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### Research Paper

# A Qualitative Study of TEFL Graduate Students' Source Text Use: Learning, Problems, and Strategies

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## Abstract

An intriguing discussion in the second language (L2) writing scholarship has addressed writing from source texts (STs) susceptible to accidental or intentional plagiarism. While the literature mainly focuses on L2 writers, the problem is also intractable for many native English writers. This paper reports a qualitative case study investigating how graduate students in an EFL context attain awareness and understanding of source text use (STU), their specific problems, and their strategies in citing STs. A cohort of sixteen Iranian second-semester MA students of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) participated in this study. They were interviewed in-depth about STs and their STU. Thematic analysis revealed that writing software packages, writing courses and instructors, and self-studies variously contributed to their learning of using and citing the STs. The results also suggested that the participants used various strategies, including using STs to learn, using direct quotations, and using STs without citation to cope with the STs and STU problems. “Paraphrasing” and “direct quotation” were also found as the two preferences with different justifications in citing an ST. The paper discusses the findings and the implications for second language academic literacy development and source-based writing instruction.

**Keywords:** Source texts, Source Text Use, TEFL Graduate Students, Writing Using Source Texts, Academic Writing

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## 1. Introduction

Citation as a means of developing and communicating knowledge to readers (Hyland, 1999), valorizing the owners of ideas, and describing the social dynamics of writing (Swales, 1986) is intrinsic to scientific research within and across various discourse communities. Given the prevailing focus on text samples and writing in L2 research (Ghanbar & Rezvani, 2024a & 2024b; Lillis & Tuck, 2016; Riazi et al., 2018; Zheng & Yu, 2019), there has been an ongoing and intriguing discussion in the writing literature regarding writing from sources (Wette, 2010, 2017).

Research has focused on novice writers' appropriate or inappropriate source text use (STU) in Anglophone and non-English speaking contexts (Hyland, 2009; Keck, 2014; Rezvani & Miri, 2023; Shi, 2004). Based on the findings of these studies, it has been noted that source integration or attribution is an intractable problem for many native and non-native writers of English susceptible to accidental or intentional plagiarism. In what follows, I will briefly discuss STU in second language writing, textual plagiarism and stern penalties, and problems facing L2 writers' use of STs. The review will contextualize the study and lead to the research gap and research questions that were addressed in the current study.

### 1.1 STU in Second Language (L2) Writing

Student writers, particularly from non-native language backgrounds, face many cognitive and linguistic demands trying to handle the complex task of academic writing, compounded further by the necessity to write from source texts (STs) as part of the fulfillment of their academic studies (Keck, 2014; Pecorari & Petrić, 2014; Shi, 2006). This complexity is driven, on the one hand, by the essential and interactive nature of text responsible writing to

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remain faithful to the STs, and on the other the hand, by the legitimacy of STU strategies they have to master and draw upon while reproducing or synthesizing the ideas from the STs (Pecorari & Petrić, 2014; Wette, 2017). Thus, inadvertent or deliberate negligence or violation of norms and regulation of academic writing and STU might set students up for academic plagiarism and the resulting penalties.

### **1.2 Textual Plagiarism and Stern Penalties**

Since the rise and prominence of plagiarism as evidence of illegality within academic communities, violators or textual criminals, regardless of their intentions and the degree of academic offense, have been charged with and commonly faced noncustodial punishments by the disciplinary institutions. However, as bureaucratic and plagiaristic restrictions and detection were spun out, so was an increasing body of research on how and why students, particularly novices, commit this academic violence. As a result, numerous attempts by both scholars and instructors were made to reconceptualize and refine strict academic policies on students' transgressive practices and intertextualities, and offer more pedagogical suggestions rather than disciplinary restrictions and measures (Casanave, 2004; Chandrasoma, et al., 2004; Pecorari, 2001, 2003; Valentine, 2006; Wette, 2010).

It is commonly held that plagiarism is the misuse of sources but the degree to which this renders a violation of academic rules and standards is still subject to debate. This institutionally academic transgression, according to Roig (1997), can extend from copying and making trivial changes to the original excerpt (subtle reformulation) to poaching chunks of the text without attribution or alteration (blatant plagiarism) mainly because the writer fails to credit and identify the STs or reconstruct the text sufficiently and accurately, even when the author is credited (Roig, 1997).

While inadvertent plagiarism is more charitably associated with and results from unawareness of institutional principles and ethics, deliberate plagiarism is a matter of individual conscience (Howard, 1995), which may not be tolerated according to some strict university policies stipulating that “plagiarism is plagiarism,” no matter what the writers’ intention has been (Howard, 1995, p. 797). If not corrected and effectively dealt with, it is argued, the poor citing performance of novice writers, particularly those with an L2 background, may persist and become even fossilized (Pecorari & Shaw, 2012).

