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**Intertextual practices in academic writing by Chinese ESL students**

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**Abstract:** In light of the increase of international graduate students, the dynamics of higher education in English speaking countries have changed dramatically coupled with an obvious gap between native English speaking (NES) and English as second language (ESL) graduate students in terms of their academic literacy. As a key component of academic literacy, academic writing consists of noticeable differences between these two cohorts of students. Against the backdrop of ongoing attention to the process and practice of academic writing, this study examines Chinese ESL graduate students’ intertextual practices in composing their academic writing, especially, when the students newly arrived in an English speaking world. Intertextual practice in this study is concerned about not only the transgressive intertextual practice or plagiarism behaviours, but how Chinese ESL students draw on external sources in developing their own writing. This study shows that the most salient feature in the intertextual practice of the participants is the use of indirect quotes rather than syntheses in their own words, and most of the external sources are used to introduce new beliefs, ideas, or issues to their writing. In addition, this study explores possible factors that mediate these practices in consideration of the linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds of the Chinese ESL students.

**Keywords:** academic literacy, academic writing, intertextual practice, Chinese ESL students

### 1 Introduction

In light of the increase of international graduate students, the dynamics of higher education in English speaking countries, such as the United States, Great Britain, Canada and Australia have changed dramatically coupled with an obvious gap between native English speaking (NES) and English as second language (ESL) graduate students in terms of their academic literacies. Most of

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ESL graduate students experience difficulties when pursuing their studies in English-medium universities, even though they have met the language requirement for admission into the universities. It is noticed what they lack usually is not only the basic language skills, but also the advanced academic literacies in an English educational institution, which would be the prerequisites for them to achieve academic success in an English-medium university. For university students, academic literacies include knowledge of the linguistic, textual, social and cultural features of academic written discourse as well as knowledge of English as used in their academic communities (Braine 2002). Such academic literacies could enable students to socialise and acculturate into the discourse communities in which they pursue their academic studies. Issues such as how to develop arguments in academic essays, how to draw on other sources for writing their own papers, and how to avoid plagiarism and to learn the required referencing system in the academic disciplines could be unfamiliar to ESL students newly from a social and educational setting different from the English speaking world. These academic writing practices in English education institutions, however, are not only linguistically and textually oriented, but also are deeply embedded in the specific social and cultural contexts.

In regard to the use of external sources, which is the focus of the present study, there seems to be a widely shared opinion in the western academic world that non-western ESL students tend to take information, facts, and views from academic texts and use them as their own without proper acknowledgement. The area has been explored under the names such as plagiarism (e.g. Abasi and Akbari 2008; Abasi and Graves 2008; Bloch 2012; Petric 2012; Pecorari 2008; Pecorari and Shaw 2013), transgressive intertextuality (e.g. Chandrasoma et al. 2004), textual appropriation (e.g. Pennycook 1996; Shi 2006, 2010, 2012), and textual re-use (e.g. Flowerdew and Li 2007). For a detailed summary of the related research, please refer to the recent state-of-the-art article on plagiarism in the Language Teaching journal (Pecorari and Petric 2014). In addition, source functions have been extensively explored in the studies such as, Mansourizadeh and Ahmad 2011; Petric 2007; Petric and Harwood 2013; Samraj 2013. The recent research on this issue has shifted from discussion of plagiarism as a wrongdoing to a more ethically-neutral way of looking at the issue. The researchers explore textual relation between the writer’s language and the sources by using the terms such as textual appropriation, textual re-use, or intertextual practice. Moreover, recent literature (e.g. Liu 2005; Flowerdew and Li 2007; Pecorari and Shaw 2013) suggests that cultural interpretation alone is not adequate for explaining plagiaristic behaviours. As Liu (2005) suggests, in dealing with ESL students’ plagiarism
behaviours, it seems better to focus on students' language and writing development than to dwell on issues such as cultural differences, which are not only debatable but also have few direct pedagogical implications.

