

Beyond the accusation of plagiarism

Article (Accepted Version)

Gu, Qing and Brooks, Jane (2008) Beyond the accusation of plagiarism. *System*, 36 (3). pp. 337-352. ISSN 0346-251X

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/17085/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Beyond the Accusation of Plagiarism

Abstract

The paper explores the complexity of the notion of plagiarism from sociocultural and psychological perspectives. Plagiarism is a dynamic and multi-layered phenomenon (Russikoff *et al.*, 2003; Sutherland-Smith, 2005) and needs to be understood in relation to a specific context of academic conventions and environment. Drawing upon the experiences of ten Chinese students on a pre-session course and subsequently their postgraduate courses, the paper investigates change in these students' perceptions of plagiarism in a different academic community over time. Three English tutors who taught the students on the pre-session course were also interviewed to compare their judgment of plagiarism with the students' own accounts of their writing experience. Early results from the study and an extensive review of the literature on plagiarism suggest that learning to write in an unfamiliar academic discourse requires, at the deepest level, the students' cultural appropriation of their *conceptual* understanding of the way of writing and of the meaning of using the literature to develop their written argumentation. This learning process spans a developmental continuum involving the learners overcoming emotional tensions which arise from changes in their cognition, senses of identity and sociocultural values. A holistic and developmental perspective is thus required to understand changes in students' perception of plagiarism as part of their wider adaptation to the academic conventions of their host countries.

Keywords: plagiarism, intercultural adaptation, international students

1. Introduction

The number of Chinese students studying in the UK has seen a huge increase since the launch of the British Government's long-term worldwide educational campaign in 1999. These students' study-abroad experience is likely to be, as is the case more generally, "a significant transitional event that brings with it a considerable amount of accompanying stress, involving both confrontation and adaptation to unfamiliar physical and psychological experiences and changes" (Cushner and Karim, 2004: 292). It is within this context that our study was carried out to investigate the phenomenon of Chinese learners' plagiarising behaviour, which appears to have received increased attention amongst British teaching staff, particularly those in the field of English language teaching (ELT) in the last few years. These people are at the forefront of the internationalisation of British higher education, often working with international students shortly after their arrival in the UK. As a result, they may have formed a strong impression about the difficulty of teaching Western academic conventions, of which academic integrity plays an essential part, to their Chinese students.

Drawing upon evidence from an extensive review of the literature on plagiarism and two rounds of interviews with ten Chinese postgraduate students over a period of 15 months, the paper argues that although difference in cultural values has a role to play in the accusation of plagiarism, an excessive emphasis on culture may result in a dismissive attitude towards Chinese learning practices. The ten Chinese students' intercultural experiences and change over time suggest that learning to write in an unfamiliar academic discourse requires, at the deepest level, a *conceptual* understanding of knowledge construction and conventions in the students' specific

academic community, rather than practice of mechanical aspects of citing and referencing.

A distinctive strength of the study is the holistic and developmental perspective that the authors adopt to probe into a learning process that is itself holistic and developmental in nature. The purpose of this paper is to offer pedagogical implications, including the need for increased awareness amongst faculty of the differing meanings of plagiarism across cultures and the inadequacy of focussing on writing skills, rather than conceptualisation and values, when training Chinese students.

2. The Concept of Plagiarism

Plagiarism, a term that conveys a strong sense of disapproval, is defined in the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (Soanes and Stevenson, 2006: Oxford Reference Online) as “*take (the work or an idea of someone else) and pass it off as one’s own.*” Plagiarism originated from the Latin word *plagiarius* meaning the theft of words as well as slaves (Howard, 1995). As Howard (1995: 790) posits, “the very etymology of the word *plagiarism* demonstrates the antiquity of the concept”. With the rapid development of modern technologies giving writers access to vast textual resources, plagiarism is seen as “an ever-increasing practice and problem” both within the academy and among the general population (Chandrasoma *et al.*, 2004: 172; see also Price, 2002; Sullivan, 2002; Briggs, 2003).

