An Insight into Textual Borrowing Practices of University-Level Students in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Alma Jahić
University of Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Abstract

Textual borrowing, a distinctive feature of academic writing, is a very complex practice which poses problems to novice English as a Second Language/English as a Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) writers. Students in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) also encounter these problems when writing in English. The present study investigates the use of source texts in student essays in order to find out how BiH students incorporate borrowed text into their own. The first part of this paper provides a short theoretical background on the topic and offers insight into the BiH education system, while the second part of the paper presents the main research results which show a high incidence of inappropriate textual borrowing in student texts. It is argued that a stronger focus on teaching writing and more hours of explicit teaching are possible ways to overcome this problem.

Textual Borrowing and Plagiarism

Textual borrowing is one of the main features of academic writing. It is a term writing teachers use when talking about integrating facts, research, and scholarship into a text. Namely, a text is not considered academic if it does not rely on and refer to previously published scholarship and research. As Campbell (1990: 211) states, 'Even the most original academic paper integrates facts, ideas, concepts, and theories from other sources by means of quotations, paraphrases, summaries, and brief sentences'. Students, however, are not always clear about the role of textual borrowing in their writing; therefore, they typically have problems with appropriate integration of source texts. These problems most often concern plagiarism, an act of taking other people's words and ideas without referencing them. This is particularly true for some novice undergraduate ESL/EFL students who are encountering academic writing in English for the first time.

Influence of Culture and Previous Education on Textual Borrowing

ESL/EFL students' textual borrowing practices are influenced by different factors among which culture and previous education play a very important role. Namely, the Western concept of ownership of text is not universally accepted (Pennycook 1996) so a student's culture can play an important role in his/her writing practices. Fox (1994 cited in Bloch 2004: 211) argues that American students view plagiarism as a violation of accepted cultural norms, while ESL students sometimes commit plagiarism because it is a product of their own cultural norms. This makes it clear that culture is a very important issue when dealing with ESL students' writing practices.

The influence of culture on students' textual borrowing is closely related to the influence of previous education. Some of the difficulties experienced by ESL/EFL student writers in higher education are found in their own education systems. Different countries have different education systems, different views on what and how subjects should be taught, as well as different ways of assessing students. For example, in the Anglo-American culture a great stress is put on teaching writing, since writing is regularly used as a means of assessment. On the other hand, in some countries attention is put on

oral assessment of students. For instance, in the Russian education system oral assessment plays a major role (Petrić 2005). As a result, students are rarely taught to write academically and, consequently, when they are asked to write in English, they are unaware of the conventions needed to produce acceptable academic texts in this language.

There are also countries where writing is paired with oral testing as a means of assessment. However, the focus of tertiary-level writing in these countries is not the same as in the Anglo-American culture. Namely, the education in these countries often heavily relies on textbooks. Sherman (1992) gives a nice example of this situation. Working at an Italian university, she realized that there was a misunderstanding between her and her students. Sherman, coming from the Anglo-American culture, could not understand the fact that her students learned content from textbooks by heart and gave verbatim answers when questioned. She also realized that they borrowed inappropriately from sources and did not really argue in their written assignments. She found the cause of the problems in her students' previous education, which was, she stated, very text-based, meaning that students were expected to memorize content from textbooks and produce it in the exam without too much deviation. Based on this example, it appears that the focus of writing in cultures such as this one would be, simply put, to provide verbatim answers on the exam paper. Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) closely resembles Italian education in this respect.

Teaching Academic Writing in Bosnia and Herzegovina

This section provides a brief description of teaching writing in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Most of the information comes from my own experience while some comes from informal interviews I held with one primary and one high-school teacher, and two university teachers. Both the primary and high school teacher taught the Bosnian language course and were able to provide information about the teaching of formal writing at these levels. At the time of the interviews, one of the university teachers worked as a teaching assistant at the Department of Psychology and Pedagogy and another worked as a senior teaching assistant at the History Department. They provided insight regarding how and when writing is taught at the university level. All teachers apart from a teaching assistant had extensive teaching experience.