Against the backdrop of ongoing attention to the processes and practices of academic writing and the previous studies on textual appropriation, this study tends to approach the issue of use of external source from an intertextuality perspective. It aims to examine Chinese ESL graduate students' intertextual practices in composing academic writing, especially, with the focus of understanding how they manipulate external sources in developing their own writing. Intertextual practices in this study are concerned about not only the transgressive intertextual practices or plagiarism behaviours of ESL students, but how the Chinese ESL students draw on external sources in developing their own writing. This would be an important component of academic literacies which may form a cornerstone of their academic success in the future. To that end, multiple data including the students' academic writings, text-based interviews, questionnaires and institutional documents are collected to investigate intertextual practices and possible factors that might mediate these practices.

2 Research methods

2.1 An analytical framework for intertextual practice

Discussions of intertextuality in applied linguistics provide a perspective for reading and writing texts as processes of interacting with prior texts, writers, readers, and conventions. Intertextuality is regarded as a complex phenomenon which often eludes clear-cut analysis. Previous research indicates that identifying the "voices", phrases or sentences on which texts draw is always challenging. As Culler (1981: 103) argues, it is impossible to establish the origins of all intertextual elements in texts, as texts draw not only on specific other texts but on "anonymous discursive practices, and codes whose origins are lost". Hence, when it comes to the actual analysis, it is impossible to explain all the sources and conventions that texts rely on in order to have meaning. In view of this, often the most explicit intertextual sources become a major focus in the analysis of intertextuality (e.g. Devitt 1991; Bazerman 1993, 2004; White 2005).

Following the approaches to intertextuality analysis in the works of Bazerman (2004), Devitt (1991) and White (2005), this study mainly focuses on linguistic conventions of intertextual practices. According to Bazerman (2004),
there are many reasons for doing an intertextual analysis. For instance, to identify which realm of sources a writer relies on and how they do this as well as to understand how a writer attempts to characterise, rely on, and advance prior work in their related fields of study. In addition, Devitt (1991) and Bazerman (1993, 2004) take intertextual relations not only as social practice, but more or less as stable conventions of a particular discourse community. Bazerman (2004: 94) states that “intertextuality is not just a matter of which other texts you refer to, but how you use them, what you use them for, and ultimately how you position yourself as a writer to them to make your own statement”. These theories and beliefs have provided the current study with great insights in establishing a framework to analyse the intertextual practices in academic writing of Chinese ESL graduate students.

Furthermore, White’s (2005) framework in appraisal theory for analysing “engagement” is especially relevant to the current study. “Engagement” “is concerned with the sourcing of attitude and acknowledgement of alternative voices” (Martin 2002: 58) in a text. In other words, it is concerned with identifying linguistic resources useful for including external sources and looking closely at the choices available for evaluating these sources (Droga and Humphrey 2002). In the current study, White’s (2005) framework for analysing external sources is drawn on and incorporated with Bazerman’s framework on intertextuality to analyse the data collected. This study explores four dimensions of intertextuality to understand how writers draw on external sources to write their own texts. These dimensions are (1) intertextual representation, examining how writers include external sources in a text; (2) source type, exploring what type of sources writers use; (3) source function, investigating what writers use external sources for; (4) endorsement, considering how the writers position themselves as writers in relation to external sources. Thus, the following analytical framework (see details in Table 1) is established to examine how writers draw on external sources in writing their own texts.

This analytical framework is applied for detailed textual analysis of the sampled texts written by the Chinese ESL students. The four key intertextual representations are identified with reference to the following definitions.

1. Direct quotation is usually identified by quotation marks, block indentation, italics, or other typographic setting apart from the other words of the text.
2. Indirect quotation usually specifies a source and then attempts to reproduce the meaning of the original but in words that reflect the author’s understanding, interpretation, or spin on the original. Indirect quotation filters the meaning through the second author’s words and attitude and allows the meanings to be more thoroughly infused with the second writer’s purpose (Bazerman 2004).
3. Summary specifies a brief statement or account of the main points of something that has been said in the original. It is usually based on a single source and involves far less text re-use of the original than indirect quotations. It is often referred to as paraphrases (Hyland 2000).

4. Synthesis is the combination of external sources or elements to form a connected whole. It is usually derived from multiple sources. It would involve complex rewording, restructuring, reinterpretation of the original with a view to forming a coherent whole in the second author’s writing (Hyland 1999).