Departing from the conventionally restrictive view of plagiarism, Chandrasoma et al. (2004) dismiss the intertextual prosecution for plagiarism and further propose that students’ intertextuality can be explained by literacy, personal and educational development, identity negotiation, and discourse patterns. Probing and embracing students’ inaccurate and unethical practices, on a positive note, can be viewed as a way for better authorial establishment and textual construction. Silva (2005), in this regard, leniently views students’ slightly modified texts as “writing with an accent” and posits that writing with an accent should be as much welcome as speaking with an accent. Pennycook (1996) also admits that “Perhaps plagiarism is a way of learning and acquiring” textual capital (p. 225). It follows then that rather than detecting the errors and penalizing students, instructors and policymakers ought to identify the reasons why and the specific conditions under which the students are likely to plagiarize (Chandrasoma et al., 2004; Pennycook, 1994). From a positive, pedagogical standpoint, students might copy and write with an intention to develop their cognitive and linguistic skills rather than to deceive (Chandrasoma et al., 2004; Currie, 1998; Howard, 1995; Pecorari, 2003; Pennycook, 1996; Polio & Shi, 2012; Starfield, 2002).

### **1.3 Writers’ problems when using STs**

There have been several research strands on students’ academic literacy practices and citation management. One line of inquiry attempted to explain

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student's STU in terms of their proficiency. For example, Johns and Mayes (1990), studying students' summary protocols, concluded that low proficiency students either struggled to reduce the source content to the basic idea units or merged different lines within and across the paragraphs. Nonetheless, both low and high proficiency students distorted the source content by making inaccurate generalizations and reporting. Deckert (1993), also in another study on L2 students' perspectives on plagiarism, noted that first-year students exhibited not only a little understanding of the western canons of scholarship but also little concern over the prerogative of the source author staff members and academia. By contrast, junior students demonstrated heightened awareness of and concern for morality, authority, and originality. By the same token, Abasi et al. (2006) added that more experienced writers could satisfy implicit communicative goals and thus favored more authority and originality than inexperienced writers. Similarly, Gebril and Plakans (2009) suggested that the high proficient group drew on STs more frequently than the low proficiency group.

The second strand of source-based inquiries sought to explore students' and faculty members' identification of plagiarism, involving several plagiarized and correctly paraphrased text excerpts, to have participants single out the substantially paraphrased texts. In Roig's (1997) study, for instance, it was found that about half of the respondents mistook 6 out of 10 instances of plagiarized texts for being correctly paraphrased. Roig (1997) contended that students' conception of citation is acknowledging the ST with a few minor adjustments to the language, hence warns that this miscalculation is prone to prosecution and accusations of plagiarism. Then, in 2001, when university professors were asked to either identify the plagiarized text excerpts or rewrite the same paragraph, 30% of the professors committed plagiarism, who, according to Roig (2001), could have taken the precautions

to avoid misrepresenting or misinterpreting the ST materials. This can be compared with Pecorari and Shaw's study (2012), in which 50% of the teachers presented different misconceived intertextual arguments, involving the misidentification of the cases as plagiarism. The variation in the respondents' evaluations and perceptions of instances of plagiarism was explained by the teachers' lack of consensus about the intertextual conventions and practices (e.g., what content is expected in need of no citation, the legitimacy of using secondary references in particular contexts and identification of ill-intentioned borrowing).

The third line of composition research looked at the differences between first language (L1) and L2 students' source integration methods. L1 students might rely on moderate and substantial revisions than exact and near copies (Keck, 2006), tend to cite more frequently in comparison to L2 peers (Hyland, 2009; Shi, 2004), might have a richer understanding of the academic concepts and purposes and are, therefore, more successful in developing an authority or "saying something in their 'own' words" (Starfield, 2002) than L2 student writers. On the contrary, within the bounds of the Taxonomy of Paraphrase Types, Keck (2014) disputed the default assumption that L2 students, with limited lexical fluency and intertextual means, display more verbatim STU than paraphrasing, as in his study L2 students "paraphrased ST language as far more frequently as their L<sub>1</sub> peers than they copied it" (p.18). The L2 students' lower L2 proficiency was compensated by more background knowledge and more control over the assigned reading sources (Hyland, 2009).

The ST writing literature points to several specific challenges of students in their STU. They seem to become overwhelmed with the demand to demonstrate a sophisticated source-based writing ability that involves representation of content-area knowledge, rhetorical awareness, and

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inferential thinking (Hyland, 2005; Shi, 2012). Some source content is also far beyond their reach, with which they have less connection and interaction (Howard et al., 2010; Wette, 2017). In addition, students usually strain to pool ideas and knowledge from various sources to develop textual property (Abasi et al., 2006; Hyland, 2002; Ivanic & Camps, 2001; Wette, 2018), to integrate multiple voices with their own to explain their positions (Wette, 2010, 2019), as well as to disambiguate the boundaries between their texts and the published texts (Abasi & Akbari, 2008; Ivanic & Camps, 2001; Wette, 2010). The confusion about borrowing words or ideas and how to cite the sources using pithy quotations (Hyland, 2009) adds to their source use difficulties.

