

## **Paraphrasing: an Essential Tool for EAP**

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The importance of providing explicit, proactive instruction of paraphrasing skills is endorsed in recent research as a way to help students avoid committing cases of plagiarism. This article reports a study of the effectiveness of the explicit instruction of paraphrasing skills in the ELP. Students' paraphrases are analyzed using a quantitative measurement and the interview data is analyzed descriptively. The results suggest that teaching of paraphrasing seems to have improved students' skills but not increased their awareness of the importance of acquiring appropriate text borrowing skills. Implications of the findings are discussed and it is suggested that all writing instructors help students realize that their skills are yet to be improved and keep reminding students that inappropriate paraphrasing skills may lead to plagiarism.

The spread of English as a lingua franca is increasing ever more in our globalized world, and the academic community is no exception. In today's global academia, the acquisition of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) skills can be considered to be an essential prerequisite for entry. Moreover, academic success is often associated with one's academic writing ability. In particular, the ability to appropriately integrate from other sources, among other skills in academic writing, is an essential part of successful academic writing (Campbell, 1990) because failure to do so may result in a suspected case of plagiarism, which is often interpreted as “academic dishonesty” in the Anglophone Academic Discourse Community (AADC) (Currie, 1998; Matalene, 1985; Pecorari, 2002).

Some research has investigated the issue of plagiarism from a cultural

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perspective (Matalene, 1985; Pennycook, 1996). These two studies report anecdotes concerning Chinese students' attitudes about writing from sources. Chinese students, who come from a collectivistic culture as opposed to Western individualistic culture, perceive plagiarism as an “imitation” (Matalene, 1985, p.803), which is considered to be a way to show respect for the author, free from any intention to deceive readers.

Although the influence of culture may be unavoidable in students' textual borrowing strategies, research shows that, even after being exposed in AADC, both first language (L1) and second language (L2) English writers still commit inappropriate textual borrowing (Keck, 2006; Pecorari, 2002) and Pecorari (2002) strongly claims that it is not something that stems from an intention to hide the ownership of the borrowed words.

Pecorari (2003) further maintains that acquiring text borrowing skills takes time and the learning process is not linear, and he advocates the implementation of a developmental stage where students are provided with step-by-step instruction together with ample opportunity for trial and error without severe penalty in case of suspected plagiarism. In fact, the idea of allowing for a developmental stage has been supported by many researchers (Currie, 1998; Howard, 1995; Pecorari, 2003). These studies suggest that it is very important to provide them with explicit, repeated instruction in text borrowing strategies, as well as raising their awareness about the possible danger of plagiarism which may be caused by inadequate citation. Also, as Campbell (1990) clearly states, the teaching of paraphrasing, among other techniques, is essential to help students avoid committing cases of plagiarism. Indeed, the teaching of paraphrasing should play a great role in making students' entry into the AADC an easy one.

Although the instruction of paraphrasing has been supported in much research as a way to solve students' problems with writing (Campbell, 1990; Keck, 2006; Pecorari, 2003), no studies to our knowledge have attempted to assess the outcome of the explicit instruction of paraphrasing.

The present study was designed to investigate the effectiveness of the explicit teaching of paraphrasing. The following are the research questions I had developed.

1. Does explicit teaching of paraphrasing skills help students acquire paraphrasing skills?
2. Does explicit teaching of paraphrasing skills help raise students' awareness of

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the importance of the skills?

### Questionnaire study

The study is based on the results of the questionnaire study we conducted earlier. The questionnaire contained 13 Likert-scale questions about students' background and experiences in learning English and 14 Likert-scale questions and two open questions regarding their perceptions and expectations about their English studies in the ELP. The questionnaire was administered to 81 students enrolled in spring term in the Reading and Content Analysis (RCA) classes taught by the author.

Results indicate that 71 per cent of the students answered they had not learned how to paraphrase before. This means that the remaining 29 per cent of the students did learn how to develop paraphrasing skills, which was somewhat surprising to us. Both of us had worked as Japanese high school teachers before, and so I knew from our experience that teaching paraphrasing was beyond the scope of secondary school English instruction.

One reason for such a response appears to be a lack of awareness as to what paraphrasing actually means. Because the questionnaire was conducted in the students' first language, Japanese, and the term "paraphrase" was translated to *iikaeru*, which is supposed to be the Japanese equivalent, it was only after looking at the results did we realize that the students might have associated the word "paraphrasing" with a common grammatical exercise in Japanese high school English instruction which calls for a simple conversion of sentences based on the learned patterns. For example, "I am too tired to run." should be changed to "I am so tired that I cannot run." There is only one "correct" answer and no variation is permitted, therefore it is only a conversion and definitely not an example of paraphrasing. Therefore, it may be said that those students were not even familiar with the concept of paraphrasing. To summarize, it may be said the participants had very little experiences in paraphrasing in secondary education, or had no idea what paraphrasing means.

