

Plagiarism in ESOL students: is cultural conditioning truly the major culprit?

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Introduction

The past decade has seen the rise of a general line of argument claiming that what is called 'plagiarism' in TESOL and in the West at large is not a universal but only a culture-specific concept, and that TESOL professionals must, therefore, adjust accordingly, including perhaps some forms of accommodation, in dealing with students from cultures where 'plagiarism' or what may constitute plagiarism in the West is reportedly allowed (Insull and Craig 2003; Pennycook 1996; Scollon 1995). Colin Sowden's article, though more tempered, basically follows this argumentation because his main thesis, gathered from his discussion and his article's telltale title, is that cultural conditioning is the major culprit for plagiarism among Asian students, especially among those from the Far East. Though well-intentioned and interesting, Sowden's article, like most of those holding the same position, is flawed in several ways, including relying on dubious assumptions about other cultures' writing practices, and using unwarranted conflation of separate concepts or issues to advance his argument.

Before I elaborate my point, though, I would like to commend Sowden for taking a fairly moderate position on the issue, as evidenced by his warning against stereotyping Asian students and his rather even-handed presentation of the various approaches to dealing with multilingual students' plagiarism and the consequences involved. However, such moderation, commendable as it is, does not eliminate the flaws in his argument.

Is plagiarism acceptable in China? Unreliable informants

The first problem with Sowden's argument is that in TESOL, the notion of plagiarism being a culture-specific concept is based largely on the dubious claim that plagiarism or copying others' writing is an acceptable practice in the Far East, especially China. The claim is dubious because it is built primarily on inaccurate or partially inaccurate information provided mostly by ESOL students who were found plagiarizing (consult, for instance, Insull and Craig 2003; Pennycook 1996; Pecorari 2001). A good example of such unreliable information can be found in what a Chinese student reportedly said in Insull and Craig's study (2003). The student was found copying extensive text from some website and was told it was wrong. Yet the student replied that she 'could not believe that it

was impermissible to cut and paste paragraphs from a web page into her own essay', claiming that copying good writers' work in one's own writing 'has always been the way we've been taught!' (Insull and Craig's 2003 presentation handout: 3).

Before I explain why such information is inaccurate, I would like to point out that I am not suggesting that there are no cultural differences in writing or other areas of learning. I know there are, and I appreciate methodical and accurate discussions of cultural differences. For example, I think Sowden is right on target in pointing out that memorization or rote learning has always been a highly valued learning strategy in the Far East and that such a learning strategy can lead to high levels of understanding if applied appropriately. However, I am hesitant to endorse false assumptions based on inaccurate information because such assumptions often lead to cultural stereotyping, something that is as detrimental to and as common in our profession as the practice of neglecting or negating cultural differences (consult Carroll 2004, Kumaravadivelu 2003, and Phan Le Ha 2004 on the issue of cultural stereotyping). As Kumaravadivelu (2003: 717) points out, often when ESOL students do not behave the way we (ELT teachers) expect them to, 'we readily explain their behavior in terms of their culture or cultural stereotypes.'

A personal perspective

Based on my educational experience as a native of China and the research I have conducted, I would like to argue that the claim that copying others' writing as one's own is allowed, taught and/or encouraged in China is not accurate. I received all my education, with the exception of my graduate study, in China, and I never recall any of my teachers telling us it was acceptable to copy others' writing and turn it in as one's own, be it a paragraph or a couple of sentences. On the contrary, all my teachers often warned us not to copy others' work. In fact, the concept of 'plagiarism' as an immoral practice has existed in China for a very long time. Chinese has two terms for plagiarism and they are both derogatory: 'piao qie,' which literally means to rob and steal someone else's writing, and 'cao xi', which means to copy and steal.

The first term, 'piao qie', has no other meaning except for plagiarism, and the second term, 'cao xi', may also mean to secretly attack someone from behind. The use of the first term can be traced back to AD 700. According to *Ci Yuan* (1988: 197), the most authoritative dictionary of Chinese etymology, Liu Zhongyuan, a very famous Tang Dynasty poet who lived from 773 to 819, used the term 'piao chie' to deplore the fact that quite a few scholars resorted to plagiarism. Similarly, Han Yu, another famous writer in late AD 700, also employed the term to condemn plagiarism (You, Wang, Xiao, Ji, and Fei 1983 vol. 3: 141). Thus, the concept of plagiarism has existed in China for more than a thousand years.

