Building strong writing foundations: An investigation into materials for teaching paraphrasing

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Abstract

In 2008 we identified a concern around our practice in developing students' ability to paraphrase source texts effectively. We decided that a useful way to inform our teaching would be to critically review a range of resources aimed to help students develop paraphrasing skills and to evaluate these for clarity and comprehensiveness. This initial review of materials has become the first stage in an action research cycle (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009) as we have continued to work on redesigning and trialling our own materials for teaching paraphrasing, based on the criteria that emerged through our investigation. At the 2009 ATLAANZ conference Catherine presented these materials to Learning Advisor colleagues for feedback and suggestions. This paper describes our process in detail and reports on observations about learning and teaching the complex skill of paraphrasing. We reflect on the purposes and challenges of materials design, and inevitably on our roles as Tertiary Learning Advisors (TLAs).

Introduction

The ability to paraphrase others' words is a high stakes academic writing skill. Using the expectations of our institution as an example, most undergraduate and postgraduate writing tasks require students to base their assertions on evidence from sources, in at least one section of an assignment response. Routinely, university and polytechnic writing guidelines indicate that direct quotations can constitute only a small component of this source-based writing. Students who fail to paraphrase effectively will be likely to achieve lower grades for academic writing and potentially risk committing plagiarism. Thus, in our work with students as Tertiary Learning Advisors (TLAs), one of our roles is to provide appropriate and useful guidance in the areas of referencing and paraphrasing. Following work we undertook as part of an institutional project on anti-plagiarism strategies, we found ourselves well-placed to inform students about what they must not do. However, despite having taught workshops titled 'Introduction to Academic Writing' or 'Academic Writing Intensive', we were rather less confident about our success in outlining effective ways of using other writers' words and ideas in writing. Nor were we satisfied with the materials we had

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thus far developed for this work. While teaching the more overt techniques for citing sources is relatively straightforward, teaching the more subtle art of paraphrasing was an area we both identified as needing more attention. Given the complex language processes involved, students' interest in developing paraphrasing skills and the central nature of this skill to academic writing, identifying effective teaching approaches for paraphrasing seemed to be an important endeavour.

Definitions and purposes of paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is defined in a variety of ways within the literature. According to the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (American Psychological Association, 2010), when you paraphrase you "summarize a passage or re-arrange the order of a sentence and change some of the words" (p. 15). Interestingly, this brief definition points to a conflation of the terms 'paraphrasing' and 'summarising' despite the fact that the two terms are often described as separate, although related, concepts. Creme and Lea's (2003) writing guide for students describes paraphrasing as a form of quoting which can be seen as being potentially confusing. They say that "there are two ways of using a quote from a reading: allow the quote to 'stand alone' or incorporate the gist of what the author has said more seamlessly into your own text – this is known as paraphrasing" (p. 64). In our view, a more accurate definition is given by Leki (1995) in a chapter titled 'Summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting sources'. She explains that:

> Paraphrasing is using your own words to report someone's material or ideas. A paraphrase allows you to use another writer's material to support a point you are making in your own work without using the other writer's exact wording….Unlike a summary a paraphrase is usually about the same length of the original, but both the words and the sentence structure of the original must be changed in a paraphrase. (p. 185)

Quoting can be contrasted with paraphrasing and summarising in that the wording of a section of text is not altered, but incorporated into a piece of writing exactly as it was written in the original text. Quotations are usually marked in a text by speech marks or are indented, separating them from other text. Whether paraphrased, summarised or quoted, all uses of source material need to be correctly acknowledged in line with the referencing system being followed.

One of the difficulties of paraphrasing is undoubtedly the lack of convergence around definitions of paraphrasing and the subjective nature of judgements about the extent to which a text has to be rewritten before we can be sure it has not been plagiarised, or whether the writer has accurately conveyed the intended meaning of the original. Higher education institutions have a wide range of rules and regulations that leave "considerable scope for confusion" (Zimitat, 2001, p. 11) about how plagiarism is defined and by association how paraphrasing is understood. Indeed, Roig (2001) describes the lack of a clear and consistent description of plagiarism and paraphrasing

across the disciplines as a "highly undesirable state of affairs" (p. 321).

Some writing about paraphrasing suggests that there are clear objective criteria for what constitutes a good paraphrase, but this does not seem to be the case when studies have been done which ask students and staff to evaluate paraphrases, or to come up with a set of criteria themselves. Accounts exist of the difficulties groups of content lecturers have in coming to agreement about whether a given example of source-based writing is effective paraphrasing versus plagiarism (Sutherland-Smith, 2005). One study indicates that when asked to paraphrase, staff themselves plagiarised (Roig, 2001). Zimitat (2008) points out in relation to one such study, "there appeared to be a view that appropriate use of the text related to some difference between the original and rewritten text, though the mechanisms to achieve this were not clear" (p. 15).

