

# Source integration practices and pedagogical implications in English academic writing: A case study of Omani undergraduates

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**Background:** College students often struggle with integrating sources because of unclear academic expectations and limited instruction. This study examines these challenges to inform the development of more effective pedagogical support.

**Objectives:** The purpose of this research is to analyse the challenges faced by English as a Foreign Language students in applying APA-style citation and referencing, as well as in summarising and paraphrasing. Using assessment data drawn from the institutional course learning outcomes (CLOs) dashboard, the study evaluates the extent to which these academic writing skills have been mastered and, in turn, determines the efficacy of current teaching strategies.

**Methods:** Data from 60 ENG101 students at the Modern College of Business and Science in Muscat, Oman, were analysed quantitatively using a standardised assessment rubric to assess source-integration skills. Institutional CLOs' dashboard figures were also reviewed to validate rubric scores, and to identify citation and paraphrasing trends.

**Results:** Although participants demonstrated stronger summarising and paraphrasing skills (78% and 80%, CLO 5), they struggled with citation and referencing (67% and 65%, CLO 4), with errors in accuracy, integration, and formatting. These weaknesses compromise research credibility and highlight the urgent need for targeted instructional strategies.

**Conclusion:** Students showed stronger summarising and paraphrasing skills, but weaker citation and referencing performance. These findings underscore the need for integrated pedagogy and adaptive feedback tools. Future research should also examine broader contexts and citation styles.

**Contribution:** The study contributes to academic writing pedagogy by identifying English as a Foreign Language students' challenges with source-integration skills, including citation, referencing, summarising, and paraphrasing, and by proposing targeted instructional strategies that foster ethical source use, strengthen academic integrity, and prepare learners for advanced research.

**Keywords:** academic writing; APA citation and referencing; EFL students; learning outcomes; source-integration skills.

## Introduction

Undoubtedly, writing, namely the academic genre, is regarded as a key skill in higher education, demonstrating students' ability to articulate complex thoughts and engage in academic discourse. Grounded on this, proper citation and referencing skills, along with proficiency in summarising and paraphrasing, are keys to maintaining academic integrity and reliability (Alawad, Ayadi & Alhinai. 2025; Leon 2023). Despite the importance of these skills in the academic writing context, as previously mentioned, Kirkman, Waller and Catterall (2017) added that most students do not master them, even though they are explicitly taught, as evidenced by the difficulties they face in applying American Psychological Association (APA) rules consistently in assessment settings, in which citation is associated with sound performance across academic achievement and ethical practice.

Considerable relevant literature in the area approaches citation errors from either plagiarism or penalties perspectives, often treating poor referencing skills as carelessness (Dunleavy 2014; Khalid et al. 2014; Vardi 2012). By contrast, the developmental view identifies citation as a complex but basic literacy skill that requires time to learn and practice to master

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(Santini 2018; Valentine 2006). In this vein, some scholars see that many cases of 'textual plagiarism' occur unintentionally by untrained students who have not yet grasped referencing conventions. Although this view is regarded as persuasive and developmental, there are very few studies that have empirically proven that such errors actually exist in students' writing to support this claim, particularly in English language education in non-native contexts. The leading problem that the current study addressed is that, despite strict guidelines and explicit instructions regarding APA citations and referencing, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students still show recurring patterns of errors. This undermines the effectiveness of prevailing pedagogical approaches, and highlights the scarcity of relevant studies in non-Western educational contexts. The study's response to this problem was directly represented by adopting a quantitative analysis of the freshmen students studying academic writing at the Modern College of Business and Science in Muscat, in the Sultanate of Oman. The analysis mainly focused on the performance of the targeted participants in incorporating sources according to APA standards (2020), as well as summarising and paraphrasing. Using performance data from continuous assessment related to the ENG101 course, as recorded in the institution's EduPortal grading system, the study seeks to analyse common error patterns in citation and referencing, and to assess and address them pedagogically. Through this case study approach, the research presents new evidence from a context that has not been studied or addressed in depth by previous relevant studies, addressing the distinctive issues encountered by EFL students. To this end, this study provides a model for enhancing citation literacy through formative feedback and targeted instruction, rather than focusing on offences.

To accomplish this intent, the study formulated three objectives, which are as follows:

- Evaluating the students' ability to integrate sources, including citation, references, paraphrasing, and summarising in academic writing.
- Assessing the impact of instructional strategies on students' mastery of source integration skills using performance data.
- Determining the frequency of repeated citation and referencing errors, as well as the accuracy of summaries and paraphrases in EFL students' work, and suggesting effective teaching strategies to help improve them.

