

# A case study of undergraduate L2 writers' concerns with source-based writing and plagiarism

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In recent decades, a wealth of studies on second language writing and plagiarism have emerged, particularly with the increase of international students enrolling in academic institutions that favor English-medium instruction. In most of these studies, the plagiarism-related variables (e.g., paraphrase) under scrutiny are determined by the researcher prior to the study being conducted; few studies, however, have examined plagiarism-related variables as determined by students. The purpose of this study was to investigate five undergraduate L2 students' experiences and concerns with source-based writing and plagiarism over the course of one semester within the context of the students' in-semester coursework assignments. Results show that mitigating factors, such as the context of assignment guidelines, disoriented students as they worked on their assignments. These factors, in turn, played a critical role in the agential moves students made to complete their assignments and the efforts they put forth to become members of their academic communities. Pedagogical implications for instructors of English as a second language and writing tutors are discussed.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, associations with plagiarism have been overwhelmingly negative, a consequence ascribed to students' poor time management or an unethical shortcut to a higher grade. Although instances of plagiarism as transgression do indeed still exist, research in the realm of second language (L2) writing

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has remained firm in purpose, calling attention instead to plagiarism as an integral stage for many students as they transition from novice to seasoned academic writers. If there is a consensus on the findings of this research, it is that acts of plagiarism are part and parcel of learning (Pecorari, 2015).

A common thread in most of these studies is a narrowing of the focus to a specific variable associated with plagiarism. By scrutinizing these variables, researchers gain a more nuanced understanding of the struggles students face. Through such scrutiny, however, the variables in question run the risk of becoming disembodied from the academic contexts in which students would realistically encounter them. This context becomes critical when, for instance, students must write papers as part of their coursework. Thus, the purpose of this study was, over the timeframe of one semester, to investigate the perceptions of and experiences with source-based writing and plagiarism as dictated by the study's L2 undergraduate participants.

## 2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

For several decades now, the number of international students attending U.S. colleges and universities has steadily increased, with some institutions reporting that their international students represent more than one third of the current student body (Ross, 2017). Accordingly, a large body of research on L2 writing in higher education has emerged. Several studies have highlighted how the prevailing first language (L1) writing practices in these students' home cultures stand in stark contrast to those of the United States. For instance, scholars have noted that L1 culture has considerable sway in the development of students' conceptions of plagiarism (Canagarajah, 2002; Casanave, 2004; Flowerdew & Li, 2007; Pennycook, 1996; Price, 2002; Shi, 2006).

Yet even if these students are not bewildered by cross-cultural conceptions of plagiarism—in other words, if they are able to recognize that the academic norms of their home countries do not necessarily hold true elsewhere—they nonetheless face other related challenges as they matriculate in U.S. universities. For example, definitions of plagiarism may lack clarity or be inconsistent (Pennycook, 1994), because they typically do not draw attention to matters such as students' intention, developmental perspectives, and disciplinary perspectives (Flowerdew & Li, 2007). This quandary may prove particularly daunting for any student—native or nonnative speaker—who is resolute in their efforts to avoid committing plagiarism. In short, although cross-cultural conceptions of plagiarism may pose challenges for L2 students, the systems of source-based writing in U.S. universities are also potentially problematic.

Because the purpose of this study was to investigate how L2 students might negotiate these systems, relevant scholarship on source-based writing and plagiarism is divided into two categories: first, studies in which specific variables garner focus and, second, studies (often longitudinal case studies) that adopt a holistic approach, allowing for issues to reveal themselves over time through the eyes of the participants and the texts they are working on.

As examples of the first category, source-based writing and plagiarism-related variables under scrutiny have included paraphrase (Keck, 2006, 2010, 2014), culturally shaped notions of plagiarism (Pennycook, 1996; Shi, 2006), cross-disciplinary issues (Pecorari & Shaw, 2012; Zhu, 2004), and the formation of L2 writerly identity (Ouellette, 2008). By concentrating on specific variables (e.g., paraphrase), these studies have provided a detailed look at L2 students' perspectives and practices regarding these variables. At the same time, the decontextualized nature of these types of studies can be limiting. For instance, in examining L1 and L2 students' paraphrasing strategies, Keck (2006) selected for her participants two *Newsweek* editorial source texts that were similar in length, reading difficulty, and rhetorical structure. These source texts were selected to suit the study and the participants' reading levels; however, in the context of coursework readings, it is unlikely students would encounter such

carefully groomed texts for paraphrasing. Similarly, although Ouellette's (2008) study examined the construction of an L2 student's writerly identity, conceptions of the participant's identity were not considered in conjunction with the potential influence of university plagiarism policy.

