

## Plagiarism and the culture of multilingual students in higher education abroad

Colin Sowden

*The cultural values of multilingual students are sometimes at variance with Western academic practice, in matters such as plagiarism. In accepting this, however, it is important to avoid stereotyping. Instead we should respect and make use of the students' own traditions of study. It is also time to acknowledge that ideas and language are necessarily derivative, and to take account of this in our understanding of plagiarism. Plagiarism itself can be discouraged by the use of oral presentations, both as a means of improving language control, and as a tool within the overall assessment process. In addition, attention should be given to students' unfamiliarity with concepts which are culturally conditioned.*

### Background

In English language teaching today cultural appropriacy seems to have replaced appropriate methodology as the key concern in the classroom. In the field of EAP the question of how best to train non-native speakers to imitate the work of competent native speakers has given way to discussion of whether such a goal is legitimate or even desirable. It is against the background of this shift of emphasis that the issue of plagiarism among multilingual students has attracted increasing attention. In particular, there has been debate about the role of the students' own culture in explaining the phenomenon, and it is this relationship which I wish to explore in this paper. In doing so I make a distinction between the plagiarism of ideas and the plagiarism of language, which do not always go together. I also distinguish between the issue of ownership of text (a matter of copyright) and the issue of originality (a matter of authenticity), and focus on the second.

### The culture factor

It is certainly possible to identify values and practices among certain groups of multilingual students which contradict established notions of plagiarism in the West, especially in countries with an Anglo-Saxon heritage. Among these is the idea of the communal ownership of knowledge. Pecorari (2001: 145) reports a conversation with a group of Japanese students in which a tutor questions their failure to cite an author whose arguments they had used in their assignments. They replied that since what the author said was obviously true, his name did not need to be mentioned. In other words, the author's insights, having

achieved the status of common sense, had thereby entered the field of common knowledge, and no longer belonged to him exclusively. A similar point could be made about Chinese academic norms, which are the result in part of a long tradition of reproducing Confucian teachings in civil service exams. The philosopher's words were known by and belonged to everyone, and being able to reproduce them, without citation, in place of your own, was considered an appropriate, even laudable strategy.

Another cultural characteristic which is likely to prove awkward here is the idea that good students do not challenge their teachers or other authorities, but faithfully copy and reproduce them. As Cortazzi and Jin (1997: 78) say, speaking particularly of China, 'A learner's duty is to understand and master what those in authority say, as transmission, before any independence of mind or creativity in a field can be expected'. In the same vein, Ballard (1996: 155) reports an exchange between a Politics lecturer in an Australian university and a Japanese student. When the latter

was asked 'What is your opinion about these two conflicting interpretations of the reasons for the Great Depression?', his reply, 'But I do not have an opinion—I am student', reflected genuine cultural bewilderment.

Closely connected with this perception of roles is the idea of there being a correct answer to every question, which it is the teacher's duty to provide and the student's duty to learn. There is little tolerance of uncertainty. From this perspective, plagiarism can be seen as a virtue: producing what you know to be correct. In contrast, speculating with ideas which may be incorrect will tend to be viewed as pointless or even dangerous.

Yet a further difference which is relevant is the assumed role of the individual student vis-à-vis their fellow students. In many cultures, especially those of Asia, achieving group consensus is more important than demonstrating one's own understanding and abilities. Such an attitude, of course, has deep socio-psychological roots. Speaking of the Japanese, Dorji (2001: 63) says that they 'learn from an early age to always consider themselves in relation to the group as a whole for, what are, essentially, Confucian ideas of hierarchy, extend into the realm of the family', and this thinking is reflected in their behaviour in the classroom. Such an approach to learning is greatly at odds with what is expected of students in most countries in the West, where individual effort and self-reliance are considered meritorious, and mutual assistance is not encouraged outside strict boundaries. As Thorpe says (1991: 113) in reference to Chinese students:

. . . there are cultural differences in the definition of what constitutes doing one's own work, not only as far as help from a tutor is concerned, but also over the question of whether or not students may write collaboratively and claim a piece of work as their own.

