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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.

Is more research needed?

Given the gains that have been made in understanding plagiarism in L2 writing, an important question to ask is whether a further proliferation of research on the topic is called for. To the extent that a substantial portion of newer contributions to the body of literature amounts to more of the same, the answer is "no." In particular, we do not need more studies which approach plagiarism in the abstract. Interviewing or surveying students or teachers about their understandings of plagiarism, asking them about their source use behaviour, or asking abstract questions such as, "Is it acceptable to copy an entire sentence from a source without quotation marks?" cannot tell us much which is new. There is also no need for further studies which document student attitudes or behaviour in order to draw comparisons with an assumed homogeneous received view of acceptable source use.

These approaches can be found in early and valued contributions to the current body of literature, but do not bear repeating because they have already told us as much as they can. They also face methodological challenges, which means that their contributions to understanding plagiarism can only be indirect. Studies which assume a widely held received view of acceptable and unacceptable source use, and use it to examine the behaviour or beliefs of L2 writers, are not comparing like with like. Studies which ask about attitudes or behaviour in the abstract risk obscuring textual or contextual details which would have made a difference to answers. For example, when asked about whether it is appropriate to copy "a few words" without quotation marks, do all respondents understand "a few words" in the same way? If not, then their collective answers are not entirely informative.

The overarching issue is that plagiarism is a textual act which is understood as a transgression of principles to which key actors in a given domain broadly subscribe, but the avoidance of plagiarism involves mastery of a complex skill set, writing effectively from sources. In other words, understanding plagiarism requires situating the reality of the text in its context, including the skills and understandings of the writer who produced it and the perceptions of the discourse community for which it was produced. As plagiarism matures as a research area, approaches to examining it must also develop from mono-dimensional studies to ones which triangulate these perspectives. Four questions, in particular, are ripe for this richer, deeper treatment.

The first question concerns the role of culture: Do cultural differences, as has frequently been asserted, cause or at least contribute to plagiarism? The cultural explanation exists in both broad and specific forms. In its broadest form, it consists of an observation that "they" don't understand plagiarism the same way "we" do. Specific reasons for this include the idea that some cultures have a collectivist orientation which causes writers to believe that texts belong to a common pool of knowledge rather than to an individual writer whose proprietary interest is infringed when her/his work is copied. A second frequently mentioned reason is that some writers come from backgrounds which predispose them to show great deference to the authority of the teacher. This makes citation (the explanation goes) both unnecessary and potential offensive: the former because the teacher has an encyclopedic knowledge of key texts on a given topic and will recognize material from a source; the latter because citation would amount to suggesting the opposite, i.e., that the teacher is not sufficiently knowledgeable.

The cultural explanation has been at the heart of interest in plagiarism from the beginning. Yet what has been written on this topic has so far generated more heat than light. A number of studies have investigated learner attitudes or behaviour in a specific cultural context and then concluded that they are at odds with Western understandings of plagiarism, but these findings must be taken with a grain of salt, given that Western gatekeepers differ in their understandings of appropriate and inappropriate intertextualities (Pecorari & Shaw, 2012), and that Western students also plagiarize, for a range of complex and interrelated reasons (Blum, 2010) not always related to deliberate cheating. In other words, these studies can (in the best case, and when not handicapped by methodological problems) document attitudes or behaviour, but not square the circle and demonstrate that they are attributable to culture.

Other studies (e.g., Shi, 2006) have found differences among students from different backgrounds, but writers from different cultures are likely to be speakers of different first languages, have different degrees of proficiency in the language they are writing in, and come from different educational systems which teach the skills of academic writing to differing extents and in different ways. It is, in other words, very difficult to tease out culture from language and other background factors, and the importance of doing so is not purely theoretical: Alongside the published assertions that L2 writers have a different understanding of plagiarism than their L1 counterparts, there are denials of such claims from cultural insiders (e.g., Le Ha, 2006; Liu, 2005), as well as research findings which have been interpreted as casting doubt on cultural explanations (e.g., Hu & Lei, 2012; Wheeler, 2009). Work which triangulates the perspectives of readers and writers from different cultures with specific instances of source use could potentially shed useful light on a vexed question.

