Using Turnitin to Provide Feedback on L2 Writers' Texts

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Abstract

Second language (L2) writing instructors have varying tools at their disposal for providing feedback on students' writing, including ones that enable them to provide written and audio feedback in electronic form. One tool that has been underexplored is Turnitin, a widely used software program that matches electronic text to a wide range of electronic texts found on the Internet and in the program's massive repository. While Turnitin is primarily known for detecting potential plagiarism, we believe that instructors can make use of two features of the program (GradeMark tools and originality checker) to provide formative and summative feedback on students' drafts. In this article, we use screenshots to illustrate how we have leveraged Turnitin to provide feedback to undergraduate L2 writers about their writing and use of sources. We encourage instructors who have access to Turnitin to explore the different features of this tool and its potential to create opportunities for learning.

Introduction

Educators have long been concerned about plagiarism, and developments in technology and the Internet over the past two decades have further complicated the issue. One way that institutions have responded to these concerns is by purchasing matched text detection software, which is often referred to as plagiarism detection software. Simply defined, matched text detection software matches text to other electronic text to determine how similar the texts are to each other. Arguably the most well-known of these programs is Turnitin, which is currently used in 15,000 institutions in more than 140 countries (Turnitin, n.d.). Turnitin matches papers to other electronic texts in its database that includes over 600 million student papers submitted to its repository, online texts

(e.g., journals, dissertations and theses, and books), and Web-based texts (e.g., blogs, websites) and provides a percentage of text that was matched in the form of an originality report. Turnitin recently changed the name of their product to *Turnitin Feedback Studio*; however, for simplicity, we will refer to the program as *Turnitin* in this paper hereafter.

While Turnitin and similar matched text detection programs are often used punitively, some scholarship has begun to shed light on the non-punitive potential of the program for providing feedback to students about their writing. In this article, we provide a brief overview of scholarship on electronic feedback. We then describe how we have used the originality checker and GradeMark features of Turnitin to provide formative and summative feedback on students' early and final drafts, focusing on both the sentence and text levels. We also describe the challenges that we have experienced while using the program and conclude by calling for a reconceptualization of the program as a pedagogical tool.

Review of Literature

Research on electronic feedback provided to English language learners is fairly limited; however, some work has investigated the effects of both written and voice electronic feedback on second language writers' texts. For instance, a study employing Microsoft Word margin comments found that second language (L2) writers, after training was provided on how to interpret and respond to comments, successfully responded to 62% of the feedback given on the two assignments in their course (Ene & Upton, 2014). Interestingly, the students were more successful at revising their first paper (69%) than their second paper (49%), which could be the result of "the increased complexity of the writing assignments and teacher expectations" (p. 86). In another study, instructors used Markin4, a Windows-based annotating software, to provide direct and metalinguistic feedback to L2 writers (Figure 1). The authors found that both types of feedback resulted in higher overall scores, with direct feedback having a more significant effect (Saadi & Saadat, 2015). Both of these studies illustrate that with appropriate training provided to students and instructors, electronic feedback can replace an instructor's handwritten comments.
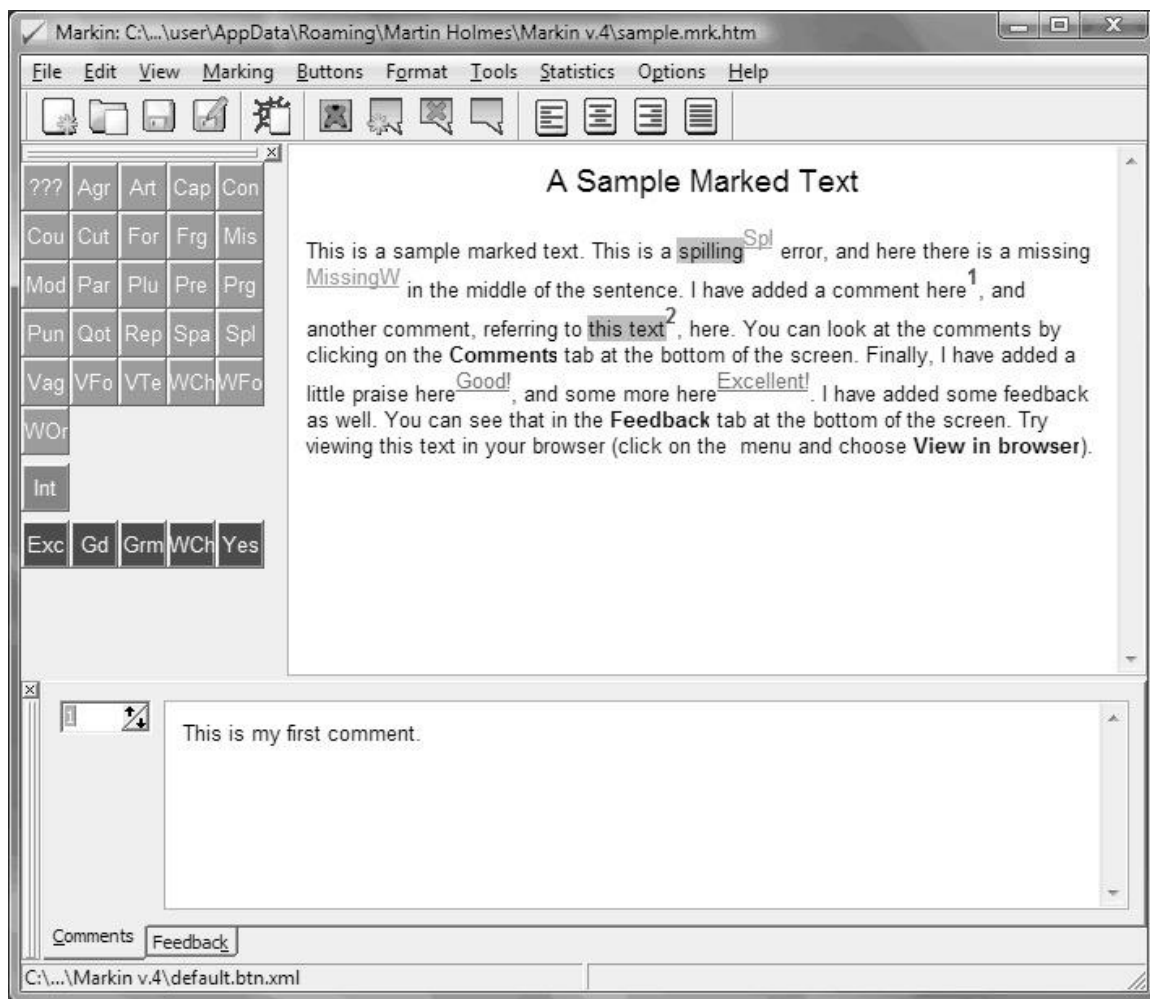
Figure 1. Screenshot of the Markin4 software with sample marks
(from cict.co.uk/markin/features.php, reproduced here with permission)

Other research has explored whether voice comments have advantages over written comments in certain contexts, as the human voice can help add a dimension to comments that written feedback may lack. For instance, some work has shown that audio comments lead students to pay closer attention to the comments and their writing (e.g., Cavanaugh & Song, 2014; Ice, Curtis, Phillips & Wells, 2007; Kim, 2004; Mellen & Sommers, 2003). Other studies have examined student and instructor perceptions of audio feedback provided in the form of MP3 files, indicating that audio feedback was often positively viewed by instructors and well received by students (e.g., Cavanaugh & Song, 2014; Hennessy & Forrester; 2014). In some cases, voice comments were preferred over written feedback since they were perceived as friendly, motivating, and detailed (Lunt & Curran, 2010; Wood, Moskovitz, & Valiga, 2011). While audio feedback may cause some difficulties for English language learners, especially for learners with weaker listening skills, it can help students become more involved in a course through active listening in and outside of

class. Providing feedback through voice comments in online courses can increase instructor-student interaction (Olesova, Richardson, Weasenforth, & Meloni, 2011).

