Perspective on Plagiarism in ESL/EFL Writing

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May 2010
Abstract

The incidents of plagiarism is reported to be increasing in both undergraduate and graduate level written assignments since the explosion of data sources accessible through the internet. Plagiarism is of particular concern with ESL/EFL students because of differences in educational background and culture. In this literature review, I will examine the unique issues of plagiarism in ESL/EFL student writing and concentrate on three major areas. First, I will examine the definition of plagiarism to arrive at a concise definition that allows for differences in educational and cultural background. I will explore the cultural context of plagiarism often cited as the basis for ESL/EFL student openly submitting plagiarized written assignments. Next I will explore plagiarism as a result of lack of English language skills and writing skills. In conclusion, I will provide alternatives proposals to disciplinary action to reduce the potential for plagiarism.
Prospective on Plagiarism in ESL/EFL Writing

Introduction

The concept of plagiarism is unique to western culture where the ownership of ideas developed and the moral code for protection of this ownership is imbedded in the culture of higher education in North America, Europe and Australia. Incidents of plagiarism have been recorded as far back as 1583 and include accusation of plagiarism by many famous authors including William Shakespeare (Plagiarism: Webster's Timeline History, 1583 - 2007, 2009). In spite of this long and vivid history, plagiarism continues to be a major concern in institutions of higher education. In fact, in two surveys where students self-reported acts of plagiarism, the percentage of students who indicated that they had plagiarized at one time ranged from 35% to 45% (Roberts, 2008). An Australian study in 2001 reported that ”80% of university students admitted to plagiarizing their work at some time” (Handra & Power, 2005).

The globalization and internationalization of education has brought an influx of non-native English speaking students into the westernized institutions in increasing numbers. These students have brought myriad of teaching and learning issues among which incidents of plagiarism often occur. All too often “these students are portrayed as being rote-learners who are ‘persistent plagiarizers’” (Handra & Power, 2005, p. 2) James Lund observed that for many of the Korean graduate students at Westminster Seminary the “academic journey was even more difficult than that of most students due, in large part, to cultural and linguistic barriers (Lund, 2005, pp. 93-94). The cultural influence has been recognized in much of the literature (DiMaria, 2009) (Leask, 2006) (Lund, 2005) (Hayes & Introna, 2005) (Handra & Power, 2005) and cannot be ignored but does culture alone explain and justify plagiarism by ESL/EFL students?

Definition of Plagiarism
In an effort to curb the incidents of plagiarism many colleges and universities rely on written policy forbidding plagiarism and providing clear punishment for infraction of the policy. Included in nearly every policy is a simple definition of plagiarism such as:

**Definition:** In an instructional setting, plagiarism occurs when a writer deliberately uses someone else’s language, ideas, or other original (not common-knowledge) material without acknowledging its source. (Defining and Avoiding Plagiarism: The WPA Statement on Best Practices, 2003)

While this definition is very clear and direct, the definition does not offer a guideline for distinguishing between a student who submits someone else’s work as their own and the student who inadequately cites ideas and words taken from someone else’s work. The Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) recognizes that “a student who attempts (even if clumsily) to identify and credit his or her sources…has not plagiarized” (2003, p. 2).

In an investigation of North American college websites for available guidelines on plagiarism, Kyoko Yamada found that, while nearly all of the 336 college websites examined provided a definition of plagiarism, only 6 provided sample text of plagiarized and acceptable non-plagiarized work (2003, p. 249). The WPA also recognized that the lack of clear examples may result in work that falsely appears to be plagiarized when:

- Students may not know how to integrate the ideas of others and document the sources of those ideas appropriately in their texts
- Student will make mistakes as they learn how to integrate others’ words or ideas into their own work because error is a natural part of learning
- Students from other cultures may not be familiar with the conventions governing attribution and plagiarism in American colleges and universities
In some settings, using other people’s words or ideas as their own is an acceptable practice for writers of certain kinds of text (for example, organization documents), making the concepts of plagiarism and documentation less clear cut than academics often acknowledge and thereby confusing students (2003, pp. 2-3).

