Developing Plagiarism Policies in EFL Contexts: A Saudi Arabian Focus

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Abstract
This commentary responds to the approach used in establishing a plagiarism policy for preparatory year students at a medical university in Saudi Arabia. While appropriating others' ideas and passing them off as one's own is considered unethical in Western academia, the concept of textual ownership varies from culture to culture. Thus, this paper investigates the pedagogical and academic currency of establishing plagiarism policies in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts (and Saudi Arabia specifically) without accounting for the role local writing traditions and culture play in academia. Whereas much previous literature has examined plagiarism policies situated in English as a second language (ESL) contexts, this paper examines challenges that may be particular to EFL contexts and lays out a framework for establishing plagiarism policies therein.
Keywords: academic integrity, contrastive rhetoric, intercultural rhetoric, plagiarism, second language writing, textual ownership

Introduction

For a working definition of plagiarism, we can use Park's (2003) interpretation of it as "the theft of words or ideas, beyond what would normally be regarded as *general knowledge* (p. 472, emphasis not in original)." In the interests of leveling an academic playing field and "promoting both the theory and the practice of academic integrity" (Park, 2004, p. 292), plagiarism should be a primary concern for any institution of higher learning (HE); policies serving as preventative measures need to be implemented, dealing in a measured fashion when plagiarism does occur. But '*general knowledge*' is not always universally understood: plagiarism not always clear cut, especially when 'perpetrators' come from different first language (L1) backgrounds and academic traditions. Currently, how policies are developed and how punitive in scope they are has become the subject of debate in both L1 and second language (L2) literature. In the UK, there has been a shift in focus to fostering university environments and creating plagiarism policies "where emphasis is on promoting good scholarly, academic practices" rather than simply "deterring [plagiarism] through detection and punishment" (Macdonald & Carroll, 2006, p. 244). The shift stems from research "[highlighting both] the problems students [have] with the concept of plagiarism" and "the need to improve student understanding and ability to avoid [it]" (Macdonald & Carroll, 2006, p. 240). Macdonald and Carroll (2006) showcase how UK students, for whom English is their mother tongue, have 'conceptual confusion' about plagiarism; likewise, for international students studying English and hailing from various academic traditions, the idea of plagiarism and 'academic theft' can be equally murky.

To this, scholars interested in reconceptualizing plagiarism in TESOL have hypothesized various theories as to why international students plagiarize. Differing cultural perspectives in knowledge construction (and whether such construction becomes a personal commodity or communal property) has been identified as one potential factor (Sowden, 2005; Gu & Brooks, 2008). Plagiarism has also been attributed to students' lack of mastery of the conventions of academia; they might inherently understand that passing someone else's work off as one's own is immoral but lack the proper experience to cite sources properly (Wheeler, 2009). Hence, plagiarism has been identified as a challenging obstacle to navigate for many types of students (L1 English speakers and international students) in many different English language learning (ELL) contexts (ESL and EFL). The crux of this article, however, focuses on how plagiarism is particularly challenging in contexts where students are studying EFL.

Of the different modes of writing learners study in foreign settings (i.e. professional writing, technical writing, etc.), writing for academic purposes presents the greatest challenge. This is because beyond simply learning a particular set of writing mechanics, they will need to internalize what constitutes plagiarism and produce compositions that are in accordance with the procedural formalities of university policy which proscribe plagiarism in any form. To acclimate students in EFL contexts so that they manage this successfully is a formidable task. On one hand, it is imperative for students to know what plagiarism means because they might either 1) matriculate to inner circle universities[i] or 2) they may seek to contribute to inner circle academic communities by way of publishing. On the other, plagiarism is arguably premised on a very 'Western' concept of textual ownership not universally understood as one and the same. One must then ask how does a HE institution develop appropriate plagiarism policies for students who are developing English writing mechanics, learning the expectations of L2 readers *and* required to

internalize the ethical framework within which inner circle academia operates? How punitive in scope should the policy be?

