

Paraphrasing: A New Approach to the Study of Knowledge Building

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Abstract

Previous research on knowledge building has focused on a cognitive approach. The purpose of this paper is to examine whether corpus linguistics approach could be a more effective methodology for understanding knowledge building.

Forty two Nursing undergraduates at the University of Hong Kong, ranging in age of 19 to 21 years old, participated in online student-centered discussions over a 12-week semester. Students were invited to exchange opinions about the concepts extracted from the literature they read. Findings show that students were able to actively understand and apply new concepts using the Discussion feature offered by MOODLE. All students posted clear and focused messages that covered the concepts discussed in the literature and those which went beyond the reading materials. Paraphrasing was identified as a significant vehicle for building knowledge in the virtual learning environment created by MOODLE. Students constructed their knowledge by paraphrasing the concepts repeatedly and in different ways that could be labeled as expansion, reduction, description, explication, modification, and correlation. The meaning of lexical items, including terms, is constructed, in a collaborative effort, by the members of a discourse community. So far the crucial role of paraphrasing has escaped the attention of linguistics, including corpus linguistics. The same is true for the notion of intertextuality which analyses the dialogic aspect of KB.

The focus of this presentation is on paraphrase. I will offer a classification of paraphrases based on the data provided by my KB discourse, and I will use the methodology of corpus linguistics to interpret my data. My study shows that it is possible to investigate knowledge building as a collaborative activity without having to rely on cognitive models.

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