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Copying, paraphrasing, and academic writing development: A re-examination of L1 and L2 summarization practices

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Abstract

Recently, a number of scholars (e.g., Leask, 2006; Liu, 2005) have raised concerns about the discourse of plagiarism, arguing that an emphasis on cultural difference has served to reinforce stereotypes of particular L2 groups and perpetuate deficit views of L2 learners. In an effort to address these concerns, the present study revisits Keck's own (2006) comparison of L1 and L2 summarization practices and investigates (1) why both L1 and L2 writers might choose to copy or Paraphrase source text language while composing a written summary and (2) whether the strategy use of novice writers differed from that of their more experienced peers. The study found that L1 and L2 writers identified many of the same excerpts to include in their summaries, excerpts which allowed them to introduce the problem in focus and to explain the author's thesis. The study also found that the higher rate of copying observed for the L2 group as a whole could be explained by a small number of students who copied source text language extensively. In both the L1 and L2 groups, novice writers tended to rely more on source text excerpts than their more experienced peers.

Keywords: Summary-writing; Paraphrasing; Plagiarism; Textual borrowing

Introduction

Because reading plays such a major role in advanced academic writing tasks, educators have become increasingly concerned with the ways in which developing writers attempt to integrate source texts into their writing. This concern has lead to a number of recent investigations of student textual borrowing strategies, or instances in which students select a particular excerpt from a source text and either copy the excerpt exactly, or Paraphrase the excerpt by making changes to lexis and syntactic structure. Students' inappropriate source text use, in particular, has been the focus of much discussion and debate (Currie, 1998; Flowerdew & Li, 2007a; Johns & Mayes, 1990; Liu, 2005; Pecorari, 2003; Pennycook, 1996; Polio & Shi, 2012; Shi, 2004, 2006; Sowden, 2005; Tardy, 2010; Tomas, 2010; Yamada, 2003). Though typically, in the context of higher education, student plagiarism is associated with cheating and dishonesty (Leask, 2006; Pecorari, 2001; Yamada, 2003), educators who work with developing writers argue that, for many students, plagiarism represents not an intention to deceive, but rather their developing competence in text-responsible writing (Chandrasoma, Thompson, & Pennycook, 2004; Currie, 1998; Flowerdew & Li, 2007b; Howard, 1995;

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Liu, 2005; Pecorari, 2003; Polio & Shi, 2012; Sowden, 2005). In these cases, most educators agree that instances of student copying should be addressed through pedagogy, rather than through disciplinary actions (Casanave, 2004; Pecorari, 2001, 2003; Valentine, 2006). Some have even questioned whether such instances of textual borrowing should be labeled as a type of "plagiarism": Students, language teachers, and university professors have all been found to disagree about what counts as textual plagiarism (Deckert, 1993; Pennycook, 1994, 1996; Rinnert & Kobayashi, 2005; Roig, 1997, 2001; Shi, 2006, 2010, 2012), and, in recent years, the idea of authorial ownership (and thus plagiarism itself) has been challenged (Howard, 1995; Pennycook, 1996; Scollon, 1994). Nevertheless, most agree it is important to consider why students might copy from source texts when completing academic assignments, as such investigations may help us to better understand not only students' attitudes about textual borrowing, but also the role that such borrowing might play in their academic development.

A number of factors have been identified that might explain why developing writers—both students writing in their native language and students writing in a second language—copy from source texts. In the case of second language (L2) writers, differences in cultural attitudes regarding the use of source texts have been cited as possible explanations for students' copying. A number of discussions (e.g., Matalene, 1985; Pennycook, 1996; Shi, 2006; Sowden, 2005) have focused on non-Western, primarily East Asian, students and how cultural practices such as text memorization might help to explain the textual borrowing strategies these students employ when writing in English. Surveys of students from China, Japan, and Korea (Rinnert & Kobayashi, 2005; Shi, 2006) have also found that, when studying English in their own countries, these students receive limited exposure to writing from sources, and little, if any, instruction in summary, Paraphrase, and citation. In comparison, the U.S. students interviewed in these studies reported that writing from source texts received a great deal of attention in their academic courses.

Some have pointed out, however, that cultural differences are likely not the only, or even best, explanations for student textual plagiarism (Flowerdew & Li, 2007a, 2007b; Ha, 2006; Leask, 2006; Liu, 2005; Pecorari, 2003). In a review of plagiarism research, Flowerdew and Li (2007a) argue that "while there is now generally a call among literacy educators to attend to potential cultural differences when dealing with student plagiarism ... there is at the same time a need to guard against essentializing culturally conditioned views of plagiarism" (p. 166). In the case of students who are classified into what Kumaravadivelu (2003) calls "a single cultural basket labeled *Asian*" (p. 710, emphasis in original), educators and published scholars alike have expressed the view that international students studying in English-speaking universities bring with them a culture which accepts plagiarism as a legitimate strategy, a culture which does not value creativity and critical thinking in the same way that Western cultures do (Flowerdew & Li, 2007a; Gu & Brooks, 2008; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Leask, 2006; Liu, 2005). These assumptions, Leask (2006) argues, help to perpetuate deficit views of L2 learners:

> The discourse of plagiarism constructs students from diverse cultures in particular ways: firstly, as culturally inferior others who must be taught how to learn other than by rote and imitation, whose learning style and strategies impede critical thinking and are likely to result in inadvertent plagiarism; or secondly, as desperate, embattled and inferior learners whose only means of coping in the superior world of the Western academy is to deliberately plagiarise, to take others' words and ideas as their own in various ways such as 'patchwriting', in which case they are both stealing and cheating (p. 185).

As an alternative to discourse which emphasizes cultural difference, Flowerdew and Li (2007a) highlight approaches which emphasize developmental and disciplinary perspectives. Because plagiarism has been the topic of discussion in not only English L2 contexts, but also in English L1 (first language) contexts (e.g., Howard, 1995; Howard, Serviss, & Rodrigue, 2010; Hull & Rose, 1989; Valentine, 2006), many have suggested that the demands of adjusting to a new academic discourse community play an important role in students' decisions to copy from source texts. These educators argue that copying often represents students' efforts to learn and practice the academic language that their professors expect them to use. For example, Howard (1995), in her discussion of novice L1 writers, argues that "patchwriting," though viewed by some to be an act of "cheating" or "stealing," is "an important transitional strategy in the student's progress toward membership in a discourse community" (p. 788). Similarly, Currie (1998) found that the subject of her case study, Diana, used copying as a strategy for learning the language of the academic discipline she was studying. Pennycook (1996) also shares this view, arguing that there are "useful things to be learned from reusing the structures and words from others' texts" (p. 225).