an academic essay. It also protects academic integrity by avoiding plagiarism. However, students are significantly challenged with the citation practices when they are engaging other sources in their academic essays. To illustrate, students modify a few words of a source while retaining its core sentence structure. Students insert a direct quote without an introductory signal phrase or syntactic link. Students assign an idea to the wrong author or cite a secondary source as a primary one (Pecorari, 2016). These errors are classified into two types. The first type of errors are referred to as mechanical errors such as misplacing commas, missing page numbers, or mismatched reference lists. The second type of errors are referred to as functional errors such as improper paraphrasing that borders on patchwriting, or using sources out of context.

However, writing an academic essay requires EFL students to balance between the formatting rules and the writing tasks such as quoting, summarizing, and paraphrasing, which often lead to committing frequent and varied citation errors.

1.2 Research Problem

Despite the formal continuous instruction from writing courses, students repeatedly face difficulty in executing citations accurately in their essays. EFL students face challenges when citing the sources in their academic essays.

While previous research relied on either quantitative surveys or students' viewpoints, previous studies failed to reveal the specific, technical patterns of mistakes occurring within the text itself. Therefore, this study addresses a critical gap as it draws a comprehensive investigation by determining the frequency percentages, and distribution of the specific citation errors and examining the context of these errors within the sentences, identifying contextual issues with source integration, paraphrasing, and quoting.

Thus, this study attempts to draw a clear understanding of the nature, frequency, and context of citation errors made by Libyan EFL students by relying on direct textual evidence from student writings.

1.3 Research Objectives

The main objectives of this study are:

1. Identifying and categorizing the specific types of citation errors committed by Libyan undergraduate EFL students in their academic essays.
2. Exploring the contextual patterns of students' citation errors in source integration, paraphrasing, and quoting.

1.4. Research Questions

This study is designed to answer the following questions:

1. What types of in-text citation errors do EFL students at Misurata University

commit when writing their academic essays?

2. How do the contextual patterns of these errors manifest within students source integration, paraphrasing, and quoting?

1.5 Importance of the Research

This study stems from the importance of integrating other sources into the academic essays. Incorrect citation practices can cause students to be accused of plagiarism. Therefore, this study is designed to investigate the citation difficulties that Libyan EFL students face when integrating other sources into their own essays. It is an attempt to shed the light on the types of citation errors that students commit in source integration, paraphrasing, and quoting to find pedagogical techniques to help EFL students to cite the sources correctly in their academic essays.

1.6 Literature Review

In academic writing, students establish scholastic integrity and avoid plagiarism through proper citation. However, mastering this skill presents as an obstacle for many university students, particularly EFL learners.

There are different types of citation errors. Firstly, mechanical or format errors such as punctuation, capitalization, and spacing. These are referred to as non-semantic errors that violate style guide rules (Sweetland, 1989; Wette, 2017). Secondly, errors caused by incomplete and missing components such as missing years or page numbers. It involves omitting important bibliographic elements such as missing publication year, volume, or page numbers for direct quotes (Loan & Pramoolsook, 2016). Thirdly, inaccurate attribution and misspelling errors such as misspelling authors' names or writing the publication dates wrongly (Gasparyan, Yessirkepov, Gerasimov, Kostyukova, & Kitas, 2016). Fourthly, errors referred to as text-citation mismatch errors such as the omission of in-text citations from the reference list or structural misalignment relative to the source (Wette, 2017).

Previous research indicates that EFL students commit a wide range of citation errors, which generally fall into two broad categories: mechanical/formatting errors and inappropriate source synthesis. To start with, Loan and Pramoolsook (2016) noted that Vietnamese postgraduates commit formatting and structural errors, such as, frequent use of secondary citations, non-standard citation styles, grammatical errors, and a lack of critical discussion of the cited works. In addition, it was concluded that these Vietnamese postgraduate students failed to synthesize sources, build persuasive academic arguments. The researcher recommended that "Academic writing" courses must provide direct, explicit instruction that goes beyond formal mechanics to build students' awareness of the rhetorical functions, stance-building, and persuasion effects of citations.

Secondly, concerning the integration of sources, EFL students struggle to smoothly transition into a citation using signal verbs. To illustrate, Mansourizadeh and Ahmad (2011) stated that EFL writers insert a direct quote as a standalone sentence without any syntactic connection to their own prose, making it harder for the reader to deduce the relevance of the source. Additionally, Pecorari (2016) highlights the idea of patchwriting. Pecorari used the term "patchwriting" to refer to a practice where students copy sentences from a source text

but alter only a few words or rearrange the syntax slightly, failing to truly paraphrase the author's ideas.