On top of the detailed textual analysis, the follow-up interviews were carried out to supplement the insights from the students’ (writers) perspectives in intertextual practices.

Table 1: An analytical framework for intertextual practice.

| 1. Intertextual representation (How writers include external sources in a text) |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Direct quotation                | Inserted                        |
| Indirect quotation              |                                 |
| Summary                         |                                 |
| Synthesis                       | Assimilated                     |

| 2. Source type (What types of sources writers use) |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Attributed                      | Unattributed                    |
| Personal or impersonal          | Mentioning of a person, document, or statements |
| Identified or unidentified      | Comment or evaluation on a statement, text, or otherwise invoked voice |
| Specific or generic             | Implicitly recognisable language and forms |
| Singular or plural              |                                 |
| Status neutral or high/ low status |                                 |

| 3. Source function (What writers use external sources for) |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Background information          |                                |
| Evidence                        |                                |
| Beliefs, ideas, issue circulated|                                |
| Others                          |                                |

| 4. Endorsement (How the writers position themselves as writers in relation to external sources) |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Non-endorsement (neutral)       |                                |
| Endorsement (positive)          |                                |
| Dis-endorsement (negative)      |                                |
2.2 The research setting and participants

This study was carried out at a major university in Australia. Locating in a metropolitan area, this university enjoys an international reputation for outstanding teaching and research. Participants in the study were ten master coursework students from China, newly enrolled in this university. They were invited to participate in this study after an information session at the beginning of the academic year. The ten participants were studying in the Master of Education (TESOL) or Master of Education (General) programs, in which academic writing plays an important role. This group of students are in the same age group (25 to 30), sharing similar linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds, but they also have similar experiences in terms of length of residency in Australia, ESL proficiency, L1 and L2 writing expertise, and the stage of their academic studies. As to keep all the participants anonymous, the symbols of S1 to S10 are used to refer to each participant. Table 2 summarises the participants’ principal educational backgrounds.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>IELTS or EAP preparation courses</th>
<th>IELTS average/writing</th>
<th>Undergraduate studies in China</th>
<th>Postgraduate studies in Australia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S1</td>
<td>3 months IELTS preparation in China</td>
<td>6.5/6</td>
<td>BA in English</td>
<td>MEd in TESOL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2</td>
<td>15 weeks IELTS and EAP in Australia</td>
<td>7.5/7</td>
<td>BA in English</td>
<td>MEd in TESOL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S3</td>
<td>1 month IELTS in China</td>
<td>6.5/6</td>
<td>BA in Chinese literature</td>
<td>MEd (general)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S4</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>6.5/6</td>
<td>BA in English</td>
<td>MEd in TESOL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S5</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>6.5/6</td>
<td>BA in English</td>
<td>MEd in TESOL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S6</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>6.5/6</td>
<td>BA in English</td>
<td>MEd in TESOL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S7</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>7.5/7</td>
<td>BA in English, BA in Chinese</td>
<td>MEd in TESOL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S8</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>7/6</td>
<td>BA in English</td>
<td>MEd in TESOL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S9</td>
<td>3 weeks IELTS in China</td>
<td>6.5/6</td>
<td>BA in English</td>
<td>MEd in TESOL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S10</td>
<td>1 month IELTS in China</td>
<td>6.5/6</td>
<td>BA in English</td>
<td>MEd in TESOL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table shows that all participants in this study have met the language requirement of IELTS average 6.5 by the university, with two of them reaching average 7.5. Nine out of ten participants graduated with an English major in
undergraduate studies in China, and will do a Master of Education in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) in Australia.

The primary data consist of the background questionnaires, 40 pieces of students self-nominated assignments with teachers’ grading and comments, the follow-up interviews and the relevant university documents. The participants were encouraged to submit their own “best” assignments, involving heavy use of external sources in their writing. Detailed textual analysis based on the four dimensional framework has been carried out on these 40 assignments.

3 The analysis of intertextual practices

With four assignments nominated by each of the ten students, a total of 40 assignments with an average of 2,000–2,500 words for each piece have been analysed. The types of assignments include literature review, discourse analysis, case study, and curriculum design.

