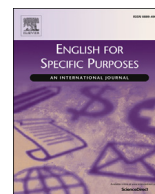




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From the Editors

## Paraphrasing to transform knowledge in advanced graduate student writing

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## ABSTRACT

Based on one's comprehension and interpretation of the original text, paraphrasing goes beyond a faithful account of the source text. Differing from previous research which has mostly focused on students' re-use of the source text, this study explores whether and how students paraphrase to express their own views. We examined 192 paraphrases identified by 18 advanced graduate students in their academic papers across disciplines at a North American university. Analyses of students' writing, their sources, and their own accounts present an exposition of writers' thinking and processes of paraphrasing featuring various types of linguistic adaptations and content recontextualization. The study suggests that paraphrasing by these advanced graduate students is a process of smoothly integrating the source information into the new text by syntactically restructuring, interpreting and recounting only the source text with relevance to the new text. During the process, the writer sometimes paraphrases to incorporate information in the immediate source text with that gained from prior readings.

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## 1. Introduction

Students, even advanced graduates, find it challenging to develop the intertextual skill of paraphrasing (e.g., Yamada, 2003). In this paper, paraphrasing is defined as recontextualizing source information in one's own writing with a credit to the original author. By restating and mixing source text with one's own, paraphrasing provides a window on how writers mediate or integrate their own and others' voices. To explore how graduate students paraphrase in the context of writing an academic paper, the present study analyzed 192 paraphrases identified by 18 graduate students (6 PhD and 12 Master's) in their academic papers and the student writers' reflections on their paraphrasing practices. Graduate students have been chosen for the study because they are generally expected (more than undergraduates) to advance knowledge in disciplinary writing. The participants were advanced graduate students as they were enrolled in various programs at a prestigious North American research university as either native English speakers or speakers of other first languages who had obtained high scores from standardized English proficiency tests. To situate the study in the context of existing literature, we will first

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review definitions of and research on paraphrasing (a) as a faithful recast of the original text and (b) as an evaluation of the source information.

### 1.1. Paraphrasing as a faithful recast of the original text

There is no consensus on what constitutes a good paraphrase (Shi, 2012), though many would agree that paraphrasing is recasting the source text accurately with a credit to the original author. Such a definition, based on linguistic rephrasing to preserve meaning, suggests that a paraphrase should be “exactly logically equivalent” (Bhagat & Hovy, 2013, p. 471), but not containing the original vocabulary and sentence structure (e.g., Oshima & Hogue, 1999). The understanding of paraphrasing as a faithful account of the source text using a different wording leads to a typology of paraphrasing strategies based upon various formal linguistic changes (e.g., Barrón-Cedeño, Vila, Martí, & Rosso, 2013) or an examination of paraphrasing based on percentage/amount of revisions (e.g., Keck, 2006, 2010).

With a focus on the linguistic attributes or degree/percentage of text re-use in paraphrasing, several researchers have conducted questionnaire surveys to explore respondents’ understandings of appropriate and inappropriate paraphrasing (e.g., unattributed paraphrasing or insufficient paraphrasing with long strings of words copied) by asking students and instructors to compare source sentences and paraphrasing scenarios with various proportions of words re-used either with or without documentation of the source in first language (L1) (Julliard, 1994; Roig, 1997, 2001) or second language (L2) contexts (e.g., Chandrasegaran, 2000; Deckert, 1993; Hu & Lei, 2012; Lei & Hu, 2014; Pennycook, 1994; Sun, 2009). Findings demonstrate disagreement over the extent to which the original text needs to be modified to avoid plagiarism among not only students (Chandrasegaran, 2000; Deckert, 1993; Hu & Lei, 2012; Roig, 1997, 1999; Sun, 2009), but also instructors (Julliard, 1994; Lei & Hu, 2014; Pennycook, 1994; Roig, 2001). Many students believe that language can be re-used for accuracy (Sun, 2009), and that it is acceptable either to paraphrase without acknowledging the source (Chandrasegaran, 2000; Deckert, 1993; Hu & Lei, 2012), or to appropriate long strings of words from a source text without quotation marks as long as the original author receives credit (Deckert, 1993; Roig, 1997). In comparison, the participating instructors, while mostly perceiving unacknowledged copying as unacceptable, revealed divergent views about plagiaristic practice when evaluating passages containing some unacknowledged copying or unattributed paraphrasing (Lei & Hu, 2014; Pennycook, 1994).

Also focusing on the amount of textual borrowing and paraphrasing strategies, another group of researchers has analyzed strings of words which are traceable to source texts in the writing of undergraduates (Campbell, 1990; Keck, 2006, 2010, 2014; Shi, 2004), graduates (Pecorari, 2003), and scholars (Sun, 2013; Sun & Yang, 2015). Researchers have observed that students, especially undergraduates, tend to rely closely on the original wordings of the source text in their paraphrasing attempts (Campbell, 1990; Keck, 2006, 2014; Shi, 2004). While students are assumed to rely on the source text because of their limited writing experience and language proficiency, scholars have been noted to conduct textual borrowing frequently when co-authoring (Sun, 2013), or citing from their own previous publications (Sun & Yang, 2015). In addition, students and scholars in science and applied sciences have also been found to use more words verbatim from sources than their peers in humanities and social sciences (e.g., Shi, 2012; Sun, 2013).

The empirical evidence of how some students and scholars rely on the original language in their attempts at paraphrasing suggests that it is difficult to avoid re-using the original words while trying to provide a faithful account of the propositional content. The question of how many different ways one can say the same information without using the original words (Pecorari & Shaw, 2012) directs our attention to how paraphrasing is based on one’s understanding of the source text. In fact, researchers have found that writers’ comprehension of the source information (based on text readability or vocabulary difficulty and syntax complexity) directly affects their amount of textual borrowing in paraphrasing (Roig, 1999, 2001; Sun, 2012). The reliance on comprehension of the source text implies that paraphrasing involves one’s own interpretation and evaluation of the original source information.

### 1.2. Paraphrasing as an interpretation and evaluation of source information

In academic writing, the writer needs to paraphrase to reconceptualize the source text coherently with his or her own authorial intentions. By adding one’s own authorial intention and persuasive power, paraphrasing, to a certain extent, “almost invariably demands a refraction or distortion of the original meaning” (Orellana & Reynolds, 2008, p. 61). This line of argument suggests that paraphrasing, when integrated with one’s own authorial intention, is charged with the function of *knowledge transforming* as opposed to *knowledge telling* (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1987). According to Scardamalia and Bereiter (1987), there are two different writing models about how knowledge is brought into writing. Compared with knowledge telling, which is a way that immature writers commonly generate text by telling what they know about the topic – often by focusing “at the level of item-by-item text generation” (p. 164) – knowledge transforming is an expert strategy to develop thought or “transform knowledge that is not so assembled into coherent and effective form” (p. 171). Viewed from the perspective of knowledge transforming, paraphrasing is performed with a goal to generate new understanding in order to recontextualize the source information in the new text. This process resembles that of textual transformation which, as Spivey (1990, p. 256) pointed out, “entails organizing, selecting, and connecting” through reading and writing.

Evidence of paraphrasing as knowledge transforming has been illustrated by Yamada (2003), based on an analysis of exemplary paraphrases on ten North American college websites on plagiarism. Good paraphrasing, as Yamada (2003) has observed, involves one’s inferential thinking by making a conclusion based on statements/premises or by noticing similarities

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