Research Article:

# Crossing Boundaries to Become a Critical Writer: A Reflective Study of Writing a Literature Review from a First-Year International PhD Student

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## ABSTRACT

This reflective study examines my personal experiences as a PhD student in a British university writing a literature review. It focuses on exploring the coping strategies that I have learned from my supervisor's corrective feedback as I overcome my boundaries to becoming a critical writer. Employing auto-ethnography modes of enquiry, I provide "thick descriptions" of my supervisor's corrective feedback – in the form of tracked changes, notetaking, and recording – in order to identify critical writing strategies that can be learnt from the feedback. This might be valuable for others who face similar struggles and complexities. This study identifies seven strategies that can be effectively applied in developing critical literature review; these are to: (a) provide general comments on the literature; (b) demonstrate research gaps; (c) highlight the limitations of previous related studies; (d) comment on the weaknesses of theories/perspectives; (e) state the deficiencies of research methods; (f) recommend constructive feedback; and (g) highlight strengths of previous works. The findings are of interest to those who face similar struggles and are from a similar background, particularly other international students from non-English-speaking countries such as Indonesia, Thailand and China. This study offers fresh insight into practical and applicable strategies for becoming a critical writer. For the sake of clarity, strategies are presented with illustrations to help readers easily apply them in practical, appropriate ways.

**Keywords:** Reflective study, crossing boundaries to becoming a critical writer, critical writing, writing literature review critically, PhD student's experiences

## INTRODUCTION

Being a PhD student at one of the UK's elite universities might be the dream for most students across the globe, particularly those from either developing or poor countries. It might not be easy for some international students; however, since they need to adjust not only their academic but also their non-academic lives (Li et al., 2025). Those who are interested in pursuing their doctoral degree in the UK universities, for example, should be totally well-prepared to face any possibility of unpredictable barriers – academic or non-academic – as experienced by most international students (Ravichandran et al., 2018). This is certainly true in the case of adjusting to the UK higher education system (Jiang et al., 2025), which might be extremely different and challenging compared to that of their home countries. It is commonly recognised that the British higher education system has been meticulously designed to meet global higher education standards with high teaching quality (Padlee et al., 2020), and by promoting student learning through higher-order thinking skills (Gupta & Mishra, 2021), including critical writing (Lin et al., 2025). Furthermore, the quality of their academic staff truly enables UK universities to be globally recognised through their remarkable research productivity (Padlee et al., 2020), which positively contributes to people's lives and knowledge development. This is further supported by the availability of outstanding and sophisticated facilities that ease the accomplishment of the UK higher education goals. Therefore, it is not surprising that several British universities have been included within the list of top-class universities in the world, including Oxford, Cambridge, and Imperial College, London.

On the question of barriers, critical writing, as a skill increasingly demanded of PhD students in British universities, seems likely to become one of the most problematic issues among international students. Due to the lack of critical writing skills, a host of international PhD students struggle significantly in their first year of study, particularly in writing research proposals in a critical way (Therova, 2022). In fact, it cannot be denied that many of them get stressed (Chen et al., 2016) or even fail (Gao, 2021) in their first year because of their inability to write their research proposal critically. The literature includes many studies addressing the struggles with studying overseas of either international PhD or master's students (Moshtari & Safarpour, 2024; Doi & Dai, 2025; Jiang et al., 2025; Schneider, 2025). Some of the studies suggest that there are still huge gaps in international students' critical writing skills. Such gaps could become highly detrimental and might negatively affect the willingness of international student candidates to study overseas, particularly at UK universities.

To respond to the above-mentioned issues, a fresh study is urgently needed to explore in depth personal experiences on how to cross boundaries to becoming a critical writer. Employing autoethnography modes of enquiry, this study is aimed at exploring my personal struggles – as an international PhD student from Indonesia studying higher education curriculum in the UK – in writing a literature review in a critical way. Additionally, this study is expected to make significant contributions to the understanding of critical writing development among international PhD students, offering practical strategies, methodological insights, and policy recommendations. By addressing the challenges faced by students from non-English-speaking backgrounds, the research advocates for more inclusive and supportive

academic environments. The use of autoethnography as a reflective tool also opens new avenues for exploring the personal and emotional dimensions of the PhD journey, making this study a valuable resource for students, educators, and policymakers alike. Finally, it is fully expected that this study can inspire other international students who have similar problems, backgrounds, and challenges in dealing with the complexities of critical writing.