Some scholarship has examined how instructors provide electronic feedback on students' writing using the GradeMark feature of Turnitin, in which instructors can assign electronic comments on a paper that a student submitted to the program. Buckley and Cowap (2013) investigated 11 university instructors' perspectives on the usability of the software. The participants noted a number of "strengths in the functionality of the software that made marking easier and quicker for certain assignment formats, such as the use of QuickMark Comments" (p. 59). Their findings were also consistent with those of Henderson (2008), who concluded that providing electronic comments through Turnitin "automates some of the marking process, is tied to the student's work, and is much quicker than hand writing the same comments over and over again" (p. 11). In another study about the impact of GradeMark on students' work, Reed, Watmough, and Duvall (2015) made several interesting observations. First, they noted that the majority of the comments made by instructors on students' texts were related to critical aspects of the assignments, referencing, grammar, and mechanics, which demonstrated the versatility of the GradeMark tool. However, there was no correlation between the number of comments made and the grades assigned. In addition, the Rubric tool in GradeMark included seven objectives the assignments were graded on, and while graders did differ in how they graded each objective, mean scores did not differ significantly. Incorporating the Rubric tool into electronic grading can not only help identify inconsistencies among graders (Reed, Watmough, & Duvall, 2015), but also improve grading transparency (Jonsson, 2014).

In addition to examining the usefulness of GradeMark, other literature has highlighted the usefulness of Turnitin for providing feedback about students' source use in particular. For instance, Conzett, Martin, and Mitchell (2010) describe how instructors in their intensive English program at a university in the United States have used Turnitin to support a framework that focused on teaching L2 writers how to use sources and avoid plagiarism. They illustrate how students in their program use Turnitin to check their paraphrases, in-text citations, and the formatting of their references pages, highlighting that "these services are tools for students… rather than 'gotcha' policing tools for instructors" (p. 305). Similar findings from a case study of undergraduate L2 writers in the United States indicate that the color-coding feature of Turnitin helped students analyze the quality of their electronic sources, generate discussions about whether matched text needed a citation, and determine whether their overall paper balanced direct quotations with their own words (Kostka & Eisenstein Ebsworth, 2014). Finally, Li and Casanave (2012) describe how Turnitin was used to help two L2 writers at a university in Hong Kong understand that direct quotations must be cited exactly as they appear in the original text and address discrepancies between students' and their instructor's perceptions of students' source use.

Given the sheer prevalence of Turnitin in institutions across the globe and growing scholarly interest in the potential of Turnitin for providing electronic written and audio feedback, we believe that it is worth exploring how Turnitin may be used with students instead of against students (Emerson, 2008). In the following section, we describe how

we use two particular features of Turnitin, GradeMark and originality checking, to provide feedback to advanced L2 writers. We first describe GradeMark, which allows instructors to provide a variety of comments, evaluate assignments using electronic rubrics, and provide formative assessment. We then describe how we use the originality checking feature to draw students' attention to their source use.

The Setting

We teach advanced reading and writing English as Second Language (ESL) courses in a pathways program at a private urban research university in the United States. While our department provides separate tracks for undergraduate and graduate students, both programs offer conditional admission to international students who require additional English language support before matriculating to the university. Students take both English language courses (e.g., reading/writing and listening/speaking) and receive transferable credit for content courses (e.g., philosophy, American history, environmental science, and calculus, among others). Students are enrolled in the program for either one, two, or three semesters, depending on which level they place into upon arrival. To successfully complete the program and matriculate to the university, they must achieve both the GPA required by their destination degree program and a passing score on an English language proficiency exam.

Our university subscribes to Turnitin, which faculty and students can access through our course management software system, Blackboard. Because the majority of students are unfamiliar with Turnitin before coming to our program, we take special care to orient them to Turnitin in our classes. We have used different approaches to introduce students to GradeMark, originality checking, and Turnitin more generally. For instance, if students have never used the program, we have asked them to watch a training video at home about originality checking, which can be found on Turnitin's website. In class, we then discuss why instructors might use Turnitin to check for potential plagiarism and how students can submit their papers on Blackboard, and later we address any questions students might have about the program. When providing feedback using GradeMark, we give students a short demonstration of Turnitin in class, covering file submission guidelines, the types of comments the students will receive, ways of accessing comments (e.g., viewing comments one-by-one or printing the whole document), and revision strategies. In the reading and writing courses we teach, we ask students to submit all drafts of their papers to Turnitin.

Although students can access Turnitin at home, we prefer to work with Turnitin in class either in peer review groups or during individual student-teacher conferences. To prepare for individual conferences, we ask students to bring specific questions either regarding the comments we provided on their drafts or questions they had while writing. We go over students' originality reports during peer review. Each pair opens their originality report and discusses each instance of matched text. While students collaborate, we visit each pair to answer any questions and look at students' originality reports, answering questions if necessary and clarifying any issues that may arise.

GradeMark for Written and Audio Electronic Feedback

In the GradeMark section of Turnitin, instructors can use built-in comments called QuickMarks (QM) to provide customized feedback on students' texts. Using QMs can save instructors time because comments can be dragged and dropped directly onto students' papers and saved for future use. The built-in comments are divided into several sets, as displayed in Figure 2.

- The first set is called *Commonly Used*, which includes frequently used punctuation and grammar comments determined by Turnitin.
- *Composition* comments include a variety of comments related to grammar, word use, sentence structure, and organization.
- *Composition Marks* include such comments as new paragraph, insert word, transpose, cite, among others.
- *Format* includes commonly used formatting comments (e.g., lowercase, line spacing, font, and capitalization).
- *Punctuation* comments allow instructors to suggest such edits as comma splice, missing comma, no period, and others.
- *Usage* refers to comments on word use errors, such as commonly confused words, can/may, its/it's, or dangling modifiers.

Only one set can be used at a time, but the comments can be added from one set to another using the *Actions* button on a selected comment (Figure 2). New sets and new comments can be added freely; however, built-in comments cannot be modified.
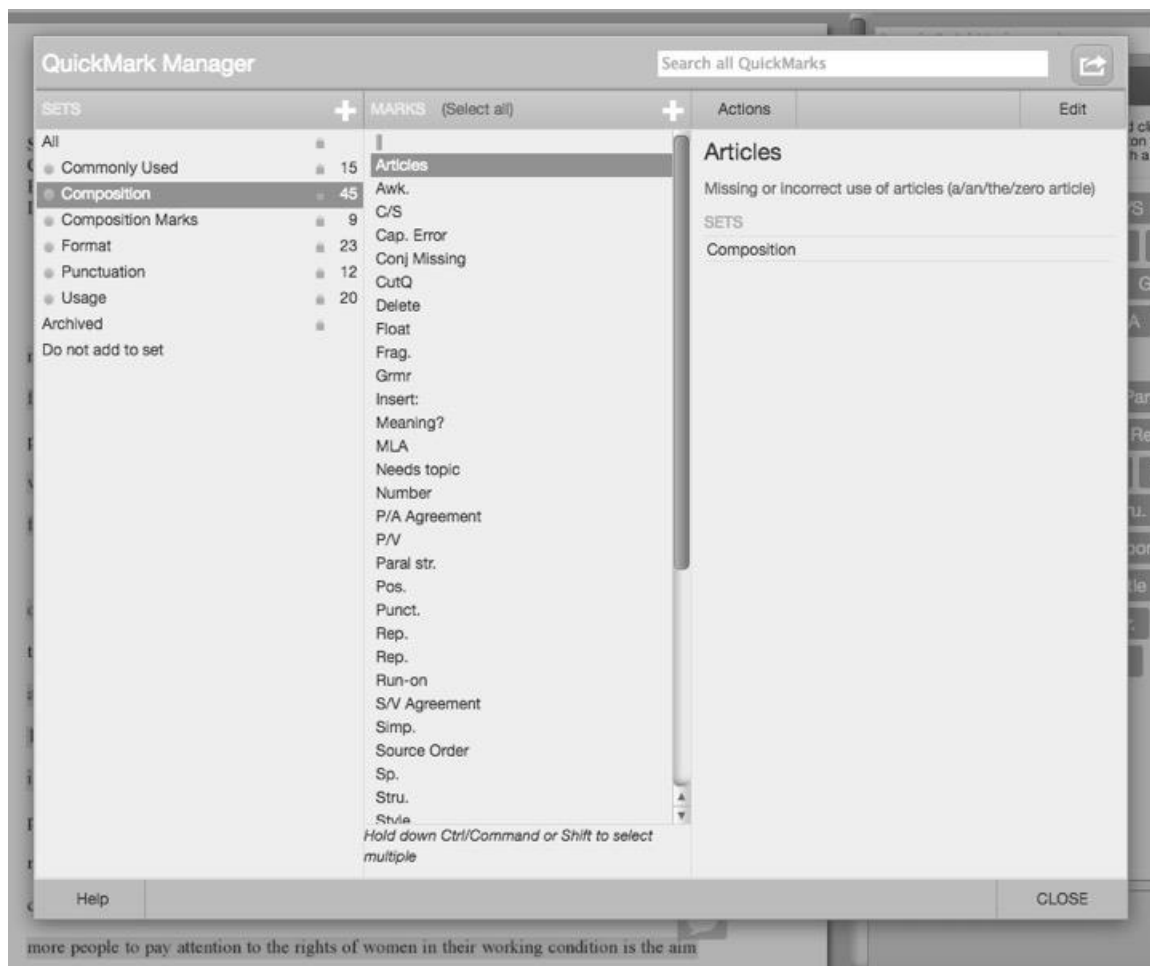
**Figure 2. Overview of QuickMark Manager with editing sets**