Evaluating 'advice' resources

Acknowledging that we were not pioneers in teaching paraphrasing as a component of academic writing, we decided to undertake a critical survey of recent materials, including books and web-based resources, which aim to teach students approaches to paraphrasing. On the basis of this survey we developed a set of guidelines to inform our own materials design process and undertook to prepare a set of resources that dealt with some of the complexities of understanding how to paraphrase effectively. We chose this path partly because it offered a direct route to solutions for a teaching practice issue we had identified, and also because we surmised that materials design might reflect current theory and research on the learning and teaching of paraphrasing skills. Materials design is an aspect of our learning development practice that does not receive sufficient attention, so we thought a good way to correct this would be to see what we could learn from the insights and effective practices of published materials designers.

We were aware that a lot of attention has been paid to investigations of the burgeoning plagiarism phenomenon, and many writers have ended dissections of the problem by concluding that academic writing is developmental and more should be done to assist student writers to avoid plagiarism (Dixon, 2006; Stefani & Carroll, 2001). We observed in the literature a certain amount of excitement around the topic of plagiarism (Davis, Drinan, & Bertram Gallant, 2009; Harris, 2001) and the sense of a growth industry around this hot topic evidenced by the number of articles, books, misconduct policies and plagiarism detection software packages. Given that 'lack of writing skills' has been given as one of a number of reasons for plagiarism (University of Alabama in Huntsville, 2007, as cited in Roberts, 2008, is a recent example), we had expected that writers of practical advice texts might have some good ideas to address the skill deficit. After all, it is usually identified that in the case of plagiarism, prevention is a more appropriate response than punishment (Angelil-Carter, 2000; Roberts, 2008; Sutherland-Smith, 2005). Since there is not a sense that the plagiarism issue is going away, we expected advice or guidance to be readily available.

As TLAs, we normally see students prior to submission of assignments, and usually the inability to paraphrase seems a matter of lack of awareness or skill rather than will or intention to plagiarise. In this situation we often need to quickly unpack the complex notions around paraphrasing as well as suggesting effective ways of actually doing it. In reflecting on our work with students, we decided that the actual processes that are entailed in academic writing using source texts needed some demystifying as our students often asked for greater clarity, asking: 'How much of this can I use?' 'How much do I have to change it?' 'How can I get better at doing this?' We acknowledged that we needed to learn more about teaching this aspect of writing, and felt that we had not developed or located satisfactory resources. We had the feeling that developing clear criteria for what constitutes paraphrasing should make it easier for students (and staff) to analyse texts and evaluate their own efforts at synthesis, and to give feedback on these efforts.

Paraphrasing is clearly an important skill in academic writing. In the words of Barks and Watts (2001), "a crucial aspect of the reading-writing connection at Anglophone colleges and universities is the appropriate integration and documentation of other texts, or textual borrowing, in the light of the innately intertextual nature of academic practices in such settings" (p. 246). It is required in one form or another within all the disciplines we have worked with. According to Chanock (2002), tertiary education involves the recognition that "knowledge is made and remade by people" (p. 2), and students are learning to express their particular view of that knowledge. Certainly it is argued that "academic writing, with its focus on argument and evidence, takes time to learn through experience and feedback, across the continuum of undergraduate study" (Haggis, 2003, as cited in Zimitat, 2008, p. 12).

From her empirical study of reading-to-write interactions, Asencion-Delaney (2008) shows that the ability to paraphrase is shaped by a variety of factors. While effective reading and writing skills are important, paraphrasing skills, or what Asencion - Delaney calls 'reading-to-write' skills, are complex and distinct as they demand reconstruction of content and meaning with individual understandings and contextual requirements. We have used the work of Grabe (2001) and Asencion-Delaney (2008) to come up with a list of the skills involved in paraphrasing for student academic writers:

- understanding a writing task sufficiently to work out where and why use of sources might be required;
- information literacy skills to identify and evaluate relevant material;
- ability to read and comprehend the text structure of the original as well as the content information and ideas being expressed;
- synthesising prior knowledge of the topic with the information conveyed in the original;
- planning, composing, organising and editing the paraphrase and integrating it into the surrounding text;

- ensuring that the paraphrase both adequately conveys the meaning of the original source but does not plagiarise;
- citing the original text accurately, according to the conventions of the required referencing style.

