Textual borrowing practices among international students: A thorny issue

CONTTIA LAI

Background

The international student population in Canada has been increasing since the Government took a market-oriented approach to education for international students in the 1980s and 1990s (Chen, 2008). To increase its market share in view of the fierce competition for international students with countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom, Canada will double the size of international student base from 239,131 in 2011 to more than 450,000 by 2022 (Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada, 2014). At the University of Toronto, the total international enrolment has risen from 6.5% in 2002-2003 to 15.2% in 2013-2014, and will reach 16.6% in 2018-2019 (University of Toronto, 2014). Since the majority of international students are speakers and learners of English as an additional language, this expansion of intake of international students will inevitably create a soaring demand for academic English language and writing support. With the variability of writing practices of international students from non-Western backgrounds, numerous issues such as unintentional plagiarism and patchwriting may arise when these students draw on their previous educational experience with writing from sources. Both content and academic writing teachers with less experience with non-Western students may perceive international students’ illegitimate textual borrowing behaviors as cheating, laziness, or the deliberate violation of rules and regulations.

The Challenge

Developing the ability to integrate source material effectively into their writing presents a major challenge for multilingual students learning to write for academic purposes (in English). Nevertheless, it is a common requirement for university students to use textual sources in their academic writing; in fact, the ability to seek support from textual sources is one of the indicators of content knowledge, and of multilingual students’ readiness for academic studies. In fact, a good grasp of this essential academic literacy skill is conducive to their learning of new knowledge as well as their socializing into their prospective academic communities.

Grabe and Zhang (2013) noted that this crucial academic literacy skill is challenging for both native speaking and L2 student writers, and it takes effort to become skilled at reading/writing integration tasks such as summarizing, synthesizing information, critically responding to text input, or writing a research paper. Previous research has found that writing from sources involves complex processes in which students are required to undertake a variety of local tasks such as planning, writing, revising, editing, synthesizing, monitoring, structuring, and elaborating (Ruiz-Funes, 1999, 2001).

As for long-term development, Beaufort (2004) identifies five knowledge domains that inform the cognitive processes of academic writers: discourse community knowledge, subject matter knowledge, genre knowledge, rhetorical knowledge, and writing process knowledge. These complex processes, however, often pose a big challenge to novice multilingual academic writers who are struggling with the new academic genre, disciplinary knowledge and
the second language. In addition, the writing processes as well as the types and quality of the written texts produced vary across individual student writers as they interpret the reading/writing tasks differently (Allen, 2004; McCulloch, 2013; Ruiz-Funes, 2001; Wolfersberger, 2013).

Novice international students also often find it difficult to determine the focus of their writing and the extent to which they need to focus; choose appropriate textual sources; decide on the need for and methods of citations; form their own opinions, achieve the goals that they originally set out for their writing; establish relevance and credibility of sources; and present contrasting views from sources (McCarthy Young & Leinhardt, 1998; Shi, 2010; Thompson, Morton, & Storch, 2013). As Wette (2010) aptly observed, L2 academic writers “had difficulties comprehending complexities in texts, summarising propositional content accurately, and integrating citations with their own voices and positions” (p. 158). As a result, their response to the demand for knowledge transformation is to excessively quote from textual sources instead of paraphrase, believing that this practice would help them to establish a stronger authorial voice (Hirvela & Du, 2013).

“Patchwriting”

Some novice L2 academic writers who exhibit immense difficulties in making use of source materials even resort to patchwriting (Howard, 1993), a practice that is defined as “copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one-for-one synonym-substitutes” (p. 233). Wette (2010) notes that patchwriting or inappropriate use of source materials result from a range of factors such as (a) insufficient knowledge of the disciplinary literacy practices; (b) limited experience with writing from sources; (c) a lack of self-confidence to write well as second language writers and as peripheral members of their respective disciplinary discourse community; and (d) limited learning strategies and English proficiency. Research shows that patchwriting, a means of survival for some newcomers of the disciplinary discourse community and a developmental strategy (Chandrasoma et al., 2004; Currie, 1998; Davis, 2013; Howard, 1995; Li & Casanave, 2012), is an issue of academic literacy instead of an act of academic dishonesty or a form of cheating.

How Educators Can Help

It is, therefore, important to increase our understanding of international students’ textual borrowing practices by examining their academic writing trajectories so that we can devise matching strategies and offer necessary services to support their writing needs. In addition, educators should help student writers, especially those with little or no experience writing from sources to conceptualize task requirements so as to minimize the discrepancies between students’ interpretation and teachers’ expectations. Another important issue to consider is when educators design reading/writing tasks, they have to take into account the influence of task conditions and text types on students’ performance. Generally speaking, tasks that require argumentation based on source texts are cognitively more challenging than tasks that only require a summary or synthesis of information in the source texts. Similarly, students working with source material that is high in text density are more likely to resort to behaviors such as copying or over-citation than those working with source texts that are less cognitively demanding. Finally, instruction for writing from sources can help to orient student writers, especially those with little experience working with academic sources. Through formal instruction, student
writers learn what is expected and what is not acceptable, and eventually develop their capability to align themselves with the prospective discourse communities along with their increased understanding of their fields of study.

References


Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada (2014). *Canada's international education strategy: Harnessing our knowledge advantage to drive innovation and prosperity* (Cat. No.: FR5-86/2014).


