Proceedings of the Edinburgh Linguistics Department Conference '96 pp. **142–149**

Plagiarism and questionable appropriation of text by non-native speaker students in taught postgraduate courses: views and experiences of postgraduate staff

John Philip Lesko
9400219@mull.sms.ed.ac.uk

Abstract

In a survey of 21 postgraduate staff from 14 Edinburgh University departments, respondents expressed their views on plagiarism in the academic writing of non-native speakers and related their experience in dealing with such plagiarism when it occurred. This in-progress report summarises these views and suggests some possible preliminary generalisations. Although the views of staff varied widely, for those staff who had encountered plagiarism in the writing of their non-native speaker students, the common thread seemed to be the borderline English academic writing proficiency of the student.

1 Introduction

My interest in studying plagiarism stems first of all from experience in teaching academic writing to both native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) students, throughout which experience I have seen students, NS and NNS alike, grapple with the concept of plagiarism while trying to master academic conventions of source acknowledgement and attribution. My interest also stems from a fascination with the strong reactions and hostility that inevitably result when suspicious appropriation of text is discovered. ESL/EFL students are 'frequently viewed by Western instructors as persistent plagiarisers' (Deckert 1993:131), and one of my questions is *why*? Why are NNSs seen as persistent plagiarists?

As part of my general research into plagiarism and questionable appropriation of text by NNSs, my objective in surveying Edinburgh University staff was to investigate views and experiences of those who evaluate the students' writing. One of my goals in conducting the survey was to complement results of a questionnaire (still being conducted) investigating student views and conceptualisations of academic plagiarism.

Having heard many anecdotal cases of plagiarism involving NNSs and having read experiences other writing teachers and researchers have had with NNSs and plagiarism (Deckert 1993; Matalene 1985; Pennycook 1994; Scollon 1995; Yao 1991), one of my assumptions prior to undertaking this survey was that survey respondents would be able to provide insights from their encounters with appropriation activity among NNSs. I also hoped that I might obtain actual student texts to analyse. This in fact was one of my main purposes in conducting the survey—to obtain texts and samples of plagiarism that had been discovered by instructors in students' writing.

So by analysing student texts, by investigating student views and conceptualisations of plagiarism, and by investigating staff experiences with textual appropriation activity among NNSs, I hope to put together a coherent picture of this very complex issue. This in-progress report will deal mainly with results obtained from staff questionnaires and interviews.

2 Data collection

2.1 Difficulties encountered

Questionnaires and surveys are not without their problems. One problem in particular that has come up with this touchy area of inquiry has been a hesitancy on the part of some university staff to talk about plagiarism for fear of bringing out the departmental 'dirty laundry'.

Another difficulty encountered was that some staff did not have the time to complete even a brief questionnaire and confessed quite freely that if I did send one, it would end up in the bin. To overcome this difficulty I conducted a guided interview with such respondents by telephone, asking for the same information requested in the questionnaire.

2.2 Survey participants

21 postgraduate MSc course co-ordinators and senior lecturers in 14 university departments were surveyed, 13 by questionnaire and 8 by guided interview. My premise in restricting the survey to taught MSc courses was that students would have more frequently evaluated writing assignments than in a research degree course. Students would have more opportunity to plagiarise, and more chance of being discovered in the regularly evaluated take home exams, essays and dissertations of an MSc taught course.

2.3 The questionnaire (see Appendix)

In the two page open-ended questionnaire and in the guided interviews, I asked for the participants' general impression of the English academic writing ability of incoming NNSs. I also inquired as to what kind of assistance was available for students struggling with their writing assignments, what common strategies and processes students used in fulfilling writing tasks, and what sort of training/instruction was given to prepare students for academic writing. More specifically to the point, I queried respondents as to whether this training and instruction included guidance on the avoidance of plagiarism and whether students faced any difficulties in fulfilling writing tasks. Also, I asked whether the respondents had come across any recent (past 5 years) instances of questionable appropriation of text, and if so I requested the brief details with the intention of following up on such a lead in the hope of obtaining copies of the student texts in question. Finally the respondents' advice was sought regarding how a case of plagiarism involving a NNS should be dealt with. Survey participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and that no department or individual would be mentioned by name.

3 Results and preliminary generalisations

3.1 Tentative generalisations subject to further validation

Although the research is continuing as more staff are surveyed in other universities, it seems possible to make some preliminary generalisations. Preliminary observations and generalisations are as follows. First, in every case of plagiarism that I have come across and had access to the student texts in question (about 9 so far with several current leads to follow up on), the student had, in the view of the staff respondent, a low proficiency in English academic writing. Second, each individual case is different and usually more complex and complicated than originally imagined. Third, when persistent plagiarism occurs among NNSs, it is more than likely a survival strategy adopted by the student to avoid failing the course.

