“Why am I paraphrasing?”: Undergraduate ESL writers’ engagement with source-based academic writing and reading

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A B S T R A C T

One of the most common and vital areas of coverage in second language (L2) writing instruction is writing from sources, that is, the process of reading source text material and transferring content from that reading to writing. Research as well as everyday practice in the classroom has long shown that working with source texts is one of the most challenging of all academic literacy activities for L2 writers. This is particularly true in the domain of paraphrasing, an important and yet complicated device for the treatment of source text material. While the procedures involved in paraphrasing source text material may appear simple, the enactment of those procedures is a complex and often elusive experience for L2 writers. In this article we discuss a study of two mainland Chinese students’ engagement with paraphrasing in an undergraduate academic writing course, with a particular focus on their understanding of the purposes and functions of paraphrasing and how such understanding influenced their paraphrasing practices. Our results reveal a multilayered relationship between the students and paraphrasing and contribute to the paraphrasing literature by drawing greater attention to paraphrasing from students’ perspectives.

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1. Introduction

A key element in academic writing instruction is developing in students the ability to use source texts. This involves important connections between reading and writing: reading sources effectively to identify the most useful information for writing purposes, and knowing how, in the act of writing, to successfully incorporate that material into the text being created (Hirvela, 2004). Indeed, while writing from sources, students need to engage in a variety of complex reading and writing activities and make contextualized decisions as they interact with the reading materials and the assigned writing tasks (Kucer, 1985; McGinley, 1992; Spivey, 1990). Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) identify two key purposes underlying such source text use in the course of combining reading and writing. One is what they call knowledge telling, where the student writer demonstrates her/his ability to identify and present appropriate source text material in the course of displaying a broader ability to comprehend sources and address the topic at hand. The other is knowledge transforming, where the student writer uses source text material more substantively as a means to develop a larger theme or argument. In each of these domains the writer utilizes such core academic reading/writing techniques as direct quotation, summarizing, and paraphrasing. This is why Murray, Parrish, and Salvatori (1998) have asserted that these acts “are at the threshold of reading and writing” in academic settings and Campbell (1990) says of them that they constitute “processes that involve reading, understanding, learning, relating, planning, writing, revising, editing, and orchestrating” (p. 211). The underlying assumption

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in these perspectives is that acquiring the ability to make use of source text material in these ways is a challenging and important task encompassing a host of interconnected subskills.

For L2 writers, who move between dual (if not multiple) languages, cultures, and rhetorical systems and may not have received any L1 training in source text use as defined in Anglophone settings, such core activities as quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing tend to be especially demanding, as the growing body of literature addressing academic plagiarism attests. As such, they generally receive considerable attention in L2 academic writing courses, particularly at a time when there is a seemingly widespread perception that these writers often commit, whether willfully or unintentionally, acts of plagiarism while using source text material (Pecorari, 2003, 2008).

Despite being one of the most important means of writing involving source text material, especially in the act of summarizing, paraphrasing has received relatively little attention in L2 writing research. Thus, there is a need to look more closely at what happens when L2 writers engage in this complex act of source-based composing. In this article we discuss our qualitative study of two L2 writers’ engagement with paraphrasing during an undergraduate L2 academic writing course at a university in the United States. Utilizing such data gathering instruments as think-aloud protocols and text-based interviews, we examined how ESL writers attempted to understand and make sense of the purposes and functions of paraphrasing in academic writing, and how such understanding influenced their actual paraphrasing practices.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Contextualizing paraphrasing

While paraphrasing is one of the principal means by which writers capture the original words and ideas of other authors and, anecdotally speaking, appears to be commonly taught in academic writing courses for both native speakers and non-native speakers of English, it receives surprisingly little attention in both the pedagogical and research literature. A major reason for this is that it is often subsumed within summary writing (Hyland, 2000), as a recent definition of summarizing by Hedgcock and Ferris (2009) suggests:

Summarizing is both a reading and writing skill. Where reading is concerned, effective summarizing requires an understanding of the key ideas in a text and an ability to distinguish among main points (which belong in a summary) and supporting details (which typically do not). For writing, summarizing requires the writer to express the main points of a text she has read succinctly and in her own words. (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009, p. 185).

A summary, then, is a significantly condensed version of a longer original source text that requires the use of various devices in the process of achieving that reduction in length (for further discussion of summarizing, see Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005). Paraphrasing is one of those devices. Thus, it is connected to summarizing. A summary may thus contain paraphrases (but not be confined to them). Where paraphrasing differs from summarizing, then, is in how the primary goal of summarizing is achieved. In summarizing, the writer attempts to capture the key information in a source text by writing entirely new sentences in her/his own words, with one sentence perhaps expressing the same key information found in several sentences in the original text. In paraphrasing, the writer recasts individual sentences, creating a combination of original language and grammatical structures from the source text with some new words and grammatical structures. While summarizing seeks to condense source information by including the main points only, paraphrasing allows the writer to retain the same level of specificity as the original source text.

An important question to address at this point is: why should writers paraphrase at all, since such sentences could be quoted verbatim instead of being paraphrased. In fact, in much published academic writing (e.g., journal articles), direct quoting is found. However, an important marker of a scholar’s (or a student’s) understanding of a source text, especially a complicated statement by the original author(s) of the source text, is the ability to find a new way to capture the gist of what was stated in the original passage. For teaching and learning purposes, especially, paraphrasing, because of what it asks students to do with the original source material, provides insight into how well students read (since comprehension is the first step toward paraphrasing) as well as write. In addition to helping teachers learn more about students’ reading and writing ability, paraphrasing provides meaningful opportunities for students to practice close reading of target texts and language and thus enhance their reading and writing skills. In other words, paraphrasing is a form of learning, and a study like the one described here is, in essence, a study of learning.

Looking more closely at paraphrasing, Campbell (1998) describes it as “Using different phrasing and wording (requiring citation) to express a particular passage that was originally written or spoken by someone else, in order to blend the other’s idea smoothly into one’s own writing” (p. 86). Uemlianin (2000) offers this definition: “the reproduction of the information content and structure of source text” (p. 349), a process or set of processes in which, says Yamada (2003), students are required to engage in such important acts as inferential thinking and decision making as they generate meaningful and accurate reconstructions of what they have read.