Some studies reported students' alienation from academic discourses (Currie, 1998) and ambivalence as to whether to cite common knowledge or not (Chandrasoma et al., 2004; Shi, 2012). They also oscillate between citing or not citing, paraphrasing or quoting (Shi, 2008) and working from firsthand accounts or secondary STs (Li & Casanave, 2012; Pecorari, 2003; Wette, 2010). As a result, sometimes, they have to base their textual decisions and practices on intuition (Shi, 2008). Students also tend to be careless either because they have to juggle multiple disciplinary assignments or simply not being stretched enough (Currie, 1998; Pennycook, 1996). Most egregiously, students might decontextualize the propositions and items of content and barely reflect on and contest the textual sources they consult in their writing (Abasi, et al., 2006; Hyland, 2009). In other words, they "write from sentences selected from sources, not write from sources" (Howard et al., 2010, p.187). In general, students appear to focus on and illustrate the privileged ST authors' voices rather than using their own, thus unwittingly working in their shadows (Abasi & Akbari, 2008; Hyland, 2002).

Studies such as Abasi and Akbari (2008), Hirvela and Du (2013), Mori (2018), and Shi (2012) have also shown that L2 students, being afraid of distorting the content or losing credibility and authority for their arguments, tend to either play it safe and rely on direct strategies or alternatively opt to patchwrite the sentences that are demonstrated through “copy-deletion” and “word substitution” (Howard, 1999). Ever since, researchers such as Chandrasoma et al. (2004), Currie (1998), Hirvela and Du (2013), Howard (1995), Liu (2005), Pecorari (2003), and Polio and Shi (2012) have referred to patchwriting more leniently as an intellectual bridge between immature school writing and sophisticated scholarly submission. The assumption has been that novice writers try to gradually work their way through uncharted territories through patchwriting, and community literacies and membership. In other words, “Learning a skill is rarely a straight line from input to mastery,” and thus, “The novice academic writer must crawl before being able to walk” (Pecorari, 2003, p. 320).

Given the importance of patchwriting as a steppingstone toward scholarly writing and academic achievement, partially altering and reporting the STs should not be found, particularly when acknowledged, duplicitous, or immoral but ill-informed about the appropriate use of textual and discourse strategies (Jamieson, 2016; Roig, 2001). Through explicit instruction, correction, and detailed oral or written briefing on students’ writing-citing activities, students may gradually learn to place less reliance on direct replication of the ST (Wette, 2010) and more on assimilating established literacies and discourse strategies of the community (Shi, 2018).

Albeit there have been many empirical studies on the students’ perceptions of and difficulties in writing using STs, little is known about how English as a foreign language (EFL) student writers attain awareness and understanding of the STU, their specific problems, and their coping and

preferred strategies in citing STs. The following research questions guided the current study.

1. How did TEFL graduate students learn to cite source texts?
2. What problems do they experience when citing source texts? How do they tackle those problems?
3. What STU strategies do they prefer to use when writing from source texts? And why?

## **2. Method**

### **2.1 Research context and participants**

This study is a qualitative case study that explores TEFL graduate students' ST awareness, problems they face when using STs, and the strategies they use to deal with those problems and they generally prefer. A cohort of sixteen second-semester MA students from a public university in Iran participated in the study. There were two males and fourteen female participants. The participants completed an advanced disciplinary course on academic writing as a required course in their TEFL program. The course involved timed classroom essays and take-home assignments on academic topics and annotated reports for which they had to study the disciplinary literature and cite from the sources.

Textual borrowing is a sensitive issue related to plagiarism, and L2 writers might not be willing to talk openly about their STU. Therefore, I first ensured the invited participants that their names and identities would be kept confidential and that their views would be used only for research purposes and in a de-identified way. Then, they all formally consented to taking part in the study and signed a form. The participants' demographic information is presented in Table 1. Pseudonyms are used for participants.

Table 1  
*Participants' Demographic Information*

	Participant	Gender	Age
1	Arman	Male	35
2	Ali	Male	27
3	Soraya	Female	24
4	Azadeh	Female	25
5	Raha	Female	28
6	Leyla	Female	26
7	Negar	Female	24
8	Zahra	Female	23
9	Noushin	Female	25
10	Marziyeh	Female	30
11	Sahar	Female	32
12	Forugh	Female	24
13	Mahshid	Female	26
14	Roya	Female	29
15	Fatemeh	Female	24
16	Sara	Female	25

## 2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Discourse-based interviews (for details, see Odell et al., 1983) were carried out with the research participants to obtain “their tacit judgments and performances of writing” (Lancaster, 2016, p. 120). The interviews for this study were conducted individually in English over the telephone by the researcher in July 2023 (see Appendix A). The interviews were all recorded and transcribed verbatim. Then, the transcriptions were thematically analyzed in three basic steps of data description, data interpretation, and data collation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the interviews, some notes were taken to provide context for participants’ discussion of STU, problems, and strategies. The transcriptions were thoroughly and recursively studied. The initial reading of the transcripts incrementally generated some tentative coding categories, which were then applied to the rest of the interview transcripts.

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More categories were developed, or refinements were made as soon as the subsequent interview transcripts generated new insights.

