

Connecting with the academic community through appropriate appropriation of sources: Avoiding the mistake of plagiarism

Dr Cally Guerin

Based on conference presentation, ACTA, Darwin, June 2008

Abstract

Plagiarism continues to be a difficult concept for EAL students learning to write academic English. This article argues that an approach which focuses more on the development of the students' authorial voices might help them avoid making the kind of mistakes that hinder their connection with the community of their academic discipline. By thinking about plagiarism as a "mistake", we can move beyond a discourse of crime and punishment to one focused on learning about "appropriate appropriation". The article examines some of the possible reasons EAL students plagiarise and offers suggestions for several strategies to help students develop an authorial voice.

Introduction

Plagiarism continues to be a difficult concept for EAL students learning to write academic English. Despite EAL teachers' attempts to explain the complexities of appropriate citation and use of secondary sources, students at both secondary and tertiary level continue to make mistakes in this aspect of their writing. This article argues that a different approach to the issue of plagiarism, one which focuses more on the development of the students' authorial voices, might help students avoid making the kind of mistakes that hinder their connection with the community of their academic discipline. By thinking about plagiarism as a "mistake", we can move beyond a discourse of crime and punishment to one focused on learning about "appropriate appropriation".

This discussion comes out of attempts to understand students' potentially informative or productive "mistakes" in the context of working with EAL postgraduates at The University of Adelaide in South Australia, in particular, research students in the Sciences and Health Sciences in the Integrated Bridging Program – Research. These students are working towards creating an identity for themselves as independent researchers in academic English. However, the findings are relevant to all EAL teachers engaged in training their students in the conventions of academic writing.

I started by considering the mistakes or errors students make in learning to produce academic writing, and wanted to create a safe space in the teaching/learning environment where students could use these mistakes as learning opportunities on the way to entering the discourse community of their discipline and becoming the academics they aim to be. Writing is a useful focus for this, as these students must present their work as a written thesis. One purpose of that written document is the construction of an identity and place for themselves within the debates of their academic field: “new researchers [are required] to wrestle with issues of their own identity as novices writing to and in a community of experts” (Tardy, 2005, p.325). My questions were: How can I help these students avoid making the mistakes that will hinder the development of that identity and the consequent connection with their academic communities? What are the most important mistakes in their writing that need attention?

While reading about error correction and teacher feedback on writing, I’ve come to question my own practice. Is the feedback which aims to comprehensively work through each and every error in students’ writing actually helping them become better writers? Is every error really a learning opportunity? Or does this actually result in something closer to “avoidance” in the way that Truscott (2007) so controversially criticises? What level of error-free academic English do these students really need, given the university’s policies on editing of theses? Are all these “surface” errors relating to missing articles or incorrect tenses all that important? How much do grammatical errors of subject/verb agreement or verb forms really matter, given that students can have their theses edited and proofread by native speakers?

I had been pondering this when my students handed in the first drafts of their literature reviews, and I came across a mistake that goes to the very centre of this idea of creating an identity for oneself in order to enter the academic community, the mistake that evokes indignation and outrage in that community, potentially destroying all hopes of gaining a credible scholarly identity, the mistake that results in marginalisation or even exile from the academic community, perhaps even being punished by “the academic death penalty” (Howard, 1995). Of course, I’m referring here to plagiarism.

A brief survey of a small group of EAL teachers in Adelaide elicited the anticipated responses to a questionnaire about plagiarism. Answering a question about how they feel when students hand up plagiarised assignments, they reported feeling downcast, even annoyed, that students hadn’t

listened to the instructions, that the students were disrespectful in not trying to do as they'd been asked. They awarded grades of 0 or insisted that students rewrite the essay. They also tried to discuss the problem with students and explain the concept of plagiarism yet again. These teachers were doing all the usual things in order to train their students in the academic conventions required by the Australian education system, just as I had also done. Clearly, we all needed a new strategy to achieve better outcomes.