3.1 Intertextual representation (How writers include external sources in a text)

As the first stage of intertextual analysis, intertextual representation in the texts has been identified and classified into four types, namely, direct quotation, indirect quotation, summary and synthesis. The total and average occurrences in the texts are summarised in the following Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total in the 40 assignments</th>
<th>Average occurrences per text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct quotes</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>3.375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect quotes</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>5.275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summaries</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syntheses</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>1.075</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>507</strong></td>
<td><strong>12.675</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is found that within these 40 pieces of writing the average occurrences of direct quotes are 3.375 per text. Indirect quotes are 5.275 per text and summaries are 2.95 per text. However, the syntheses in which the writers combine and
synthesise the ideas from the source texts are just 1.075 per text. It shows clearly here that the writers tend to just change a few words of the source texts (i.e. indirect quotes) more often than to digest the ideas and produce their own texts (i.e. summary and synthesis) in their own words.

In all the assignments, direct quotes have been found in nearly every piece of text. Usually the students have clearly attributed direct quotes to some identified and specific sources. For instance, one student writes,

[Example 1]

A motivated individual is defined as the one who “wants to achieve a particular goal, devotes considerable effort to achieve this goal, and experiences satisfaction in the activities associated with achieving this goal” (Mitchell and Myles, 2001, p.24) (S5: Assignment 2).

The students usually use the direct quotes for definition and conceptualisation that they feel difficult to summarising or synthesising. When being interviewed on why direct quotes are used instead of summarising, the student explained,

I’m not sure how to paraphrase them, and I don’t think that I can do something better than the author did to convey the idea so clearly. And also, I think Mitchell and Myles are big names in this field. It will be a risk for me to misinterpret their words (S5, 25/07/08)

It seems that the participants in the study use direct quotes for something that they think is important but difficult to explain clearly in their own words.

This study also finds that compared with other ways of integrating external sources, indirect quotes are the most commonly used techniques for the students to simply repeat what has been read without much change of the sources. For instance, a student writes,

[Example 2]

Corder (1983) believes that errors are valuable to language teachers, language researchers and language learners because language teachers could implement their teaching through analyzing learners’ errors, language researchers could collect language data for their research through error analysis, and last but not the least, second language learners could have a better understanding about the problems in their second language proficiency. (S7: Assignment 3)
Here the student uses indirect quotes to introduce new theories and concepts, which they seldom show any endorsement to the sources. This practice might indicate that the students have not taken a deep processing approach (Erhman 1996; Erhman et al. 2003) to the source texts and simply quote the original text indirectly, which involves large chunks of language re-use (Flowerdew and Li 2007). According to Ehrman (1996:173), deep processing to the source material is an active process of making associations with material that is already familiar, examining interrelationships within the new material, elaborating the stimulus through associations with it and further development of it, connecting the new material with personal experience, and considering alternative interpretations. The learner may use the new material to actively reconstruct his or her conceptual frameworks.

In other words, it is a conceptual effort that all university students, especially those at a postgraduate level, are expected to take in dealing with readings in their specialised fields. The lack of deep processing approach by the Chinese students might be attributed to many factors, such as their unfamiliarity of the academic writing expectations and conventions, the lack of engagement of their work, or the Chinese tradition that values authoritative voices (Shi 2006). This issue is to be further explored in the following sections.

### 3.2 Source type (What types of sources writers use)

Following the analytical framework, this study analyses the source types of all the intertextual instances identified in Section 3.1. The results are showed in Table 4.