It may have been much more desirable to design a study using a pre- and post-test approach. However, we were rather hesitant to assign a paraphrasing task at their initial stage of learning academic English for pedagogical reasons. One major one is a simple hesitation to ask them to do something that we could well assume they were not familiar with. Since they had no previous experience

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of academic writing and therefore novice writers, it is assumed the results of this study can still illustrate something about the effect of explicit instruction of paraphrasing.

### Methods

#### *Participants and procedure*

A total of 32 ICU students (20 male and 12 female) agreed to participate in the present study. They were among the 42 students enrolled in RCA classes taught by the first author, Oda. Among them, 21 were 18 years old, 9 were 19 and 2 were 20. All of them were born in Japan, and all students spoke Japanese as their first language. The students had been studying English for between 6 and 10 years, with the greatest number of students studying it for 6 years. All graduated from Japanese high schools. No students had experience of studying abroad. Thirty students entered ICU as first-year students and 2 students (1 male and 1 female) as transfer students in April 2007.

About one month into the academic year 2007, from late April through June 2007, students were given explicit training in paraphrasing skills. We decided to start at the time when students seemed to be more or less settled into their new lifestyle as college students after having gone through the initial stage of making transitions from their high school life.

Students were given the instruction in paraphrasing skills for a total of seven weeks. Acquiring paraphrasing skills is one of the objectives of the Reading and Content Analysis course (RCA) along with summarizing skills and others. RCA is one of the core courses in the ELP as well as Academic Reading and Writing course (ARW). It meets twice a week with one class lasting for 70 minutes. Approximately 15 minutes, or sometimes more, per one class were spent on the teaching of paraphrasing, and so at least 30 minutes' instruction each week was devoted to teaching paraphrasing in total. In addition, tutorial sessions with individual students, which constitute an integral part of RCA, mainly focused on improving paraphrasing skills. Also, students were given two homework assignments during the seven weeks. What kind of "explicit instruction" was offered to the students in class needs to be explained in detail. At the very initial stage, in the first week of the seven weeks, considering the fact that the students did not have a clear understanding what paraphrasing

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meant, the instructor prepared paraphrases of selected sentences from the text before class. During the class, the paraphrases were presented to the students and they were asked to find where the original sentences are from the text.

For the next three weeks, the students were divided into small groups of three or four and were given a group paraphrasing exercise. Students made the paraphrase together and one of them wrote it on the blackboard. There were five to six paraphrases for each original, and the instructor commented on them one by one. Without a doubt, acquiring such skills takes a long time and much practice (Campbell, 1990), and it is essential to provide them with a developmental stage (Howard, 1995), and therefore only supportive, formative feedback was provided to the students.

For the last three weeks, students were individually given a paraphrasing exercise in class and were asked to write it down on a sheet of paper and submit it to the instructor. The instructor returned it at the tutorial session and provided the feedback.

### *Data collection and analysis*

In order to achieve data triangulation, data were collected from multiple sources. First of all, a paraphrasing task was given to the students as a tool to evaluate students' paraphrasing skills and to determine how much progress was made? In the last week of the spring term, the students were asked to paraphrase two sentences selected from the two articles they had read during the term. They were given 30 minutes to complete the task (See Figure 1).

The data were analyzed using Pecorari's (2003) approach in order to provide a quantitative measurement. In his study on how widespread plagiarism is in the theses and dissertations written by seventeen writers who are MA and PhD holders from British universities, he counted the words being used in both original and student writing and divided it by the number of the words found in the students' writing.

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Figure 1. Paraphrasing task instructions

**Paraphrase the following sentences.**

In particular they will try to preserve their university as a sanctuary within whose walls any question can be asked.

Communication is not merely the desire and the responsibility of the scholar; it is his discipline, the proving ground where he tests his findings against criticism.

Second, using tutorial sessions, all participants were briefly interviewed to investigate their overall comments about their experiences in academic writing in the ELP in general and specifically about their perceptions about paraphrasing skills. We also asked the ARW instructor who taught the participants many questions about his teaching principles and his perceptions about students' progress. Although they were not the focus of this study, they were included for possible influence on students' perceptions.

### Results and Discussion

Research Question 1: Does explicit teaching of paraphrasing skills help students acquire paraphrasing skills?

