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**CAN CHINESE COLLEGE EFL STUDENTS RECOGNIZE  
BLATANT AND SUBTLE PLAGIARISM?**

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## Abstract

In the last two decades, plagiarism in second language writing has attracted much research attention. There has been a heated debate on whether certain cultural practices in non-Western societies encourage plagiarism as defined in Anglo-American academia. In particular, a substantial body of empirical research on this topic has focused on Chinese students studying in Western educational settings and tried to relate their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors to Chinese cultural influences. However, it can be argued that such students may not be representative of typical Chinese cultural practices because they have been in contact with different cultures and have lived outside of a Chinese cultural context. Furthermore, many of the existing studies have not distinguished attitude (i.e., stance towards plagiaristic practices) and knowledge (i.e., understanding of what constitutes plagiaristic practices).

This paper reports on a study designed to address the aforementioned problems. A sample of 270 Chinese university students was asked to evaluate two passages containing instances of blatant and subtle plagiarism under different conditions and to give open-ended responses to justify their evaluations. Quantitative analyses of the data revealed that only a small portion of the students were able to recognize the passages as plagiaristic and that those who were able to do so, as a group, held a punitive attitude towards the identified plagiarism. Qualitative analyses of their open-ended responses uncovered a complex picture of their understandings and perceptions of plagiarism, different from those sanctioned in Anglo-American academia. These results are interpreted as evidence of cultural differences in the conceptualization of plagiarism. The paper concludes by arguing against the adoption of a simplistic dichotomy of culturally acceptable vs. culturally unacceptable practice in research on plagiarism in L2 academic writing.

## **CAN CHINESE COLLEGE EFL STUDENTS RECOGNIZE BLATANT AND SUBTLE PLAGIARISM?**

### Introduction

The last two decades have seen growing research attention to plagiarism in L2 academic writing. On the one hand, new information technologies and easy access to vast Internet resources have made plagiarism increasingly easy and tempting (Sutherland-Smith, 2008). On the other hand, the increasing use of text-matching programs to prevent and police plagiarism has contributed to much publicity of the problem (Clegg & Flint, 2006; Park, 2004). Along with a surging sense of the acuteness of the problem, a growing body of research has examined plagiarism in L2 writing from cultural, developmental, and disciplinary perspectives (Flowerdew & Li, 2007a, 2007b; Pecorari, 2008; Pennycook, 1996). A substantial portion of this research has taken a cultural approach to plagiarism in L2 writing and shared the assumption that the Anglo-American notion of plagiarism may not be shared in some cultures (Pennycook, 1996; Sutherland-Smith, 2005). Central to this cultural approach is a heated debate on whether some cultures, for example, Asian cultures in general and Confucian heritage cultures in particular, accept or even encourage plagiarism (see Dryden, 1999; Liu, 2005; Sowden, 2005).

Much empirical research informed by various cultural perspectives has focused on the question of whether there are culturally shaped perceptions of and attitudes towards plagiarism and yielded conflicting findings. Some studies (e.g., Evans & Youmans, 2000; Maxwell, Curtis, & Vardanega, 2008) have found no cultural differences in perceptions of plagiarism, others (e.g., Deckert, 1993; Marshall & Garry, 2006; Rinnert & Kobayashi, 2005) have reported cultural differences in attitudes towards plagiarism. These mixed results have

engendered considerable controversy about the cultural perspectives informing the empirical studies.