Following on from our reading on plagiarism and the developmental nature of paraphrasing skills, we thought it would be interesting to observe the extent to which the negative (what not to do) and the more positive (what to do) was focused on. As descriptions of developmental stages in learning to paraphrase, the literature includes terms such as 'patchwriting' (Howard, 1995, as cited in Zimitat, 2008; Moore, 1995, as cited in Hinton, 2004;) and 'plagiphrasing' (Whitaker, 1993, as cited in Wilson, 1997) as both signs of the extent of the plagiarism problem and as transition phases. From those working with English as an additional language (EAL) students, there is clear recognition that writers with a more restricted range of vocabulary and a limited command of grammar will need to move through stages from near-copying to fully-realised paraphrasing (Williams, 2004; Wilson, 1997). We wondered whether these stages of learning would be emphasised in any of the published materials available.

Paraphrasing is not easy to teach, as it involves drawing attention to features of language, and teachers as well as learners may lack the linguistic tools to analyse lexico-grammatical aspects of text in detail. In reviewing the literature around source-based writing, Williams (2004) points out that teachers appear to view it from differing perspectives - writing, grammatical or lexical - "with none taking on the task wholeheartedly" (p. 248). In our local setting, paraphrasing is often not explicitly guided by content lecturers; we see it represented as a need to 'avoid plagiarism' or 'write in your own words' on assessment guidelines; and only in courses for EAL students or Foundation Studies (tertiary bridging courses) do we see exercises or tasks which focus specifically on paraphrasing. New academic writers seem to be expected to leap in and have a go at using their own words to restate an author's idea, and clearly a certain amount of confidence is required. With its basis in close reading of source texts followed by rewriting of individual understanding of that reading, paraphrasing is clearly helpful to learning, as through it we can learn more about the subject of study, learn about the discourse of the discipline, and start to participate in this discourse.

Given the above range of considerations from learning and teaching perspectives, we felt eager to critically review a selection of recent materials directed toward teaching students about writing from sources. We hoped this survey of published good practice would provide the basis for our own learning resource development work.

Method

As our goal was to learn from the work of other, more experienced practitioners, we chose to follow an action research or action inquiry cycle (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009; Reason & Bradbury, 2006). The first stage involved gathering data about resources

for learning to paraphrase that were currently available to students. A total of 31 print and web-based sources were selected for the materials review survey. This selection was non-random and items were chosen based on our knowledge of the field, references to popular texts from colleagues, the availability of texts and their recency. All sources used in this study were published after 1995. We also focused on local texts which were written within the New Zealand or Australasian context, although sources were derived from English, Canadian and American publishers. All texts were targeted towards students rather than teachers of academic writing. Typically they were sections of longer texts on the development of effective academic writing, as indicated by their titles and the subjects listed in their tables of contents. Since summarising seemed to be used in some texts as a synonym for paraphrasing, both words were searched for in our critical survey of texts. We also searched under 'referencing' or 'acknowledging sources' to see if advice about paraphrasing was included under these headings.

Each source was examined for its content on the topic of paraphrasing through consulting the table of contents and index, and sections that seemed likely to deal with paraphrasing were reviewed. A photocopy was taken of the relevant section or chapter(s) that focused on developing learners' paraphrasing skills. These selections were then examined for their discussions about paraphrasing, as well as the clarity and or comprehensive nature of the coverage.

Findings

The survey revealed that most academic writing sources addressed paraphrasing or summarising, although we came across a number of texts that did not address the topic at all or dealt with it minimally (9 sources out of 31 in total). It was common to find material about paraphrasing under 'plagiarism' in tables of contents, indexes and page/section headings. We found it interesting that some sources seemed to quite deliberately avoid using the term 'paraphrasing' or used it very sparingly. For example, in Stella Cottrell's *Study skills handbook* (2003), a useful activity is provided where students have to pick out the plagiarised, or correctly quoted or paraphrased sections, of excerpts of text, yet the term 'paraphrasing' occurs only once in these materials and is not defined or explained. It was particularly noteworthy that, although there were different levels of comprehensiveness in the explanations about paraphrasing across the materials we surveyed, and we found some texts that would clearly be helpful to students, for the most part the discussions of paraphrasing were quite brief. Also, to judge from the examples of paraphrasing presented, there is little common understanding among materials writers about what constitutes an effective and acceptable paraphrase. Often the discussion of referencing itself was extremely brief and, alarmingly, some examples of paraphrases did not include references to the source text. Moreover, even in sources targeted to second language learners, there was limited attention paid to identifying paraphrasing as a language issue, or to concrete ways of improving ability to paraphrase.

