

## WRITING FROM SOURCES: PROCESS, PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

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## ABSTRACT

The competence of writing from multiple sources is crucial for EFL students in higher education. The academic writing process requires the support and integration of various skills such as fluency as well as the skills of integrating information from the source texts within the written text, reading the rhetorical context and interpreting the task. The aim of this article is to investigate the writing process from-sources in EFL setting. This article discusses the complexity of the writing-from-sources task such as how students construct a task representation and personal and contextual factors that influenced the creation of the participants' task representations, other factors such as individual background experiences. Language proficiency is assumed affect reading and writing performance. Some suggestions are presented to help teachers designing the task of reading and writing from source texts.

## KEYWORDS

## Reading and Writing From Source Texts, Task Representations

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Reading activities play a significant role in accomplishing academic writing tasks. The tasks of writing from source texts can involve various reading activities such as reviewing several reading sources, reading source texts to write an academic essay or producing a scientific report. This article refers a writing-from sources to an academic writing task for which the students must read some different source texts and then use the information from these texts to develop their own academic text.

The teachers' observation and their experiences in supervising a final report in the English Department of State Polytechnic of Selatjaya in particular, reveal that most students find it difficult to use sources into their final report. Final report writing in English, especially for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners like polytechnic students, is problematic, as the students should think not only about the content and the organization of the report, but also the language. To focus the discussion of this issue, three questions are formulated:

1. What do the students do during writing from source texts?
2. What are the main problems of students' writing from multiple sources?
3. What should teachers do to teach students write from source texts?

To answer these questions, the writer will discuss the process of learning from texts and the students' difficulties in writing from sources based on theories. This article highlights some of the main theoretical reading and writing models as well as relevant literature in order to build a framework for the discussion and conclusion. This article explores what we know about learning from texts and writing from source texts.

The discussion of the students' difficulties have been drawn from four issues: language proficiency, writing experience, plagiarism and pandewriting. This article outlines a few reading and writing problems that have had a major impact on the student academic writing. It also presents practical aspects behind the reading and writing problems of the students. The discussion then moves into specific conceptual processes and tasks that combine reading from sources and writing, such as transferring, corroborating and integrating and the section derives implications of such for EFL students. The discussion also addresses the issue related to EFL writing-from-sources that are a part of writing solutions in an academic setting: multiple text task design and its superiority over single text task design. Finally, it summarizes the previous discussions.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Writing from Source Texts

This section presents the discussion to answer the question: What do the students do when engaged in a writing-from-sources task within intensive report writing? To discuss any further on how the students learn from source texts we need to define the concept of strategy and process. A strategy is an action in which students must employ for solving complex problems of learning. Macaro (2006:330) contends that a strategy is a conscious or semi-conscious behavior that directs a language learner towards achieving a particular goal during learning. More advanced strategies of learning from text are essential as they facilitate a deeper

and better understanding of the text. This article refers to a process as a cluster or a sequence of strategies.

Writing from source texts has been the focus of academic discussions for quite a long time. The old model concerning learning from text is based on assumption that learning is transmission of knowledge. The transmission model is not supported by current studies on knowledge learning as this model of learning considers learning simply knowledge transfer. Recent studies suggest that information is not learned by retaining information merely from one source to another, but is processed and transformed by learners through learning (Spivey, 1980:346). If the learned information needs to be retained, the current information must be processed through integration with previously learned information. Combining process of the new information with the old information to form new knowledge is the concept of multiple source text learning. It is constructed either by assimilating the current information into previous information structures or creating new knowledge structures by accommodating the new information that account for both the previously known and the new information (Rumelhart, 1980:74).

There are many academic writing tasks that require reading, writing, and analytical activities such as argumentative essay writing, critical reviews, interpretive essays, and research papers (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). The following discussion presents two models of writing from source texts in an academic setting: writing from multiple texts and synthesis writing.

Winchburg (1991) reported his study on how students learned historical events from different contradictory documents. The analysis of the participants' think-alouds, revealed three main strategies reported by students when reading and writing from multiple texts. The first strategy of writing from multiple texts is the corroboration strategy which is defined as the student activity of comparing or contrasting different documents and its contents with one another. The second one is the sourcing strategy which is applied by the students to identify the source texts during reading. Finally, the third strategy is contextualization or the act of situating the information from a source text in a temporal and spatial context. The use of these strategies shows the differences between expert historians and novice students.