In the writing courses we oversee, we suggest that instructors use the *Composition* set as the primary set, but the set can be enhanced based on the needs and preferences of each instructor. The changed set will appear in all sections of courses that the instructor teaches. Comments can be added and deleted depending on how frequently certain errors occur in students' work. All the comments that are saved in the QMs appear on the text as a speech bubble with a short or abbreviated title, which is the same title that appears in the QMs menu on the right (Figure 3). The comment tool can also be used to provide additional personalized feedback when the built-in comments are insufficient to describe the error or the problem in an assignment. This type of comment appears as a speech bubble on the paper and does not have a description. The comments can be placed in two different ways: either by dragging and dropping the selected comment onto the desired location, or by highlighting the area that includes the error and click on the comment. The highlighted text can also be color-coded, which allows the instructor to assign different colors for different types of comments.
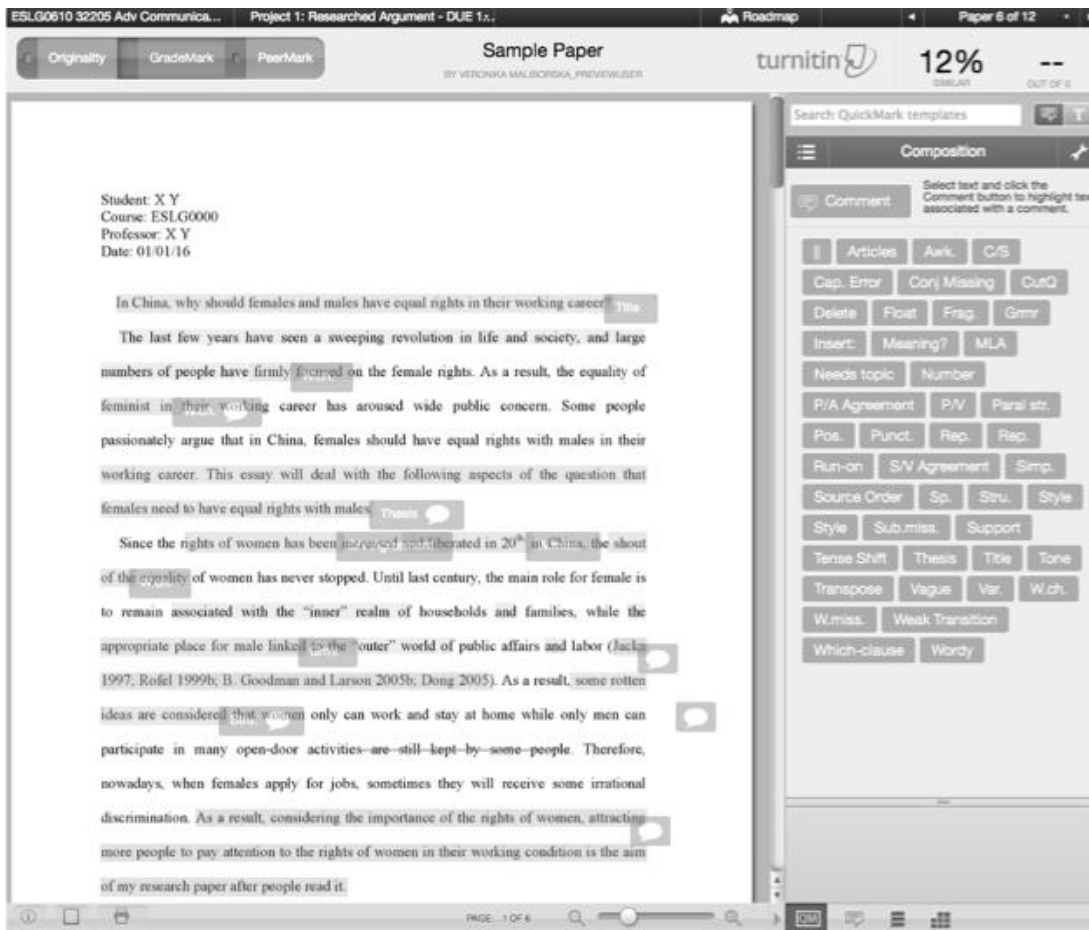
Figure 3. Sample paper with feedback provided using QMs (instructor view)

