

Article

Can EAP meet the needs of international students with source use?

Mary Davis

Oxford Brookes University

ABSTRACT

This study evaluates the extent to which EAP can equip international students with the source use skills necessary at Master's level. It draws on interview data from a PhD study of eight international postgraduate students and tutor comments. The findings offer insights into the challenges the students face in developing their citation, critical engagement, use of reporting verbs, paraphrasing and avoidance of plagiarism, in order to meet tutor expectations. It appears that while some features of source use are fairly easily developed, other features remain problematic and cause anxiety. Thus, more ongoing support from EAP with source use seems necessary throughout Master's degrees.

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Introduction

Problems for international students with source use, particularly at Master's level, have been widely acknowledged. Evidence suggests that source use is often taught only at induction stage and limited to guidance on referencing (McGowan, 2005). Furthermore, while instruction about source use should be explicit and available for international students (Carroll, 2005, p.27), it seems postgraduate tutors do not prioritise their needs (Hall and Sung, 2009, p.61). As a consequence, the responsibility for teaching source use has increasingly fallen to EAP teachers. Therefore, given the importance of using sources competently at postgraduate level, it is worth questioning the extent to which EAP equips international students with the source use skills they need at this level. While instruction about source use is frequently focused on in EAP textbooks and course materials, some studies have indicated limitations, for example Martala (2006, p.51) found that students improved their referencing skills on an EAP course, but continued to have problems with criticality. Other studies have identified problems with the transferability of new knowledge about source use, indicating it is more likely to transfer if content is included (James, 2006, p.802) which bears out the strong recommendation by Hyland (2006, p.12) to focus on the disciplinary needs with source use. James (2006, p.798) also found that learning about

sources on an EAP programme was more likely to transfer at the beginning of further study, which implies that by the time Master's students reach their dissertation, their pre-sessional EAP learning about source use may have 'worn off'. Therefore, this study aims to examine the experiences of international postgraduate students with source use and to determine how successfully their needs are met by EAP teaching.

Method

This study, as part of PhD research on the development of source use (Davis, 2014), tracked eight international student participants (S1-S8) over a two-year period (on Pre-Master's and Master's programmes). A profile of participants can be seen below.

Table 1: Profile of participants

Participant	Nationality	EFL/ESL	Male/Female	Master's Subject
S1	Chinese	EFL	F	Business
S2	Chinese	EFL	M	Business
S3	Algerian	EFL	M	Business
S4	Chinese	EFL	M	Business
S5	Chinese	EFL	F	Technology
S6	Japanese	EFL	M	Business
S7	Algerian	EFL	M	Business
S8	Sri Lankan	ESL	M	Business

All students had non-UK undergraduate degrees from their own countries, and used English as a foreign language, apart from the Sri Lankan, who used it as a second language. They all studied Master's degrees in business, except for one Chinese student who studied technology. Students (S1-S8) were interviewed at each stage about their source use, to explore their experiences and development (stages three and four on the Master's included here). In the final stage, eight postgraduate tutors of the students were interviewed (T1-T5 included here).

Findings and discussion

I will set out the findings and discussion using data from interview extracts based on five features of source use: citation, critical engagement, reporting verbs, paraphrasing and avoiding plagiarism. I identified these features as essential elements of source use in the

emerging themes from interviews with tutors and students, from their prevalence in student assignments and from my own reading and teaching.

Citation

Students' use of citation can be seen as a standard element to academic writing, both in terms of accurate formatting and effective use. Tutors were asked about their expectations of how students should use citation. One tutor explained how she felt high expectations were justified:

When they are handing in their first sets of written coursework, we expect them to use the Harvard referencing system pretty much perfectly, so we do work during the induction, we do work with the Academic Conduct Officer, and we do a formative assessment where they get to practise and we correct that (T1).

From this explanation, it is clear that the tutor expects citation formatting to be used without any mistakes, but also that there are several learning opportunities in place. One participant described what she had learnt:

I feel, once you do the citation, it's like more helpful, it's not a bad thing, it's better to use citation than plagiarism because the tutor, they like citation, yeah (S1, Stage 4).

This student's understanding of citation seems to be focused on its importance to tutors. At the same time, students appeared to encounter personal preferences among tutors about how they wanted sources to be used, as one reported:

The tutor of this module, he said he didn't like quotation, that's why I didn't use quotation. He said quotation is not really good. (S2, Stage 3).

This reaction from a tutor of business, a social science discipline, seems confusing for students, who had been taught to use quotations on their Pre-Master's programme. It is interesting that both students say they responded to what they thought tutors 'like'. This reaction was noted by Pecorari (2013, p.129): depending on the support available, students may attempt to adapt their practices and draw their own conclusions about how to use sources. Thus, students would benefit from further discussion about citation to develop their understanding.

Critical engagement

Critical engagement has been recognised as one of the most difficult skills for students with source use. As with their expectations for citation, tutors seemed to require high levels of critical engagement in terms of evaluative skills. One tutor elaborated on this:

We want them to critically evaluate the information that they find, to debate issues, and as they progress through the programme, to increase that ability to debate, so that when they get to something like the dissertation, they are comfortable with the issue of debating. We say ‘we want you to think independently, we want you to challenge the theories, the models, the concepts (T2).

For some students, achieving these skills may not be problematic. One student commented on his sense that his development of critical engagement was satisfactory:

‘My writing is not perfect but it is readable I think, and I can make an interpretation of ideas of people and use it, in my own way, which is really important’ (S3, Stage 4).