Following the above procedure, the categories were constantly checked against the existing categories and were, therefore, recoded, expanded, integrated, or condensed. Then, the emergent categories were juxtaposed to generate and identify potential overarching themes. The themes were then evidentially supported by directly quoting and incorporating meaningful, exemplary views from the participants when reporting and interpreting the study findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Rezvani, Ghanbar & Pourhemt, 2024). Hence, the data analysis procedure was iteratively inductive rather than deductive (Riazi, Ghanbar & Rezvani, 2023). The researcher cross-checked the emergent coding categories and themes to ensure consistency and preciseness of the coding procedure and analysis (Riazi, Rezvani & Ghanbar, 2023). There was a recurrent reference to the field notes taken and memos recorded (see Saldaña, 2011; Riazi et al., 2023). A few themes were rechecked with a couple of participants for further assurance of the interpretation, as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

### **3. Findings**

In what follows, the findings are reported in response to the research questions. They are also organized around the themes that emerged and their interpretation with reference to the participants' actual views.

#### **1. How did TEFL graduate students learn to cite source texts?**

The first research question concerned how students developed an awareness of STU and learned how to write from STs. Five substantive themes regarding the participants' resources for learning how to use and cite STs were extracted from the interview analysis. Overall, "Software packages," "University courses," "Course instructors," "Websites," and "Self-studies" emerged as the sources for learning how to use STs. In what follows, further explanations will be presented for each theme.

One of the recurrent themes commonly expressed by the participants was that they learned how to use STs while they were working with software programs such as "Endnote". In addition, the participants discussed what they gained from the practice with it and its feedback regarding correct or incorrect citations and referencing methods. Raha, for example, commented that "I actually learned about it from Endnote... you know it made things a lot easier for us, [for example] how to cite the texts, how to quote the text either directly or indirectly." Noushin also acknowledged that she learned the difference between information- and author-prominent referencing by working with Endnote. She admitted that "I did not know that the content is placed first when multiple sources had similar findings or addressed common issues and aspects," and "the author stands out when we want to introduce or support their findings.

This was also the case when they were required to write assignments or short papers for their courses. As pointed out by Ali, such actual and hands-on practice of referring to the literature made them perceive their STU problems and look for correct citing choices more consciously. Several students acknowledged what they learned from their courses, particularly the "Advanced Writing" course. Multiple participants commented that they learned, for example, how to describe the methodology or write the introduction of a study and occasionally how to paraphrase isolated sentences. However, a few participants wished they could have explicit instruction on and actual practice of academic literacies and essentials of citing and writing from an ST. Disappointed by his experience in former courses, Ali expected that courses and instructors incorporate STU instead of just getting students to know and work on sections and content of research papers and thesis.

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Another source of the participants' awareness and learning was their course professors' occasional indications in various courses while lecturing or critically reading a text. On the spot, it seemed that pointing to STU and citation in original academic texts implicitly benefited some students. For Sahar, for example, the first time she noted how writers' understanding is cited using an indirect quotation and parenthesized in-text citation was when one of her teachers emphasized that what they saw in the slide was his understanding of a complex definition from a book. Then, they were asked to see the original if they were interested to know more, as there was a parenthesized phrase reading "(for more details see someone, date)." That was the first time she closely noticed the phrase and what it could imply. Negar also learned the difference between a bibliography and an end-of-the-paper reference list once it was raised and discussed by one of the professors in "Research Methods in Applied Linguistics" when the focus was not in effect on writing. It is noteworthy that although no course directly dwelled on the STU, "from the first semester at the university, the course professors helped us a lot to see how source texts are used" and "now when I am studying on my own, I also usually focus on how source texts are used, whose view it is [...], to learn how to use them in my term papers", commented by Sahar.

Some students also tended to study more books or articles on academic writing or actual exemplary STs to acquire the specifics of STU when they found the classroom instruction and discussion insufficient. Having not yet learned the academic policies and having heard that students might be accused of plagiarism, a few students were pushed not to rely on the instructions they received. For instance, Roya recalled that she attended a thesis defense session where she saw that a large number of the examiners' comments or criticisms were on the presenter's STU, the accuracy or

consistency of the citation and references, especially when some instances of plagiarism were pointed out. Realizing the significance of STU in academic work, Roya decided to read more books for more specific guidelines on academic writing and text citation.

## **2. What problems do they experience when citing source texts? How do they tackle those problems?**

I also elicited the students' STU problems and coping strategies. When analyzing the interview data, I noted that the problems are concerned with either the STs or how to use them. Thus, I extracted three subthemes of (1) variety and abundance of STs, (2) structural complexities of STs, and (3) accuracy and dependability of STs.

Some students complained that the ST abundance might be overwhelming and thus difficult for them to choose relevant texts and content. For them, the problem occurred when they were searching for the relevant texts. Ali stated that "when I look through the resources I find for the assignments, I may initially think that one suits my purpose, but the more I search and study, the more I get confused so that I lose sight of what I was looking for." For some participants, understanding the sources' syntactic complexities was challenging and, at times, frustrating. Zahra, for instance, reflected that her citational problems were mostly rooted in the sources' complex grammatical structures, "driving me (her) to rely entirely on the ST language."

On the other hand, some others worried whether STs they came across or studied were accurate and dependable enough to be used. They wondered how they could discern the accuracy and dependability of STs or particular contents of them. In this regard, academic journal papers posed a more considerable problem as some students like Fatemeh stated that "as a grad student I do not yet know which paper and from which journal can be considered scholarly and dependable and why."