Given the extensive time (i.e., several semesters or years) students spend at university, typically toward a degree, numerous case studies have been employed to address the need for a more holistic approach, often aligning with the timeframe of a university semester and adopting as a data source the assignments that are part of the participants' coursework. For instance, Harwood and Petri (2012) investigated the role of enacted performance in tandem with two L2 students' citation behaviors and their efforts toward making a favorable impression on the instructors who would mark their writing. Currie's (1998) semester-long case study examined the textual borrowing practices of an L2 undergraduate student enrolled in an organizational behavior course. Similarly, Li and Casanave (2004) investigated whether the writing strategies of their participants (two first-year English language learners [ELLs]) entailed patchwriting or plagiarism, and Hirvela and Du (2013) looked at the paraphrasing practices of two L2 undergraduate students taking an ESL source-based writing course.

Yet several of these studies, despite their holistic nature, tend to veer toward a particular variable (e.g., performance, paraphrasing strategy). Further, because the studies typically have only one or two participants, findings are limited to the context of the assignment(s) in one or two courses. The purpose of this exploratory case study was to place central focus on five L2 undergraduate students' perceptions of and experiences with source-based writing and plagiarism as the students, over the course of one semester, worked on required writing assignments. This study also addresses the call for more studies that focus on the holistic picture of L2 writing behaviors in the digital age (Li & Casanave, 2012). To this end, the study's research questions are as follows:

1. What does the context of a holistic approach reveal about L2 students' challenges with source-based writing and plagiarism?
2. What moves do students make to negotiate these challenges?

### 3 | METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 | Recruitment

This study took place at a large public university located in the midwestern United States. I adopted purposive sampling (Check & Schutt, 2012) to recruit L2 undergraduate students who (a) had full, unconditional admission to the university (a score of 100 or greater on the iBT-TOEFL) or (b) were fully admitted, but because they had received scores below 100 were required to fulfill the university's English proficiency requirements. In the case of the latter, students would take both regular coursework and credit-bearing ESL courses. Regular coursework would play a vital role in the study, because academic writing in regular coursework is less likely to be decontextualized and more likely to require source-based writing tasks (Howard, Serviss, & Rodrigue, 2010).

#### 3.2 | Participants

Five L2 undergraduates agreed to participate (see Table 1 for participant information). The participants provided the study with variety in gender (three female, two male), language (four different native languages), areas of study (five different majors), and coursework that required source-based writing

**TABLE 1** Participant information

Name <sup>a</sup>	Gender	Age	Academic year	Major	Country of origin	Languages
HoJun	Male	20	Freshman	Biology/pre-veterinary	South Korea	Korean, English
JinYoung	Female	21	Freshman	Biochemistry/medical track	South Korea	Korean, English
Luigi	Male	22	Senior	Law	Italy	Italian, English
Navya	Female	22	Freshman	Psychology	India	Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu, Sanskrit, English
Yimin	Female	19	Sophomore	Art and theater	China	Chinese, English

<sup>a</sup>All names are pseudonyms.

(law, psychology, honors chemistry, and rhetoric). Although the participants had acquired full admission status, their status varied. As freshmen, HoJun, JinYoung, and Navya were all taking ESL credit-bearing coursework. Yimin, as the lone sophomore, took only regular coursework. Luigi, on the other hand, although fully admitted, fell somewhere between undergraduate and graduate. At the time of the study, he was in the first semester of his fourth year, working toward a 5-year law degree in Italy. He attended the university where the study took place for only one semester as an exchange student.

### 3.3 | The study

By coordinating the study as closely as possible with the lifecycle of one semester's coursework, I positioned myself to draw connections between participants' experiences or concerns with source-based writing and plagiarism with a particular paper or project they were working on for a course. Focus groups with semistructured questions (Merriam, 2009) were conducted near the beginning, middle, and end of the fall semester, with at least 1 one-on-one meeting held with each participant between both the first and second focus groups and the second and third focus groups (see Table 2 for study timeframe).