However, debating and challenging the literature are likely to be new activities for many international postgraduate students, who struggle to do this. For example, one student criticised his lack of improvement and highlighted his problems trying to follow tutor requirements:

I think I still need practice make my argument and comment on my sources more sophisticated. But my tutor recommend some books, but it’s really difficult to read and not focused on what we do, but the tutor mentions we should read and talk about, so we have to do it (S4, Stage 3).

Thus, students’ ability to engage critically is likely to depend on how far they can understand and interpret what they read, and their perception of critical engagement with sources may remain quite different to that of their tutors, especially if they have a different educational background (Weller, 2010, p.101).

Reporting verbs

Students’ choice of reporting verbs is linked to critical engagement in terms of the degree of evaluation. Tutors seemed to perceive their range and understanding as limited; for example, one tutor commented:

I think they tend to choose two or three favourites, in terms of ‘state’, ‘argue’ and ‘point out’ and I don’t think they are generally aware of the different shades of meaning (T3).

Student remarks seemed to bear out this view:

I use a lot of ‘states’- it’s familiar for me to use ‘state’ (S5, Stage 3).

Students may choose non-evaluative reporting verbs such as ‘state’ because using them is easier than employing evaluative reporting verbs that require more critical engagement with sources (Hyland, 2004, p.37). However, another student preferred an evaluative reporting verb:

I use ‘discusses’ because it shows kind of debate within the coming paragraph, it could be between two ideas or two authors’ (S3, Stage 3).

It appears that the reporting verbs chosen by students tend to be based on individual preferences for certain words, with some more comfortable with a non-evaluative stance and some making use of evaluation. However, as found by Hyland (2004, p.38), academic writers need to show their position on a subject through their choice of reporting verbs; thus, if students tend to avoid evaluative verbs, their writing would lack the sort of debate and challenge required by T2 above.

Paraphrasing

Tutors highlighted problems with paraphrasing for international students in terms of grammatical errors, transferring meaning, choosing appropriate synonyms and paraphrasing sufficiently. One tutor explained:

Some students will try, and get completely lost in trying to paraphrase it because they then run into grammatical structure issues and then as a marker, you are trying to read through this. I just don’t understand and on a couple of occasions recently, I’ve actually said ‘I think you need to go to the EAP Department’ (T4).

Previous research has shown that tutor readers sometimes feel they lack the time to work out the meaning of some attempts to paraphrase and want to send the problem away to EAP (Davis, 2012, p.27). One student explained the problem from a writer’s view:

I think there are two ways of worrying about it, because I must not use the words on the original sources so I have to change it, and I must not change the meaning of the

information. But sometimes if I want to change the words, the meaning is slightly different, so it takes long time to paraphrase (S6, Stage 3).

This comment is striking because rather than saying there are two elements in paraphrasing the student describes, ‘two ways of worrying about it’, which indicates his concerns. Another student explained her worries about leaving source text to paraphrase later:

I think I have a lot of bad habits because I didn’t really do the good or right thing sometimes, I will just use it right now, maybe later I will forget what part I want to change (S1, Stage 3).

This concurs with the finding by Pecorari (2008, p.111) that students sometimes adopted a risky ‘change it later’ strategy with paraphrasing, resulting in continued anxiety and problems with plagiarism, which will be discussed in the next section.

Avoiding plagiarism

Of all the features of source use, avoiding plagiarism is obviously the most basic requirement to good academic practice. Yet, despite its importance, tutors said that there was no time to help:

To me, formative feedback [about plagiarism] is the most important thing but it’s the hardest thing to do because you just don’t have the time to do it, it isn’t scheduled (T5).

This comment is important as the tutor recognises the need for more plagiarism education, and at the same time, the lack of opportunities for it. This bears out the conclusions of other studies of the lack of instruction about plagiarism (McGowan, 2005; Pecorari, 2008). Students also reported that tutors had no time to support them, and it was not prioritised:

To be honest, everything I’ve learnt was in my Pre-Master’s. When you start your Master’s degree, nobody tells you anything about plagiarism. I mean, they’re gonna tell you about plagiarism and referencing once or twice but that’s it, they’re gonna move on (S7, Stage 4).

This student’s perspective is clearly that teaching about avoiding plagiarism only takes place in EAP courses. At the same time, there was evidence of students continuing to worry about plagiarism:

Sometimes I feel a bit scared about [plagiarism] because sometimes I have used too many words from the text (S8, Stage 3).

This comment suggests that more needs to be done to meet students' needs in terms of plagiarism education on Master's programmes.

Conclusion

This study has reviewed some international postgraduate students' experiences of using sources through a discussion of student and tutor comments, in an attempt to see how well EAP meets their needs with source use. In terms of the five features of source use focused on, the following conclusions can be made: tutors expect citation to be 'perfect' and students seem to manage this fairly well, though they might struggle with individual tutors' preferences; critical engagement is clearly more challenging to develop, and students may not achieve this; the use of reporting verbs tends to be limited to individual preferences; students continue to struggle with paraphrasing due to lack of confidence, vocabulary and poor strategies; avoiding plagiarism remains a source of anxiety to students, as there is a lack of support. In sum, postgraduate tutors appear to have high expectations about source use (especially citation and critical engagement) but lack time to support students, and students' attempts to use sources competently seem to be affected by ongoing worries and lack of understanding. While it is acknowledged that these findings are based on a small number of participants' views, it seems significant that both tutors and students have linked support with source use to EAP. More continuous EAP teaching about source use until students reach the end of the dissertation could help them avoid problems and worries at this critical stage.

CONTACT THE AUTHOR

marydavis@brookes.ac.uk

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