Consequently, these integration errors affect the quality of academic writing and lead to unintentional plagiarism.

1.7 Related Studies

Previous research has been conducted to understand why EFL students consistently struggle with citation practices. It was found that writing an academic essay requires a high degree of cognitive processing. This cognitive process requires EFL students to manage second language (L2) grammar and vocabulary in order to execute complex research skills. Flowerdew and Li (2007) argue that when EFL students lack the linguistic proficiency to paraphrase a complex academic idea accurately, they often revert to patchwriting or excessive direct quotation out of fear of misrepresenting the original author. This lack of vocabulary limits students' ability to manipulate sentence structures, which leads to committing mechanical citation errors.

Moreover, previous literature reveals that cultural background has an impact on students' attitudes toward text borrowing. For instance, repeating the exact words of an esteemed scholar as a sign of respect (Pennycook, 1996). Pennycook (1996) argued that students from specific cultures or rote-learning backgrounds commit improper citation practices when adjusting to Western university expectations because they find the strict Western demands for constant citation counterintuitive. This indicates that Western notions of individual authorship and intellectual property are not universal.

A recent study was conducted to investigate the underlying causes and the types of citation errors. It was revealed that the root causes of citation failure are; the absence of explicit citation guidelines, lack of formal instruction in citation ethics, and lack of automated citation-verification software. Additionally, it was found that students commit different types of citation errors, such as, making claims without providing supporting references, misrepresenting mechanisms, numerical data, attributing text to an unrelated or incorrect reference and committing errors related to authors' names, publication year, volume, or page numbers (Agarwal, Arafa, Avidor-Reiss, Hamoda, & Shah, 2023).

Maisarah, Chenda, and Soy (2026) conducted a study to identify the specific referencing challenges that Master of English Language Education students, at the University of Bengkulu, face when writing research reports. The study followed a qualitative, longitudinal design over a semester. The sample consisted of 25 voluntary Master of English Language Education students. Data collection was based on document analysis to examin research reports for formatting errors in in-text citations and reference lists, and open-ended interviews to explore students' perceptions and self-reported writing challenges. The researchers concluded that Master of English Language Education students, at the University of Bengkulu, struggle with international academic writing standards and maintaining formatting consistency. Additionally, it was revealed that students face language barriers and difficulty understanding structures and commit inaccurate source citation. Moreover, students have a lack of competence in using reference management software. The researchers recommended

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implementing systematic, ongoing guidance, including direct instruction in citation styles and training in reference management software (e.g., Zotero, EndNote).

To conclude, existing research indicates that the way citation is taught heavily influences student error rates. Textbooks and instructors often focus disproportionately on the threat of plagiarism and the punishment associated with it, rather than teaching citation as a rhetorical tool for building an argument (Pecorari, 2016). Additionally, previous studies concluded that EFL students face structural, linguistic, and cultural challenges when applying citations in academic essays, resulting in both formal formatting errors and deeper rhetorical integration issues.

The literature consistently shows that there are linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical gaps regarding the citation practices of EFL students. While existing studies thoroughly document these errors among undergraduate students, there remains a notable gap regarding the context of Libya.

Therefore, this study aims to provide a holistic understanding the citation errors, committed by Libyan EFL undergraduate students, by combining the statistical weight of quantitative frequencies with the contextual depth of qualitative textual analysis.

2. Methodology

To investigate the citation errors committed by undergraduate EFL students when writing their academic essays, this study employs a mixed-methods descriptive research design. A mixed-methods approach is ideal for this study as it allows for a comprehensive investigation of the data.

2.1 Data Collection and Analysis

Firstly, a corpus of students' essays was analysed quantitatively by determining the frequency, percentages, and distribution of the specific citation errors. This statistical overview highlights the most prevalent areas of difficulty for undergraduate writers through identifying, categorizing, and quantifying the frequency and types of citation errors committed by the students.