3.2 Borderline writing proficiency

Respondents saw weaker students as the ones facing problems with source acknowledgement and attribution. Such students, according to one respondent, 'write in note form and have no idea how to structure an essay.' These students had difficulties with basic academic writing. For instance, structuring essays in paragraph form and making clear distinctions between quotations and paraphrased material presented great trouble for them. Another respondent adds that 'many attempt to incorporate "chunks" of text from references and join them together unchanged ... [but] ... fewer will successfully link these up with their own words.' One MSc dissertation went on for page after page with no paragraphing and with obviously lifted phrases and sentences written in well structured 'academese' (academic jargon) interspersed with the student's own non-native style of writing with no clear acknowledgement or references to other sources.

One senior lecturer reported that in his view, plagiarism was an indication that a student should not have been admitted to the course in the first place. Comments made on an early draft of Student A's MSc dissertation illustrate the borderline academic writing proficiency in question:

> **Student A:**
>
> Is the following paragraph a quote or a paraphrase by you? If the former, then it must be indented and shown as a quote with a page number. You make it impossible to know if these are Sanderson's words or yours.

> Is this paragraph a quote from someone? There are no sources given for it. A lot of this seems very derivative.
>
> Why on earth can you not present your work in simple paragraphs? This paragraph runs for a couple pages.
>
> Much of this great long paragraph does not seem like your own work. I hope you realise you cannot use the actual sentences of someone else without putting them in quotation marks ...

... and on and on chapter after chapter in Student A's early draft of an MSc dissertation. Consider also these comments made on a course project submitted by Student B:

> **Student B:**
>
> Substantial use has been made in your text of extended unacknowledged quotation from at least one published source. Can I point out that including a reference in a bibliography is not a sufficient acknowledgement of material which has been taken from that source and used verbatim in your own text.

When asked to resubmit the project, Student B sought help from an IALS (Institute for Applied Language Studies) writing tutor in coming up with a new version of the project. Student B's writing tutor remarked that 'the new version consisted of more or less copied material' and that the student's writing 'was in fact conceptually incoherent.' In these two examples, borderline academic writing proficiency is clearly the root cause of these students' difficulties in avoiding plagiarism.

3.3 Complexity of individual cases of plagiarism

Borderline academic writing proficiency is not the only factor involved however. Scollon (1995:2) speculates that in some cases 'differences in cultural traditions may be at issue in what are at first couched as straightforward problems of plagiarism.'

The complexity of individual cases becomes apparent when a student is confronted. In one case I investigated, the student claimed that his work sounded so derivative because he had thoroughly memorised material from course texts and study materials. Does memorisation equal plagiarism when material that has been thoroughly memorised becomes indistinguishable in the student's own mind from his or her own words and thoughts to the extent that the student's writing becomes a 'mish-mash' of NS and NNS style?

Consider also the view held by one respondent that some of his students' derivative work stems from the cultural tradition of adhering to established authorities, and thus students are reluctant to change the wording of course handouts. Teachers may then find later that their lecture notes have been regurgitated word for word on course exams.

Students from highly mimetic cultures and from cultures in which adherence to established authorities is expected, may face difficulty in adapting to Western academic writing conventions. Such was the observation of Yao in her study of the academic writing processes of Taiwanese postgraduates:

> The subjects in the present study came from a culture where learning means memorizing other's words and ideas, and anything published is public. In that academic community, students do not have authority, teachers do. To report knowledge, students are allowed to use the exact words from other texts without citing references. When they write in the L2, they tend to transfer their L1 learning skill to the new situation. As most of them lacked confidence in their own L2 proficiency, the temptation of using the other author's words was often irresistible, particularly when they were criticizing and/or summarizing the other's text. (1991:162-163)

We should note here that Yao mentions both proficiency and differing cultural traditions as factors in the plagiarism she observed in the writing of these students.

The complexity of each individual plagiarism case makes broad generalisations difficult, but it seems that in most persistent cases where the student continued to plagiarise after repeated warnings, the L2 proficiency played a greater role than differing cultural traditions The floundering students used textual appropriation as a survival strategy, not necessarily transferring rhetorical strategies from the native culture.

3.4 Plagiarism as a survival strategy

Survival strategies used by floundering students included relatively minor offences such as incorporation of chunks of text from references and joining the chunks together unchanged. This type of appropriation is obvious because the style of writing changes. More serious offences involving greater amounts of appropriated texts involved copying from books, journals, postgraduate dissertations held in the library, and occasionally essays of previous years. In one case, a course co-ordinator said that a diploma project had apparently been borrowed from a college student in England. The project was then reformulated and submitted for an Edinburgh MSc. In all of these cases, surviving the demands of the course seemed to be the reason for students resorting to plagiarism as a coping strategy. As more questionnaires are coming in, this observation still stands. A student at St. Andrews University, after being confronted with plagiarism in her work, confessed to 'finding herself daunted by the standard required and aimed for.' The respondent who dealt with this particular case speculated that 'plagiarism by NNS students is probably caused by a desire to do well.'

