

# How Do Students Borrow Texts? Textual Borrowing as Transferable Content in L2 Writing Instruction\*

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Yu, Ho-Jung. 2010. How Do Students Borrow Texts? Textual Borrowing as Transferable Content in L2 Writing Instruction. *Language Research* 27(1), 231-245. Textual borrowing is a natural process where students involve reading that is underlying in academic writing. Therefore, textual borrowing should be dealt with not to accuse students of their unorthodox practice, often called plagiarism, but to improve students' critical use of texts in developing their argument. To facilitate students' textual borrowing, first, it is needed to clarify and discuss different strategies that students use in developing their argument. For this purpose, this research investigated the strategies that students used to integrate ideas from researched sources. To explore the textual borrowing strategies, twenty writing samples from first-year international undergraduate students at one North American university. This study provided a detailed discussion about the students' textual borrowing strategies, as well as implications for practice in L2 writing education. (Jeonju University)

**Key Words** plagiarism, textual borrowing, academic writing, reading, L2 writing

## 1. Introduction

Transferability is one of the buzzwords in ESL writing instruction in the higher education of the United States. Many scholars have been advocated through their research that students need to be introduced to some knowledge or content that can be transferable to other learning contexts (Hansen, 2000; James, 2006; Swales, 1990). Their efforts have been actualized in such ways that writing projects are similar to content courses that are simulated in ESL writing instruction. Although this approach might meet their own expectations, it can raise a question about the teacher's expertise on the project topics. Although

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writing teachers are able to give language-oriented feedback, not all of them might be confident in giving content-based feedback. It is indispensable that students are given a project that the teacher has an expertise on. In other words, it is important for teachers to choose transferable knowledge to students' own course, while they are experts on it. When these two conditions are fulfilled, teachers can organize meaningful interaction in their instruction. In a writing course, one topic that could fulfill these two conditions might be about how student writers use sources to strengthen their argument, avoiding the inappropriate way of using texts, so-called plagiarism.

Plagiarism has been a critical issue in academe where academic dishonesty is considered as a serious crime (Casanave, 2007). This notion is highlighted across the curriculum. In her study about the engineering and business faculty's view about L2 writing, Zhu (2004) pointed out that there is general knowledge applicable to any writing class. In her interview-based study, every faculty addressed the significance of presenting knowledge accurately via synthesizing ideas. To put it another way, as one important starting point, students should acknowledge the notion of plagiarism, and then they should avoid it through critical interaction with sources, in order to successfully participate in academic discourse. Therefore, this issue is dealt with in writing instruction one way or another since it is transferable to other disciplinary contexts.

Although avoiding plagiarism is a common and transferable skill that students need to be trained about, its concept is not crystal clear to students. In her study with 54 universities, Pecorari (2001) reported that, to faculty and institutions in higher education, plagiarism is generally and consistently understood as unattributed use of other sources by copying or phrasing in the context of assessment. However, it seems that this definition does not satisfy students since they show mixed attitudes toward plagiarism (Spigelman, 1999). The concerns that students have about this notion also include the use of peer discussion ideas and the misrepresentation of other sources. Some students consider plagiarism as a direct copy of other sources, and some are not convinced that anyone can own ideas. Likewise, it is challenging to deal with plagiarism since its definition is not clear.

Aside from the obfuscation of the definition, teachers, as well as L2 students, should take some other considerations in order to face challenges and borrow texts appropriately. One is that L2 students should raise their awareness about

cultural differences in using other information. For this awareness, Currie (1998) pointed out that the class discussion about cultural differences related to “authorship, authority, and plagiarism” (Pennycook, 1996, p. 227) should be thoughtfully carried out (p. 376), so that students could appreciate the cultural notions about this issue. Without this cultural understanding, the practices about textual borrowing techniques may simply turn into mechanical exercises.

Another consideration is that teachers should understand students’ linguistic competence in the target language, along with the writing task. Currie (1998) claims that L2 students who are in a developmental stage of L2 proficiency face difficulty in borrowing texts, while this situation becomes worse due to other academic work. She reported this reality by describing the performance of one L2 student who chose to copy texts as a survival strategy in her academic writing context. Likewise, these two aspects should be thoughtfully included to face the challenges related to textual borrowing.