Driven by these specific objectives, the following questions are dealt with in this study:

- How well do students integrate sources in academic writing, particularly in relation to APA citation, referencing, summarising, and paraphrasing?
- What learning gaps and performance trends in academic writing are revealed through errors in source-integration practices?
- How can teaching methodologies be adapted to strengthen students' use of APA conventions and their overall source-integration skills?

## Literature review

Source integration skills and practices are crucial in academic writing, contributing to credibility, attribution, and academic integrity. Nevertheless, existing research consistently shows that EFL students struggle significantly with achieving accurate citations, mainly resulting from insufficient awareness and training. Rezeki (2021) identifies the citation challenges Indonesian university students face, highlighting the prevalence of non-integrated citations and a tendency to utilise indirect citations without proper integration into argumentation. Similarly, Jomaa and Bidin (2017) investigate citation challenges encountered by Arab doctoral students, emphasising issues related to evaluating source credibility, adopting a scholarly tone, and managing second-language proficiency. Together, these studies expose substantial deficiencies in teaching methods that fail to bridge the mechanics of citation writing with text analysis.

Theoretical work by Gravett and Kinchin (2021) outlines a rationale linking these practices to student identity development. They argue that gaps in students' citation references should not be regarded as errors but rather as essential processes in identity construction within academic contexts, and citation practices shape students' self-perception as scholars. They contend that when students understand the importance of references, they become more fully engaged as learners and begin to see citation as a process rather than a mere skill. Their investigation has shown a mismatch between what educators expect students to do and what students actually do regarding referencing, leading to increased work dishonesty. Besides citation and referencing skills, source integration accuracy is also worth mastering to uphold academic integrity. Keck (2006) emphasises that paraphrasing and summarising techniques are also essential skills for avoiding plagiarism, demonstrating understanding, and integrating ideas coherently in academic writing. Unluckily, a significant number of current undergraduate students studying EFL, particularly those who attended public schools, struggle to acquire these skills. Supporting this claim, Ajmal, Bukhari and Raza (2025) assert that higher education students often lack these resource integration skills because of their limited exposure to academic traditions.

By analysing the historical development of citation standards, Hyland and Jiang (2019) point to the increasing use of non-integrated and citation-focused sources in academic writing. This practice is particularly evident in science and technical disciplines, where knowledge representation is prioritised over rhetorical cohesion. In contrast, the present study highlights how undergraduate EFL students at an Omani college struggle not only with non-integrative referencing but also with basic formatting and attribution errors. These difficulties suggest that the issue extends beyond disciplinary convention and reflects broader challenges in mastering citation practices within English-mediated academic contexts. The interdisciplinary nature of adapting or using

citation styles across different academic cultures is considered in Schembri (2023), where an examination of undergraduate dissertations reveals that the exploration of citation framing relates to student voice, disciplinary belonging, and authorship. Another study by Fazilatfar, Elhambakhsh and Allami (2018) focuses on anti-plagiarism strategies, and they demonstrate that explicit citation instruction enhanced students' confidence and awareness, positioning citations as an effective deterrent to plagiarism. Their research indicates that instructing students on the functions of citations and the processes of quoting, evaluating, and integrating sources fosters accurate citation practices. In a different approach, Zhao and Li (2025) examine critical citation and intertextuality in EFL academic writing. Their research suggests that students use direct quotations and critical citations far less frequently than confirmatory references, making the former less common. Their analysis asserts that universities must promote intertextual writing, allowing students to engage with texts beyond superficial readings, and to critique them thoughtfully instead of purely mechanically.

Further studies have investigated citation practices in different disciplines; for example, Lamptey and Atta-Obeng (2012) examine citation practices among postgraduates in Ghana, and they report that the prevalent practice of source amalgamation is beset with difficulties. Jalilifar and Dabbi (2013) noticed an inclination to use integral citations in Iranian Master's (MA) theses, and they regarded this as a greater engagement with the cited works rather than superficial acknowledgment. Lipson (2006) and Hewings, Lillis and Vladimirou (2010) suggested that citations fulfill attribution and argumentative reinforcement, which expresses the writer's perspective. Citation is as crucial as a landmark of academic persuasive writing. Other scholars, Law, Ting and Jerome (2013) and Nguyen and Pramoolsook (2016), reported some concerns related to language, especially about ESL researchers' use of citation conventions and the integration of sources at the syntactic level. These studies explore citation difficulties in different academic settings, highlighting the absence of targeted pedagogical content specific to citations, source use, and discipline-specific citation norms.

