

Is Plagiarism and its Understanding a Cultural Phenomenon? – A Literature Review

Introduction

A topic of conversation which arises among librarians and academic faculty is that of plagiarism and ethical use of information, and some portion of the conversation can be around English as a second language students and their perceived or assumed higher incidence of plagiarism in written assignments. This assumption has been repeated so often that many faculty and librarians just assume it is true. The intent of this literature review is to find what studies have been done and what information has been published on the topic of plagiarism in the academic setting, and particularly the role of English as a Second Language (ESL) students in these studies, with a hope of finding a consensus on the question positing that ESL learners are more likely to plagiarize and if so, what are the possible reasons why.

The assumptions made by faculty are often based on anecdotal evidence from colleagues, minimal knowledge of the cultures various ESL learners come from and a lack of understanding the socially situated nature of writing (Evans & Youmans, 2000). Seemingly logical presentations about Confucian heritage cultures like those by Lund (2004) and Sowden (2005), their own previous experience with ESL students and the student's failure to perform as the faculty member expected (Kumaravadivelu, 2003), all influence and support the validity of the cultural differences in plagiarism norms and so faculty do not look any further. The reason given for the failure to conform to the assignment guidelines is seen as culture.

An initial discussion of plagiarism, including how it is defined and the history of development around the concept is required to properly situate the conversation about different student groups (domestic/international, native speakers/non-native speakers) being more or less likely to plagiarize. To begin, here is a standard definition of plagiarism.

The unauthorized use or close imitation of the language and thoughts of another author and the representation of them as one's own work (dictionary.com)

This seems quite straight-forward as a definition, and is frequently echoed in documents such as university academic honesty codes. Despite this apparent clarity, there is actually a lack of

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uniformity of definition of plagiarism (Emerson, MacKay, & Rees, 2005; Introna, Hayes, Blair, & Wood, 2003; McDonnell, 2003; McGowan, 2005). The lack of definition comes not from a disagreement on the actual description of the act, but in how rigidly it is applied and in what situations. A lack of clear and consistent treatment and enforcement of discovered issues of plagiarism within a single university or single department, support this lack of clarity of definition (Introna, et al., 2003).

History of Plagiarism

Some knowledge about the history of the concept of plagiarism and the word can go a long way toward helping understand the lack of clarity around the act of plagiarism, even within the western culture. Discussion of Eastern, or at least Chinese, concepts of plagiarism will follow. Currently, issues of plagiarism in the United States frequently get confounded with the legal issues of copyright and the notion of individual ownership of text. The term plagiarist, originally meaning to kidnap and later applied to stealing text, was introduced to the English language in the late 16th century (Shaw, 1982). The concept of plagiarism, from the Latin word *plagiarius*, is first used by Martial, a Roman poet well before its introduction into English (Kolish, 1983). During this same time the liberal borrowing of text and structure from other authors was normal and expected behavior, particularly in the field of literature, and the two notions co-existed in society. The theory at the time was that all writing originated from God and the writer was just the conduit for transmission of the information to other people (Pennycook, 1996; Shaw, 1982). It is not until the late 18th century, during the Enlightenment, and the shift into the modern era when writing begins to be seen as the original work of the author (Pennycook, 1996; Shaw, 1982). Even given the shift in understanding of the nature of writing and the free borrowing of text in the pre-modern times, Shaw states “the act of using the work of another *with an intent to deceive* has been branded as plagiarism” throughout history (Shaw, 1982, p. 327). The same shift to individual ownership of text can be seen in British history, illustrated by the introduction of an intellectual property law in 1710 (Pennycook, 1996).

Conversely the Chinese have no clear laws about intellectual property, and those laws which do exist are ineffectively enforced (Liu, 2005). Liu goes on to point out that while there are few laws regarding intellectual property and plagiarism, it is not an approved practice in

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China. School composition texts are referenced in the article and they decry the practice of plagiarism and the Chinese words for plagiarism are translated and defined. The definition contains clear derogatory meanings (Liu, 2005). A news story in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* highlights a case which gathered significant media attention in China, of a faculty member at Peking University caught plagiarizing from an American textbook is severely reprimanded and demoted as a result of the discovery (Xueqin, 2002). This single story with the resulting disciplinary action emphasizes the assertions made by Liu that plagiarism is not unknown or automatically accepted as a viable way to produce written work, nor is it a strictly Western concept.

