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Second Language Writing From Sources: An Ethnographic 
Study of an Argument Essay Task

Mark Andrew Wolfersberger

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ABSTRACT

Writing from sources is a common academic task for L2 students in higher education. It is a task that requires the orchestration of numerous skills such as reading source texts, incorporating information from the source texts within the written text, and reading the rhetorical context to interpret the task. Being such a complex activity, it has received relatively little attention. Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate the complexity of a writing-from-sources task within an L2 environment.

Using an ethnographic design, I examined the writing of four Chinese (L1) students with varying levels of English (L2) proficiency completing an argumentative writing-from-sources essay task for a required writing class. The task spanned two and a half weeks and required the participants to cite five sources within a 1500-word essay. Over the course of writing, I interviewed each participant several times about their writing process, observed the participants during class, and collected all notes, drafts, and reading materials.

The results revealed the complexity of the writing-from-sources task. Constructing a suitable cognitive representation of the task was one key to success and there were a number of personal and contextual factors that influenced the creation of the participants’ task representations, factors such as individual background experiences, the writing process, and information from and interactions with the teacher and other people within the writing context. These factors varied in the strength of their influence from the beginning to the end of the essay assignment, and I present a tentative theory of task representation to explain the points at which these influencing factors had the greatest impact within the writing process.

Low L2 proficiency constrained the writing performance of some of the participants. This resulted in one participant avoiding elements of the writing task requirements in order to earn passing marks and two other participants producing plagiarized texts and receiving failing marks on the assignment. The two participants who plagiarized showed no ill intentions and, consequently, felt receiving zero marks for their writing efforts was unjust.
DEDICATION

They say that behind every good man is a magnificent woman. If this is true, then I must be a good man because my wife is absolutely outstanding. To my wife, Rebecca, who fills my life with joy.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Although a PhD thesis has been dubbed a “solitary” work, this is simply not true. Many people and organizations have contributed to this effort and the few acknowledgements that I can write here are certainly inadequate.

First and foremost, I must thank my supervisor, Rod Ellis, who shared his knowledge and expertise with me. At the outset, Rod told me that the project I was interested in was outside his specific field of expertise (although I did not then, and do not now believe any subject within even the far reaches of second language learning to be outside Rod’s expertise), but to Rod’s credit, he encouraged me to go forward with my project always offering sound advice and input, yet never manipulating my project to suit his preferences or interests. Rod always gave frank and particularly prompt feedback to drafts and other work I submitted to him. And regardless of whether his feedback meant I was off track and needed to make substantial revisions or I could move forward in my project, I always felt recharged and motivated by the depth and clarity of his insights. Thank you Rod. It has been a wonderful pleasure to work with you.

The teachers and students at AIS St. Helens, where I collected my data, also deserve a resounding “thank you.” The teachers of the Study Writing class were very willing to participate in my research, which meant they had to endure my constant classroom observations, asking about research participants, collecting drafts and other information, and reviewing drafts of my work, and they did all of this for no reward or compensation.

And the AIS students who were willing participants in my research also deserve my deepest gratitude. They allowed me to watch them in class, tolerated my constant follow-up about interviews and other data I needed, participated in numerous hours of interviews, and willingly shared information about their experiences, which were not always joyful or successful and occasionally deeply personal and emotional. This research is a tribute to these students and their quest to obtain second language academic literacy.

Another group of people who significantly contributed to this research project was all those who participated in the departmental graduate student research seminars. On numerous occasions, the graduate students reviewed my work in progress and gave me insightful perspectives on my data that indelibly shaped my project. And they were very accommodating to my persistent pleas to discuss my project. Rob Batstone can probably never know what a magnificent job he does with organizing and running these graduate student research seminars. He was consistent with organizing the seminars, allowed students to set the agenda so that it met their needs, and tactfully shared his expert and insightful perspectives on student presentations in a way that did not diminish any of the students’ viewpoints and allowed everyone to feel comfortable sharing ideas. This created an open and immensely helpful atmosphere.

I also need to thank the New Zealand Tertiary Education Commission who provided me with a Bright Futures Scholarship. This amazing and incredibly generous scholarship allowed me to focus on my study and research with very little worrying about procuring student fees and providing for my family while I studied. This made my studies relatively stress-free, which permitted me, I firmly believe, to learn far more than I would have otherwise. This scholarship, in every way, made my work possible.

Finally, these acknowledgements would be incomplete without recognizing the incomparable support I received from my family. To Nana and Granddad, thanks for filling in the emotional, social, and financial gaps while I worked long hours. But most of all, thanks for being a central part of Emily and Christopher’s lives. The relationships you built with them is worth infinitely more to me than the contents of the following pages.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research basically tells a story. And because this is a report of a qualitative research project, I will introduce it by telling a story, my story, of how I became interested in this research project. Telling my story will not only introduce the topic of the research, but it will also provide the reader with some insight into my background, which may help the reader better understand the conclusions I came to and better judge the validity of those conclusions.

My teaching and research have always been closely intertwined. When teaching, I frequently encounter situations that cause me to ask questions. Some of these questions then become the focus of my research in order to find answers. The answers I uncover through research then inevitably affect my teaching as I incorporate this new knowledge into my pedagogy. And so it was with this research project. It was born out of experiences I had while teaching that raised questions worthy of deeper investigation.