Notably, many studies adopting the cultural approach have focused specifically on L2 learners from one culture, namely students from China (e.g., Bloch, 2001; Bloch & Chi, 1995; Currie, 1998; Deckert, 1993; Gu & Brooks, 2008; Hayes & Introna, 2006; McGowan & Lightbody, 2008; Shi, 2004; Valentine, 2006). The picture emerging out of the collective results of these studies is that Chinese students appear to assume non-condemnatory stances to plagiarism and are likely to plagiarize in their own writing. There are, however, several reasons to take this picture with a pinch of salt. First, as pointed out by Flowerdew and Li (2007b), there has been a tendency to stereotype Chinese students and hence “a need to guard against essentializing culturally conditioned views of plagiarism” (p. 166). Second, it can be argued that the Chinese students involved in the majority of the existing studies may not be representative of typical Chinese cultural beliefs and practices because they were studying in Western educational settings and had been in contact with different cultures. Last and most importantly, many of the aforementioned studies have failed to draw a distinction between attitude (i.e., stance towards the acceptability of plagiaristic practices) and knowledge (i.e., understanding of what constitute plagiaristic practices). In other words, these studies have investigated Chinese students’ attitudes towards plagiarism as defined in Anglo-American academic communities without considering their knowledge of “the multiple practices that can be thought to constitute plagiarism” (Clegg & Flint, 2006, p.375). Thus it is virtually impossible to determine if a plagiaristic act has stemmed from a culturally shaped attitude or a lack of knowledge of plagiarism as understood in Anglo-American academia.

It can be concluded from the above review of the existing research that despite considerable attention to cultural issues in plagiarism, further empirical studies that are designed to address the three issues raised above are needed to examine the validity of the

controversial cultural explanations that have been advanced in the extant research on plagiarism. In particular, there is a dire need for research that directly addresses the relationship between knowledge of and attitudes towards plagiarism so as to obtain more definitive evidence regarding cultural differences in attitude and practice. To bridge the gaps identified above, this study draws on both quantitative and qualitative data to investigate Chinese EFL students' knowledge of and attitudes towards two prototypical forms of plagiarism: unacknowledged copying (hereafter "blatant plagiarism") and unacknowledged paraphrasing (hereafter "subtle plagiarism") (for definitions and illustrations of these two forms of plagiarism, see Barrett & Cox, 2005; Elander, Pittam, Lusher, Fox, & Payne, 2010; Hale, 1987; Marshall & Garry, 2006; Maxwell et al., 2008; Wheeler, 2009). Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. Can Chinese EFL students detect blatant plagiarism and subtle plagiarism in actual English writing samples?
2. What attitudes do they take towards these two forms of plagiarism if they are able to recognize them in the writing samples?

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants in this study were 270 Chinese undergraduate students from two universities in China – a normal university in Sichuan and a comprehensive university in Shanghai. To sample from two universities from locations differing vastly in socioeconomic and educational development was meant as a strategy to increase the representativeness of the sample, given that China is a large country with substantial regional differences (Hu, 2003,

2005). The participating undergraduates majored in four different disciplines: computer engineering ( $n = 64$ ), mechanical engineering ( $n = 63$ ), English language ( $n = 64$ ), and business ( $n = 79$ ). There was a roughly even split between first- and third-year undergraduates for each discipline. Of the sample, 107 (39.6%) undergraduates were male, and 163 (60.4%) were female.

### *Data Collection*

To address the research questions, a plagiarism detection instrument developed by Wheeler (2009) to study Japanese university students' perceptions of plagiarism was adapted and used to collect the needed data for this study. The adapted instrument consisted of three rating tasks. Following Wheeler, the notion of plagiarism and related Chinese words were not mentioned throughout the three rating tasks to avoid biasing the participants' judgments.

#### *Task 1*

The participants were asked to evaluate, on a 0-10 point scale, an English text of 220 words on Christmas observance in the USA and China and then explain their ratings in Chinese. The text was titled "Christmas is different in America and China," dated 26 May, 2006, and said to be a homework assignment handed in by a fictional student named Yang Min. It was a well structured passage written in correct, fluent, and idiomatic English. After they completed Task 1, the participants' task sheets were collected immediately.

#### *Task 2*

Upon completion of Rating Task 1, the participants were given two English texts. The first one was a 224-word passage titled "Christmas differences: The United States and

China.” It appeared to be authored by someone named John Smith and published in a journal in June, 2002. The second text was the same one Yang Min submitted as his homework assignment. A cursory comparison of the two texts would reveal that Yang Min’s passage was a verbatim copy of the journal article without any acknowledgement. Thus, it would be seen as a case of blatant plagiarism in Anglo-American academia. The participants were instructed to read John Smith’s journal article first and then re-evaluate Yang Min’s passage. They were asked to give written explanations of their ratings. Upon completion of Task 2, their reevaluations of Yang Min’s passage, together with their justifications, were collected before Task 3 was administered.