Secondly, a qualitative analysis was applied to textually analyze the nature of these errors. This involves examining the context of the errors within the sentences, identifying issues with source integration in paraphrasing, and quoting, thereby providing a deeper pedagogical understanding of how students mismanage the integration elements. The qualitative data were analysed through a qualitative content analysis along with the descriptive quantification system. Combining the statistical weight of quantitative frequencies with the contextual depth of qualitative textual analysis provides a holistic understanding of undergraduate citation practices of the Libyan undergraduate EFL students.

The participants of this study were 18 undergraduate EFL students, 15 females and 3 males, at Misurata University, Faculty of Languages and Translation, Department of English. Students were asked to write an academic essay as a final assessment. An argumentative topic about smartphones was given to the students along with two quotes, a quote for each viewpoint of the argument, and were asked to include and use these quotes in their essays to support their argument by either paraphrasing or quoting them in their essays.

The use of students' actual written work enhanced the ecological validity of the data. Students' citation errors were classified according to previous scholars into four categories: mechanical and format errors, incomplete and missing components, inaccurate attribution and misspelling, and text-citation mismatches (Sweetland, 1989; Wette, 2017; Gasparyan, et al., 2016).). Additionally, to ensure the reliability of the data analysis and mitigates individual subjectivity. Two raters independently coded the data. Inter-rater agreement was evaluated using Cohen's kappa, having a coefficient of 0.51, which indicates a moderate inter-rater reliability. Any remaining discrepancies between raters were subsequently resolved through joint discussion until full consensus was reached.

As this study was based on students' generated work, all ethical considerations were observed to protect the participants. Firstly, informed letter of consent was given to the department for taking the permission for using students' essays as secondary data usage. Similarly, all the participants were provided with an informed consent letter that contains an explanation of the purpose of the study, the nature of their participation, and the procedures involved in data collection. They were assured that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. Secondly, the collected data was treated with strict anonymity. All identifying information such as student names and student IDs was hidden from the documents to maintain anonymity.

This study addresses some limitations. Firstly, the study analyzed a small sample of 18 undergraduate EFL students and having a total of 56 citations. Although this allowed for a detailed qualitative and quantitative examination of citation error patterns, the sample size remains relatively small. Secondly, data were gathered from a single academic department at one institution, namely, Misurata University, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader EFL contexts and other institutional settings. Thirdly, students' citations were elicited from a single, controlled argumentative writing task.

Future research may address these limitations by expanding the sample across multiple institutions and examining naturally occurring academic writing tasks over extended periods.

3. Results

To analyze the citation errors committed by undergraduate EFL students when writing their academic essays, errors were classified into four dimensions: mechanical/format errors (punctuation, capitalization, spacing), incomplete/missing components (missing years, page numbers), inaccurate attribution/misspelling (wrong names, wrong publication dates), and text-citation mismatches (misquotations or structural alignment issues). Thus, students' citation errors were classified according to these four categories.

Quantitative Analysis of Students' Citation Errors

Students' citation attempts in their academic essays were evaluated according to a standard academic style, namely American Psychological Association (APA 7th Edition). It was found that there were 56 citations attempts across the 18 students textual work containing source integrations. 14 citation attempts were completely correct while 42 of students' citation attempts were

incorrect, containing mechanical/format errors (lowercase names, incorrect bracket styles, redundant page numbers), incomplete/missing components (missing page numbers, omitted publication years), inaccurate attribution/misspelling (wrong names, wrong publication dates), and text-citation mismatches (omitting words, altering phrases from the source).

As it can be noticed from Table 1, individual citation attempts frequently contained overlapping errors across the four categories, bringing the overall citation error rate of all the attempts are 74,9%. Whereas, 25.0% of the total citation attempts were completely correct.

Table 1

Result of Students' Citation Errors.

Error Category	Number of Occurrences (N=56)	Percentage of Total Citations
Mechanical & Formatting Errors	18	32.1%
Inaccurate Attribution / Misspellings	11	19.6%
Incomplete / Missing Components	8	14.3%
Text-Citation Mismatch / Misquotations	5	8.9%
Completely Correct Citations	14	25.0% of attempts

The above table presents that the highest percentage of participants' citation errors is mechanical and formatting errors (32.1%). The second highest percentage of the errors committed by the participating students is inaccurate attribution and misspellings errors (19.6%). The least two percentages of these errors are the errors that are related to incomplete and missing components and text-citation mismatch and misquotations (14.3% and 8.9%, respectively).

