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## Students' practices and abilities for writing from sources in English at universities in China



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### ABSTRACT

We surveyed the practices and abilities of 103 students at 4 universities in China to write from sources in English, documenting in their first and second years of Bachelors' and Masters' programs (longitudinally and cross-sectionally): (a) students' self-reported approaches to writing from sources and instruction that had helped them; (b) the frequency, accuracy, and functions of citations in samples of their course papers; and (c) their abilities to summarize a reading passage under test-like conditions. The students wrote with some proficiency in English and emerging competencies in writing from academic sources, confirming, in this context where English is a foreign language, tendencies such as nascent senses of authorial identities and patchwriting documented in prior case studies of Chinese and other students writing at English-dominant universities internationally. Limited evidence for development from the first to second year appeared in undergraduate students increasing the frequency, accuracy, and functions of their citations, moving toward the tendencies maintained by graduate students in both years' course papers. In their second years, most students also reported greater success in acknowledging source materials and focus on formal aspects of writing course papers. Only half the students indicated they had taken courses that helped them to write from sources.

The majority of research on writing in second languages has been situated in educational contexts and societies where English is the dominant language (Leki, Cumming & Silva, 2008; Manchón, 2009), an orientation which Ortega (2009, p. 249) warned “propagates knowledge and pedagogies that may or may not be appropriate in so-called FL [foreign language] and other peripheral contexts.” The present study investigated the perceptions and abilities of students about their writing from sources in English in China, a situation where English is taught as a foreign or international language but is also used together with Mandarin as a medium

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of education in certain university programs. We focused on students' practices and abilities for writing from sources in English because of their crucial importance in higher education for demonstrating the acquisition of new knowledge in course papers and examinations and for establishing identities within academic discourse communities internationally (Ferris, 2016; Leki, 2007; Tardy, 2009; Wette, 2017). The scope and content of prior research on second-language students' writing from sources have been well synthesized recently in numerous comprehensive reviews: Cumming, Lai and Cho (2016), Grabe and Zhang (2013), Liu, Lin, Kou and Wang (2016), Pecorari (2016) and Pecorari and Petrić (2014). In a synthesis of published research preliminary to designing the present research, Cumming, Lai and Cho (2016, p. 47) established that ample empirical evidence has accumulated from contexts of first and second language education to be able to assert that:

(1) students experience difficulties with, but develop certain strategies to deal with, the complex processes of writing from sources; (2) prior knowledge and experience influence students' performance in writing from sources; (3) differences may appear between L1 and L2 students in their understanding and uses of sources in writing; (4) performance in tasks that involve writing from sources varies by task conditions and types of texts written and read; and (5) instruction can help students improve their uses of sources in their writing.

What have not been well documented, however, are the contexts, practices, and development of students' writing from sources at universities outside of English-dominant societies. China presents a notable context because of the sheer size of its population, continuing growth in language teaching programs nationally, and migration of students to study abroad (Wu, 2017). Within Chinese-dominant societies, writing in English for academic purposes is a skill to be acquired and also a medium for acquiring and conveying relevant knowledge (Hirvela, 2011; Manchón, 2011). As Wang (2016) observed, over the past two decades considerable research in China has focused on teaching and learning English writing as a skill to be acquired in undergraduate programs, but up to now little research in China has addressed writing in English that involves academic sources for knowledge acquisition or among students in graduate programs. Nonetheless, three fundamental notions have been confirmed about Chinese students' writing from sources in English: students adapt strategies to cope with the challenges of writing from sources in the second language; university students' abilities, knowledge, and attitudes about writing from sources vary greatly; and, in these respects, Chinese learners resemble other populations internationally acquiring advanced academic literacy.

## 1. Chinese students writing from sources in English

Insightful research has analyzed the challenges and accomplishments of individual Chinese students performing source-based writing in their initial academic courses at English-medium universities. Detailed case studies by Currie (1998) in Canada, Gu and Brooks (2008) in Britain, Hirvela and Du (2013) in the USA, and Li and Casanave (2012) in Hong Kong have analyzed how certain Chinese-background students with limited lexical and rhetorical skills in English managed to write complex assignments that involved new ways of reasoning about ideas and discipline-specific terminology from difficult course materials that they did not understand well. These studies have documented students' novice approaches to, relative inexperience and practice with, and limited prior instruction about the nuances and conventions for writing from sources for academic purposes. Like learners in any complex domain, discrepancies emerge between what students believe, know about, aspire to, and are able to do. For example, Hirvela and Du (2013) documented how two Chinese-background undergraduate students at an American university had been taught to and could paraphrase texts in English as a kind of mechanical linguistic exercise but were not yet able to perform the rhetorical knowledge transforming required to write challenging research papers. Gu and Brooks' (2008) long-term study of 10 Chinese-background students at a British university extended this perspective further, arguing that these students' learning to write effectively from sources for academic purposes in English was an emotionally-laden, developmental process of "cultural appropriation" involving "changes in their cognition, senses of identity and sociocultural values" (p. 337).

This research has highlighted students' practice of copying phrases verbatim or with minor rephrasing, synonyms, or grammatical alterations from source materials, variously called patchwriting (Howard, 1999; Li & Casanave, 2012), textual borrowing (Currie, 1998; Shi, 2010), or language re-use (Flowerdew & Li, 2007). Patchwriting and other novice strategies for writing from sources appear to arise as a coping or developmental strategy when students have limited lexical and rhetorical resources in a second language or unfamiliar academic genre, are overwhelmed by unfamiliar language and content, write in short periods of time from a small number of source texts or that are difficult or technical to comprehend, and have not yet established senses of authorial identity, confidence, or voice to express their own points of view about topics in relation to the authority of publications. Studies in Chinese universities have also documented tendencies for students to copy phrases in their English writing. In a quasi-experiment, Shi (2004) found students of English at a Chinese university copied significantly more words when summarizing two source texts, but "with no apparent intention to steal and cheat" (p. 191), than did native English speakers in a first-year composition course at a North American university. With more senior graduate students, Flowerdew and Li (2007) documented how formulaic phrases, terminology, and genre structures in scientific writing in English lead graduate students in China to a practice of re-using expressions in their writing for publication in ways that closely resemble, but which they do not believe constitutes, plagiarism. Like other students of foreign languages, Chinese learners' uses of patchwriting may be stimulated by language teaching methods that feature short reading passages with controlled vocabulary and genres that students are prompted to re-use as learning exercises (e.g., Wen, 2016).

As compelling as these case studies have been, the relatively few students investigated limit the capacities of the research to account for the considerable variability that exists, even within the same course and university, among Chinese university students and their abilities to write summaries of source documents in English. Yu's (2008) and Yang's (2014) large-scale assessments of Chinese undergraduate students writing summary tasks in English revealed enormous differences in their scores under test-like

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