The shifting nature of plagiarism and the challenge to international foundation courses

About the author

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Cross-cultural studies have highlighted the complex nature of academic plagiarism, a challenge to foundation teachers. Traditional concepts of plagiarism are shifting owing to cut-and-paste technology, the world wide web, proofreading services and the adapting tolerances of university faculties. Foundation courses have tools to spot plagiarism, but this is becoming increasingly difficult. Foundation teachers encourage important paraphrasing and summarising skills, but should emphasise the cultural rationale for rules on plagiarism. The demands of the academic writing genre are noted as possibly contributing to the problem. To compete globally, UK higher education institutions will have to significantly modify their teaching and assessment.

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1 Plagiarism as a cross-cultural issue

In Britain, plagiarism among the professional community may attract a law suit, and on degree courses it can result in disqualification, a circumstance which stems essentially from the prevailing capitalist economic ideology (Russikoff et al., 2003). While Park (2003) points out that UK academic institutions need to develop consistently applied detection and penalty policies for dealing with student plagiarism, trying to prevent it from occurring represents one of the biggest challenges to foundation course tutors (Lake, 2004).

In China, authoritative texts are often memorised and recited verbatim. Knowledge seems to be regarded as wisdom at large in the collective public domain rather than an individual's private property, and moreover, to paraphrase it would signal disrespect to the author (Wang et al., 2000). Chinese students on foundation courses in the UK, an important presence over the last ten years, are not the only ones likely to encounter plagiarism problems. Some students from former Eastern Bloc states may be apt to view intellectual property as an adjunct to private property, a concept long ideologically and culturally proscribed by their former Soviet masters (Russikoff et al., op. cit.). The relatively recent introduction of these nationalities into UK higher education has drawn attention to the cross-cultural roots of the issue, and would seem to belie any possible charge that plagiarism necessarily represents conscious cheating.

2 Difficulties surrounding plagiarism

The nature of plagiarism is a shifting one. Definitions, methods and motivations change with the advance of technology and the pulling back of the academic ramparts. While quoting or paraphrasing without citation and using ideas without acknowledgement seem to be universally agreed upon as infringements, verbatim copying of phrases, clauses or short sentences may be noticeable but hard to prove, or even, in today's instant cut-and-paste environment, impossible to unravel. Furthermore, a certain amount of 'creative plagiarism', if properly cited, may be becoming acceptable. In a survey of lecturers on a foundation course at SOAS, while all agreed that a student's mark should be lowered if an essay is partly plagiarised, one remarked that it would have to be more than just a paragraph (Sayer & Weakley, 1999).

A further complication is introduced by the increasing use of internet sources as reference material. The very name 'world wide web' can apparently encourage students to regard its contents as public knowledge, as attested by 40% of the US students in a survey by Russikoff et al. (op. cit.). Sections of text cut and pasted from websites may be traceable through search engines, a task which has become another part of the foundation tutor's job. Instances of plagiarism are frequently obvious because of a change in style, especially so with the writing of international students. But here another problem arises, that of 'third party interventions', otherwise known as proofreaders. According to research carried out by Austin and Macaulay (2008),

most proofreaders try to work only on language, not content, in an effort to 'create a level playing field' for international students. This may apply in the faculties, but on foundation courses where all the students are international, it seems likely to have the opposite effect by favouring those who take the opportunity to use proofreaders over those who do not. If submitting a proofread essay is then seen to be rewarded, it raises the question of whether results are based on something more than academic achievement. Nevertheless, proofreading and correction before handing in are recommended by some university departments, and as the modification of the standard spreads, it is bound to affect foundation courses.

3 Strategies for avoiding and responding to plagiarism

In terms of spotting plagiarism, foundation courses have such tools at their disposal as timed essays, presentations and vivas on the same topic as an assignment. The foundation tutor's problem would seem to be how to untie students from their reliance on the wording of the source text. Exercises in providing synonyms and altering grammar and word order may help, but close paraphrasing of a handily discovered quote is rarely a satisfying solution. More often summary is what is needed, but that involves digesting and pondering longer sections of reading, something over-worked students may not have time or ability to do in a second language. Frequent practice on short texts might be a way of stimulating this capacity. There are even some online plagiarism-avoiding exercises. One to one tuition seems the best course for a pedagogical approach, but time and funding are not always available, and never limitless.

The strict conventions of the academic genre may themselves have a hand in the problem. The increasing emphasis on a 'product-oriented' approach (White in Robinson, 1988), where texts are written according to standard discourse patterns that fit the demands of a cultural and commercial hegemony, may discourage students from 'self-expression', while technology allows them easy and instant access to templates for these required discourses. There would appear to be a need for teachers to engage students with an explanation of the cultural rationale for why what we call plagiarism is unacceptable despite the aforementioned strictures and freedoms.

As already noted, the response of institutions may be, in the long run, to modify their standards. University foundation courses are already under threat from the private sector, and in order to survive in the liberalised marketplace, a certain degree of reputation for academic rigour may have to be sacrificed to the realities of an information- and text-rich global academic community. As linguists, those tutoring on foundation courses have to accommodate language change, whether they like it or not. In a similar way, the academic community may have to come to terms with significant paradigm shifts in the coming years in how course work is facilitated, supervised and assessed in view of the cultural and technological assaults on the status quo. If such be the case, then surely laws relating to plagiarism will have to be adapted to these changes too.

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