

ON PLAGIARISM AND CHINESE ESL /EFL LEARNERS : NEGOTIATING ACADEMIC WRITING IN THE WESTERN CONTEXT

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Abstract

After doing background research about plagiarism ,the author was shocked by the fact that quite a lot of Chinese learners in their second language academic writing have been involved into the issue of “transgressive ” or “ nontransgressive intertextuality ” (Chandrasoma , Thompson & Pennycook 2004). In addition , many Western scholars use Asian students ,especially Chinese students as the examples in their study of plagiarism . By doing a questionnaire and some interviews ,the writer intends to give an analysis of the high occurrence of plagiarism in academic writing among Chinese university students ,with the focus on Chinese EFL /ESL learners ;causes of and attitudes on plagiarism ,and possible solutions to plagiarism in academic writing .

Key words

academic writing ;plagiarism ;Western context ;citation convention

1 . Background

In order to know the attitudes of Chinese university students towards plagiarism ,I did a questionnaire ,which was composed of 10 questions concerning plagiarism in academic writing (see Appendix 1). The subjects were 60 Chinese non -English -major graduates and 36 English -major undergraduates who are both now studying in a northern Chinese university . The results (see Appendix 2) show that Chinese students do not pay much attention to the issue of plagiarism . Most of them ,including graduates and undergraduates ,have been involved in the plagiarizing behaviors ,though with different reasons ,like low writing abilities and being unfamiliar with proper citation . They regard that Chinese English teachers emphasize more the importance of smooth writing without gram matical mistakes than the importance of creativity in writing ,while Western teachers do otherwise . Since these students do not treat plagiarism in writing as a serious problem ,it is no wonder that most of them choose “rewrite ” ,“low marks ” and even “ pass ” ,instead of “ fail ” in Question 5 about the punishment towards the plagiarists . This questionnaire and its analyses can partially explain the reason why many Chinese students studying in the Western countries are accused by their Western academic advisors of being involved into the issue of “transgressive ” or “ nontransgressive intertextuality ” (Chandrasoma ,Thimpson & Pennycook 2004). This paper intends to give an analysis of the high occurrence of plagiarism in academic writing among Chinese university students ,with the focus on Chinese EFL /ESL learners ;causes of and attitudes on plagiarism ,and possible solutions to plagiarism in academic writing .

2 . Literature review

2 .1 Definitions

The literature review shows that there are a variety of definitions on plagiarism ,which can be ranged chronologically from being regarded as a continuum from sloppy paraphrasing to verbatim transcription

with no crediting of sources (Hawley 1984 :35) ,as a complex issue ,embedded in social ,cultural and political matrix (Scollon 1995) ,as an unacknowledged exploitation of another writer's words or ideas ,or both (Yamada 2003 :250) ,to being presented as kidnapping the words of others ,as a child is kidnapped from a parent ,which sees the legal birth of ownership of authorial rights over literary work and with it ,the notion of plagiarism (Smith 2005 :84). The multifaceted definitions given on plagiarism are accompanied by various attitudes towards it and reasons attributed to it .

2.2 Attitudes

Some scholars regard that plagiarism is a serious misconduct and plagiarists deserve severe punishment . For example ,Kolich (1983) views plagiarism as “the worm of reason ” and contends that plagiarism is morally reprehensible and all students caught plagiarizing deserve to fail (pp . 141-145). Loveless (1994 :510) claims that academic plagiarism is “the cardinal sin of academe ” and argues that transgressors should be “dealt with harshly ”. Larid (2001 :56) goes further to consider plagiarism as an “academic felony ” and to keep “rhetorical fingerprints ” of her students writing for comparison so as to minimize the chances of plagiarism .

