

Is Plagiarism a Culture Product: The Voice of a Chinese-Speaking ELL Student

I-Chia Chou

Wenzao Ursuline College of Languages

Abstract

The problem of plagiarism in ELL students cannot be simply viewed as stealing or being lazy. Coming from a Chinese background, the author explained how the concepts of "good writing" in different cultures interact with an ELL student's writing experience in plagiarizing. The author discussed the differences mainly through two concepts: originality and memorization. In Chinese culture, it is appropriate to present exactly what others have said. Being able to cite and memorize famous quotes indicates a Chinese writer's literacy components. However, those perspectives cannot be considered acceptable in a Western perspective. Moreover, many Chinese students learn to write via imitating good models. This practice becomes especially important when Chinese writers start to compose in English. Because of the different rhetoric styles between Chinese and English, many Chinese writers learn how to write English compositions through following the styles, organizations and conventions of good articles. Plagiarizing, in this sense, becomes a "patchwriting"-- a development stage through which novice writers learn to write in a new discourse. It lacks the element of intentional deception, and it is not a terminal stage. Patchwriting, hence, gives novice writers necessary support to develop their competence in academic writing. Understanding cross-culture differences concerning what counts as good writing can help teachers understand which aspects of plagiarism Chinese students need to be made aware of as well as provide support to guide EFL students enter the Western academic discourse.

Key words: plagiarism, ELL (English Language Learning) students, cultural differences, contrastive rhetoric, second language writing

Introduction

"Unable to recognize plagiarism!" Have teachers ever heard this excuse from international English language learning (ELL) students? Maybe it is not simply an excuse. Scholars examining plagiarism have noted how cultural differences impact ELL students' plagiarism behaviours. However, there still lacks of voice from ELL students themselves. In this article, I will discuss the ways in which varying cultural values concerning writing can shape the writers' perspectives of plagiarism in their own particular culture. Then I will move on to discuss how this culturally bounded plagiarism perspective affects students' writing in a second language; here focused on English. It is necessary to note that this paper is from my personal experience and reflection. Teachers and educational practitioners cannot generalize this opinion to other students and cultures.

The Concept of Plagiarism as a Product of Western Culture

Plagiarism is a relatively recent development in Western culture. According to Pennycook (1996), the concept of plagiarism stems from the development of view concerning textual ownership. Before the seventeenth century, imagination was treated as a reproductive rather than a productive activity. The production of wholly new written texts was considered a function of divine inspiration. In the 17th and 18th centuries, coincident with the rise of individualization, the concept of literary plagiarism started to emerge. Authorship of individual works of literatures was viewed as an individual act of creativity. Intellectual property was gradually included in the laws of many Western countries to protect "the concept of an originating author, an actual body that gave to words" (Willinsky, cited in Pennycook, p.205). Because originality is highly valued and protected in Western countries, plagiarism is treated as a serious moral issue in these societies.

However, this newly developed Western view of plagiarism may be oversimplified. It treats plagiarism ideologically; that is, “it unjustly elevates a Western concept to the status of norm and privileges a concept of the person established within the European Enlightenment” (Scollon, 1995, p.3). Pennycock (1996) critiqued the traditional view as failing to acknowledge practices outside the norm or to accord validity to other, different understandings of text, or different philosophies of memorization and learning. In this sense, plagiarism should be viewed as a complex issue, embedded in social, cultural and political contexts. A number of researchers have lent support to this notion by investigating the conception of plagiarism held by students with different cultural backgrounds.

Western vs. Eastern: cultural values of good writing

It (plagiarism) articulates nothing but a normative view on so-called standards, does nothing to challenge the ways in which academic systems operate, and fails to take into account any of the complexities that our students may bring in terms of their own relationship to texts and memory. I am suggesting, therefore, that many of the ways we approach supposed plagiarism are pedagogically unsound and intellectually arrogant. (Pennycock, 1996 p. 227)

As discussed above, plagiarism is basically a Western concept. When an English language learning (ELL) student comes to an American university, she may not have a full understanding of the writing conventions present in American academia. Most of these students bring their first language writing experience into the second language classroom. However, different cultural values concerning good writing practices can have significant impact on the writers' conception of plagiarism. In the following, I will focus on two cultural concepts regarding good writing practices and discuss how these conceptions can impact people's perspectives of plagiarism