The review of literatures also reveals that the concept of plagiarism is often considered synonymous with cheating and academic dishonesty resulting in any offence carrying identical punitive consequences. Although the concept of plagiarism is not a universal, the moral issue of cheating is found across cultural boundaries. Phan Le Ha reported that plagiarism was not acceptable in Vietnamese culture and provides examples of students copying during a test as an example of unacceptable plagiarism while memorization and use of a famous essay as a model of writing is not considered plagiarism (Ha, 2006). The examples of plagiarism provided by Ha, i.e. copying during an exam or using a crib sheet, match exactly examples of academic dishonest as noted by others but not considered as plagiarism (Hayes & Introna, 2005) (Crane, 2007) (DiMaria, 2009). Dilin Liu reported that within Chinese academic culture copying ideas and words was not acceptable and is considered synonymous with stealing but also noted that the technique used to reference quoted ideas or words differed from western convention (Liu, 2005). While the moral concepts of stealing and cheating are found to be universal, applying these concepts cross-culturally to a definition of plagiarism can prove difficult.

Although a single, clear definition of plagiarism did not emerge from the literature review, three points consistently form the core of the concept of plagiarism. First, that plagiarism is using someone else’s words or ideas; second, that proper acknowledgement is not given and third that the act is done deliberately with intention to deceive (Roberts, 2008). These points are consistent with the definition of plagiarism provided by the Council of Writing
Program Administrators with the exception of the last point that is expanded to include the goal of the plagiarizer to be that of deception. Inclusion of the intention to deceive within the definition of plagiarism allow for distinguishing between academic dishonesty, i.e. cheating, and the unintentional failure to use proper citation due to educational or cultural background.

Cultural Context of Plagiarism

The difference of cultural background, especially when comparing Asia students with western students, is cited as a major if not the defining factor for the prevalence of plagiarism among ESL/EFL students (Jaschik, 2009) (Sowden, 2005) (Ha, 2006) (Lund, 2005). While it is difficult to deny that cultural factors do influence individual students, the difficulty with pointing to culture is the breadth and multiple factors that are found within culture. Rather than use the broad term culture, this literature review will focus on only a few culturally defined factors that were noted within the findings.

A review of the difference in educational systems focused primarily on the Confucian based system, found in most of Asia, and the western tradition, found throughout North America, Europe and Australia, is recognized as a significant factor contributing to unintentional plagiarism. Lund cites “reverence for text and its author” (2005, p. 95) as a major influence on Asian students stemming from the near verbatim quoting from works of respected authors, respected political leaders and school text as a normal and encouraged activity in the Confucian based education. This influence is beyond the educational system as Lund explains that “they (students) could not presume to write it better than the ‘master.’” The use of the ‘master’s’ words is a sign of respect. The attitude of reverence and respect for the ‘master’ in Confucian-influenced societies (especially Korea) is a transference of the same attitude given to one’s
ancestors in the practice of ancestor worship” (Lund, 2005, p. 96). Bridget Ballard and John Clanchy observed that “Each country has its own traditions not only about what a student must learn but also how he should learn” (as quoted in Lund, 2005, p.95).

Stemming from the tradition of reverence and respect of “masters” is the lack of critical thinking skills among many Asian students. In the Confucian based education system students are taught not to question the “masters” work and, as a result, find the process of critical analysis that is expected in western education to be difficult to accomplish. Lund noted that “one finds students practicing ‘cut and paste’ techniques to assemble research papers in order to fulfill the ethical obligation of their cultural heritage” (Lund, 2005, p. 96) where students would considered arrogant for questioning or being critical of the “master” works.

The third influence emerging from the Confucian based education system is the lack of understanding of the proper method and format to be used for giving credit to sources in western academic studies. Ha noted that “although universities are often very explicit about the penalties for plagiarism, they are not aware of the fact that their students are not trained explicitly and sufficiently in how to do citation and referencing in academic writing” (Ha, 2006, p. 2). Ha pointed out that in Vietnam attribution is given informally such as adding “says Uncle Ho” to quotes from Ho Chi Minh without specifying the actual source. Thus, plagiarism judged strictly on violation of the rules or lack of adherence to a particular style, i.e. APA, MLA, Chicago Style, may be a reflection of the difference of education background directly attributed to cultural differences.