Complicating the kind of decision making Yamada refers to is the still unanswered question of what constitutes a successful paraphrase. What does it mean to say that a student has captured the original content in her or his “own words”? What if mostly the same words from the source text are used, but in a new syntactic arrangement? What if some words have been replaced by synonyms, while much of the original wording remains? Where are the lines drawn in distinguishing between good and bad paraphrasing? What, in the final analysis, constitutes effective paraphrasing practice? These are the
kinds of questions writing specialists interested in paraphrasing confront and have not yet answered definitively as they seek to develop ways to help students learn to paraphrase successfully, and at the same time to help them avoid passage into the threatening, mysterious, and contentious waters of plagiarism.

Mediating much of the discussion in this domain is Rebecca Howard’s larger notion of “positive plagiarism” (1995) and the specific, learning-directed action she calls “patchwriting” and defines as “copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one synonym for another” (1999, p. xviii). She sees students performing these operations, with varying degrees of success, not as an attempt to deceive, but rather as necessary steps within a developmental framework that gradually leads toward greater command of the resources required for genuinely successful paraphrasing. She (2001) also points out that their flawed attempts at patchwriting/paraphrasing may also result from struggles with reading, another reminder of the reading side of the reading–writing equation operating within source text use. Howard’s emphasis on patchwriting as an important component of the learning process led Pecorari (2003) to the important observation that “today’s patchwriter is tomorrow’s competent academic writer” (p. 338).

2.2. Related research scholarship

To contextualize our study, we first want to briefly examine research of particular relevance to our work. These studies operate broadly from the larger framework of writing from sources, or what is also called textual borrowing, with a particular focus on summary writing and paraphrasing. While there has been important work in this area regarding native English speaking writers (e.g., Johns, 1985; Winograd, 1984), our primary focus is strictly on L2 research. Interestingly, the amount of L2 research in this domain is surprisingly small relative to the importance of textual borrowing in its various forms. Because so much of this small body of literature treats source text use, summarizing, and paraphrasing in overlapping ways, we look at a handful of notable studies that run across these areas.

Among the best-known earlier L2 summary research, studies by Johns and Mayes (1990) and Campbell (1990) were of a comparative nature. Johns and Mayes (1990) compared the summary writing of low and high proficiency L2 writers and found that proficiency level was not a factor in their engagement with summary writing; the task was difficult for both groups, with each group struggling to condense content from longer texts. Campbell’s study compared the source text use of native English speaking and ESL undergraduates, and she found interesting similarities and differences between the two groups. Regarding similarities, each group showed less reliance on the original source and more on their own words in the body paragraphs and then heavier reliance on the source material in their conclusions. Where they differed was in the ESL students’ much heavier reliance on source text material in their introductory paragraphs.

Sarig (1993) and Currie (1998) conducted single participant case studies of some relevance to the study we present in this article. Sarig (1993) was interested in the processes involved in what she called the student’s “reconceptualization” of source text material while summarizing in both his native language (Hebrew) and in English. She found that reconceptualization was a significant challenge even for a more proficient writer like her participant. She also found that there was little difference in the summarization processes he used with texts in his native language and in English.

Currie (1998) looked at the textual borrowing practices of a Chinese student, Diana, studying at a university in Canada. In a series of reading/writing assignments, Diane continued to rely heavily on direct copying from the assigned source texts, which she attributed to complexities arising from culturally based Chinese notions of source text use and difficulty in grasping all that an act like paraphrasing entails. Currie’s article is important not just in providing a close look at a student’s difficulties in successfully managing a task like paraphrasing, but also in the constructive light in which Currie interpreted Diana’s work. As she saw it, Diana’s copying and flawed attempts to paraphrase were part of a necessary developmental pathway she (like other L2 writers) had to follow: “it is possible to view Diana’s behavior as simply a natural consequence of her developing proficiency; in short, a way to manage, and one which in Chinese culture might have been a mark of scholarly achievement” (p. 10).

Pecorari (2003, 2008) has produced two important contributions to this field, especially in terms of addressing thorny issues connected to plagiarism. In her 2003 journal article and her 2008 book, she reports on the results of her study of 17 L2 writers pursuing post-graduate degrees at three universities in the United Kingdom. She looks in particular at the patchwriting (and thus their paraphrasing) in their thesis writing; indeed, she conceptualizes patchwriting as a form of paraphrasing. She breaks this patchwriting/paraphrasing activity into different types related to different student needs and goals, such as using it as a learning strategy. A key finding in her work is seeing paraphrasing (through patchwriting) “not as the process of finding an independent formulation to transmit the ideas in a source, but as a process of editing the source and changing its language” (p. 105).

Casey Keck’s (2006) article on the use of paraphrasing during summary writing, in which the work of L1 (n = 79) and L2 (n = 74) writers was compared, is one of very few studies to look specifically at paraphrasing. Keck put forth a very useful system for classifying paraphrasing, including Near Copy, Minimal Revision, Moderate Revision, and Substantial Revision. She also developed the term “attempted paraphrase” as a way of capturing developmental efforts on the part of some participants. Using this system, she found that the “moderate” and “substantial” revision types were more common among the L1 writers, while the L2 writers relied much more on the near copy” approach.

Also contributing valuable work in this area is Ling Shi (2004, 2008), who has researched textual borrowing among university undergraduates in Canada and China. Her 2004 study compared the writing of 39 L1 writers of English at a Canadian university with 48 L2 writers of English in China in two different kinds of tasks (summarizing and
developing an opinion) In her analysis of the students’ use of source text material, she found that textual borrowing was affected by both the task and the native language of the participants, with the summary writing task displaying more borrowed words from the source text and the L2 (Chinese) students more prone to copying, without attribution, material from the source texts in both writing tasks. Also valuable in this study was her distinction between “close” and “total” paraphrase.

Shi’s 2008 study, which focused on 16 L2 undergraduate writers (3 L1 writers and 13 L2 writers) at a university in Canada, explored the students’ textual borrowing practices employed while writing a research paper. The students were asked to identify and then discuss which types of textual borrowing they had employed in various instances of source text use. Shi’s study shed light on the complexities involved in students’ decisions about, and actual use of, textual borrowing approaches, including paraphrasing. An especially important finding relative to our study was that, when deciding between copying (for direct quote purposes) or paraphrases, a key element in the decision making process was students’ level of confidence about being able to represent source text material in their own words.