### *Task 3*

In Rating Task 3, the participants were again instructed to read John Smith’s journal article before they proceeded to evaluate another English text of 193 words supposedly written by another fictional student named Li Yun. Once again, they were asked to justify their ratings. Li Yun’s text was an unacknowledged close paraphrase of John Smith’s journal article and, consequently, was a prototypical case of subtle plagiarism in Anglo-American academia.

### *Data Coding and Analysis*

Each participant had three scores from the rating tasks: one for the initial evaluation of Yang Min’s passage (i.e., the score obtained from the first rating task), one for the re-evaluation of Yang Min’s passage (i.e., the score obtained from the second rating task), and one for the evaluation of Li Yun’s passage (i.e., the score obtained from the third rating task). To decide if the participants recognized Yang Min’s and Li Yun’s passages as cases of



plagiarism, the written explanations they gave to justify their evaluations in Task 2 and Task 3 were examined closely and coded. A coding scheme of four major categories – i.e., content, language, organization, and plagiarism – was developed iteratively in the preliminary coding of the data. After satisfactory inter-coder reliability was achieved by enlisting the help of a trained research student who coded a portion of the data independently of the second author of this paper, the latter coded all the data using the finalized coding scheme. If a participant gave a plagiarism-related explanation for his/her rating in Task 2 or Task 3, he/she was regarded as recognizing the form of plagiarism in question.

To answer the first research question, the explanations given by the participants to justify their re-evaluations of Yang Min's passage and ratings of Li Yun's passage were tallied by category and task. To answer the second research question, two mixed-designs two-way ANOVAs were conducted on the scores from the three rating tasks. In both ANOVAs, the between-subjects variable was detection of plagiarism (i.e., participants who detected plagiarism vs. those who did not), and the within-subjects variable was rating task (i.e., Task 1 vs. Task 2 in the ANOVA for blatant plagiarism; Task 1 vs. Task 3 in the ANOVA for subtle plagiarism). The ANOVAs were intended to determine whether recognition of plagiarism had an effect on the ratings of the plagiarized passages. In addition, qualitative analyses were conducted on the participants' written justifications for their ratings so as to acquire an in-depth understanding of the participants' knowledge of and attitudes towards the two forms of plagiarism.

## Findings

An examination of the participants' written justifications for the scores they awarded Yang Min's passage revealed that the majority justified their re-evaluations of the passage in

terms of language (e.g., accuracy and appropriateness), content, and rhetorical organization. Despite the procedural manipulation which made it extremely easy to spot the word-for-word copying in Yang Min's passage, only 35.19% ( $n = 95$ ) of the participants identified it as a case of plagiarism. Similarly, an overwhelming majority of the participants justified their scores for Li Yun's passage in terms of content, language, and organization. Only 11.85% ( $n = 32$ ) of the 270 participants identified Li Yun's passage as a case of plagiarism despite the procedural manipulation which made it very difficult to miss the unacknowledged paraphrasing. Taken together, these results indicated that only a very small portion of the participants shared the prevalent Anglo-American conception of blatant and subtle plagiarism.

The ANOVA run on the data collected from Tasks 1 and 2 yielded a significant main effect of detection of blatant plagiarism on the participants' ratings,  $F(1, 267) = 121.06, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .31$ . The group that identified Yang Min's text as plagiaristic rated it significantly lower than the group that did not. There was also a significant main effect of rating task,  $F(1, 267) = 292.37, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .52$ , indicating that the participants rated Yang Min's passage significantly lower in Task 2 than in Task 1. Furthermore, a significant interaction between rating task and detection of plagiarism was found,  $F(1, 267) = 269.64, p = .001, \eta_p^2 = .50$ . As can be seen clearly from Figure 1, the interaction occurred because the detection group's mean scores dropped markedly from Task 1 to Task 2, whereas the non-detection group's mean scores varied only minimally.