2.1 Plagiarism in the academic community

In the academic community, despite a lack of consensus on the definition of plagiarism (Pennycook 1994 and 1996; Howard, 2000; Briggs, 2003), the prevalent institutional strategy for student plagiarism continues to be containment and punishment (Kolich, 1983; Howard 1995; Decoo, 2002; Price 2002; Zobel and Hamilton, 2002; Briggs, 2003). Plagiarism is considered to be “the worm of reason” that “starves the seeds of originality” (Kolich, 1983: 145) and violates all five fundamental values of academic integrity – “honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility” (Centre for Academic Integrity 1999: 4).

Academics are, indeed, aware of the complex causes for plagiarism. Carroll’s (2004), warning against the rise of plagiarism amongst students, suggests such awareness as she differentiates two distinct student behaviours, which, if discovered, may be considered plagiarism: i) the deliberate act of choosing to break the rules, i.e. intentional violations or fraud (Howard, 2000), and ii) “misbehaviour”, i.e. unintentional violations, which often occur when students are exposed to a set of unfamiliar academic conventions but have not yet “understood the conventions of academic writing or have not yet learned to use the skills of citation, paraphrasing and using other’s ideas to underpin their own arguments” (Carroll, 2004: Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development website). The identification of these acts suggests that complex factors underlie plagiarism, a concept denoting a heterogeneous variety of meanings that are far more sophisticated than a dishonest act of stealing or cheating (Hunt, 2003; Hayes and Introna, 2005).

2.2 Plagiarism as a “cross-cultural phenomenon”

There is a growing consensus that plagiarism is a “cross-cultural phenomenon” (Russikoff *et al.*, 2003; also Pennycook, 1996, Currie, 1998, Zobel and Hamilton, 2002, Sowden, 2005, Shi, 2004 and 2006). Such a notion, however, by no means implies support of cheating or allowing people to use culture as an excuse when claiming other people’s words and/or ideas to be their own. Like many other concepts in education, perceptions of plagiarism can also be shaped by a range of context-related factors including historical, political, economic, social, pedagogical and technological influences. The notion of plagiarism as a cross-cultural phenomenon recognises the “hidden” influence of these context-related factors on a writer in making explicit that the words being used are *not* his or her own. In their survey of 645 international students, Russikoff *et al.* (2003: 109) concluded that “plagiarism has often been an outgrowth of difference in understanding”.

In a similar vein, Pennycook (1996) and Sowden (2005) argue that plagiarism is culturally conditioned and thus is interpreted differently across cultures. Pennycook (1996) points to the complex context of plagiarism, arguing that notions of ownership, authorship and intellectual property which have developed in the Western context are subject to their distinctive cultural and historical specificities. By exposing “not only the fallacy of a pristine textual integrity so vigorously pursued by the dominant writing pedagogy of the West but also the inherent hypocrisy of its deterministic attitudes to plagiarism” (cited in Chandrasoma *et al.*, 2004: 174), Pennycook raises the question of whether people from other cultures should indeed be obliged to conform to the same conventions.

Implicated in Pennycook's argument are relationships of power which pertain in the academic context. Chandrasoma *et al.* (2004: 175) assert that power hierarchies are not only "constructed intertextually", but also "intertextually maintained, rejected, contested and transformed". Making meaning in a text involves an active interplay between the writer, the reader and the discursive resources within a wider social, cultural, historical and political context, upon which each party draws. The meaning of a text, thus, does not reside in the text (Howard 1995). It is produced by the interplay between the text and the reader in relation across texts (Pennycook, 2001) with reference to socioculturally and sociohistorically constituted "ways of being in the world" (Gee, 1996: viii). Bruner (2003) maintains that the cultural situatedness of meanings provides a basis for their negotiability and communicability. When the reader (the teacher) and the student writer have unequal access to the dominant discursive resources and intellectual conventions, communication between the reader, the writer and the texts may become highly problematic and plagiarism may occur only in the reader's eyes, but not the writer's.