**Table 4: Source types.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source type (Total occurrences in the 40 assignments)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attributed 445</td>
<td>Unattributed 62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Personal/impersonal 407/38</td>
<td>1) Mentioning of a person, document, or statements 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Identified/unidentified 439/6</td>
<td>2) Comment or evaluation on a statement, text, or otherwise invoked voice 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Specific/generic 423/22</td>
<td>3) Implicitly recognisable language and forms 48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Singular/plural 278/167</td>
<td>Note: 2) and 3) above have some overlapping with the total of 62 unattributed instances. See an example in Example [4].</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 2) and 3) above have some overlapping with the total of 62 unattributed instances. See an example in Example [4].
In the 507 identified intertextual instances, 87% (445/507) have been attributed to sources while about 12% are unattributed. The majority of the unattributed instances are comments or evaluations on some concepts or theories, with some implicitly recognisable language and forms from external sources. In most of the attributed instances, the Chinese students employ more personal, identified, and specific sources than other types. For example,

[Example 3]

As ESL students, when they go through various steps of acquisition of different components of the L2, they will make errors which can reflect their problems in SLA process. These errors may be caused by inappropriate transference of L1 patterns and/or by incomplete knowledge of the L2 (FERRIS, 2002, Chapter 1). As well known, many ESL students have confusion when they deal with the articles. The English article system which includes the indefinite article a(n), the definite article the, and the zero (or “null”) article (Liu, D. & Gleason, J. L. 2002, p. 2). (S6: Assignment 1)

Although there are obvious errors of in-text citations in this student’s writing (e.g. the capital letters of FERRIS, the given name initials in Liu, D. & Gleason, J. L., etc.), this student has acknowledged all the sources (all personal and specific, even with unnecessary information, such as ‘Chapter 1’ in the first in-text citation and ‘p.2’ in the second). As this is her first assignment at the beginning of her master program, it is assumed that this student has yet to be familiar with the style conventions of English academic writing when writing this paper.

Unattributed sources are the “grey” areas where most likely the students’ plagiarism occurs. In general, few students copy the outside sources verbatim without any change. They usually use the “implicitly recognisable language and forms” to interpret or evaluate some ideas and theories. For example,

[Example 4]

The third element that lies under the umbrella of communicative competence is discourse competence, which is concerned with learners’ ability to interpret the overall meaning of a text, the flow of the main messages in the text, the connection between sentences and the organizational features of the whole text. In other words, discourse competence enables learners to compose cohesive and coherent texts. Cohesive devices like reference, substitution, ellipsis,
conjunctions and lexical chain greatly facilitate writers to develop cohesive texts so that the elements of different sentences are logically connected in a way that is easy for readers to follow. (SI: Assignment 3)

The fluency and accuracy of the language use here suggests that the student may have re-used some external sources without clear acknowledgement. An internet search has identified that the language used here has a high level of similarity with the words in Savignon (1983: 38). So it is identified as a case of plagiarism, though a careful paraphrase of the original might make this paragraph a good example of summary on the basis of a single source.

In the follow-up interview with the student, she explained that she didn’t know how to summarise the original sentence properly and also she has ‘forgotten’ to acknowledge the source properly.

Although such instances of unattributed sources are not widely identified in the data set, most often they need the markers’/lecturers’ alertness to recognise the instances and further confirm with other computerised or manual techniques for plagiarism detecting.

3.3 Source function (What writers use external sources for)

The analytical results for source function are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Source function.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source function (total occurrences in the 40 assignments)</th>
<th>507</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>– Background information</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Evidence</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Beliefs, ideas, issue circulated</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Others</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table demonstrates that the students draw on most of the external sources to introduce beliefs, ideas, or issues (e.g. Examples 1 and 2 above), or provide background information for their writing (e.g. Example 3 above).

It is also found that most of the students participated in this study seldom use external sources as evidences of their own opinions and/or a starting point for further research and investigation. Most of the sources have just been
employed as background information to introduce new ideas to the writing. The instances of using external sources as evidence will be further illustrated in the following section.

### 3.4 Endorsement (How the writers position themselves as writers in relation to external sources)

Endorsement indicates whether or not writers express their own opinions towards the external sources. They can provide positive opinions (i.e. endorsement), negative opinions (i.e. dis-endorsement), or no opinions (i.e. non-endorsement). The analytical results of the endorsement are shown in the following Table 6.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Endorsement (total occurrences in the 40 assignments)</th>
<th>507</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Non-endorsement (neutral)</td>
<td>453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Endorsement (positive)</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Dis-endorsement (negative)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The analysis shows that in most of the intertextual instances (about 90%) the writers did not indicate endorsement to the relevant external sources, only taking external sources as the channel of information providing. However, in the instances of endorsement or dis-endorsement, the writers usually take a deep processing approach and assimilate the sources into their own writing. For example, one student writes,