Faced with the usual range of different forms of plagiarism in the first draft of my students' literature reviews, I set out to write my own literature review of this topic. Consequently, I've come to regard the use of citations and secondary sources as a process by which students are learning to implement an "appropriate appropriation" of the existing literature in the field. If I could think about this in terms of EAL students participating in the process of learning to find their own voice¹ in their writing, and hence their own identity as scholars within the academic community, I could move from a discourse of crime and punishment to one of skills acquisition. As they work towards that identity as a member of their disciplinary community, these students are learning to seize control of the literature as well as the language required to discuss and analyse it, a necessary skill if they are to occupy the site of their discipline.

The first step towards this reconceptualisation is to distinguish between the blatant "copying" that is wholesale reproduction of another's work (using an entire paragraph or document) and the unintentional "plagiarism" that is part of a learning process about appropriate citation and use of others' work. While the use of large tracts of others' writing is difficult to regard as an oversight, it might be possible to think about the unintentional forms of plagiarism, or "nontransgressive intertextuality" as Borg would have it (cited in Chandrasoma et al., 2004), as a kind of "honest mistake". Howard prefers the term "patchwriting" to plagiarism to describe "copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one-for-one synonym-substitutes" (quoted in Howard, 1995, p.788). Both nontransgressive intertextuality and patchwriting generally appear in the work of students accompanied by comprehensive reference lists and citations in the text. No attempt is made to hide anything and the students are clearly not trying to trick anyone; rather, they genuinely believe they are doing precisely what

1. The complex concept of "voice" has been debated at length in the EAL literature and elsewhere (see, for example, Atkinson, 2001, as well as the rest of the issue in which his paper appears). In this paper I use it to refer to the sense of an organising intelligence behind the text – selecting, ordering, evaluating, assessing, choosing a specific vocabulary.

they have been asked to do. So, while I'm not trying to argue that these other forms of plagiarism are in same category as grammatical errors, I do wonder if they should be treated with a similar lack of moral outrage.

Reasons for plagiarism

If we understand something of why students might plagiarise, then perhaps we can find pedagogical practices that help them avoid this kind of mistake, and instead learn what is appropriate in this setting. The literature, much of it reporting students' own explanations, maintains that language proficiency and workload are two common reasons for plagiarising (see, for example, Read, Francis and Robson, 2001, or Abasi and Akbari, 2008 for a review of these discussions). Other reasons include cultural differences in relations between the individual and the group, cultural differences in relations to authority, and philosophical differences in the approach to learning and education. The most insightful and useful work I've read on the topic is still the discussion that took place in the late 1990s, especially in the work of Ramanathan and Atkinson, and Pennycook. Although this work isn't very new, the debates about plagiarism still rage through high schools and universities in Australia and very little seems to have been resolved in the intervening years.

The first two reasons for plagiarism introduced above are fairly straight forward. In terms of language proficiency, one can imagine that students are tempted to copy sections of text when they fear they don't really understand the content. It might feel "safer" not to reveal that incompetency by rewriting. Additionally, students are advised that assignments must be presented in an appropriate academic style; if students are not confident that they know what this means, they may be concerned that their own sentence structures and vocabulary choices do not adequately meet these expectations. When it comes to workload, EAL students will often take considerably longer than their native-speaker peers to read and write in English. As deadlines loom, the struggle to prepare comprehensible text might easily appear overwhelming. All of these scenarios are common, and students frequently seem to believe they are solved with the addition of citations in the text to indicate the source of the material employed.

However, other aspects of inappropriate appropriation of text require somewhat more subtle explanations. While all of the reasons listed in the introductory paragraph relate to EAL students, it is the transcultural nature of this persistent issue that really interests me. What happens when ideas and attitudes are transferred across cultures?

Firstly, many of our EAL students come from cultures that encourage very different relations between the individual and group from what is common in the Australian education system. Ramanathan and Atkinson (1999) offer a detailed explanation of these differences. A central argument in their article is that cultures that value interdependency tend not to value a strong individual voice, and this carries over into academic writing styles as well. Rather, more emphasis is placed on internalising and transmitting established knowledge. Standing out as an original individual is not highly prized in such a society. It is important to note here the Australian education system does, of course, value collaboration, cooperation and teamwork, but the emphasis is different from some non-western cultures. This difference is relevant to academic writing because students from such cultures have been trained to place much less emphasis on individual ownership of knowledge than they encounter in the Australian system. Hence, the use of someone else's sentences may not seem entirely inappropriate.