In Sowden's (2005) study, plagiarism was shown to be the consequence of students' conceptual confusion, rather than a deliberate behavioural avoidance or misuse of citation or referencing. Sowden found that beneath the surface observation of his Japanese students' failure to reference previous scholarship in their assignments, lay the students' confusion about how knowledge is constructed and the difference in meaning between common knowledge and common sense. For his Japanese students, "the author's insights, having achieved the status of common sense, had thereby entered the field of common knowledge and no longer belonged to him exclusively" (2005: 226-227).

2.3 Plagiarism and international students: a holistic and development perspective

It is, however, unreasonable to assume that such conceptual confusion about the distinction between common knowledge and common sense is a problematic terrain for international students alone. Indeed, this is something that all academic writers have to tackle alongside differences which are disciplinary, as well as cultural. Nevertheless, compared to home students (viz. UK students in this study), the challenge for international students may be particularly acute because of their greater level of unfamiliarity with the socioculturally and intertextually constructed academic conventions, as well as the traditions, values and beliefs embedded in the broader social and cultural context in which they live. Cultural issues, as some may claim, play a significant role in why students plagiarise (Zobel and Hamilton, 2002; Shei, 2004 and 2006), or perhaps more accurately, in why students are perceived to plagiarise by their teachers.

Others, however, argue that cultural conditioning is not the major culprit for plagiarism (Liu, 2005; Phan Le Ha, 2006). This paper takes a similar stance: culture plays an important but not deterministic role in understanding *change* in Chinese students' perceptions of plagiarism. We argue that it is much too easy to attribute the differences observed in Chinese students to the consequences of the Confucian heritage culture. Given the diverse differences in historical, political and economic development across different regions in China and the country's rapidly evolving image in these changing times of globalisation, it is virtually impossible to generalise what Chinese learners are.

Gu and Schweisfurth (2006) carried out a mixed method comparative pilot study on Chinese learners' experiences in the UK and in British projects in China and found that, in addition to culture, factors such as the identities and motivations of the learners and the power relationships between them and their teachers were also significant issues in the strategic adaptation made by Chinese students. Elsewhere, Gu and Maley (in press) observe that despite various intercultural challenges and struggles, most Chinese students in their study have managed to survive the demands of the learning environment, and to adapt and develop.

Angélil-Carter (2000), with a closer focus on students' motivation and development in writing, also found that textual borrowing is more a problem of writer development than of academic dishonesty. The danger of treating the incidents of *textual borrowing* (in contrast to *apparent plagiarism*) (Pennycook, 1996) with the sanctions commonly applied to cases of plagiarism is that it may deny students' genuine endeavour to learn and adapt; it may deny students an opportunity to correct and improve; and more importantly, it may have a profoundly detrimental effect on their self-confidence and motivation to learn.

As discussed earlier, an important aspect of international students' intercultural experiences is their endeavour to fit in with the host culture and educational conventions, adapt to them and grow through them. Their perceptions of plagiarism, amongst many other culturally-embedded values and beliefs that have been challenged by the new context, may also change as they are trying to survive and succeed in their studies. This points to the dynamic nature of plagiarism. It is from this holistic and developmental perspective that the authors have analysed the ten

Chinese students' writing experiences and perceptions of plagiarism during their year of study in a UK university.

3. The Study

3.1 Background

There has been a major influx of Chinese students to British universities since 1998, with approximately 60,000 Chinese students currently studying in the UK (China Economic Review, 1st November 2007).

Despite this rapid increase in Chinese student numbers, few British lecturers have had substantial training in how to teach international students effectively in these numbers. Meanwhile, most Chinese students have had little experience of adjusting to alternative academic conventions (Gu and Maley, in press). As a result, the potential for misunderstanding, stress and failure in this encounter is huge, as both authors have indeed experienced in their own learning and teaching. This study is thus designed as a necessary response to a clear pedagogical need to understand the situation better.

3.2 Methodology

The current study, which is in its early stages, has gathered qualitative data from ten Chinese students (four in Arts and Humanities, three in Social Sciences, and three in Science and Engineering) at a British university over a period of fifteen months. Two formal rounds of semi-structured interviews were carried out with these students, focussing on the challenges facing them in their academic writing practice and the change (or absence of change) in their perceptions of plagiarism over time.