On the other hand , many other teachers and researchers express their different understandings towards and tolerance on the issue of plagiarism . Matalene (1985 :790) ,for instance , maintains that Chinese students plagiarize because of their Confucian traditions ,which emphasize the memorization of a canon of texts . She further calls for an understanding and appreciation of rhetorical systems that are different from the West . Myers (1998) also contends that traditional Western notions of plagiarism “splinter on close examination . . . and a new order is needed ”. This order is inclusive of the writing traditions of non -Western backgrounds (p .13). Currie (1998 :15) ,based on her case study of a subject named Diana ,a Chinese girl ,regards that Diana copied not with the intent to violate Western cultural norms ,but rather with the intent to learn and to pass the course . Chandrasoma ,Thompson &Pennycook (2004) claim that it is unlikely to succeed to deal with plagiarism with the focus on policing rather than understanding . They suggest discussing the issue of plagiarism within its context :the level and background of the accused student ,the nature of the assignment ,the attitude of the lecturer ,and the nature of the discipline (pp . 188-89).

While the aforementioned scholars and researchers in the second part show their positive perceptions of the issue of plagiarism by emphasizing the relationship between this issue and the cultural differences in writing traditions and the context where it occurs ,the following exposure of and views on plagiarism are thought provoking .

Mallon (1989) debunks the hypocrisy of the term plagiarism by raising a report from the New York Times which was about the accusation from Stanford University (SU) on the University of Oregon that the latter plagiarized SU teaching assistants handbook section on plagiarism . Keyes (1992) reports research by Robert Newcomb revealing that many aphorisms generally attributed to Benjamin Franklin were in fact lifted from other sources ,virtually word for word . Actually Franklin himself acknowledged that by asking “ Why should I give my readers bad lines of my own when good ones of other people's are so plenty ?”(Cited in Keyes 1992 :31). Pacitti reviews the prevalence of cases of plagiarism in Italy amongst academics and authors . One former rector of a Naples university had resigned following a finding that five of his seven major published works were simply German texts translated into Italian . “ Rather than indignation ,the popular reaction was surprise that a man in his position of power had allowed himself to be caught ”(1997 ¶). Pennycook (1996 :212) also points out that the studies of literary plagiarism reveal a long list of accused prestigious plagiarists ,including Laurence Sterne ,Samuel Coleridge ,Thomas De Quincey ,Edgar Allen Poe ,Norman Mailer ,Alex Hailey ,Dee Brown ,Martin Luther King ,Gail Sheehy ,Helen Keller ,and many more . These studies and people's attitudes towards the issue of plagiarism reflected from these studies reveal that the issue of plagiarism is a universal concept and the exploration of its causes should be done from multi-layered aspects ,as Pennycook (1996 :225-26) claims that there are “ many complex things going on behind the surface phenomenon of apparent plagiarism ”.

2.3 Reasons

The literature review also shows that many studies done by the Western scholars on the issue of

plagiarism use Chinese learners as examples of plagiarists for analyses. It seems that the issue of plagiarism, especially when it is discussed within the context of cultural studies, is closely connected with Chinese learners. However, my aforementioned studies on plagiarism and especially the exposure of the cases of some prestigious figures in the Anglophone world who are involved in the issue of plagiarism, together with other studies on plagiarism's high occurrence in other countries (Miller 1990; Pecorari 2002, more are omitted for the limited space) unanimously disregard that Chinese learners are the major plagiarists. A close examination on the reasons put forward in the descriptions of ESL students accused of plagiarism (the focus being on Chinese learners, but with occasional examples from other cultures) can add our understanding towards the issue of plagiarism and contribute to our further study on the controversial issue.

2.3.1 Cultural conditioning

Fox (1994) points out that while for American students plagiarism is a violation of accepted cultural norms, for ESL students plagiarism may be a product of their own cultural norms. Scollon (1995: 5) also regards that "communication—including issues involving plagiarism—is a cultural model which can be located in terms of a particular historical moment and a particular cultural group". Bloch & Chi agree that cultural traditions shape preferred writing styles. "Research suggests that Chinese and Western academic texts differ in their use and expectations of citations of source materials" (1995: 271). Pecorari (2002) claims that Chinese academic norms are the result in part of a long tradition of reproducing Confucian teachings in civil service exams. The philosopher's words were known by and belonged to everyone, and being able to reproduce them, without citation, was considered an appropriate, even laudable strategy (p. 280). In fact, from the aforementioned second part on people's attitudes towards plagiarism, the examples in which plagiarism is attributed to cultural conditioning could be found easily.