As the above literature review shows, albeit a few out of a great quantity, much insightful discussion has been precedent and the discussion still continues. However, more efforts should be added on the current discussion in order to extend and lead it to a practical application to practitioners and researchers. For instance, even though there is much research about how students practice textual borrowing, predominant studies have been conducted with international graduate students.

In fact, it is also true that many undergraduate students need to show their successful interaction by integrating information from articles and researched study in order to write their undergraduate-level paper. For example, Zhu (2004) in her study about the faculty’s views explains that one of the key skills that students need to develop is to read and summarize literature accurately. Also, the first-year composition courses in which the current study was conducted required students to use researched sources in order to complete their drafts. More rigorous research should be carried out with undergraduate students.

Most importantly, “writing is a skill, and writing from sources is an important skill for academic writers, yet the instructions students receive about plagiarism are often in the form of warnings and information sheets emphasizing declarative knowledge about the act, rather than the skills needed to avoid it” (Pecorari, 2008, p. 2). The issues of plagiarism or textual borrowing should be discussed in an aspect of promoting a good argument, rather than in as aspect of

accusing or preventing it. In other words, this issue should be dealt within the central issue since this issue involves the relation between reading and writing and the development of a good argument.

With the importance in mind, this research gravitates toward responding to the question: *What are textual borrowing strategies that novice academic L2 writers use?* Responding to this question may elucidate the actual phenomenon of students' utilizing texts in the context where this study was situated. Answers to this research question can be a fundamental beginning for the issues of textual borrowing.

## 2. Research context

### 2.1 Participants

The participants of this study were international students who took the first-year writing course, named SLW 107 (*a pseudonym*), at a large North American university in the fall of 2008. The total number of students, 36, represented a variety of nationalities, such as Korean, European, Chinese, Cost Rican, Singaporean, Russian, Saudi Arabian, and Filipino. All of the students identically fulfilled the TOEFL score of over 560 as language-proficiency requirements. Except a small number of students, a majority of students did not have any difficulty in communicating in English.

### 2.2 The brief summary of the writing assignment:

Students were required to complete four writing assignments during the semester. The writing assignment for this current study required the students to produce an annotated bibliography and write a four-to-five page expository essay about plagiarism. The overall description of this writing assignment reads:

Assignment overview: Assignment two is an expository essay that explains the concept, Plagiarism. The goals of this assignment are to educate and inform the concept to SLW 107 classmates and the instructor based on your accurate and insightful understanding of the concept and then to demonstrate your competence in borrowing information from sources. Although the genre of the final product is going to be an

expository essay, you are allowed to present your own perspectives on the issues relating to plagiarism and textual borrowing since the fine line between plagiarizing and not plagiarizing may not exist. Your own opinion should be grounded on the critical understanding of plagiarism and its related issues. This assignment requires you to carry out secondary research (e.g. library) and integrate researched information into your essay by applying the citation system consistently. Finally, to complete this essay successfully, you need to demonstrate the various writing strategies, including organizational ones, we cover in class.

### 2.3 Data collection and analysis

The primary data for this study consisted of twenty writing samples and sources that students used for one academic writing assignment. Most of the writing samples were 4 to 5 pages, excluding the page of reference list. From each of these twenty writing samples, one paragraph was selected from the twenty writing samples to examine the patterns of integrating sources into student writing. The samples for the analysis were selected with three primary criteria in mind: density of citation, availability of original source, and length of paragraph. Introduction and conclusion paragraphs were disenfranchised for the analysis since in body paragraphs students tend to use sources to support their main claim. Apart from these three main criteria, the selection of paragraphs was random.

The primary purpose of this analysis was to identify and describe the textual borrowing strategies that students use in writing their papers and to check whether the student text is convincing. The strategy identification fell into two analytical realms: language and content (Abasi & Akbari, 2008; Pecorari, 2008). The realm of language focuses on the micro level of borrowing sources (e.g., lexis and syntax); and the realm of content involves the analysis of developing ideas.

