ESL Academic Writing and Plagiarism

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Introduction

I recently asked my students to write a short free write on what they had learned or understood about plagiarism this semester. Everyone could give back what they had heard, "It's bad to copy", "We should write in our own words", etc. Five minutes after writing this piece on plagiarism, two students, one Bosnian, one Jordanian, who are friends, copied word for word from each other's papers on a low stake piece of writing. Two other students, Syrian women, called me in the office from home one day after our class had been at food pantry for a service learning experience.

> "We're here working on our service learning reflection essay together", Samar said. "Is that OK?", she asked.
> "Well, what do you mean by together", I cautiously replied.
> "We just help each other; it's easier that way"
> "But how can you help each other with a personal reflection?" I wondered out loud.
> "How can it be different? We all did same thing together at same time"
> "Oh", I said, "but they should be different."
> "OK, OK -they be different, she said and hung up"

Several Mongolian students have also had serious problems with mosaic plagiarism; it is often paired with low reading ability and differing notions about ownership of information and how to incorporate information from outside reading and still give credit to the original author. In yet another conversation about this issue, I spoke with a former Iraqi –American student, who despite her best intentions, has become rather Americanized, especially to the conventions of higher education. I told her about a few of the situations just mentioned here.
"Sure" she said disdainfully.
"They can memorize anything, but they don't understand it."

Background

I teach in a community college academic ESL program and I have observed a significant gap between my students' ability to write personal or narrative essays, which they can do well, and their ability to write in two of the most common academic genres in the disciplines summaries, and essays in which students are able to make connections between the theory presented in readings and lecture without plagiarizing (Hinkel 23, Leki 2006).

One major obstacle for ESL students trying to write in more academic genres is the minefield and temptation of plagiarism. North American teachers have a zero tolerance policy and non-native speakers may not really know what it is. Students have told me that they really hate to make mistakes; they also feel like they don't really know how to write what they are asked to write in class. Even when models are provided, they don't know how to begin.

In the program at this college, we keep track of how much students plagiarize each semester, and we try to control it, but they still do it. Our program has kept longitudinal data on rates of plagiarism in the final portfolio for many years. Students write essays in controlled settings which include writing in class without access to their sources and teacher monitored writing environments, but still manage to plagiarize. In a recent semester, our teacher group at the intermediate writing level set a target teaching and learning goal for 0% plagiarism on the research paper component of the final portfolio. Even though our program depends heavily on in class writing, frequent conferences and repeated practice with journaling, free writing, and summary writing -students still plagiarized for a variety of reasons, which included at least in part, the ability to memorize large blocks of text.

Teaching Strategies to Prevent Plagiarism

In *Preventing Plagiarism*, Laura DeSena advocates allowing students to free write extensively in class after closely researching a topic. We already were doing that, but it wasn't completely effective. She also recommends starting students off with primary sources. One of her other suggestions is to introduce students to some kind of plagiarism prevention website such as www.turnitin.com. I had heard of this, but felt that in our institution most instructors used it as a punitive tool, to "catch" cheaters. I became interested in a different model. I wondered if using a library orientation with Turnitin as a focus, helping students set up accounts and log in, and having them submit papers, but allowing them to see their originality reports, would reduce the incidence of plagiarism in our ESL writing classes.

Efforts to increase awareness around issues of plagiarism resulted in the following additions to my teaching practice. First, students were given a lecture of about twenty minutes supported with PowerPoint on the definition of plagiarism by the reference librarian who manages Turnitin accounts on our campus. Numerous examples were given and discussed. A handout with sample paper and citations was passed out to all students. The topic of this paper was plagiarism, and a writing center supervisor wrote it. In the next class, students were assisted in setting up their www.turnitin.com accounts.

Many students had to pause at this stage to set up email accounts, a necessary part of the enrollment process. We explain to students that by agreeing to set up their accounts they agree that the Turnitin site will own that copy of their paper, and it will become part of the company's database. Many critics of Turnitin find this aspect of using this company problematic. The reference librarian and I tell them this so that they understand that lending work to family or friends (a common problem) after turning it in to the site would not really be doing family members a favor.

The librarian then shows students real examples of papers that had generated an originality report. In this program, and on this website, originality reports are generated in color. Strikingly, red represents the highest percentage of a match with other texts and green the least. We discuss the probable outcomes of different kinds of matches; failure or suspension for one paper and a good grade for the other. Then, students are taught how to submit their own papers to our class site. The resulting affect is dramatic; it is possible to see light bulbs going off behind my students' eyes. Students are able to see in a real-world, concrete way what the expectations are in a U.S. academic setting and how they may differ from their home cultures.