However, some other scholars don't agree with the view on plagiarism being a culture-specific concept at all. Shaw (1991) carried out an in-depth interview study with a sample of 22 non-native graduate students who were at the stage of dissertation writing in science, which showed that non-native graduate students' native languages and cultures did not seem to greatly influence their dissertation writing. Liu (2005), based on his study of Chinese books on composition and his educational experience in China, strongly opposes the claim made by Sowden (2005) that copying others' writing as one's own is allowed, taught and/or encouraged in China. He treats such a notion as a dubious one and argues that the concept of plagiarism as an immoral practice has existed in China for a very long time. Even in ancient China, when documentation of sources was not so systematic and not so detailed, people were required to credit their sources (p. 236). Pecorari also acknowledges in 2003 that cultural issues cannot be the only factor at work in the explanation of plagiarism with the fact that plagiarism occurs among academic writers who have grown up within the Anglophone academic discourse community (p. 319).

2.3.2 Academic pressures

In the 1980s Brownlee has pointed out that the major problem surrounding plagiarism is that students are under time pressures while needing to review literature and formulate their own ideas. Diana, the subject in Currie's study (1998), asserted that copying meant saving time and helped her to achieve her goal (p. 3). The same view was held by the subject named Natalie in the research projects done by Chandrasoma, Thompson & Pennycook (2004). She claimed that she had no time to follow detailed referencing procedures so she "just put all the books in the bibliography and let the lecturer assume himself where it's from" (p. 178).

2.3.3 Lower language abilities and lack of prior knowledge

This factor should be taken into consideration together with the factor of academic pressure. Early in 1990, Campbell pointed out that caught between these two factors, student writers may be unable either to produce a mature, skilled synthesis of the ideas of others, or to attend simultaneously to all the demands of a complex writing task. Deckert's 1993 research showed that the first-year students in Hong Kong had a limited understanding of the reasons why plagiarism was wrong. He concludes that "their past educational experience simply had not exposed them to a Western conception of the broader consequences of misusing source materials" (p. 142).

Bloch & Chi (1995) also believe that second language students are expected to produce high quality research papers in a language they have barely mastered (p. 238). Currie shares their opinions by stating that the disparity between second language writers developing language and academic skills and the level they need to accomplish their task successfully may have created a cognitive overload that left them scrambling to write the assignments (1998: 10). Chandrasoma, Thompson & Pennycook further prove this aspect by analyzing the reasons for the plagiarism of one of their subjects named Hong, a Chinese student, who, according to the researchers, is lack of prior knowledge owing to her relatively short stay in Australia, inadequate disciplinary knowledge, and poor reading habit (2004: 187). While Liu (2005) denies cultural conditioning being a major culprit for Chinese students' plagiarism, he acknowledges that other factors, like the lack of adequate language proficiency, lack of task specific writing skills and the urge to cheat, should be taken into consideration on the issue of plagiarism (p. 238).

2.3.4 Ignorance of proper citation conventions

Hawley (1984: 38) regards that plagiarism may, in fact, come "more from simple ignorance rather than deceit". Pennycook (1996) observes that while students are often aware of the issues of textual borrowing, they are frequently unsure about the rules governing plagiarism and how to avoid it. Currie (1998) agrees with them by taking one of his EAP students as an example, who cannot distinguish between the borrowing of words and the borrowing of ideas and worry that his essay will end up being little more than a string of quotation marks and parentheses (p. 13). Again, in the study done by Chandrasoma, Thompson & Pennycook (2004), the subject named Catherine, another Chinese student pursuing a bachelor's degree in communication at a Sydney university, attributed her omission of the reference to the class textbook to a "common knowledge", which could be shared without acknowledgement (p. 183).

3. Negotiating western academic writing

By exposing the complexity on the definitions of plagiarism, the diversity of the attitudes towards and reasons behind this issue, the literature review aims to explore the ways to bridge the gaps between Western academic requirements and Chinese ESL writers, with the hope that the latter can smoothly and successfully negotiate themselves in the Western academic writing context.