## 3. Research findings

This section comprises the in-depth analysis of four samples that represent the predominant patterns of students' textual borrowing and some other patterns of textual borrowing.

### 3.1 Sample one: loose paraphrasing with dominant dependence on part of a single source

A. To discuss the causes of plagiarizing, two different parts should be considered; one from students and the other from instructors. From the point of students' view, largely four factors can cause plagiarizing. 1) Most students are afraid of taking risks in their own work. 2) Also their poor time management for writing can result in plagiarizing (WPA, 2003). 3) The third reason is that students may not know how to integrate the others and document the sources appropriately in their texts (WPA, 2003). 4) For the last, students may recognize the assignments or the convention of academic documentation as unimportant (WPA, 2003).  
(Kim, *numbers and underlines inserted*)

A-1. 1) Students may fear failure or fear taking risks in their own work. 2) Students may have poor time-management skills or they may plan poorly for the time and effort required for research-based writing, and believe they have no choice but to plagiarism. 3) Students may not know how to integrate the ideas of others and document the sources of those ideas appropriately in their texts. 4) Students may view the course, the assignments, the conventions of academic documentation, or the consequences of cheating as unimportant. (CWPA, *numbers and underlines inserted*)

Passage A is a paragraph that Kim developed by referring to an article on the website called Council of Writing Program Administrators. In general, the article elaborately describes the definition of, the causes of, and the actions against plagiarism. Kim borrows passage A-1 to make his own paragraph. The main idea of Kim's paragraph is to describe the causes of plagiarism that students generate before he addresses instructors' causes, as shown at the beginning. Following the topic sentence, Kim lists four factors as supporting details for his main claim of the paragraph. The flow of an overall argument makes sense. However, the close examination of the textual borrowing strategies discloses several features.

In writing the sentence 1) in passage A, Kim copies a chunk of phrase from the original source, while keeping the same sentence structure. More importantly, it is noticeable that he changes the meaning from the original idea by changing

"may fear failure or fear" to "are afraid of." These two expressions show a different level of probability about the idea of "fearing taking risks in their own work. The probability that the student presents is much higher than what the source proposes. The sentence 2) in passage A discloses that the structure of the original sentence is modified effectively, while the sentence contains the intention of the source. The sentence 3) in the passage A is almost identical to the source sentence, except the deletion of words: "ideas of" and "of those ideas." The last sentence in Kim's passage shows the same pattern as the sentence 3), by the deletion of "the course, or the consequences of cheating." In summary, Kim's textual borrowing features the close following of the source expression, patch writing (Howard, 1995), and the use of partial information - Kim only uses the four tips of thirteen described in the website - and, most importantly, the lack of his voice.

### 3.2 Sample two: lack of clarification about the sources' meaning

B. Before preventing and better yet stopping plagiarism, the first step that is needed to be taken is understanding plagiarism itself. According to Dr. Barnbaum there are five types of plagiarism: Copy & Paste, Word Switch, Style, Metaphor, and Idea...Style plagiarism, for most students is the one that is most susceptible. Students fall into this trap because they think it is acceptable to make both the sentence and the paragraph exactly like it is on the source; while in fact it is not alright. Using the sources metaphor is also considered plagiarizing, if you absolutely have to give the author credit. The last type is idea plagiarism. An idea belongs to certain authors. Each one has his own unique thoughts about something...(Peter, *ellipses (...) inserted*)

B-1. Type III: Style Plagiarism. Description: When you follow a Source Article sentence-by-sentence or paragraph-by-paragraph (as is done in the example below), it is plagiarism, even though none of your sentences is exactly like those in the Source Article or even in the same order. What you are copying in this case, is the author's reasoning style. (Barnbaum, sec. 3)

Passage B is the third paragraph of Peter's complete essay, whose controlling

idea is “understanding plagiarism itself,” as indicated in the topic sentence of the paragraph. To explain plagiarism, Peter used Barnbaum’s article, “Plagiarism: A Student’s Guide to Recognizing It and Avoiding It,” where the author demonstrates five types of plagiarism: copy & paste, word switch, style, metaphor, and idea. As part of the entire article, B-1 is the source author’s description of two plagiarizing types: copy & paste and word switch.