Finally, two recent works by Macbeth (2006, 2010) also contribute valuable knowledge about both summary writing and paraphrasing. In her 2006 article she discusses her analysis of 19 L2 undergraduate students’ completion of a summary writing task. She was especially interested in the first sentence of their summaries, where they were to capture the main idea of the source text. She found that most (15) were unable to do so, not only for reasons related to their L2 literacy abilities, but also because of what she called a “curriculum of judgments” related to the way in which the summary task was assigned, with many of the students struggling to navigate the underlying cultural assumptions accompanying the assignment, such as the treatment of main ideas. This impacted on their representation of the task of summary writing, in which they failed to fully grasp the deeper understanding of summary writing that was intended. This, in turn, shaped their approach to summarizing. As Macbeth observed: “It could be that they weren’t summarizing the article as much as following the individual steps to writing a summary in good faith, so that if they did so, summarizing would result. Their actions were practical and sensible” (p. 196). Thus, this “curriculum of judgments” restricted students’ understanding of summarizing, rendering it more of a mechanical process to them. It appeared to have the same effect on their paraphrasing.

Macbeth’s (2010) study also addresses summary writing (and thus paraphrasing as well as other textual borrowing practices) among L2 undergraduates at an American university, but this time through the use of models of what the students were supposed to produce, including what she called a “skeleton model” in which annotations in the margin of the model identify the various moves made by the author, including the use of direct quotations and paraphrases. Macbeth found that the models, when understood by the students as cases and not as correct answers, helped the students reproduce the kinds of sentences that they were expected to write, and in the expected order, but that issues related to attribution of source text material (such as correct placement of quotation marks) were not internalized, so that to some extent the models provided what she called “false provisions” of what constitutes effective source-based academic writing. In short, they failed to generate deeper understanding of what academic writing entails.

Collectively, this handful of relevant studies consistently shows that L2 writers struggle with using source text material, including while paraphrasing. In a related study of plagiarism, Hyland (2001) found that, among student writers, “After they mentally compare their texts with target ‘expert texts’, they may feel so overwhelmed by the distance between what they are expected to achieve and what they feel capable of doing, that plagiarism seems the most realistic strategy” (p. 380). This sense of being overwhelmed may also explain why, when they attempt to paraphrase, students likewise struggle, especially as they confront target language use that they believe they are incapable of producing as learners of that language as well as novices in the art of transferring source text material into their own writing, whether for knowledge telling or knowledge transforming purposes. The literature also suggests a point that emerged in our own research, as will be shown shortly: that students often fail to develop meaningful understanding of the value of an act like paraphrasing in academic writing in English. Even when they learn the rules or procedures for source text use, they struggle to take the next step, which is internalizing a conceptual understanding of the ways in which a tool like paraphrasing adds value to their writing. In short, many students fail to recognize its importance as an academic writing strategy. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that they feel reluctant to paraphrase.

Collectively, research in this area has consistently shown that the broader act of summarizing and the more specific act of paraphrasing are problematic for L2 writers. What it has not yet revealed in any meaningful way is why this is the case. For the most part, researchers have followed a product-oriented approach and so have tended to focus on comparisons of the texts produced by students (the actual wording of their summaries and paraphrases) with the original source texts they worked from. Limited attention has been directed to what we noted earlier: the learning dimension of an act like paraphrasing. This is because paraphrasing has not been examined extensively from the students’ perspectives or from a process-oriented perspective. Thus, little is known about how L2 writers actually approach paraphrasing. To shed light on this crucial aspect of paraphrasing, and to contribute an emic perspective to the existing literature on paraphrasing, the study described here—a study of learning, as noted earlier—examined the learning experiences of two undergraduate L2 writers and sought to answer the following research questions:

1) How do the two participants understand the purposes and functions of paraphrasing in English academic writing?

2) How does their understanding influence their actual paraphrasing practices?
3. Methodology

3.1. Research context and site

The findings reported in this article are based on a larger study which investigated how novice ESL writers learn and practice paraphrasing, and how they apply the skill to source-based writing tasks in an advanced L2 academic writing course. The study took place in 2011 at a comprehensive mid-western university in the United States, where a large number of international students enroll in various undergraduate programs every year.

The ESL composition program at the university offers a three-course sequence that aims to equip these undergraduate L2 learners with academic writing skills necessary for them to succeed in mainstream courses across the curriculum, and the target course under study is the last one in the sequence, the focus of which is on incorporating sources into writing. The major assignments of the course include a short research paper and a long research paper, with paraphrasing being taught and practiced (via exercises as well as the papers) throughout the course to help students develop the ability to appropriately and effectively integrate source information into their own writing.

3.2. Participants

The participants examined in this article, as well as the larger study from which this article is drawn, were undergraduate students from China. The study focused on Chinese students given the fact that they constitute the largest percentage of international undergraduate population at the university and are a growing population at many Anglophone universities. They were also chosen because of important differences in the use of source texts in formal Chinese and English writing, differences that could play an important role in such students’ attempts to learn how to paraphrase in English. The two students we focus on in this article, Chuck and Wendy (pseudonyms), were selected because differences as well as similarities in their engagement with paraphrasing are representative of what occurred across the larger group of participants and at the same time provide an especially meaningful look at the learning experiences associated with paraphrasing.

With respect to their backgrounds, as Table One below shows, each had completed some university level study in China, while they differed in terms of the focus of their academic studies: business and the arts (Table 1).

3.2.1. Educational background of Chinese undergraduate students

In addition to knowing about the participants themselves, it is important to understand the background they came from. International undergraduate students from China studying in U.S. universities, both freshmen and transfer students, tend to have extensive writing experience in Chinese, as they are regularly assigned writing tasks in Chinese lessons required at elementary, middle and high school levels. Free writing, narrative or argumentative in nature, appears to be the most common type of Chinese writing task at school. Often, students are given a broad topic and asked to develop a coherent essay around it based on their own understanding or experience. They are not expected to work with sources, but encouraged to “decorate” their essays with well-known anecdotes of famous historical figures as well as classic lines from literary works.