3.1 Empowerment from Western academy

The literature review has shown that plagiarism is a universal issue in the context of not just Asia but also the West. This means that Western academy should have the positive attitude toward this issue, and more understanding of L2 writers whose language abilities and prior academic writing habits could cause difficulties in their adopting proper citation conventions accepted by the Western context, especially at their initial period in the new discipline, the new country. Barks & Watts (2001) describe the challenges L2 writers meet in their academic writing: The cognitive and social demands of graduate level academic writing, especially in source based writing, are considerable. For example, accurate and effective paraphrasing alone requires sophisticated knowledge of English syntax, and extensive vocabulary, and a high level of reading comprehension ability (p. 249). These challenges which ESL graduates in the West meet exist, no less might be more, among ESL undergraduates.

Therefore, it is of utmost for the Western academy not only to realize the problems ESL learners have but also to know how to help them to overcome these obstacles in their academic writing and thus empower ESL writers to have good negotiation with the Western academic writing. Matalene (1985) raised a miscommunication between American businessmen who presented their Chinese hosts with gifts of cheddar cheese and Chinese hosts who generally do not like cheese. She recommends that composition teachers should not be afraid to give foreign students English "cheese", but to make sure to send it out slowly, sympathetically, and fully realizing that it tastes very peculiar in the mouths of those used to a very different culture (p. 789). In a similar vein, on the issue of plagiarism, Currie (1998: 15) calls for a need to work toward making the Western university colleagues aware of the different cultural attitudes toward textual ownership and textual borrowing. Hyland (2001: 376) further stresses that ESL teachers should use their roles as writing experts and cultural informants to empower their students.

However, some scholars hold different views. Take Kolich, A. as an example. Kolich (1983)

strongly declares :“ The act of plagiarism sullies the notions about the sanctity of my relationship to students .”“ One reason why plagiarism is so highly charged an issue for English teachers is that it tests what we believe to be the common virtue of independent ,creative thinking ,which we are determined to share with our students ”(p . 145). The assertions ,I assume ,would scare away almost every plagiarist (including those unintentional ones)and make the latter feel humiliated forever in life . Since Kolich also announces that she is not prepared to know the reasons for students plagiarism but just to catch them and punish them ,it seems quite clear what is waiting for those accused students . While Kolich enjoys acting as a “law protector ” ,I wonder :Can students accused of plagiarism have chances to enjoy the academic writing ?Is it a success or failure for the teaching practice ?

3.2 Improvement from Chinese ESL writers themselves

During my study abroad ,many of my former Chinese colleagues had encountered the experience of being unconsciously involved into plagiarism with their initial academic writing . For example ,I had a female colleague who had published a few articles in the main Chinese journals and been in her PhD program in a famous Chinese university before studying abroad . Since I was in the process of working on the issue of plagiarism ,I had been in the habit of asking people ,professors and students ,about their attitudes towards this issue . She didn't mind sharing her feelings with me . She joked it was an interview . She said she was very unhappy with the comments :the accusation was unfair and the instructor was not taking it seriously to properly instruct students in following the right track for his course requirements . In her opinion ,the instructor was not responsible . Her opinion can get support from Shaw (1991) who points out that plagiarism can result from a mismatch between the educational experience of many commencing students and teachers who may not be making explicit the expectations of learning tasks nor the academic norms that accompany them (p . 201). Angelil-Carter (2000)also regards that researchers and instructors should seriously find means of empowering second language writers to counter realistic problems they face at Anglophone colleges ,which expect them to comply with institutional guidelines on plagiarism . In addition ,Newell ,Garriga & Peterson (2001) contend that by following harsh ,legalistic procedures ,teachers may initiate disciplinary proceedings ending in punishing students who do not really understand their crime .

Despite the frustration ,my Chinese colleague was strong enough to encourage and empower herself . She determined to do better in the future assignments of this course ,especially in other courses ,from which actually so far she has got good comments and satisfactory grades . This is one way of adapting to the new rhetoric approach ,that is ,empowering oneself towards the negotiation with the Western academic writing ,which has been adopted by many Chinese ESL writers . At the same time ,suitable strategies in the Western writing context recommended by scholars are abundant in the literature ,e. g. , adopting the value of individualism and creating a new English self (Shen 1989 :46) ,adding new patterns to their intellectual repertoire and producing the kind of speech appropriate to the immediate environment ,like using phrases “ This raises several questions ... ” ;“ The results of this are ... ” ;“ My third point concerns ... ” ,etc .(Sherman 1992 :197) ,and using the effective paraphrasing to express the writer's ingenuity (Yamada 2003 :252).