To clearly contextualise this research, it is necessary to explain my background as the primary data source of this study – which might have a significant effect on my critical writing skills. This is with the aim of bringing readers in the scene or bridging them to experience and experience (Ellis et al., 2011).

To begin, I was born in a small and isolated countryside community in Indonesia in 1985. When I was around three years old, my mother and I had to follow my dad in moving to the neighbouring country of Malaysia. When I was six, my parents tried to enroll me at the local school, but unfortunately, I was rejected because I did not have a birth certificate issued by the Malaysian authorities. The only option my parents had at that time was to send me back to my grandmother in Indonesia. This finally occurred when I was aged nine, so I started elementary school very late compared to others, and I was living in a village with no electricity. My elementary school was one of those small schools with numerous limitations, including a shortage of teachers and facilities. I vividly remember that my teacher sometimes taught three classes at the same time. As a result, I never received, for example, any corrective feedback on my writing assignments, negatively affecting my critical writing. It is still clear in my mind that the learning activities were greatly focused on memorising skills, promoting low-order thinking skills instead of high-order. I moved up to one of the district junior high schools, and here my learning experience was much better compared to elementary school because I acquired other fundamental skills, including leadership, problem-solving, and collaboration. However, a teacher-centred approach still dominated the teaching-learning process. The pedagogical system tended to be oriented more towards lecturing and textbooks, an approach that could not truly develop my critical thinking, particularly my critical writing.

My struggles with critical writing are not unique. Studies have shown that students from developing countries, particularly those from remote or marginalised areas, often face similar challenges in developing critical academic skills (Charoenpornsook & Thumvichit, 2025; Kos, 2025). For example, there are still some educational systems in China that still emphasise teacher-centred learning (Song et al., 2025), making it difficult to develop critical thinking and writing skills when they pursue higher education abroad (Dai et al., 2025; Li et al., 2023). In this case, numerous international students from non-English speaking countries also face challenges in academic writing in the Western world due to a lack of early exposure to analytical writing, including China (Jiang et al., 2025), Japan (Doi & Dai, 2025), Africa (Moshtari & Safarpour, 2024), and Arab (Schneider, 2025). These examples resonate with my own experiences and further emphasise that early educational background plays a crucial role in shaping students' ability to engage critically with academic texts.

As an undergraduate student, I was personally cognisant of how poor were my critical writing skills as an undergraduate student, particularly in writing class. Several serious issues, including grammatical errors, coherence, organisation, and idea development, had

an adverse effect. This was further compounded by the fact that I was not personally given corrective feedback on my writing, because our assignments were mostly conducted in groups. This arrangement worsened my critical writing skills, as my lecturer seemed to have little time to read our individual writing in detail due to the large number of students. This problem is not confined to Indonesia; research conducted in Nigeria by Jabali et al. (2024) highlights how overcrowded classrooms and limited individualised feedback hinder the development of critical thinking skills, causing students to struggle when transitioning to higher academic standards.

I finally received extensive corrective feedback on my writing when I studied for my Masters in 2011, and my thesis supervisor required me to write critically. However, I had limited time in which to sharpen my critical writing skills, but at least I gained some experience in writing critically. Similar experiences have been documented in research on international postgraduate students in the UK, where students from South Asia and the Middle East, accustomed to a descriptive writing style, faced difficulties in adapting to the critical and analytical expectations of academics (de Caux & Pretorius, 2024).

Given these experiences, being an international PhD student at a British university was way beyond my expectations. I could not even have imagined how to meet the high standards of higher education in the UK based on my previous experience. Therefore, I felt compelled to write this article to share my personal experiences of crossing my personal boundaries to becoming a critical writer. I hope that this study can inspire other international students who struggle to write their literature review in a critical way.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Autoethnography was originated by Hayano (1979), with Ellis and Bochner (2000) playing a fundamental role in promoting and developing it within "studies of a personal nature" (Wall, 2006, p. 149). It is a methodological approach applied in qualitative research that combines ethnographic analysis with autobiographical reflection (Ellis et al., 2011). Such combination allows researchers to connect personal experiences to broader social and cultural structures (Anderson, 2006; Ellis et al., 2011; Tripathi et al., 2024). As a method rooted in the traditions of interpretivism and constructivism, autoethnography seeks to understand social reality through the perspectives of individuals directly involved in those experiences. In academic contexts, autoethnography serves not only as a reflective tool but also as a critical approach to challenge traditional research norms that often prioritise objectivity and generalisation over subjective experience (Adams et al., 2017).