Peter discloses his unique, but unorthodox, strategy of borrowing texts from the original source. As shown in passage B, his explanation of different types of plagiarism pivots on Barnbaum’s classification of them into five types: Copy & Paste, Word Switch, Style, Metaphor, and Idea. When it comes to the text-structure of the original source, it comprises a general introduction, headings of five plagiarism types, description under each type, and textual examples of each type. When Peter borrows this source, two features are evident. First, Peter creates his voice arguing each type of plagiarism is problematic, instead of clarifying what each type of plagiarism is. For example, when it comes to style plagiarism, the sentence, “Style plagiarism, for most students is the one that is most susceptible,” is solely from his opinion without any indication of this from the source text. The immediately following sentence, “Students fall into this trap because they think it is acceptable to make both the sentence and the paragraph exactly like it is on the source,” also contains Peter’s argument. Likewise, Peter tends to put down his opinion in place of describing what each plagiarism type is. Second, Peter cuts down on his explanation or argument when the notion is not clear. For instance, addressing metaphor plagiarism, he writes, “Using the sources metaphor is also considered plagiarizing, if you absolutely have to give the author credit.” This strategy is the same when he addresses idea plagiarism.

The analysis of Peter’s textual borrowing pattern reveals that he might not read the source article critically and did not screen the quality of the source article. To avoid this pattern of textual borrowing, the writer was supposed to read the original text more critically and delve into a few more sources discussing different plagiarism types.

### 3.3 Sample three: misinterpretation of some concepts from the source

C. The second fact is that the Internet increases plagiarism stupendously. The first issue is that although some detection system has been created there are still no laws to protect on-line text. A world-wide access to the



unlimited resource is a considerable potential of plagiarism, so a rewriting of institutional plagiarism policies is urgent. (Howard, 2007) Some on-line fee-based service is another problem caused by the Internet. (Howard, 2007) The emergence of web sites such as schoolsucks.com and cheating house.com became such a big ironic challenge for educations as well as for whomever against cheating in writing. An 800-words essay is sold at 20 \$ as common merchandise. (Ping)

C-1. In 1999, I argued that this leadership must take as its first agendum the rewriting of institutional plagiarism.(Howard, 2007, p.12, *underline inserted*)

C-2. Because Google, a free service, generally performed on par with these fee-based services, there no obvious advantage in purchasing them. Moreover, these fee-based services appear to cause more problems than they solve. (p.11, *underline inserted*)

Passage C is part of the second paragraph from Ping's four-page essay. The second paragraph briefly points out three causes in which international students are attracted to plagiarize, and the above excerpt shows the second cause of students' plagiarism, the Internet.

Ping gives an account of the issues related to the Internet, such as absence of laws against plagiarism, revision of institutional plagiarism policies, and paid on-line services for texts. Ping reads Howard's position-based scholarly article and selects the latter two ideas. However, she misuses the sources. First, Howard uses the phrase "rewriting of institutional plagiarism policies," in her article in order to "urge that the university adopt a plagiarism policy that differentiates plagiarism from misuses of sources" (p. 12). The revision of the institutional plagiarism polices is addressed not because of a plethora of on-line sources. Similarly, Ping refers to the same author's article, yet a different part in order to point out a problem from paid on-line service. As excerpt C-2 gives a little bit of contextual clue, the original author addresses fee-based service, illustrating a free-searching engine, like Google, and a fee-based service are not much different when teachers check whether or not students plagiarize on-line sources. Howard's argument is that using a fee-based service, like Turnitin.com, is violating students' rights for their textual ownership. However, Ping

misunderstands the fee-based service as an on-line paper-purchasing service, like schoolsucks.com or cheatinghouse.com. Therefore, the two cases above are the examples in which Ping misuses a source.