The interviews used open-ended questions, including previously designed generic questions relating to students' biographies, and those which arose naturally during the interviews in response to individual students' narratives. The first round interview was undertaken in the middle of their pre-session English language and study skills course three months prior to their postgraduate study at a UK university, whilst the second was carried out towards the end of the second semester of their Master's courses. The students were asked to volunteer selected coursework and teachers' comments to the authors prior to the interviews and these were then used during the interviews as prompts for a retrospective narrative description of their writing experiences. Specific attention was paid to students' thinking processes underpinning the organisation and presentation of their writing and, where possible, problematic texts that could have been classified as plagiarism based on the dominant discourses and academic conventions in the data collection university (Appendix I: Interview Guide). Emails and telephone conversations were also used to confirm the accuracy of the authors' interpretation of students' interview narrative accounts and to capture change in their experiences between interviews.

All the student interviews were undertaken by the first author of the paper who had herself navigated a process of "intercultural mediation" (Byram, 2003: 60) during her postgraduate study in the UK. Her previous experiences provided her with an insider perspective which, combined with her outsider role as an independent researcher, featured an important methodological strength of this study. This insider/outsider perspective enabled her to empathize with the students and thus establish a strong rapport with them throughout the data collection phase. Much of the oral contact was in Chinese to allow the students to express themselves freely and to avoid ambiguity

in meaning which may arise from the use of a second language. Although each case demonstrates a story of adaptation in its own right, these stories, from differing angles, inform the investigation of change in these students' perceptions of plagiarism in the UK higher education environment over time.

The second author of the paper, who was herself an English tutor on the course, also undertook semi-structured interviews with three colleagues who taught the ten Chinese students on the pre-sessional course, in order to compare their judgment of the students' development in relation to acceptable use of previous scholarship with the students' accounts of their writing experiences.

All the interview data were jointly coded by the two authors. Their different personal, professional and ethnic backgrounds form an important basis for establishing an intercultural relationship between them. Such a relationship constantly exposes them to each other's "otherness" and positions them on a cultural binary scale, whilst at the same time providing a shared frame of reference for their self-examination and self-reflection, and facilitating their endeavour to perceive reality through a different lens. The interaction enhances an in-depth understanding of the intercultural experiences of the informants, minimises the subjective constraints as observed by Shah (2004) in intercultural research, and constitutes a distinctive methodological strength of this study.

It is important to note that in investigating Chinese students' experiences and perceptions of plagiarism, it is not our intention to suggest that accusations of plagiarism are restricted specifically to Chinese students. Rather, we intend to

demonstrate through emerging evidence from the current study that a holistic and developmental perspective may offer methodological and conceptual insights for future in-depth investigations into the plagiarist behaviour of international, as well as home, students in UK higher education.

Initial emerging themes were categorised into five focussed themes (observations) in relation to students' perceptions of plagiarism. The development of these themes took into account key challenges that students had experienced in their journey of learning to write on their pre-sessional courses (Observations 1-4) and changes in their perceptions of these challenges over time (Observation 5). In the following section we shall discuss five key observations.

4. Students' Perceptions of Plagiarism: Key Observations

4.1 Conceptual confusion

Western academic practices are cultural practices (Pennycook, 1994). The same can be argued about academic practices in other parts of the world. Chinese students' unfamiliarity with British culture and its academic conventions may well be as innocent as many British teaching staffs' limited, if not stereotypical, knowledge of Chinese cultural and educational practices.

Hong, a female student who was to undertake a Master's course in Media Studies after her pre-sessional course, found that writing essays in English was completely different from writing ones in Chinese.

I found writing essays was the most difficult task on my pre-sessional course. You know this is totally different from Chinese essays. I think the way to write English essays is really easy. ... You have your own ideas and you have got someone really powerful to support your ideas. You just explain what is like. You have many books and you read them. But for Chinese essays, you have to write your own ideas, always your own ideas. ... So English essays are easier to write than Chinese ones.