A second question for future plagiarism research in L2 writing relates to variation in the views of academic gatekeepers as to what should be allowed or prohibited, encouraged or discouraged. Are such differences systematic and attributable to factors such as academic discipline, or largely idiosyncratic? This is a pressing question because a great disparity of views among academics has potentially serious ramifications for students who may be penalised by one teacher for a writing strategy which was allowed, or at least tolerated, by another. Exposing the precise nature and causes of such differences would provide one remedy, and opening a fact-based discussion about whether and to what extent differences can be reconciled would provide another.

A third – and perhaps the most pressing – question for future L2 writing research on plagiarism is how to help students develop their writing in complex intertextual environments. In part this entails examining the role of plagiarism in the writer's development. Howard (1995) originally posited patchwriting not only as a transitory strategy but as one which advanced the writer's discoursal development: Through *mimesis* the novice writer can try on the cloak of scholarly language and learn to feel comfortable in it. At the lexical and phraseological end of the spectrum we know that repetition is conducive to learning. Yet the body of research on plagiarism in L2 writing, while concluding that it has a variety of causes other than deliberate cheating – and thus resembles patchwriting – has concentrated on its problematic aspects. A more specific question, then, is whether students who are encouraged to patchwrite can become better, autonomous writers?

One obvious reason for this gap in the research literature is that patchwriting is commonly treated as an offense deserving punishment; even if individual teachers may take a tolerant view of it, a significant risk exists that patchwriting could cause a writer to incur the penalties imposed for deceptive plagiarism. However, the difficulty of investigating source-dependent writing as a potential resource has left a significant gap in what we know about plagiarism in L2 writing. Other work investigating effective methods to help writers develop in this area is also needed.

Effective interventions would be particularly welcome with respect to a fourth and final question which could benefit from further research: How does intention interact with the developmental aspects of source use? If patchwriting and deceptive plagiarism can be distinguished in their origins and causes, it is likely that both can be ameliorated by enabling students to become more confident, proficient writers. There is also room for research aimed at improving our understanding of the role of intention. This may be a surprising claim, given that the existing research evidence supports the idea that some plagiarism is unintentional, and this evidence sits well with the perceptions of many L2 writing teachers. However, in the case of a given writer accused of plagiarism, the type of evidence available is likely to be indirect and circumstantial. In addition, the distinction between deliberately deceptive plagiarism and unintentional mistakes is likely to be an oversimplification in many cases, perhaps most. Writers may, for instance, use a source-dependent writing strategy with the awareness that it is less than best practice, but not be aware that a teacher may regard it as a serious breach of ethics. A finer-grained understanding of the workings of intention would therefore be useful.

Where next?

Swales (1990) showed that a gap in the existing research literature is one justification for the need for a research article, but of course not all gaps are in equal need of filling. The catalogue of unanswered questions above is far from complete, as it is restricted to those of particular significance. In the case of plagiarism, I wish to argue that the L2 writing community can have the greatest impact not by producing research to address every identifiable gap in the literature, but by spreading it existing findings beyond the L2 writing community, and by using them to generate solutions in the many contexts in which plagiarism is a real or perceived problem.