Qualitative Analysis of Students' Citation Errors

To start with, as it can be seen from Table 1, the most dominant error type was the mechanical and formatting errors (32.1%). This indicates that students struggled extensively with academic punctuation and formatting system such as lowercase names, incorrect bracket styles, redundant page numbers. To illustrate, several essays introduced parenthetical page numbers twice in the same narrative sequence (e.g., Student 8, Paragraph 2; Student 14, Paragraph 3, "Technology is best..." (p. 12)), right after writing p. 12 in the introduction sentence). Additionally, multiple instances showed uncapitalized proper nouns (e.g., Student 6, Paragraph 2; Student 11, Paragraph 2, *william Matt*) and (Student 1, Paragraph 4, *john lasseter*). Punctuation marks were frequently misplaced outside parenthetical references or altogether missing inside parenthetical limits (e.g., Student 11, Paragraph 2, (William Matt 2022,12) and (Student 13, Paragraph 3, (2019 page 55). One of the essays demonstrated an unusual bracket application technique, (Student 10, Paragraph 3, [Arledge (J), (2019) p 65]), breaking away from any recognized formal academic style guide.

The second dominant error type committed by the students was inaccurate attribution and misspellings (19.6%). Students repeatedly degraded source credibility by altering author identities. To illustrate, *William Matt* was transformed into *William Martil* (as in Student 8, Paragraph2) and *William Mat* (as in Student 5, Paragraph

2). *Jenny Arledge* was stripped of her consonantal spelling to become *Jenny Aledge* (as in Student 18, Paragraph 3) or *Jenny Alledge* (as in Student 1, Paragraph 3). Furthermore, a number of students attempted an APA-style reference list inversion within the running body text itself, resulting in awkward constructs (Student 9, Paragraph 2, "Matt. W. (2022) ") and (Student 9, Paragraph 3; Student 14, Paragraph 5), "Arledge J. (2019)"), which breaks standard narrative citation flow.

The third dominant error type was the incomplete and missing components (14.3%). Students omitted essential data when citing the source. For example, students' uses of direct verbatim quotes were frequently dropped into text paragraphs without specifying the explicit page number location. Moreover, students occasionally missed the source publication year entirely, relying solely on names and quotes.

The less frequent error of these errors was misquoting and mismatching text-citation. Students modified active words inside quotes without using brackets. For example, changing the original text "Smartphones can become the wings..." to "smartphones able to become the wings..." (Student 11, Paragraph 3) or omitting key terms entirely by misspelling the original word, such as writing "educational word" instead of "educational world" (Student 13, Paragraph 3; Student 17, Paragraph 3).

To summarize, the analysis shows that while students generally comprehend where and why external evidence should be utilized to support assertions (such as communication, education, and entertainment arguments); they face a systematic barrier in managing the technical mechanics of source integration. This results in a lack of academic uniformity caused by the high variability of students' formatting practices.

4. Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to investigate and evaluate how undergraduate EFL students handle academic source integration, specifically focusing on the frequency, and the nature of citation errors. The findings were interpreted from the quantitative and qualitative data generated from students' writings through conducting textual analysis.

Answering the Research Questions

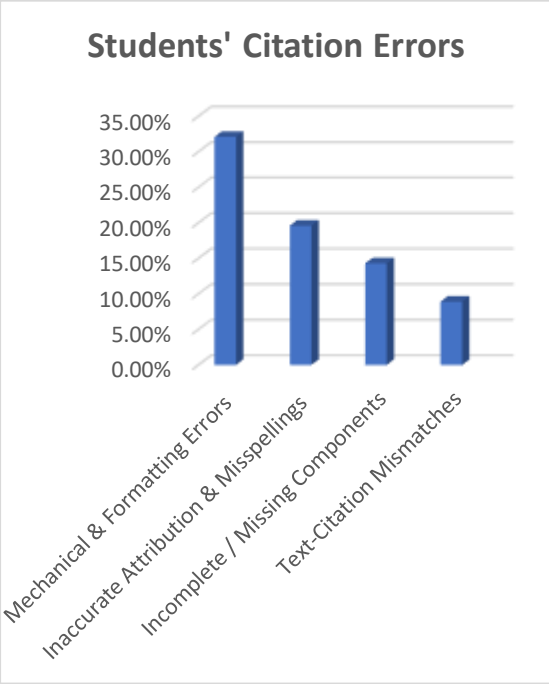
Research Question 1: What types of in-text citation errors do EFL students at Misurata university commit when writing academic essays?