The advantage of QMs in Turnitin is that error codes are accompanied by short explanations that can be seen either when the student places the mouse cursor over the QM or when all errors are viewed in the Comments List tab. These types of comments comprise a form of metalinguistic feedback, which has been researched in second language writing and mostly found effective when used over extended periods of time and provided for simple errors (e.g., Bitchener & Knoch, 2010; Saadi & Saadat, 2015; Sheen, 2007; Shintani, Ellis, & Suzuki, 2014). The purpose of metalinguistic feedback is to provide a clue that can help students identify the error, often using error codes based on linguistic terms (Saadi & Saadat, 2015). Such QMs as *Articles*, *C/S* (comma splice), *Conjunction Missing*, *P/A* (pronoun/antecedent) *Agreement*, and *S/V* (subject/verb) *Agreement* are examples of metalinguistic feedback (Figure 3). Depending on the error and assignment goals, the QMs can be edited directly in the paper to provide additional feedback. We often add explanations when we provide general grammar comments from QuickMarks. This feature is also useful when a student is making the same error repeatedly, as the instructor can provide an explanation or add a link to an external site the student can consult.
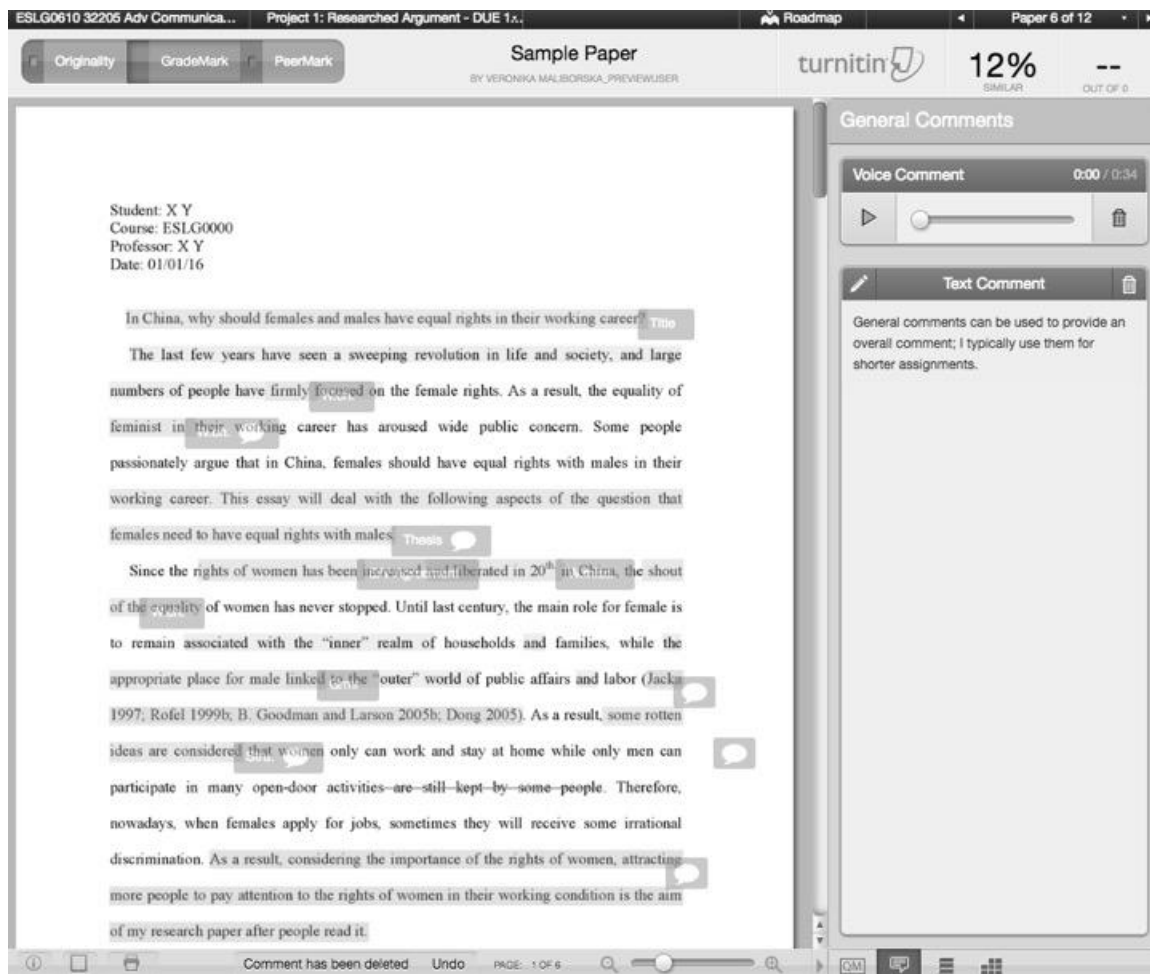
Figure 4. The general comments section in GradeMark

The *Text Comment* in the *General Comments* section in Turnitin can be used to provide a written comment about the overall assignment (Figure 4). For instance, if an assignment does not require further revision, this section provides an easy way for the instructor to tell the student that further revisions are not necessary. The *Text Comment* can also be used to provide praise. Positive comments are just as needed as corrective comments, especially when working with international students, who may feel vulnerable and insecure about their language skills and writing ability. Our students often say that *General Comments* help them know exactly what they do well and what they need to improve. Another use of the *Text Comment* box is for leaving overall comments when significant revision is required. The same comment can be provided by creating a new drag-and-drop comment, so instructors can choose whichever comment tool they prefer.

Voice Comments

In addition to tools for providing written feedback, Turnitin also offers a built-in option for providing audio feedback, which was added to the program in 2012 (Turnitin, n.d.). Audio feedback can be recorded in the *General Comments* tab using the *Voice*

Comment tool (see Figure 4) in addition to QMs, *General Comments*, and the grading rubric. An instructor could record audio comments without providing any additional written feedback. We have used this tool only occasionally when individual conferences could not be scheduled. The main limitation of this tool is that it allows only a three-minute long continuous recording, and no changes can be made once the recording is completed. If an instructor needed to re-record for any reason, the whole recording would need to be deleted and recorded again from the beginning (Figure 5). Nevertheless, we have found this tool convenient for providing miscellaneous comments about the paper or comments that would either require detailed explanations or take too long to type.
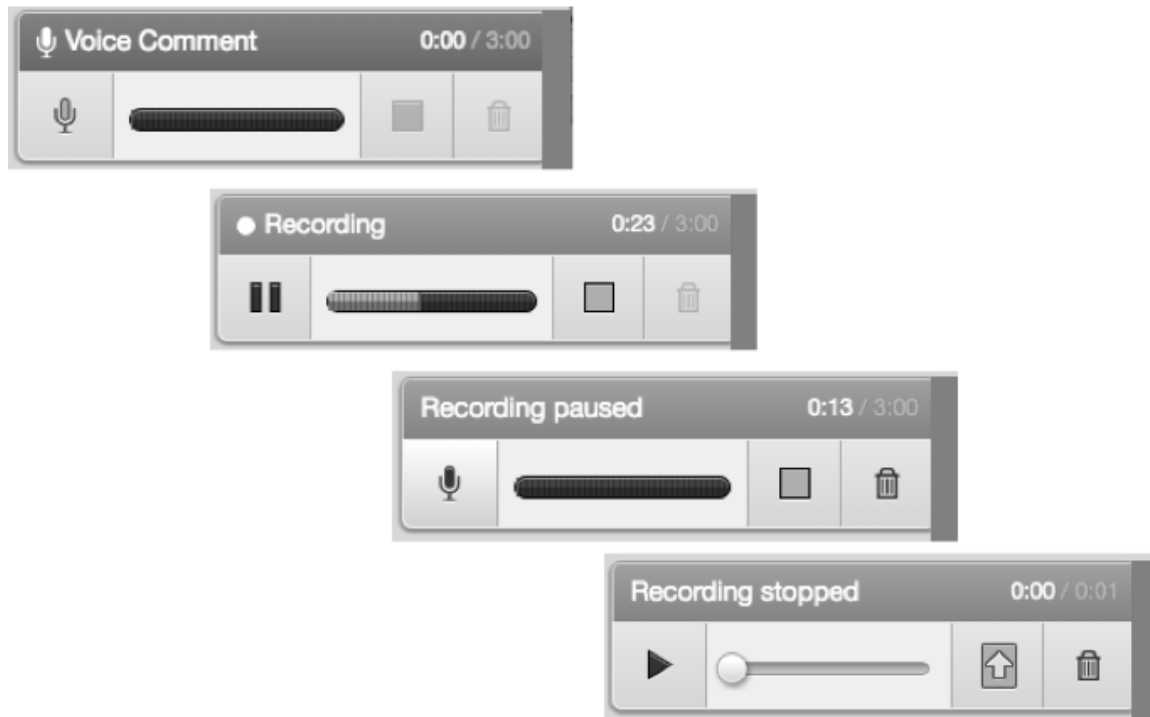