From an interpretivist perspective, social reality is understood as a subjective construction formed through the interaction of individuals with their environment (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This approach has implications for autoethnographic research, where the resulting personal narratives are not simply representations of individual experiences (Xu, 2023), but also reflections of broader social structures. In the context of academic studies, autoethnography allows for an in-depth exploration of the challenges faced by individuals in complex academic environments, such as international PhD students adapting to different educational systems.

In addition to interpretivism, autoethnography is also underpinned by constructivism (Lee, 2020; Xu, 2023), which emphasises that reality is not objective but constructed through individual experiences in specific social and cultural contexts. In this case, self-reflection is a key element that allows researchers to construct meaning from their experiences (Xu, 2023). Hence, constructivism in this autoethnography study also contributes to a deeper understanding of how individuals negotiate new academic and cultural structures, such as in the process of adapting to critical writing standards in UK universities.

Finally, autoethnography is also closely related to narrative research (Adams et al., 2021), which emphasises the importance of storytelling as a method for understanding human experience. This approach allows autoethnographic research to provide richer and deeper insights into individual experiences, highlighting how personal narratives can contribute to a collective understanding of academic challenges (Adams et al., 2021). In the context of international PhD students, a narrative approach to autoethnography can reveal not only the technical academic challenges but also the emotional and psychological aspects that accompany them, such as stress, anxiety, and the process of adapting to a different educational system.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, autoethnography becomes a multidimensional and reflective approach, which not only provides in-depth insights into individual experiences but also connects them to broader social and structural dynamics. In the context of PhD research on higher education curricula, autoethnography becomes a particularly relevant tool for analysing how international students adapt to different academic systems, how they develop critical writing skills, and how their experiences reflect structural challenges in global higher education. Thus, autoethnography serves not only as a research method but also as a means to advocate for changes in higher education policies that are more inclusive and oriented towards the experiences of international students.

## METHODOLOGY

Considering the aim of this study, which explores my own experiences of crossing boundaries to becoming a critical writer, I strongly believe that an autoethnography design appropriately meets the abovementioned aim. Put most simply, this refers to a research design that allows an author to systematically examine his/her personal experiences in order to comprehend certain cultural issues (Anderson, 2006; Ellis et al., 2011). In this case, the intention is to show how the author's personal experiences inextricably link to a cultural phenomenon (Anderson, 2006; Wall, 2006; Ellis et al., 2011). Connecting to this autoethnographic study, I systematically explore the unbroken link between my previous experiences in critical writing and my first-year PhD struggles at a British university in writing my literature review critically.

There are several fundamental reasons strongly influencing me in opting for this design. Firstly, autoethnography tends to be "more authentic than traditional research approaches" (Wall, 2006, p. 155) because using myself as the subject provides fuller pictures or richer meanings from my own personal experiences that relate to critical writing culture either in Indonesian or British universities. Secondly, rigorous methodology should not be an issue,

because of "the life being expressed [in a narrative] not merely as data to be analysed and categorised but as a story to be respected and engaged" (Bochner, 2001, p. 132). In addition, this approach tends to be simpler and time-saving compared to other designs because I do not, for example, need to adjust to others' schedules for interview or observation. Lastly, ethical consideration is also not something fundamental to deal with in autoethnography, because I present meaningful data related only to my own experiences, without touching other people's confidentiality.

In contrast to the abovementioned advantages, I should also anticipate any potential biases because of autoethnographic weaknesses noted in the existing literature (Atkinson, 1997; Sparkes, 2000; Wall, 2006). The most criticised aspect is methodology, with autoethnography viewed to have suffered from fundamental flaws in research design, suggesting difficulties in judging its trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Also, issues of subjectivity are also criticised, because this approach tends to be individualised, self-indulgent, introspective, and narcissistic (Atkinson, 1997; Sparkes 2000), indicating ignorance of "social context, social action, and social interaction" (Atkinson, 1997, p. 339).

Following those who bolster autobiographical inquiry, such as Bochner (2001), Ellis and Bochner (2000), Ellis et al. (2011), and Sparkes (2000), and in response to the weaknesses stated previously, I establish the credibility of this study by providing in-depth analysis of corrective feedback provided by my supervisor in tracked changes, along with my notetaking and recording when meeting with my supervisor in person. These comprehensively help me to recall memories related to my personal struggles and coping strategies in writing critically. This also refers to data triangulation from different sources, as suggested by traditional scientific approaches. Furthermore, even though the findings of this autoethnographic study might not be generalised to a wider context – because they relate only to my personal struggles and strategies – they could be transferred to other relevant contexts. To deal with transferability, I provide "aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 277) of my personal experiences in writing my literature review in a critical way, bridging outsiders to comprehensively understand my cultural experiences in writing critically (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). Most importantly, such thick descriptions could strongly assist others with similar complexities, struggles, and backgrounds (Ellis et al., 2011) to transfer to their own context my personal struggles and coping strategies in writing critically. This potentially contributes to personal as well as social change for more diverse and wider communities (Ellis et al., 2011), particularly international PhD students across the globe. Moreover, I adopt a code-recode strategy to establish the study's dependability (validity and reliability). This strategy aims at presenting my personal "live experiences in a holistic way" (Kaur et al., 2021, p. 2304), to evoke readers' feelings based on their own context (Ellis et al., 2011).