Emerging also from culture is a differing attitude toward individualism that can directly influence a student toward both intentional and unintentional plagiarism. Individualism is a western tradition, primarily found in the U.S., and contrasts dramatically with an attitude of
community found in most parts of the world (DiMaria, 2009). Sowden (2005) points out that most Chinese students are expected to work as a group, sharing knowledge and assisting each other. In an interview with a Saudi Arabian student, DiMaria was told “we grow up in a society that tells us to share things and wish the best for your friends” which extends to “your accomplishments are not recorded by your name, but by your tribe or family” (2009, p. 3). The influence of community bonds together with the deficiency in language skills and isolation in a foreign country would be a natural catalyst for students to congregate with others from their own country, create study groups, assist with writing project and even share questions and answers to exams all without any thought of these practices being acts of plagiarism. Also emerging from the cultural bond with community is the added pressure to succeed brought on by failure being seen as a disgrace to family and community which may lead to intentional plagiarism or other academic misconduct (Crane, 2007) (DiMaria, 2009).

Although not directly address as a part of culture, the literature reveals that ESL/EFL students are confronted with the need to perform adequately in English as a second language without having fully developed many of the language skills necessary for academic study (Leask, 2006). Hayes and Introna, in comparing native United Kingdom (UK) student with non-UK students, found that the non UK students had little or no experience with writing research papers as most academic writing had been “group project papers or business reports” (Hayes & Introna, 2005, p. 219). In their research, Hayes and Introna reported that “several Greek students said that when English is not one’s first language, “taking a bit here and there helps with getting the meaning across. Paraphrasing, if you are not a native speaker, is difficult” (2005, p. 221). Patchwriting, an effective technique used to teach ESL/EFL student the art paraphrasing by “copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or
plugging in one-for-one synonym - substitutes” is viewed by many as plagiarism (McDonnell, 2003, p. 6). Although the need to teach ESL/EFL students the technique of paraphrasing as a writing skill was recognized, Yamada (2003) found that not only was information regarding the inferential thought processes missing from North American college websites but it was also missing from information and research on plagiarism, writing manuals and textbooks. These are language skills necessary for the ESL/EFL student to achieve success.

The last focus point directly relating to cultural differences that contribute to plagiarism by ESL/EFL students centers on the concepts of authorship and voice, both related to the idea of individualism. For many non-native English speaking students, authorship was reserved for those recognized as “masters” or authoritarian figures. This is reinforced in the findings of Ramanathan and Atkinson where “early socialization and literacy training, formal assessment procedures, teaching methodologies, pedagogical practices, and worldviews of teachers, parents and other “authority figures”—reinforce the centrality of memorization at an everyday level” (1999, p. 63). From this education experience, students are expected to express the thoughts of the masters without individualized voice or authorship.

Abasi, Akbari and Graves (2006) in exploring the intersection of writing and identity among inexperienced ESL writers and more experienced ESL writers found that most inexperienced writers were unaware of the development of a personal identity, i.e. voice, in their writing. The inexperienced writers relied heavily upon the text of the source material to convey the authority of the subject, whereas, the more experienced writers “were quite aware of their audience expectations and, as a matter of course, strategically represented themselves in certain ways through the rhetorical deployment of others’ words and idea” (Abasi, Akbari, & Graves, 2006, p. 106). The issue facing many ESL/EFL students is expressed by Joel Murray, “Having
their own perspective and being graded on how well they express it is an entirely foreign concept for them” (as quoted in Stanley, 2002). Bill Snyder writing in the TESLEJ Forum (Stanley, Karen, 2002) summarized the situation of the ESL/EFL student as “mastering the tools for avoiding plagiarism, including gaining the language to express oneself adequately and the confidence that one’s expression is adequate, as well as mastering rhetorical structure, the tools of citation and quotation, etc. is not an easy task” (p. 6). The development of individual’s voice and authorship in academic writing is traced in the progress of the student as they move from “expert in training” to full acceptance within their chosen discipline (Abasi, Akbari, & Graves, 2006).