The interviews showed that primary and secondary schools do not offer writing instruction. At universities, writing courses are generally not offered although some instruction might be provided by individual teachers on their own initiative. Attention to teaching writing might be found within courses in English departments, but not as a subject in itself.

High school is a time when students in BiH encounter academic writing for the first time. Namely, in their final year, Bosnian students are required to write a graduation paper, which is simply a research paper from one of their areas of study. Graduation papers are about 20 to 30 pages long and for the first time in their education these students are supposed to use outside sources in their writing.

In order to help students fulfill this challenging task, every student is assigned a teacher as a mentor who is supposed to provide guidance to him/her on how to write this paper. In reality, this guidance often comes down to helping students with choosing the topic and helping them find, or simply providing students with, appropriate literature on the topic. However, schools do not normally offer explicit instruction to students as to how to write this graduation paper. In this way, students can graduate from high school completely unaware of the basic principles of academic writing.

At the university level, students are occasionally required to write research papers. In order to write a research paper, they need to use different source texts to obtain the necessary information. As with secondary education, writing is not explicitly taught at university level either. However, the interview with a teaching assistant revealed that he provides students with some basic information on how to write these research papers and that he also touches upon textual borrowing and appropriate ways to reference borrowed texts. Regardless, formal instruction in credited courses does not exist and, in reality, it is up to the teacher whether he/she will devote some time to these issues. Furthermore, many of the instructions teachers provide are elementary and the question remains how useful they are to students who have never been taught to write academically.

The long term goal of research papers is to prepare students for writing a diploma paper, a longer research paper of about 20 or more pages in length which every student must write and defend orally in order to graduate. As with the high school graduation paper, students writing a diploma paper are assigned a mentor. In reality, it is once again up to the mentor as to how much effort they ask a student to put in, as well as how much effort they themselves will put into this task. This means that some diploma papers can be of a very good quality, while some others may not be as good. At the university where this study was conducted, students cannot fail since university rules do not allow this. Once a mentor approves a diploma paper for the oral defense, it means it received a passing grade.

Thus, the above-mentioned situation with the teaching of writing at universities in BiH is consistent with what Petrić (2005: 217-218) writes about the education systems of Central and Eastern Europe:

> At tertiary level, writing in the native language is generally not taught and the concept of teaching academic writing or discipline specific writing is not widely known (Yakhontova, 1997). Many scholars note the lack of textbooks or manuals of writing in the native languages […] or even equivalent terms for 'academic writing'. One of the reasons for this lies in the fact that the dominant mode of evaluation tends to be oral assessment. Writing therefore does not play such a central role as in American universities since it is not directly relevant to academic achievement.

Having described the situation with the teaching of writing in BiH, in the following sections of the paper I discuss a small-scale study into students' textual borrowing practices at a university in BiH.

The Setting and the Corpus

The data for this study was collected at the Department of English Language and Literature at a state university in BiH. This department introduced the academic writing course into its curriculum in the 2003/2004 academic year with the aim of preparing students for writing their diploma paper in the fourth year of study. It is believed that this university, namely its English department, was one of very few, if not the only one, to offer an academic writing course in BiH at this time. The introduction of the course showed the department's willingness and determination to keep up with the new currents in English language teaching.

The academic writing course was introduced as an obligatory, two-semester course for third year students. For the course, the students were required to produce two out-of-class essays per semester. The first semester essays were 700 to 800 words long, while second semester essays were 1,000 to 1,200 words long. At the time of data collection, 93 students, divided into three groups, attended the course. I personally worked with two groups of students while another teacher worked with the third group.

Student texts were graded analytically using five different categories[1] which were combined to reach a final grade. I chose to focus on the highest and the lowest scoring essays as in this case it was sure that all the categories receiving either low or high scores, including the two language proficiency categories, Grammar and Vocabulary, would be covered. This enabled me to look at the correlation between textual borrowing practices and language proficiency which otherwise would not have been possible.