(Hong)

Whilst her interpretation of the meaning of originality in “Western” essay writing may not be entirely accurate, her comments on the importance of expressing original views in Chinese essays caught our attention. Hong’s statement suggests that “Chinese students” and “plagiarism” may not be closely associated in her mind. Hui, a male student in Science, made similar comments when studying on his pre-sessional course: *“In Chinese university, we also have this problem with plagiarism, but most people always use their own ideas, never copy.”*

Indeed, evidence in the literature on Chinese rhetoric shows that independent thinking and “originality and skill in reasoning and expression” (Kracke, 1953: 62) have been advocated in Chinese academic traditions (Moloughney, 2002, Kirkpatrick, 2005).

What is also revealed in Hong’s remarks is her misunderstanding of the purpose of using the literature in developing her arguments in her essays. Her comments on the necessity of quoting “powerful” authors and the easiness of writing English essays may appear to be innocent and naïve; however, they bring to light some profound

conceptual confusion with regard to writing in ways that are considered to be appropriate by the host (i.e. dominant) academic discourse communities. When probed further, Hong explained that referencing books in the ways required by her tutors was a new experience for her and that she *had to* include references in her essays because, as emphasised by her tutors, her ideas could hardly stand without support from previous scholarship. Although there may be some truth in her explanations, her interpretations are nonetheless superficial. What is missing is an understanding of the meaning of building upon existing knowledge to advance independent and original thinking. Writing, in this sense, is a means to present this thinking process, and also an end that allows the author to share his/her thoughts with a public.

Hong was, however, not alone, as comments from the other nine all point to similar confusion about the role of referencing. Such confusion denotes important pedagogical challenges for English tutors on pre-sessional courses. Recognition of the blind spots for both the students and the tutors and the gap that exists “between what is prescribed and what is practiced” with respect to disciplinary norms and occluded academic genres (Pecorari, 2006: 4) will help avoid the tensions observed between the following student, Zhu, and her English tutor, Alan.

For Zhu – a female student registered on a postgraduate course in International Relations – adding references to her essays was merely a mechanical task. She had hoped that her tutor could make some critical comments upon the organisation of her “original ideas” in the first draft of her essay, so she was surprised when her tutor’s

criticism came from a completely different direction. Alan, her pre-sessional tutor, hypothesising about why she had, in his eyes, plagiarised, commented,

So, to me, one version of it might be that she panicked, and ... thought that will do and maybe misunderstood what a draft was, but having said that, the shock of being told it really wasn't good enough and being in a sense "found out" because I wrote the name of the website on the top of her draft, that really provoked a pretty dramatic reaction in her.. I can only assume that she panicked and had to do it the night before and found something and I would hope that when she looked back on it she would think that it was completely inappropriate, not just the issue of referencing and citation but also the issue of what kind of source is that, bearing in mind that it is a controversial topic.

(Alan, pre-sessional tutor)

For Alan, Zhu's tears were an indication of her sense of guilt. He was convinced that Zhu cried because she panicked when she was caught copying and pasting materials from a website. This is despite the fact that Alan was aware that the writing work he had commented upon was Zhu's first draft. The following quote from Zhu describes how she felt at the time.

I did not put references in the first draft. My tutor gave it back to me and said to me "Where are your references? I cannot give you any marks because there are no references in your essay." That really shocked me because I thought this was only the first draft. It was only a draft. In my

research project diary, I only needed to write down my own ideas in my essay. I focussed on language and I wanted to organise the structure of the essay well because I thought these things were difficult. Putting in references is very simple. You just need to copy them in. So in my first draft I didn't think that was serious. So I handed it in ... Maybe he thought I plagiarised others' work. That was a serious problem – now I know. (Zhu)

Zhu was extremely upset because she felt that her hard work was neither recognised nor valued by her tutor. It was this unexpected disappointment that had caused her tears. She found her tutor's refusal to mark her work incomprehensible because, in her view, adding references was merely a mechanical task which could be easily carried out as the final step of completing her essay.