Focus groups<sup>1</sup> and one-on-one meetings were held in a private room in a technology center of a campus building. Meetings lasted 60–90 minutes. All sessions were audiorecorded. The three focus groups called attention to, respectively, participants' initial concerns with source-based writing as the semester began, concerns regarding specific coursework assignments that arose during the semester, and postsemester reflections and coursework results.

In return for participating in the study, participants were offered free writing tutoring sessions as part of one-on-one meetings. Arrangement of these meetings depended completely on the participants, who contacted me via email or text message when their need arose. These meetings acted as a counter to some of the weaknesses of a focus group, because they provided participants with a more private setting, which laid the foundation for them to ask deeper questions and share more meaningful information about their assignments (Merriam, 2009).

In the study, because I acted as both researcher (conducting the study) and participant (offering feedback on participants' source-based writing), my dual role was critical. In qualitative studies, the participant-observer role is not a binary, either-or role; rather, participation is represented on a continuum that ranges between complete immersion and complete separation (Patton, 2002).

<sup>1</sup>See the Appendix for a list of focus group questions.

**TABLE 2** Study timeframe

Date	Type	Participant(s)
September 29, 2016	Focus group 1	All participants
October 3, 2016	One-on-one meeting	HoJun
October 6, 2016	One-on-one	JinYoung
October 28, 2016	One-on-one	JinYoung
November 1, 2016	One-on-one	Yimin
November 2, 2016	One-on-one	Luigi
November 4, 2016	One-on-one	Navya
November 10, 2016	Focus group 2	All participants
November 18, 2016	One-on-one	JinYoung
December 2, 2016	One-on-one	Yimin
December 15, 2016	One-on-one	HoJun
December 15, 2016	One-on-one	Luigi
December 16, 2016	One-on-one	Navya
January 29, 2017	Focus group 3	All participants

In the focus groups, I functioned mainly as observer as participant (Merriam, 2009) by encouraging the participants to answer questions and discuss topics freely; this enabled me to assume a low-key role and minimize my influence on the group (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). My role in one-on-one meetings, however, was one of participant as observer (Merriam, 2009); I interacted directly with my participants to provide them feedback. This role enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' perspectives, yet I still needed to be aware of my role as observer and maintain a hands-off approach. To accomplish this, for instance, if a participant provided me with an MS Word file before our meeting, I inserted Word comments (hereafter "memos") in the margins or provided general feedback instead of using track changes. These actions, in turn, helped me avoid appropriation (K. Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

### 3.4 | Case study

For this study, I adopted a case study approach. Simons (2009) defines a case study as "an in-depth exploration of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program or system in a 'real life' context" (p. 21). Due to its inherent focus on specificity, a case study approach is a particularly strong design for addressing practical problems, given that the crux of the study revolves around a single, bounded entity (Merriam, 2009). In this study, the bounded entity was represented by the semester in which the study took place and the source-based writing assignments or projects that the participants undertook. Another key element of a case study approach entails the degree of control a researcher has over the study in question; as Merriam (2009) notes, a case study approach is likely the best choice if the researcher has relatively little control over a set of events or if "the variables are so embedded in the situation as to be impossible to identify ahead of time" (pp. 45–46). To this end, a case study approach facilitated my efforts to slowly assemble perspectives of the participants over time as dictated by their experiences.

### 3.5 | Data sources and analysis

The study contained five sources of data: initial survey completed by participants; focus groups (and transcribed audio recordings); one-on-one meetings (and transcribed audiorecordings); drafts of participants' writing, along with the notes I provided in the margins (F. Hyland, 1998; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005); and documents regarding participants' assignments, such as syllabi and assignment guidelines.

All audio files were transcribed into MS Word files. I began the stage of initial coding (Charmaz, 2008) on transcribed audio files and other documents (e.g., participants' assignment guidelines, drafts of participants' papers). To accomplish this, I highlighted text or inserted memos in sections that illuminated participants' general concerns with source-based writing or specific concerns with their assignments. The memos enabled me to make tentative and provisional categories (Saldaña, 2013). My next step involved axial coding, or a reconfiguration of first cycle codes into broader categories (Saldaña, 2013). For this purpose, I copied the codes (i.e., highlighted text and memos) of interest from the original transcribed Word files (and other data documents) into a separate Word file. With the goal of transforming fractured data into more meaningful pieces, I reread the data several times and organized them by theme. By applying axial coding, I started to establish and define the properties of categories (Charmaz, 2014). Selective coding involved determining which axial coding themes repeated with enough frequency to merit their inclusion in the findings.