By this stream of inquiry, this article hopes to further an insightful dialogue about plagiarism in TESOL, one that has gained momentum in recent years (Pennycook, 1996; Liu, 2005; Sowden, 2005; Gu & Brooks, 2008; Pecarori & Petrić, 2014). I will briefly review how the concept of plagiarism and its moral connotations have been reconceptualized in recent years. I will then examine common problems international/foreign students face regarding plagiarism both in ESL and EFL contexts in light of these new trends. Next, current literature on some of the driving forces behind students' 'conceptual confusion' of plagiarism in EFL contexts is reviewed. This will be done in the hopes that "looking to the underlying causes of plagiarism rather than just the symptoms [will provide] the opportunity for fresh thinking about assessment and the roles and responsibilities of all the stakeholders in the learning enterprise…" (Macdonald & Carroll, 2006, p. 244). I will then analyze the development of a plagiarism policy at a Saudi medical university in the context of traditional Saudi education. Finally, suggestions are made for how to appropriately develop plagiarism policies for HE institutions where English is taught as a foreign language.

An important point of clarification I wish to state early on is the distinction between 'intentional' vs. 'unintentional' plagiarism. Following Pecarori and Petrić's (2014) line of thought, this article is concerned with addressing how HE institutions in foreign contexts should manage *unintentional* plagiarism, the incidental appropriation of text due to poor academic skills (i.e. referencing) or due to not fully understanding plagiarism as it is conceived in Western academia (Gu & Brooks, 2008; Duff et. al, 2006). Granted, students may be penalized regardless (even for unintentional plagiarism) in inner circle HE institutions, but such a discussion is beyond the scope of this article. Thus, I wish to differentiate between 'Plagiarism', "a moral transgression and a reflection of moral decay" (Pecarori & Petrić, 2014, p. 271), and 'plagiarism', the result of general ignorance of the conventional expectations of inner circle academia: this article focusing on the latter, not the former.

Plagiarism for international students and EFL learners
For many international students studying academic English in inner circle countries, becoming a proficient writer is demanding. Beyond learning to master basic rhetorical modes, modes which may be significantly different to their own native writing styles, learners must also internalize the ethical framework which underpins academic writing. There is no room for students to have philosophical debates with professors about the cultural perceptions of intellectual ownership; failure to understand plagiarism may result in very real and imminent consequences (i.e. failing a course or even expulsion). As students are expected to manage this all, many find great difficulty.

At a US university, observing undergraduate Indian, Saudi, and Chinese students writing assignments in English, Friedman (2014) as cited in Farhang (2014) remarked, "Students from Eastern cultures are generally used to working in groups toward a common goal in ways that can run counter to the American tradition of independent scholarship' and that 'plagiarism is a new word, [and] intellectual property is a new word and idea". At an Australian university, "plagiarism

was perceived by Indonesian students as a foreign concept…[something] never introduced during their study in higher education in Indonesia" (Adiningrum & Kuteileh, 2011, p. A91). In the UK, Shei (2005) pinned the Chinese learning tradition of 'imitation', where "**creativity has to be built upon the foundation of imitation" (p. 2),** as the main 'culprit' for why Chinese students may have unknowingly plagiarized on their writing assignments. Thus, a common theme emerges concerning international students and plagiarism in ESL contexts; there is often a cultural and ideological barrier that creates 'conceptual confusion' for students. The concept is perhaps even more convoluted for learners studying English as a foreign language in their respective countries.

In a study with Japanese learners Wheeler (2009), while dispelling the notion that the Japanese condone plagiarism as a cultural practice, attributed cases of patchwriting and textual borrowing to a general lack of knowledge of proper citation techniques. In Turkey, Erkaya's (2009) study found that some participants "had never heard the word [plagiarism] before in English or in Turkish (p. 91)" before entering university and "**that no formal explanation on how to write research papers [had] ever been provided to the students, thereby leading them to plagiarize" (p. 91).** Finally, Aldohmi (2017) as cited in (Albanawi, 2017) attributes plagiarism amongst Saudi students to "ignorance about what constitutes plagiarism and how to avoid it", "[in]sufficient training about academic ethics and integrity and … the risks of academic misconduct", and the fact that the education system in Saudi Arabia does not seem to have an established, clear and a strict policy against plagiarism in schools and universities." What exactly is the source of this confusion in EFL contexts? To partially answer this, a brief discussion of the influence of L1 culture on knowledge construction is necessary.