Alternative Approaches

Based on the increasing number of incidents of plagiarism that have been reported it appears that current measures to deter plagiarism are failing. This failure, well summarized by Leask, is that “in intercultural interactions we cannot assume that simply explaining the rules will suffice—no matter how simple or complex the explanation. Nor can we assume that punishment will deter; for, if the concept itself is not understood and/or students don’t know what to do, or can’t do what they have to do to avoid it, no deterrent will be effective” (Leask, 2006). Thus we return to the literature to discover possible alternative approaches to the issue of plagiarism in relationship to ESL/EFL students.

First, as pointed out earlier in this review, a definition of plagiarism that allows for difference emerging from cultural is necessary, not as an excuse for plagiarism but as a guideline for determining intentional versus unintentional plagiarism. The concepts of cheating and stealing are found across all cultures but the concept of ownership of ideas and words is not as
universal. Defining plagiarism to include clear distinction between intentional and deliberate acts of academic dishonesty will allow teachers and administrators to apply disciplinary action when appropriate and teaching strategies to remedy failure to use proper citation, poor paraphrasing or inability to effectively express ideas in a second language.

Second, the traditional written assessment tools, i.e. the research paper, the literary essay and the term paper, need to be challenged and viewed in the perspective of real-world learning. Hunt points out that “a student’s learning is accurately and readily tested by her ability to produce, in a completely arhetorical situation, an artificial form that she’ll never have to write again once she’s survived formal education (the essay examination, the formal research paper), is questionable on the face of it, and is increasingly untenable” (Hunt, 2002). Hunt also suggests that the artificialness of the written assignment coupled with the reuse of a short list of themes or topics for the assignment promotes plagiarism by providing a readily available source of written papers produced by previous students. Roberts (2008) offered a suggestion to modify the assessment process to not grade the final product but rather grade the writing process by having students submit outlines, drafts and keep reflective journals. An alternative to Roberts suggestion is the option of having the students write a first draft from notes without referring to the original sources (Shoebottom, 2000). Roberts also suggested having the students use plagiarism detection software and be required to revise their writing to remove offending passages and correct inappropriate citation as part of the process of learning to write rather than have the plagiarism detection software used after the fact by the teacher.

Third, the need to provide effective training for students in not only the mechanics of format and syntax but also in the process of academic writing emerged throughout the literature reviewed. Liu states that “language development is perhaps the most important tool in
combating plagiarism’ citing the “lack of language proficiency and writing skills is perhaps the major reason that ESOL students resort to plagiarism” (Liu, 2005, p. 240). McDonnell (2003) suggested the use of patchwriting as an effective tool to introduce ESL/EFL student to the art of creating appropriate paraphrasing, a skill necessary for avoiding plagiarism. Yamada found that most universities failed to include any reference to introducing inferential thought process as a method for avoiding plagiarism and suggests exercises for ESL/EFL students to rewrite a story from a different point of view as a way of giving “novice writers freedom to explore various textual interpretations, which would serve to cultivate their own voices” (Yamada, 2003, p. 254).

Equal to the need to provide effective teaching to the ESL/EFL students is the need for cultural awareness on the part of the teachers and administrators. Ha quoted Chandrasoma as finding that “academics and institutions are often unaware of the influence of culture, language, identity, knowledge, and education on students’ writing” (Ha, 2006, p. 3). Such an awareness is necessary to avoid stereotyping ESL/EFL students and to provide better assistance and teaching for the students.

Conclusion

From the literature review, cultural differences are a contributing factor that can lead to unintentional plagiarism by ESL/EFL students but should not be taken as an excuse or justification for deliberate and intentional acts of academic dishonesty. Cultural differences do attribute to a lack of understanding of the concept of individualism and ownership of words and ideas that is unique to western culture. Differences in educational experiences, directly related to culture, can contribute to a student not being adequately prepared to meet the expectations higher academic studies. The importance of developing second language skills emerges from the
literature as a critical factor for success and the development of these skills should be a shared responsibility of the student, teachers and administration. While intentional plagiarism should not be tolerated, learning the writing skills to avoid plagiarism must be a part of the developmental process for the ESL/EFL students.
**Works Cited**


http://wpacouncil.org/positions/WPAplagiarism.pdf