## 4 | FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, a case study approach framed the study's findings via both the real-life context of the participants' experiences and the fact that the variables under scrutiny were driven by the participants rather than by the researcher. The findings thus fall into one of two categories. The first set of findings pertains to the struggles the participants faced. These struggles tended to relate to participants' individual source-based writing assignments or projects. The second set of findings pertains to the actions participants took to address these struggles. Below, individual profiles chronicle two points: details regarding participants' writing assignment and participants' concerns with source-based writing and plagiarism.

### 4.1 | Participant profiles

#### 4.1.1 | HoJun

During the semester, HoJun's lone source-based writing assignment was for his Introduction to Psychology course. For this two- to three-page paper, HoJun had to write about an "unhealthy behavior" of a friend or roommate and how he could change that behavior by adopting the principles of operant conditioning. One concern for HoJun was the notion of plagiarizing another student's "idea," since hundreds of students were taking the same psychology course. HoJun also worried about proper use of citation conventions. He participated in the study because of a general concern with writing from sources.

#### 4.1.2 | Luigi

Luigi and I discussed his paper for his Human Rights in the World Community course, for which he examined the right to a fair trial through the eyes of Italy, the United States, and the European Court

of Human Rights. Because Luigi recognized that the differences between Italian and U.S. law are reflected in both practice and the classroom, he was unsure of differences in citation style, or what constitutes plagiarism, between the two countries. Luigi's concerns also involved paraphrasing, as he grappled with striking a balance between avoiding plagiarism and keeping the meaning of legal texts intact.

### 4.1.3 | JinYoung

As an honors student, JinYoung wrote a one- to two-page chemistry paper—the topic was how chickens cool themselves—as part of her obligation to fulfill her honors contract. For this paper, she concerned herself with citation conventions, primary versus secondary sources, and determining what information requires citation. In general, JinYoung's desire to participate in the study was fueled by her fear of being accused of committing plagiarism in the United States, particularly since Korean education, as she noted, “doesn't have specific rule about plagiarism.”

### 4.1.4 | Navya

During our one-on-one meetings, Navya discussed a paper on a historical issue of psychology she was writing for her Introduction to Psychology course. A specific concern of hers centered on the credibility of some of her sources. Navya's general concerns were tethered to her lack of experience with source-based writing. As she noted in her initial survey, “I don't have any experience in writing papers, so I don't know what a freshman's paper should look like. I don't have any standard barometer to compare with it.”

### 4.1.5 | Yimin

The crux of my discussions with Yimin focused on her second rhetoric assignment, a source-based *PechaKucha*<sup>2</sup> presentation, in which students had to address an annoyance and effectively advocate for a solution. Understandably, Yimin sought assistance regarding citation in conjunction with the digitally advanced medium of the project. Specifically, she worried about how to cite sources in her project, where to locate resources to guide her, and which convention system to use.

## 4.2 | Contextualization of participants' struggles

In this section, I discuss the struggles participants experienced as they worked on their assignments (see Table 3). Though the struggles in and of themselves are not new (e.g., paraphrase), the role of context in complicating participants' understanding merits attention.

As a first example, multiple participants struggled with paraphrase. Luigi, for instance, alluded to the challenge of paraphrasing texts that were heavily couched in legal terminology and context. Specifically, he was concerned about a strict paraphrase being interpreted as patchwriting (Howard,

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<sup>2</sup>Translated from the Japanese, *PechaKucha* means “chit chat.” The presentation requires a speaker to discuss a topic through a visual medium in which exactly 20 slides are presented, each 20 seconds in length, for a total of 6 minutes 40 seconds. The format thus requires concision and a rapid pace.

1992), or mirroring the original text too closely, but that a looser paraphrase might alter the original meaning. He was also concerned about paraphrasing texts that first required a translation from the Italian-only source. Luigi's dilemma is rooted in the controversy of determining what constitutes a good paraphrase (Hirvela & Du, 2013).

