

L2 Students' and Composition Teachers' Perceptions of Textual Borrowing

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Abstract

Second language writers in English medium universities need advanced writing skills to survive as they face the challenges of conducting research and writing academic papers. ESL university students struggle to meet these demands when writing from academic sources and incorporate textual borrowing (or “patchwriting” strategies) that teachers may perceive as plagiarism in English academic contexts. The present study aims to investigate the gap of perception in judging what constitutes plagiarism between ESL writers and native English composition teachers in a university setting. Each group performed a judgment task that measured their tolerance of varying degrees of textual borrowing in paraphrasing attempts within sample student texts. Questionnaires explored potential moderating variables for their judgment. The purpose of the study is to get a better understanding of second language writers’ awareness of what is considered acceptable levels of textual borrowing when incorporating source text into their own writing. An overarching objective is to help clarify the lack of nuance in current definitions of plagiarism, particularly for second language writers.

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Background

The ability to successfully incorporate ideas from source text in academic writing is an advanced skill for writers in their first language, but for second language (L2) writers with limited linguistic ability this challenge can be daunting. There may be gaps in knowledge of paraphrasing between student L2 writers and that of composition teachers (the educational gatekeepers of the target learning contexts). How might these varying perceptions affect the preparedness of L2 student writers who strive to be successful in academic writing? This study strove to provide insight into this question.

Research Questions

1. To what extent does ESL writers' judgment of appropriateness in textual borrowing differ from that of university composition teachers?
2. What factors most influence ESL students' judgment of appropriateness in textual borrowing?

Methods

Participants in this study included 26 PIE students from two of the upper-level sheltered PIE 105 composition classes and 23 ENG 105 composition teachers. The students were young adults from Saudi Arabia and China pursuing undergraduate degrees in a variety of fields of study, while the teachers were mostly first year composition teachers. Both students and teachers took a survey that included background questions and a judgment task about paraphrasing. The survey was administered to participants either in class (for students) or outside of class on campus (for teachers).

Results

Data showed a statistically significant difference between judgment of teachers and students when comparing "within one" scores on the judgment task (based on four-point

likert scale) with a weak effect size of 0.11. In response to the second research question, the only factor that resulted in statistically significant difference showed that teachers who identified plagiarism more often also appear to be less strict in their overall ratings, surprisingly.

Relevance to PIE and Second Language Learning

Although only a pilot study, these findings suggest a gap in perceptions about appropriate use of source text in paraphrasing between students and teachers. I hope a follow up study could result in helping inform both policy (in regards to plagiarism in L2 writing) and instruction for L2 writers that can help them become more aware of (a) how to paraphrase and (b) teachers' expectations in regards to paraphrasing.