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Students' writing from sources for academic purposes: A synthesis of recent research

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ABSTRACT

Educators have long recognized that a major challenge for students learning to write for academic purposes is developing the ability to integrate source material effectively and appropriately into written compositions. To identify and evaluate the current state of empirical evidence, we conducted a systematic synthesis of the published research that has investigated writing from sources systematically from a variety of analytic perspectives, in first and second languages, and in diverse contexts internationally including students in universities, colleges, and secondary schools. Five general claims emerged across our analyses of 69 empirical studies published in refereed journals or books in English from 1993 to 2013. Each claim has firm empirical support but each also warrants further research and refinement: (1) students experience difficulties with, but develop certain strategies to deal with, the complex processes of writing from sources; (2) prior knowledge and experience influence students' performance in writing from sources; (3) differences may appear between L1 and L2 students in their understanding and uses of sources in writing; (4) performance in tasks that involve writing from sources varies by task conditions and types of texts written and read; and (5) instruction can help students improve their uses of sources in their writing.

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Educators around the world would agree that learning to write effectively from sources is a fundamental academic literacy skill normally acquired during secondary and higher education. It is a major learning outcome from university studies (Beach, Newell, & VanDerHeide, 2016; Collis & Biggs, 1983; Haswell, 2000; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2011). Writing from sources is also a process of demonstrating the acquisition of new knowledge, a means of establishing membership and identity within academic discourse communities, and a common requirement for course papers and tests (Hirvela, 2011; Hood, 2008; Ivanic, 1998, 2004; Leki, 2007; Lillis & Curry, 2010; Melzer, 2009; Sternglass, 1997; Tardy, 2009). There is increasing evidence that writing effectively from sources is a requisite, threshold ability that students need in order to be able to engage proficiently in academic studies in a second or an additional language (Cumming, 2013, 2014; Cumming et al., 2005; Gentil, 2011; Huang, 2010; Macqueen, 2012; Raymond & Parks, 2002; Rea-Dickins, Kiely, & Yu, 2007; Rosenfeld, Leung, & Oltman, 2001). At the same time, researchers have long acknowledged that knowing how to write effectively from sources is not only a challenge for

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students to learn but also for instructors to know how best to teach (Graham & Perin, 2007; Nelson, 2008; Pecorari & Petric, 2014).

Reviewing relevant research, and asserting its integral importance for language learning and teaching, Grabe and Zhang (2013, p. 9) defined writing from sources as follows:

Learning to write from textual sources (e.g., integrating complementary sources of information, interpreting conceptually difficult information) is a challenging skill that even native speaking students have to work hard to master ... Tasks that require reading/writing integration, such as summarizing, synthesizing information, critically responding to text input, or writing a research paper, require a great deal of practice.

Other recent reviews by experts such as Flowerdew and Li (2007), Pecorari (2016), and Pecorari and Petric (2014) have observed that although educators have for several decades (e.g., Pennycook, 1996) questioned the “received view of plagiarism as a transgressive act” (Pecorari & Petric, 2014, p. 269), most of the relevant published research has analyzed students’ writing from sources as inadequately or inappropriately developed forms of “intertextuality” (Bazerman, 2004; Chandrasoma, Thompson, & Pennycook, 2004; Ivanic, 1998), “textual borrowing” (Belcher & Hirvela, 2001; Currie, 1998; Shi, 2010), or “patchwriting” (Howard, 1999) that may arise inadvertently from lack of awareness of discourse, cultural, or genre conventions or limited linguistic or rhetorical abilities rather than intentionally as deceit in respect to institutional policies or academic standards.

Given the continuing interest in and importance of this topic from diverse perspectives, the growing accumulation of empirical studies, and ongoing debates about how to conceptualize writing from sources, we decided it was time to synthesize the available research systematically to try to establish what it has revealed collectively about how students actually develop abilities to write from sources in academic settings. Rather than engaging in further polemics about terminology or plagiarism or trying to duplicate the reviews based on experts’ impressions that have already appeared, we opted to follow principles of research synthesis to identify, analyze, and evaluate the existing corpus of published research and its collective results. We wanted to find out what is known from valid, reliable empirical research about students developing abilities to write from sources in academic contexts. Accordingly, we limited our focus to studies of learning, development, and instruction in educational settings rather than attempting to address the many studies that have also been done in the related, but distinctly different, contexts of language or writing tests (e.g., see Deane, 2011; Yu, 2013), workplaces (e.g., see Beaufort, 2006; Henry, 2000), or publication for professional purposes (after completion of educational programs) (e.g., see K. Hyland, 2015; Lillis & Curry, 2010).

1. Method

To guide our inquiry and selection and interpretations of research publications, we formulated a central research question: How do students develop abilities to write papers from sources for academic purposes in instructional contexts?

We followed conventional procedures for research synthesis specified by Cooper, Hedges and Valentine (2009) and Norris and Ortega (2006). At the outset, we were not certain if we would find sufficient results for a full meta-analysis (involving statistical syntheses of primary results). While progressing in the study, we realized that we would need to be satisfied with a research synthesis that is more of a systematic content analysis rather than a full meta-analysis. That is, we realized that trying to compile and compare results statistically was neither logical nor feasible because the extant research about writing from sources entails too many diverse educational contexts and populations; different purposes, research designs, languages of instruction and learning, and indicators of achievement; as well as research and reporting of varying quality (cf. Plonsky & Oswald, 2014; Plonsky, 2014). Circumscribing the scope and diversity of the research, though, may be one of our major findings, as observed below.

After agreeing on our guiding research question, the second and third authors of this article conducted systematic searches of the computer data bases in the University of Toronto library to identify research published between 1993 (when considerable research on the topic began to emerge) and 2013 (one year before the end of our project funding in 2014). The databases consulted were Canadian Business and Current Affairs Education, Education Resources Information Center, FRANCIS, Linguistics and Language Behaviour Abstracts, Modern Language Association International, ProQuest Educational Journals, PsycINFO, and Scholars’ Portal. Five categories of keywords were used for the searches: (1) “academic” and “writ*” or “compos*”, (2) “cit*”, “paraphras*”, “quot*” or “summar*”, (3) “discourse synthesis”, “intertextual*”, “source material”, “textual borrowing”, “use of source text” or “writing from sources”, (4) “college” or “universit*” and “high school” or “secondary school”, and (5) “learn*”. In the first search, we used keyword combinations of categories 1, 2, and 4. For example, one of the combinations was “academic” and “writ*” or “compos*” and “cit*” and “college” or “universit*”. For the second search, we used the combinations of keywords in category 3, the terms observed frequently in the studies found in the first search and the keywords in category 4. Since we decided to focus on studies of students’ learning and development, the keyword “learn*” was added to the previous two searches in the third inquiry. These keywords permitted coverage of either American or British spelling while allowing us to identify studies with a primary focus on writing from sources in academic settings. The search results elicited some studies that examined reading to write, a preliminary crucial step in writing from sources, although reading per se was not a primary focus of our inquiry (e.g., Ascención Delaney, 2008; Boscolo, Ariasi, Del Favero, & Ballarin, 2011; Segev-Miller, 2004; Wolfe, 2002).

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