3.3 Development from Chinese EFL teaching

It is of vital importance to improve the quality of Chinese EFL teaching so that Chinese EFL learners could enhance their academic writing abilities . Only the proper academic teaching in Chinese EFL context is emphasized and guaranteed can the Chinese ESL students be reduced the initial stress and frustration in their new Western educational environment and be smoothly and quickly adapted to the Western academic writing which is a challenge even to the native new university students .

Pennycook recounted his teaching experience in China . One time ,he assigned his students to write a biographical sketch ,and one student produced a text on Abraham Lincoln which seemed unusually fluent . When Pennycook asked the student about it ,the student reported feeling “ rather fortunate that the teacher asked them to write something which he already knew . Sitting in his head was a brief biography of Abraham Lincoln ,and he was quite happy to produce it on demand ”(Pennycook 1996 :202). Coincidentally ,I have the same experience . Once I gave my non-English-major PhD students the topic A Person I Admire Most to work on for their Composition Course examination . To my surprise ,when I

marked their writings ,I found 90 percent of students chose the same title My Mother and wrote the identical articles with the same examples to support their views by using the same sentences . Similar to the student of Pennycook who did not attempt to conceal that he was not the original author of the Lincoln biography , my students did not deny that they used the article they memorized from an English book . At that time ,I just laughed with them and joked ,“ whose mother is it ?Yours or his /hers ?” Still I gave them high marks for their good memorization based on my requirements on their writing :clear expressions and as few as possible gram matical ,spelling mistakes . Now when I think of that experience ,if my students who directly copied the article they read and used it as their own are regarded as plagiarists ,I have to ask myself “ whose fault is it ?Teachers or students ?”

I agree with Liu (2005) that the issue of plagiarism should not be treated as a culture specific but a universal concept since it happens among both non native students and native students . At the same time , I wholly support the view raised by Bloch (2001) that Chinese examination system plays a negative role in Chinese students effective academic writing and is one reason for their plagiarism . Furthermore ,I regard EFL examination system in China is the major culprit for Chinese EFL /ESL students inefficient writing abilities and involvement into plagiarism . Chinese EFL teachers have to teach students examination writing with the simulations of the writing section of the CET (College English Test ,a standardized English test required for Chinese EFL university students to take). The students revisions and the teachers feedback are mainly ,or only ,concerned about gram matical and lexical errors rather than exploring and discovering meaning . Though I enjoyed reading articles written by my intellectually and intelligently mature Ph . D students who freely and uniquely expressed their ideas on certain topics ,I used to remind them that their gram matical and spelling mistake free essays would earn them higher marks than their thoughts could . My guidance actually restricted their independent and ingenious writing abilities and as a result they wrote the identical articles on the topic My Mother . However ,I am no exception at all . My personal experience in EFL teaching in China could be used as an example to reflect most ,if not all ,of English writing teaching practice in China ,since my Ph . D students possess comparatively higher English proficiency than average Chinese EFL university students who ,based on the literature review ,are generally found being dependant more on imitation and less efficient in independent academic writing skills (Matalene 1985 ;Deckert 1993 ;Pennycook 1996 ;Liu 2005). The limited space does not allow me to elaborate on the specific methods adopted in the enhancement of Chinese EFL writing practice ,but the problems Chinese EFL learners have in their academic writing and the resultant measures taken in dealing with these problems deserve much consideration and exploration from Chinese EFL teachers and researchers ,who accordingly might rely on the help and cooperation from Chinese EFL examination system designers .

4 . Further research

In studying the issue of plagiarism and Chinese learners ,I have read about 50 related articles . One point arouses my attention . In almost any researching field in Linguistics concerning Chinese learners , e. g. fields on Second language acquisition among Chinese learners , Chinese EFL teaching , Chinese ethnic language maintenance or Chinese NNS professionals in ELT ,etc ,usually lots of Chinese scholars and researchers in the West can be found to explore these issues from aspects of theory ,research and practice and publish related papers in the Western journals . I have been often wondering how the Chinese professionals in the West perceive the issue of plagiarism based on their experience of studying ,doing researches and writing articles in the Western academy . Have they ever been accused of plagiarism and if so ,how did they survive it and empower ,appropriate themselves into the challenging new world ?I believe that their personal and first hand experiences would be of interest and value to Chinese EFL /ESL learners and provide implications to EFL /ESL writing teaching practice .

