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Disciplinary Dialogues

Plagiarism in second language writing: Is it time to close the case?

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Within academia, plagiarism is widely regarded as an archetypal violation of ethical standards. In this light, when the topic made its first appearances in the second language (L2) writing literature, it was presented as something not so much objectionable as anomalous, an odd phenomenon requiring an explanation (e.g., Matalene, 1985). It was cast as symptomatic of a broader set of gaps in our understanding of L2 writers and as an indicator of potential mismatches between students' and teachers' expectations (e.g., Currie, 1998; Leki & Carson, 1997).

Appropriately, then, for an applied discipline, L2 writing's interest in plagiarism was initially pedagogical, and it was only later that it became a research topic in its own right. It was not until Howard's (1995) influential essay (coming from the L1 composition tradition), ''Plagiarism, authorships and the academic death penalty,'' that student plagiarism was treated to a sustained theoretical analysis. The first empirical study of plagiarism in student writing of which I am aware was Angélil-Carter (2000), and the first systematic intertextual analysis of L2 texts came in Pecorari (2003).

However, if researchers were slow to recognize plagiarism as an area of scholarly investigation, we have since made up for lost time. There is now a voluminous and rapidly growing literature on student plagiarism. At the time of writing, a Google Scholar search on the keywords ''plagiarism'' and ''second language writing'' turned up over 1300 works since 2000. That expansion suggests that a stock-taking exercise is in order, specifically to consider whether adding to this body of literature is a profitable enterprise.

What do we know about plagiarism in L2 writing?

It is by now well established that plagiarism is a relatively common feature in much L2 writing: The strategy of reusing language from sources without adequately acknowledging them or the way in which they were used has been thoroughly documented. Or, more precisely, it has been established that a significant proportion of writers use sources in ways which could attract the label ''plagiarism'' (e.g., Flowerdew & Li, 2007; Pecorari, 2008; Petrić, 2004; for a review of the issues in this section, see Pecorari & Petrić, 2014).

This qualification is necessary because it is clear that there is a lack of consensus about which types of source use should be labelled with that name. Understandings of plagiarism vary across academic disciplines (Borg, 2009; Hu & Lei, 2015; Jamieson, 2008; Shi, 2012), which is hardly surprising, given that conventions for source use themselves vary widely across disciplines (e.g., Charles, 2006). In addition, there appears to be significant individual variation in what is recognized as plagiarism (Pecorari & Shaw, 2012).

One specific potential cause of disagreement is the question of intention. Many teachers, though by no means all (see Sutherland-Smith, 2008), understand plagiarism to involve an intention to deceive and thereby to gain unearned academic rewards. However, as some of the first accounts of plagiarism in L2 writing indicated, it often occurs in circumstances which make it difficult to believe that cheating was the writer's objective (e.g., Cadman, 1997; Spack, 1997). For this reason, and because apparent plagiarism is frequently a complex reworking of multiple sources (Pecorari, 2003), much of it appears to

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be what Howard (1995) called ''patchwriting,'' a technique used by novice writers resulting in texts resembling a patchwork quilt of source extracts because they lack the linguistic or rhetorical sophistication to produce an academic text from whole cloth.

We know quite a lot about the mutually dependent factors which lead students to write in ways which are diagnosed as plagiarism, one of which is mismatched expectations. Students express uncertainty about what their teachers expect them to do (Shi, 2006). They also express beliefs which are likely to be at sharp odds with those of their teachers. For example, Löfström and Kupila (2013) surveyed 104 university students in Finland and found that

> Citing text verbatim with reference to the original author(s), but without quotation marks was considered a serious or a very serious form of plagiarism by 30% of the students, while 70% either did not know, did not consider this to be plagiarism or considered it a less serious form of plagiarism. (p. 236)

Similar results came from a study which presented Chinese students with examples of writing intended to be easily diagnosed as plagiarism. In fact, only a minority of them did so (Hu & Lei, 2012). In an earlier study in Japan using a similar methodology (Wheeler, 2009), many more respondents identified the example texts as plagiarism, but by no means all did so. In the latter two studies, the students who *did* identify the examples as plagiarism were highly critical of it. This supports the view that some plagiarism is unintentional, in the sense that students who do not diagnose unattributed copying as plagiarism in someone else's texts may find the same strategy acceptable in their own. In other words, there may be an intention to re-use sources, but not to plagiarize by so doing.