The second academic writing is synthesis writing. This writing involves three challenging points: organizing, selecting, and connecting during reading. Spivey and King (1989) indicate that readers use textual cues to help them create a mental organization of a text. Textual cues show the organization of a text and indicate the link between propositions in the texts.

## 2.2 Students Problems of Writing from Other sources

In academic writing conventions, there are three ways of using source information into the writers' texts namely direct quotations, paraphrases and summaries. These kinds of academic sourcing are difficult for students to do due to some factors. In contrast to the academic requirements, the students use information from source texts inappropriately.

One of the specific problems that frequently appear in the process of writing-from-sources tasks done by students is plagiarism. Students use source texts either by direct copying and

or changing the language to certain degrees but the results have not yet fulfilled the criteria of paraphrases or summaries as required by academic writing. Martin (2008) proposes a definition of plagiarism as presenting other people's ideas as one's own. Further, he explains that the easiest way to detect plagiarism in writing is word-for-word copies, phrases, sentences, paragraphs or entire works without adequate acknowledgement. It is difficult to judge plagiarism of ideas, when a person expresses someone else's ideas in a completely different form.

EFL student reading ability is a problem that can contribute to the plagiarism practices because insufficient reading abilities may lead a student to plagiarize. They rely too much on coping strategies and excessive quoting due to the lack of linguistic proficiency or reading abilities (Kirkland & Saunders, 1991:105). Even many EFL readers are unable to recognize the argument in most academic texts.

The importance of EFL proficiency in writing is supported by some experts and evidenced in the following research studies on the roles of EFL proficiency within EFL writing. Kanta, (1990:46) points out that lack of reading ability can lead to a poor use of sources in the text the student is producing. Students with poor language proficiency tend to process language in a word-for word process, focusing on the words and structures of a text, whereas more fluent readers focus on conceptual relations of the material.

Grabe (2001) holds that second language (L2) proficiency is a key factor determining the final results of the student writing from multiple sources. Similarly, Cumming (1989:86) contends that the student writing improved due to more advanced L2 proficiency. Language proficiency could have also affected writing expertise, which can be defined as one's ability to synthesize the ideas of source texts with their multi perspectives.

There have been some studies in EFL textual borrowing which reveal inappropriate use of source text. The studies indicate EFL students experience problem integrating information from source texts into their writing (Pecorari,2003, Locki and Carson, 1997). LoCastro and Masuko (2003) report their study concerning NNSs' plagiarism and difficulty in academic writing.

Predictably, the same problem is also true to polytechnic students, especially when they are producing an English academic paper. With all of this background, this paper attempts to describe how English teachers should deal with these issues.

The practices of plagiarism must be eliminated because they are considered by scholars as intellectual fraud and by teachers as a barrier to learning development. This point of view can be contrasted with the opinion which considers patchwriting different from plagiarism. They view patchwriting as a developmental stage of learning.

Patchwriting is students' using source texts in which they copy from source texts, substitute words with synonyms, change grammar, and delete words of the source texts. Howard (1993:46) holds that this phenomena is natural and positive because college students frequently do not have much experience writing from sources. In writing from sources the students do patchwriting before they are able to write from sources correctly and acceptably. Teachers must recognize that students will go through patchwork stages before they reach to sufficient ability to write from sources (Hall & Rose, 1989). Teachers

will considered patchwriting deliberate plagiarism if they do not recognize this as a student's process of learning.

Several institutions tend ignore patchwriting or plagiarism. Neither do they treat patchwriting properly nor consider plagiarism as serious violation. These institutions will treat serious academic frauds. In contrast to Western culture, the use of another's words without proper acknowledgement of the source is considered plagiarism and rejected academically.

