

‘Reading and remembering?’ of ‘Reading and interpreting?’: A study of the use of sources by first year university students for whom English is an additional language¹

Celia Thompson, Janne Morton, Neomy Storch

School of Languages and Linguistics

University of Melbourne, Australia

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Abstract

Knowing how to use sources effectively often poses considerable challenges for first year undergraduate students for whom English is an additional language (EAL). In this longitudinal case study we investigated the selection and self-reported use of source materials by thirteen first year EAL undergraduate students from a range of disciplines enrolled at a major Australian university. This study addresses an under-researched area in the literature on the writing development of EAL learners over time (see Leki, 2007 and Storch, 2009). Our findings show that students at the beginning of their first year selected material predominantly from websites and that Google was the most popular search engine. The main criteria guiding students’ selection of sources were authoritativeness, ease of understanding and relevance. By the end of the first year, not all students (notably those from Engineering and Science) were able to report further on their use of sources, as they had not undertaken any research in the second half of the year. In contrast, students from Arts, who also tended to be more proficient EAL learners, continued to undertake research-based assignments and demonstrated an awareness of the role played by task type, argumentation and writer authority in their selection and use of sources. We conclude this paper by considering the implications of these findings for EAP pedagogy and future research.

Issues in the literature

- Power, representation and authorship in the processes of textual creation (Bourdieu, 1991; Foucault, 1984; Starfield, 2002; Thompson, 2005);
- Cultural differences in the use of attribution and sources (Pennycook, 1996; Thompson, 2009; Thompson & Pennycook, 2008);
- EAL students’ lack of linguistic resources (Currie, 1998; Storch, 2009);
- Academic literacy and disciplinary socialisation (Howard, 1996; Moore et al., 2012; Pecorari, 2003);
- Factors influencing students’ (mainly UGs) selection of sources: Availability, ease of understanding and accessibility (Burton & Chadwick, 2000);
- Availability of wide range of electronic texts pose further issues regarding formation of opinions, values, linguistic development (Plakans and Gebril, 2012), and ethics of scholarship (Stapleton, 2005);
- Determining nature of ‘common knowledge’ in specific disciplinary contexts is problematic (Chandrasoma et al., 2004; Wette, 2010);
- Paraphrasing and copying (Keck, 2006; Pecorari, 2008; Storch, 2009);
- Patchwriting (Currie, 1998; Howard, 1992; Thompson & Pennycook, 2008);
- Emergent authorship and student writer identity (Abasi et al., 2006; Angéllil

¹ A version of this paper is currently under review for a Special Issue of the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* on academic writing from sources.

Carter, 2000; Thompson, 2011);

- Literature highlights the need for studies into advanced writing development of EAL students over time (Leki, 2007; Storch, 2009; Storch & Tapper, 2009);
- Disagreement about how much research first year UGs are required to do (62% required to undertake research in Burton & Chadwick (2000) study of 543 students; Leki (2007) reported on little amount of research-based writing in her UG case studies).

Methodology

Research questions

1. What kind of sources do first year undergraduate EAL students select? Do these practices change over time?
2. How do students describe the ways in which they incorporate source texts into their research-based writing? Do these practices change over time?
3. How do students describe their authoring practices in relation to their use of sources in their research-based writing? Do these practices change over time?

Research design

- Longitudinal case study approach over a year;
- Five interviews with each student were scheduled throughout the year; beginning, middle and end of Semester 1; beginning and end of Semester 2.
- Interviews were semi-structured and based in part on students' written assignments.

Research participants

Table 1: Students' language and study backgrounds

Name	Gender	First language	Length of time in Australia	Study Major	ESL subject
Colin	Male	Chinese	1 year	Engineering	Academic English 1
Helen	Female	Mandarin	1 month	Music	
Qing	Female	Chinese	1 year	Biomedicine	
Alicia	Female	Chinese	2 years	Built Environment	
Nhung	Male	Vietnamese	1 year	Economics & Commerce	Academic English: Economics & Commerce
Fenfang	Female	Mandarin	3 years	Economics & Commerce	
Kath	Female	Chinese	2 years	Economics & Commerce	
James	Male	Chinese	2 years	Economics & Commerce	
Alex	Female	Chinese	3.5 years	Economics & Commerce	
Judy	Female	Chinese	1 year	Arts	
Laura	Female	Portuguese	5 years	Arts	
Kelly	Female	Vietnamese	3 years	Science	
Yves	Male	Indonesian	8 months	Eco. & Commerce	

Data sources

- Copies of students' written assignments (once they had been

- graded) & relevant documentation;
- Transcriptions of interviews.

Data analysis

- Interviews 2 to 5 were analysed thematically (Interview 1 was not analysed as it focussed on introductions and providing clarification for the research participants);
- An initial broad set of categories was established based on research questions and iterative readings of the interview transcripts;
- Categories were applied to a subsample of the data that was coded by each of the researchers;
- Comparison and discussion established final set of categories that captured student responses and ensured consistency of analysis.

Findings and discussion

RQ1 What kind of sources do students select? Do these practices change over time?