It is not unreasonable to assume that a culture which tolerates the idea of students sharing knowledge and responsibility in this way, is one which

## The danger of stereotyping

is less likely to discourage copying and the appropriation of ideas from other sources without acknowledgement.

Such generalizations about cultural background and its influence do need to be taken seriously, but we must beware of them degenerating into stereotypes. As Phan Le Ha (2004: 52) comments, after having listed the kinds of study behaviour usually associated with the East (her term):

The above notions of Asian students and teachers are not necessarily false, but they are inherently problematic and misleading . . . they only seem to touch upon the surface without understanding it sufficiently. There is much more going on under the surface in respect to terms such as 'rote learning' . . .

Therefore, while maintaining an awareness of cultural predispositions on the part of multilingual students, we must be careful how we interpret the behaviour; we must also remember that groups defined by nation, culture or language are not homogenous, but composed of individuals who are not all alike.

Individual differences obviously exist: family background, the degree of exposure to foreign ideas, aptitude, previous learning experiences and personality will, among other factors, variously influence a student's approach to their new academic environment. Speaking of Chinese students, Harris (1997: 43) maintains that 'many are serialist learners by acculturation not personal inclination'; given the opportunity, they will respond positively to alternative approaches with which by nature they are more in sympathy. Harris goes on to conclude: 'if this is correct, it follows that it is feasible to bring such students to a point of greater learning versatility by the use of educational techniques designed to do just that'. He makes the further point that multilingual students may well cling to their traditional academic methods because, being in a new culture, they need to have a sense of security, but will become more flexible as their confidence increases. Furthermore, these methods also provide for that gradual accumulation of knowledge, which will allow them to take a broader, more critical approach to their studies at a later stage.

The attitudes and expectations of multilingual students with respect to the host culture will also vary considerably between individuals of similar origin. James (1980: 13) identifies three distinct types here: those who aim to make minimal change; those who aim to be bi-cultural; those who aim to identify totally with the foreign context. These aims in turn inform specific attitudes towards the learning process, fellow students, the special subject, academic staff, and so on. If we agree that culture can play a determining role in the matter of plagiarism, and if we also accept James' typology, then we can expect that those students in the third group, who are already predisposed to adopt new academic values, will respond well to the challenges presented by their new academic environment. However, those who fall within the first group will tend to be more resistant to change and adaptation. It may very well be that those with a strong integrationist motivation towards their new place of study

will be less inclined to practise plagiarism than those who are not and more willing to accept the prevailing academic values.

### **Bridging the gap**

The usual way of responding to the perceived culture gap facing multilingual students is that followed in most EAP programmes, which is to encourage them to adopt the norms of their host culture, including those relating to the issues of plagiarism, and to become adept at the skills that this involves. This process may be loosely termed ‘apprenticeship’ (Canagarajah 2002: 31). Such an approach certainly has pragmatic value since it fosters behaviour which will be recognized and rewarded by their new institution. At the same time, though, it assumes that the host culture will naturally replace that of the student, and that the latter will willingly collaborate in this process. Perhaps instead multilingual students would benefit from preserving what they find most useful from their own vernacular culture, both general and academic, while also striving to assimilate what is best from their new context. In this way they can draw on their existing strengths while developing new ones.

Such an approach is what Cortazzi and Jin (1997: 88) term ‘cultural synergy’, arguing that compromise rather than conversion should be the goal: both teachers and students need to be aware of cultural differences in the academic context and to respond in a way which respects the integrity of the different traditions. Multilingual students can learn to operate in both cultures, adopting in effect two personae, which are deployed as occasion demands. This is an outcome which Zamel (1997: 347) also anticipates when advocating what she refers to as ‘transculturation’. Thus, when discussing plagiarism, Todd (1997: 182) comments, ‘It is possible we may be able to move to a position where we can allow overseas students to write in ways more consistent with their cultures without losing sight of our own ways of writing and thinking’.

