Significant research into the ‘manifest intertextuality’ (Fairclough, 1992, p.104) of academic English has included Swales’ (1990) categorisation of integral and non-integral reporting, Thompson and Ye’s (1991) work on reporting verbs and Hyland’s analyses of patterns of attribution across disciplines (for example, Hyland, 1999). Pecorari draws on this body of work to show clearly the complex range of skills needed by higher education students to effectively use sources in their writing and the way in which the requirements for this use shift according to discipline, text type and even the different sections of texts. Pecorari also demonstrates that there are usually few resources available to higher education students to develop and practice this complex set of skills and they are left to work out the requirements and skills on their own.

Pecorari shows the consequences of this. She analyses text samples taken from nine masters theses and eight PhD theses in the disciplines of Science, Engineering, Social Sciences and Humanities from three universities in Great Britain. The PhD theses had been examined and passed, while the majority of the masters theses were in draft form. Pecorari compares the students’ texts to the sources they cited and her findings are startling. Between 23% and 41% of the language of the student texts (not including direct quotations) repeated the language of their sources. This means that they all, to varying degrees, contain textual plagiarism according to the criteria Pecorari has established (i.e., that a text contains words and/or ideas from an earlier text; repeats words or ideas from an earlier text; and/or does not show its relationship to an earlier text, p.6). Across the 17 samples the proportion of repeated language in individual writing ranged from 95% to 7%; the longest repeated string of words was 102 and the shortest was 6. Pecorari also found that, of the sources cited in these samples, only 75% could be found because of mistakes in citation or missing references. Pecorari also found inaccurately cited secondary references which effectively misattributed sources and examples of inaccuracies in reporting the content of the sources. Whilst acknowledging the difficulties involved in determining writers’ intentions, Pecorari concluded from her interviews with the masters’ students that none had intended to deceive in their use of sources.

The texts Pecorari analyses were written by postgraduate students most of whom would have had at least three years of writing academic English as undergraduates. Additionally, the PhD theses she analyses had been deemed as meeting academic standards.
As her samples came from four different disciplines in three different universities, it is not likely that these samples are unusual. The supervisors of the master’s students were surprised by Pecorari’s findings but as one pointed out that with only ‘half an hour for each project report there’s no way most people would have time to go back and check to what extent this sort of straight copying has occurred’ (p.135). If these are the findings with postgraduate students what might be the situation with undergraduate student writing? To date little research on intertextuality in academic writing has focused on undergraduate student writing. However an analysis of 38 essays by commencing undergraduate students at an Australian university showed that instances of undetected textual plagiarism were widespread but were also affected by issues such as students’ awareness of and skills in locating and evaluating suitable source material (Stevenson, 2006).

Pecorari’s findings should be sufficiently shocking to encourage higher education institutions to embed the teaching of academic literacies, such as writing from sources, in mainstream subjects. And such is Pecorari’s major recommendation. These institutions might also consider a shift in policies regarding plagiarism. As Pecorari comments (p.148) most plagiarism policies fit ‘within the framework of the university’s disciplinary rules’ and so are better suited to dealing with acts of deception rather acts which result from a lack of skill and/or experience.

‘Plagiarism’ is the most elastic of terms. In the higher education context, plagiarism is attached to behaviours ranging from acts of fraud (possibly a more accurate depiction than theft) to textual mishaps resulting from ignorance or misunderstanding. Like many before her, Pecorari wants to distinguish between acts which set out to deceive and those that are the result of inexperience or ignorance. She divides plagiarism into two basic types on the basis of ‘the presence or absence of intentional deception’ (p.4). She divides textual plagiarism into ‘prototypical plagiarism’ (where the intention is to deceive) and ‘patchwriting’ (where there is no intention to deceive). Through this, Pecorari inherits two problems which remain unresolved in this book. The first is the difficulty, which Pecorari later admits (p.98), in determining ‘intention’. The second is that by identifying patchwriting with ‘unintentional’ plagiarism she aligns with a position where patchwriting is bad, even though she is, at times, drawn to Howard’s (1995) argument that it may be for some students an important, even necessary stage in learning to write ‘academically’.

Some of the recommendations that Pecorari makes in her final chapter are useful, including the encouragement of teaching staff in universities to set written assignments which require students to use a limited number of specified sources. This not only models the type of resources that are considered appropriate for academic work and enables students to develop the skills to find them, but also draws attention to significant ideas
and texts in a subject and enables a marker (who may be able to spend only 15 minutes responding to each text) to see more easily how students are using those sources.

In keeping with the linguistic focus of her book, Pecorari tends to see the main solution as explicit teaching about what textual plagiarism is and how to write appropriately from sources to avoid it. However this is, at best, only a partial solution. In Chapter 2 Pecorari lists what she refers to as ‘culture-based explanations’ for textual plagiarism by non-native English speaking students. One of these explanations is ‘students’ perceptions about their roles, e.g. a belief that their role as writers is to repeat information from sources’ (p.13). Then in her analysis of the texts Pecorari compares two samples, one with a high percentage of repeated language and one with a low percentage. She concludes that a significant difference between them is that the writer of the text with the lower percentage had a ‘clear sense of purpose’, a ‘clear direction’ for this text that the other student lacked and that ‘in the absence of a clear direction for the text, it is easier to integrate material from a source in its original form’ (p.93). These notions of the role of the student writer and of having a clear sense of purpose in a text are significant. If explicit teaching to avoid textual plagiarism is introduced then this is where it needs to start with both native and non-native English speaking students. Many students commencing university (and with the increasing diversity of students attending universities it may even be ‘most’) come with an assumption that their role as a writer is to synthesise, or knit together as seamlessly as possible, ‘bits of information’ from a variety of sources. This means that staff need first to teach and model the analytical and critical thinking appropriate to the discipline and then show students the implications of this for the use of sources in writing.

Pecorari also suggests that universities manage their admissions so that ‘students have reasonable chances of success’ (p.150). This, as Pecorari acknowledges, is perhaps overly optimistic due to universities’ financial dependence on fee-paying students. In addition, although Pecorari admits that many teaching staff resist the move to incorporate the teaching of academic literacies within their subjects, she dismisses the ‘distinction between content and writing skills as impractical’ (p.147). Impractical it may be but it is a significant barrier. Teaching staff may perceive subject content and the literacies required as either/or because they have not had opportunities to see how they can be combined to enhance student learning. Some staff also may not feel confident in developing students’ academic language as they have neither explicitly identified what they do in their own writing nor analysed the practices of their discipline.
Despite these qualifications Pecorari’s book offers an important application of research into intertextuality in academic English and the findings of her research project should not be ignored in any university where English is the language of teaching and learning.

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REFERENCES