Culture and knowledge construction in private vs. public domains
Language and culture are intimately related and exploring the idea that there may be a relationship between learners' cultures and plagiarism is not new. While some have advanced notions that 'cultural conditioning' plays a role in predisposing learners to plagiaristic tendencies (Sowden, 2005), others caution us against generalizations based on faulty reasoning (Liu, 2005) and against making value judgements that stem from a myopic view of 'textual ownership' (Pennycook, 1996; Thompson, 2005). Others have clarified that plagiarism as understood in the West is "a historical and cultural phenomenon….[the] response to a particular set of economic, social and technological conditions….[and] may not be applicable to writing cultures and rhetorical traditions marked by a different course of development" (Pecarori & Petric, 2014, p. 274). Thus, plagiarism is *a* reality, but it should not be considered *a universal* reality. At a theoretical level, the principal idea of textual ownership is rooted in Anglo-Saxon, Enlightenment thinking which necessarily positions it in contention with other writing traditions that have different conceptualizations of what 'intellectual ownership' means (Pennycook, 1996). Some cultures may view knowledge and its construction as a communal, collective enterprise (Sowden, 2005; Gu & Brooks, 2008). As such, the idea of 'borrowing' other ideas or attributing a particular idea to a particular individual necessarily looks different and has different formalities in other cultures. In Western contexts, knowledge constructed by an individual becomes the sole property of that individual and is fundamentally private. Anyone wishing to use such knowledge must acknowledge its proprietor to avoid passing it off as his/her own work and impeding the original author's right to monetary gain. In other societies, knowledge constructed by an individual

becomes communal property. Anyone is free to use such knowledge, choosing to refer to the original proprietor or not.

Pedagogical considerations and support mechanisms for EFL students

Foreign students could benefit tremendously from being educated about the intellectual and academic basis which plagiarism is founded on; a didactic approach aimed at informing learners how plagiarism came about, what it means, and how to avoid it. This helps in facilitating their induction into the academic communities that they will ultimately become a part of. In inner circle universities, there is "a growing awareness among scholars and practitioners alike that the solution to problems relating to plagiarism lies in education rather than punitive measures" (Pecarori & Petrić, 2014, p. 287). As such, a two-pronged pedagogical approach which 1) "[educates] students explicitly about plagiarism" and 2) "[teaches] source use and referencing in greater depth" has been proposed (Pecarori & Petrić, 2014, p. 287). Similarly, Macdonald and Carroll (2006) move away from 'punitive' measures and propose a holistic approach 1) in which students are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills necessary for 'a scholarly/academic approach to learning', 2) that ensures assessment doesn't necessarily 'encourage or reward plagiarism', and 3) in which institutions bear the responsibility of recognizing 'that students are not adequately prepared when they enter HE' as they need to gain "[the] understanding of the appropriate conventions and practices implicit in academic study in a western university." (p. 236) This policy framework imposes "regulations [which] are not designed to punish" but instead to educate (Macdonald & Carroll, 2006, p. 236).

Thus, institutions of higher learning ought to concern themselves with introducing induction programs for international students who might struggle with the concept of plagiarism. Equally important is to familiarize students with the formalities of 'source use and referencing' to aid in the "development…of academic literacy" (Pecarori & Petrić, 2014, p. 288). Acclimating international students to understanding plagiarism and the formalities of academia must also be done "in a supportive learning environment in which students are not accused of plagiarism for making errors in the process of learning" (Pecarori & Petrić, 2014, p. 288). How effective might such interventions be? Duff et. al (2006) implemented a three-year intervention plan aimed at 1) familiarizing international students with Western expectations in academia and 2) reducing occurrences of plagiarism. Results suggest that the intervention framework led to a significant reduction in plagiarism. Pecarori and Petrić (2014) also advocate "[engaging] students in tasks and discussions that will lead to a deeper understanding of what constitutes plagiarism" (p. 288). Such a comprehensive approach "situates plagiarism within a larger framework of issues related to academic integrity, including authorship, copyright and intellectual property" (Pecarori & Petrić, 2014, p. 288). It is important to note that if these measures have been implemented in ESL contexts and yielded success, it is only more appropriate that such measures be adopted for students learning about plagiarism in foreign contexts.