The ANOVA run on data collected from Tasks 1 and 3 found a significant main effect for detection of subtle plagiarism on the scores given by the participants,  $F(1, 268) = 37.52, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .12$ . The detection group rated Li Yun's passage significantly lower than the non-detection group. A significant main effect for rating task was also identified,  $F(1, 268) = 28.99, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .10$ , showing that the detection group gave lower scores in Task 3 than

in Task 1. Finally, there was a significant interaction between rating task and detection of plagiarism,  $F(1, 268) = 54.66, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .17$ . Figure 2 clearly shows that although the non-detection group's mean score for Task 3 was slightly higher than that for task 1, the detection group's mean score for Task 3 was markedly lower than that for Task 1.

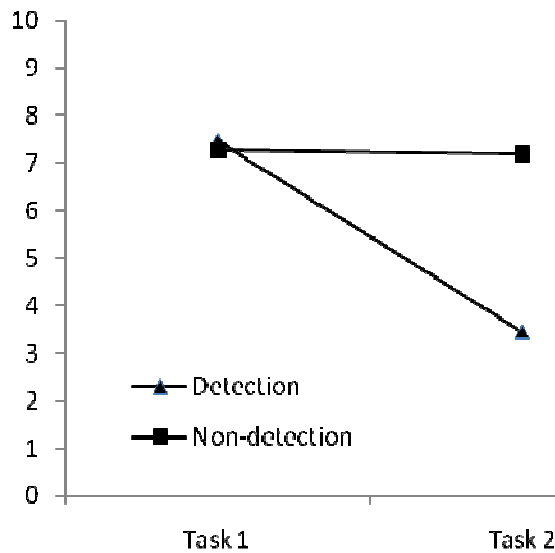


Figure 1. Mean scores by task and detection of blatant plagiarism

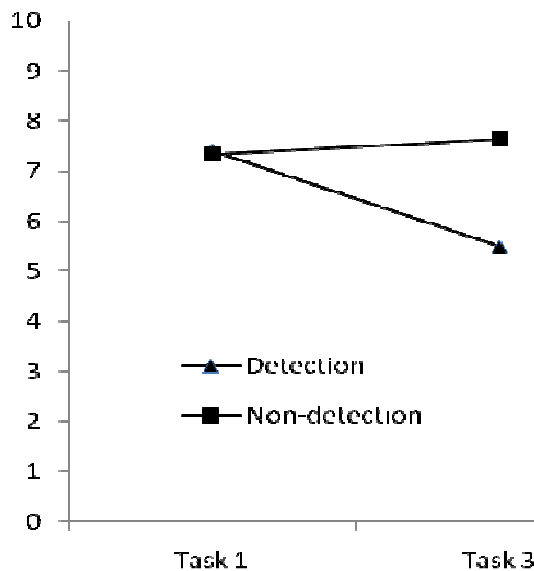


Figure 2. Mean scores by task and detection of subtle plagiarism

Taken together, the ANOVA results indicated that the participants who recognized the unattributed copying and unacknowledged paraphrasing as instances of plagiarism took clearly punitive attitudes towards such plagiaristic practices by marking the perpetrators down. These attitudes were also clearly reflected in the participants' written justifications. Among the 95 participants who recognized the blatant plagiarism in Yang Min's passage, there was considerable agreement about the nature of the problem. Nearly 12% of the 95 participants simply described the problem as *piao qie* or *chao xi* without further comment. According to Liu (2005), these two expressions are the Chinese equivalents for plagiarism: "'Piao qie' ... literally means to rob and steal someone else's writing, and 'chao xi' ... means to copy and steal" (p. 235). Because the Chinese terms convey a strong sense of intentionality, labeling the unacknowledged copying with them indicated that the participants regarded it as an intentional act of deception and theft.