Finally, I establish the confirmability of this study by demonstrating "readers with evidence of the decisions and choices made by the researcher regarding theoretical and methodological issues throughout the study" (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 3). The data obtained from the corrective feedback provided by my supervisor in tracked changes and my notetaking and recording when meeting with them in person were categorised in order to generate themes. In particular, I applied thematic analysis to provide meaningful data for

the readers. Following Bowen (2009), my thematic analysis dealt with:

1. Initial coding – repeated, in-depth reading; annotating tracked changes, notetaking, and recording; and then categorising data into themes;
2. Focused coding – rereading and recoding the initial codes to ensure that they are based on factual evidence on my personal experience of becoming a critical writer; and
3. Axial coding – elaborating among themes for the sake of establishing meaningful and powerful connection to my personal struggles and coping strategies in writing critically.

## RESULTS

Crossing my boundaries to becoming a critical writer has not been an easy job. I genuinely experience many complexities in writing critically. Interestingly, my supervisor's corrective feedback drove me comprehensively towards becoming a critical writer because they were very detailed and critical in commenting on every single sentence that I wrote. In this case, my supervisor's feedback absolutely forced me to improve my critical writing ability. She emphasised that I should cover several fundamental foci in designing my literature review, including showing differences and similarities between present and previous studies, contrasting and/or comparing findings of different studies, and identifying gaps not addressed by previous studies. These comments drove me to learn strategies (see Figure 1) to write my literature review in systematic and critical ways, as presented and discussed within the following themes.
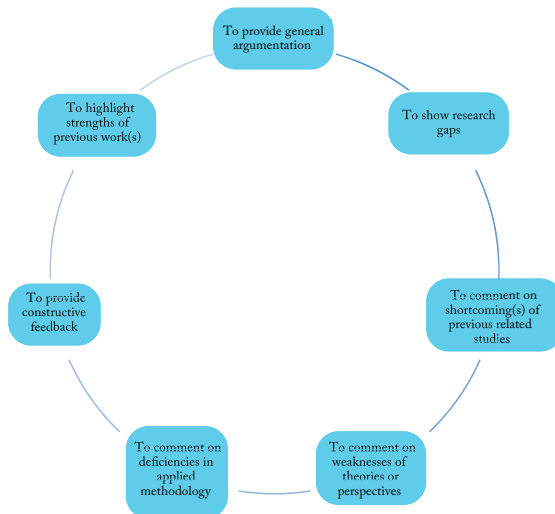


**Figure 1.** Strategies learned from my supervisor for being a critical writer

## To Provide General Argumentation on Previous Related Studies Being Discussed

The first strategy that I learned from my primary supervisor's feedback on designing my literature review is to provide general statements about the relevant literature being discussed. My supervisor supposes me to highlight the originality of the works without deeply criticising them. Following my primary supervisor's guidance, I have attempted to review existing literature to identify other scholars' general comments on the related previous studies. Based on my notetaking, I found several phrases fulfilling this purpose, as presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Illustrations of common phrases used to express general comments on the literature

| Phrases | Sources |
| --- | --- |
| Much has been written about this topic in the field of … | Porto (2014, p. 1) |
| Some studies conducted in … have investigated … | Therova (2022, p. 125) |
| There is an increasing amount of research on … | Yeh et al. 2021, p. 22) |
| To date, more research has focused on … | Altalouli (2021, p. 933) |
| [the] body of literature has shed much light on … | Lei (2019, p. 656) |
| Much of the research on … has highlighted … | Agrawal & McNair (2021, p. 951) |
| Alongside these developments there has grown a debate about the merits and demerits of … | Hussey & Smith (2008, p. 107) |
| There are a number of scholarly works highlighting the issues and difficulties of … | Chen et al. (2016, p. 47) |
| There is a growing literature documenting … | Aitchison et al. (2012, p. 435) |
| … a growing body of research has investigated … | Yang & Yin (2022, p. 2) |