A greater openness in this respect might cause some academic norms to be reformulated. Consider, for example, memorization, which is a familiar technique among learners from a Confucian background. Instead of being viewed as an end in itself, as it might appear to an uncritical observer, it should rather be viewed as a means to an end, not concerned with superficial, short-term retention, but as a way of gaining deep understanding of a topic through respect for and mastery of a key text (see Pennycook 1998: 222). This reflects the tradition that enlightenment comes through approximation to an established wisdom rather than by means of individual enterprise. Indeed, it may well be that a concern for promoting critical thinking has meant that memorization (as in chanting times tables or conning poems by heart for the purpose of recitation), which a generation ago in Britain, for example, was considered a vital component of learning, has been undeservedly neglected in more recent times. Indeed Chan and Drover (1997: 59) argue that:

the achievements of students from Confucian heritage cultures suggest that staff in Western educational institutions may also benefit

from revisiting some of the formal approaches to teaching which they have largely repudiated.

Canagarajah (*ibid.*: 35) adds a further dimension to this question. He argues that students may need to retain the integrity of their own discourse in the new academic context in order to preserve a proper sense of identity. He says that:

. . . students may see a need to resist academic discourse when they sense the power it enjoys historically, with bad previous experiences of objectifying their communities, providing them subordinate positions, and even leading to the domination of minority cultures.

He refers (*ibid.*: 41) approvingly to Prior's ethnography, which envisages the multilingual student maintaining in parallel both their own vernacular discourse and that of the host community, until the virtues and benefits of the latter are absorbed without detriment to the former. Indeed, the benefit will flow in both directions:

the authoritative discourse of the expert gradually becomes the internally persuasive discourse of the student, just as the former itself slightly changes in light of the new experiences introduced by the student.

### How original can we be?

While the above responses to the question of plagiarism may be valid, they do not address the matter at its most fundamental level. Producing academic text, like producing everyday language, is never entirely an original process, but is manifestly dependent on what already exists in the public domain or in the writer's or speaker's own repertoire. Indeed, the idea of lexical chunking as an underlying mechanism by which language is generated presupposes that we rarely make an entirely original utterance. This will be especially true when we are striving to achieve command of a particular kind of discourse in order to gain entry to a particular community. As Ivanic (1998: 3) says:

The only way an apprentice member can learn to become a full member is by copying, adapting and synthesizing from the works of other members.

With this in mind, the student writer will naturally model their output on specific examples that they have already encountered, and cannot really do otherwise.

As far as the originality of ideas is concerned, we need to be aware that, in the general sense just mentioned, we all plagiarize. (What, indeed, would be the point of handing out a reading list at the beginning of a course if we did not accept this fact?) This practice can be justified by the notion of intertextuality: that at one level or another, in language and ideas, new texts are almost inevitably derivative. However, exploiting other people's ideas, like absorbing examples of language we have encountered and committed to memory, does not preclude originality in their use. The ways in which these items are subsequently combined, and recombined, will rarely be identical, since one individual is not likely to exactly mimic another in a sustained fashion unless they

have deliberately chosen to do so. Being authentic in this way, though, is by no means easy, even for someone working in their first language. As Scollon comments (1995: 22): to be original 'is possible only as a struggle to achieve that voice in an internal discourse of voices borrowed from society'. At the same time, there is but a fine line dividing what may be considered valid intertextuality and deliberate copying. Perhaps, indeed, a distinction can only be made if one takes into account the student's intent, in their choosing whether to make use of the skills and strategies which they have at their disposal. It is this consideration, of course, which can give the matter a moral dimension, and so render it liable to heated debate.