Furthermore, the factual writing practices in many EFL settings in Indonesia which focus on the skill of memorization and give less practices on independent and critical arguments have mislead to plagiarism. Imitation is an integral part of learning in the polytechnic institution. This is true for developing skilled graduates. In many activities, students begin the learning practices of speaking or writing by imitating a model. This educational process is usually long. In terms of learning to write, students are encouraged (and sometimes required) to drill and use them in their own writing. In this kind of skill learning, creativity has to be built upon the foundation of imitation. Frequently, there is a lack of element of creation and analysis for a polytechnic learner in gaining certain knowledge or skills. Although this is not considered a significant factor affecting student plagiarism, some experts believe that this will become a barrier in developing independent and creative writing.

The writer's observations also indicated that most students of State Polytechnic of Sierwijaya are unable to produce appropriate academic papers. They still have difficulty in dealing with linguistic skills and knowledge, as well as with analyzing arguments and synthesizing information. This information implies that if no improvement is carried out, the students' poor competence in academic writing will seriously affect the quality of future graduates.

### 3. DISCUSSION

#### What should teachers do?

Writing success is determined by various factors that interact together during learning process. Genre studies have found interactions between the texts, readers and writers, and the contexts within the reading and writing (Johns, 1997). In other words, each writing task involves an interaction process that requires writers to work in rhetorical context and frame their writing. Thus, teachers too need to create representations of the tasks and the teacher evaluate students writing based on how close the student writing match the teacher's task representation (Connor & Carroll, 1993).

Flower et al. (1990: 23) define task representation as an interpretive process that translates the rhetorical situation into the writing activities. The representation of the task was a student's understanding of the content and schematic features of the final written texts, text organization, style, use of source texts, and number of paragraphs. A task representation may be manifested in the final written texts as its physical manifestation Flower (1990). In other words, task representation is the interpretation of the various requirements for the assigned writing tasks by students, and they manifest it through response genre format, rhetorical purpose. Task representation determines writer's respond to the task and composing strategies (Flower, 1990; Spivey, 1990 & 1997).

To design this writing task, the first thing teachers must do is decide what skills, products, and processes the students are required to do and make a plan of action that will lead to a written product that appropriately fulfills the writing task. Flower et al. (1990) have proposed a theory of task representation construction based on three principles. The first principle is that students create a writing task representation from their recent writing task and background. When dealing with a writing task, writers do not select a task representation from choices of task representations. Rather, the writer's past experiences with writing, strategies, and writing conventions and patterns all interact to create something new in the writer's task representation and help the writer decide how to approach and successfully accomplish the writing task. The second principle writers must identify cues from context, incorporate the cues and implications of the cues into a developing representation of the task, and use their experience and judgment to adjust their task representation to fit those cues. Task cues come from a variety of sources such as a printed writing assignment sheet, feedbacks, readings and source texts, and other students in the class.

Writers need a long time to develop task representations and then their changing perception of the task is likely to lead to revisions in their drafts and final assignments. Students need to adjust their task representation for the final exam writing assignment. In this case, students need a whole semester to build a task representation of the final exam. Teachers should facilitate several draft revisions (multi drafts) to allow the improvement of the task representation and the paper before they submit final version of the paper.

Although many factors affect the success of writing, this article focuses on the assumptions that three factors determine a student's success or failure in accomplishing the writing task assigned: writing competence and the implementation of task representation. The first factor would be the student's level of writing competence, such as organizing ideas, producing grammatically accurate and syntactically complex texts; creating cohesion and coherence within a text; and synthesizing source texts. These skills have been recognized as essential writing skills for successful academic writers and have thus maintained a prominent place in L2 writing pedagogy (Keld, 1993; Silva, 1990).

In addition to writing competence, the ability to perceive the requirements of the writing task, or in other words the student's task representation will determine the student's success in writing. If the student applies this skills that do match the task as the teacher design it, the student will likely receive an accurate results and get high grade. On the contrary, if the student fails to interpret the task accurately he/she will fail even though he/she possessed the writing skills and the content knowledge required to receive a high grade (Hamp-Lyons, 1991). Thus, we can see that mastering an adequate level of writing competence may not be enough to write successfully, but that success is more likely to occur through both mastering writing competence and the skillful application of that competence through creating an accurate task representation for each writing task.