### 3.4 Sample four: reinterpretation of the sources

D. ...Different cultures may have their own notions about plagiarism. Such as China, students are asked to recite many famous articles and use them to their own papers in order to increase the scores of students' papers. Furthermore, students do not have to do any citations because people treat master piceces as a part of Chinese culture. Chinese culture and rhetoric are based on collectivist ideas of social harmony (Bloch&Chi, 1995, p.267), just as a Chinese scholar pinpointed, "if my works are plagiarized or copied, that means my works are great" (Johnson, 2007, para.18). In fact, only few decades ago, people just paid very little attention to the issue of plagiarism. Nowadays, with the development of globalization, eastern people are also involved into the big influence of western culture. But some people asked, "are western people arrogantly imposing ethnocentric cultural norms to the rest of the world?" (Penny Cook, 1994, 1996). Can different cultures have different norms and rules of plagiarizing? (Lee, *underlines and ellipsis inserted*)

D-1. Bloch and Chi also discussed at length the possible influences of cultural and rhetorical traditions from Chinese history, with the intention of dismantling the myth that Chinese culture and rhetoric are based on simple collectivist ideas of social harmony: "Chinese rhetoric, rather than being monolithic, encompasses[s] a variety of forms of thought, often reflecting the divergence of philosophical inquiry in Chinese society" (Block & Chi, 1995, p. 267) (Casanave, 2007, p. 176, *underline inserted*)

D-2. Some say attitudes may be hard to change. "Scholars think, 'If my works are plagiarized or copied, that means my works are great,'" said Fu Yongkang, a graduate student of journalism at Shantou University (Johnson, 2007, para. 17)

D-3. If we insist that students strictly follow Western conventions for textual borrowing and citation, are we arrogantly imposing ethnocentric cultural norms, as Pennycook (1994, 1996) suggests? (Casanave, 2007, p.

186, *underline inserted*)

Passage D is the third paragraph of Lee's complete essay, whose controlling idea is about cultural differences in the notion of plagiarism, as indicated in the second sentence of the paragraph. To support the idea of cultural differences in plagiarism, According to passage D, Lee is seemingly using four different sources whose authors are Bloch and Chi (1995), Johnson (2007), and Pennycook (1994, 1996) to develop his expository writing. The fact is that he has used two sources. One is Johnson's news article, as indicated in the passage, and the other one is from chapter 5 of Casanave's book whose focus is on textual borrowing. Articulating different aspects (e.g., defining plagiarism, cultural issues, Internet and plagiarism, and classroom aspects) on plagiarism, Casanave is addressing the viewpoints of Bloch and Chi, and Pennycook.

Examining Lee's incorporating these sources in his writing, he adopts his own particular pattern. The pattern is that Lee borrows the source information to construct his own sentence. Moreover, the sentence makes sense structure-wise, not meaning-wise. For example, Lee displays, "Chinese culture and rhetoric are based on collectivist ideas of social harmony," citing Bloch and Chi, and continues, "just as a Chinese scholar pinpointed "if my works are plagiarized or copied, that means my works are great." In borrowing Bloch and Chi's argument, Lee misuses their original intention. They are saying that "Chinese culture...social harmony" is the myth to be dismantled. Moreover, Johnson writes the clause, "if my works...great" in the context where Chinese government is making efforts to investigate misconduct in borrowing texts, but it is difficult to change writers' attitude. Johnson does not use the clause to support "collectivist ideas of social harmony." It is evident that Lee misuses the sources by distorting the original authors' intention and by creating his own invalid argument. Finally, according to the later part of passage D, it is implied that as globalization advances, the western culture influences the world. He might intend to address the norms of plagiarism influenced by the western culture. There are a few concerns in using the source, D-3. First, Lee is supposed to add some sentences between the proceeding sentence and the quoted sentence. For example, Lee needs to point out that the western influence reaches the point where the norms of textual borrowing in non-western countries follows those of textual borrowing in the western culture. Second, in the quote, "are western

people arrogantly imposing ethnocentric cultural norms to the rest of the world?" Lee changes "we" in the source to "western people," which makes sense, and adds "to the rest of the world" to his text. If it is a quote, Lee is not supposed to modify any words to quote the original text. In fact, the source that Lee attempts to quote is what Pennycook addresses literally, but what Casanave paraphrases or summarizes what Pennycook claims in his articles. Therefore, using a quote is inappropriate. All in all, the distinct pattern in Lee's textual borrowing is to create his own sentence and meaning while he is disregarding the authors' original intention and reinterpreting it.

