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The influence of culture and educational context on Chinese students' understandings of source use practices and plagiarism

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1. Introduction

Research on plagiarism and how to support students in their use of source material in their academic writing continues to expand and has covered a variety of topics and perspectives.

Most scholars now look beyond moral explanations as to why students engage in inappropriate textual borrowing (e.g., Howard, 1995; Pecorari, 2003; Pennycook, 1996), instead exploring complexities related to the second language (L2) writer's identity (Abasi, Akbari, & Graves, 2006), attempts to join a discourse community (Flowerdew & Li, 2007), or educational or cultural background, knowledge, or attitudes (Hu & Lei, 2012; Rinnert & Kobayashi, 2005). The concept has been reviewed from a critical perspective as well, calling attention to the role of power and privilege within plagiarism accusations (Lea & Street, 1998; Lyon, 2009).

This topic is particularly salient given that misunderstandings about plagiarism continue in spite of instruction (Flowerdew & Li, 2007; Wette, 2010) and suggestions for various educational strategies intended to eradicate it (Bikowski and Broeckelman, 2007; Dong, 1998). Students often express concerns over plagiarizing inadvertently and are unsure of Anglo-American academic expectations (Lea & Street, 1998). Many scholars recommend contextualizing plagiarism and its avoidance within the larger framework of effective writing, helping students understand cultural and social as well as technical aspects of source use (e.g., Bloch, 2008). As indicated by the growing number of students accused of plagiarism and calls for more practice-oriented research on how English L2 writers use source material (Wette, 2010), more understanding is needed on how students understand plagiarism and various ways that source material can be integrated into an author's text (i.e., source use practices).

This study addresses this need and focuses on undergraduate Chinese students. It has been suggested that students from Asian countries often struggle to learn source use practices and avoid plagiarism when they pursue studies in North America (Rinnert & Kobayashi, 2005). China, specifically, has been identified as a culture in which many do not share the Anglo-American notion of plagiarism and idea ownership (Sutherland-Smith, 2005) and as a population that merits further

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research in this area given the large numbers of Chinese students on American campuses (Bloch, 2001). Hu and Lei (2012) point out the need to conduct more research on students' knowledge and understanding regarding plagiarism outside of ESL contexts, such as in mainland China. This study therefore focuses on the Chinese student population, specifically on the role of culture and educational context, by examining how Chinese undergraduate students use Chinese terms to characterize source use practices. It seeks to situate conversations about this topic into broader discussions about cross-cultural education, using a more "nuanced approach" into the role of culture on textual borrowing and citation (Pecorari, 2008, p. 22) in order to be "mindful about cultural tendencies" (Connor, 2011, p. 35) in our teaching and to question the extent of the role of culture on L2 writers' textual borrowing practices.

2. Literature review

2.1. Culture and educational context in textual borrowing attitudes and behaviors

Definitions and interpretations of culture have been heavily contested in academia in general as well as within linguistics (Atkinson, 2015). A number of scholars have expressed concern over the damage that postcolonial (e.g., Kubota, 1999) and individualist (e.g., Spack, 1997) interpretations of culture can have on individual writers and the choices they make. These concerns are addressed by other scholars who respect these concerns, yet view culture as a necessary topic of discussion and see it as dynamic set of choices and behaviors that individuals negotiate within a cultural landscape (e.g., Atkinson & Sohn, 2013). One lens through which to view culture comes from Connor (2011), who sees it as the active interplay between large groups of people (e.g., countries or regions), smaller groups (e.g., disciplines), and individual variations.

Many researchers have discussed ways in which culture may affect L2 writers' citation practices, with the acknowledgement that its influence can be "hidden" (Gu & Brooks, 2008, p. 339). A key factor suggested has been differing values related to learning, for example the prioritization of synthesis and critical thinking in Western cultures vs. memorization of content in non-Western cultures (Chandrasegaran, 2000; Dryden, 1999). Similarly, weaving unattributed source words with personal voice as an "imitation" was seen as useful for learning in participants in China (Matalene, 1985, p. 803) but considered plagiarism in the West. Similar to values related to learning, other researchers look to differing concepts of ownership of ideas and common knowledge as they explore students' textual borrowing practices (Flowerdew & Li, 2007; Rinnert & Kobayashi, 2005). The practice of naming and thus highlighting the original writer can be considered less necessary, and thus perhaps less noticed, by students in Asian cultures (Shi, 2004). These values and concepts of ownership can affect students' attitudes about texts (Currie, 1998): Pennycook (1996) suggested that a Cantonese university student's attitude was "fundamentally different" from a cross-cultural perspective from the Western educational perspective (p. 227). An example of differing attitudes and their effect on source use practices comes from Rinnert and Kobayashi (2005). They found that Japanese university students may view unattributed copying as "not entirely negative" (p. 39) when the writer fully understands or agrees with the text or is using well-known source material.

Researchers have also advocated looking beyond cultural explanations for plagiarism, finding the concept of culture in general to be overly simplistic, deterministic, and leading to stereotyping. As a general principle, Kubota (1999) warns against using culture to stereotype L2 writers. Bloch (2008) strongly refutes the argument that plagiarism is "hardwired into our culture" (p. 263), points out socioeconomic and historic influences on the concept of intellectual property ownership, and argues that social factors must be considered in order to understand how various groups conceptualize plagiarism. Le Ha (2006) argues that culture is just one of many possible influences on students' source use and potential plagiarism, noting the importance of other factors such as stereotypes against students from Asian countries, different understandings of common knowledge, and insufficient training regarding academic writing. She calls for educators to learn about their students' writing experiences and background knowledge in order to "better assist international students in their writing without silencing their own voices and discouraging their creativity" (p. 78).

Other researchers also emphasize the role of academic development and enculturation into their academic community as influencing students' source use behaviors (Abasi et al., 2006; Angélil-Carter, 2000; Gu & Brooks, 2008). Song-Turner (2008) notes that students' views change over time—as students study longer in a Western educational institution, their definition of plagiarism moves closer to that of the Western view. The role of educational context (i.e., where the student is studying and the norms therefore placed on the student) is an important consideration that is closely linked to cultural expectations.

Hayes and Introna (2008) call for a "progressive and formative approach" toward helping students learn about academic source use expectations in avoiding plagiarism (p. 108). Similarly, Gu and Brooks (2008) call for "a holistic and developmental perspective" to "understand changes in students' perception of plagiarism as part of their wider adaptation to the academic conventions of their host countries"
(p. 337). Second language writing development thus entails developing literacy skills considered appropriate and effective in a specific cultural and educational context, with literacy seen as a social practice, not only as a technical skill (Connor, 2011). A component of developing these academic writing skills is learning to use L2 words in ways that conform with discourse community norms, and words from the writer's first language (L1) can reveal cultural understandings that may impact the development of literacy in the L2.

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