The observed gap in perception supports the notion that plagiarism is a multi-layered cross-cultural phenomenon. The English tutor and the Chinese student had contrasting expectations and understanding of the nature of this writing task. For the student, the focus of writing an essay should be on the organisation of ideas and the presentation of a coherent structure, compared to which, citation and referencing were less important. The source of such an attitude can be traced back to her (as well as Hong's and Hui's) educational background at home where the academic conventions placed a much higher value on the demonstration of profound collective knowledge and the presentation of the essay in writing training than on citation and referencing, unlike English-language academic practices.

It is thus of crucial importance that teachers and lecturers understand the complexity of plagiarism and engage with the issues of context before taking judicial actions and penalising student plagiarists, particularly international students. Hall's observation of "hidden cultures" (1976) reminds us that when we judge the practices of the "other" on the basis of our own practices, values and perceptions which we believe are the norm because they are shared by people around us and reinforced by the context in which we work and live, we may not see what we think we have seen. When the power relationships between "we" and "the other" are in favour of the former, we are more likely to believe the practices of the "other" to be cultural whilst our own remain the norm. This is indeed a form of cultural exclusivism that Pennycook (1994) roundly criticises in Deckert's claims which present "the supposedly Western tradition" as superior to "the supposedly Chinese tradition" (1994: 132).

4.2 Deliberate versus unintentional plagiarism

There is no denying that intentional plagiarist behaviour exists amongst international students, as rightly observed by Tong, a male postgraduate student in Linguistics,

Our teachers [tutors on pre-sessional course] have told us that some overseas students plagiarised other people's work often because they did not quite understand rules of referencing. ... If some Chinese students were found having plagiarised someone else's work, I think it is quite likely that they did it because they were lazy. They must know that plagiarism will not be accepted. (Tong)

Similarly, Jo, this student's English pre-sessional tutor, did not seem to be entirely convinced that non-deliberate plagiarist behaviour was possible.

I think so [a good idea to differentiate deliberate and unintentional plagiarism]. If the student doesn't know they've actually done it [plagiarised], then they can be asked to redo it [the piece of writing]. ... But no, if they've intentionally copied, then it [the mark] should be a zero...but how can you plagiarise without realising?

(Jo, Pre-sessional course tutor)

However, the previous student Hong's experience shows that intentionality is key to understanding instances of students having unwittingly transgressed the boundaries of academic conventions (Chandrasoma *et al.*, 2004), particularly when they are adapting to academic conventions that may be radically different from their own. McKay (2001) concluded in his research on plagiarism that there were a range of factors that had influenced some students' "non-deliberate plagiarism", which could have been prevented if support, guidance or possible solutions had been offered earlier.

Meng, who was to undertake a Master's course in Engineering, struggled to distinguish his original ideas from those of others, thus exemplifying Deckert's (1993) observation of "learned plagiarism". This describes a transitional phase for student writers, in which the students' overwhelming concern is for what they perceive as important areas of learning, rather than institutional rules.

I am not quite clear where to draw a line to distinguish my ideas from other authors' ideas. For example, I read a book and had some ideas of my own. So when I write, maybe half of the sentence is a summary of the author's ideas whilst the other half is about my new ideas drawing upon the ideas in the book. Should I make a reference to the book? It was a real headache for me because I felt that actually my ideas were integrated with someone else's. At present I do indicate the original sources in my essays. But I feel that it seems that my own new ideas have become somebody else's. I find that quite difficult and don't know what to do.

(Meng, a male student in Engineering)

Meng's remarks raise the question of whether a lack of citation should simply be considered a transgressive act. What had troubled him most were the boundaries between common knowledge, which is itself a culturally or locally defined concept (Chandrasoma *et al.*, 2004), textual sources of authentic information/knowledge, and his own contribution to creativity and originality. Beneath the surface act of adding references to the original textual sources was his genuine attempt to demonstrate his intellectual contribution, as well as his commitment to academic integrity.

