



The development of source use by international postgraduate students



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ABSTRACT

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It is widely accepted that learning to use sources is difficult, especially for international postgraduate students, but to date, few longitudinal studies have been carried out in this area. Therefore, this two-year UK-based study aims to help fill this gap by examining the source use of three Chinese postgraduate students of business, technology and public relations. Data was gathered over four iterations through a Pre-Master's EAP programme and subsequent Master's degree, in order to investigate the development of source use on both EAP and Master's programmes. Four features of source use in the assignments – citation, paraphrasing, reporting verbs and attribution – were analysed over the period. Analysis of the results shows that participants started at different points, progressed differently, and did not all reach a competent level. Participants also developed some individual strategies in their source use, such as relying on a small range of features, over-citation and copying sections of attributed text, especially internet sources. The findings offer an insight into student practices and suggest the need for greater and more continuous pedagogical support to enable students to achieve competence in source use.

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1. Introduction

This study will focus on the development of source use by international students¹ at postgraduate level, in terms of citation, paraphrase, use of reporting verbs and attribution. To do so, firstly I will draw on influential published work in these four areas for definitions and grounding, before exploring them in more depth. Citation is defined in this study as the act of putting an authorial reference into text, using the distinction from Swales (1990) between 'integral citation' (author in sentence, usually followed by a reporting verb) which has the function of drawing more attention to the author; and 'non-integral citation' (author usually in brackets at the end of cited information, following the Harvard or APA system) which draws more attention to the author's research. The term 'paraphrase' is defined as changing the words of an original text into the writer's own words, using the categories of attempts to paraphrase devised by Keck (2006) of near copy (identical to source, except for one or two changes), minor revision (incorporating a few lexical changes), moderate revision (incorporating several lexical changes) and substantial revision (incorporating many lexical and syntactic changes). Reporting verbs are defined as verbs used with integral citation, either evaluative (which indicate the writer's position relative to the source, such as 'argue' or 'claim') or non-evaluative (which indicate the writer's neutrality to the research, such as 'state' or 'report') (Hyland, 2004; Swales, 1990; Thompson & Ye, 1991). Attribution is defined as the appropriate acknowledgement of words and

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¹ The term 'international students' is used in this study to mean students from countries outside the UK, who are non-native speakers of English. This is in order to focus the research on the predominant group of international students who both come from a different educational culture, and do not have English as a first language.

ideas to authors (East, 2005; Sutherland-Smith, 2008) and includes making a distinction between the writer's own words, and the words of others, through quotation formatting.

The literature on citation is influential in source use pedagogy; for example, many tutors use the Creating a Research Space (CARS) model (Swales, 1990), to introduce student writers to why and how to use citation. Building on this, Swales and Feak (2004, pp. 251–2) emphasise some of the important functions of citation as acknowledging an author's intellectual property, giving authority to a writer's arguments and creating the writer's niche. Research by Harwood (2009) draws attention to complexities in citation, as his expert informants reported up to eleven different functions of citation and both inter- and intra-disciplinary differences. Furthermore, research into student problems with citation has looked at how overcoming these difficulties can gradually lead to an understanding of academic writing as the construction of knowledge (Shi, 2010; Spack, 1997). From these studies, it can be seen that understanding how and why to cite takes time and represents a challenge for novice student writers.