As for English writing, most students have relatively little experience with it, since the English lessons offered at school tend to focus on vocabulary, grammar and reading while providing limited opportunities for learners to practice writing. In fact, high school students in China are only required to be able to write a very short paragraph in English (approximately 150 words), where they describe a picture or a photo, or compose a brief bulletin notice, following the guidelines of the high-stakes National College Entrance Exam. In such tasks, students are expected to demonstrate their ability to utilize accurate vocabulary and a variety of complex sentence structures to generate a coherent paragraph, the content of which is normally provided in the guiding instructions. The special emphasis of the English writing requirements on the accuracy and complexity of language continues in the general English courses offered at the college level. As a result, students transferring from Chinese universities also do not have much English writing experience, just like the true freshmen participants in this study who have no prior college experience. When beginning their college life in the American university, both freshmen and transfer students have little or no idea of why and how to incorporate sources into their writing, and most of them are not familiar with the concept of paraphrasing. Also worth noting here is that there is not an exact term in Chinese for paraphrasing. Thus, quite a number of Chinese undergraduate students may not even have heard about the term before and find it difficult to identify an equivalent concept of paraphrasing in Chinese.

3.3. Data collection

The data reported in this article were mainly collected from two sources. One was think-aloud protocols in which the students revealed their decision making processes and their paraphrasing practices as they occurred. Regarding the think-alouds, although controversy still exists about their effectiveness as a data collection technique, this method was deemed appropriate for the study

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Major</th>
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<tr>
<td>Chuck</td>
<td>Business administration</td>
<td>Transfer student (sophomore)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wendy</td>
<td>Visual design</td>
<td>Transfer student (sophomore), originally an accounting major in China</td>
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because of the way it allows researchers to gain a closer look at participants’ thought processes and composing practices. In a study of learning like ours, this closer look was essential. During the think-alouds, the student participants were asked to paraphrase a short paragraph taken from their current assigned readings and verbalize their thoughts as they paraphrased. Three rounds of think-aloud protocols were arranged at the beginning, middle and the end of the term with the aim of increasing the consistency of data collected and tracking possible changes that occurred in participants’ paraphrasing practices.

Another major research method used in this study was text-based interviews. Toward the middle of the term, the students began utilizing paraphrasing as a way to integrate source information into research paper assignments, which constituted the most significant learning experience in the course. Drafts of the participants’ papers were collected and used as the basis for generating interview questions. Here they were asked to describe the decisions they had made while paraphrasing for their papers (e.g. what to (or not to) paraphrase, when to (or not to) paraphrase, why paraphrase) and to explain their perceptions about the roles that paraphrasing played in their writing in order to explore the reasons why they chose to do what they had done. During the think-alouds and the text-based interviews, the participants spoke in their native language, Chinese, which was also the native language of the second author.

3.4. Data analysis

Examining how novice L2 writers understand the purposes and functions of paraphrasing and how such understanding influences their actual paraphrasing practices, this research sought to provide “thick description and grounded interpretation” (Prior, 1995, p. 321) of L2 learners’ paraphrasing experiences in their academic writing development. For data analysis, the commonly used iterative and progressive data analysis method was employed. The think-aloud protocols and text-based interviews were transcribed, and data was coded and categorized relative to the focus of the research questions. To achieve triangulation for the study, patterns generated through the analysis of different data sources were compared and contrasted, seeking to unveil overlaps as well as inconsistencies.

We were especially interested in how their accounts of their learning experiences correlated with two important constructs discussed briefly earlier: Bereiter and Scardamalia’s (1987) distinction between knowledge telling and knowledge transforming. Because the students were eventually required to engage in research-based writing, where there was an expectation to develop an idea and not simply report the ideas of others, we felt that it was important to explore the extent to which they approached paraphrasing from each perspective. This would provide an additional lens through which to break down how they dealt with paraphrasing. We also felt that this was consistent with the aims of the course, where the paraphrasing exercises students performed involved knowledge telling in the sense of a focus strictly on accurately representing what the original text said, with no need to look at the material in any larger context. By contrast, later in the course, when the students moved to research paper writing, their paraphrasing efforts were expected to be connected to a larger meaning making process. What was paraphrased had a purpose beyond decontextualized rearranging of sentences. We felt this placed such paraphrasing in the domain of knowledge transforming, though that term (and knowledge telling) was not included in any of the instruction the students received. A key argument we make in the remainder of this article is that the knowledge telling/knowledge transforming distinction is a valuable one in attempting to understand L2 writers’ attempts to learn paraphrasing.

4. Findings

In this section we present the findings through two individual cases so as to draw attention to the experiences of each of the participants. Cross-case analysis occurs within and after the case presentations.

Our analysis suggests that the following themes emerge from these cases, and that they shed valuable light on the knowledge telling/knowledge transforming dichotomy that we argued earlier can be a useful tool in understanding L2 writers’ engagement with paraphrasing.

First, instruction and related learning activities that foreground paraphrasing as a decontextualized mechanical process of rewording and grammatical rearrangement, i.e., as a type of knowledge telling, create a double-edged sword. On the one hand, our participants learned how to execute these moves and were comfortable doing so. On the other hand, they placed little value on this learning and consequently saw no real function for paraphrasing as an academically mediated action.

Second, the transition from knowledge telling to knowledge transforming is a complex one that students cannot be expected to grasp on their own. Our results suggest that they are likely to lock onto a strictly knowledge telling oriented view of paraphrasing unless explicitly taught how to see paraphrasing as knowledge transforming as well. The emphasis on knowledge telling along not only leads to an impoverished view of paraphrasing and subsequent disinclination to try to learn more about it, but may also promote the kind patchwriting that many teachers see as unacceptable for one reason or another. In short, there is a need for L2 writing teachers to foreground knowledge transforming while teaching paraphrasing if they wish to see students employ it for deeper meaning-making purposes.

We illustrate these themes in the presentation of the cases and in the discussion that follows them.

4.1. Chuck

Chuck, the Business Administration major who had transferred from a university in China, had not been taught about paraphrasing when he was in China. He was one of the best writers in the class, having performed extremely well in most
quizzes and in-class exercises about paraphrasing. In fact, his paraphrases were often selected by the instructor to display as exemplars of the common features characterizing good paraphrases. In other words, he had developed a command of paraphrasing as knowledge telling. According to Chuck, capturing the gist of a source sentence or two was not difficult; how to represent the linguistic subtlety was what he considered the most important marker of a good paraphrase. During the think-aloud protocols and text-based interviews, Chuck repeatedly emphasized the importance of “linguistic faithfulness” to the original sources. As he put it, “a critical issue here with paraphrasing is to accurately express the details [linguistically]”. To him, linguistic manipulation was what paraphrasing entailed in essence. This understanding led him to pay special attention to maintaining the complexity of the sentence structure and word choices while working on the course’s paraphrasing exercises.