In response to the first research question, the results of students' paraphrasing tasks were examined. Note that any discussion relating the issue of students' intention to plagiarize is excluded from the analysis because this is specifically a paraphrasing task and the students did not paraphrase intending to use it to integrate other people's work into their own. The rest of the discussion will only focus on the linguistic issue.

Table 1 shows that 100, 85, 70, 50 and 40 per cent of the words in the paraphrase were the words used from the original. Pecorari (2003) argues that even 40 % of the paraphrase consisting of the words from the original undoubtedly shows a sign of plagiarism and cannot be considered to be students' original wording. Based on this assumption, I presented the percentages of the students who have more than 40% of their words taken from the original.

For Paraphrase 1, the vast majority of the students (91%) had 40%

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Table 1

The words used from the original

| Words in common (%) | Paraphrase 1 | Paraphrase 2 | Pecorari's study (MA + PhD) |
|---------------------|--------------|--------------|-----------------------------|
| 100                 | 0            | 3            | 2                           |
| 85-                 | 0            | 6            | 10                          |
| 70-                 | 19           | 16           | 19                          |
| 50-                 | 78           | 50           | 35                          |
| 40-                 | 91           | 66           | 44                          |

paraphrase (Note that this is an accumulated figure and includes the above percentages of 50, 70, 85 and 100 % paraphrases). A large majority, 78 % of the students had 50% paraphrases but there are no cases for 85 and 100 % paraphrases. It seems that students did not commit heavy textual borrowing, but that most students could not help repeating the original words in more than half of their paraphrase.

Comparing this with the results from Pecorari's (2003) study, it is evident that the pattern of the spread is a little different from each other. None of our participants did heavy borrowing (85%, 100%) whereas more than 10% of Pecorari's (2003) participants borrowed excessively from the original source. It is striking that more than 10 per cent of Pecorari's (2003) participants borrowed more than 85% from the original, considering that they are MA and PhD graduates who are assumed to be well-versed in the conventions of AADC. Pecorari (2003) expresses concern about these students having successfully completed their studies and received degrees without ever acquiring proper skills to use information from other sources. The fact that our participants, who had only been exposed to paraphrasing instruction for seven weeks, seemed to be more careful about heavy textual borrowing compared to much more advanced academic writers needs recognition.

True, much higher percentage of our participants do commit lower level of unattributed source use with 78% of the participants having 50% paraphrase in Paraphrase 1, which might suggest a failure or the invalidness of explicit instruction in paraphrasing skills. However, for Paraphrase 2, the percentage pattern is very similar to that of Pecorari's (2003) participants, who are at a much advanced level in terms of academic writing. The difference of the percentage distribution may be attributed to the simple fact that one original sentence was more difficult to paraphrase than the other.

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To summarize, although the percentage distribution was different among the two paraphrasing tasks, it may be safely said that the level of inappropriate textual borrowing of our participants is not so different from that of more advanced academic writers.

Although this is only a small-scale study and the limited amount of the data makes it difficult to make any generalization, the participants' endeavor can be acknowledged in that heavy textual borrowing is about the same level if not lower compared with much more advanced academic writers, and however creditable their endeavor may be, that endeavor would be futile if the students were not equipped with any paraphrasing skills. Therefore, although the data is very limited, it may be said that the participants have displayed what progress they have made, though limited, from the seven weeks' instruction in paraphrasing skills.

Research Question 2: Does explicit teaching of paraphrasing skills help raise students' awareness of the importance of acquiring paraphrasing skills?

In order to answer this question, I asked each student two questions in interviews. The first question was "what have you learned from the writing instruction in ELP?" In order to elicit natural responses, I asked a very simple question. Student A says:

I think I really learned a lot about how to write a paper. I mean, how to organize a paper. For example, having introduction, body, conclusion and so on. It was really new to me. I never learned anything like that before. And you are not supposed to use "I" and "you" in a paper? I was surprised!

Echoing the above student's remark, a large majority of the students said that they had learned about the organization of a paper (30 students out of 32). They seemed to be overwhelmed by the fact that they actually had to compose a writing piece by themselves. This seems to stem from their high school experience in writing instruction. As has been revealed by recent research, teaching of writing not only in English but also in Japanese is extremely underrepresented in the curriculum of Japanese secondary education (Hirose, 2003; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2002). Student B remarks:

I had never written anything containing more than 200 Japanese alphabet

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letters since I was an eighth grader.