The third problem is proficiency, which is needed to process source texts while reading. Without sufficient comprehension of the source texts, it is impossible for students to integrate information from those texts into their own writing. In addition to a minimum level of EFL proficiency, the ability to construct meaning from text is useful for writing. Thus, unlike native readers who already have language competence and focus on reading

processes in order to advance their reading skills, EFL readers must work to process both a minimum level of EFL understanding or proficiency as well as an expanded reading processes.

Many confounding factors may affect the resulted grade of student writing. A good paper will fulfill all the expectations of the teacher and consequently receive a high grade. A high grade would logically represent successful writing. However, we know that teachers grade academic writing tasks based on more than what is in the paper. Teachers grade students based on several factors such as attendance in class, class participation, judgments of the student's efforts and understanding of learning materials taught in classroom (Casanave, 1993; Leki, 1993; Prior, 1995). The third principle of task representation construction is that an unstable task representation can lead to inconsistencies and disjointed text in the final written product. It is possible that the students will change their previous ideas in the middle of writing, which would lead to inconsistencies in the text. There will be some variations of the task representations in the same task (Yang & Shi, 2003).

Teachers can design learning activities which provide a mini-lesson or handouts on effective sourcing, integration and/or citation guidelines. Students submit first draft writing and have them peer review. Through this kind of learning the students will develop skills how to find and develop research questions and claims, how to use sources into a paper, how to cite sources. They also learn how to incorporate some information or data set that teachers have provided.

Teachers assign paper and provide all resources where students can access openly. The assignment should be based on the following guide:

- Embed assignment tasks in course theme and materials
- Prescribe use of one or more particular sources (especially one you used in class).
- Require copies of source material
- Process note on group activities
- Require an annotated bibliography ahead of time, complete with call numbers for books and journals and complete URLs for web resources
- Supervise them in peer groups to swift from copious work or patchwriting to summary, paraphrase and integration into text with appropriate referencing and provide opportunities to practice.
- Provide checklists that outline the required elements students are seeking. For example: Support Evidence Paragraph Checklist
- Introduce quotation, paraphrase or summaries by referring to the author of the quote
- Explain how the quote or paraphrased used works to prove, support, or explain the point a writer is trying to make in the topic sentence of the paragraphs
- Assign multi drafts to allow the improvement of task representations

Teachers are suggested to assign argument essay where students are required to read from source texts. Argument essays are suggested because this task will likely enable students to use sources as well as evaluate and give opinions on the topics of their assignments. The teachers conduct class activities that allow the participants to share their ideas and

understandings of the class articles with other students in the class. They also incorporate the ideas from the articles into many other class discussions. To facilitate step by step improvement, teachers can assign multi drafts which allow revisions and the improvement of task representations.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

There is a growing interest in the study of how students are capable of writing from different sources of information and the strategies they apply as well as the problems appear during learning. Winchburg (1991) reported how people construct an understanding of historical events from a group of fragmented and contradictory documents. History teachers were commonly confronted with the need to teach by using different original or primary sources of historical evidence, yet little research had been conducted in order to guide these teachers. Because learning historical contents implies more than reaching a solution, but reconstructing an event or set of events by using different sources. Spivoy (1990) describes three strategies that occur as writers engage in synthesis writing: organizing, selecting, and connecting. Writers use variations of these processes while engaged in reading and composing for synthesis writing. And all three of these processes are heavily influenced by the writing task, the writer's representation of the writing task, and numerous individual factors such as topical knowledge, world knowledge, and discourse knowledge.

Plagiarism and patchwriting are important issues in academic writing because of their position between source texts and the acceptable reproduction. It helps us better understand L2L writers composing from sources. Plagiarism may be accidental; either because of lack of understanding or lack of preparation. Students simply do not understand they are doing something wrong when they quote or use other work without appropriate acknowledgements. This is particularly important when comparing the form of participants' written texts with the source texts. This article also assumes that writing expertise and L2 proficiency have a significant effect on students' compositions and composing strategies.

Teachers can help students to develop their writing skills and minimize plagiarism by providing 'user friendly' instructional activities which can be accessed and draft revisions. Students also need to be helped to write better through multi drafts to improve their task representation and finally improve their papers.

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