To illustrate his knowledge telling practices, when asked to paraphrase the following sentence, “One of the implications of these findings is that episodes of rejection or relationship dissolution can be just as damaging and debilitating as episodes of physical pain to the person experiencing them” (Eisenberger, 2011, p. 182), Chuck produced the following paraphrase: “According to Naomi Eisenberger (2011), the negative effect on physical health caused by social rejection or problems of relation is to a great extent similar to that of physical pains.” As is revealed by the think-aloud protocol, he spent a great deal of time deciding what sentence structure would be appropriate to use in his paraphrase in order to retain the parallelism “...as...as” in the source sentence. When paraphrasing, Chuck was keenly aware of the necessity of using a complex sentence structure so that the quality of his paraphrase was not compromised in terms of style. Also, he spent an extra amount of time during the think-aloud protocol debating with himself about whether certain words or phrases that he decided to use in his paraphrase faithfully represented the tone of the source text author. In his paraphrase, he deliberately added the phrase “to a great extent” to capture the level of certainty conveyed by the modal verb “can” in the original sentence. As an example of the care he took in retaining fidelity to the original language in the text, he was quite dissatisfied with the part of his paraphrase where he used “negative” to replace “damaging and debilitating,” as he believed that “negative” denotes a weaker tone and is not as specific and informative as “damaging and debilitating,” thus making his paraphrase less accurate.

Because of his efforts during the paraphrasing exercises in minimizing the syntactic and lexical distance between his paraphrase and the source sentence, Chuck was able to produce paraphrases that closely represented the original source information. In short, he excelled at paraphrasing for this more restricted knowledge telling purpose. His paraphrases were often considered by the instructor of the course as demonstrating a high level of linguistic competence.

However, when it came to paraphrasing for research paper writing (i.e., knowledge transforming), Chuck seemed quite reluctant to utilize the knowledge telling skill that he had demonstrated in the short paraphrasing exercises. Although he generally excelled at maintaining linguistic faithfulness in short paraphrasing exercises, he encountered difficulties doing so when working with longer source texts for his research paper writing. As he started reading academic articles related to the topic that he had chosen for his research papers, Chuck became overwhelmed by the technical content and the large number of unfamiliar terms he encountered, and found it challenging to apply the paraphrasing strategies that he developed in short exercises to research paper writing. In addition, he reported that when interacting with longer source texts, he was occasionally confused about the authors’ purposes for including certain information, and therefore unsure whether the way in which he rephrased the information in his paraphrases indeed captured the author’s original intention. In short, when expected to engage in knowledge transforming, he was at a loss.

For short paraphrasing exercises, Chuck emphasized the importance of maintaining the subtle meaning expressed by specific linguistic devices. This was made possible by the decontextualized nature of that activity. For research paper writing, however, when paraphrasing had to take place within a context (knowledge transforming) and the source text material being paraphrased was more complicated because it was embedded within a larger communicative framework (as opposed to the decontextualized sentences of the paraphrasing exercises), he realized that sometimes he was only able to vaguely grasp the general points of an article, and thus unable to work out quality paraphrases that contained specific and detailed information as he had done so well for the short paraphrasing exercises. Because of this, he considered what he produced “something in-between paraphrasing and summarizing, something more like [one’s] own explanations.” This is a very interesting hybridized view of paraphrasing, and it suggests that Chuck, despite his fundamentally negative attitude toward paraphrasing, was spending some time thinking about it.

Despite his relative success in short paraphrasing exercises, Chuck became frustrated with the use of paraphrasing for research paper writing, concluding in the end that paraphrasing was simply not the best option to use while writing a research paper. In other words, as he encountered this more demanding knowledge transforming dimension of paraphrasing, Chuck’s inclination was to abandon paraphrasing rather than attempt to push himself to a new level of paraphrasing ability. This, we maintain, is where paraphrasing instruction is especially crucial. Teachers need to return to teaching paraphrasing skills (for knowledge transforming purposes) and not assume that students can easily transfer the ability they encountered when introduced to paraphrasing as a knowledge telling device.

As a novice L2 writer who was unfamiliar with the conventions commonly associated with English academic writing, Chuck eventually considered paraphrasing a useless skill and a risky practice that did not bring any particular value to his research paper writing. Indeed, he feared that it could easily result in plagiarism, with severe consequences to follow. He did acknowledge that, compared with quoting, paraphrasing allowed more flexibility, as it enabled him to selectively include information relevant to his topic; however, he still placed little overall value on it. This is what we characterized earlier as an impoverished view of paraphrasing, one confined to the useful but limited domain of knowledge telling.
Chuck’s restricted attitude toward paraphrasing is further illustrated in his belief that direct quoting was a more effective and safer choice for research paper writing. According to him, quoting allowed him to incorporate source information and stay away from plagiarism. From his perspective, strategic quoting better served the purpose of including sources into his papers, in that it ensured the specificity, technicality and authority of the information. Through the use of quoting, Chuck believed that he no longer had to worry about how to tackle the technical terms and maintain the original tone of the source texts, since he was presenting the source information in the authors’ original words. In addition, he believed that including direct quotes written by published academic writers added an authoritative touch to his papers. As he put it, using the wording of experts helped him to “intimidate readers, to show them that [he] reads a lot and knows stuff that sounds complicated.” Compared with paraphrasing, Chuck considered quoting a far more useful skill for his research papers.

Here we see, on the one hand, that Chuck embraced direct quoting as another, and easier to manage, form of knowledge telling. As he saw it, quoting achieved the same ends as paraphrasing, with less effort required and reduced danger of unacceptable patchwriting or plagiarism. On the other hand, unlike paraphrasing, Chuck also seemed to visualize, and to at least partially accept, a knowledge transforming role for quoting that he never acknowledged for paraphrasing. Perhaps because the cognitive demands of quoting are easier than those for paraphrasing, he was better positioned to take a deeper look at what could be achieved via quoting, as shown in his comments about intimating readers and demonstrating his reading ability.