## To Show Gaps That Have Not Been Covered by Previous Related Studies

My supervisor also repeatedly required me to identify gaps in my research areas that have not been covered by previous studies. She consistently reminded me that the fundamental reason to identify gaps is to ascertain the originality of my work. I personally struggle to deal with this issue, as it requires extensive reading of relevant literature. Acknowledging my struggles, my supervisor guided me in identifying and taking notes on examples from the literature that illustrate how scholars address such gaps. From these activities, I highlighted diverse expressions used by scholars to show existing gaps – some of which are illustrated in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Illustrations of common phrases used to demonstrate gaps in the literature

| Phrases | Sources |
|---|---|
| However, … has been and still is underrepresented. | Porto (2014, p. 1) |
| … little is known about … | Therova (2022, p. 126); Yang & Yin (2022, p. 2) |
| … we still have much to learn about …… we still understand relatively little about … | Aitchison et al. (2012, p. 435, p. 436) |
| Limited available literature on … focuses largely on ... | Ammigan et al. (2021,  p. 302) |
| However, previous research is more concerned with ... | Yang & Yin (2022, p. 2) |
| There is a need for it to be more visible in both research and discussions of … | Altalouli (2021, p. 933) |
| There is a paucity of research on … | Lei (2019, p. 656) |
| … So far, there have been no attempts to examine how … … No published study found provides information on … | My supervisor's suggestion |
| Fewer current studies on … have been found. | Yeh et al. (2021, p. 22) |
| The literature on X approaches has shown inconsistent findings regarding … | Cho et al. (2021, p. 1217) |

**To Comment on Shortcomings or Limitations of Previous Related Studies**

The next fundamental aspect that I must address in my critical literature review is commenting on the weaknesses of previous studies, as suggested by my supervisor. This could provide strong evidence to justify gaps being addressed in further studies, promoting the originality of my studies.  Recognising my difficulty, my supervisor has instructed me again to highlight common phrases used within the literature in expressing weaknesses of existing studies. Examples of such phrases are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Illustrations of common phrases used to show weaknesses of previous studies

| Phrases | Sources |
|---|---|
| • One limitation of this study was its primary focus on … | Lei (2019, p. 678) |
| • Another limitation of this study related to … | |
| • The approach tended to fragment portrayals of individual cases. | |
| … it [the study] is limited by the small number of … | My supervisor's suggestion |
| This study does not comprehensively discuss … | |
| … it [this study] has a couple of limitations. | Cho et al. (2021, p. 1230) |

**Table 3.** *(Continued)*

| Phrases | Sources |
|---|---|
| … its [the study] implications may be limited to other similar settings. | Kim et al. (2021, p. 244) |
| • Araujo (2011) provided a valuable synthesis of …, but limited such insights to only ... | Krsmanovic (2021, p. 4) |
| • Bista and Gaulee (2017) explored a variety of themes and patterns that occurred in the literature on … but limited their investigation only to theses and dissertations published in 2016. | |
| • Similarly, Zhang-Wu (2018) directed the focus of her review to … but restricted the inquiry to … | |
| One of the limitations of this study is a sample size. | Shahsavar & Kourepaz (2020, p. 9) |

## To Comment on Weaknesses of Theories or Perspectives

Following the above-mentioned themes, commenting on weaknesses of theories related to my study was also one of my supervisor's greatest demands. In this case, I was supposed to criticise any theories or arguments that relate to my study. As usual, my supervisor requires me to list several phrases that can be utilised in demonstrating the weaknesses of theories or perspectives, as displayed in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Illustrations of common phrases used to comment on limitations of a theory or argument

| Phrases | Sources |
|---|---|
| Although … is the vital part in …, it has some shortcomings in that it only examines …. Besides, the reliability of … has not been fully established. | Shahsavar & Kourepaz (2020, p. 9) |
| Let us be clear, we are not arguing that … should be abandoned, only that there are serious faults with current ideas about their use. | Hussey & Smith (2003, p. 359) |
| … such … are of questionable value even at … | Hussey & Smith (2002, p. 225) |
| …. is dismissed for social scientific standards as being insufficiently rigorous, theoretical, and analytical, and too aesthetic, emotional, and therapeutic | Ellis et al. (2011, p. 283) |
| • … most conventional ethnographic work neglects to examine the fundamental nature of the phenomena being studied. | Hammersley (2019, p. 579) |
| • … conventional ethnographic work lacks appropriate rigour … | Hammersley (2019, p. 580) |