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It seems that when relevant and suitable STs were selected, a new challenge arose as to how to use them academically. One of the burdens, as mentioned by some students, was citing STs indirectly. This seems to be particularly problematic because, if the STU is inappropriate, it might be conceived as “an act of cheating on the original author” or, at best, “it indicates someone’s weakness,” Soraya and Forugh commented. A further STU challenge for the participants was opting for the best way to cite STs. According to Azadeh, what often confused most students when writing using STs was deciding whether to quote an ST directly or paraphrase its content. Their oscillation between these two led to an obsession with the question of which one in a particular STU did justice to the ST and at the same time enriched their own texts. They were also perplexed as to where and how exactly STs fit into their writing when using a citing strategy.

More specifically, some of the participants, like Azadeh, were hesitant in STU as she kept asking, “are they my words or their words?”, “is it my voice or their voice?”. Similarly, Forugh acknowledged that she always asked, “how much STU is enough?” or “is it an advantage to study and use many STs?”. Some of the STU problems were also very detailed and technical. As expected, they complained about the profusion of documentation and citation styles available complicated further by the details included in each style.

One characteristic of note about the participants was that they did not publish any papers at the time of this study. Nor did they write the required thesis or its proposal. In other words, their STU experience was limited to their term paper and assignments. That is why a few participants were little concerned about their STU skills and problems. They thought that “since term papers were not taken much seriously”, there was no point in expending much care about citational accuracy and appropriateness, as Mahshid stated.

However, Arman also admitted that he was “aware of the significance of correct citation, but for works that will be seen or published.”

I was also interested in how they coped with the ST and STU problems. Overall, their coping strategies were categorized under three core themes of “using/ citing STs to learn,” “using direct quotations,” and “using STs without citation.” One of the common strategies used to resolve the problem of abundance and variety was citing the most frequently cited STs in the relevant literature. Increased citation frequency, to some participants, also meant that the STs cited were dependable and accurate enough to be cited. In their view, in other words, the more frequently an ST is cited, the more significant and credible it will be.

Similarly, when baffled about how to use the STs that they found relevant and significant, most participants usually looked at how they were used in worked exemplary STs. For instance, a creative strategy Zahra commonly adopted for complicated STs was to “search for STs which used and cited an ST to understand it better and also to see how it was cited, to use and cite it in my (her) own way.” They also referred to such STs to cross-check their citation accuracy and consistency and how much of an ST could be cited so as one’s own text ownership and voice were not lost. This extra quest for illustrative STs, which used STs of interest, seems to be a pragmatic strategy that, in the long run, also taught them more professional STU.

The direct quotation came up as another practical rather exclusive strategy for the participants like Azadeh, who were less confident about their STU. They could more safely and readily employ direct quotations when they thought accurate interpretations or linguistic adaptations of an ST were beyond their capacity. Little linguistic confidence made her “stay within my (her) comfort zone” by using only direct quotations regardless of STs and what she wrote.

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A few participants, however, seemed to incorporate the contents of the STs without any explicit citations. If they deemed their citations were not accurate enough, and their STU might lead to the charges of plagiarism or penalization by the instructor, they were usually tempted to avoid citation and traces of STs altogether. Instead, somewhat surprisingly, they gave a bibliography to acknowledge what they generally not specifically used. For example, this was the case with Roya, who skipped “in-text citations and referred to them at the end as the bibliography.”

### **3. What STU strategies do they prefer to use when writing from source texts? And why?**

Data analysis generated “direct quotation” and “paraphrasing” as the two basic strategies they favored and used in STU. I also came up with several justifications for their preferences. These two broad-based strategies were what they typically used, and it was not a choice of either this or that. However, it is essential to note that “patchwriting” was not mentioned nor opted for as a citing strategy by the participants in the interview. I assume that they viewed minimal changes in the wording or structure of the ST as a type of paraphrase and took paraphrasing as an inclusive strategy.

The first point evident in their responses to the probes was that they were all well aware that their preferences were dependent on “the nature of STs”, “the text they are going to produce,” and also “its recipient.” In general, students like Azadeh and Mahshid, who were hesitant to use ST academically, tended to “leave well enough alone by using direct quotation” to a larger extent. It was realized that their hesitance was mainly because of these EFL students’ lacking confidence in English proficiency and academic writing rather than their citational proficiency. They thought that it was hard to find a suitable substitution for subject-specific vocabulary as the original lexis. Ali argued that authors of scholarly resources were known to write most precisely using very technical vocabulary, leaving the least redundant

content. "So how can we change them?" he wondered. Similar highly perceptions of the STs such as "natural," "interpretable," "succinct," "smooth," "academic," "technical enough" was expressed as the reasons for why they preferred to commonly use the original content verbatim with acknowledgment.

Interestingly, a couple of students (Forugh and Raha) revealed that they sometimes wanted to adapt and use an ST to reflect their understanding and writing skill, but at last, they found it pointless to manipulate the ST as they might, lacking knowledge or expertise, distort the academic content or language of an ST. For them, sentences detected in the STs as most relevant and representative were so pithy and well-structured that if restated, they would conceivably distort the author's intended meaning or the arrangement of their ideas.