### 3.5 Textual borrowing patterns with the other samples

Many other student texts can be categorized into the above cases in one way or another. Except for the above cases, there are a couple of other ways in integrating sources. One noticeable way is that some students used one source dominantly without citing it properly. These students used many sentences and ideas directly from one source, but the students cited them as if they had summarized them. In doing so, they used the voices of the original authors as their own. This is problematic in developing their own argument. Another way is that a couple of students patched many writers' ideas in one paragraph. It is said that synthesizing texts is key to academic argument. However, when the students patched many writers' ideas, students did not add their appropriate commentary or their understanding on their original sources.

However, not all of the analyzed texts were improper in borrowing sources. Some students' texts demonstrate that student writers summarize, paraphrase, and quote sources appropriately, although the quality of borrowing sources in relation to content and language differs. For one good example, in her text, May developed her argument about some factors of improper textual borrowings. Addressing informed opinion from John Dichtl's journal article, May intellectually uses the source to delineate her point. Part of May's text reads:

Dichtl (2003) reiterates peer behavior as one of them. A particular attitude plagues a classroom wherein if every student does it, then it must be okay for everyone to get on the act as well. He states, "...dishonesty is learned from peers and that cheating establishes a 'climate' in which 'the none-cheater feels left at a disadvantage'" (p. 368). This is

completely a no-win situation for both the student who chooses to commit plagiarism and the other who takes the higher road.

To give one factor of plagiarizing, May summarizes Dichtl's paragraph-long discussion about peer pressure on plagiarism within one sentence and adds her words for explanation. Then she quotes the scholar's key statement and close the plagiarizing factor with her opinion. This writing example shows that May is text-responsible in terms of the source content and language and she develops her thoughtful argument.

#### 4. Conclusion and implications

There were a couple of students like May who were text-responsible in the sense that they quote, paraphrase, or summarize sources properly to create their strong argument. The research findings, however, reported a number of distinctive strategies that showed the improper textual borrowings of many students. The strategies included: 1) *loose paraphrasing with dominant dependence on part of a single source*, 2) *lack of clarification about the sources' meaning*, 3) *misinterpretation of some concepts the source*, 4) *reinterpretation of the original sources*, 4) *improper citation*, 5) *patching many sources*. The students' argument with these borrowing strategies lacked the voice of student writers by letting the source speak or by pretending that the student writers own the content of the sources.

The close examination of student writing samples in accordance with the sources that the student writers refer to showed detailed textual borrowing techniques. The results reported that the strategies of borrowing texts were limited to several ones, not representing the twenty different ways in twenty excerpts from students' complete essays. These improper ways could be demonstrated to writing contexts where students are required to borrow texts in order to strengthen their argument. This demonstration before their writing could help students to become aware of some possible mistakes or errors in textual borrowing that they will be able to be cautious about.

It is undeniable that attention to textual borrowing or plagiarism is mostly in the western academic writing course, not in the Korean EFL context. However, researchers and teachers in writing courses, regardless of its context, cannot

ignore one fact. The fact is that reading is indispensable to develop a good written argument. In other words, there is “the fundamental relationship between good reading skills and good writing from sources” (Pecorari, 2008, p. 77). Good reading skills mean that students identify useful information from sources, and they understand them accurately. Otherwise, they are likely to misuse the points that original authors try to make.

In fact, the above fact is fundamental for Korean students to advance their writing. It is worthwhile for the Korean students to be educated about how to use other texts in order to strengthen their own argument. Since appropriate textual borrowing is contextual, researchers and practitioners in this context should be informed about the Korean students through research that can respond to, “What are apparent strategies that students use in textual borrowing in the EFL context, especially higher education in Korea? What are viable strategies to help students avoid plagiarizing texts and make a strong argument?” The results of this question will be conducive to Korean students’ progress in their writing.

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