Figure 5. Recording *Voice Comments*
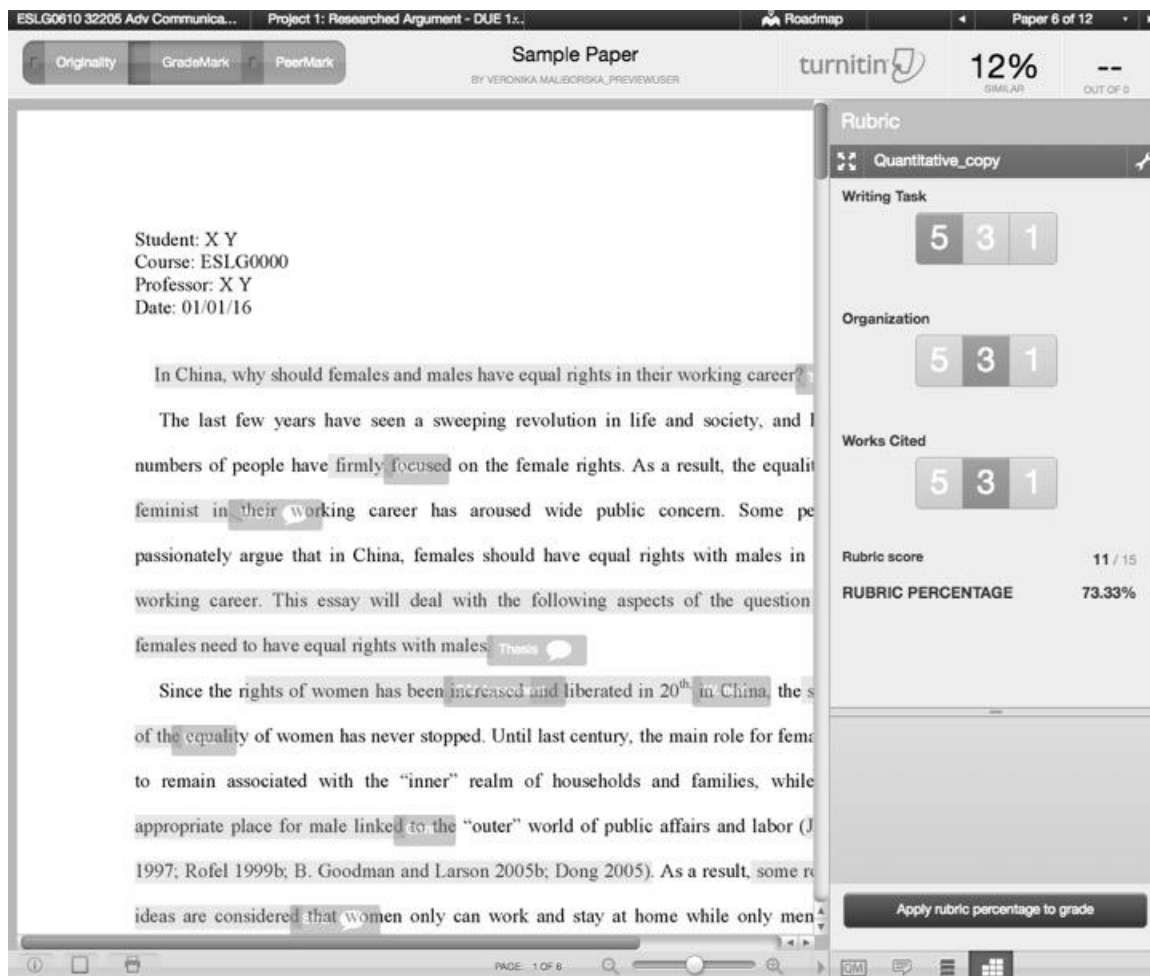
Grading Rubric

The Rubric/Form Manager in GradeMark allows instructors to create two different grading tools, both of which are similar in purpose and function. The grading rubric takes the form of a traditional analytic grading rubric that includes a detailed description for each score across a number of criteria used to evaluate the assignment. The grading form is simpler than the rubric; it takes the form of a condensed rubric, where each criterion is described only once, and the score is assigned during the grading process. The grading rubric and the grading form in Turnitin have to be created and added through the assignment setup menu before they can be used to grade students' work. Turnitin also provides a large set of rubrics one can use and modify (Figure 6). The rubrics are convenient and user-friendly, and the grading scales and their descriptions in the rubric can be modified as needed. An advantage to using the rubrics provided by Turnitin is that students can access all information regarding their assignments at once, such as the

written and/or audio feedback provided, the estimated or the assigned grade, and the originality report, which will be discussed below.
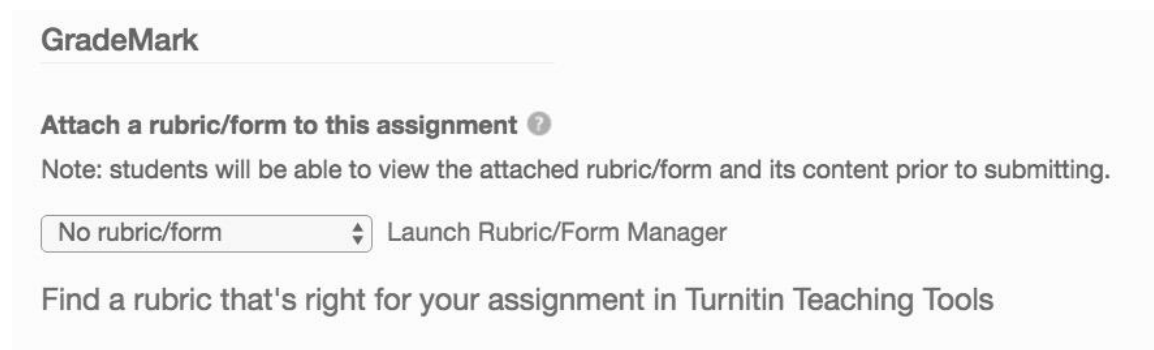
Figure 6. Rubric and Form Manager in the paper assignment settings

Instructors can set up the rubric fairly quickly if it is available in a Microsoft Word file. The grading criterion for each score can be simply copied and pasted into the rubric tool. When grading a paper, these descriptions become visible for the instructor when the cursor is placed over each score. When the grading form is used, the descriptions are visible in the menu. The rubric tool is convenient because Turnitin offers *import* and *export* options in the setup menu. Thus, a saved rubric can be easily added when another assignment in the same or a different course is created. The rubric can also be used to provide estimated scores on initial drafts, as the score transfers to the Blackboard grade book only when the "Apply rubric percentage to grade" feature is clicked (Figure 7). Students have found it helpful when estimated scores were provided on their drafts for assignments that required multiple revisions, and this score also reinforces the importance of incorporating feedback to improve subsequent drafts.

Figure 7. Sample use of the grading rubric

Originality Checker

The originality check feature of Turnitin matches students' submitted papers in its repository, publications, and online material and produces an originality report that shows a percentage of overall matched text. The program highlights each instance of matched text in a different color and provides a direct link to the original source. When creating an assignment in Turnitin, instructors can customize certain features within the originality checker. For instance, they can

- opt to exclude directly quoted text, bibliographic material (i.e., References pages), and small matches (the word count can be established by the instructor)
- overwrite previously submitted drafts (so students' subsequent drafts of a paper are not matched to previous drafts)
- set deadlines for students to submit their work
- choose whether students can see their own originality reports
- select which databases Turnitin searches for matches.

Figure 8 displays a sample originality report. In this student's essay, 18% of the paper was matched to 16 different electronic sources. Below the match overview, students and instructors can see exactly which percentage of the overall matched text came from a particular source, as the originality report appears in exactly the same format for instructors and students.
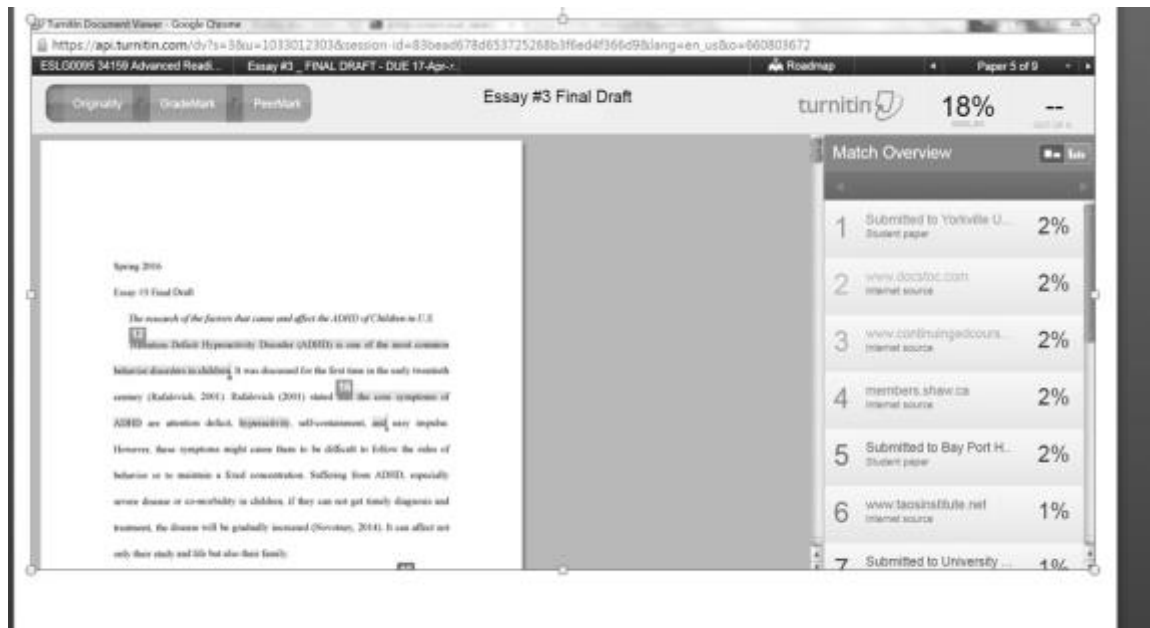