It could therefore be argued that if a student, multilingual or otherwise, is creating original text by use of another's ideas or language, then this should be recognized as a valid procedure, and encouraged in the same way that we would praise efforts at second language production based on memorized lexis reproduced in a grammatically and contextually appropriate way. Naturally in such cases students should be aided to develop a correct method of citation and attribution, in order to ensure that the norms recognized by the host academic culture are properly observed. Most importantly, perhaps, multilingual students should be assisted in the development of their second language skills, and strict course entry requirements in this regard should be enforced. If, on the other hand, there is a deliberate choice not to make use of known skills (whatever the reason for this might be, which itself will need addressing), then the charge of plagiarism in its full sense needs to be upheld. This is so not primarily because of concern for intellectual property rights, but so that students will be obliged to demonstrate understanding of the topic in question by articulating related arguments with the degree of originality just outlined.

Such a recommendation, of course, invites the natural response that a student's motives are not self-evident, and that if such a policy regarding plagiarism were adopted in an institution of higher education, it would render impossible a fair and objective assessment of academic writing assignments. In addition, there would be little incentive for students, particularly multilingual ones, to improve their language and text-handling skills. Furthermore, such a response might fail to take sufficient account of the obstacles presented to multilingual students by their own cultural mindset, the overall schema with which they view and interpret the world. Over and above the uncertainty which all undergraduates experience when dealing with new topics, multilingual students may find some of the concepts that they meet alien to their way of thinking, and may therefore lack the cognitive framework to deal with them adequately. This will then present a problem as far as the related language is concerned because, as Scollon (*ibid.*: 16) says, 'language operates from an underlying metaphorical structure which reproduces . . . a conceptual orientation to the world'. In other words, students whose conceptual framework is limited in this way, will find it very difficult to write originally about certain unfamiliar concepts, even in the sense outlined above.

## A practical suggestion

Perhaps these problems can never be fully resolved, but they can be addressed. Parallel assessment procedures, such as *viva voce* interviews, can be introduced where wilful plagiarism is suspected; greater use can be made of oral presentations, both as an alternative to written assignments or as a formative step in the process of producing an assessed piece of writing; regular progress tests can be held, for both formative and summative purposes. Oral presentations are a particularly useful way for students to improve and demonstrate their mastery of a subject, and they favour students with good memorization skills, as do progress tests. They require an organization of ideas similar to that demanded in an essay, but in language which is likely to be simpler and more direct, and hence more manageable. Moreover, the need to reduce complex ideas obtained from written sources to speech will inevitably force the students to use their own words, even though they may not be using their own ideas, thus largely avoiding the inevitable temptation to plagiarize that comes when writing.

Of course, oral presentations have difficulties of their own, and may contain plagiarism too, but a flexible range of assessment criteria, which reflect the quality of delivery, the rhetorical structure and the use of visual aids, as well as command of the subject-matter, will usually ensure that the overall mark is appropriate. In the first year of an undergraduate programme, performance in presentations and progress tests can be scored, and the mark included in the final assessment. The criteria for written work, the traditional essay or project assignment, must remain strict as far as plagiarism is concerned, thus encouraging students to improve in this area. Work on language and study skills will continue, and the students' command of English should improve. In the next year of the programme, the marks awarded for oral presentations and progress tests will decline as a proportion of the overall total, until in the third year, assessment will be by written work alone. End-of-year exams, too, will play an important role in cross-checking student scores obtained from coursework.

In order to help multilingual students overcome their unfamiliarity with new topics and meet the challenge presented by concepts which may appear alien, subject-specific support, if not already available, should be provided in addition to the more generic skills training which is usually offered. Students can begin by verbalizing concepts with which they are familiar before trying to articulate ones which are new and unfamiliar. Such a proposal, of course, has obvious implications for the design and delivery of support programmes. It would certainly involve a great degree of collaboration between EAP and subject tutors. However, the benefits would be considerable both in helping reduce plagiarism and in ensuring that the academic institution takes a greater account of different world-views. This is one example of how cultural readjustment by what might be seen as the dominant culture may be required and achieved. In this way historical imbalances and present diversities can be discovered and respected, and learning can become a two-way process.

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