For the analysis, six essays from the second writing task in the first semester were chosen. Three essays had the highest scores while other three had the lowest scores. Students wrote about the influence of age on language acquisition and for the first time they were required to use outside sources. Students were provided with two different source texts: Chapter 3 from Brown (2000) and Chapter 5 from Johnson (2001). It was expected that with two different sources, students would make sure to identify and differentiate between them.

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[1] The categories are: Task Realization, Discourse Management, Grammar, Vocabulary, and Effect on the Reader

Methodology

The corpus of six chosen essays was analyzed for textual borrowing by juxtaposing students' texts with source texts. The sentence, as marked orthographically, was used as the basic unit of analysis (Shi 2004: 177) and therefore each sentence from a student's text was compared to the original text in order to find out whether there was textual borrowing present in the student's sentence or not. If textual borrowing was discovered, then this sentence was put into the appropriate category to which it belonged. A coding scheme with categories was adopted from Shi (2004) but it was adjusted to fit the needs of this study. The coding scheme used in this study is as follows:

1. TEXTUAL BORROWING WITH NO REFERENCE:
a) exact copy b) near copy c) close paraphrase d) special paraphrase

2. TEXTUAL BORROWING WITH REFERENCE:
a) exact copy b) near copy c) close paraphrase d) special paraphrase
e) appropriate textual borrowing (with appropriate or inappropriate reference)

3. TEXTUAL BORROWING WITH QUOTATIONS:
a) with appropriate reference b) with inappropriate reference c) without reference

4. MISCELLANEOUS

The first category includes sentences from students' essays in which textual borrowing was identified but for which no reference was provided. The second category includes examples of textual borrowing with references, where 'with references' means 'with any kind of reference, appropriate or inappropriate'. Sentences or their parts enclosed within quotation marks make up the third category, called textual borrowing with quotations, where 'with quotations' means that the text enclosed within quotation marks may be verbatim or near verbatim, as well as appropriately or inappropriately referenced or without reference. The fourth category contains examples which did not fit any of the already existing categories. The meaning of the subcategories for the first two categories is as follows:

a) exact copy – represents a string of exactly copied words from the original text as well as those strings of copied words which differ from the original sentence in a punctuation mark, usually a comma, and/or an article.

b) near copy – represents a string of words 'modified slightly by adding or deleting words or using synonyms for content words' (Shi 2004: 178).

c) close paraphrase – represents a string of words 'closely paraphrased by reformulating syntax or changing the wording of the original text' (Shi 2004: 178).

d) special paraphrase – represents sentences in which no strings of consecutive words were found but which nevertheless represent textual borrowing. This can be clearly seen from the context in which these sentences are found.

e) appropriate textual borrowing (with appropriate or inappropriate reference) – represents sentences substantially changed and therefore appropriately borrowed which are referenced either appropriately or inappropriately.

The three subcategories of textual borrowing with quotations category are believed to be clear and have no need for special explanation.

It must be said that subcategories are not clear cut, or as Campbell (1990: 216) stated: 'the notions Exact Copy, Near Copy, and Paraphrase represented points along a continuum rather than clearly defined separate categories, making interpretation problematic'. At times, one and the same sentence contained a part which could be coded as one subcategory and a part which could be coded as another subcategory, making the categorization difficult. In cases like this, I opted for what I considered to be the stronger categorization. For instance, in the example below I chose near copy,

since the first part of the sentence (which is a near copy of the original text) seemed more important and somehow stronger than the second part of the sentence, which represents a paraphrase.

Student text
Neuromuscular plasticity, cerebral development and lateralisation (assigning) certain functions to the brain hemispheres in the childhood help children easier language learning.

Original text
There is evidence in neurological research that as the human brain matures, certain functions are assigned, or 'lateralized', to the left hemisphere of the brain, and certain other functions to the right hemisphere (Brown 2000: 54).