Closely related to the first point, many of our students come from cultures that encourage very different relations towards authority from what is commonly experienced in Australian society. These students have learnt to be humble and deferential towards authority figures; the implication for writing is that the appropriate response in such a culture is to learn to imitate the excellent writing of classical scholars. Again, this is not completely unfamiliar to the Australian context: we also have a concept of the high-quality academic writing that we aspire to, as well as a clear idea of what constitutes "academic style". The difference is once more in terms of voice; while our EAL students might regard it as proper and necessary to attribute knowledge by quoting from a recognised authority, we expect them to discuss the material in their own voice, evaluating and assessing the work and opinions of published authors. Ramanathan and Atkinson describe the responses of a Chinese student, Fan Shen, who reports a sense of "creating a new self" in order to write in English (1999, p.55). Rather than demonstrating the humble modesty valued by his own cultural traditions, Fan Shen felt obliged to write in a more assertive manner, expressing his own opinions more forcefully. One can imagine that, for students educated in a world where such blowing of one's own trumpet is not admired, this poses a significant challenge.

Finally, a significant difference also exists in terms of the philosophical approach to learning that many of our students have experienced in their home cultures. There is sometimes a tendency in Australia to dismiss the process of extensive memorisation as simply passive rote learning that has little value for our students. However, Pennycook (1996, p.222) points out that, alternatively,

such learning can in fact lead to a very deep understanding of the material. In the Australian context this might be compared to the memorisation of multiplication tables or the periodic table of elements; in this situation, memorisation leads to a comprehensive knowledge of all the individual components as well as their relationships to each other – clearly a valuable exercise. It is also useful to remember that the best results in exams, both in Australia and elsewhere, are achieved by students who can most accurately reproduce the information they are being tested on. Part of this process of memorisation in the acquisition of English might include learning “beautiful phrases and sentences” (Ho quoted in Ramanathan and Atkinson, 1999, p.54²) that can be used at opportune moments. Does this constitute plagiarism or an admirable command of the language? How is this deliberate, overt memorising different from the less conscious absorption and integration of collocations by native speakers? And, perhaps most importantly, why does this difference matter? Given this training in such memory work, I wonder if students sometimes memorise phrases and sentences when reading without being fully aware of what is happening. These fragments might then slip into their writing without appropriate acknowledgement.

Pedagogical responses

So, how do we help students avoid making this mistake of plagiarism and instead encourage the development of their own authorial voices? Clearly, it is not enough to point out that it is forbidden for students to copy other people’s work and submit it as their own. While the majority of our students understand the basic concept of plagiarism, there are many grey areas where the distinction between what is acceptable and what is not acceptable blurs. Some of the advice that is currently given to students is not particularly helpful. However, there are several areas we can focus on to facilitate our EAL students’ learning of academic conventions in this area: the kind of assignments set, note-taking skills, and essay planning.

It is common for EAL teachers to advise students to “use your own words”, but it doesn’t always result in the kind of writing we hope for; rather, the writing can move into incomprehensibility, becoming crowded with errors and mistakes. One must surely then sympathise with students’

2. This reference provides a good example of the kind of layering of citation that students often face – here we read me quoting Ho, who is reporting on the data gathered in interviews (that is, of course, the words of the interviewees), cited in Ramanathan and Atkinson. It is by no means unusual for students to find themselves similarly distant from the original author, which in itself can cause complications in knowing who the words should be attributed to.

perplexity and their queries about why they should do this when a perfectly clear, logical, grammatically correct sentence already exists. Added to this is a certain amount of bafflement about which chunks of language are common property and which count as “original”. Would we consider phrases such as “To the best of our knowledge...”, “It is necessary to identify the relationship between...”, “Recent research has demonstrated that...” as plagiarised if we saw them in academic writing? How does the idea of ownership fit with this? While the examples above are stock phrases that don’t contain any content words, our students who are struggling to come to terms with the concept of plagiarism are not always confident about the differences.