What Chinese books have to say

Consulting six Chinese books on composition (four of which are textbooks) also indicates clearly that copying others without giving them due credit is not an acceptable practice (Bu and Chen 1993; Lin 1994; Liu 1989; Ma and An 1984; Wang and Yang 1988; Wu 1981). My reason for referring to Chinese composition books is that, concerning writing

practices in China, they are a reliable and authoritative source, at least much more so than ESOL students from China. All six books consulted were published in the 1980s or the early 1990s, before the current debate about whether plagiarism was allowed in China began, so the books could not have been influenced by the debate. The books are also geographically representative as three of them are authored by mainland Chinese and the other three by Taiwanese.

With regard to proper citation, all the books state the need to credit the source of a citation. (See, for example, Liu 1989: 195–6; Wang and Yang 1988: 322). In fact, Wang and Yang's statement on this point is as clear as any that can be found in English composition books: 'when you cite others' opinions, you need to acknowledge them in a note; when you cite published Chinese or foreign language sources, you need also acknowledge every single one of them and double check their accuracy. Otherwise, you show no respect for others' work. Plagiarism and copying are immoral acts and should be opposed.'¹ In fact, even in ancient China, when documentation of sources was not so systematic and not so detailed, people were required to credit their sources. For instance, if one quoted Confucius, one had to say 'Zi [a short name for Confucius] yue [said]...' , and if one quoted from a poem, one had to say 'Shi [a poem] yun [read or said]...' (Thus the claim that Chinese usually quote Confucius or other famous scholars without mentioning their source is inaccurate.) Again, I am not suggesting that Chinese always cite their sources in such cases. They do not, yet do English speakers sometimes not do the same when they cite in their speeches well-known quotes such as J. F. Kennedy's 'Ask not what your country can do for you, ask...', Churchill's 'blood, sweat, and tears,' and many of Benjamin Franklin's axioms?

Of course, the fact that plagiarism has always been criticized in China does not mean that plagiarism has not been a problem there. In fact, it has been and still is, perhaps more so today than before because of the negative impact of economic reform on education and the publishing industry and because the lack of clear laws for punishing plagiarism as well as the ineffective enforcement of existing laws thanks to the fact that China has never been truly a country governed by law. Quite a few in China's academia resort to immoral practices including plagiarism to make money or gain promotion. Yet the serious problem of plagiarism in China does not mean that plagiarism is an acceptable practice. As I have shown, plagiarism has always been condemned in China, and this condemnation has recently intensified in response to the widening of the problem in the past decade.

Anyone following China's media will not fail to notice that plagiarism, like counterfeiting, is chastised almost daily. Moreover, the Chinese government and its academic institutions have launched a series of initiatives to crack down on plagiarism. In June 2004, the government released the report of a study it commissioned on corrupt practices including plagiarism in the leading academic and research institutions in China ('Zhong ke yuan bao gao jie 'dao de lun sang' ba zong zui' ['China's Academy of Sciences' Report Exposes Decline of Morals in

Terms of Eight Wrongdoings'] 2004). The report decries the decline of morals in academia and makes suggestions to correct the problem. On August 26 2004, the Chinese Ministry of Education issued a document entitled *Gao deng xuexiao zhexue shehui kexue yanjiu xueshu guifan* [Rules and regulations for academic work in philosophy and social sciences in higher education] to help stop dishonest academic practices; the document states clearly that 'no plagiarism or stealing of others' academic work in any form is allowed' and 'citation of others' work, whether published or not, must be acknowledged and documented in detail' ("Jiaoyubu banfa di yibu 'xueshu xianzhang'" ["Ministry of Education Issues First 'Academic Work Rules Document'"], 2004).