To further illustrate Chuck’s engagement with paraphrasing in research paper writing, we will look at an instance during the composing of his long research paper where he was addressing the relationship between correlation and causation. Attempting to answer a question about whether causation can be deduced from correlation, Chuck directly quoted (rather than paraphrased) the following sentence, “But the answer to the strict question remains ‘no’ (Stigler, 2005, p. 1)” as the response to the question. In an interview, he explained that the reason why he kept this seemingly simple sentence in his paper rather than paraphrasing it was that this line conveyed the firm negative tone of the original author, and paraphrasing would not allow him to maintain the same tone. As he said, “If this is something just from me, people will not believe it.” Here, again, Chuck was unable to view paraphrasing beyond a knowledge telling dimension. In this instance, when he had to establish some authorial presence, i.e., engage in a moment of knowledge transforming, he opted for the simpler act of direct quoting.

Looking across Chuck’s paraphrasing experiences and comments about them in the interview and think-aloud data, we can see that, as a Chinese student coming from a different rhetorical background, he found it difficult to fully understand the purposes and functions of paraphrasing in research paper writing, despite his seemingly successful attempts at the practice in short exercises. That is, his understanding of paraphrasing was confined to a knowledge telling function. To him, paraphrasing is simply “a legitimized form of plagiarism,” since all the information is still taken from a source. In fact, when asked why he thought paraphrasing was taught in the course as a major skill, Chuck said that the main reason was to avoid plagiarism, which could be easily achieved through the use of direct quoting. This comment raises an important point about paraphrasing instruction. When framed in connection with plagiarism, rather than as a productive academic writing activity serving knowledge transforming purposes, such instruction is likely to lead students to the kind of impoverished view that Chuck had adopted. This suggests that teachers, like students, need to understand what paraphrasing can achieve in a more ambitious knowledge transforming role. This may be especially true for students like Chuck, for whom paraphrasing was a truly foreign writing activity. Having no previously established paraphrasing schema to draw upon, students like Chuck will need especially well conceptualized and skillfully delivered paraphrasing instruction if they are to construct a fuller view of what can be achieved through paraphrasing.

In the end, even though he was good at short paraphrasing exercises assigned by the teacher, Chuck did not actively utilize the skill as a strategy to incorporate source information into his papers. Reluctant to paraphrase for research paper writing, Chuck equated the practice with a sense of ineffectiveness and powerlessness (in the eyes of his readers) that he found unacceptable. At the same time, it appears that he had never really developed a sense of the value to academic writing that accompanies good paraphrasing. It was simply one option available to him, with no outstanding features that caused it to stand above other options, such as direct quoting. It would seem that, from a technical perspective, he could have transferred his paraphrasing skills from the completion of exercises (knowledge telling) to the writing of papers (knowledge transforming), but at a conceptual level he failed to see the full value of paraphrasing in academic writing in English.

## 4.2. Wendy

Wendy was a transfer student originally majoring in accounting who had decided to pursue a major in visual design after she came to the United States. Unlike Chuck, who was never introduced to paraphrasing before he came to the United States, Wendy had heard of the term in her high school English classes in China. As she recalled, one of her English teachers would often ask students to orally paraphrase a difficult sentence or two taken from the texts that they were reading and check whether students had understood key vocabulary, colloquial expressions, and complex sentence structures. In this case, paraphrasing was employed strictly for instrumental purposes as an informal testing technique to monitor students’ development of language proficiency. In other words, it performed a kind of knowledge telling function. Because of this experience, Wendy developed her understanding of paraphrasing as “interpretation in English,” which aimed to “assess one’s language ability.” In fact, when interviewed at the beginning of the term, Wendy said that she was rather surprised to find out that the teacher of the composition course introduced paraphrasing as a writing strategy instead of a tool to assess her English proficiency.
In general, Wendy perceived paraphrasing as a linguistically-oriented practice that required a high level of English proficiency. At the beginning of the term, Wendy felt quite insecure when she was asked to complete paraphrasing tasks, as she was afraid that making too many linguistic changes would lead to an unfaithful representation of the information presented in the source texts. As she repeatedly pointed out in the interviews, she preferred to adopt “a conservative way of paraphrasing,” where she would follow the original sentence structures and try to make minimal changes linguistically. According to her, a paraphrase that looked too different in terms of wording gave her the feeling that she was “doing something wrong.” One question that she wrestled with throughout the course regarding paraphrasing practices was how far she could and should go when making linguistic changes in source text material, and she did not seem to find a satisfactory answer by the time she finished the course. It appears that Wendy was unable to distance herself from the assessment-oriented view of paraphrasing she had been taught in China, thus locking her into a narrowly constructed knowledge telling view of paraphrasing activity. This attests to the power of the initial paraphrasing instruction students are exposed to and the need for that instruction to provide a more inclusive view of paraphrasing than a decontextualized process of rearranging and replacing words.

As an international student, Wendy was very conscious, during the interviews, of her non-native writing style and regularly commented on her lack of vocabulary and inability to utilize colloquial expressions and complex sentence structures. She emphasized her belief that her English “was really poor,” and therefore was not confident about using her own words to paraphrase the sentences that she considered “elegantly written” by the original authors. Because of this, Wendy often chose to retain original words and phrases that she believed to represent an elevated language style. For instance, when she was working on a short paraphrasing task based on the following sentence “Perhaps more important, the incorporation of neuroscience into the study of decision making may change how we define patterns of behavior” (McClure, 2011, p. 124), she decided to keep the phrase “the incorporation of neuroscience,” as she thought that the word “incorporation” in the original sentence “sounds sophisticated.” An interesting feature of Wendy’s was that she was an avid learner, and she tried to improve her language proficiency through the source texts by actively using certain terms and sentence structures taken from the sources in her paraphrases, and it was through paraphrasing that she was able to notice the stylistic differences between source texts and her own writing. Thus, she had a strong association between language learning and paraphrasing. According to her, she would always compare her paraphrases with the original sentences, consciously identifying new words and phrases that she believed to represent a higher level of linguistic proficiency. This was a more elaborate form of knowledge telling in which Wendy used paraphrasing as a window into her own developing language skill, as she had been indirectly taught to do in China.

An interesting issue in Wendy’s case, as in Chuck’s, was the extent to which she was (or was not) able to transfer her knowledge telling paraphrasing skills (acquired, like Chuck, through short paraphrasing exercises) to the knowledge transforming associated with research paper writing later in the course. Here it is important to remember the additional paraphrasing instruction Wendy had received in China, which had provided a paraphrasing schema to potentially draw upon in the transition to knowledge transforming type of paraphrasing. As we have already seen, that schema appeared to implant in her a narrow view of paraphrasing.