## Research gap

Literature reviewed has consistently addressed the persistent difficulties EFL learners encounter in source interpretation, incorporation, and author positioning (Jomaa & Bidin 2017; Rezeki 2021), together with challenges in integrating citations and negotiating disciplinary conventions (Hyland & Jiang 2019). Such difficulties frequently manifest in non-integrated, list-like referencing styles that compromise textual clarity and hinder the development of academic identity (Gravett & Kinchin 2021; Zhao & Li 2025). Collectively, these findings underscore a critical pedagogical gap: citation instruction has often been confined to mechanical accuracy, with insufficient attention to fostering critical engagement with sources, and disciplinary awareness.

The present study seeks to address this gap by examining undergraduate EFL students' mastery of APA citation practices alongside their accuracy in summarisation and paraphrasing, two essential techniques of source integration. By evaluating the impact of targeted instruction, the study advances the call for discipline-based pedagogy (Fazilatfar et al. 2018), and situates citation training within the broader concerns of academic identity formation and plagiarism anxiety. In doing so, it contributes to the refinement of pedagogical approaches that integrate ethical source use, interpretive precision, and disciplinary positioning. Furthermore, the study acknowledges the potential of emerging innovations, such as artificial intelligence-driven citation analysis and adaptive feedback, as promising extensions to strengthen this pedagogical agenda.

## Research methods and design

Intending to affirm research questions and provide evidence for conclusions, the study adopted a quantitative approach to measure students' mastery of citation/references according to the APA style course learning outcome (CLO 4) and summarisation/paraphrasing (CLO 5) in academic writing. This approach was adopted to analyse target students' performance data driven from continuous assessments related to source integration skills, which is a part of the ENG101 course taken by freshmen students, to provide quantitative evidence of these skills, and strengths and difficulties which can be easily and systematically identified. The quantitative analysis of the course outcomes provided structured benchmarks aligned with the course objectives and the institution's mission, and established a coherent matrix for analysing teaching effectiveness.

## Sample and context

The study was carried out in the Modern College of Business and Science in Muscat in the spring semester of 2025. The sample was made up of two classes of first-year students, who completed source-integration skills as a part of ENG101 ( $N = 60$ ). As English-medium students in an EFL setting, this sample represents a population in which citation, referencing, summarising, and paraphrasing skills are not only pedagogically important but often underdeveloped. The emphasis on first-year students is purposeful, as basic academic writing skills are developed at this early tertiary stage, which has a significant effect on subsequent academic writing.

## Instruments

Data were gathered through the referencing and citation skills test, a required component of the ENG101 continuous assessment that contributes to students' final grades. As per the course delivery plan, students were provided with five structured teaching sessions on APA citation and referencing, that involved rules for in-text citation formatting, reference list formatting, and the differences between integral and non-integral citation styles. They were also given instructions on summarising and paraphrasing during the same instructional

sequence through classroom tasks included in regular lessons with immediate feedback from the instructor. The test is intended to cover the two sets of skills according to the course syllabus. Student answers were rated by means of a rubric that assessed not only the extent to which students provided accurate, consistent, formatted APA citations, but also their ability to summarise and paraphrase properly.

## Procedures

The methods employed in the study were well structured according to the following procedures:

- Students received five lessons of explicit instructions regarding source-integration techniques, including APA citation and referencing, as well as summarising and paraphrasing. These tasks were taught and practised through class-based activities with formative feedback.
- After these activities, a continuous assessment test was taken as part of the ENG101 course evaluation, and among others, it was evaluated for the final mark.
- Students' assessment submissions were scored using a rubric to relate them to the targeted course CLOs.
- Course learning outcome verification data were then obtained from the institutional CLOs dashboard at the course level based on CLO 4 and CLO 5 scores for all students in the class collectively and not on an individual basis, as shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2, to ensure ethical handling of the data and to maintain consistency between the two classes.

## Data analysis

Quantitative analysis was first conducted on CLO scores for source-integration use; trends are presented using descriptive statistics, and evidence of instructional impacts is demonstrated through a comparison between Class 1 and Class 2. Rubric-based scoring feedback was used as a springboard to develop error categories (i.e. misinitial citation placements, improperly formatted references, confused/inverted integral and non-integral citations, and the accuracy and consistency of summary and paraphrasing), which were tallied as percentages of the total observed.