Another factor which contributes to plagiarism is the inherent challenge and complexity involved in avoiding it by using sources in appropriate ways. This requires that the writer be able, *inter alia*, to: identify, read, and understand relevant materials; relate them to the topic at hand and to each other; decide on an appropriate form of incorporating material from a source (e.g., quotation, paraphrase, summary); and deploy the linguistic skill to incorporate them. In short, effective and appropriate source use requires declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge in a range of areas. The complexity of learning to write from sources is only compounded by the fact that the intertextual landscape is increasingly electronically mediated, exposing novice academic writers to usages which differ from received academic conventions, are unstable, and are rapidly evolving (Belcher, 2001; Bloch, 2012; Blum, 2010).

Learning these things requires both instruction and practice, and L2 writers in the English-speaking world have had these to varying extents. Writing tasks used for assessment purposes are not as common in all parts of the world as they are in Anglophone universities, and students may arrive at university without significant previous experience of writing. Nor are their experiences at university necessarily optimally conducive to learning, as many of the things they need to learn about using sources are not superficially visible. For example, if a student has copied directly from a source and provided a citation, but not marked it as a quotation, a teacher may believe it to be a paraphrase, and without actually comparing the student's text with the source there is nothing which *reliably* can alert the teacher to that fact. There are of course rare exceptions, when the teacher or other reader has such great familiarity with the source that it is possible to diagnose the problem. More frequently, such a sharp contrast exists between the source's and the student's language that suspicions arise. But if nothing alerts the teacher to the problem, s/he may be unaware that sources were used in problematic ways. The opportunity is therefore lost to provide formative feedback. The lack of criticism, in turn, can be interpreted by students as an endorsement of their source use strategies (Pecorari, 2008).

The lack of feedback in such cases is especially significant because appropriating language from a source is a frequently used strategy with clear benefits. Previously published texts can serve as phrase banks for writers who do not have a sufficiently large stock of academic language in their mental lexicon (Flowerdew & Li, 2007). If student writers believe that patchwriting *may* be appropriate, they have every incentive to adopt it as a strategy, and the coexistence of patchwriting and confusion in L2 writers about what is permitted has been demonstrated (Davis, 2013).

Writers could potentially be motivated to hold out for individually and originally crafted forms of expression if they held a strong sense of authorial identity and purpose, but that is something which novice L2 writers must develop (Abasi, Akbari & Graves, 2006). Abasi and Akbari's (2008) study of seven L2 writers led them to conclude that

> The pedagogical emphasis on the display of mastery over the privileged literacies of their courses helped create a situation that encouraged the students to appropriate excessively from published sources.... Similarly, patchwriting at the global level of ideas seemed to be tied to the pedagogical positioning of students as writers without authority. This cueing of the rhetorical context in turn played a part in motivating the students to reproduce knowledge rather than construct it through making a reasoned claim. (p. 271)

Writers might also more effectively avoid plagiarism if it were their sole focus, but it is not. Shi (2008, p. 19) interviewed students who recognized ideas in their own writing as coming from a source but could not say whether or not they had paraphrased the source's wording. It is easy to imagine inexperienced academic writers taking their eyes off the source-use ball when there is so much else to learn about the writing process, as well as the content of the courses in which writing is done.

In short, the overarching lesson from L2 writing and plagiarism research so far is that much ''plagiarism'' is about learning: learning of academic and discipline-specific conventions for using and reporting sources; learning the phrases and patterns which *sound* like academic discourse; and learning to claim an authoritative position on the academic stage.

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