What was interesting in Wendy’s case was how, unlike Chuck, she developed a more extensive relationship with knowledge telling. As we saw earlier, Chuck became very good at the knowledge telling function of paraphrasing, but only as a series of techniques to employ. He never associated it with the development of his language proficiency or his ability as a writer. By contrast, Wendy acknowledged that the use of paraphrasing enabled her to explain certain information in her own writing style, which made the flow of her papers smoother. She saw paraphrasing helping her as a language learner and recognized that this could impact on her writing ability as well. Her approach to paraphrasing could eventually lead to more sophisticated use of it for knowledge transforming purposes, a prospect that seemed much less likely in Chuck’s case.

However, like Chuck, she still chose to use direct quotes quite often because she believed that the level of her wording was not comparable to that of the original authors. For example, in her long research paper that focused on the advantages of digital trails, she directly quoted the following sentence, “the government or law enforcement agencies could identify members of a protest group by tracking social networks revealed by the new technology (Richardson, 2008; para. 3)” to explain one type of use of digital trails. When asked why she decided to quote the whole sentence instead of paraphrasing it, Wendy said that she liked the structure of the sentence (“...by doing”) and she believed that including a sentence like this improved the language style of her paper. According to Wendy, when writing her research papers, she would only paraphrase sentences that were written in a fairly simple style because only in this way was she able to maintain the same level of linguistic complexity in her paraphrases. In her mind, then, the choices had become applications of different forms of knowledge telling: paraphrasing as a linguistic operation or direct quoting. However, she differed from Chuck in seemingly according some value to paraphrasing and investing some time in considering the options before her.

What stands out in Wendy’s case, then, is how she never really moved beyond a linguistically-oriented conceptualization of paraphrasing. Paraphrasing never really left her linguistic tool box, and so she never developed an understanding of its full power in academic writing. Her association between paraphrasing and language learning was noteworthy, but it served limited ends. In this respect she resembled Chuck, though for her the linguistic framing seemingly ran deeper, perhaps because of her additional exposure in China. Also like Chuck, she approached paraphrasing from a fundamentally mechanistic orientation by focusing on the ways it allowed her to manipulate language, not to engage in meaning making, that, is knowledge transforming. In other words, it was not a tool for developing content in an essay; it was only a way of rearranging sentences for linguistic or stylistic purposes. Then, too, like Chuck, there was a sense of an intimidation factor at work in the
move from more mechanically oriented paraphrasing exercises (i.e., knowledge telling) to the use of paraphrasing for knowledge transforming purposes. Though she had more exposure to paraphrasing than Chuck, in the end she felt a similar kind of powerlessness, as a non-native English writer, when faced with what she considered the superior writing of the original authors. Here, like Chuck, she was then more likely to select what was in essence the default mode of direct copying, in which case her perceived shortcomings in language proficiency were concealed. Thus, it could be said of her as well as Chuck that they ‘had lost the forest for the trees.’ The forest, the real set of uses for paraphrasing, remained some distance from them as they wandered through the trees representing the linguistic procedures attached to paraphrasing. If that is the case, it once again highlights the importance of how paraphrasing is introduced via instruction. If foregrounded strictly as a knowledge telling device revolving around decontextualized “rearrange and replace” strategies, paraphrasing will be exactly that to L2 writers like Chuck and Wendy. This suggests a need for L2 writing teachers to introduce and teach paraphrasing along a continuum that includes both knowledge telling and knowledge transforming.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Chuck and Wendy represent students with different levels of success with paraphrasing in the academic writing course that focused on source-based writing. On one level, they could use it well enough for isolated and decontextualized knowledge telling purposes (Wendy less so than Chuck), but each of these participants struggled to use it when asked to transform knowledge through source text use as they moved to the more challenging research paper tasks. For them it was still principally a linguistically-oriented rearrangement tool that served no larger purpose they could see (especially Chuck). In the end, they lacked the confidence and motivation necessary to trust themselves as writers in the face of seemingly superior text produced by the original authors whose work they had read. Their response when asked to engage in knowledge transforming was to bypass paraphrasing altogether; they retreated to the seemingly safer ground of direct quoting, where they not only stayed true to the original meaning of the source text material, but also believed that they gained a stronger authorial voice vicariously by association with the original authors. Thus, the instructional goal of developing students’ paraphrasing ability was thwarted at this deeper level. They had been taught paraphrasing as a kind of linguistic and lexical technology (knowledge telling), not as an activity serving rhetorical purposes (knowledge transforming), perhaps because of an assumption among teachers that students can, on their own, transfer knowledge telling skills and understanding to knowledge transforming. As we see it, the instruction had fallen short by not foregrounding the knowledge transforming portion of the paraphrasing equation. Under these circumstances, it was not surprising to see that Chuck and Wendy attached no real value to paraphrasing and were more inclined to appreciate the powers of direct quoting.

Among the two participants, Chuck, with his lack of prior experience with paraphrasing and his preference for direct quoting in his research papers, seemingly had a contradictory relationship with paraphrasing. While he came to see no real value in paraphrasing, it appeared that he had spent some time thinking about it, and he had gained a good command of it at the knowledge telling level. Developmentally speaking, he was not yet prepared, and more importantly seemingly unwilling, to make the transition to full-scale use of paraphrasing for knowledge transforming purposes. He had decided that paraphrasing beyond a knowledge telling function could place him in jeopardy by leading him into plagiarism.

Wendy perhaps stood out most for her self-awareness of the distance between her own writing and the source texts, as well as her conceptualization of paraphrasing as a language learning tool, perhaps as a result of her prior experience with it in China. For her it did have some value, but only in the linguistic domain. On a developmental scale, then, she was far removed from any meaningful relationship with it with respect to knowledge transforming. Like Chuck, she was content to paraphrase for knowledge telling purposes.