**Table 4.** *(Continued)*

| Phrases | Sources |
| --- | --- |
| • The concept seemingly suffers to suggest a comprehensive explanation for … | My supervisor's corrective feedback |
| • This perspective seemingly overlooks the negative impacts of … | |
| • One of the fundamental negative sides of this theory is that … | |
| • The model is strongly criticised due to the lack of practical and the theoretical implications. | |
| • The practicality of this strategy is truly questionable. | |
| this study lacks clarity regarding the indicators used in determining … | Sukirman & Linse (2024, p. 231) |

## To Comment on Deficiencies in Applied Methodology or Research Designs

What follows is a critique of deficiencies in research methodology. In this case, I am supposed to provide a brief description of the reason(s) for my choice of research methodology. The description should cover two fundamental areas: the research methodology's strengths and its weaknesses. As suggested by my supervisor, there are different ways to express deficiencies in applied methodology or research design (see Table 5 for illustrations).

**Table 5.** Illustrations of common phrases used to comment on limitations of research methodology or research designs

| Phrases | Sources |
| --- | --- |
| • The methods stated previously suffer from several notable shortages. | My primary supervisor's suggestions |
| • Some documented studies have reported that the research design is unable to … | |
| • The practicality and applicability of the designs are questioned by some scholars. | |
| • Many studies have proved that the strategy of … fails to demonstrate …. For instance, … reports that …. | |
| • Potential biases of this design might negatively affect the validity of obtained data. | |
| • The subjectivity of data analysis has raised some inquiries. | |
| • The results of the analysis suffer from the data trustworthiness. | |
| • Another limitation of this study related to its analytical approach that prioritised issues over cases. | |

## To Recommend Constructive Feedback

It would be unfair to offer criticism of research gaps, previous related studies, theories, arguments, or research methods/designs without recommendations and constructive feedback. Following the aforementioned strategies, several essential phrases can be utilised to provide constructive feedback, as shown in Table 6.

**Table 6.** Illustrations of common phrases used to provide constructive feedback

| Phrases | Sources |
| --- | --- |
| To make them applicable and useful, they need to specify knowledge, understanding, skills and abilities, rather than simple behavioural responses, and to indicate the quality or standard of these … | Hussey & Smith (2002, p. 225) |
| • This study should be more meaningful if the researcher can also explore … | My supervisor's corrective feedback |
| • Involving cross-national participants will make this study more convincing. | |
| • The limitation of the previous studies can truly be addressed by applying multiple data collection techniques. | |
| • This experimental study would be more powerful with large randomised controlled trials. | |
| • Considering the practicality and applicability, this study should provide a clear guidance how to …. | |
| • Other types of data such as those from students and faculty management should also be considered in order to provide more comprehensive view of the issue. | |

## To Highlight Strengths of Previous Work

The last strategy learnt from my supervisor's corrective feedback is to highlight the strengths of previous works, with the aim of balancing my critical evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of previous studies in my literature review. My supervisor strongly advises that being critical in carrying out a literature review should focus not only on the weaknesses, but also on the strengths of previous studies. Like other above-mentioned strategies, some common phrases can be used in highlighting the strengths of previous studies, as demonstrated in Table 7.

**Table 7.** Illustrations of common phrases used to highlight the strengths of previous studies

| Phrases | Sources |
| --- | --- |
| Bruner's thesis has implications for the use of learning outcomes at the various levels or stages within education. | Hussey & Smith (2003, p. 362) |
| The findings of this study add to the growing body of research on … | Lei (2019, p. 679) |
| • This fascinating finding offers a valuable contribution with regard to …<br>• This comprehensive analysis makes a powerful description of …<br>• This wide-ranging survey is surely valuable for our understanding of …<br>• The findings provide a new understanding of how … | My supervisor's corrective feedback |
| In my opinion, all of these examples, as different as they are, have something important to offer. They are the sharing of new and unique knowledge that is useful and applicable in a broader context. | Wall (2006, p. 157) |

## DISCUSSION

The journey to becoming a critical writer is fraught with complexity, as evidenced by my personal experience. Like many international students (Padlee et al., 2020; Therova, 2022; Jiang et al., 2025; Li et al., 2025; Lin et al., 2025), I faced significant challenges in writing critically (Lin et al., 2025), including difficulty using evidence to support or challenge arguments (Safari & Ahmadi, 2024), lack of critical voice (Shahsavar & Kourepaz, 2020), and difficulty in deciphering corrective feedback from supervisors (Bailey et al., 2015). These challenges are not unique to me, but are widely reported in the academic community, suggesting universal difficulties in the transition from descriptive to critical writing.