[Example 5]

> Chinese conceptions of education and social values have been much influenced by Confucian thinking (Biggs, 1996; Lee, 1996; Scollon, 1999). The thinking has endowed education the highest status in Chinese society, which is not only reflected as the inner satisfaction with full personal development (Guo, 2001), but also as the social recognition and material rewards (Lee, 1996; Lasera, 1987; Zhu, 1992). These perceived functions and benefits of education have provided generations of Chinese with powerful motivating forces to aspire to success in education. (S8: Assignment 3)

Here the student synthesised the ideas and concepts from the external sources and structured the argument that different functions of education and its
implications in Chinese society are deeply influenced by Confucian thinking. As a good example of synthesis, this student has covered a wide range of reading and successfully integrate them into development of her own voice in writing. All the external sources used here are evidences to support her final conclusion that “these perceived functions and benefits of education have provided generations of Chinese with powerful motivating forces to aspire to success in education”. Unfortunately, such instances of synthesising are not commonly found in the students’ academic writing covered in this study.

4 More examples of the Chinese ESL students’ writing practice

In English medium universities, usually there are high expectations and requirements for students (especially for postgraduates) to develop academic writing with clearly articulated opinions by integrating and synthesising external sources. Such universities would set clear goals with statements of graduate attributes, in which “the ability to create new knowledge” and “understanding through the process of research and inquiry” are usually foregrounded (cf. USyd 2015). The universities usually require the student to be able to acquire and evaluate new knowledge through independent research and to exercise critical judgement and critical thinking to create new modes of understanding. Against such a backdrop, lecturers usually set up clear guidelines for students to develop critical thinking and articulate the students’ own voices on the basis of thorough understanding, analysis and synthesis of the subject matters. Undeniably, such requirements of critical thinking and development of writing would present great challenges to students from China without relevant training and experience. The following section presents two unsuccessful attempts that the Chinese ESL students have made to articulate their authorial voices in their writings.

The following example is an excerpt written by a Chinese student who just studied two and half months in Australia. This assignment requires her to evaluate the treatment of English grammar in English language teaching (ELT) textbooks. In the beginning of the discussion section, she wrote,

[Example 6]

No one has ever doubted the crucial position of grammar in education in historical tradition for time being (Mulroy, 2003, p. 60). However, as the
development of a variety of approaches to language teaching, it becomes more blur about the grammar place in the language classroom (Nunan, 1991, p. 143). It is of much freedom for language teachers to set their own methodology in grammar teaching. Since the form and function in language interact with each other in close relationship (Johns, 1994, p. 294), either “formal grammar” or “functional grammar” can be focused in the classroom (Larsen-Freeman, 2001, p. 34). As for the passive voice teaching, the present writer would prefer a function-focused input in the grammar class. But in which approach can the passive voice be taught effectively to the intermediate learners? According to current approaches to grammar teaching, task-based instruction is an ideal option for the passive construction teaching. As the task-based approach is composed of three phases in Rod Ellis (2003, cited in Nassaji and Fotos, 2004, p. 135), each of them could be detailed in the grammar teaching in classroom. (S2: Assignment 1)

Within this paragraph of 184 words, she includes five quotes from famous scholars in the field with an attempt to present the familiarity and understanding of the works in this field. However, in marking this assignment, the teacher gave out very brief comments on the students writing. The teacher states,

- Reasonable critical evaluation, though with possible gaps. Reasonable understanding of principles. Some back up of evaluation with clear examples.
- Reading reasonably appropriate. Evidence of linking and integration of reading into text, though some problems.
- Overall grade – Credit 72%

Here the teacher just mentioned the “possible gaps” and “some problems” without clear illustration of the problems. But, on the whole, she/he just gave a credit grade to the assignment.