But before I explain the specific experiences that led to this research project, I need to explain a bit of my professional background. My research background began when I was working on a master’s degree in TESOL at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. While discussing with my thesis supervisor the range of possible research topics in applied linguistics, he suggested a topic focusing on the transfer of L1 writing process to L2 writing. The topic fascinated me and thus began my interest in L2 writing. I subsequently applied to teach in the associated intensive English program (IEP) at the university and was assigned to a writing class, which became my laboratory for informally testing my emerging ideas on my research topic.

After completing my MA TESOL, I was hired to work full-time at the IEP and became the coordinator for the writing classes. While teaching, I became disillusioned with the curriculum’s obsession with timed writing. Many students wanted to pass the writing portion of the TOEFL test, which then consisted of writing a 30-minute essay based on
personal experience and opinion, and the teachers were very obliging of this demand by almost exclusively assigning TOEFL-style writing. This raised questions in my mind about the relevance of such instruction to the students’ future academic goals and the washback effect of the TOEFL (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996). After researching the range of writing skills required of new university students, I helped change the curriculum in the upper intermediate and advanced levels of English proficiency to include, among other things, writing assignments that incorporated information from source texts.

After implementing the new curriculum, the teachers and I began to encounter some issues with which we did not have to previously deal. One of those issues was an increased incidence of plagiarism, possibly a predictable outcome given the shift in focus towards using sources in the students’ writing. In reaction, I consulted with the teachers and university guidelines to establish a zero-tolerance policy for plagiarism. Any amount of plagiarism, whether two sentences or two paragraphs, resulted in a failing grade for the assignment, or failing grade for the final exam portfolio. I helped put this policy in place with little investigation into the causes of the plagiarism but assumed, as most people might, that plagiarism was generally the result of academic dishonesty. I left the IEP feeling confident about that plagiarism policy. However, having completed this research project, which includes several investigations into the causes of plagiarism, I cringe at the thought of the plagiarism policy I helped create.

After finishing at the IEP, I found myself in New Zealand teaching writing at AIS St. Helens, a small private tertiary college with approximately 80% international students. When I first started teaching at AIS, the writing course, Study Writing, was a supplementary elective course and not required for a degree. However, because many of the international students struggled with meeting an acceptable writing standard, Study Writing was made a required course for all new students. This shift in purpose for the Study Writing course necessitated a change in the curriculum and I was designated as the person to reevaluate the curriculum and
make the needed changes. This led me to conduct a brief survey of written assignments given by lecturers at AIS, which showed that most assignments involved writing from readings. This led to the reorientation of the Study Writing curriculum towards writing-from-sources instruction, a familiar direction given the writing curriculum at the IEP I had just left.

At this point, having restructured the curriculums of two writing programs to include writing-from-sources instruction, I understood the importance of building writing-from-sources skills in my students. However, I wanted to know more about the difficulties students encountered while engaged in writing-from-sources tasks so that I could better help my students improve their writing skills and be successful in their regular academic courses. Thus emerged the topic for this research project: L2 writing from sources.

From a review of the literature, I was aware of some of the general obstacles L2 students face when engaged in a writing-from-sources task; however, I was very much interested in the student population that I was teaching. This, along with my preference to work closely with individuals, led me to an ethnographic research design, which allowed me to focus on the contextualized experiences of the four students who were participants in this research. The resulting research project, reported here in this thesis, was guided by this general research question:

1) What is the nature of individual L2 students’ experiences when engaged in a writing-from-sources task within an intensive academic writing course?

After I had collected the data and began a closer examination of it, two other questions emerged regarding how the participants constructed mental representations of the writing task and the causes of plagiarism in some of the participants’ essays. Specifically, those two questions were:

2) What factors influenced the participants’ representations of the assignment task throughout the process of writing?
3) What factors contributed to a participant producing a final written product that the teacher or the institution considered plagiarized?

This study, therefore, was a close examination of four students’ experiences while working on a writing-from-sources argumentative essay assignment. It examined these students’ reading and writing processes in relationship to the students’ backgrounds and contexts. And the study resulted in my reexamining the way I approach pedagogical issues related to writing from readings—specifically designing writing-from-readings tasks for the Study Writing class at AIS and addressing individual cases of student plagiarism.

The following chapters provide the detailed information on this study. In the second chapter, I review some of the research related to writing from readings. Some of the research is presented in order to delineate the research space into which my study fits, and some of the research I discuss provides background information to the topics that arose in my study, specifically task representation and plagiarism. Chapter three explains my ethnographic research methodology, provides background information on the four research participants and the context of the study, and details the analysis methods I used on the data.

Chapters four, five, and six present the results of the study. Chapter four contains four case studies, one for each participant, that provide insight into the nature of each participant’s experience while engaged in a writing-from-sources task. The case studies set the stage for the presentation of results and discussion in chapters five and six. Chapter five illustrates how the participants constructed a mental representation of the writing task throughout the two-and-a-half weeks of writing and concludes with a tentative theory of the factors that facilitate and impinge upon the task representation throughout the construction process. Chapter six describes ten factors that led to plagiarism in two of the participants’ final drafts as well as other issues surrounding the plagiarism, such as the participants’ intentions and the effect of receiving zero marks for their essays.
Chapter seven, the final chapter, summarizes the results from chapters four, five, and six and discusses the implications on the local context where the study was conducted. It also provides potential implications for other contexts that are similar to the one in this study.