It is thus accurate to say that, in most cases, those who plagiarize in China, like those who do it in the West, know that what they are doing is wrong and they do it anyway as an easy way to obtain personal gains. As for those Chinese ESL students who are found plagiarizing but claim that it is an acceptable practice in China, they are doing it either out of ignorance or out of the need for an excuse for their wrongdoing. Unfortunately, their stories have sometimes been innocently believed by some of our kind-hearted teachers and researchers.

Jumps in reasoning

As stated above, Sowden never explicitly states that copying others' writing as one's own is allowed in China or the Far East but he implies it via unwarranted jumps in reasoning about writing practices in these cultures. For example, he suggests that the heavy use of memorization and the respect for authority in learning naturally leads to plagiarism. He claims, 'From this perspective [of learning], plagiarism can be seen as a virtue' (Sowden p. 227). Such a claim is just speculation based on an unwarranted jump in reasoning.

It is true that Chinese students, like many students from the Far East, rely heavily on memorization in their learning and they are taught to respect authority. Yet memorizing good writing to help one to learn to write better is not the same thing as copying other work and claiming it as one's own. Similarly, to cite an authority does not mean to claim the citation as one's own thought or words. In fact, a major role of memorizing good writing in Chinese is to help the learner to appreciate and become familiar with effective rhetorical styles and useful writing techniques that the memorized writing uses so the learner can use them in his/her own writing in the future. In other words, memorization is not meant as a tool for copying. If one indeed uses it in the latter way, it is condemned in Chinese as 'si ji yin bei' [literally means 'dead and inflexible memorization'], a rote task that contrasts with *huo xue huo yong* ['learning and using it creatively'], a practice that memorization is meant to support. In fact, memorizing good writing to improve writing is very similar to the memorization of the multiplication tables, a practice meant to help one to do multiplication more efficiently.

Sowden also unjustifiably conflates group work, including sharing knowledge in a group project, with the practice of copying and appropriating ideas from others. He argues that Chinese culture encourages the sharing of knowledge among students, and therefore Chinese culture 'is less likely to discourage copying

and the appropriation of ideas from other sources without acknowledgement' (Sowden p. 228) The problem is that I am not sure that Chinese culture encourages group work and the sharing of knowledge among the students more than Western culture. In fact, based on my experience, students in the West are requested to do group projects as often if not more than their Chinese counterparts. In completing such projects, Western students also have to share their work and knowledge, and sometimes their assignment asks them to turn in just one joint project report. So why does a practice found in both Chinese and Western cultures present a potential problem for plagiarizing in China but not in the West?

How original can you be?

Sowden's discussion of 'how original can we be?' represents another attempt at conflating separate issues to advance his argument. There is no question that the issue he raises is very profound, and there is no denying that there is a limit to our originality both in terms of ideas and language use. Numerous scholars have made convincing arguments about the issue. For instance, in terms of language originality, Sinclair (1987) in the presentation of his 'idiom choice principle' demonstrates that when we speak or write, the topic, context, register, etc. of our conversation or text may severely limit the choice of words at hand, making us resort to pre-constructed or semi-pre-constructed phrases. For example, in the debate on abortion or gay marriage, most of what people say on either side of the issue is often repetitions of the same arguments.

Yet the originality issue raised by Sowden does not have much to do with the kinds of plagiarism problems that ESOL teachers face. While the former deals with how original a piece of writing is even though the author clearly wrote the piece from known ideas he/she has internalized, the latter concerns how much writing the author did, i.e. how much he/she simply copied directly from other people's writing. Unlike the former question, the latter type is generally not too difficult to answer. While I do not deny that to determine whether a student has plagiarized in a particular piece of writing or in a particular part of the piece can be very challenging at times, I contend that based on the knowledge of their students' ability and on common sense, ESOL teachers in most cases can decide fairly easily whether a student has plagiarized.

Usually, when a teacher accuses a student of plagiarism, the offence is rather obvious, typically involving copying others' writing verbatim without using quotation marks and/or without giving the source. Few teachers would consider a student's piece plagiarized if the student wrote it mostly in his/her own words and gave appropriate citations even though the idea or the content was not new. In fact, at the risk of overgeneralization, the kinds of plagiarism problems that most of my colleagues and I have encountered and confronted students about are the following two. In the first type, the student wrote part of the article, often the beginning and the conclusion, where the student's true writing ability clearly showed itself, but then in the rest of the article the quality of the writing suddenly improved exponentially (often becoming professional). In the other type, a student whose English proficiency was

very limited turned in an essay that only a highly proficient writer could have written.