The role of supervisor feedback in overcoming these challenges cannot be overstated. My experiences align with the findings of Aitchison et al. (2012) and Hey-Cunningham et al. (2021), who argued that supervisor feedback serves as a key pedagogical instrument for improving students' academic writing competence (de Caux & Pretorius, 2024). My supervisor's detailed and critical feedback on every sentence I wrote was instrumental in encouraging me to improve my critical writing skills. This is in line with Denney and Tewksbury's (2013) emphasis on the importance of including fundamental focuses in designing a literature review, such as pointing out differences and similarities between current and previous studies, comparing findings from different studies, and identifying gaps that have not been addressed by previous studies. These strategies, guided by my supervisor's feedback, have been key in transforming my approach to academic writing.

One of the first strategies I learned is to provide a general statement about the relevant literature. This is in line with Denney and Tewksbury (2013, p. 220), who suggest "first and foremost, literature reviews include a comprehensive overview of a general topic". The aim is to introduce key issues and/or theories related to my study. In this case, I am supposed to

show the originality of the works without deeply criticising them (Bailey et al., 2015). The second strategy is to identify gaps to ensure the novelty of the work – not simply to copy others' work (Ridley, 2008; Denney & Tewksbury, 2013). Pointing out these gaps requires critical thinking and critical writing skills, as researchers need to make "connections between current issues and previous findings on the same topic" (Shahsavar & Kourepaz, 2020, p. 2); see also Mallet (2004). I struggled with this because I had to read more relevant articles to "identify areas that were not yet explored" (Ridley, 2008, p. 43).

The third strategy I learned from my supervisor is to comment on the shortcomings of the existing studies. Identifying such drawbacks is aimed at highlighting how shortcomings within previous studies generate gaps for later studies (Ridley, 2008; Shahsavar & Kourepaz, 2020). In addition, my supervisor emphasised that another reason to show shortcomings in previous research was to assist me "in better forming the argument for why further research is needed" (Denney & Tewksbury, 2013, p. 219). Commenting on shortcomings in previous studies is tricky for me, as it is for other scholars (Chen et al., 2016). This requires a great deal of knowledge and understanding in the field to critique the context, forcing me to read more literature. Without such knowledge and understanding, researchers will have difficulty finding weaknesses in previous studies, as reported by Shahsavar and Kourepaz (2020). This is supported by the statement of Gall et al. (1996), as cited in Randolph (2009, p. 11), that one of the most problematic issues experienced by scholars in writing a literature review is the inability to "consider conflicting findings and alternative interpretations in synthesizing quantitative literature". Interestingly, to help me find these drawbacks, my supervisor asked me to analyse research outcomes, research methods, theoretical frameworks, and implications – referred to focus characteristics within Cooper's (1988) Taxonomy of Literature Reviews.

Critiquing a theory or perspective is another important aspect of critical writing. As Shahsavar and Kourepaz (2020, p. 2) note, a literature review "should be prepared and organised critically to compare and contrast different theories and ideas". The primary purpose of commenting on a theory is to "demonstrate a current awareness of theory and the use of concepts" (Jesson & Lacey, 2006, p. 145), as well as to address "the usefulness of a theory" (Gottfredson, 1983, p. 206). Critiquing a theory or argument can help us understand the completeness, accuracy, and clarity of the theory (Gottfredson, 1983). As my supervisor reminded me, understanding the weaknesses of a theory or argument can prevent researchers from accepting "misleading" concepts that could negatively impact research findings. Following the above-mentioned strategies, critiquing the methodology or research design is another critical strategy I learned. My supervisor emphasised the importance of evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the chosen methodology to ensure the trustworthiness of the data and minimise bias. This task was challenging because it required a deep understanding of the research design and its practical implications. However, it was also one of the most rewarding aspects of my academic development, as it allowed me to contribute to the rigour and quality of the research.

Furthermore, my supervisor consistently emphasised the importance of providing constructive feedback when critiquing previous work. As Trimmer and Guest (2020, p. 11648) noted, constructive feedback is essential to maintaining rigor and quality in scholarly output. This approach not only ensures the credibility of the research but also

fosters a culture of continuous improvement within the academic community. Finally, my supervisor suggested balancing the critique by highlighting the strengths of previous studies. This approach ensures that the critical writing remains objective and respectful of existing scholarly work (Lim & Bowman, 2024). By acknowledging the contributions of previous research, I was able to provide a more balanced and nuanced critique, which strengthened the overall quality of my writing.