It can be said that writing a paper is such a new experience for them that throughout the course they were preoccupied with somehow producing a writing piece which should trace the academic code as closely as possible, and the main strategy they chose to cope with the situation was to focus their efforts on appropriating the organization of their papers. Nobody mentioned learning paraphrasing skills.

This tendency of L2 writers is endorsed in a study by Leki (1993). In her analysis of 77 ESL students enrolling at five American universities, Leki (1993) pointed out that students realized the importance of learning managing tasks skills, including paraphrasing skills, after their exit from ESL programs and had to face the reality of writing assignments of university mainstream classes. It may be that only after they actually started writing papers in their disciplines will they become aware that paraphrasing skills plays an important role in academic writing.

The second interview question asked about their perceptions about paraphrasing. In response to the question “what did you think about paraphrasing?” many students only briefly answered that it is difficult or that they had not done it before. Nobody elaborated on it, in contrast to very engaging attitudes many students showed in their response to the first question.

It is worthwhile noting that some students seemed to have developed perceived confidence in their paraphrasing skills. Student C and D say:

Student C: Paraphrasing? Yeah, I can handle that! Not so difficult.

Student D: I just changed the word order. No problem.

What seems to have increased students’ perceived confidence in paraphrasing skills after only seven weeks of instruction? One interpretation may be that it is a result of repeated practice. Much practice may have made them overly confident. Another explanation may be that the instructor provided only supportive feedback and formative evaluation, and no summative evaluation was provided, assuring a trial-and-error stage for students, as has been supported in research (Currie, 1998; Howard, 1995; Pecorari, 2003). Students’ excessive confidence cautions us that too much may not be enough. Therefore, although it is necessary to allow students to make trials and errors on the one hand, helping students become more aware of the importance and the

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difficulty of acquiring good paraphrasing skills on the other hand is also crucial.

### **Limitations of the study**

One important limitation of the present study among others concerns the validity of the measurement I used to analyze students' paraphrases. Researchers have used different approaches to evaluate students' paraphrasing skills, but despite their efforts, a reliable method has yet to be established. For example, Campbell (1990) classifies students' textual borrowing strategies into six categories including Exact Copy, Near Copy and Paraphrase. However, she admits that they are not clearly "separated" but they mark "points along a continuum" (p.216) and that there is a possibility that this evaluation can be sometimes subjective. (For an extensive review on this issue, see Keck, 2006).

In her analysis of paraphrases used in summaries, Keck (2006) focused attention on word links. She classified strings of words borrowed from the original into two categories, unique links and general links, depending on where the word link was taken from. Unique link means that the link was unique to the original passage. General link, on the other hand, was defined as "general" because it occurred not only in the original passage but also other parts of the text and therefore not unique to the original passage. This distinction is essential because unique links seem to represent what is unique to the original author's language use. Although Keck's (2006) method seems to be the most reliable at present, this analysis requires the use of the computer program developed by her and I could not obtain it, therefore we could not use the method.

We then chose to use Pecorari's (2003) approach, which was the only other method which can provide any kind of quantitative data. Although it functions as quite a reliable tool for analysis in many cases, we identified a few cases in which the measurement did not necessarily reflect the true quality of the paraphrase. The following is a case in which Pecorari's (2003) method does not seem to function properly.

#### *Original:*

"Communication is not merely the desire and the responsibility of the scholar; it is his discipline, the proving ground where he tests his findings against criticism."

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### *Example 1*

“Communication of the scholar is not only the desire [sic] and the responsibility but also his dicipline [sic] the proving ground where he tests his findings against criticism.” (85 %)

### *Example 2*

“Scholars should communicate with other people in order to rub their ideas.” (8 %)

Therefore, the method of using the percentage of the words overlapping has crucial limitations. It does not seem to function as a reliable tool when students did not closely trace the original and therefore ended up with a much shorter paraphrase than the original, or when they did not complete the task and only had fragments.

## **Conclusion**

Results are both encouraging and cautionary. It was very encouraging to know that students were able to at least acquire some of the basic paraphrasing skills from the seven weeks of instruction.

we realize, on the other hand, the importance of providing students with not only understanding and support but also with repeated caution that students are yet in the process of developmental stage. The results of this empirical study support the patchwriting model proposed by Howard (1995).

All writing teachers should keep in mind that it is of utmost importance to make them aware that “so little done, so much to do”, quoting Cecil Rhodes’ last words. His words indeed is a reflection of a difficult life he has lived, and acquiring paraphrasing skills is a long, not linear, on-going process which can also be very difficult. Our students need to understand it.

## **Acknowledgement**

The authors wish to express appreciation to Professor Eiichiro Tsusui for his professional research assistance in corpus-based analysis.

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