The lack of depth we identified in many of the texts available to students about paraphrasing fits with some observations in the literature. Barks and Watts (2001) note that "despite the complexity of textual borrowing in the ESL writing classroom many of its related issues and problems tend to be overlooked or insufficiently addressed in ESL writing textbooks" (p. 252). Some texts provide extensive treatment of paraphrasing, such as Wilhoit's (2004) *A brief guide to writing from readings, Writing from sources: A guide for ESL students.* However, no one source seemed to deal with paraphrasing in a comprehensive way and thus we argue, on the basis of the current survey, that more attention may need to be paid to this academic writing issue in materials development. One heartening aspect of our survey was the realisation that we were not the only academic writing teachers to be challenged with teaching paraphrasing.

As part of our review of paraphrasing sources we began to develop an understanding of what a comprehensive resource might contain. We identified a list of 14 criteria for in-depth coverage of paraphrasing which is presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1. *List of aspects of paraphrasing to be covered in comprehensive materials*

Aspect	**Further explanation**
Discussion of the importance of paraphrasing	Why it is important, what other roles does it play, in addition to plagiarism avoidance
Definition of paraphrasing	Possibly in relation to other source-based writing such as quotation
'Acceptable' and 'unacceptable' examples of paraphrasing	With explanation as to why the examples meet or do not meet acceptability criteria
Qualities of a good paraphrase	Discussion of a writer's key aims when paraphrasing
Information about whether to paraphrase	Discussion about when paraphrasing is appropriate and when it might be better to quote a source
An outline of the processes involved in paraphrasing	With examples for the different steps
Discussion of plagiarism	
Activities and exercises for students to practice paraphrasing	
Discussion about 'how similar is too similar?' and the extent of shared language	
An indication that paraphrasing skills are developmental	
Discussion about what can be regarded as common knowledge	
Glossary of key terms	
How paraphrasing is different from quoting and summarizing	
A list of additional resources	

Following our survey we realised that we had learned a great deal from looking into resources produced by others. We decided to take the next step in the action research cycle and respond to the challenges of designing and trialling our own resource for teaching paraphrasing.

Catherine presented our draft resource to TLA peers at the ATLAANZ 2009 conference for feedback and suggestions. She outlined the process of materials development and some of the issues that arose for us. Workshop participants gave us very useful feedback about the resource, challenging us to re-think some of our ideas and make amendments. For example, in the opening paragraphs we had stated that "lecturers prefer paraphrasing to direct quoting". As was rightly pointed out, this is not always the case. This issue led to a valuable discussion about the nature of 'voice' in writing and how this could be addressed in materials for teaching paraphrasing. A key aspect of the feedback centred on some of our examples and whether or not we had written 'acceptable' paraphrases. Some of the participants voiced strong reservations about the paraphrases, while others appeared to view them as being appropriate. This lack of consensus mirrors some of the observations in the literature discussed earlier, reinforcing for us the situational nature, subjectivity and complexity of paraphrasing.

Conclusions

As we have worked on the resources post-conference and used them in our teaching, some important considerations have emerged. We believe that our re-developed resources are helpful to students, but we are concerned that, realistically, only a few highly self-directed students would be likely to work through what has become a lengthy document. A further concern is that of the varied audiences and levels of understanding among the students we work with. For understandable reasons, published materials for students tend to convey the notion that 'one size fits all' and do not address the development of academic writing or different disciplinary expectations in a substantive way. To date, most materials on paraphrasing we have encountered, including our own, are essentially monologic, in that there are limited opportunities for interaction with the content and ideas presented. In written materials, feedback on completed paraphrasing exercises does not usually suggest that there is a range of appropriate ways in which a source text could be paraphrased[2]. Moreover, we questioned our own assumption that design and production of materials was the best approach to dealing with this important aspect of academic literacy. In this sense we closed one action research cycle, but opened another: we changed our own ideas and our teaching practices based on what we had learned, but we are now exploring ways of engaging students in discussion and negotiation of issues around paraphrasing.

[2] An exception is the very comprehensive text by Jeanne Godfrey (2009) which we became aware of at the beginning of 2010. See Godfrey, J. (2009). *How to use your reading in your essays*. Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan.

In reporting on their own teaching experience with postgraduate students, Abasi and Graves (2008) point out that approaches to teaching academic literacies need to be more dialogic and transformative. For this to occur, the options now are for us as TLAs to focus on face to face teaching, design of truly interactive online materials, and support of content lecturers to embed the teaching of paraphrasing in academic programmes. We have made some moves in each of these directions. We see the resources we have created as a toolkit that could be used, ideally adapted as appropriate, by content lecturers as well as students, and as a basis for discussions around classroom teaching of reading, writing and paraphrasing. This project has ultimately resulted in a shift in focus and we are now more than ever concerned about raising awareness among lecturers across the curriculum about this academic literacy issue.

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Appendix: List of materials reviewed

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