In a separate incident, in his psychology paper on operant conditioning, HoJun struggled to paraphrase the textbook definitions of key terms that students were required to incorporate into their papers. His paper would later be flagged for plagiarism, for which he was docked four points. In one of our focus groups, HoJun stated confidently that he understood the texts of his psychology book and the terminological definitions contained therein; the issue stemmed, rather, from his assertion that he didn't know how to paraphrase sentences that were already concisely written. As HoJun noted, "It's not easy for me to change easy words to easier words."

This finding deviates from most studies, which tend to attribute L2 writers' struggles with paraphrase to developmental issues, such as limited ability to comprehend source texts (Hirvela & Du, 2013; Spack, 1997) or tasks that require linguistic skill beyond their current level (Shi, 2004). In a study of both L1 and L2 undergraduate writers, Howard et al. (2010) found that not one of the 18 papers written by the participants included a summary, yet all 18 papers included paraphrase; the authors thus called into question the students' critical reading practices, noting that the students "are not writing from sources; they are writing from sentences selected from sources" (p. 187). Writing from isolated source sentences thus increases the potential for inadvertent plagiarism (Howard et al., 2010).

The consensus seems to be that, because learning to paraphrase well is a gradual process of development, the onus is placed squarely on the L2 writer's ability to comprehend a text and reconfigure it into a proper paraphrase. Although this may be a fair expectation on the whole, HoJun's case also deserves scrutiny, because the hardships he faced with paraphrasing emanated—at least in part—from his paper's requirement to include several paraphrases of relatively straightforward definitions from a textbook used in an introductory psychology course. HoJun thus engaged in *localized patchwriting*, or the "close appropriation at the micro level of lexis and syntax," a practice that, according to Abasi and Akbari (2008), is inadvertently encouraged by faculty who saddle their students with unrealistic writing expectations (p. 270). To this end, it is unclear whether HoJun's difficulties stemmed from his own writing development or from restrictive guidelines. Howard et al. (2010) note that writing from sentences "does not compel the writer to understand the source" (p. 177). Yet according to HoJun, despite his understanding the source material, he felt forced to work at the sentence level.

A second contextual challenge that several participants encountered involved locating and citing sources. For her psychology paper, Navya wrote about phrenology, namely the research of Pierre Broca, a 19th-century French physician who investigated the localization of brain function. In her quest for sources, however, she interpreted primary sources to be limited to the original works of Broca and thus sought copies of papers dating back to the 1880s. As Navya noted, "Instead of me recollecting from my memory or looking at my textbook and verifying it, I think that it would stand a bit more as a fact if I could find the primary source on it." Navya was unaware that the meaning of primary sources and secondary sources may vary across disciplines (Burton & Chadwick, 2000) and that a more recent source (e.g., one critiquing Broca's work) would have been acceptable for inclusion.

In a related situation, JinYoung also expressed concern about source usage. For her honors chemistry paper, she referred to websites such as Wikipedia. She remarked that these sites, in addition to providing a comprehensive summary or layperson's explanation of difficult ideas, were not a destination; rather, they served as a springboard, often leading her to sources she knew would be considered more appropriate and credible for inclusion in her paper (Biddix, Chung, & Park, 2011). Yet one concern that arose for her was *not* citing a Wikipedia page. Though she did not directly use (and thus did not cite) any of the information from Wikipedia in her paper, she still questioned whether the knowledge

**TABLE 3** Participants' struggles and reconciliation strategies

Participant	Source of tension	Reconciliation strategy
Navya	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Medium of guidelines</li> <li>• Flexibility (e.g., topic choice, type of argument)</li> <li>• Lack of model papers</li> <li>• Lack of familiarity with primary sources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• [Not reconciled]</li> <li>• Learned to let scholarship/expert opinion inform her own opinion</li> <li>• Sought assistance at the writing center</li> <li>• Sought the “original” sources, as in Broca’s 19th-century research papers</li> </ul>
Luigi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Medium of guidelines</li> <li>• Understanding guidelines</li> <li>• Law-specific citation concerns</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• [Not reconciled]</li> <li>• Consulted professors</li> <li>• Attended library session on <i>The Bluebook</i></li> </ul>
HoJun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citation conventions</li> <li>• Online library systems</li> <li>• Stealing others’ “ideas”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Turned to online search for citation websites for guidance</li> <li>• Used Korean websites (e.g., Naver) and other Korean-language resources</li> <li>• Avoided models</li> </ul>
JinYoung	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online library systems</li> <li>• Understanding guidelines</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Used Korean websites (e.g., Naver) and other Korean-language resources</li> <li>• Let Wikipedia guide her to better/primary sources</li> <li>• Emailed professor with questions</li> </ul>
Yimin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stealing others’ “ideas”</li> <li>• Citation methods for <i>PechaKucha</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoided models</li> <li>• [Not reconciled]</li> </ul>

she had gleaned from the site warranted its inclusion in her reference list or whether its exclusion might be construed as a form of ideational plagiarism.