Instead, we need to introduce some different strategies into our teaching. Abasi and Akbari (2008) offer very insightful and practical advice on how pedagogical practices can be modified to enable our students to develop the skills to avoid plagiarism. They suggest that we set assignments that are not easily downloaded from the web or copied from last year’s class. If the most obvious topic is set yet again, there is far more opportunity (and therefore possibility) for plagiarism to occur. A more effective approach would be to set assignments that focus on recent or local issues. In other situations, it is possible for students to write about their own application of the theory under investigation to a practical situation in which they have been directly involved. Abasi and Akbari report that these kinds of assignments seem to encourage students’ own voices to appear confidently in the text, partly because they know that they are the authority in this particular instance.

A second strategy lies in the encouragement of clear and skilful note-taking. Three clear levels of notes are required so that students know exactly which words and phrases are copied verbatim and where the ideas appeared first. Quotation marks and page numbers are recommended for anything copied verbatim; summaries can be recorded without quotation marks, but still with page numbers;³ and the students’ own comments on the text can be enclosed in square brackets (in line with any additions inserted into quotations). Alternatively, students may use different colours to indicate these three levels. Whatever system students develop, it is essential that it is used consistently to ensure no mistakes are made when presenting the final piece of writing for assessment.

3. It is also helpful to encourage students to write their summaries without direct reference to the text. Once they have read and understood the main ideas, they should write their summary without looking at the other author’s words. This allows students more opportunity to form their own sentences in their own voices.

The third tactic is to encourage the writing of a plan that outlines the “story”⁴ of the piece of writing first, then add citations later. The student’s voice is foregrounded as the material is ordered and the links made explicit between the different elements. The first step is to write a skeleton plan with perhaps the basic citations (without any quotations) in place, then the students can fill in what they already know from the information they have internalised and synthesised. All of this is without reference to the texts researched for the assignment. Finally, students can add more detailed citations and use quotations as necessary. By this time, most of the assignment has already been expressed in the students’ original sentences, highlighting their own voices.

By taking these measures, the mistakes of plagiarism/patchwriting/transgressive intertextuality will be minimised. Thus, our students will have a clearer sense of their own voice and identity as scholars, and consequently take their appropriate place in their academic communities.

References

Abasi, A.R. & Akbari, N. (2008). Are we encouraging patchwriting? Reconsidering the role of the pedagogical context in ESL student writers’ transgressive intertextuality. *English for Specific Purposes*, doi:10.1016/j.esp.2008.02.001.

Atkinson, D. (2001). Reflections and refractions on the *JSLW* special issue on voice. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 10, 107-124.

4. By “story” I mean the narrative logic that links each paragraph or section to the others. We need to see the progression of the ideas and to understand why they are in this order. For example, when my students write their research proposals or theses, we move from a broader context to the specifics of their own projects. The outline might respond to the following series of questions:

What is the field of enquiry?

What do we already know about it?

What don’t we know (the gap in knowledge)?

How can we find that out? What experiment will provide the answer?

The final thesis would also include the answer to the final question: What did we find out? And what do these findings mean?

Chandrasoma, R., Thompson, C., & Pennycook, A. (2004). Beyond plagiarism: Transgressive and nontransgressive intertextuality. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 3(3), 171-193.

Howard, R.M. (1995). Plagiarisms, authorships, and the academic death penalty. *College English*, 57(7), 788-806.

Pecorari, D. (2003). Good and original: Plagiarism and patchwriting in academic second-language writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 12, 317-345.

Pennycook, A. (1996). Borrowing others' words: Text, ownership, memory, and plagiarism. *TESOL Quarterly*, 30(2), 201-230.

Ramanathan, V. & Atkinson, D. (1999). Individualism, academic writing, and ESL writers. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 8(1), 45-75.

Read, B., Francis, B., & Robson, J. (2001). "Playing safe": Undergraduate essay writing and the presentation of the student "voice". *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 22(3), 387-399.

Tardy, C.M. (2005). "It's like a story": Rhetorical knowledge development in advanced academic literacy. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 4, 325-338.

Truscott, J. (2007). The effect of error correction on learners' ability to write accurately. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 16, 255-272.