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Rant! The Purpose of Citations and References

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Recently, I have noticed that a number of articles in this volume of TESL-EJ have referenced a specific book when they probably did not have access to it, nor would most of the TESL-EJ readership.

We all certainly recognize the need to cite the sources of the ideas mentioned in academic articles, be they our own or those that we have studied, read or heard about. Doing a quick search via ChatGPT using the prompt “What is the purpose of references in research?” I found the following seven points:

1. Acknowledge Intellectual Contributions
2. Maintain Academic Integrity
3. Support Claims and Arguments
4. Facilitate Traceability and Verification
5. Map the Scholarly Conversation
6. Enhance Credibility and Authority
7. Assist the Peer Review Process.

From the standpoint of the author, I asked “Why is citing important”? From many similar responses, here is one authoritative answer from the MIT library staff.

(<https://libguides.mit.edu/citing>)

It’s important to cite sources you used in your research for several reasons:

- To show your reader you’ve done proper research by listing sources you used to get your information
- To be a responsible scholar by giving credit to other researchers and acknowledging their ideas
- To avoid plagiarism by quoting words and ideas used by other authors

- To allow your reader to track down the sources you used by citing them accurately in your paper by way of footnotes, a bibliography or reference list.

I hope that you, the reader, agree with all of the above. So what is the problem? For one, the citations regarding Lev Vygotsky's work. Most scholars in our field properly appreciate his groundbreaking contributions, and citations are necessary when his work is relevant to the current research. Vygotsky passed away in 1937, so the interpretation of his work has been carried forward by more recent scholars, such as Michael Cole, the lead author of the oft-cited 1978 book, *Mind in Society: Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (1978), which is "a unique selection of Vygotsky's important essays, most of which have previously been unavailable in English," according to a quote from Amazon.com.

The issue is, however, that many authors have apparently overlooked the main purposes of references and citations. After examining recent articles in the current volume of TESL-EJ, I counted seven articles that cited Cole's book. Out of these seven articles, only two mentioned a secondary source where they might have obtained their information, while the other five simply attribute Vygotsky (1978) without citing the specific location in the work or providing any text from it. I wonder whether they have actually read (the relevant sections of) the book! It seems that none of the seven numbered purposes or four bullet points mentioned above can be properly achieved in this manner.

In such cases, it would seem more "reader-friendly" to me to cite an easily accessible work that explains in depth the relevant concept and its impact on the paper currently being read. </Rant>

We will publish reactions to the "rant" in a future issue. Please post your thoughts to: <https://tinyurl.com/tesl-ej-rant>.

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