Global Nature of Plagiarism

There have been a variety of studies conducted around the specific topic of plagiarism, trying to determine if the historical variation in the laws and their application, along with other cultural differences, lead to the validity of assumptions about student plagiarism. Interestingly some of these studies, and many of the publications read for this review, are from non-American authors and study sites, indicating that the perceived problem is wider than a strictly US or western culture issue. Studies included in this discussion have been conducted in the United Kingdom, Australia and Malaysia (Emerson, et al., 2005; Gururajan & Roberts, 2005; Introna, et al., 2003; McGowan, 2005; Smith, Ghazali, & Minhad, 2007).

The studies conducted included many elements, and much of the findings from them are included below in detailed discussion of why students plagiarize. While these are all small scale studies with a resulting lack of ability to generalize about the larger populations, the findings support each other on some key points. On the larger scale, student understanding of plagiarism was measured to see if the concept being discussed and assumed among faculty is actually due to a lack of education or deliberate cheating on the part of the students. Among the findings from Emerson, *et al*, (2005) is what would appear to be a self-reporting bias about the student's abilities to know what constitutes plagiarism and how to avoid it. In the same study, and verified in a different study, very little difference between native and second language students was found when the concepts of plagiarism were tested (Emerson, et al., 2005; Evans & Youmans,

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2000). Both groups showed a strong understanding of the notion of plagiarism as defined earlier. This would lead one to believe that while the cultural background of the students may be different, their understanding of the act of plagiarism is quite similar. Which raises the question, if their understanding is similar, why is there a faculty perception of higher incidence of plagiarism among ESL students? Xueqin agrees that plagiarism is not a strictly western phenomenon, and that it is a problem in Asia as well (Xueqin, 2002) and as seen in the US, there is an uneven response to acts of plagiarism and differing levels of punishment for the offending author. Gurarajan (2005) found that domestic Australian students will plagiarize, but they are not as likely to justify their acts as the international students. So it can be seen that this is truly a global problem.

With this seeming preponderance of information stating that the concepts of plagiarism are global, where does the concept of ESL students, and particularly ones from Asian cultures, being more likely to plagiarize come from? The basic assumption is that the plagiarism is unintentional and the students are not trying to deceive the professor, but that the actions are a natural extension of Confucian influenced societies (Introna, et al., 2003; Lund, 2004; Sowden, 2005). Those cultural attributes are outlined as a reverence for text and its author, rote learning with its assumed lack of critical thinking as a result and an unfamiliarity with documentation standards (Lund, 2004). The western notion of obedience to authority is problematized by Kumaravadivelu, who sites instances of student behavior problems observed in Chinese classrooms very much like those seen in US classrooms (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Much of the western perception of Asian student obedience to authority likely stems from a behavioral observation of ESL students being especially quiet in class and not participating and sharing ideas. In reality that quiet behavior may have nothing to do with a cultural obedience to authority as much as a lack of comfort with spoken English and thus a choice to remain quiet and reduce their own stress (Kumaravadivelu, 2003).

Many of the articles in this review speak of the rote learning technique in use in many Asian cultures (Deckert, 1993; Lund, 2004; Pennycook, 1996) and point to it as a reason why plagiarism occurs more in Asian ESL students. There is a long tradition of deriding this teaching mechanism in the West, dating back to the colonial educators as memorization only and not true learning, implying that the rote learning mechanism removes all development of critical thinking

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skills from the learning process (Lund, 2004; Pennycook, 1996). It seems that because Western educators do not see the value in this style of education, it is used as a reason to justify their perception of increased likelihood of plagiarism from this group of students. When asked to articulate this assumption it is explained as an “innocent and ingrained habit of giving back information exactly as it they find it” (Deckert, 1993, p. 133).

Justifiable Plagiarism?

The above statement from Deckert about the seemingly innocent acts of plagiarism speaks to the thoughts that perhaps for ESL students, the acts we call plagiarism are justifiable. Many of the discussions of ESL students acts of plagiarism go on to speak of reasons for justifying the acts, and the justifications used can be correlated to the type of student responding to the questions (Gururajan & Roberts, 2005). Based on a single study, the international students enrolled in Australian university were more likely to justify their plagiarism than the domestic students (Gururajan & Roberts, 2005, p. 1577). Smith, *et al* (2007) categorizes these justifications into two broad categories contributing to plagiarism; internal and external pressures. The subcategories in these two groups are echoed by many other findings about why students, both ESL and domestic students, plagiarize. Those reasons include pressure from family and professors in the external category and negative self-image, lack of awareness of plagiarism issues and lack of competence in completing the assigned tasks as internal factors (Deckert, 1993; Gururajan & Roberts, 2005; Introna, et al., 2003; Pennycook, 1996; Shaw, 1982; Smith, et al., 2007; Sowden, 2005). Additional factors mentioned in some studies include the prevalence of online information and resulting ease of cut-and-paste ‘writing’ (Pennycook, 1996; Smith, et al., 2007), heavy workload (Pennycook, 1996), low likelihood of getting caught, particularly in large enrollment classes (Emerson, et al., 2005), and lack of perceiving a problem in their writing method (Gururajan & Roberts, 2005; Shaw, 1982; Smith, et al., 2007).