The majority of the participants who identified Yang Min's text as plagiaristic explicitly commented on the unacceptable similarity in language and content between the source passage and Yang Min's text. This is illustrated by the following quotations:

1. The content of this essay is almost the same as that of the journal article. It smacks of *chao xi*. (Task 2: 253\_Business)
2. This essay uses the language of the journal article; it is devoid of one's own ideas and originality. (Task 2: 150\_Computer Engineering)

Many of these participants explicitly characterized unacknowledged copying as a shameful act and a moral transgression, as can be seen from the following quotations:

3. It is shameful to copy others' work. (Task 2: 233\_Business)
4. A verbatim copy of another person's academic work. It goes against the basic moral requirements for a college student. (Task 2: 127\_Computer Engineering)

There were also participants who held less categorical attitudes. On the one hand, they recognized verbatim copying and close paraphrasing without acknowledgement as plagiarism, hence generally unacceptable practices; on the other hand, they believed that these practices were somewhat excusable under certain circumstances:

5. This essay was not written by the student. It could get seven points if it was written from memory in a formal exam, but it could get only one point if it was an in-class assignment. (Task 2: 77\_Computer Engineering)
6. This essay has the same ideas (as the journal article), but there is substantial change in language. If it is meant for publication, it will be accused of plagiarism. But it is just fine if it is written in an exam. (Task 3: 217\_Mechanical Engineering)

Compared with the high level of consensus of opinion about the nature of the problem with Yang Min's passage, there was some ambivalence towards Li Yun's passage, though general agreement existed about the inappropriateness of unattributed paraphrasing. Some participants appeared to mitigate the problem by emphasizing Li Yun's use of "different language," but others tried to rationalize their low scores for the passage by stressing her copying of the "same ideas":

7. Although the ideas of this essay are the same as those of the journal article, most expressions are different, the sentence structures are varied, and the diction is precise. (Task 3: 187\_Mechanical Engineering)
8. The main ideas of this essay are the same as those of the journal article. Although there are some changes throughout the essay, they are confined to expressions. (Task 3: 284\_Business)

Notably, no participant explicitly characterized close paraphrasing without acknowledgement as a moral transgression.

The analysis of the qualitative data also revealed an interesting distinction made by some participants between copying on the one hand and imitation/borrowing on the other. Imitation and borrowing were seen as acceptable or even desirable on the ground they could be used as valuable learning strategies:

9. Obviously, this student copied the passage from the journal article. Undoubtedly, it takes good writing skills to get published in journals. Thus, we college students can imitate journal articles to some extent. But “imitating” is not equal to “copying.” This passage only differs in a few words from the journal article, and the rest is exactly the same. Copying is no good for either Chinese writing or English writing. (Task 2: 149\_Computer Engineering)

Despite the distinction between copying and imitation, no participant made any attempt to define what actually constituted imitation or borrowing for them.

Not a few participants voiced some interesting views of memorization in connection with unattributed verbatim copying. In these views, whereas copying was condemnable, the memorization involved in copying was commendable:

10. Though it is the same as the journal article, it takes great effort to memorize the latter. (Task 2: 206\_Mechanical Engineering)
11. Merely a verbatim copy of the journal article. Anyway, the student memorized the article, which is quite some effort. (Task 2: 248\_Business)

## Discussion

The results from the quantitative analyses suggested that the Chinese EFL undergraduate students had different conceptions of plagiarism from those sanctioned in Anglo-American academia. There is considerable empirical evidence that Anglo-American

undergraduates are generally able to identify both unacknowledged copying and unattributed paraphrasing as plagiarism. Hale (1987), for example, gave 197 American undergraduates pairs of passages (i.e., each pair consisting of a published text and a student paper) and asked them to determine if the student passages were plagiarized. These passages were either copied verbatim or paraphrased from the published text, and they either acknowledged the original text or did not reference it. The researcher found that in only 16% of the cases the participants made incorrect judgments on whether a student passage was guilty of plagiarism. Importantly, three-quarters of the incorrect judgments occurred “when passages taken verbatim were referenced but not noted as direct quotations” (p.69). Taken together, these results indicated that the American undergraduates rarely failed to identify unacknowledged verbatim copying and paraphrasing as plagiarism. Yeo (2007) presented first-year science and engineering students at an Australian university with scenarios of various forms of textual misappropriation and found that 94% of them were able to detect unattributed verbatim copying as plagiarism. Using a similar data collection method with 181 first-year students at a New Zealand university, Marshall and Garry (2006) found that 96% and 77% of the 115 English-speaking students correctly identified unattributed verbatim copying and paraphrasing as plagiarism, respectively. Comparable results were also obtained from the sample of Australian undergraduates in Maxwell et al.’s (2008) study. In contrast to these high rates of detection, 65% and 88% of the participants in our study respectively did not identify the clear exemplars as cases of plagiarism, in spite of the deliberate procedural arrangements that made the identity or similarity between the source text and the student passages all too obvious. These results suggested cultural differences in the conceptualization of plagiarism.