Figure 8. Sample Turnitin originality report

We have found that the originality checking feature of Turnitin is effective for helping students determine whether they have accurately incorporated original text into their paper. This is because we use Turnitin in class during peer review and/or individual conferences with students, and we ask students to analyze every instance of matched text. Figure 9 provides an example of a direct quotation that was matched to its original source. When the student and his peer review partner looked at this match, they realized that the original source was quoted directly, the authors were introduced in a signal phrase, and quotation marks were included. However, the in-text citation was missing a page number, which is necessary for citing direct quotations in APA format. In the subsequent draft, the student added the page number that referenced the direct quotation. The student may have noticed the missing page number without using Turnitin by carefully rereading and revising the paper. However, the salience of the color-coded originality report made it easier for the student to notice the missing in-text citation.
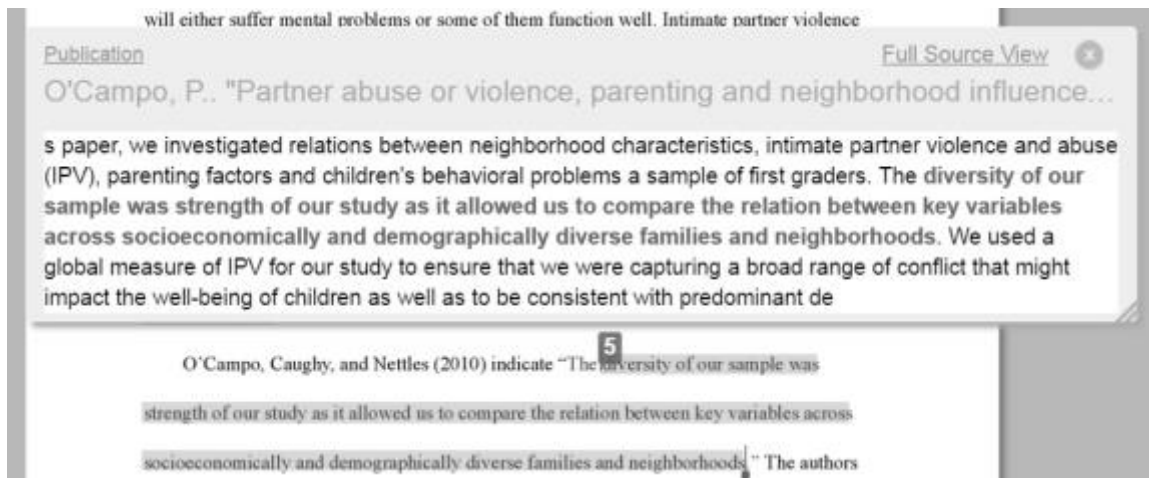
Figure 9. Matched text example

The color-coding feature in Turnitin originality reports can also draw students' attention to unintentional plagiarism. For instance, as shown in Figure 10, the student had directly incorporated a string of text from the original source into the paper without including quotation marks and a page number, and this sentence was matched to its original source. This kind of source use might not have been noticed by the instructor and/or student on a paper version draft, and the student's attention may not have been drawn to this particular sentence if it had not been matched to its original source. Nonetheless, the salience of the color-coded match prompted a discussion between the student and her peer review partner, which helped her realize that this information should either be quoted directly or paraphrased. In this instance, the student opted to paraphrase this color-coded phrase in the following draft, so quotation marks were not necessary. The student also added the in-text citation that was missing.
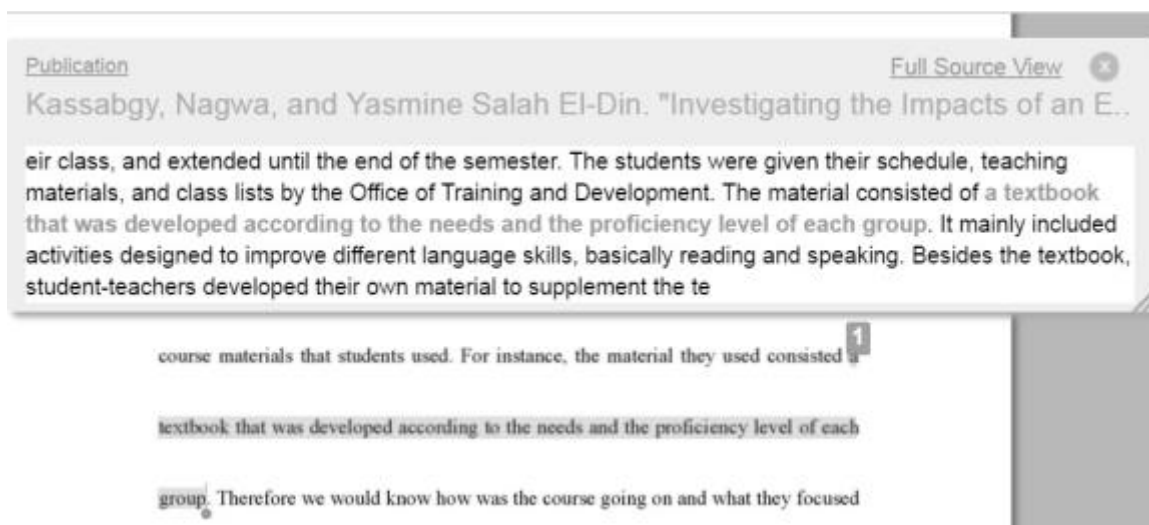
Figure 10. Screenshot of a student's in-text citation that required revision