Originality

In Western cultures, originality is highly valued. Therefore, violating intellectual property is considered improper and in fact often criminalized. Writers in Western culture are encouraged at all times to express their original voice. Violating this concept of originality can lead to school sanctions and other official or unofficial reprimands. However, is it fair to impose this cultural value on students of other cultures in which plagiarism is viewed differently? I believe that this may in many circumstances be unfair. Before the development and eventual dominance of the Western view of conception of plagiarism, the Chinese did not place a great deal of emphasis on originality. There is a Chinese axiom, “天下文章一大抄”. Translated, this means, “all written works are copied from others works.” Regarding writing essays in an exam, students are encouraged to memorize what famous philosophers or scholars have said and cite them directly in the compositions. This concept of writing has been prevalent in Chinese culture for centuries. Erudition in a written work is often considered merely a function of the quality of the citations and references. For academic research papers in the Chinese sphere, especially in educational fields, secondary research and literature review are one of the most popular styles. In my opinion, this prevalence reflects a belief that such styles are in fact the most beneficial to the reader. Researchers try to impress the reader by emphasizing the quantity of reading they have done. Trying to write “original” ideas is not especially emphasized. Moreover, when these writers quote sentences or ideas, this in fact reflects a level of respect for those who originally crafted the ideas. Therefore, in order to propagate and emphasize these respected thinkers, paraphrasing is encouraged.

Chinese writers see originality in a quite different light than Western writers. Chinese writers believe that it is appropriate for a paper to present exactly what others have said. However, this practice would not be considered acceptable in Western culture. Hence, it is not hard to imagine the challenges and problems Chinese students may face because of this different viewpoint when they come to the U.S. Many Chinese students are accused of plagiarism by their Western-minded teachers. Some teachers believe that this behaviour exists because the students are lazy and do not want to write their own work. Some teachers believe that it stems from the students' lack of knowledge of plagiarism. In my opinion, however, in many instances neither of these reasons may be the case. Using Connor's (1996) contrastive rhetoric point of view, this behaviour may simply reflect cross-culture differences concerning what counts as good writing.

Memorization

Memorizing good models is highly valued in Chinese culture. From their youth, children have to memorize the Three-word Scripture (San Zi Jing) and Tang poetry. Throughout their years in school, students are compelled to memorize many articles and passages in their textbooks. When Chinese learn English, they need to memorize many phrases, proverbs and texts. What is the purpose of memorizing these models? Students can imitate the writing style, the sentence structure and the vocabulary used in the models. In addition, students can use the phrases, sentences or ideas appearing in those models in their compositions. In contrast, memorization is rarely valued in Western educational systems. If a Chinese student writes some well-known sentences or ideas from his memorization without acknowledging the source, the student will be accused of plagiarizing. This is a dilemma for many Chinese ELL learners. Since Chinese students have memorized models throughout their academic careers, the students often forget the source of the statements. Thus, the students are in fact penalized for their skill at memorization.

In short, it is not the case that second language writers fail to appreciate the concept of plagiarism. However, because of different cultural values, these students may not be aware of what is appropriate or inappropriate with respect to the use of sources. Moreover, the students may not be fully aware that unattributed copying is not appropriate in Western culture.

Plagiarizing as a learning strategy

Copying, for example, might prove a useful early step in the composing process, a way for them (second language learners) to develop a felt sense of written English... a vehicle for learning the language and conventions they are attempting to appropriate (Currie, 1998, p. 14).

In this paper I have discussed two areas in which cultural values can have an impact on the concept of plagiarism. For these and other reasons, it is unreasonable and unfair to always view plagiarism as an act induced by malicious intent and to accuse an ESL learner without understanding their cultural values. In most of the cases, ELL students do not intend to plagiarize or to deceive. They instead intend to imitate good models in order to write a good composition. As Pennycook (1996) has observed, while ELL students are often aware of the issues of textual borrowing, they are frequently unsure about the rules governing plagiarism and how to avoid it. In such cases, copying reflect less an intentional violation of a cultural code than a survival measure in the face of perceived difficulties or deficiencies. In this sense, plagiarizing can be viewed as a learning strategy or even a survival skill.