The frequency and distribution of citation errors in undergraduate EFL student essays was grouped according to four types; mechanical and format errors, incomplete and missing components, inaccurate attribution and misspelling, and text-citation mismatches.

The quantitative findings reveal a remarkably high error percentage in source integration, with 74.9% of all citation attempts containing at least one structural or technical error. Out of 56 of the overall students' citations, only 25.0% were executed correctly.

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Fig 1.
Students' Citation Errors



The distribution of these errors is significantly recorded toward mechanical and formatting difficulty rather than a total failure to attribute ideas. The distribution pattern implies that student difficulties stems heavily in the implementation of the mechanical and formatting rules rather than the academic integrity. Thus, these results show that students know when to credit a source to reinforce an argument (e.g., matching smartphones with communication, education, and entertainment), but they lack the procedural precision required to format those credits correctly.

Research Question 2: How do the contextual patterns of these errors manifest within students source integration, paraphrasing, and quoting.

The high percentage of the mechanical and formatting errors (32.1%) indicates that students frequently resort to guesswork when they fail to recall exact citation style guidelines. For instance, students overcompensated the page number by providing it in both narrative and parenthetical formats within the same clause (e.g., Student 5, Paragraph 2, *According to William Mat (2022) p. 12."Technology is best when it brings people togeather" (p. 12).*). Furthermore, EFL students tend to design intuitive but academically invalid visual frameworks to separate source content from their own words such as using brackets instead of parentheses (e.g., Student 5, Paragraph 2, [Arledge (J), (2019) p 65]).

The second high percentage of the citation errors committed by undergraduate EFL students is the inaccurate attribution and misspellings (19.6%), which indicates to a cognitive error in the implementation of citation rules. Students frequently applied the reference list criteria in the in-text citation (Student 15, Paragraph 2, (Matt. W. (2022); (Student 17, Paragraph 2, Arledge J. (2019)). This suggests that students have a structural confusion regarding the differing functions of a reference list and an in-text citation.

The incomplete and missing components (14.3%) errors such as dropping the page numbers or omitting publication years resulted from the high cognitive load. Students' attempts to synthesize their own compound sentences alongside a quote resulted in dropping essential elements of the citation. This indicates that applying these multiple components (author, year, page, quotation marks) simultaneously overwhelms students' ability to hold and process the citation rules and increases students' cognitive load.

Finally, text-citation mismatches accounted for 8.9% of the total citation errors. One of these errors committed by the

students was modifying active phrasing such as changing the sentence "Smartphones can become the wings..." into "smartphones able to become the wings..." (Student 11, Paragraph 3). Instead of fitting the quote in their argument, students created ungrammatical sentence structures. This indicates that some EFL students tend to prioritize semantic approximation over precise verbatim replication.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis of students' academic essays indicates that the citation errors committed by Libyan EFL students at the Department of English, Faculty of Languages and Translation, Misurata University are highly systematic approximations of academic norms. The findings suggest that greater emphasis may be needed on explicit instruction in citation mechanics. Explicit contrastive modeling clarifies why mechanics matter, explicitly differentiates in-text patterns from reference lists, and provides procedural scaffolding to reduce cognitive load during textual integration.

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Conflict of Interest:

There is no conflict of interest. The process of collecting data and the analysis stage went smoothly as organized.

Declaration of AI Use

It is worth declaring that no AI tools were used for data collection, analysis, and discussion. AI tools were used solely for searching for recent studies conducted on the same area of investigation.