A review of each of these reasons for unintentional or justifiable plagiarism in more detail can help us understand why they may be used by all students, not just those for whom English is a second language. The cut-and-paste culture, made available and almost encouraged through the abundance of online information, makes taking chunks of text from disparate sources and pasting them into a new whole a simple for the student (Pennycook, 1996) and is not seen as

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having the same severity of consequence as taking a section of text from a print item (Introna, et al., 2003). The sheer volume of the online sources makes detection on the part of the instructor more difficult as well (Smith, et al., 2007). In addition to the ease of cut-and-paste is the difficulty of paraphrasing when writing in a second language. The reason stated for direct copying of text, when ESL students were asked, is not due to an early education based on rote learning and memorization, but on a recognition that the concept they wish to convey is very well stated in the original and they would be unable to improve on how it is stated, and likely confuse the point if they tried to paraphrase or rewrite it, and so they leave it as found (Introna, et al., 2003; Pennycook, 1996; Sowden, 2005). The intent is not to deceive, but to be sure their point is understood. The problem arises in lack of source citation, which is another recurring issue (Emerson, et al., 2005; Smith, et al., 2007). Studies have shown that students understand the issues of impropriety about copying text and ideas from others but do not know or fully understand the citation conventions (Emerson, et al., 2005; Pennycook, 1996). In some cases the lack of knowledge on citation practices is indicative of an educational lack of preparation for writing evidence supported academic documents (Deckert, 1993; Emerson, et al., 2005). Writing skill is one area where the differences in Eastern and Western education systems may be at the root of the problem, since writing and citing sources are developed skills which need practice and are more typically part of the Western educational system (Deckert, 1993).

The pressure for good grades, often expressed as coming from the family of ESL students, makes it justifiable in their minds to take text from the master for assured accuracy and thus a better grade (Gururajan & Roberts, 2005). This is directly related to an inability or lack of comfort in paraphrasing the source material mentioned above. Similarly, a heavy workload can lead to plagiarism as a coping mechanism to get everything accomplished on time. Pennycook (1996) notes much of the plagiarism in these areas of overloaded students or of discomfort with the task are symptoms of carelessness rather than a strategy to cheat. Even in instances where the workload may be reasonable, plagiarism may be used as a coping mechanism for dealing with unfamiliar teaching and learning styles (Introna, et al., 2003).

Interestingly, students, native speakers and ESL, tend not to see an ethical dilemma in their failure to cite sources (Gururajan & Roberts, 2005; Shaw, 1982). There could be any number of reasons for this lack of taking plagiarism seriously, be it the prevalence of online text

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and considering electronic texts as different from printed materials, feeling alienated or unnoticed in a large enrollment class or having no fear of being caught due to the teaching style or assessment technique used by a given teacher (Emerson, et al., 2005; Smith, et al., 2007). Perhaps as educators, we enable the plagiaristic activity through our own avoidance of the issue and inconsistent enforcement when it is encountered.

Why target ESL students?

The justifications for plagiarism provided in the different studies are not limited to ESL students, even if they are more likely to use the justifications with discussing reasons for plagiarism (Gururajan & Roberts, 2005). Many students may at some time use plagiarism to help get an assignment done. Smith, *et al* (2007, p. 124) cites a couple of studies, which were not read for this review of the literature, that are reported to show that more than 40% of students in the United Kingdom have plagiarized at some time and more than 55% of students in the United States have plagiarized on an assignment, a number found in multiple studies. One of the main reasons faculty are more likely to notice and investigate the ESL student papers for plagiarism is due to the very nature of them being non-native speakers and writers of English, which means copied text stands out from the body of a work in its construction, grammar and word choices (McGowan, 2005). Native English speakers who engage in the same activities are likely to have stronger writing and paraphrasing skills and so are more able to hide the copied portions of text within their own writing better.