Results

The study examined textual borrowing in six argumentative essays, which together contained 220 sentences. Out of this number, 103 sentences proved to contain textual borrowing and were therefore excerpted from the corpus for further analysis. The results show that the first category, textual borrowing without reference, accounts for more than half of all the cases of textual borrowing, or more precisely for 55 out of 103 cases. Out of these 55 cases, ten are exact copies and all of them were found in lower scoring essays. This suggests that higher scoring students understood that copying original text without making any changes to it and without providing reference for it is unacceptable and thus they completely avoided this practice. The lack of unreferenced exact copies in higher scoring students' texts is probably one of the greatest differences between the higher scoring and lower scoring essays. Another important finding concerning this category is that near copies were the most numerous subgroup. In fact, these near copies represent the most numerous subgroup of all subgroups, in all categories, in both lower and higher scoring essays.

The second category, textual borrowing with reference, accounts for about 30% of all the cases of textual borrowing. The group of higher scoring essays in this category exhibits a slightly greater number of examples, namely 18, compared to 16 examples in lower scoring essays. Near copies represent the most numerous subgroup in this category as well. In this category students did provide the reference for the sentences they borrowed; however, their in-text citations often do not follow the rules of appropriate in-text referencing, thus, some references provided are appropriate while some are inappropriate.

Textual borrowing with quotations is the third category looked at and it comprises three subcategories. One of the most interesting findings concerning this category is that in the three lower scoring essays no examples were found to belong to the first subcategory, textual borrowing with quotations and appropriate reference, which means that none of the students used a direct quotation and provided an appropriate reference for it. This is quite alarming since proper ways of referencing were covered in class and one of the requirements students needed to fulfill was to include in their essays at least one direct quote. In the case of higher scoring essays two examples were found to belong to this subgroup. Although not a large number of student sentences with textual borrowing were coded as textual borrowing with quotations and appropriate reference, students compensated for it by using a much larger number of direct quotes without appropriate reference. There are a total of nine examples of these inappropriately referenced direct quotes making it the subgroup with the biggest number of examples within this category. The final subcategory, textual borrowing with quotations without reference, contains only one example which suggests that students knew that a text enclosed within quotation marks should always be referenced.

The final category, miscellaneous, contains only two examples, both of which are referenced. Since this category was constituted to account for examples which did not fit any other categories, this means that the existing examples differ from all other examples in some way. Namely, the first example differs greatly semantically from the original sentence and the second example is greatly distorted due to the fact that the person whom the student mentioned as the source of her statement did not say what the student claims he did.

Discussion

This small-scale study investigated students' textual borrowing practices and it was discovered that students have many problems within this area of academic writing. The essays examined showed a high incidence of inappropriate textual borrowing i.e. plagiarism. Students used different types of inappropriate textual borrowing such as exact copies, near copies, and close paraphrases. As for appropriate methods of source use, students used direct quotations; however, their quotations often exhibited problems such as not being appropriately referenced and/or not being identical to the original text. However, it must be mentioned that higher scoring essays contained more appropriate source use. This is supported by the fact that higher scoring essays are characterized by the complete lack of unreferenced exact copies and unreferenced direct quotations. This shows that higher scoring students whose essays were analyzed have a better understanding of the practices of textual borrowing.

A very interesting finding is that the examples of near copies, referenced and unreferenced alike, are the most numerous type of textual borrowing in both groups of essays. This could be interpreted as students' effort to appropriate the source texts in an acceptable way. By using near copies, it seems that students are trying to distance themselves from source texts but at this stage of their development as writers they are still unable to do so. One possible explanation for this may be found in Howard's concept of 'patchwriting' (2001 cited in Pecorari 2003: 320). Namely, students whose essays were analyzed were just beginning to learn about academic writing so in this early stage of their development as writers they did not feel confident in their writing abilities and therefore relied on the source texts too much.

As with all complex issues, there is not one simple reason responsible for students' inappropriate source use but rather it is the interaction of different reasons which brought about such high levels of plagiarism in student essays. More hours of explicit, formal teaching is one possible solution to this problem. It is true that in BiH attention is not given to the issue of plagiarism unlike in Anglo-American culture and, therefore, students often get by with plagiarizing; however, if these students were to study abroad they would face great difficulties. As the English language has become the *lingua franca*, educated people, if they want to be a part of the modern world, also have to be familiar with writing practices in the English language. For this reason more attention should be given to developing writing skills as well as skills of appropriate textual borrowing in the education system of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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