4.3 Memorisation and understanding

Chinese literary education based on memorisation of the classics has a 2,000 year old history (Galt, 1951). The influence of such a long tradition of "memorisation" and "understanding and analytical ability" (Connell 1987: 203) on teaching and learning can still be seen in classrooms in China (Gu, 2004). The positive role of text

memorisation in enabling the learner to attend to details of language and borrow them for productive use, as Ding (2007) observes, was also found in our study. There is evidence suggesting that memorising good writing helps generate a real feel for the language and the flow of ideas. For example, Wang, a male student in Logistics, commented while studying on his pre-sessional course:

Why do we always use other people's ideas and quotations? Because we study English, we always memorise some words from other people, so it is a natural thing to use other people's things [words/ideas]. (Wang)

Liu (2005) asserts that "a major role of memorizing good writing in Chinese is to help the learner to appreciate and become familiar with effective rhetorical styles and useful writing techniques that the memorized writing uses so the learner can use them in his/her own writing in the future" (2005: 234). In a similar vein, Bao, a male student in Social Policy, explained how his undergraduate learning experience in the Chinese Department of his university in China continued to exert an influence on his current writing practices.

In our Chinese Department we were encouraged [by our lecturers] to follow a flow while writing, but this was after a period of careful reading and thinking. During this period, we were encouraged to appreciate classic essays. When I came across clear, elegant prose and excellent argument [in classics and good literature], I would naturally want to remember them. Following a flow had become a habit when I was writing. So I found it quite hard here because I had to stop and

worry about making references. But if I completed my writing in one go, I found that I could not remember all the references that I had used. Therefore, I had to be extra careful when I was writing my essays here, distinguishing other people's views from my own and referencing them. ... I found that this different way of writing affected my train of thought or the organisation of my thoughts.

(Bao, a male student in Social Policy)

Bao's exposure to the interface between two distinctly different practices of composition and rhetorical systems appears to have led to his initial struggle and frustration in writing English essays. Such frustration also reveals, however, his endeavour to adapt to rules and conventions of a different academic culture. Matalene (1985) rightly reminds us that

Invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery can all be defined, practiced, and valued in ways other than our own. Recognizing these differences can make us more civilized guests and more effective teachers; we can witness and perhaps even inspire the extraordinary syntheses that are possible when a brilliant student integrates Eastern and Western rhetoric.

(1985: 804)

Learning by memorisation is thus "not meant as a tool for copying" (Liu, 2005: 234). Rather, it is an emotional and psychological experience. It involves careful thinking, appreciation of rhetoric, meaning making and understanding. It is *not* a superficial,

mechanical rote learning experience, but a form of learning that also promotes deep cognitive and affective learning.

4.4 Patchwriting as a transitional strategy

Patchwriting is a textual strategy which involves “copying from a source text and then deleting some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one-for-one synonym-substitutes” (Howard, 1993: 233). It remains a controversial concept in the teaching of writing as, for some, it is a form of plagiarism. For example, Alan, the English tutor on the pre-session course, implied that borrowing patches of words and sentence structures from other texts was a deliberate act which revealed international students’ lack of confidence in their linguistic capabilities.

I don’t think there is much possibility for accidental plagiarism. There’s careless or tired referencing or citation sometimes, ...but I think it’s compounded in the students we meet by linguistic constraints. In many cases they don’t have the linguistic facility to write from their note-taking, ... to their drafting, to their writing, to write efficiently and fairly swiftly in order to quickly reformulate it and condense it and then do the citations. ... It’s not necessarily a referencing and citation issue, it’s a linguistic issue before that sometimes.

(Alan, English tutor)

However, Cui’s experiences on her pre-session course suggests that, rather than being an act of cheating, patchwriting is a learning strategy that students use to engage with the linguistic and discursive forms of their disciplines.

Sometimes I just want to improve my writing. I read some articles and felt that, “wow, that was a wonderful sentence. I want to learn it.” ... So I write it down. But I don’t write the whole sentence down, not completely. I want to be creative too. I want to reorganise these sentences, and use them to express my own [subject] knowledge, ... so that they could be my own sentences. ... I learned good [sentence] structures from the articles. The language is beautiful and I want to use it.