With respect to the research questions posed earlier in the article, the answer to the first question, “How do the two participants understand the purposes and functions of paraphrasing in English academic writing?”, seems to be that Chuck and Wendy displayed some levels of understanding paraphrasing. They had certainly learned something about it in the course and possessed what might be called a working knowledge of it, at least in the domain of knowledge telling. This type of understanding is perhaps not surprising and may be consistent with what the literature reveals. As we saw earlier, L2 writers generally struggle with paraphrasing, but not hopelessly or completely. What seems to happen to many of them, as in the cases of Chuck and Wendy, is that they hit a wall in their understanding and have a hard time moving past that point into the more challenging domain of knowledge transforming. The understanding remains superficial and functional, not rhetorical and conceptual, raising the important question of what needs to be done to enhance their movement to a deeper relationship with paraphrasing. The view we have advanced in this article is that students like Chuck and Wendy need instruction that directly addresses paraphrasing as knowledge transforming.

There is, however, another dimension to this question, as revealed partly in Chuck’s case. Chuck was not merely stuck at a certain point in his understanding of paraphrasing; he also had questions about its real value, as reflected in his belief that teachers only teach it to help students avoid plagiarism, not to make them better writers. This point raises interesting questions about the debilitating effects that may result from teachers’ understandable emphasis on plagiarism in academic writing courses. Through that emphasis, paraphrasing is perhaps unintentionally positioned primarily as an antidote to plagiarism, not as a valuable rhetorical tool for knowledge transforming purposes. There needs to be greater emphasis on the latter foregrounding of paraphrasing if students like Chuck are to see it in a more positive light, and not as a means of avoiding or preventing something else. In this regard, Chuck had formed an understanding of paraphrasing that was counterproductive in terms of his long-term development with it.
Meanwhile, in the teaching of paraphrasing, where linguistic operations must be introduced, students like Wendy may have a hard time moving beyond that linguistic framing of it. She did understand it in linguistic terms, but she was unable to move beyond those terms. This is a point teachers need to be sensitive to. If there is too much emphasis placed on the linguistic dimensions of paraphrasing, what we have called knowledge telling, its rhetorical properties (knowledge transforming) are obscured, as appeared to happen in Wendy’s case.

Regarding the second research question, “How does their understanding influence their actual paraphrasing practices?”, the situation is perhaps more complex. Here is where Chuck’s situation is especially pertinent. Chuck understood the architecture of paraphrasing, as his success in his paraphrasing exercises demonstrated. And yet, when he had to move from display (knowledge telling) to more sophisticated use in his research papers (knowledge transforming), his understanding was of little apparent value to him. His confidence in his paraphrasing ability waned, despite his self-awareness of his success at performing paraphrases, echoing results seen in Hyland (2001) and Shi (2008), where students essentially folded in the face of original texts that intimidated them. Wendy folded as well, though, unlike Chuck, she saw how paraphrasing could be beneficial to the growth of linguistic proficiency. Still, in the end her understanding of paraphrasing did not translate into better use of it. What is interesting in their cases is how direct quoting emerged as an appealing alternative.

What these results seem to suggest is what the literature on summarizing and paraphrasing has consistently shown: that there is a developmental dimension involved (Currie, 1998), and that students almost need to struggle for a while, as they do when they patchwrite, as Howard’s (1995, 1999, 2001) and Pecorari’s (2003, 2008) work has shown. In essence, little has changed since the early work of Johns and Mayes (1990), though we now have a much better understanding of the issues and challenges involved in L2 writers’ attempts to gain command of paraphrasing (and the larger skill of summarizing). It could be, too, that the cultural dimension cited by Currie (1998) and Macbeth (2006) was a factor for Chuck and Wendy, in that paraphrasing serves culturally-mediated purposes related to how source text material is perceived. There is no evidence that Chuck and Wendy possessed such understanding, and this may account in part for why they never grasped its rhetorical value.

While this developmental perspective is useful, writing teachers cannot be content to look at paraphrasing strictly in these terms. What Chuck and Wendy have shown is that students do think about paraphrasing and develop attitudes toward it, and this dimension must also be taken into account in the design of paraphrasing instruction. That is, the teaching of paraphrasing is not simply a matter of supplying students with a host of paraphrasing skills or strategies. It is also important to look at how students conceptualize and evaluate these skills. This is where the learning dimension we referenced early in this article is so important. Our results suggest that L2 writers follow a learning trajectory with respect to paraphrasing, just as they do with other writing-related skills. It is essential for teachers to look at paraphrasing through that lens, especially in helping them transition from knowledge telling to knowledge transforming, and not assume that teaching word replacement and grammatical restructuring strategies is all that paraphrasing instruction is about.

What is perhaps especially notable in this study is the apparent failure of the decontextualized paraphrasing exercises to instantiate any lasting understanding of paraphrasing. Such exercises may have some value in helping acquaint students with the techniques involved in paraphrasing, but the transition from exercises to authentic uses of paraphrasing (knowledge transforming) is seemingly more complicated than some teachers may recognize. Even the generally successful Chuck stalled during that transition. This is where Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987)’s distinction between knowledge telling and knowledge transforming may be especially useful in future teaching and research, as these constructs offer a meaningful perspective on that transition from exercises to composing. Helping students understand these two dimensions of source text use and the roles of paraphrasing within them may enable students to better understand the full range of paraphrasing’s ability to allow them to reconstitute source text material in ways that afford them authorial power and flexibility. This kind of instruction would perhaps have helped Chuck move away from his deficit view of paraphrasing as a means of preventing plagiarism, while Wendy might have had more incentive to travel beyond her purely linguistic orientation to paraphrasing. This distinction would also help in addressing the “cultural curriculum” that Macbeth (2006) sees as prevalent but not addressed in source-based writing instruction, in that knowledge telling and knowledge transforming are rooted in culturally-shaped views of reading and writing. In the final analysis, what the results of this study suggest is that teachers of academic writing need to foreground the rhetorical and cultural, not merely the linguistic, dimensions of paraphrasing.

By exploring paraphrasing from a learning perspective, and through the lens of knowledge telling and knowledge transforming, our study contributes to the paraphrasing literature by offering insight into what paraphrasing looks like through students’ eyes. While our study is limited by its focus on just two participants from the same cultural background, we believe that the accounts provided by Chuck and Wendy take us more deeply and more meaningfully into the world of paraphrasing as experienced by second language writers. These are the kinds of findings the L2 writing field needs if it is to move forward in its understanding of how paraphrasing is learned and how it can be taught more effectively. Such findings can also contribute to our growing understanding of important plagiarism-related issues.

References