The next step was to plan assignments that increased students' abilities to paraphrase and summarize better, since much of what ESL students paraphrase is what others would call plagiaphrasing or mosaic plagiarism. Several online summary writing tutorials were identified and assigned. Numerous class discussions, student samples from our class, and bad examples of summary writing from previous classes were shared. I make frequent use of the document camera in my classroom so that text to student writing comparison could be made quickly and easily.

Most primary sources are too complex or use too much archaic or subject specific vocabulary to be useful for non-native speakers, but I think DeSena has a point when she says that students have to know that is OK for them to have an opinion about a topic based on their own analysis and understanding. Therefore, simple examples of primary research were identified. I used short stories in a literature class and charts and graphs from the Teaching Tolerance website in a research class. This allowed students to have their own opinions and reactions to information before being forced to evaluate, understand and write about secondary sources such as literary criticism articles or books on controversial topics, in more integrated way. Students were asked to free write on their assigned class reading since the previous class. Through subsequent drafts, these free writes became summaries and students' confidence about how much they knew "without looking" increased.

In all writing classes, making performance outcomes and reader expectations clear is crucial. Rubrics, which addressed those outcomes, were openly shared with students, as well as the passing and failing papers from previous semesters. Students can see that they don't have to display perfection in their writing and that teacher expectations are reasonable for the skills set that they currently possess.

Concerns

Students in my class were allowed in different ways to learn what the expectations of writing without plagiarizing were, but the semester of plagiarism preventing activities was not completely successful. The following conversation occurred during conference with a Syrian student named Loha:

Me: "So this part is really just copied right out of our book"

L: "You mean I am supposed to put this part in my own words?"

Me: "Yes", laughing, "You know because it is plagiarism if you just copy it's plagiarism."

L: "Oh" looking puzzled

Me: So why do you think you did this when we've talked so much about not plagiarizing?

L: "Well in my engineering major we didn't write that much, but in grade school the more it like book or teacher… that is good… that is better."

Me: "But how could you do that on papers and tests in class?"

L: "We study hard …"

Me: "Like memorize?"

L: "Yes, not exactly, but the more like book – higher grade"

This student is a hafiz, a person who has memorized the entire Quran. She is also a very honest person, who wants to learn to do things the "right way." This whole idea of plagiarism though, is just very different and difficult for her to grasp.

Another group of students from Vietnam, Mongolia, and China have also reported that being closer to the book source is better than having "original" ideas. They express a version of "what do I know?" when asked about why they would copy. However, saying that students copy just because they learned to do that way doesn't tell the whole story.In fact, the entire issue is more complex and not easily solved in a semester.

Another problem for me this semester was the student's reluctance to use www.turnitin.com. They may have lacked the computer skills to use it routinely, or they may resisted the notion that it implied they were trying to cheat. At any rate in the heat of the semester, I found it hard to push it when students had given me a paper copy. Also, it is more complicated to use the site for multiple drafts of the same student's paper because they match to themselves once that paper is in the database.

Conclusions

ESL students face many obstacles in their efforts to use an academic register, write grammatically correct sentences, and transfer writing strategies and genres learned in ESL classes to mainstream academic coursework. One essential underpinning is the ability to recognize and avoid plagiarism in their writing. Increasing vocabulary recognition, focused feedback on rhetorical and sentence level error all form part of the patchwork that builds the bridge across the gap for students, as do effective use of classroom technology and interactive websites and databases.

However, because of cultural differences that these students have, teacher strategies alone cannot address the problem of plagiarism in higher education. U.S teachers should also have realistic expectations of students after one or two semesters in American higher education. It is unreasonable to assume all students from other countries can overturn a lifetime of educational socialization in one or two semesters. Educators should also understand those second language students' goals, expectations, and family pressures may be more rigid than for other students. For example, international students pay significantly more for classes, and can be deported if they fail two semesters, under F-1 visa requirements. Students often feel an overwhelming pressure to do well to please their families since they are paying so much for them to be in American schools. Students from immigrant families feel similar pressures knowing that their families have left their homeland, and parents have taken less skilled jobs in order for them to have a chance to succeed in college.

These are just a few of the psycho-social and cultural issues that NNS of English face when entering higher education in the United States. They also face a myriad of linguistic challenges. Ideas about culture, ownership and what kind of knowledge is valued also play a part in why students may be tempted to plagiarize. Teachers should use a combination of awareness of both sets of challenges while avoiding the easy solution of stereotyping large groups of individuals in a certain way. Each student will be a result of a complex interplay of culture, language and individual differences and accordingly should be guided by teachers with this more realistic paradigm in mind. Students are complex, and so are the reasons that they may plagiarize.

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