Another Edinburgh respondent emphasised that in some cases, students resort to plagiarism as a survival strategy not because they are incapable of completing a particular assignment in a satisfactory manner, but because they may be incapable of satisfactorily completing multiple assignments in a short time period. For example, with several course projects due at nearly the same time and with a deadline to meet for a difficult take-home exam, students may succumb to that 'irresistible temptation' to use plagiarism as a survival strategy.

4 Summary and implications

Considering that borderline academic writing proficiency is a factor in every case of plagiarism encountered as a result of this survey, it seems clear that Mohan and Lo (1985) have a sound basis for understanding NNS writing difficulties in terms of developmental factors.

This is not to say that differing cultural traditions do not figure into the equation at all. The cultural background of NNS students adds to the complexity of plagiarism cases and makes the unravelling of such cases more difficult. However, the predominant view among survey respondents was that the weak or borderline students were the ones facing difficulty with plagiarism, and that cultural background, although helping to explain some cases of plagiarism, should not excuse it.

Now back to the question, 'Why are ESL/EFL students perceived by Western instructors to be persistent plagiarists?' From my experience in teaching NS students the conventions of academic writing, I can say that I would have characterised many of them as persistent plagiarists. My students were first year university freshman, needing initiation into the techniques for writing academic essays. It would have been easy to characterise the whole lot of them as persistent plagiarists. However, this would been unfair on the one hand to the students who had mastered source acknowledgement and citation conventions (but who slipped up once in a while), and on the other hand it would have been unfair to the students who were taking a bit longer to learn these conventions. These developing writers needed much guidance, some more than others, in mastering academic writing conventions.

Perhaps this is one reason NNS students are seen as persistent plagiarists. The ones with definite problems stand out in our minds, and because most ESL/EFL students are in effect developing writers, occasional slip-ups occur. Thus NNSs in general are stereotyped as persistent plagiarists. Lending support to this suggestion are those survey respondents who saw no difference in their views on and experiences with plagiarism in the writing of native versus non-native speakers. In their view it was just as much of a problem for NSs as NNSs.

NSs, in their development as writers, go through heavily derivative and imitative stages, depending on examples of how a certain type of writing should be carried out. And there is good reason to believe that the same is true for NNSs. NNSs in the early stages of developing academic writing skills will certainly face difficulties and may resort for whatever reason to plagiaristic activity, as NSs may do. In fact, during the course of my research, several NNSs have insisted that their NS counterparts are just as worthy of the term 'persistent plagiarist', citing examples of appropriation activity they had witnessed among NSs. Covering up such appropriation and smoothing over the stitched-together texts being easier for a proficient NS than a less proficient NNS may be another reason such appropriation stands out more to Western instructors, because it is spotted easier.

The research is continuing, and it remains to be seen whether these preliminary generalisations and observations will stand the test of further staff and student surveys.

References

Deckert, G. 1993. Perspectives on plagiarism from ESL students in Hong Kong. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 2: 131–48.

Matalene, C. 1985. Contrastive rhetoric: an American writing teacher in China. *College English* 47: 789–808.

Pennycook, A. 1994. The complex contexts of plagiarism: a reply to Deckert. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 3(3): 277–284.

Scollon, R. 1995. Plagiarism and ideology: identity in intercultural discourse. *Language in Society* 24: 1–28.

Yao, L. 1991. *Writing in English for Academic Purposes: case studies of four Taiwanese graduate students*. PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota.

Appendix: Questionnaire on the academic writing challenges faced by non-native speakers of English

Instructions: The following questions are of the free-response type. Please respond as you feel appropriate, using the overleaf or extra sheets of paper as necessary.

1. What is your general impression of the English academic writing ability of incoming non-native speakers of English (NNS) to your course?

2. What kind of assistance is available for students who may need help with their academic writing skills?

3. What are some common writing strategies and processes that your NNS students use in fulfilling their writing assignments?

4. What kind of training/instruction do you give your students in preparing them for their academic writing tasks? Does this training/instruction include guidance on the importance of source attribution and acknowledgement, and the avoidance of plagiarism?

5. Are there any difficulties that your NNS students face in fulfilling their writing assignments for your course?

6. Are you aware of any recent (past five years) instances of questionable appropriation of text, plagiarism, or difficulties with source acknowledgement and attribution in the writing of NNS students? (Note: I would also be interested in any other instances you have come across as a result of evaluating the writing of NNSs throughout your career.)

7. If you have come across cases as mentioned above, could you give the brief details of the case(s) in which you were involved?

8. What advice would you give to an administrator on a case of suspected plagiarism involving a non-native speaking overseas student? Should the cultural background of the student be considered? What other factors should the administrator take into consideration prior to making a decision on the case?

Additionally the following information would be helpful for me to get in touch with you regarding any questions I might have about your responses:

a. department___________________________________
b. name and professional status____________________
c. telephone number____________________________