Plagiarism policy developed in a Saudi Arabian context

Plagiarism and academic dishonesty have been documented amongst Saudi learners in literature (Razek, 2014; Tayan, 2016). But these studies have often lumped 'Plagiarism – the result of moral decay' and 'plagiarism – the result of ignorance of the academic conventions of Western academia' together, whereas I focus on the latter. Before discussing the dynamic of plagiarism

amongst Saudi students and the plagiarism policy we adopted at our university, it is important to contextualize the educational landscape of ELT in Saudi Arabia. Due to an assortment of issues such as poorly trained Saudi English instructors, limited opportunities for practice outside of the classroom, low motivation, and misalignment between curricular objectives and learner needs, many students come to university level with limited English skills (ur Rahman & Alhosaini, 2013). Consequently, there has been a proliferation of university preparatory programs[ii] in Saudi Arabia to help bolster English language proficiency before students enter respective colleges of study where the medium of instruction is exclusively English. Of the limited linguistic repertoire some Saudi learners have, writing is usually the weakest. Traditionally an oral culture, I have found through experience and independent study that many students have barely written for academic purposes in their mother language let alone have basic English writing skills before joining the university level. Thus, many Saudi students are essentially learning to write academically for the first time but doing so *in a foreign language*.

The government university concerned in this study specializes in science and health professions. Students enter a university pre-professional program (UPP), which consists of three semesters of basic science and English language courses, before moving on to their respective colleges (i.e. College of Medicine, College of Nursing, etc.). The college of choice is determined by the GPA they receive after the first year of the UPP program. The English component consists of writing, reading, communication and grammar courses scaffolded between beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels. At its inception, the writing program used to begin students at the paragraph level in the first semester. In the second semester, students continued to work at the paragraph level but were required to use secondary sources in their assignments. For the third semester, students progressed to the essay level where they learned three rhetorical modes and included secondary sources in all assignments.

Given the educational context Saudi students come from in high school, the unrealistic expectations of the writing courses, and the general lack of knowledge of plagiarism and source use, a number of instances of plagiarism surfaced in the writing program, especially in the second and third semester courses. Absent an official policy, there was a general consensus that one needed to be created in order to tackle the issue of plagiarism and foster an environment of academic integrity in a health science university. Select professors and English lecturers were asked by the Dean of the college to form a committee to develop a college wide plagiarism policy. The committee consisted of Western and non-Western faculty, all of whom had been educated in either North America or the UK. As a writing course coordinator at the time and an appointed member of the committee, I was eager to share the pertinent literature I had been reading on 'didactic vs. punitive' approaches and eager to discuss shaping a policy around students' academic realities. Somewhere quickly along the way, however, the line between 'Plagiarism' and 'plagiarism' became skewed. There wasn't much effort nor interest in attributing Saudi students' plagiarism to general ignorance or lack of awareness. Thus, a didactical element was missing from much of our discussion. Though I tried to voice the importance of factoring students' L1 culture of writing and severe lack of basic English writing skills into the development of the plagiarism policy, it was often drowned out by the calls from many committee members to stop students from cheating and prevent them from compromising the academic integrity of the university. These students were 'morally bankrupt' and needed some deterring force to stop them. This approach

spoke to a "pedagogical unsound[ness] and intellectual [arrogance]" that Pennycook (1996, p. 227) alluded to when one adopts such a narrow view of textual ownership. Why would we not consider these other factors when developing a plagiarism policy in a foreign context? Unless of course, it's perfectly acceptable to export a myopic view of textual ownership and apply it in any context in any part of the world.