For novice ELL writers, they are not yet equipped to write autonomously in a new discourse. Therefore, copying may help novice writers develop language as well as academic skills. When I was learning to write in the academic field, professors often used phrases such as, "say it in your own words." However, from a second language learner's perspective, it was often difficult for me to say things in my own words. First, the sentences in the books I read were sophisticated and concise. They were well written. How was I able to restate these ideas in my own words given my limited English proficiency? Second, no matter how hard I tried, the sentences I read would remain in my mind. Whenever I tried to paraphrase them or express a similar idea in my own papers, equivalent sentence structures or vocabulary usages would appear in my sentences. Third, I did not believe that if my sentences closely mirrored sentences from the written source, this reflected a lack of creativity or originality in my composition. In my opinion, my creativity and originality were expressed through reorganizing the article I had read using my own way of thinking. Using a few sentences from the article was beneficial to increase the cohesion in my paragraphs. Finally, I did not believe that I was plagiarizing as long as I did not publish my paper. I feel that this copying and paraphrasing helped me to greatly improve my language and academic skills. Imitating good models helped me to understand writing conventions in American culture, learn the elements of good text structure, how to use transition words, how to condense sentences and how to make paragraphs coherent. I learned not only to use more sophisticated vocabulary but also to more formally and coherently construct academic papers.

From my own experience as a second language writer, I do not think that plagiarism is simply stealing. When people steal, they have malicious intentions and want to have the stolen object belong to them. In many cases, second language writers are instead involved in textual plagiarism; that is, language and ideas repeated from a source without sufficient attribution. However, they generally lack a standard feature of prototypical cases of plagiarism: the intention to deceive (Pecorari, 2003, p. 318). In other words, second language writers plagiarize without intending to violate academic conventions.

Instead, they exhibit this behaviour in order to write a better paper. Moreover, when a writer “borrows” (Pennycok, 1996) others’ words, sentences or ideas, this does not mean that the writer claims that they have ownership of those words, sentences or ideas. According to my understanding, only after one publishes does a writer have the ownership or authorship of that piece of work. For the majority of students, however, the intent is not to publish. All these students want is to adapt to a new discourse and culture and to write adequate papers in academia. Therefore, to view plagiarism as simply stealing without considering the individual needs and intentions of students exhibits a biased and presumptuous Western point of view.

Since plagiarism can be viewed as a learning strategy, does that mean there is such a thing as “positive plagiarism?” As I have discussed in the previous paragraphs, appropriate amounts of copying or borrowing may be viewed as necessary for a novice second language writer. Some scholars use the term textual plagiarism to indicate a plagiarizing situation, which is caused not by the intention to deceive but by writers’ need for further growth. However, I prefer to use the term “patchwriting” instead of “positive plagiarism” or “textual plagiarism.” Because the definition of plagiarism is still blurred, I do not want to add more complexity using other adjectives or unclear terms. The term “patchwriting” is presented by Howard (1995). Similar to the idea of textual plagiarism, patchwriting is a development stage through which novice writers learn to write in a new discourse. It lacks the element of intentional deception, and it is not a terminal stage. Patchwriting gives novice writers necessary support to develop their competence in academic writing. In my opinion, the term “patchwriting” provides a more appropriate description of a necessary learning path for novice writers than the term “positive plagiarism.”

Conclusion and Implication

Plagiarism is a complex issue. In this paper, I discussed plagiarism from several angles and conceptions. First, cultural differences play an essential role in the conception of plagiarism. Second language writers may assume that behaviour, which is appropriate in their home country, is appropriate in all contexts. Therefore, they may be unaware of different standards governing the use of sources. Understanding the perspective of second language writers’ concerning plagiarism can help teachers understand which aspects of plagiarism students need to be made aware of. In my opinion, teachers should treat plagiarism as a writing convention and teach it explicitly. Second language writers need to be informed about the dangers of plagiarizing--the possibility of reprimands, course failure, and even expulsion. Teachers, on the other hand, should support novice writers as they learn to write in a new language and discourse, and help the students develop some skills necessary for acceptable compositions. Second, I argued that plagiarism cannot be viewed merely as an ethical issue. What is often thought of as plagiarism may provide necessary support and enable second language writers to adjust to a Western academic discourse. As expressed by Pennycok (p. 227), “all language learning is to some extent a process of borrowing others’ words and we need to be flexible, not dogmatic, about where we draw boundaries between acceptable or unacceptable textual borrowings”. I strongly believe that understanding cultural values and the process of language learning can help teachers to be more flexible and sympathetic when dealing with issues of plagiarism.

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