Finally, for her *PechaKucha* presentation, Yimin concerned herself with citation in the digital age, such as how to cite a photograph or screengrab and how plagiarism might fit into this new technological medium. (Although Yimin’s first paper for her rhetoric course was not directly discussed in our meetings, Yimin mentioned that for this paper she had incorporated music and thus concerned herself with properly referencing music soundbites.) In recent decades, most studies addressing the changing conceptions of intertextuality in conjunction with the advent of the Internet have given prominence to the increased risk of plagiarism. Relatively few studies on source-based writing and plagiarism, however, have taken into account the increased complexity of how—and what—students should cite (Park, 2003; Pecorari & Petri, 2014), or multimodal writing, which fuses writing with recent technological advances (Cumming, Lai, & Cho, 2016). In this regard, Yimin’s struggles with citation in her *PechaKucha* highlight the need for further research on development rather than transgression when it comes to citation and digital literacy practices.

In sum, the participants’ concerns with source-based writing and plagiarism often accorded with common areas of research (e.g., paraphrase, primary vs. secondary sources). Flowerdew and Li (2007) suggest that acts of textual plagiarism often occur because of a student’s “survival strategy,” or an effort to write “within their capacity” rather than strive for an “ideal performance” (p. 168). Yet in this study, whether participants engaged in textual plagiarism or not, their “survival strategies” derived, at least in part, from the opaque academic systems they found themselves having to navigate rather than—perhaps in addition to—a limited writing ability or lack of knowledge about academic literacies.

## 4.3 | Agential moves

### 4.3.1 | Consulting professors

Given the contextual concerns of participants' assignments, participants frequently exercised their agency to ameliorate their problems. This agency often manifested itself in participants' contact with their professors. For instance, while writing her paper on phrenology, Navya sought sample papers to guide her, because she—like many L2 writers—did not know what a “traditional” English academic paper looks like (Spack, 1997). She thus consulted her professor, who referred her to the library in the Biology building, where she was able to access a few older papers. JinYoung, on the other hand, contacted her professor to ask whether the use of any secondary sources would be acceptable in her chemistry paper. She also inquired about a discipline-specific style guide she had found (the American Chemical Society Style Guide) and whether this guide was preferable to a more common one (such as APA) in referencing her paper. This particular concern stemmed from JinYoung's quest to determine whether she needed to cite a chemical formula.

During our one-on-one meetings, Luigi also raised concerns about citation for his law paper. Subsequently, after one of his classes, he asked his professor about proper citation methods, such as how to cite international court cases, and whether footnotes also needed to be complemented by a reference list (this question derived from inconsistent referencing across articles he read for class). The professor responded by introducing him to *The Bluebook*, a style guide for legal citation, and would later arrange for students to meet with a librarian to introduce them to basics about *The Bluebook*.

In all of these scenarios, participants' agential moves were in essence coping strategies to aid them in recognizing different writing practices and rhetorical systems, and adapting to the academic environments in which they were situated. Gu and Brooks (2008) summarize this aptly:

*An important aspect of international students' intercultural experiences is their endeavour to adapt to and grow through the host culture and educational conventions. Their perceptions of plagiarism, amongst other culturally-embedded values and beliefs challenged by the new context, may also change as they are trying to survive and succeed in their studies.*

(p. 340)

Yet what remains unclear is the degree to which students, on the one hand, adopt coping strategies to improve their own writing or learn the ropes of their new academic community or, on the other, grapple with the systemic inadequacies of the university. This move thus showcases participants' efforts to seek clarity in the assignment and make progress in their writing, particularly because, according to several of the participants, they hail from academic cultures in which office hours do not exist.