The originality checking feature of Turnitin can also be useful for drawing students' attention to the accuracy of their paraphrases. In Figure 11, a student had attempted to paraphrase the original source by keeping the structure of the original sentence but substituting synonyms, a common practice that Howard (1993) defines as "patchwriting." According to Howard, patchwriting refers to "copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one-for-one synonym substitutes" (p. 233). The red highlighted text clearly shows which words the student changed. Another point discussed was the student's inadvertent use of an indirect citation. In this case, the student read the Elmelech article, in which the author(s) cited *Palmer* (1983). This match prompted a discussion about the discoursal functions of citations, such as whether to use indirect citations and how they should be cited. After examining and discussing this match with his peer review partner, the student realized that referencing Palmer in his paper would indicate to the reader that he read Palmer himself, which was not the case, and revised the sentence accordingly.
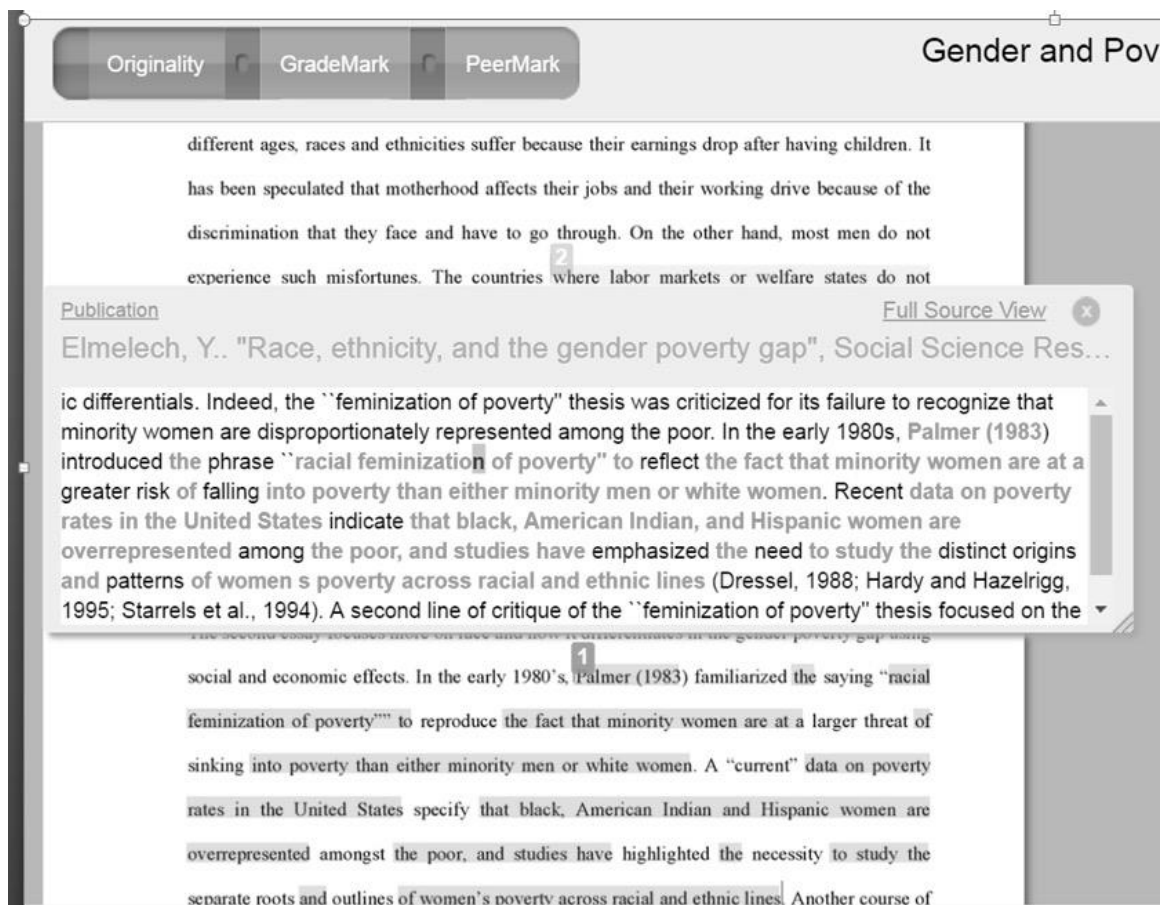
Figure 11. Screenshot of a student's patchwritten text matched to its original source

Figure 12 illustrates another example of a student's attempt at paraphrasing. The student had substituted synonyms for text in the original source that precedes that direct quotation; for instance, the student substituted the phrase *neighborhood characteristics*

have little or no direct impact upon child behavioral problems with a phrase that includes synonyms for words in the original phrase: *neighborhood issues have no direct influences on children's behavioral problems*. The student then directly quoted the rest of the sentence, yet she neither placed quotation marks around the direct quotation nor included a page number. In class, the student and her peer review partner discussed how to revise this match, and the student included the preceding phrase in the direct quotation. The student also realized that one word (*factor*) was missing from her direct quotation and added this word to her subsequent draft.
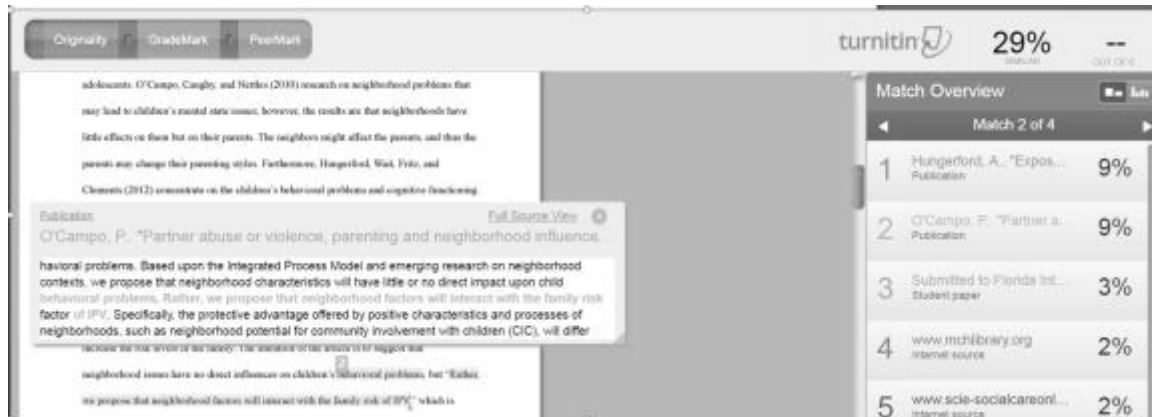
**Figure 12. Attempted student paraphrase matched to original source**

Another benefit of Turnitin is that the originality report can provide information on how much of a student's overall paper includes direct quotations, a finding that has been reported elsewhere (Kostka & Eisenstein Ebsworth, 2014). For instance, in the spring 2015 semester, a paper submitted by a student, Simon (pseudonym), included a large section of red highlighted text that was neither cited nor quoted. In a three-page paper, Simon had 39% matched quotations with little interpretation, 30% of which were matched to one source. He had attempted to cite the source by including the author's name. However, quotation marks were missing and one passage had encompassed six sentences of back-to-back quotes. The in-text citation (*Philip*) was placed at the end of the string of quotations, and the date of publication was missing in the in-text citation. In class, we discussed the match and Simon revised his paper to paraphrase the quoted material. Figure 13 displays Simon's originality report and matched text that was inaccurately quoted.
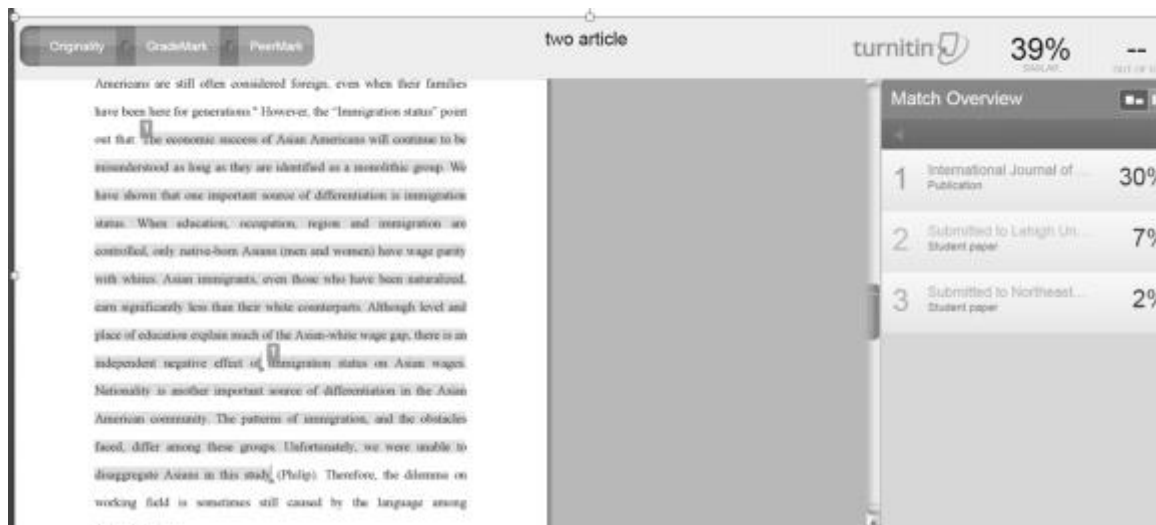
**Figure 13. Example of large portion of unquoted text matched in Turnitin**