Plagiarism of language

Sowden also argues that L2 language learning involves extensive 'plagiarism' of language and hence it is very difficult and perhaps incorrect to enforce the penalty of plagiarism against these students. Yet such an argument constitutes just one more example of blurring two quite different issues. Most would agree that it is one thing for an ESOL student to memorize an expression or expressions and then use them later in his/her own speech or writing, but it is quite another for the student to copy someone else's writing (usually involving more than just an expression or expressions) and present it as his/her own. I believe that ESOL teachers are quite capable of making such a distinction in dealing with their students' plagiarism problems. I do not think a teacher will accuse a student of plagiarizing in his/her writing simply because he/she used one or more established expressions such as idioms. Yet when a student lifts sentence after sentence, even paragraphs, from others' work and puts it in his/her own essay, then a teacher generally will, rightly, criticize the student for plagiarizing.

Conclusion

It is now quite clear based on my discussion above that the argument that cultural conditioning is primarily responsible for plagiarism among Chinese or Asian students is a dubious one because it is based primarily on incorrect information and is presented often via unwarranted jumps in reasoning and conflation of separate issues. In fact, even if we concede that such cultural conditioning indeed exists to some extent, we still cannot say for sure that it is the main reason that ESOL students plagiarize. There are many other factors that may motivate ESOL students from many L1 backgrounds to plagiarize, including a lack of adequate language proficiency, lack of task-specific writing skills, and, of course, the urge to cheat.

As Carroll (2004) indicates in arguing against stereotyping Japanese students as individuals lacking critical thinking skills, the reason for Japanese students' reticence in discussion is their lack of language proficiency and resources, not critical thinking skills. Similarly, inadequate language proficiency and writing skills may be the main reason for Asian ESOL students' plagiarism problem. That is why plagiarism is not limited to Asian students or L2 students. Of course, what constitutes the main reason for plagiarism among Asian students goes beyond the space and the scope of this article. Extensive empirical research is called for in order to find an answer to these issues.

The final problem with the argument of Asian students' plagiarism being culturally conditioned is that such an argument yields few pedagogical implications or solutions. Few of those making the cultural conditioning argument suggest that those students who were inclined to plagiarize due to cultural conditioning should be allowed to plagiarize, for such a proposal, as Sowden admits, has serious moral and legal consequences. Instead, they often ended their discussion, treating the problem as a language and writing development issue

rather than a cultural one. Sowden is no exception. His proposed solution—the practice of oral presentations—works exclusively on the improvement of students’ language and text-handling skills. Improving these skills, as he suggests and I agree, will reduce the students’ chances of plagiarizing. Sowden even openly admits, perhaps unconsciously, that language development is perhaps the most important tool in combating plagiarism when he writes, ‘Most importantly, perhaps, multi-lingual students should be assisted in the development of their second language skills, and strict course entry requirements in this regard should be enforced’ (Sowden, p. 231).

In short, Sowden’s solution contains no cultural component except for providing the students with concepts and ideas that they are not familiar with. Yet do we not have to do the same even with native-speaker students? Do the latter students not have some unfamiliar concepts and ideas, too? Of course, the number of such concepts for them may be smaller than that for ESOL students.

The fact that the solutions offered by the proponents of the cultural conditioning hypothesis deal almost exclusively with language and writing development would indicate again that lack of language proficiency and writing skills is perhaps the major reason that ESOL students resort to plagiarism. Of course, we need more studies to know the answer on this issue. One thing I think we perhaps would all agree on is that helping ESOL students to develop language and writing skills will enable them to write better and to reduce their need to resort to plagiarism. Therefore, in dealing with ESOL students’ plagiarism, it seems better to focus on students’ language and writing development than to dwell on issues that are not only debatable but also have few direct pedagogical implications.

Note

1 The quote is an English translation, and the translation is mine. The English translations of the Chinese quotes elsewhere in the text are also all mine.

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