Not all students tended to use direct quotations due to a lack of linguistic confidence or proficiency. For a few students who preferred to use a direct quotation, it was a way to credit the language and content to the ST writers. This recognition of the ST authorship, as asserted by Negar, reflected that "as writers, we are aware of and grateful to the academic writers' great efforts." For a few other students, direct quotation was economical in the writing process and, at the same time, improved the accuracy and acceptability of their argument. However, since paraphrasing or transforming other's thoughts "takes time" and "is laborious," according to Ali and Sara, they preferred to use the authors' language. Moreover, Sahar, as "a busy student and teacher," usually went with "ready-made" ideas, content, and linguistic models, not to "bother changing the text when everything is almost there."

Despite their limited academic experience and publishing, some participants preferred to rely primarily on paraphrasing. Although they might fail in their paraphrasing attempts, seeing that the works of publishing

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scholars mainly consisted of paraphrased ideas with a few excerpts quoted directly encouraged them enough to develop this academic skill. They also pointed frequently to “academic authority,” “flexibility,” “proficiency,” “dexterity”... when explaining why they preferred this STU strategy and generally what they could accomplish via paraphrasing. For participants like Arman and Zahra, paraphrasing demonstrated that writers had mastery and grip on the STs. Soraya, similarly, usually attempted to get the gist of the ST ideas and then paraphrase her comprehension using her own language “to show them what I have got.”

Another reason those who preferred paraphrasing pointed out was that they found it a formidable but rewarding challenge. A considerable difficulty for these students was to establish coherence in their writing using STs integrated with their own ideas and content. They thought there was no other way around but to face it and learn how to paraphrase and cite accurately and academically. Marziyeh’s well-expressed comment is most revealing. Recalling being advised by one of her professors to write most coherently if she wanted to make a writer, she stated that “it is so easy to use a lot of STs directly, but it is so hard to connect them and to write coherently this way.” Thus, she commonly preferred paraphrasing to direct quotations to be able to write most academically.

Another intriguing and relevant theme I noted was their care about and tendency to project their ownership and voice in their writing, given their little experience in scholarly publishing. This could also account for why most of them developed a preference for paraphrasing though they thought it was, in effect, a challenge. This is evident in Soraya’s words, “It is hard, but I always want to have my own words and ideas. I try to use the text as an additional guide, not as a sole source to copy from”. Zahra also enjoyed developing her own voice in writing, showing her “understanding and

analysis of the literature and expressing them in my (her) own way.” This could also affect the reputability of their work. For Mahshid, paraphrasing as an academic strategy could situate her work in a broader academic community and facilitate her membership.

#### **4. Discussion**

This study examined how first-year graduate TEFL students developed an understanding of STU, the problems they face, and their coping and preferred strategies in their STU. The analysis of the data revealed that writing software packages like Endnote, writing courses, instructors of other courses, and self-studies variously contributed to their understanding and learning of using and citing STs academically. The courses and instructions, however, seemed to only address some citation basics like referencing and writing from isolated sentences drawn from STs. Since the participants were well aware that inappropriate STU might ensue grave consequences and even accusations of plagiarism, explicit academic literacy instruction that highlights rhetorical and linguistic practices is called for to develop students' deep understanding of and engagement with the STs, citation accuracy and legitimacy, and strategies to STU in L2 context (Abasi & Akbari, 2008; Hyland, 1999; Mori, 2018; Rezvani & Miri, 2023; Shi, 2008; Storch, 2009; Thompson & Tribble, 2001; Wette, 2019).

The study also probed the students' challenges in their STU and their coping strategies. The results suggested that the students struggled with STs and how to use them. One of the common challenges associated with the STs, according to the participants, was the variety and abundance of the sources leading to confusion over choosing relevant texts and contents. One of the welcomed assets of the information explosion, high-speed internet connectivity, and modern digital assistants is the availability of academic resources at authors' fingertips (Apuke, 2016; Audu, 2006; Emeka &

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Nyeche, 2016; Flowerdew & Habibie, 2022). On the negative side, however, novice writers, as indicated in this study, may find it overwhelming to sort through databases, find relevant STs and use them in their own writing (Pecorari, 2003). Grammatical complexities of STs may also cause problems in their understanding of the texts and lead them towards an overreliance on the content and language of STs. This is particularly the case when attempts are made in rewriting and incorporating the STs, which entail more structural mastery and grammatical sophistication (see, for example, Chen & Su, 2012; Choy & Lee, 2012; Flowerdew & Habibie, 2022; Handayani & Johan, 2018; Pennycook, 1996; Wette, 2010). The accuracy and dependability of the readings they incorporate into their texts were, in addition, a matter of concern. The students seemed to be cognizant of the significance of the credibility of the journal articles of choice, but yet they wondered how they could be evaluated. Scholarly sources and research credibility can enhance the students' argument plausibility and accuracy and their assignment evaluation by the instructors. However, locating, evaluating, and citing dependable STs and credible information are generally assumed to be difficult for student writers (Rieh, 2002; Savolainen, 2011).

