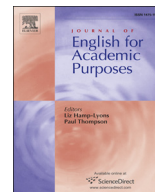




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Forum

Uncovering published authors' text-borrowing practices: Paraphrasing strategies, sources, and self-plagiarism

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to examine the paraphrasing strategies, sources, and self-plagiarism of 71 journal articles in the fields of language and education. Turnitin plagiarism detection software and human scrutiny were employed to uncover the full range of detectable text-borrowing practices in these publications. The results indicate 30 different types of paraphrasing strategies, among which copying verbatim and substitution were the most frequent. Additionally, authors in the study often integrated multiple paraphrasing strategies within single sentences. Journal articles represent the majority of the sources from which text is borrowed. Regarding authorship, overall, more than two-thirds (67.28%) of the observed textual borrowing involves the reuse (or recycling) of texts from an author's previous publications. The prevalence of matches with one's own publications calls for more explicit operational standards among disciplines in this regard and points toward factors that may contribute to unintentional self-plagiarism, such as lexical bundles or authors' stylistic habits in writing.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Plagiarism

The term “plagiarism” traditionally refers to numerous types of transgressive academic behavior, including poor paraphrasing skills, inappropriate citation and referencing, and the submission of others' writing as one's own (Pecorari & Petric, 2014). Definitions of plagiarism often carry a negative connotation because the activity is commonly viewed as “literary theft, stealing (by copying) the words or ideas of someone else and passing them off as one's own without crediting the source” (Park, 2003, p. 472). Plagiarism is often construed as a crime, theft, or sin, all of which deserve punishment (Bloch, 2012; Pecorari, 2001). This traditional view of plagiarism derives from the “Enlightenment notion of the author as an autonomous individual who is a sole creator of original works through self-expression” (Pecorari & Petric, 2014, p. 274).

Since the 1990s, this traditional notion of plagiarism has been criticized for overemphasizing individual authorship (Pennycook, 1996; Scollon, 1995) and for being contrary to theories of learning (Howard, 1995). Contrasted with the notion of unitary authorship implicit in traditional conceptions of plagiarism, the current trend is to regard authorship as being “constructed in discourse through interaction and negotiation with other texts, and through the reuse of available linguistic

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and other resources" (Pecorari & Petric, 2014, p. 274). This view is in line with the notion of intertextuality, which, as argued by Chandrasoma, Thompson, and Pennycook (2004), goes beyond only text reuse, but should further indicate the integration of "multiple strands of knowledges within texts designed to produce desired meanings" (p. 175). From a pedagogical perspective, the heavy emphasis on unitary authorship neglects the benefits of learning through imitation (Howard, 1995). For example, patchwriting, as defined by Howard (1993), refers to the strategy of "copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one-for-one synonym-substitutes" (p. 233). This practice is viewed as an essential developmental phase that inexperienced writers need to go through as they developed as academic writers (Howard, 1995; Pecorari, 2003, 2008). Rather than dismissing students' patchwriting as plagiarism, Howard (1995) argues that the practice deserves pedagogical attention and support, instead of punishment.

These criticisms leveled at the traditional notion of plagiarism have led to the emergence of various terms that describe the practice of source use without the negative connotations and these terms have allowed researchers to understand the practice of source use from more pedagogically constructive perspectives. For example, the term, textual borrowing, is widely used in the literature (Currie, 1998; Petric, 2012; Shi, 2004). In a case study exploring text-borrowing by a second language learner, Currie (1998) indicated the complex nature of the practice. The study suggested that student writers' inappropriate text-borrowing should be understood alongside various other factors such as course demands, students' language proficiency, academic skills, and learning strategies. In another study, Flowerdew and Li (2007) used the term "language re-use" to describe the textual practices of Chinese doctoral science students in their English-language writing for publication. The results of the study showed that these novice scientific writers borrowed short phrases as well as several consecutive sentences from the works of other writers. Students considered their language re-use practice legitimate and did not regard borrowing as plagiarism as long as the scientific work presented in their article was original.

1.2. Studies on paraphrasing

Since integrating outside sources into one's own writing is an important academic ability, intertextuality has been considered a key feature of academic writing (Polio & Shi, 2012). Appropriate intertextuality requires writers to paraphrase. Campbell (1998) defines paraphrasing as "using different phrasing and wording (requiring citation) to express a particular passage that was originally written or spoken by someone else, in order to blend the other's idea smoothly into one's own writing" (p. 86). The extent of paraphrasing ranges from a single paraphrasing strategy that involves the use of only one strategy (e.g., substituting with synonyms) to more extensive paraphrasing, integrating multiple strategies together (e.g., deleting, substituting, and re-ordering).

To address the question of what constitutes appropriate paraphrasing, researchers have suggested various criteria. For example, substantial paraphrases, as defined by Keck (2006), contain only general words that repeatedly occur in the original text. In Shi (2004) study, paraphrases with no textual borrowing need to meet the criteria of having no direct borrowing of two or more consecutive words. On the other hand, in Roig's study (1999), paraphrases that borrow more than five consecutive words from the source text are considered to be superficial paraphrasing. Oshima and Hogue (1999) defined unacceptable paraphrasing as using the same words and grammatical structure as the source. Although researchers have attempted to define what constitutes effective paraphrasing, the definitions still vary considerably in terms of the extent to which a paraphrase can borrow vocabulary or syntactic structures from the source text (Shi, 2012). Beyond linguistic modifications of the source text, Keck (2010) also indicated that substantial paraphrases involve more than grammatical or syntactic changes; additions of phrases or sentences that explicitly restate the implicit ideas in the source text are also important.

Previous studies have suggested disciplinary differences are another major factor in different practices of intertextuality. Studies have shown that discipline-specific standards and practices of appropriate intertextuality are still vague (Sun, 2013; Sutherland-Smith & Carr, 2005). Hyland (1999) analyzed 80 research articles in eight disciplines and found that citation conventions vary across disciplines and reflect how different discourse communities construct knowledge. For example, authors in the humanities use citations more often than those in the sciences and tend "to place the author in subject position, to employ direct quotes and discourse reporting verbs, and to attribute a stance to cited authors" (p. 352). In contrast, authors in hard sciences use fewer citations and are more likely to minimize the significance of the cited authors. This difference in citation practice is related to the extent to which people value the originality of words and ideas. In natural sciences, it is believed that "the core of science are facts and theories, not words" (Bouville, 2008, p. 314). Therefore, students in the sciences perceive that copying words from source texts that describe shared knowledge in the field is a legitimate practice (Flowerdew & Li, 2007). Researchers in the humanities, on the other hand, do not separate words from content and attach great importance to the originality of wording (Bazerman, 1994).

Even within the same discipline, the criteria for what comprises a successful paraphrase and scholars' actual practices of paraphrasing seem to vary. A series of experiments conducted by Roig (2001) showed that differences do exist in paraphrasing practices among college professors across disciplines and even within a single discipline. The results also showed that college professors apply more rigorous criteria when they paraphrase than when they evaluate students' paraphrases. Interestingly, however, the results indicated that some college professors also paraphrase by borrowing strings of words from the source texts. Thus, the issue of legitimate paraphrasing is complex (Mulcahy & Goodacre, 2004) due to the vague definition of academic plagiarism and paraphrasing, added to the varied disciplinary-specific standards, practices, and an apparent lack of consensus among academia (Sun, 2009, 2013; Campbell, 1990; Pecorari, 2003; Shi, 2004; Sutherland-Smith, 2005; Yamada, 2003).

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