Cultural differences in the conceptualization of plagiarism were also reflected in the views of those students who identified unacknowledged verbatim copying and close

paraphrasing as plagiarism. Many of them did not regard unattributed direct copying and, especially, unacknowledged close paraphrasing as categorically transgressive. Some even considered it acceptable to memorize and reproduce other people's writing in exams, though they disapproved of such practice in the context of homework assignments. Taken together with their punitive ratings of the two plagiarized passages, the complex picture of the participants' understandings and perceptions of plagiarism provided some important evidence against a culturally essentializing view of plagiarism which claims that Chinese culture is accepting of plagiarism (e.g., Russikoff, Fucaloro, & Salkauskiene, 2003). While the penalization of the plagiarized passages constituted clear evidence of a condemnatory attitude towards plagiarism, those students who did not mark down Yang Min and Li Yun did not necessarily condone plagiarism. There was qualitative evidence that they did not share the Anglo-American conception of plagiarism.

Such conceptual differences may have stemmed from the prevalent Chinese literacy practices, which value the memorization, repetition and imitation of authoritative texts (see Bloch & Chi, 1995; Ding, 2007; Hu, 2002). Both Pennycook (1996) and Scollon (1995) have noted that memorizing classics and imitating canonical texts in an effort to master authoritative knowledge are regarded as a core component of literacy learning in Chinese culture. The participants' own comments quoted previously also attest to their embracing of memorization and imitation as legitimate learning strategies. The valuing of these learning strategies could have led some participants to perceive Yang Min's and Li Yun's passages as acceptable applications of the learning strategies.

Interestingly, the qualitative analysis of the participants' justificatory explanations revealed that the same act of textual misappropriation was seen as varying in acceptability in different contexts. Such perceptions could be ascribed in part to the prevailing educational practices in China that value effortful learning and place a premium on the reproduction of



authoritative, text-based knowledge upon demand (Hayes & Introna, 2005; Hu, 2002; Tweed & Lehman, 2002). In the Chinese education system, to be able to memorize and reproduce the content of an authoritative text in an exam is often seen as evidence of having made a serious effort to learn and having mastered the essential knowledge contained in the text. By contrast, a homework assignment is seen more or less as a venue for exploring one's own ideas and their expression. Consequently, to submit a copied text as one's assignment would not only provide no evidence of mastery of the relevant knowledge but would also violate the ethics of effortful learning (Tweed & Lehman, 2002).

### Conclusion

The participants' ratings of the plagiarized texts and the nuanced views expressed in their justifications of the ratings have revealed that although their understandings might coincide with some Anglo-American ideas about plagiarism, they either did not share or were not aware of other aspects of the Western conceptualization. Thus, the seeming condoning of what Anglo-American academia regards as plagiarism does not necessarily reflect a cultural acceptance of the act but may result from different perceptions of what constitutes plagiarism or a lack of knowledge about the Anglo-American notion of plagiarism. As Ouellette (2008) points out, "while all cultures may disapprove of 'stealing' words and ideas from source texts, what actually constitutes inappropriate textual borrowing may still vary both across and within cultures" (p. 258). In view of the differing conceptions of what constitute appropriate or inappropriate textual practices, we argue that it is necessary to take a more nuanced approach to plagiarism and related issues than a simplistic dichotomy of culturally acceptable vs. culturally unacceptable practice would allow. Absolutist claims about the acceptability of plagiarism to certain cultures not only are misleading but also smack of ethnocentrism.

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