Taken together, the issues emerging from the findings relate specifically to strategies learned from my supervisor in the process of designing my critical literature review. Such strategies have comprehensively helped me to transform my paradigms from descriptive to critical writing. I personally find that, compared to other strategies (Jesson & Lacey, 2006; Ridley, 2008; Randolph, 2009; Denney & Tewksbury, 2013), the approaches I have developed from my supervisor's corrective feedback is very practical and applicable, positively reforming my critical writing style. Furthermore, these strategies have become easier for me to apply through the use of common phrases – either from my supervisor or from previous studies – utilised in critical writing. The examples displayed in the tables above greatly helped me to develop my critical writing skills because I can easily pick them up in my writing, helping me to cross boundaries to become a critical writer. I feel compelled to share these valuable experiences because I strongly believe that they might help others who share similar struggles, background, and complexities in crossing their own boundaries to becoming critical writers.

## CONCLUSION

This autoethnographic study aims at gaining a better understanding of my personal experiences in crossing my boundaries to becoming a critical writer while producing my literature review. To gain more meaningful data, I have analysed deeply my supervisor's corrective feedback in the form of tracked changes, notetaking, and recording, in order to generate "thick descriptions" of critical writing strategies that I learned from the feedback. Such descriptions might help outsiders to gain a better understanding of my personal struggles and coping strategies in learning to write critically. The findings clearly indicate seven strategies for becoming a critical writer which I learned from my supervisor's corrective feedback while developing my literature review. The first strategy relates to providing general comments on the literature with the aim of pointing readers towards the issues being discussed in the section. The second strategy is to demonstrate what research gaps the present study addresses. In this case, it is necessary to review previous studies widely, highlighting their similarities and differences in order to identify gaps that have not been addressed by previous studies. The next strategy deals with highlighting the limitations of previous related studies, followed by commenting on the weaknesses of theories/ perspectives, stating the deficiencies of research methods, offering recommendations and constructive feedback, and highlighting the strengths of previous works. Interestingly, the aforementioned strategies are accompanied by examples of common phrases used by scholars, and suggested by my supervisor to demonstrate critical writing skills. Such illustrations comprehensively helped me to develop the critical literature review.

Although this study focuses on my personal experience, this study highlights the important role of supervisor feedback in helping international PhD students, especially those from non-native English-speaking backgrounds, develop critical writing skills. It suggests that supervisors should provide detailed and constructive feedback, while educational institutions should provide appropriate training programmes and resources, such as writing centres and peer mentoring programmes, to support students in the transition from descriptive to critical writing. Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of early exposure to critical writing in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, especially in educational systems that place a high emphasis on rote learning. By integrating cultural and linguistic sensitivity into feedback practices, universities can create more inclusive environments that address the unique challenges faced by international students. This study also demonstrates the value of autoethnography as a reflection tool, encouraging future research to explore other aspects of the PhD journey, such as proposal writing or fieldwork, through personal narratives. Then, it is hoped that this study can inspire others to cross their boundaries to become critical writers by applying the strategies that I learned from my supervisor; these are very practical and applicable compared to strategies proposed in other studies.

This study provides seven practical strategies for writing a critical literature review, complete with examples of commonly used academic phrases, making it a valuable resource for international students and novice researchers. It highlights the specific challenges faced by students from non-native English-speaking countries, providing insight into how early educational experiences shape academic skills. Using autoethnography, the study connects personal struggles to broader cultural and structural issues, advancing this method as a means of exploring individual experiences in academia. The findings bridge the gap between theory and practice, providing actionable advice for students while advocating for more inclusive higher education policies. Ultimately, the study encourages reflective practice among PhD students, building resilience and self-awareness, and calling for systemic change to better support international students in Western academic institutions.

Due to practical constraints, this study cannot provide a comprehensive review of my personal experiences in writing all of the chapters of my thesis. In this matter, this study has examined only my personal experience of writing a critical literature review. To address this limitation, future research could shed more light on others' experiences in order to share their approaches to crossing personal boundaries to writing a good abstract, introduction, research method, findings, and discussion section. Such studies will be valuable for other international students and/or early career researchers to tackle their complexities in order to write critically. Furthermore, with regard to research method, these findings are less generalisable to a wider context because I analyse purely my personal experiences, and this could raise questions about subjectivity – and some scholars have made this criticism. Regardless of the ungeneralisable, the values shared in this study can be transferred to similar contexts and backgrounds as a bridging tool to cross boundaries to become a critical writer.

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