In the follow-up interview with the student, when being asked why she used so many in-text citations in this paragraph, she replied,

_I’m afraid of being punished for plagiarism, so I always try to put all the possible in-text citations there._

She further illustrated the composing process in writing this assignment,

_I’m writing the paper while reading a lot of references. Usually (I) put all the sources on the table while writing on my computer, and write down what I think it’s important and relevant from the reading._
It shows that the student fails to articulate her own authorial voice clearly, though incorporating many authoritative sources. This demonstrates clearly that good marks and positive feedback from teachers cannot be guaranteed if only a number of external sources are cited without proper analysis and synthesis.

Later in the same year, the same student produces the following text excerpt as part of her last assignment. It is when she had been studying in the program for about 10 months.

[Example 7]

Again in the research of Nikolov (2001), *an obvious limitation can be seen from the unclear data about language learners’ appreciation of the target culture as a result of language study or their interest in the culture, or in other words, the integrative motivation.* (S2: Assignment 4)

Here as shown in this excerpt, the student seems to adopt a deeper processing approach to the external sources, though further language improvement is still needed. In this assignment, she takes the reference sources on board and evaluates them in a careful way with clear disendorsement shown in the above paragraphs (*italicised*). It looks that after about one year study she came to realise that it is crucial to go beyond summarising readings and she needs to present analysis and criticism to the external sources for academic success.

Another case is that a student was asked to complete an assignment in a unit named “Bilingual Education”. This assignment requires the students to write a critical literature review to describe and comment on five key issues and arguments surrounding bilingual education. The students need to find and present viewpoints that support and refute various aspects of the related issues, or that pinpoint beneficial/detrimental aspects of policy or practice. More importantly, the students need to critically analyse and discuss why those issues are important in some educational contexts and not in others. In other words, the students need to establish their authorial voice after reading and analysing the literature.

As a result, one student came up with the following writing.

[Example 8]

Bilingualism or biliteracy means much more than the ability to speak, read and write in two languages... *I would like to use* a prism could be used to illustrate the interwoven relationship between various factors. ...
First of all, *I would like to draw your attention* to the one surface of the prism—bilingual learners...
Here, I would like to discuss how do bilingual learners feel in the process by referring two case studies of that took place in the United States. ... (S6: Assignment 4)

In this assignment, the student repeats “I” nine times apparently for the purpose of articulating her personal authorial voice.

However, in the written comment on this assignment, the lecturer indicated clearly the dissatisfaction to the student’s work. The lecturer wrote that,

*The writing and arguments are clear and easy to follow. In the future, perhaps avoid using sentences like “I would like to give you more examples…”, or “I reckon…”, or “now I would like to discuss…” What you could have done was to put them into topic sentences without having to explicitly write “I am going to talk about this now.”*

When being interviewed about this assignment, the student explained,

*When I prepared for this assignment, I have to read a lot of references as possible, trying to select the useful ones and summarise them… I attempt to express my “self-voice” by using “I…” in my writing, ohm, I hope I did that…*

The analysis indicates that the students failed to express her individual viewpoints explicitly and articulately, though choosing to use so many expressions with first person pronoun “I” in the writing. In this assignment the uses of “I” usually indicate the change of topics or strengthening the importance of the points (e.g. I would like to draw your attention..., I would like to focus on..., I would like to move on to...) rather than elicit some independent ideas or critical analysis on the issues. All these fail to illustrate her personal endorsement of the external or express personal opinions on specific topics. It can be argued that the student took a surface processing (Ehrman 1996) approach to the sources adopted, and her own understanding and comprehensive paraphrasing is not shown in her writing. Here the students mainly uses “I” as “representative” or “guide” to the audience through the essay rather than as an “opinion holder” or “originator” of some unique ideas (Ivanic and Camps 2001).

5 Discussion

With the aims of investigating the students’ use of external sources, this study found that the participants demonstrated some common intertextual practices in their writing as well as individual differences. The tendency in use of indirect quotes rather than summaries and syntheses in their own words are observed as
the most salient feature in all the writing of the participants. That is, the student writers have appropriated source materials in their own texts without much lexical or syntactic alteration. This could be the case that widely observed in the participants’ practices of “indirect quoting”. The participants have sparingly used synthesis as a source representation skill, and rarely used the sources as evidence for his/her opinion making.