## Validity and reliability

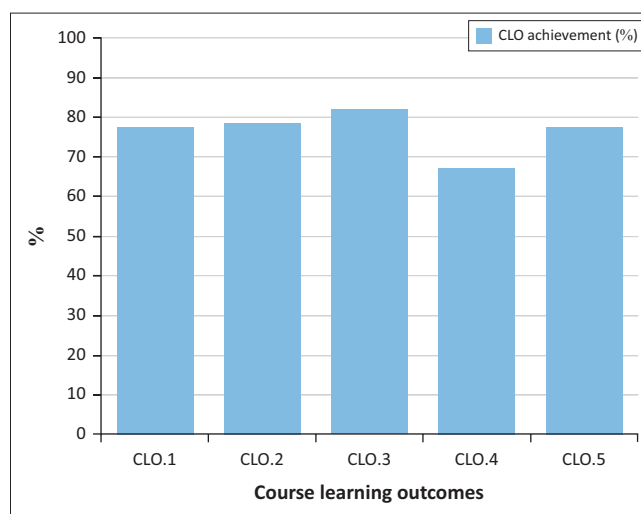
Regarding the validity and reliability of the findings, there was a clear measure of validity and reliability demonstrated, and methodological soundness was maintained. Evidence of content validity was found in the congruence between the rubric and CLO objectives for both APA citation and summarising and paraphrasing. Reliability was anchored in standardised test contexts and rubric application across cohorts. The standardised grading system established consistency in observed findings and scoring that were important for inter-rater reliability and objectivity. However, this rubric was created for grading and not the research, which is considered an obvious methodological limitation.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Modern College of Business and Science Research Ethics and Intellectual Property Committee (No. RE/2025/14).

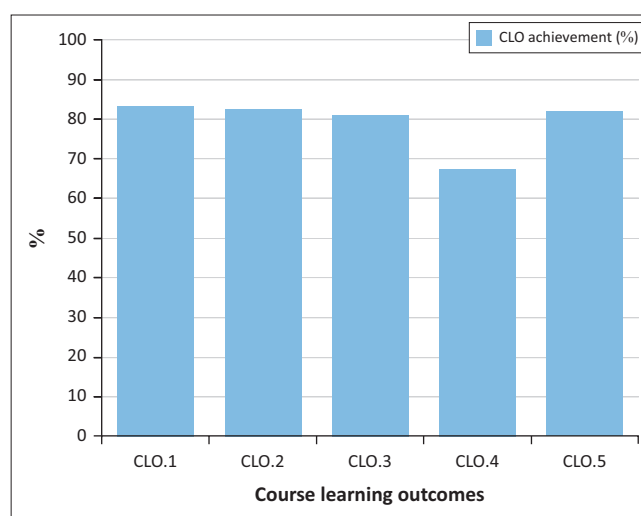
## Findings

This section presents the outcomes of students' performance in citation and referencing (CLO 4) and in summarising and paraphrasing (CLO 5), based on evidence drawn from one of the ENG101 course continuous assessments. The results are reported using rubric-based scoring aligned with APA citation and source-integration objectives, supported by descriptive statistics and institutional CLO dashboard trends. Together, these measures provide a transparent account of achievement levels across sections, highlighting recurring challenges and instructional gaps. The findings are discussed in relation to the research questions and objectives, situating student



Source: Institutional CLOs Dashboard  
CLO, course learning outcome.

FIGURE 1: Achievement in Class 1: CLO 4 and CLO 5.



Source: Institutional CLOs Dashboard  
CLO, Course Learning Outcome.

FIGURE 2: Achievement in Class 2: CLO 4 and CLO 5.

performance within broader concerns of academic writing pedagogy.

### Performance overview: CLO 4 and CLO 5

As shown in Table 1, which displays the percentages of students' performance across the two classes selected, the students performed better in summarising and paraphrasing (CLO 5) compared to citation and referencing (CLO 4) in both classes, which shows a strong command of language skills but difficulties with APA citation and referencing. As illustrated, students from Class 1 attained a 67% average result for CLO 4, which rose significantly for CLO 5 to 78%. In Class 2, this pattern was also observed, as they recorded 65% for CLO 4 and 80% for CLO 5, demonstrating stronger summarising and paraphrasing skills than citation and referencing accuracy.