### 4.3.2 | Tracking down sources

Another example of an agential move was highlighted by Navya's struggles with the notion of common knowledge, defined by Shi (2011) as knowledge “mutually known and shared among a group of people” (p. 308). As mentioned earlier, Navya strove to cite sources rather than recall them from memory; this point is particularly important, because as a psychology major from a family of neurologists, and as a student who in high school had read psychology articles of her own volition, Navya arrived on campus with a wealth of knowledge in her field not typical of undergraduate freshmen. For

instance, as she conducted research for her paper on phrenology, she stumbled upon National Public Radio and *Scientific American* articles. Of consequence was the fact that Navya knew the content of the articles to be “true”; she was familiar with the content, but simply could not recall the origin of the studies she had previously read. As she often said, she found herself “in a pickle,” because she possessed field-specific common knowledge (Shi, 2011) yet struggled to recall original sources to cite that knowledge. Despite this predicament, Navya recognized she would have to track down and cite the original sources to convince her readership she understood and was capable of abiding by the rules of academic writing.

Though Navya’s dilemma could also be considered a contextual challenge, I opted to include the dilemma as an example of agency, as her efforts to track down sources—despite her contention that the content of these sources was common knowledge to her—showcases her desire to integrate herself into the culturally conditioned academic literacies of her scholarly community. Navya’s agency was further evidenced by her identifying with multiple communities; the heterogeneity of these communities renders common knowledge not as “a stable construct, but rather one in continual dynamic movement” (Shi, 2011, p. 309).

### 4.3.3 | Striving for academic membership

One highlight of the participants’ efforts to exercise their agency was a heightened awareness of their presence in a new academic community. Although native English speakers—as incoming freshmen—are also entering a new community, it can be argued that the challenge for ESL students is distinct, because these students do not likely arrive at the table with the culturally conditioned knowledge afforded to native English speakers who have spent their entire lives as members of the U.S. academic system. Although the participants did not always know how to best acclimate to their new environs, they seemed to develop their sense of agency by being aware of these new environs and also recognizing that they would have to figure things out if they wanted to succeed.

In the final focus group, though participants were quick to note they wished the university would provide more detail to its multiple source-based assignment practices and systems, they nonetheless stated explicitly that the burden of learning the system still fell squarely on their shoulders. As JinYoung noted, “If I just try something without any help, then I think it is impossible to do the right thing.” But they also realized that the help wouldn’t come to them. Navya, for example, felt that although help was there, it would stay “there”: “It’s up to you. Do you want it or not? Because that particular bar of excellence isn’t going to change, in terms of writing papers.” Participants also alluded to other avenues for assistance; for instance, Navya mentioned how she had benefited from her recent writing center visits.

In sum, participants seemed motivated to exercise their agency because of a strong desire to succeed. Although it is tempting to categorize some of the participants’ decisions as missteps, one could also argue that the decisions signaled great effort—through nothing short of time-consuming, scrupulous methods—to become members of their new academic communities.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

Guided by the plagiarism-related experiences and concerns of five L2 undergraduate students, the purpose of this study was to provide, over the course of one semester, a broader scope of the contextualized challenges these students encountered with their source-based writing assignments and

plagiarism. The choice of a case study approach helped to accentuate the practical problems the participants encountered and also permitted the participants to advance the study in a manner and at a pace that suited their needs. Two major themes arose from the findings. First, although participants' struggles often pertained to issues commonly associated with plagiarism, these struggles were compounded by the contexts in which they occurred. For instance, according to Hyunwoo, his frustrations with paraphrase stemmed not from reading comprehension difficulties, but from his assignment's requirement to paraphrase simple ideas at the sentence level. Second, when faced with adversity in myriad academic contexts, participants exercised their agency by attempting to address their predicaments, often independently, in an effort to become members of their new communities. All participants felt it was incumbent upon them to find solutions to their problems, which they pursued, for instance, by consulting professors or exploring discipline-specific citation styles.

The difficulties that entail source-based writing for L2 writers extend beyond the overly simplistic bifurcation of academic dishonesty and developing academic proficiency; recent research has shown a much wider array of challenges that these students face as they strive to become full-fledged members of their new academic communities (Pecorari & Petrić, 2014). In this regard, although the findings of this study can to some degree be ascribed to participants' developing understanding of source-based writing and plagiarism, they also have clear ties to the context of the culturally conditioned academic literacies in which their challenges were positioned. For instance, it is unclear how much of a factor participants' dilemmas with, say, paraphrasing or source usage could be attributed to, on the one hand, their own nascent reading comprehension or writing skills or, on the other, to professors' restrictive assignment demands. As the participants encountered these dilemmas, they also negotiated them, typically with great success. More often than not, they made decisions that effectively helped them take steps toward achieving membership in their scholarly communities. Based on these findings, three pedagogical implications for ESL instructors and writing center tutors deserve discussion.