Paraphrasing is the main means through which writers express the ideas of other authors, and therefore is one of the most important language issues in academic writing for international students (Chatterjee, 2007; Flowerdew & Li, 2007; Keck, 2006). Research by Schmitt (2005) demonstrates the impact of small vocabulary size on non-native speaker students' ability to read source material and write extended texts; similarly, Ridley (2006) argues that admitting international students with lower IELTS scores to English-medium universities leads to greater needs for support with writing. Furthermore, Keck (2006) gives some evidence that non-native speakers are more likely to use a strategy of near copying and less likely to achieve a substantial paraphrase of source text, compared to native speakers. Many studies have shown that when international students attempt to follow the common instruction 'use your own words', they experience difficulty because of a lack of vocabulary or lack of a sense that they own words in English (Angéilil-Carter, 2000; McGowan, 2005; Pennycook, 1996; Sutherland-Smith, 2008). It has been suggested that when checking assignments, markers focus more on the copying of words, rather than ideas (Angéilil-Carter, 2000). As argued by Introna and Hayes (2004), one of the consequences of the current widespread use of text-matching software, such as Turnitin, to check student work is that tutors pay more attention to the words students use. This can mean international students with weak linguistic skills may have high matches and thus face accusations of plagiarism. Poor attempts at paraphrasing are often called patchwriting, a term defined by Howard (1993, p. 233) as 'copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one-for-one synonym-substitutes'. Her analysis reveals that patchwriting can be an expected stage of development of source use, when students do not know how to voice their views clearly, or do not know enough about a subject to do so (Howard, 1995).

It has been reported that international students tend to use a small range of reporting verbs (Thompson & Ye, 1991), which can limit their ability to engage with research and create arguments. They may also lack awareness of disciplinary differences related to reporting verbs. In the analysis of disciplinary differences by Hyland (1999), marketing and sociology were found to use verbs such as 'argue' and 'suggest' most frequently, while electronic engineering used 'propose' and 'use' most frequently. This means international students need to develop an understanding of the appropriate reporting verbs to use with their disciplines.

Problems with international students' attribution of sources have been given a lot of attention in recent studies (Bloch, 2001; Braine, 2002; Pecorari, 2003; Sutherland-Smith, 2008). Chanock (2008) attempts to understand the reasons behind students' attribution of plagiarised text, where copied text is cited as a paraphrase, not a quotation. She concludes that this practice stems from a student's monologic understanding of argument in communicating information they have read into their writing, while university regulations to show quotation formatting come from a dialogic view of knowledge in which the different textual contributions to writers' arguments are shown. In a study of attribution practices by Lee (2010), lower graded essays by East Asian students were found to contain either too much or too little attribution, with a lack of awareness of how to attribute and retain an authorial voice. Furthermore, East (2005) discusses the problems of not knowing how and why to attribute sources due to differences according to context, culture and knowledge; for example, the decision about whether an idea is common knowledge depends on the writer's familiarity with sources on the topic.

The problems related to source use can be particularly severe for international postgraduate students. There is great pressure to adapt to new rules of source use within a short space of time (McGowan, 2005), and with the intensity of focus on some subjects, little time available on their courses for skills teaching (Murray & Kirton, 2006). This may mean international students do not gain effective skills to use sources appropriately. Behrens' (2010) report of student complaints to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator indicated that a disproportionate number (39%) of complaints regarding plagiarism come from international postgraduate students. According to Hall and Sung (2009), tutors also complain that international postgraduate students are increasing their workload, through their needs for help with cultural and linguistic issues in their source use.

The number of international postgraduate students in UK HE is growing, and the largest number continues to be Chinese (Universities UK, 2011). It is known that Chinese students in Anglophone settings may struggle with source use (Hall & Sung, 2009; Holmes, 2004; Liao & Tseng, 2010; Shi, 2010), which may be especially due to the adaptation they need to make to the academic conventions in their new context (Currie, 1998; Hayes & Introna, 2005; Pilcher, 2006). They may also struggle with a different style of learning and teaching. The UK educational culture promotes independent learning which many international students, such as Chinese, may be unaccustomed to. For example, a Chinese participant in the study by Pilcher (2006) was used to tutors being always available to consult in China, in contrast to their limited availability in the UK. McGowan and Lightbody (2008) also draw attention to the abstract way in which referencing is usually taught in Anglophone institutes, through a presentation of rules and then an expectation that students can apply them independently. This may contrast with the teaching of more concrete rules and examples to follow, commonly provided in China.

Learning about source use has become an integral part of EAP teaching. It now appears more specifically in EAP textbooks, such as in Bailey (2011) under the heading 'Avoiding plagiarism'. Some recent EAP studies have focused on plagiarism, for example, in

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