The results indicate a notable disparity in the students' referencing and citation accuracy, summarisation, and paraphrasing ability. This gap stems from the students' ability to summarise and paraphrase far outstripping their ability to reference and cite correctly. Even though students understand the texts and the summarisation process, the ability to cite in APA style seems to need further attention, given the low achievement in CLO 4. These patterns are graphically depicted in Figure 1 and Figure 2, which show the CLO results for the two groups based on the institutional grading dashboard. These findings address the study's objectives by evaluating students' source-integration skills, assessing instructional impact, and identifying recurring citation and paraphrasing errors. In line with the research questions, the results reveal performance disparities, highlight learning gaps, and provide evidence for refining teaching methodologies to strengthen APA citation and source use.

The comparison between CLO 4 (citation and referencing) and CLO 5 (summarising and paraphrasing) reveals descriptive differences in performance, with students demonstrating comparatively stronger comprehension than citation accuracy. Figure 1 and Figure 2, together with rubric scoring and dashboard percentages, illustrate these trends, but remain limited to descriptive evidence. Within this scope, the data point to recurring challenges in APA formatting, in-text citation practices, and the distinction between integral and non-integral citation frameworks, which help explain why students' achievement in CLO 4 (citation and referencing) lags behind their stronger performance in CLO 5 (summarising and paraphrasing). These observed patterns highlight areas where citation competence appears weaker than summarisation skills. However, the evidence presented does not extend to definitive conclusions regarding specific instructional needs or the effectiveness of interventions. Recommendations for remedial strategies and writing workshops are therefore reserved for the conclusion, where they are framed as pedagogically sound possibilities rather than empirically validated outcomes.

### Analysis of citation and referencing performance (CLO 4)

Analysing the errors performed in citation and referencing (CLO 4) highlights the key issues summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 highlights key citation errors that students frequently encounter in APA formatting, reinforcing challenges in accurate source integration. The highest error rate, 30%, for incorrect in-text citation placement, suggests difficulty properly positioning author-date citations, leading to confusion in attribution and weakening argument credibility. Additionally, 25% of students struggled with reference list formatting, making errors in italics, indentation, and punctuation, indicating gaps in understanding APA structure. Twenty per cent failed to distinguish between integral and non-integral citations, limiting their ability to integrate sources fluidly into academic discourse. This lack of variation in citation types affects coherence in research writing and reduces clarity in supporting claims. These findings align with the first research question, confirming that students struggle with citation integration, in-text accuracy, and reference formatting. Addressing these challenges through structured interventions, targeted feedback, and practical exercises can enhance citation precision and strengthen academic writing standards.

### Analysis of summarising and paraphrasing performance (CLO 5)

While citation and referencing were relatively weaker, students demonstrated greater proficiency in summarising and paraphrasing tasks, as outlined in Table 3.

Table 3 highlights common summarisation and paraphrasing errors, providing insight into students' ability to synthesise information effectively. As the most frequent issue, 20%

**TABLE 1:** Achievement across classes CLO 4 and CLO 5 for citation, referencing, summarising and paraphrasing.

Class	CLO 4	CLO 5
	Citation and referencing achievement (%)	Summarising and paraphrasing achievement (%)
1	67	78
2	65	80

CLO, course learning outcome.

**TABLE 2:** Common American Psychological Association citation errors observed.

Error type	%	Description
Incorrect in-text citation placement	30	Integrally misplacing citations or misusing the APA author-date format.
Reference list formatting issues	25	The failure to italicise, indent, and punctuate correctly.
Failure to differentiate integral and non-integral citations	20	Misusing citation styles or applying one exclusively.

APA, American Psychological Association; CLO, course learning outcome.

**TABLE 3:** Common summarising and paraphrasing errors observed.

Error type	%	Description
Inaccurate summarisation	20	Minor difficulties in condensing key points effectively while preserving meaning.
Improper paraphrasing	15	Occasional reliance on direct wording from sources instead of restructured sentences.
Loss of meaning in rewording	10	Few instances of poorly modified sentences that distort original meaning.

struggled with inaccurate summarisation, suggesting minor difficulties in condensing key points while maintaining clarity. Additionally, 15% exhibited improper paraphrasing, relying on direct wording instead of restructuring sentences. While they grasp the paraphrasing conceptually, practical application remains inconsistent. Furthermore, 10% experienced a loss of meaning in rewording, altering the original intent of the text. Though less frequent, it highlights the need for improved semantic preservation. These findings align with the second research question, confirming that while students generally understand summarisation and paraphrasing, challenges persist in citation accuracy and source integration. Strengthening structured paraphrasing exercises and summarisation techniques can enhance their academic writing proficiency.