Addressing Plagiarism in Student Work

Frequently, upon finding a suspected instance of plagiarism, a teacher will immediately jump to the assumption of intentional deceit in completing the assignment and a need to punish the action (Introna, et al., 2003; Pennycook, 1996). And yet, as seen above, there are many reasons which are not intentional cheating which makes our immediate jump to punishment “inadequate and arrogant” (Pennycook, 1996, p. 226). Additionally, the variety of online sources makes it increasingly difficult for a professor know all the potential sources or to locate the source or sources used to compile a paper, and thus many cases of plagiarism probably go

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undetected. One of the conclusions many of the articles read for this review make is a need for a system of differentiated punishment which takes into account the intent and amount of plagiarism in a work as well as the pattern of repetition before declaring any wrong-doing (Gururajan & Roberts, 2005; Introna, et al., 2003; McDonnell, 2003; McGowan, 2005; Shaw, 1982; Sowden, 2005). It seems a call from teachers to investigate intent and amount means we agree with student claims of unintentional plagiarism and that circumstances should mitigate the punishment (Shaw, 1982). For example, citation problems manifest as plagiarism, but may be a strictly educational process in helping students develop the skills in citation techniques and standards and so automatic failure of a course for lack of this ability, particularly in their first year of college seems unduly harsh (Emerson, et al., 2005; Introna, et al., 2003; McGowan, 2005).

Educate before punish

Some form of graduated policy which parallels the student's progress in a program is one idea on how to include pedagogy and discussion around the topic of plagiarism. Including education and discussion in the teaching allows for learning and development on the part of the student before a teacher jumps immediately to the punishment phase for an unintentional offense (Emerson, et al., 2005; McDonnell, 2003). McGowan refers to a model along these lines as a period of learning with leniency or an apprenticeship into the use of supporting arguments with evidence which could equate to the first year of tertiary education (McGowan, 2005). Similarly, Introna, *et al* (2003) and Smith, *et al* (2007) also call for additional or better education for all students about what constitutes plagiarism and the mechanisms behind academic citation processes to avoid unintentional plagiarism.

Acknowledgement of Academia as Unique

In order for professors to generate an honest discussion with students around the nature of plagiarism, there is a need to discuss the uniquely stringent definition that academia uses for plagiarism which is not echoed in many other areas of western culture (Shaw, 1982). Literary plagiarism is somehow much less damaging to the reputation of the author than academic and particularly scientific plagiarism (Shaw, 1982). For example, students continue to read Samuel Coleridge, despite a substantial history of plagiarism for most of his career, and while his

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reputation as a poet may be tarnished, it is certainly not destroyed (Shaw, 1982). The practice of liberally borrowing and imitating the work of a master in creation of your own work is still an accepted practice in the literary world, which creates a stark contrast for the rigidity of citation practices expected in science and other academic writing. This disparity between literature and science is also seen in the treatment of the occurrences, adding to the unclear nature of the definition of plagiarism posited at the beginning of the paper. In literature the author is seen to have created a breach of ethics if they plagiarize the work of another, but it does not do long term damage to a career. In the sciences, an author caught plagiarizing can lose their job, the support of the academic community and all future credibility, and the only theory advances for this in the readings is the more factual nature of the information in the sciences (Shaw, 1982).

Another stark difference can be seen between academia and the business world, where materials written in a company, particularly if they are good quality, are expected to be reused in whole or in part to generate new documents. Similarly, an individual working in business is frequently confronted with signing a document they did not write, thereby making it appear as their own work when it is the work of another (Kolish, 1983). By definition this is plagiarism, and yet it is accepted practice in the business world and no one thinks twice about it.

Conclusions

The collection of literature included in this review seems to point toward a possible bias for ESL students to engage in plagiarism than native English speakers, but not in any clear and unequivocal fashion. The habits labeled as “justifiable plagiarism” are issues for all students, not just ESL students, and findings of several of the studies show self-reported admissions of plagiarism among students who are raised in the western culture. This problematizes the conjecture that ESL plagiarism is simply an outcome of not understanding the western cultural demands on academic writing, which has often been seen as creating the problem for non-western students.

The ESL students written English can be less polished, and thus when a passage is included in their work which reads like a native English speaker wrote it, they become a target for plagiarism investigations. Based on what several authors presented regarding the poor view of plagiarism in the Chinese culture, I do not agree with the frequent assertion that plagiarism in

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the work of ESL students is due to a lack of understanding of a western definition of plagiarism. They may have more issues stealing the ideas rather than the actual words or feel they are cheating themselves as opposed to damaging the original author in any way, but they understand the notion of plagiarism. The real problem is in western expectations of citations for sources, which leads to perceived plagiarism, even if that was not the intent.

I agree with the conclusion of many of the study and article authors that there needs to be a real effort made to teach about plagiarism and citation practices to make a real effort to help all students learn as opposed to assuming they have arrived at their higher education studies with the knowledge of how to do all of those tasks already.

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