The fact that this has not already happened is in part due to the fact that plagiarism research in L2 writing has itself been somewhat closed to influences from other areas, and that may in turn be attributable to the prominence of the cultural explanation (mentioned above) since a logical concomitant of that view is a to treat L2 writers as a special case. This has led to a degree of isolationism, and to neglect of the fact that there is a burgeoning plagiarism literature from other perspectives. Plagiarism has been addressed in fields as diverse as composition (e.g., Howard, Serviss, & Rodrigue, 2010), higher education theory and policy (e.g., Park, 2003), ethics (Roig, 2001), bibliometrics, and information science (e.g., Jackson, 2006). Research on plagiarism also appears in journals with a focus on pedagogical issues within specific disciplines such as psychology (Landau, Druen, & Arcuri, 2002), medicine (Bilić-Zulle, Frković, Turk, Ažman, & Petrovečki, 2005), engineering (Yeo, 2007) and political science (Braumoeller & Gaines, 2001). However, at the risk of generalising, many researchers on plagiarism in other disciplines appear (to judge from reference lists) broadly unaware of the voluminous body of research on plagiarism in L2 (and L1) writing. The voices of writing specialists are too often missing from that conversation.

Nor is it only to research domains that we can contribute. The fact that research on plagiarism is published in outlets with a subject-pedagogical focus illustrates that that work is driven by a need for an answer to an extremely pragmatic question: "How do we stop our students from doing this?" Writing specialists should be contributing to an answer. We know some of the things that cause plagiarism, we know that it is not possible to eliminate plagiarism without enabling students to write effectively and appropriately, and we know the skills that students need to do so. We know as well that to a great extent we can teach our way out of the problem, and teaching to improve writing performance is in our sweet spot. Sharing that knowledge across the university would help our colleagues to help their students.

The accumulated body of knowledge on this topic has administrative implications as well. Davis' (2013) longitudinal study of postgraduate writers found that some used patchwriting, and concluded that the "findings call into question whether international students achieve a competent level of source use over the two-year period of the Pre-Master's EAP and postgraduate programmes" (p. 132). This conclusion is likely to square with the perceptions of many teachers in financially pressed institutions where admissions policies are decided with targets and budgets front of mind, and students are routinely admitted who have not been well prepared for success in their programs. Second language writing specialists know that patchwriting can be adopted to compensate for limitations on discoursal and linguistic skills: Students who are admitted to degree programmes taught in English with a low proficiency level are likely candidates to become patchwriters. Yet headline-catching university plagiarism scandals (not infrequently involving L2 writers) are testimony to the fact that in many institutions our voices are not heard by those who shape policy.

Nor is plagiarism the sole concern of academic institutions. In any professional or vocational sphere which involves the production of texts, from newspapers to sales proposals to annual reports, the fundamental questions related to plagiarism are relevant. To what extent is it conventional and/or acceptable to incorporate elements of other texts? What must be done by way of signalling or acknowledgement to make that use appropriate? These are questions which plagiarism research has investigated in an academic context, and writing teachers are skilled at enabling developing writers to learn to find answers to them. If it is true that the area of L2 writing has concentrated on academic texts at the expense of those from other fields (Belcher, 2012, 2013), there is no obvious reason why it should be so, and with regard to plagiarism it is easy to argue for the potential usefulness of the L2 writing literature outside the academic arena.

In short, while there are still useful additions to be made to the body of research on plagiarism in L2 writing, of at least equal importance is disseminating the findings of existing work. Second language writing is very much an applied field, but the research described above is not so much applied as potentially applicable. What readers of this journal know about plagiarism ought to permeate the university and shape policy and practice at all levels, from admissions to disciplinary boards and most especially how colleagues across the academic subject areas assign, coach, and assess student writing, and then extend beyond the university as well.

Eliot (1920), whose prominent use of intertextuality has been viewed alternatively as literary allusion or plagiarism, famously proclaimed the virtues of textual theft in a commentary on the borrowings of Philip Massinger:

> Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion. (1920, p. 125)

A good poet, according to Eliot (1920), works from found materials: The test of quality is in the originality of the result, not the raw ingredients. In the case of plagiarism research, it is my contention that the L2 writing community should adopt the strategy of good poets, and do with what we have – a substantial body of knowledge about plagiarism – something we are relatively unaccustomed to doing: turn it into applications.

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