However ,to my disappointment ,among the publications I have referred to (my literature review covers articles in the 1980s ,1990s and 2000s) ,only one was written by a Chinese scholar (i. e. Liu 2005) ,while all the others were written by the Western scholars . Even the article of Liu (2005) seems to be more like a response paper to that of Sowden (2005) than a paper totally prepared for the exploration of the issue of plagiarism . Thus ,a question surfaces :Chinese professionals in the West have done a great deal of study on other topics relating to Chinese learners ,why are publications concerning the issue of plagiarism written by Chinese scholars so few ?Based on my literature review on plagiarism and Chinese

learners and informal interviews with many Chinese colleagues ,I do believe ,with some reservation ,not few Chinese scholars and researchers have encountered the experience of being involved into the issue of plagiarism in their initial academic writing in the Western context ,since many of them admitted in their autobiographical essays (e. g. Shen 1989 ;Li 1999 ;Liu 2001)that they have experienced many puzzles ,difficulties and challenges in their initially negotiating the Western academic writing . Then does the absence of Chinese scholars in the West doing researches in the field of plagiarism imply that this issue is unworthy of discussion since it is too obvious to deserve exploration ?Or does it imply that this issue ,to Chinese professionals who have grown up in the traditional Confucian society ,is too sensitive to be exposed ,just like a kind of Pandora's Box ?

These unanswered questions suggest future endeavors from teachers ,scholars and researchers in the West and China ,especially from Chinese professionals ,whose interests on and exploration of the issue of plagiarism and Chinese learners ,coupled with their knowledge and understanding of Chinese culture and Chinese learners ,would definitely add much vigor and possibly provide new findings to this much-addressed issue by the Western scholars . This would also accordingly contribute to both the ESL and EFL academic writing teaching practice in the West and in China .

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Appendix 1 Questionnaire

There are ten questions concerning plagiarism and writing in the Western context . Please read them carefully and write down your thoughts as fully ,truly and freely as possible .

- 1 . Do you regard the plagiarism in writing as a serious misconduct ?
A . not serious B . very serious
- 2 . Have you ever involved in plagiarism in writing before ?
A . yes B . no C . quite few
- 3 . You plagiarized because of ...
A . intentional behavior ,since you had no idea in writing .
B . unintentional behavior ,since you were not familiar with the proper citation .
- 4 . What kinds of articles ,in your opinion ,would often drive you to plagiarize ?
A . Chinese articles B . English articles
- 5 . How should the plagiarizing students be punished ,according to you ?
A . fail B . rewrite C . low marks D . pass
- 6 . Do you think whether plagiarism has some relationship with Chinese traditional education ?
A . a great deal of relationship
B . no relationship ,just personal behavior
C . certain relationship ,but more personal behavior .
- 7 . Have your English teachers emphasized " Originality in writing "in classrooms ?
A . yes B . no
- 8 . Which do you think Chinese English teachers pay more attention to in evaluating your articles :
creativity or smooth writing ,no mistakes in spelling and grammar ?

- A . creativity B .smooth writing ,no mistakes in spelling and gram mar
- 9 . How do you think Western teachers evaluate your articles ?
- A . paying more attention to creativity and uniqueness .
- B . paying more attention to beautifullanguage ,correct gram mar .
- 10 . Are there many plagiarizing behaviors among your classmates ?
- A . many B . not many

Appendix 2

Results showing the numbers of students choosing particular answers in the 10 questions

Students No .	Non -English -major graduates (60)				English -major undergraduates (36)			
	a	b	c	d	a	b	c	d
1	36	24			26	10		
2	49	10	1		23	13		
3	36	24			15	21		
4	32	28			21	15		
5	4	16	27	13	3	13	12	8
6	26	8	26		6	10	20	
7	25	35			15	21		
8	4	56			3	33		
9	47	13			28	8		
10	56	4			32	4		

(...continued from p .119)

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