Finally, we have found that the program helps students understand that using previously written text in a new assignment can be understood as a form of plagiarism. In the spring 2015 semester, a student named Olivia (pseudonym) submitted two sentences that she had written for a project in the previous semester, both of which centered on a similar topic. When she submitted her paper to Turnitin in the spring, the two sentences she had submitted previously were matched directly to her own paper (Figure 14). However, to her dismay and surprise, Olivia did not know that reusing one's own work without referencing it might be considered "self-plagiarism" by some faculty. We discussed the notion of reusing previously written work, a learning opportunity that would likely have been missed if Olivia had not submitted both papers to Turnitin, as there would have been no other way to know that Olivia had used the same paragraph in a previous class.
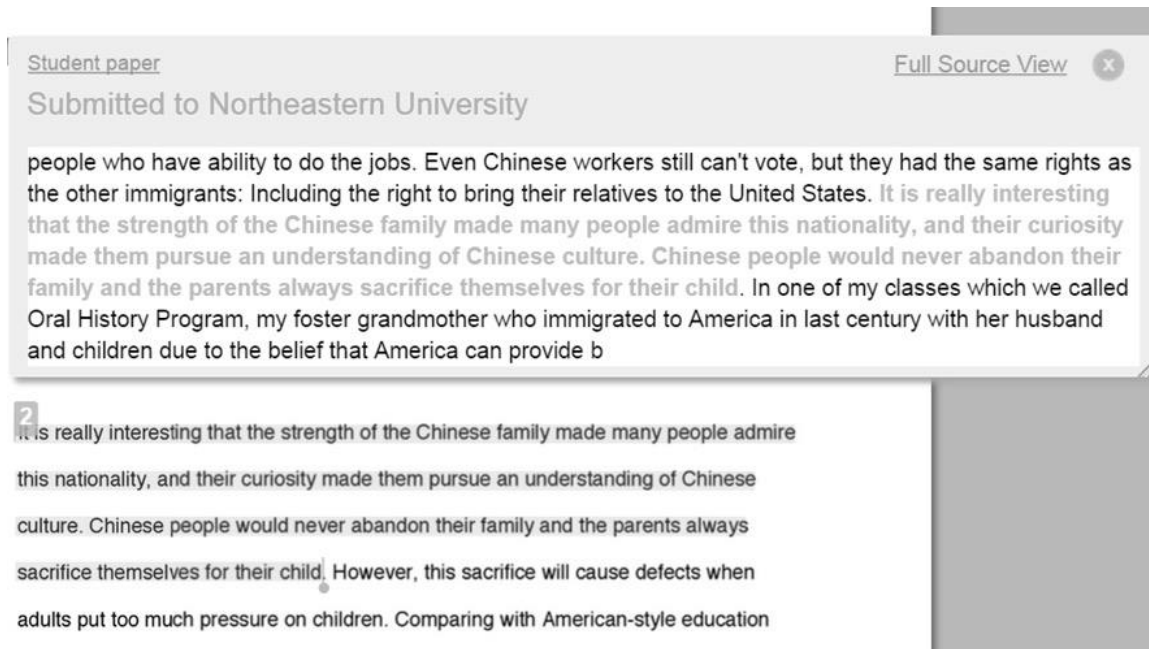
Figure 14. Screenshot of a student's reused text

Limitations of Turnitin

While Turnitin has many advantages, we would like to acknowledge some of the program's limitations. First, some scholars have raised concerns about the program for its violation of students' intellectual property and privacy (Foster, 2002; Purdy, 2005). As Vanacker (2011) pointed out, students have to submit their papers to Turnitin's repository, often without being able to decline to do so, and secondly, plagiarism detection software diminishes trust between instructors and students. While students do have to submit their papers to Turnitin, teachers have the option of having students' papers not be submitted and retained in the Turnitin repository. Because of this option, GradeMark and the originality checking features can still be used in the ways in which we have described above, without requiring students to keep their papers in the repository. Figure 15 displays the optional setting for removing students' submitted papers from the Turnitin repository.
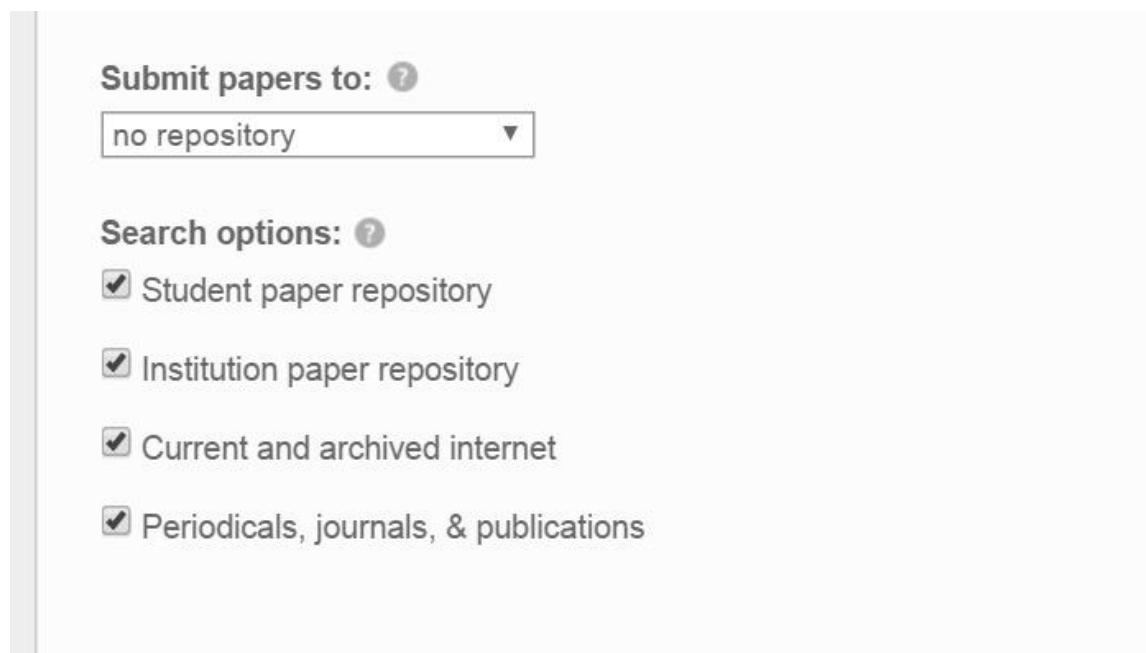
Figure 15. Preventing submission of students' papers to the Turnitin repository

In addition, others have noted that Turnitin may detect "false positives," which refers to text that was matched but not actually plagiarism, and "false negatives," which refers to text that should have been matched to its original source but was not (Betts, Bostock, Elder, & Trueman, 2012). We indeed recognize that Turnitin does not detect "plagiarism." The program matches electronic text to other electronic texts, and instructors are the ones who must make decisions about the accuracy of students sources and evaluate these matches. In small groups, students also have the opportunity to evaluate their own matches and help their peers evaluate matched text. For this reason, it is critically important for instructors and students to look through originality reports carefully and examine each particular instance of matched text.

We have also found some limitations to GradeMark. For instance, using QuickMarks on selected text makes it clear what the comments refer to in the text; however, when a QM is assigned to a selected word, phrase, or sentence, the borders of the selection cannot be changed. If the wrong sentence is selected, the comment needs to be deleted and placed again. In addition, editing QM comments and sets applies new changes to the instructor's account, which may result in a growing universal set of comments that can apply to a variety of courses. The longer a set is, the more time it will take to find a comment. If an instructor teaches substantially different courses or courses that involve different types of assignments, we suggest creating different sets of QM comments for each course. Additionally, as mentioned previously, the voice comment in Turnitin is limited to a three-minute recording and the audio file cannot be edited before the audio recording is saved as a voice comment. The voice comments can only be recorded in the *General Comments* section, and cannot be placed into the text the same way as QMs. Finally, the Rubric tool in Turnitin is useful and easy to use, yet changes to the score descriptions can

only be made in the setup menu. The grading form lacks the option of assigning a minimum and maximum value for each criterion.

Conclusion

As we hope to have illustrated, we feel that Turnitin can be used to support academic writing instruction in a variety of ways, and we strongly advocate that the program be used non-punitively. Given the varying tools available in Turnitin, we suggest that instructors think carefully about how they can leverage the tools we have described to provide feedback according to the course, the assignment, and students. We also suggest that instructors take the time to familiarize themselves with the program and increase transparency by openly discussing the program with students and establishing trust. We are hopeful that work will continue in this area, and that instructors who are expected to use Turnitin will feel encouraged to experiment with the many features the program offers for providing feedback on students' academic writing.

Acknowledgements

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