Table 2: Source types

Source type	Interview 2	Interview 3	Interview 4	Interview 5
Web site	9	1	4	1
Subject provided materials: Lecture, course guides & Text books	8	5	5	3
Wikipedia	3	-	1	-
Newspaper/TV news	2	5	1	-
Journals /chapters, reports	3	4	7	1
Other e.g. videos, school book	2	-	-	-

Table 3: Criteria for selecting sources

Criterion	Interview 2	Interview 3	Interview 4	Interview 5
Academic/authoritative/reliable	10	4	2	1
Easy to understand	5	3	-	1
Relevance	4	2	1	1
Interest	2	-	-	-
Up-to-date	2	-	-	-
Accessibility	1	1	-	-
Type of information presented	3	1	1	2
Task type/disciplinary subject	-	1	-	4

RQ2 How do students describe the ways in which they incorporate source texts into their research-based writing? Do these practices change over time?

At the beginning of year

- To support students' own opinions (cf Plakans & Gebril, 2012);
- Used paraphrasing but: not always with reference; uncertain how to reference (see Angéllil-Carter, 2000; Pecorari, 2008; Storch, 2009);
- Unsure what constituted 'common knowledge' (cf Chandrasoma et al., 2004; Wette, 2010).

By the middle of year

- Used material to present range of ideas as well as opposing viewpoints;
- Students becoming more confident with referencing and realising that different disciplines require different citation styles (see Leki, 2007; Pecorari, 2008);
- Role of task type identified by one Arts student as influential in how she incorporated sources (cf Plakans & Gebril, 2012);
- Importance of analysing assignment title also noted.

By the end of year

- Some students constructed themselves as active participants in the research process, becoming more discriminating and focussed in their use of sources;
- Making notes and planning highlighted;
- Importance of field of study: Commerce subjects were about "picking up knowledge, reading and remembering" and Arts subjects were about "reading and interpreting" (Alex, Economics & Commerce).

RQ3 How do students describe their authoring practices in relation to their use of sources in their research-based writing? Do these practices change over time?

Beginning of the year

- Some students felt they were learning how to become academic writers and therefore could not yet be considered 'authors';
- Source text authors were 'factual' (Judy, Arts) (see Cassanave, 2002; Thompson, 2005);
- Author identity: "I had to change myself to write [for different subjects]" (Laura, Arts) (Abasi, et al., 2006);
- Textual ownership: "Sometimes author's ideas and [my] ideas come together, so it's not always clear who owns the ideas" (Kelly, Science) (Thompson, 2011).

Middle of the year

- "Being an academic author means [explaining] things clearly in a proper structure and a proper language use" (Yves, Economics & Commerce);
- "Sometimes you're more of an author [and] think that your opinion is important enough to be shown... I want to give my side of the story... I don't think I'm an author yet. I think it's a process" (Laura, Arts);
- Kelly felt able to organise and summarise her ideas with a reference, as well as being able to change the language of her source texts: "to make it my own sentence but keep the idea the same" (Kelly, Science).

End of the year

- For some students: Personal investment, confidence in the development and ownership of ideas, as well as critical analysis and copying;
- “I have my own opinion now. That has changed. ...I would like to impose myself more” (Laura, Arts);
- “I didn’t used to know that it was important to be evidence-based, ... now I have to research first before I develop my argument” (Judy, Arts);
- Kelly felt she played no role in constructing her texts: “[academic writing] it’s about putting other people’s ideas together; it’s about referencing and that’s it!” (Kelly, Science);
- At the start of the year “you’re basically describing the info”, Alex could now analyse information and “maybe make a judgment about whether it is useful or not and state my point of view”, although if the text was difficult, she would still copy rather than interpret, she said (Alex, Economics & Commerce).

Key finding

- Arts students were required to complete research-based written work in the second half of the year, this was NOT the case for students from other disciplines.
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Concluding points

- Internet use becoming more focussed;
- University-based search engine used to access discipline-specific electronic databases;
- Continued use of lecturers’ materials;
- Sources selected on basis of authority, reliability, ease of comprehension and relevance;
- Towards the end of the year a few students identified task and discipline as further criteria influencing their source selections.

Concluding reflections

Display or construction of knowledge?

- From incorporating sources that supported own opinions to evaluating sources from range of perspectives - but NOT all students;
- Most not required to undertake research-based assignments (apart from in their EAP subjects);
- Reading limited to textbooks & course materials;
- Focus on comprehension & understanding of key concepts NOT on interpretation & synthesis.

Support in the literature

- Leki’s research (2007) which highlighted lack of research-based writing across the disciplines;
- Recent study by Moore et al. (2012) of perceptions of academic staff about literacy demands of first year tasks, also found clear differences between more humanities-oriented and technically-oriented subjects.

EAP practitioners – followers or leaders in academic literacy development?

- This study highlights the importance of ongoing research into EAL students’ acculturation into disciplinary communities of practice;
- How does/should undergraduate pedagogy: Articulate with graduate attributes? Prepare students for postgraduate study? Contribute to the research agenda of our universities?

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