



Discourse appropriation, construction of identities, and the complex issue of plagiarism: ESL students writing in graduate school

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Abstract

Recent research on academic writing has established the intersection of writing and identity. However, it is not clear whether writers themselves are aware of this link. In this study, we investigated five ESL graduate students' awareness of the identities that they constructed through the appropriation of others' words and ideas in their texts. Moving beyond prevalent moral explanations, we further sought alternative reasons for students' inappropriate textual borrowing practices, often categorized as plagiarism. Our findings suggest that, depending on their enculturation into disciplinary discourses, students exhibit different levels of awareness of the available and privileged identity options in the social contexts of writing. We argue that student textual plagiarism can best be viewed as an issue of authorial identity construction. The findings indicate that the roots of students' production of institutionally unacceptable texts lie in their epistemological orientation as well as their authoritative view of source texts. We finally reflect on the implications of the findings for academic writing instruction. Drawing on the notion of students-as-ethnographers, we suggest that writing instruction can raise students' awareness of the link between writing and self-representation as well as the epistemology underpinning academic authorship, as two important dimensions of successful writing.

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Recent research on academic writing has revealed the intersection of writing and identity construction (Cherry, 1988; Hatch, Hill, & Hayes, 1993; Ivanic, 1998). It has been demonstrated that as writers appropriate and represent social discourses (Bakhtin, 1986; Kress, 1989), they textually construct social identities in the sense of representing themselves in alignment, or dissonance, with those discourses. Moreover, as Costley and Doncaster's (2001) work suggests,

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identities are constructed not only through appropriation of social discourses but also through the way these discourses are incorporated into writers' texts. However, one question that has remained unanswered is whether writers themselves are aware of the identities that they textually construct, or whether this is only an analytical perspective that researchers have imposed on their research participants' writings (Casanave, 2003). This is one of the questions that the present study aimed to address by exploring ESL student writers' own awareness of the identities that they construct through borrowing from sources.

Closely linked to the issue of borrowing from sources and appropriation of discourses is the problem of "textual plagiarism" (Pecorari, 2003) in ESL student writing. We frequently witness that papers written by many ESL students exhibit certain academically inappropriate textual practices, such as wholesale reproduction of source materials and unattributed or partially attributed borrowings. A significant body of research (Crocker & Shaw, 2002; Leki, 1992; Pecorari, 2003; Pennycook, 1994, 1996; Price, 2003; Prior, 1998; Sherman, 1992; Starfield, 2002) corroborates our experience that apparent plagiarism in student papers cannot always be accounted for by simply attributing it to an intention to deceive or a lack of mechanical skills of documentation. After all, students in many cases paraphrase and acknowledge their sources in such a way that they can be rather easily traced. Regardless of students' intentions, however, certain discourse appropriative practices are considered transgressive and reprehensible in academic institutions in North America and other major English speaking countries (Howard, 1999; Pecorari, 2001).

Contrary to the prevailing view in academia that identifies students' inappropriate textual borrowings as instances of plagiarism and dishonest behavior, recent scholarship in first and second language writing research has problematized the use of the term *plagiarism* in dealing with such practices. When confronted with unacceptable intertextuality in student writing, Howard (2000) suggests using three categories which identify fraud, insufficient citation, and excessive repetition. She equates plagiarism with behaviors that are clearly aimed at deception, such as submission of someone else's paper as one's own. While making a similar distinction between plagiarism and problematic intertextuality, Chandrasoma, Thompson, and Pennycook (2004) argue that unacceptable intertextuality is "centrally concerned with questions of language, identity, education, and knowledge" (p. 172). They point out that as soon as we use the term *plagiarism*, we cast what is essentially a complex issue of learning into an issue of morality. While they recognize that writers may borrow or cite inappropriately from source texts, they suggest the alternative notion of transgressive intertextuality instead of plagiarism to avoid the negative and condemnatory connotations of the term. This, they argue, would allow for a pedagogical rather than a juridical response to students' textual borrowings that contravene institutional or disciplinary norms.

In light of current pedagogical interpretations of students' apparent plagiarism, our secondary aim in this study was to come up with alternative explanations for the inappropriate textual borrowings that we witnessed in the texts produced by two of the participants. In an early work on students' reading and writing problems, Hull and Rose (1989) demonstrate that to understand why students produce texts that violate communally accepted norms and practices, we need to examine the identities of students in terms of who they are as socially, culturally, and educationally constituted subjects. This perceived inseparability of the text from the writer's identity raises the question of whether the histories of the two participants in this study who exhibited instances of plagiarism in their papers can shed some light on why they plagiarized. It is important to note here that intertextuality falls into the category of "occluded features" (Pecorari, 2006) of academic writing, and that transgressive intertextuality might remain

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