In addition to the problems associated with the STs, participants had difficulties using them correctly and appropriately. One of the main STU problems for the participants was choosing to paraphrase or quote the ST sentences directly, wondering what role each strategy played in their STU as well as how their arguments and positions could be framed and supported when opting for a particular citing strategy (See also, Hyland, 2009; Mori, 2018; Shi, 2008). Representing the ST content faithfully while using indirect quotations was also another significant challenge for many of them. They feared indirect STU might result in distortions in the text language or content and accusation of plagiarism. These findings collectively support the finding

in the literature that professional and accurate STU that involves content knowledge and linguistic competence prove challenging to novice L2 writers (Gebriel & Plakans, 2009; Hyland, 2005; Liao & Tseng, 2010; Shi, 2012).

The participants also oscillated between under- and over-referencing the STs. This results from their struggle to decide whether they should represent their own voice and dominate the text more by citing less or use STs more to be seen less (Abasi et al., 2006; Howard et al., 2010; Shi, 2008). It is not surprising that when STs are incorporated very often, they fail to find their authorial voice and establish clear boundaries between their own contributions and those incorporated and cited in their texts (for more discussion see, Abasi & Akbari, 2008; Ivanic & Camps, 2001; Wette, 2010). They may even feel they have not contributed to the academic conversation and literature as much have “appeared too dependent on the source language” (Howard et al., 2010, p.187). This is perhaps because many students lack familiarity with the notion of common or shared knowledge in academic writing. Rarely do they distinguish between the contents learned by previous exposure and iteration and those offered by and original to a particular author, which requires citations (Mori, 2018). The students, moreover, were concerned about various citing and documenting styles available and prescribed in their discipline or in the STs they find and study. Various disciplinary preferences and the intricate details of citation conventions are likely to overwhelm the students by demanding accuracy and consistency of the references cited (Angélil-Carter, 2000; Bazerman, 1988; Charles, 2006; Harwood, 2009; Hyland, 1999, 2000; Thompson & Tribble, 2001). It should be noted that all these challenges arise when one aspires to use and cite STs. Compared to these beleaguered students, some students did not face STU challenges not because of their mastery of STU or English proficiency but

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due to their little concern about citation accuracy and legitimacy when their texts were not going to be published.

Participants were also enquired about their strategies for coping with their ST and STU problems. Some were found to rely on professional STs as exemplary models to learn about STs and cite them. High citation counts or how frequently the ST was cited and used in pertinent literature were viable strategies for participants to cope with STs' abundance and their dependability. In addition, for more assistance in accurate and apt STU, they consulted and drew upon the other illustrative STs that cited and used the ST of interest. They even studied and used academic books and scholarly STs to learn to simplify complex sentence structures and integrate them into their writing or to learn how to cite so that their contributions remain visible. Learning with worked examples has been appreciated and documented in learning research (Klopp & Stark, 2018; Renkel, 2014). Using worked exemplary STs as cognitive and linguistic models and a "socializing" strategy (Duff, 2010, p. 173) has also been well established as a way of accessing correct STU and referencing technicalities and details in the L2 literature (e.g., Almarwani, 2020; Leki, 1995; Merkel, 2019). This learning strategy, for instance, was evident in Merkel's study (2019) as novice L2 students strived to track down the STs of relevance one way or another to learn what and how to cite in their writing to ensure compliances with academic conventions. Almarwani (2020) reported the same coping strategy, whose participants proofread linguistic features by searching the same use in published exemplars.

Despite these students' quests for and consultation with illustrative academic models, some tended to cope with the problems using STs with quotation marks or without any specific acknowledgment. Poor linguistic and content knowledge may presumably explain why these students developed

tendencies towards direct strategies or STU without citations (Leki, 1995). Furthermore, students' decisions about the amount of investment and effort to make in writing from STs may, in part, explain why some decided to cite STs to learn while others opted for safer and more straightforward choices (Merkel, 2019). When required to show mastery of academic knowledge and literacy skills in academic writing, novice students are undoubtedly inclined to resort to these "survival strategies" to write "within their capacity," overlooking arsenal of writing strategies for an "ideal [academic] performance" (Flowerdew & Li, 2007, p. 168).

Another issue of concern in the present study was the students' preferred STU practices and strategies. "Paraphrasing" and "direct quotation" emerged as two basic STU choices with several justifications for their choices. Some participants preferred direct quotation use because they lacked linguistic confidence and English proficiency. Other students, however, thought direct quotation could benefit them, acknowledging that by using this strategy, they could express their appreciation or acknowledgment of the ST authors' wisdom and intellectual work. Moreover, they could also speed the writing process or represent a sophisticated argument by adopting academic language and content modeled by scholarly authorities. It is worthy of note that no participant explicitly pointed to or preferred "patchwriting" as an STU strategy. As shown in the literature, novice L2 students are likely to classify their partial paraphrases or patchwriting under the more inclusive category of paraphrasing, assuming no distinction between these two (Mori, 2018; Shi, 2018).