## 5.1 | Examining assignment guidelines

It is unrealistic to think that students will encounter—particularly at large universities that require cross-disciplinary coursework in different colleges—comprehensive pedagogy or guidelines that will necessarily shepherd them in the right direction or mollify all of their source-based writing and plagiarism concerns. Consequently, even the most well-versed instructors may not be able to provide students with clear-cut answers to all their questions or predict the breadth of issues that students might face. To this end, it is important for instructors not only to teach common attributes of source-based writing (e.g., paraphrase, source usage), but also to place themselves more concretely in the shoes of their students. For instance, in considering students' assignment guidelines, the instructor could direct the students, in pair or small group work, to engage in a deep reading of the guidelines. The students could then compile a list of concerns they have; these concerns could also be transformed into questions, in both written and oral format, as if the students were directing the questions at a professor.

## 5.2 | Creating assignment guideline-based activities

ESL instructors and writing center tutors might look to remedy problems preemptively by educating students about scenarios they could potentially encounter. For instance, in addition to emphasizing

paraphrase as a skill requiring both source comprehension and writing ability (Hirvela & Du, 2013), instructors might contextualize paraphrase further with an activity that prompts students to read several samples of assignment guidelines (in different courses, disciplines, etc.) and discuss how the guidelines might affect a student's approach to paraphrasing. These samples could also be utilized for discussion on other aspects of academic writing, such as source usage and citation conventions. Although no amount of education will likely prepare students for the variety of assignment guidelines they will encounter through four or more years of undergraduate coursework, creating activities that encourage students to scrutinize assignment guidelines might help them raise their awareness and think critically about these guidelines, which will resonate well beyond their ESL coursework or writing center sessions.

### 5.3 | Using students' struggles to inform pedagogy

ESL instructors might consider using L2 students' sources of confusion (and attendant agential moves) as a means to develop their pedagogy. For instance, students' discovery of different citation systems (e.g., *The Bluebook*) might prompt instructors to engage in more detailed discussion in their teaching about discipline-specific citation systems. Similarly, the notion of a student possessing extensive pre-existing knowledge of a particular subject (i.e., Navya's knowledge of psychology) could encourage instructors, through classroom discussion, to probe more deeply how the extent of students' pre-existing knowledge could affect the role of common knowledge and citation in their academic writing.

In sum, as long as ESL students continue to face hardships with academic writing, these hardships can, and should, critically inform our pedagogy. Although one of the key components for instructors of L2 writing is to help L2 students transition into U.S. literacy practices, it is also critical for these instructors to gain a better understanding of what these students experience "in the trenches"; a better understanding, in this regard, could serve us well in adapting our teaching to align with the challenges of different writing contexts.

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### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to the manuscript reviewers and the journal editor for their feedback. I am always grateful for everyone's efforts.

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**How to cite this article:** Merkel W. A case study of undergraduate L2 writers' concerns with source-based writing and plagiarism. *TESOL J.* 2019;e503. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.503>

## APPENDIX

### Questions: First Focus Group

1. Can you please briefly introduce yourself? For instance, your name, country and language of origin, your major, and any other information you'd like to share.
2. What are your reasons for participating in this study?
3. What are your general concerns about starting your studies? For instance, getting used to the United States, a language barrier, or differences between your academic life and culture back home with what you will experience here.
4. What specific university concerns do you have? For instance, your course load, your assignments, or using source materials in your academic writing.
5. Have you heard the term *plagiarism*? What do you think it means? How did you learn this meaning?
6. Please talk to me a little more about plagiarism. For instance, what does plagiarism mean in your home country? Are your perceptions of plagiarism in the United States different, or do you think your perceptions will change?

1. Have your perceptions of your U.S. academics changed since you first arrived? What have you learned?
2. Can you tell me something that you've struggled with in your coursework?
3. What challenges have you faced with your academic writing?
4. What projects or papers are you working on now?
5. Looking back on the semester, how do you feel now about your experiences with source-based writing and your concerns about plagiarism?
6. What advice would you give to other international students who will soon be in their first year of study?