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Chinese graduate students paraphrasing in English and Chinese contexts

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ABSTRACT

Paraphrasing is based on one's comprehension and interpretation of the source text (e.g., Yamada, 2003). It is not clear, however, how English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) students paraphrase to project their individual views in their research papers when writing in English or their home language. This study compares the Chinese and English paraphrasing of 17 graduate students who speak Chinese as their first language. The participants (12 from a Chinese university and 5 from a North American university) identified 117 paraphrases (66 Chinese and 51 English) from their research papers and explained how they paraphrased each example. The Chinese paraphrases were found to contain significantly more textual borrowing from the matching source text than the English paraphrases. The former were not all acknowledged but the latter were. There were also a total of 80 mentions of content recontextualization (55 Chinese and 25 English). These mentions featured selecting information in the English paraphrases (24, 96%), compared with using the citer's own interpretations (17, 31%) and additional ideas (22, 40%) in the Chinese paraphrases. Implications of these cross-cultural differences are discussed.

1. Introduction

As a citation device, paraphrasing is to restate the source text so as to fit it into one's own writing. Compared with quoting that uses exact words from the source, paraphrasing allows the writer to rephrase the source text based on his/her own understanding and interpretation (Yamada, 2003). Since there is always more than one possible way of comprehending and interpreting the source information, which might go beyond the original author's intention, paraphrasing opens the window for research on the citer's spin on the original. If academic writing is a process of embedding one's ideas in the literature (Roth & Cole, 2010), paraphrasing can be seen as a citation device to achieve such embedding. Research, however, is needed to provide evidence of this textual practice.

To explore how paraphrasing is used to express one's authorial intention, it is interesting to focus on the practice of students. This is because students, as novice writers, might struggle to comprehend the source content (Sun, 2012), have problems of going beyond a linguistically oriented paraphrasing towards a meaning making process charged with one's own authorial intention (Hirvela & Du, 2013), or want to disguise their responsibility when giving opinions since academic writing

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holds the writer responsible for the truth of an assertion (Hyland, 2002). In addition, academic writing carries "a culturally constructed individualistic ideology" (Hyland, 2002, p. 1110) and many students who speak English as their second language (L2) may write or have written in a first language (L1) context (e.g., Chinese) where individual identity seems problematic if one tries to stand out of the group to make novel claims or face-threatening criticisms (Bloch & Chi, 1995; Hu & Wang, 2014; Mu, Zhang, Ehrich, & Hong, 2015; Taylor & Chen, 1991); where textual memorization and reproduction are indicative of a traditional literacy of hard learning (Hu & Lei, 2012; Matalene, 1985; Pennycook, 1996); and where "rhetoric books make no clear distinction among texts from direct quotation to paraphrase, from cited sources to uncited sources" (Scollon & Scollon, 1997, p. 94). Against the backdrop of these issues, this study explores how some Chinese graduate students paraphrase in their L1 Chinese-language writing and whether the relevant practice differs from their Chinese peers' writing in L2 English-language writing.

Chinese students' source-use practice has generated a considerable amount of research focusing on Chinese students' knowledge of and attitudes to plagiarism (e.g., Shi, 2006; Deckert, 1993; Hu & Lei, 2012), as well as their writing or textual borrowing practices (Currie, 1998; Flowerdew & Li, 2007; Li & Casanave, 2012; Li, 2006, 2013; Matalene, 1985; Pennycook, 1996; Wang, 2016; Zhu, 2005). However, only a small number of studies have explored the relevant issues (i.e. textual borrowing, citation practices, and expressing one's own opinions) by comparing academic or source-based writing in Chinese and English. To contextualize the present study, we review related studies which compare (1) English writing by Chinese students and L1 English writers, as well as (2) English-language and Chinese-language writing.

1.1. English writing by Chinese students and L1 English writers

One strand of research compared Chinese students' English writing with L1 English writing to identify non-native like academic practices. For example, Shi (2004) compared textual borrowing of a group of English majors in Mainland China and their L1 English peers in North America in the writing of a summary and an opinion essay with assigned source texts. The Chinese students were found to borrow many more words from the source texts without acknowledgement than their English counterparts especially in summary writing. The study suggests that Chinese students might not only lack the English language proficiency to assimilate the source text in their own words, but might also have their own cultural perceptions on acceptable citation practices. The implication of how student writers might be influenced by their L1 or Chinese way of thinking and writing was confirmed by Yang and Shi (2003) who noted, in their study of the summary writing processes of some Chinese MBA students and their L1 peers in a North American university, that one Chinese participant thought-aloud in Chinese and relied on his thinking and writing skills developed in Chinese writing while writing in English.

Language and cultural differences in expressing one's opinions were also evident in corpus-based studies that used L1 English corpus as a baseline for comparison with the Chinese ESL or EFL student writing. Of the relevant studies, Hyland and Milton (1997) examined hedges and boosters in the English writing of Hong Kong high school leavers and their L1 British peers of similar age. The study suggests that the Chinese were found to be less able to achieve an appropriate degree of assurance and probability than the British. Such a difference was supported by similar observations that, compared with L1 English writers, Chinese high school and college EFL learners were less likely to use epistemic devices such as *may, might, likely, possible (-ly)* or *probably* (Chen, 2010); Chinese English majors tended to use limited hedges and were more assertive (e.g., using "should") when making claims (Feng & Zhou, 2007); and Chinese ESL PhD students in applied linguistics were slightly less conscious of engaging with alternative voices in their theses (Geng & Wharton, 2016). Together, these findings suggest a limited academic competence among Chinese students in expressing their views appropriately in English writing. In fact, as Hyland (2002) noted in his study comparing the writing of Hong Kong undergraduates and L1 scholars, Chinese students consciously avoided self-mentioning in their project reports "to deny ownership and responsibility for their views" (p. 1107). Cultural specific views of authority highlighting an inferior position of student writers, as Hyland (2002) explained, might be one of the reasons.

1.2. Academic writing in Chinese and in English

Another strand of research compared Chinese-language versus English-language writing to identify whether there was an interference or transfer from one language to the other. Of the studies involving Chinese students' writing in both languages, Liu and Thompson (2009) contrasted attitude choices of a Chinese undergraduate writing an English and a Chinese essay. The Chinese text was found to have fewer *affect* and *judgment* items to avoid direct ethical or moral evaluations and disclosure of personal emotions for either face-saving or self-protection, which, as the researchers suggested, reflected a Chinese practice of language and rhetoric to achieve social harmony. Also comparing how Chinese students wrote in both languages, Yu (2008) explored how 157 Chinese undergraduates summarized an extended English text in both English and Chinese. The study found that summarizing the source text in the same language (English) allowed direct copying that might lead to a better-finished product. However, the Chinese summaries, in which English writing ability was not involved, were found to be a better measure of students' English reading comprehension than English summary writing. The study implies that reading comprehension is the prerequisite of successful source-based writing, and copying might signal L2 students' inability to understand the source text.

Unlike the above studies that focused on student writing in both languages, a few studies compared scholarly publications in Chinese and English by authors writing in their L1 in various disciplines such as educational psychology (Loi, 2010),