Punitiveness the soup du jour, the committee decided (by majority) to discipline students who committed plagiarism by giving them a warning for the first offense, a grade of zero for a second offense, and being referred to the Dean in the case of a third offense. In all fairness it was suggested that before implementing the policy, educating students in some form would be necessary. As such, a mandatory 1-hour workshop was conducted at the beginning of every semester by members of the committee to lecture about what plagiarism is, how to avoid it, and what the new policy entailed. Once students partook in the workshop, they were accountable to the plagiarism policy and subject to its penalties. However, 1 hour in the beginning of a 15-week semester was hardly sufficient to give Saudi students a comprehensive understanding of the inner workings of plagiarism within the framework of Western academia. In the Duff et. al (2006) study, a series of academic interventions were conducted over a *three-year* period to help internalize the Western model of plagiarism. And their didactic approach reinforced the notion that 'students needed to be engaged with the nature of academic culture; …look[ing] to tutors "to provide the guidance to signpost the values of scholarship and nature of originality" (Macdonald & Carroll, 2006, p. 240). What we did was merely give a cosmetic introduction to a very compact concept, and then students were held accountable immediately thereafter. That to me was not in the best interests of the students and would create more problems than it solved.

Understandably after implementing the policy, there was panic and horror by students and their parents alike about not committing this 'thing' called 'plagiarism' which could adversely affect a student's grades, grades that would determine eligibility to enter medical school. After being promoted to supervisor for the entire writing program (nationwide) I had to field many complaints and examine plagiarized compositions. While the university policy was to penalize students for plagiarizing, intuitively I felt uneasy about penalizing students, the majority of whom didn't really realize what they were being penalized for. Some students presented their work having forgotten to add quotation marks: lack of thoroughness with referencing techniques. Some students presented work with barely coherent sentences, yet they were expected to be using outside sources. Some students became so consumed, even obsessed, with avoiding plagiarism that they seemed (as evidenced by my conversations with them) to focus more on citing correctly than with actual developing well written compositions with solid structure and mechanics. Essentially, the plagiarism policy created fear and confusion, "focus[ing] almost exclusively on identifying and punishing students who plagiarise" (Macdonald & Carroll, 2006, p. 235) rather than educating and 'rehabilitat[ing] the offender[s].'

Conclusion
From the onset, the policy was not created with the students' best interests in mind because neither students' linguistic backgrounds nor the educational landscape of Saudi were never really factored in committee discussions. This runs incompatibly with Macdonald and Carroll's (2006) suggestion to:

> '[have] in place …procedures and regulations that recognise that students are not adequately prepared when they enter HE and …[shoulder] a responsibility to ensure that they move quickly to an understanding of the appropriate conventions and practices implicit in academic study in a western university. (p.236)

Instead, there was serious overlooking of the 'complexity of plagiarism'. We cannot simply project Western academic conventions and ideas of textual ownership in foreign contexts, and subject EFL learners to penalties and consequences for failing to adhere to that framework, without first giving them the opportunity to successfully acclimate. Once students have demonstrated that they can function properly within that framework, then I believe accountability is appropriate. Pecarori and Petrić (2014) highlight that some studies have shown that "both declarative and procedural knowledge [of source use] increased as a result of the pedagogical intervention" (p. 289).

Thus, plagiarism policies in EFL contexts need to 1) consider the role of the academic writing tradition in L1 and 2) develop an induction/intervention plan whose primary purpose is education learners about the expectations of Western scholarship. Doing so will "put arrangements in place to support those still developing necessary skills" (Macdonald & Carroll, 2006, p. 243). We also need to acknowledge that "existing research has established that textual plagiarism often has non-deceptive origins" (Pecarori & Petrić, 2014, p. 294), and that in unpacking this 'complex issue' we cannot simply assume that all students who plagiarize in foreign contexts are morally bankrupt and thus need only to be punished as a deterrent. By adopting these pedagogical interventions, we can help ensure institutions promote and preserve academic integrity while also compassionately inducting foreign learners into Western communities of scholarship, giving them every opportunity to succeed.

Notes:
[1] For the sake of argument, I refer to Kachru's (2003) 'inner circle' model as a base in which most inner circle countries subscribe to the same value system as it concerns plagiarism
[2] Generally, students enroll in a 1-2 year language foundation program before entering a particular college of study (e.g. medicine, engineering, computer science, etc.)

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