### Comparison between classes

Although both classes exhibited strong proficiency in summarising and paraphrasing (CLO 5), notable differences in citation accuracy (CLO 4) were observed. Both groups were taught by the same instructor and were assessed using the standardised course rubric applied across all sections, ensuring consistency in evaluation. Institutional dashboard data further support this comparison: Class 1 achieved 67% in CLO 4 and 78% in CLO 5, while Class 2 achieved 65% in CLO 4 and 80% in CLO 5. Class 1 students demonstrated greater difficulty in reference list formatting, frequently omitting italics, misapplying indentation, and making punctuation errors, indicating a need for reinforced instruction on APA structuring and standardisation. In contrast, students from Class 2 experienced difficulties primarily with in-text citation accuracy, such as inaccurately placing author-date references and mixing integral with non-integral citation styles. These differences, observed under comparable instructional and assessment conditions, and supported by institutional CLOs' dashboard performance data, suggest that a single overarching strategy for teaching citation principles may not meet all students' needs. Instead, more tailored instructional approaches are required to address the distinct citation difficulties presented by each group. By applying class-specific strategies, instructors could improve academic citation practices and increase consistency with scholarly referencing norms, thereby enhancing overall writing quality.

### Discussion

The results show that students only partially mastered APA citation and source-integration skills, with persistent errors in formatting and reference consistency reflecting deeper learning gaps. Performance in CLO 4 echoed prior studies (Jomaa & Bidin 2017; Rezeki 2021), highlighting EFL learners' struggles to critically evaluate and coherently integrate sources. While some proficiency in summarising and paraphrasing was evident, recurring citation errors (Table 2 and Table 3) suggest that students often treat referencing as a mechanical requirement rather than a rhetorical practice, consistent with Zhao and Li's (2025) observations. Unlike reports of minimal citation use, our

students attempted integration, though superficially, revealing limited metalinguistic awareness and muted authorial agency (Hyland & Jiang 2019). These findings underscore the need to reconceptualise citation as an act of meaning-making rather than procedural compliance. Ultimately, the observed disparities in citation accuracy and paraphrasing proficiency align with the study's objectives, demonstrating how performance data expose specific learning gaps in source-integration practices. These results directly inform the research questions by clarifying where students excel and where targeted instructional support is most needed.

### Conclusion

Students demonstrated stronger abilities in summarising and paraphrasing (CLO 5) than in citation and referencing (CLO 4), where persistent issues with integration, formatting, and distinguishing citation types echoed earlier findings (Jomaa & Bidin 2017; Rezeki 2021). The tendency to treat citations as mechanical tasks (Zhao & Li 2025) highlights limited analytical engagement, and reinforces Gravett and Kinchin's (2021) view of citation as central to academic identity, and Fazilatfar et al.'s (2018) call for pedagogy that links citations to claims and reduces plagiarism anxiety. Strengthening the connection between paraphrasing and citing, supported by adaptive technologies such as artificial intelligence-based citation tools, may improve student outcomes. These conclusions, however, are limited by the study's focus on two cohorts from a single institution and reliance on APA-specific rubric data; future research should expand across institutions, citation systems, and mixed methods to capture the complexity of source-integration practices and inform balanced pedagogical interventions. Overall, the study achieved its aims by documenting students' strengths in summarising and paraphrasing alongside persistent weaknesses in APA citation. In doing so, it provides evidence-based directions for refining teaching strategies and enhancing source-integration skills in EFL academic writing.

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### Competing interests

The author has reported that they have received funding from the Modern College of Business and Science that may be affected by the research reported in the enclosed publication. They have disclosed those interests fully and have in place an approved plan for managing any potential conflicts arising from that involvement.

## CRedit authorship contribution

Emad A. Alawad: Methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing – original draft, visualization, project administration, data curation, writing – review & editing, supervision. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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## Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study were derived from anonymised student submissions collected as part of regular coursework in the ENG101 programme at Modern College of Business and Science, Muscat, Oman. The data are not publicly available because of institutional privacy policies and student confidentiality agreements, but may be made available by the corresponding author, Emad A. Alawad, upon reasonable request and with approval from the college's academic committee.

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