

The use of paraphrase in summary writing: A comparison of L1 and L2 writers

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Abstract

Paraphrasing is considered by many to be an important skill for academic writing, and some have argued that the teaching of paraphrasing might help students avoid copying from source texts. Few studies, however, have investigated the ways in which both L1 and L2 academic writers already use paraphrasing as a textual borrowing strategy when completing their academic assignments. To expand our understanding of university students' paraphrasing strategies, the present study analyzed L1 ($n = 79$) and L2 ($n = 74$) writers' use of paraphrase within a summary task and developed a method for classifying these paraphrases into four major Paraphrase Types: Near Copy, Minimal Revision, Moderate Revision, and Substantial Revision. The study then compared the L1 and L2 writers' use of these Paraphrase Types within their summaries. It was found that, while both groups used about five paraphrases per summary, L2 writers used significantly more Near Copies than L1 writers. Conversely, the summaries of L1 writers contained significantly more Moderate and Substantial Revisions than those of the L2 writers. Implications of these findings for future studies of students' textual borrowing strategies are discussed with a particular focus on issues related to plagiarism and the teaching of paraphrasing in university writing classrooms.

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Over the past decade, much attention has been paid to the importance of reading in academic writing tasks and the need for advanced literacy instruction that focuses on writing from sources (see, e.g., the edited volumes of Belcher & Hirvela, 2001; Carson & Leki, 1993; as well as Leki & Carson, 1997; Spack, 1997, 2004). Surveys of academic tasks in university settings where English is the language of instruction (Bridgeman & Carlson, 1983; Hale, Taylor, Bridgeman, Carson, Kroll and Kantor, 1996; Carson, 2001) reveal that students are frequently expected to draw from source texts when completing assignments or exams. For example, students must

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synthesize information from assigned readings when completing in-class and take-home exams, as well as when completing writing assignments such as lab reports, article summaries and critiques, and research papers.

In addition to describing the types of “text-responsible” (Leki & Carson, 1997, p. 41) writing tasks assigned in university classrooms, researchers in the fields of L1 and L2 academic literacy (e.g., Currie, 1998; Johns & Mayes, 1990; Pecorari, 2003; Sherrard, 1986; Shi, 2004) have also investigated how developing academic writers attempt to integrate source texts into their writing. Much of this research has focused on students’ inappropriate use of source texts—instances of textual borrowing that professors and administrators would likely label as plagiarism. A number of factors have been identified that might explain why both L1 and L2 writers copy from source texts: differences in cultural attitudes regarding the use of sources (Chandrasoma, Thompson, & Pennycook, 2004; Pennycook, 1996), language proficiency (Currie, 1998; Howard, 1996; Johns & Mayes, 1990; Shi, 2004), and the context and purpose of the writing task (Barks & Watts, 2001; Campbell, 1990; Chandrasoma et al., 2004; Currie, 1998; Shi, 2004). Though it is still unclear exactly what roles all of these factors play in students’ decisions to copy from source texts, most agree that much of university students’ apparent plagiarism reflects not an intention to deceive, but rather their developing competence in text-responsible writing (Chandrasoma et al., 2004; Currie, 1998; Howard, 1996; Pecorari, 2003). In fact, many have argued that, for both L1 and L2 academic writers, copying from source texts is a necessary phase through which developing writers must pass before they acquire more sophisticated ways of integrating sources into their writing (Brown & Day, 1983; Campbell, 1990; Chandrasoma et al., 2004; Howard, 1996; Hyland, 2001; Johns & Mayes, 1990; Winograd, 1984).

This view of L1 and L2 writers’ apparent plagiarism has prompted many researchers to recommend ways in which teachers can help students to move beyond a reliance on copying from source texts. One of the most commonly recommended pedagogical interventions is the teaching of paraphrasing (Campbell, 1990; Currie, 1998; Howard, 1996; Hyland, 2001; Johns & Mayes, 1990). Typically, paraphrasing is discussed as part of a “triadic model” of “paraphrase, summary, and quotation” (Barks & Watts, 2001, p. 252). For example, Campbell (1990) and Johns and Mayes (1990) suggest that paraphrasing is one of a number of strategies (including summary and quotation) that students can use when integrating source texts into their writing. Campbell further notes that students’ inability to paraphrase effectively may, in part, help to explain their inappropriate copying.

The ubiquitous on-line and paper writing resources available to university students also emphasize the importance of paraphrasing, specifically as a strategy for avoiding plagiarism (Yamada, 2003). These resources (e.g., [Purdue University Online Writing Lab, 2006](#)) typically juxtapose “appropriate” and “inappropriate” paraphrases, both of which attempt to restate the ideas expressed in a specific excerpt of a source text. Paraphrasing exercises are sometimes provided so that students can practice restating the ideas of a given excerpt without borrowing too liberally from the language of the original.

Though the teaching of paraphrasing has been recommended in the literature and a number of resources exist which provide examples of acceptable paraphrasing strategies, only a few studies have attempted to describe the ways in which university students already use paraphrasing as a strategy for integrating source texts into their writing. Those studies which have identified paraphrases in student writing (Campbell, 1990; Johns & Mayes, 1990; Pecorari, 2003; Shi, 2004; Winograd, 1984) vary considerably in their assumptions regarding the extent to which, by definition, a paraphrase does (or should) borrow language from the original excerpt. For example, while Johns and Mayes (1990) and Winograd (1984) include paraphrase as a form of

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