It can be argued that, for some participants, the risk of unfaithful representation or any distortions in original content and language seemed to make them solely go with the less-than-ideal direct quotation. According to Hirvela and Du (2013), novice writers worried whether any lexical or phrasal

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substitution could be as concise and meaningful as the original STs. The brevity, sublimity, technicality, and interpretability of the source content and ideas thus made them “leave well enough alone.” We concur with Mori (2018) that L2 writers tend to directly quote and cite STs to appear more academic, to enrich their texts, and at the same time to avoid plagiarism. L2 students’ tendencies towards direct quotations and unwillingness in paraphrasing have also been supported by recent literature. The evidence shows that L2 students were held back to paraphrase their understandings of the STs due to their lack of linguistic confidence, academic literacy, and precautionary behavior (e.g., Abasi & Akbari, 2008; Hirvela & Du, 2013; Luzón, 2015; Shi, 2012).

On the other hand, to some participants, direct quotation was beneficial and economical in academic writing. The findings are hence along the lines of the reports by Shi (2008), Hirvela and Du (2013), and Mori (2018), whose participants chose direct quoting over paraphrasing. They thought that paraphrasing was a risky, laborious endeavor, which still constituted “a legitimized form of plagiarism” (Hirvela & Du, 2013, p. 8); conversely, direct quotation is as productive as paraphrasing, yet by far more authoritative because of directly coming from leading authors. This again attests to the students’ linguistic and academic uncertainty in challenging STs’ authorities and privileged positions, and their tendencies towards viewing the cited and quoted STs as incontestable ideal exemplars (Abasi et al., 2006; Hyland, 2009; Leki, 1995; Mori, 2018; Penrose & Geisler, 1994; Wette, 2019).

Paraphrasing was, however, preferred and valued by some participants, despite the challenges and their limited experience in scholarly writing. One common theme related to the choice of paraphrasing was how their understanding of the literature and academic literacies could be demonstrated

when this strategy was a choice. The participants argued that writers are constantly expected to flex their writing muscles by relying on their critical thinking, analysis, and voice, hoping that they will also gain authority or credibility in the community of practice. Using their own words or paraphrasing involves “the act of response and interpretation,” which demonstrates their textual ownership and raises their academic voice that other forms of STU are less likely to serve (Mori, 2018, p. 51). These participants were also motivated to paraphrase the STs because it was perceived to be instrumental in structuring and linking the STs well and establishing text coherence, making the text more readable. Because academic writing is a flow-based skill where ideas appear smoothly and contextually, they seemingly knew that it is necessary to create coherence by using appropriate textual strategies, e.g., paraphrasing. The participants viewed this coherence or “intra-text connectedness” (Poudel, 2018) to be critical for comprehensibility and interpretability of the academic texts, as also evidenced in Shi' (2012) and Hirvela and Du's (2013) studies.

## **5. Conclusion and Implications**

MA graduate TEFL students were interviewed for their STU awareness and learning of STs, problems, and strategies. The study showed that the participants had built awareness of STU through reference packages, writing courses and instructors, self-studies of academic resources. It was also found that to solve their problems with ST and STU, some tended to trace worked exemplary STs to learn more about the STs of choice and how to use them, while some, lacking confidence in English and academic writing, relied on direct quotations or used STs without acknowledging them. The study also revealed “paraphrasing” and “direct quotation” as the participants’ preferences for citing STs.

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The findings make the case that, albeit the participants had developed a high level of awareness of the significance of STU in disciplinary writing, the likely challenges to be faced, and the different approaches to cite STs, they needed further disciplinary academic writing courses. These courses may focus on their textual reproductions involving discussion boards and workshops seeking students' views, resources, and problems of STU with pedagogical strategies for and feedback on their writing and citing (Wette, 2017). In addition, instructors of writing courses are encouraged to appear as neither policy inspectors nor assessors of students' textual appropriations in a way that gives rise to risk avoidance in STU. According to Chandrasoma et al., "Part of student knowledge about plagiarism, for example, is a product of current discourses that construct it as an intentional crime. Thus, if they avoid such activity, they avoid the problem" (2004, p. 190). Hence, "recognizing the existence of the problem is the beginning of the solution" (Pecorari, 2003, p. 343). Course instructors, as a sage, can raise their awareness about various citational resources and practices at their disposal and, as a guide on the side, can engage them actively in incrementally manageable writing tasks which incorporate STs and STU. This development of awareness, knowledge in academic writing, and STU skill will provoke their engagement with, critical use of scholarly discourses and assets, and the construction of academic representation and identity (Howard, 1995).

As a qualitative case study, this research had its limitations. First, I could not get the participants to write source-based texts and observe their actual citation problems, and the findings came from interviews with the participants. Second, the participants were all from a small sample of graduate students with no experience of publishing in scholarly journals. Thus, the findings should be interpreted with caution. Future quantitative research involving larger samples, text-based writing, and longitudinal

studies on how L2 university students' understanding and use of STs develops through experience and education are needed.

The Authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

#### Appendix A

##### Interview Questions

Code:

Demographic information:

Gender:

Age:

BA major:

MA major:

1. How do you know how to use source text?
2. Have you ever been taught or trained to write from the source text?
3. What specific problems do you usually experience when using a source text?
4. How do you tackle these problems?
5. When using a source text how do you prefer to cite/show what you used?

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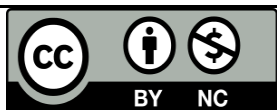
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