Admittedly, there could be many factors that contribute to such practices. Among them, this study highlights two key factors that might mediate the practices. One would be the sociocultural background that the students come from. Chinese society has been widely regarded as a collectivist and top-down hierarchy that values harmony and humility. It has been discussed in previous literature (e.g. Matalene 1985; Pennycook 1996; Pecorari 2003) that the Chinese ESL students writing may be found to contain textual features which might be described as plagiarism, but the writers’ accounts of their work and the textual analysis strongly suggest absence of intention to plagiarise. This could suggest that the conventional writing practice in China are deeply imbedded in the students writing practices. These conventions could include a tendency of reliance on authoritative voices and existing literature (e.g. Cheng 2006; Pennycook 1996; Shi 2006). As an important part of education in China, memorising what previous literature has covered and what key figures in the field have said takes up large portions of students’ time and energy in their education life. In other words, knowledge acquisition and accumulation rather knowledge creation has long been deemed to be the essential part of higher education in China. Coming from such an educational background, the Chinese ESL students are so familiar with reproducing what have been covered in books rather than challenge the received information and perceive them through analytical lenses. This mindset might lead to reproducing what they have learned from the external sources without much alteration. They would think that rewording authoritative voices might transgress the original meaning of the source texts and might result in disrespect to the authorities or the established writers, which could reversely risk their academic success.

The second and foremost factor that might mediate these features in the students’ intertextual practices can be summarised as the academic literacies issues. Specifically in this circumstance, that is the students’ lack of academic competence to fully assimilate the source texts and reproduce the ideas in their own words. This academic competence would involve high demand of language and intellectual capacity in manipulation of words and phrases and a wide range of both general academic and specialist vocabulary. In the ten participants of this study, only four had taken IELTS or EAP preparation courses in either China or Australia. IELTS preparation courses appear to cover a relatively
narrow range of skills and provide a quick and made-ready recipe for the success of the test rather than really concerns with academic literacies (Green 2006). In addition, as Turner (2004) observed, in many EAP courses, language is often conceptualised as instrument, which is subordinate to content. Along with the increasing technicisation of language, EAP courses have been often taken as an economic and intellectual short-cut that are provided to compensate ESL students’ lack of academic literacies (Turner 2004). However, when it comes to working in an academic context, it would involve very complex thinking, questioning, synthesising and conceptualising of ideas and viewpoints, all of which has to be substantialised by use of language. If efforts in EAP education have only been directed towards the technicality of following some basic structures and the use of some specific vocabulary, it could be very hard for the ESL students to acquire the essence of academic work, in which analytical and creative thinking is highly valued.

Thus, this study would suggest that careful and well-designed ESL pedagogy be made available to ESL students at different levels of their study, not only before their overseas university study, but also during their undergraduate study process. As Turner (2004) argues, language, especially in academic setting, is constitutive and is as important as content. That means language should not just be regarded as something supplementary or a tool to get things done. It takes a crucial part in human’s cognitive and intellectual development. Language development, thus, needs to be taken as part of the academic development.

As shown in the study, it might be hard for ESL students to fulfil the requirements of academic writing by adopting a surface processing approach to external sources. At the same time, without appropriate intertextual strategies, the students will even have difficulties in adapting to the conventions of critical thinking and argumentation in English language universities. On arrival at a new academic context in an English language university, the first academic challenge that Chinese ESL students encounter might be why and how to be analytical and creative in their academic writing. The two above-mentioned straitjackets, i.e. sociocultural perceptions and academic literacies that might have hindered ESL students’ academic success need to be carefully addressed by both the academics concerned and students themselves.

6 Conclusion

The examination of Chinese ESL students’ employment of external sources, to some extent, demystifies these students’ academic writing practices for both the
ESL students and teachers. The findings in this study suggest that the academic staff working with Chinese ESL students raise their awareness of these issues by reflecting on their own academic assumptions and traditions, and by initiating dialogues with each other and with the students regarding these issues. It is also perceived that for the newly arrived Chinese ESL students it would be a cognitive, linguistic, mental and even physical struggle to understand and to practice the complexity and uncertainty in academic writing. However, to be analytical and creative in their academic study would be the cornerstone for ESL students to achieve academic success in an English speaking world.

References


