

## Plagiarism and overseas students: stereotypes again?

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This article is a response to Sowden's (2005ab) and Liu's (2005) articles on overseas students and plagiarism, published in *ELT Journal* 59/3.

I appreciate Sowden's efforts in exploring plagiarism in relation to culture, and his arguing against stereotypical views of overseas students studying in English-speaking countries. Although I agree with Sowden that culture plays a significant role in students' learning styles, and perhaps in the way plagiarism is interpreted cross-culturally, I would like to argue that culture is not the only influencing factor and should not be seen as solely responsible for plagiarism in students' academic work. To support my points, I will first provide examples on how plagiarism is viewed in Vietnam. Then, I will argue that there appear to be several reasons why Western academics may rush to accuse overseas students of plagiarism.

### **Plagiarism is not at all acceptable in Vietnam**

While Sowden seems to suggest that Asian culture contributes to the act of plagiarism, I would point out that plagiarism is never allowed or made legitimate by Vietnamese culture or education. For example, even at primary school level, if a pupil copies another pupil's ideas to reproduce them in his/her very basic compositions (such as a description of one's favourite pet), his/her teachers and classmates will criticize and help that pupil realize that it is unacceptable to copy others' ideas for one's assessment purposes. Also, it is not unusual for school teachers to require students found plagiarizing to write down 100 times the same promise 'I will never steal others' ideas/writing again'. These practices show that plagiarism is viewed as unethical. If the term plagiarism in English is 'laden with negative and moral connotations' (Chandrasoma *et al.* 2004: 172), the Vietnamese terms for plagiarism, *dao van* and *an cap y/van*, have the same or even more negative connotations. These two terms clearly and straightforwardly condemn the act of cheating in writing, specifically stealing, robbing, and copying others' writing or even making someone else's writing one's own by using sophisticated cheating techniques.

Although memorizing model essays or famous ideas is common in Vietnam, this is not at all for plagiarism purposes. Showing respect to authority or showing politeness in academic writing does not mean encouraging plagiarism, either. In Vietnam, it is usual to quote Ho Chi Minh's famous statements, such as 'nothing is more precious

than independence', and we always acknowledge the source by adding 'says Uncle Ho'. We may not provide the name of the documents, the year of publication and the publishers, but it is acceptable because his famous statements are considered common knowledge. It is this difference in the understanding of what is considered 'common knowledge' in different discourse communities and how these communities treat common knowledge, that sometimes leads to misinterpretation of students' writing as plagiarism.

**Reasons for over-hasty accusations of plagiarism**  
Stereotypes of Asian students

Many academics in the West have a misconception that overseas students always have academic problems, and numerous studies have documented this tendency clearly (Kumaravadivelu 2003; Phan Le Ha 2001). Likewise, they hold stereotypes about Asian students, among which obedience to authority and lack of critical thinking are the two most common (Kumaravadivelu op. cit.). These two stereotypes are even interpreted as cultural characteristics of Asians which legitimize the act of plagiarism in Asian societies. Sowden (2005a) shows this quite clearly, and Liu (2005) responds to this misleading interpretation convincingly.

Insufficient training in academic writing

Chandrasoma *et al.* (op. cit.) show that although universities are often very explicit about penalties against 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. Ironically, as these authors demonstrate, while there are obvious assumptions that students need to communicate in the language of the academic discourse community, whether this discourse community has done enough to facilitate students' membership is often ignored. My own past experience as a postgraduate student in Australia and that of many of my students (both local and overseas) in Australia strongly support this argument. It seems that those who write curricula and syllabi assume that there is only one way of writing and this way is universal, and we all must know the norms of English academic writing. Thus, little training is given, and students are unreasonably expected to understand and follow strictly the APA or Harvard styles with regard to citation and referencing. So is it fair to accuse those who do not know that they plagiarize of plagiarism?

Furthermore, to be admitted to a course in English-speaking countries, most overseas students must have a high enough IELTS or TOEFL score. With IELTS tests, students have to take a written test, in which they have to do two tasks, neither of which involves developing their arguments based on any reading references. Thus, while being prepared for IELTS tests, students are not taught at all about citation and referencing. So is it fair to expect students to know all about citation and referencing straightaway?

Ignorance of students' language, culture, identity, education and knowledge

Many studies have indicated that writing is closely associated with culture, identity, education, and knowledge (Chandrasoma *et al.* 2004; Farrell 1997; Ivanic 1997; Phan Le Ha and Viete 2002). Hence, while one educational practice may consider a certain act as normal, another educational practice may see the same act as wrong. For example, my experience and my students' experience in writing essays in Vietnamese

universities show that it is acceptable for students to give a full list bibliography at the end of their essays without having to give full in-text references to the readings they use. This way of presenting ideas is not considered plagiarism, at least at the undergraduate level, as long as students acknowledge all the authors whose ideas they have referred to in the bibliography (Phan Le Ha 1999, 2001). Furthermore, many teachers do not require students to give references to lecture notes, so when students reproduce lecture notes in their writing, teachers accept it because both teachers and students know that the ideas are from lecture notes.

Chandrasoma *et al.* (op. cit.: 189) indicate that academics and institutions are often unaware of the influence of culture, language, identity, knowledge, and education on students' writing. Phan Le Ha (2001) and Phan Le Ha and Viete (op. cit.) argue that it is important for Australian academics to develop their interest in gaining knowledge of individual student's writing experience and understanding about valued practices in order to better assist international students in their writing without silencing their own voices and discouraging their creativity. Academics' awareness of these concerns will not only help avoid making stereotypes about overseas students but also lead to plagiarism being treated in a more reasonable manner. For example, it is not always the case that if students do not provide sufficient references, then they definitely plagiarize. Also, if students regard certain forms of knowledge as common and apply this in their writing without acknowledging sources, then this should not be seen immediately as plagiarism. To help students avoid being charged with plagiarism, it is necessary for academics to be explicit about what they expect in terms of citation and referencing, and be willing to compromise over differences in writing practices.

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