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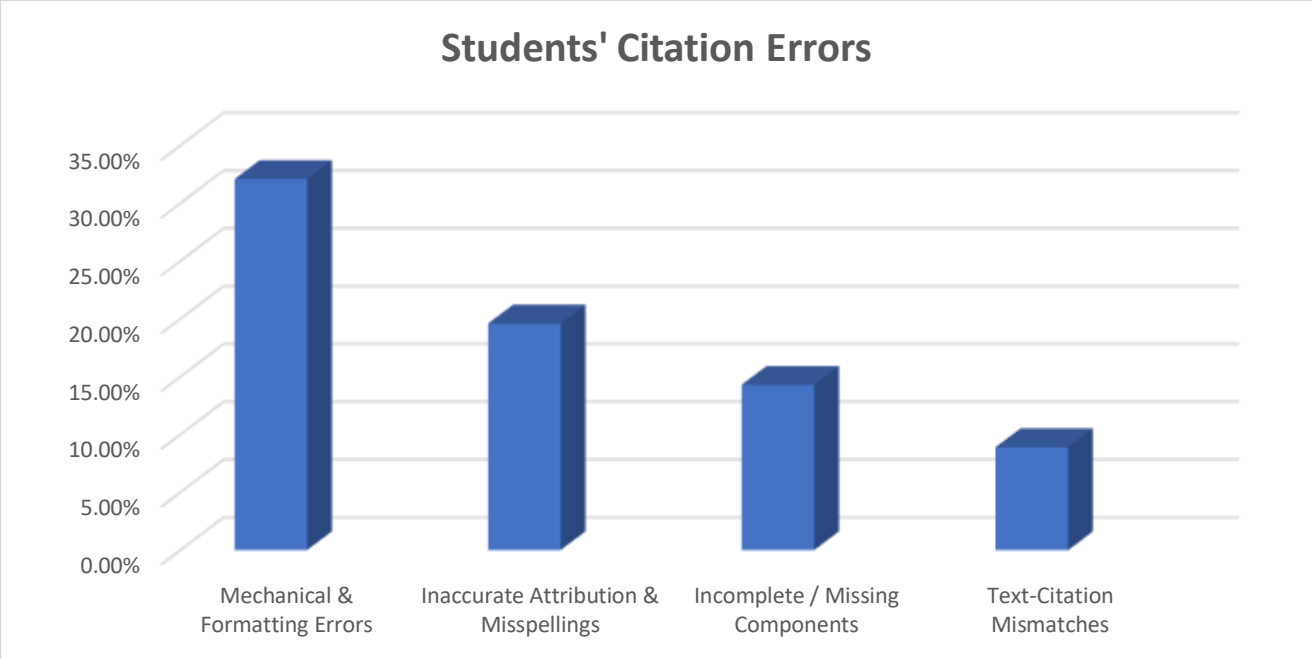
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Appendices

Appendix A:

Fig. 1. Students' Citation Errors.



Appendix B:

Table 1

Result of Students' Citation Errors.

Error Category	Number of Occurrences (N=56)	Percentage of Total Citations
Mechanical & Formatting Errors	18/56	32.1%
Inaccurate Attribution / Misspellings	11/56	19.6%
Incomplete / Missing Components	8/56	14.3%
Text-Citation Mismatch / Misquotations	5/56	8.9%
Completely Correct Citations	14/56	25.0% of attempts

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تحليل أخطاء الاقتباس لدى طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية بالمرحلة الجامعية بجامعة مصراتة

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ملخص البحث

تتطلب الكتابة الأكاديمية استخدام مصادر أخرى ودمجها في المقال الاصلي. يواجه طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية بعض الصعوبات عند الاقتباس من هذه المصادر عند كتابة المقالات. لذلك تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحديد أخطاء الاقتباس التي يرتكبها طلاب المرحلة الجامعية في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، واستكشاف الأنماط السياقية المحيطة بهذه الأخطاء أثناء كتابتهم للمقالات الأكاديمية. تكونت عينة الدراسة من 18 طالبًا وطالبة من المتخصصين في اللغة الإنجليزية المسجلين في مقرر الكتابة الأكاديمية للفصل الدراسي الربيعي 2026، بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية في كلية اللغات والترجمة بجامعة مصراتة. اتبعت الدراسة منهجًا وصفيًا مختلطًا (كميًا ونوعيًا)، واعتمد جمع البيانات على النصوص المكتوبة من قبل الطلاب. تم تحليل البيانات المجمعة كميًا ونوعيًا. أظهرت النتائج أن الطلاب يدركون عمومًا أين ولماذا ينبغي استخدام الأدلة الخارجية لدعم حججهم، لكنهم يواجهون عائقًا منهجيًا في الضوابط التقنية المطلوبة لدمج المصادر. وبناءً على ذلك، فيجب أن يركز تدريس الاقتباس على نماذج واضحة ومتنوعة حيث توضح أهمية الآليات التقنية، وتوفير دعمًا هيكلي لتخفيف العبء المعرفي أثناء عملية دمج النصوص.

الكلمات المفتاحية: *أخطاء الاقتباس؛ دمج المصادر؛ إعادة الصياغة؛ الاقتباس المباشر.*

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