(Cui, a female student in English Literature)

The following quote from Yao, a male student in Civil Engineering, reveals his confusion about the appropriate ways of paraphrasing other people’s work in his writing which would also enable him to support his own original ideas. His accounts provides further evidence supporting Howard’s (1993 and 1999) assertion that patchwriting is one of a series of *developmental* stages that (all) writers pass through. When studying on his pre-sessional course, Yao was clearly struggling with both the expression of ideas and the use of language.

I don’t know what the meaning of paraphrasing is exactly. If I remember some words from another person, I look at some article and remember a sentence or a paragraph, and I remember that clearly, and I use this sentence in my article, I think that is MY WORK...[...] If I have the same idea with that writer, is it my work? [...] I think if you change the word or paraphrase, and then another person changes some words and then another person, and many, many people change that word, you have

no space to change that word. It means this sentence disappears in your words....If you want to express the same meaning, you don't have the relevant words. (Yao)

Alan, the English tutor, may thus be correct in suggesting that patchwriting is a strategy that international students employ to learn to develop intellectual argument in a second/foreign language and in the unfamiliar academic discourses of their disciplinary fields. Nevertheless, patchwriting is not a textual strategy that is unique to international students. It is a positive, transitional composing strategy which offers all students a valuable pedagogical opportunity for making progress toward membership of a discourse community (Howard, 1995; Chandrasoma, 2004). Recognising patchwriting's positive pedagogical value will thus have profound impact on sustaining students' motivation to learn. If it were classified as plagiarism, student-writers would be thwarted in their initial, genuine attempts to develop and succeed in the dominant academic community within which they are pursuing their studies. As Pecorari (2003) posits, patchwriting is "a form of textual plagiarism which is caused not by the intention to deceive but by the need for further growth as a writer" (2003: 338).

4.5: Conceptual, holistic development

The above four observations all point to the argument that the authors have made at the beginning of the paper – that is, learning to write according to an "alien" set of academic conventions requires, by the very nature of the task, conceptual and holistic development on the part of the writer. It involves a range of issues related to understanding the construction of knowledge, the ownership of knowledge, and

perceptions of self, all of which go far beyond superficial changes in behaviour.

Ample evidence from the experiences of our case study students shows that the intercultural learning experience is also a transitional and rebirth experience, which at its deepest level, necessitates identity change. For example, Cui, the female student in English Literature, commented,

But now [on Master's course] the situation is very different. I have been reading materials in my subject as the course goes along. So I have, consciously and subconsciously, gained some understanding in the field. Sometimes when I come across something interesting in a book, I put it down in my notebook. So when I am writing up my essay, I can use my old notes which are very useful. I also look for more references according to the specific subject of my essay. So the process of preparing for my essays is very different from before.

(Cui, a female student in English Literature)

This is a student who used to wonder what other students were doing in the library when she first started her pre-sessional English course in the UK. It is clear that what she has acquired over time is not only an improved understanding of her subject. She had also acquired a deeper understanding of ways of writing in the dominant academic community. However, the most profound change in her goes beyond her improved understanding and ability to write in a way that is deemed as “normal” in the dominant academic community. She managed to engage confidently with the academic conventions as an active and competent learner. What shines through is her

successful development and adaptation. Comments from the following tutor support this observation.

Generally I think there is a change. Generally, it takes at least, for postgraduate students who are working very hard, it takes at least 6 months for them to really begin to understand what we are doing, and why we are doing it, and how we are doing it. Some students never fully understand it. Some students do understand it and adapt very positively to it. So there is variation, not one uniform response.

(Paul, English tutor)

In a similar vein, Jie, a female postgraduate student in Science Policy, expressed her enculturation into her disciplinary discourses and discovery of her new authorial self, particularly through demonstrating her creativity and originality in her writing.

I did not have any experience in doing research or writing academic essays. At school we wrote what we thought. It never occurred to us that we needed to go out to look for materials and references to prepare for our writing, which was very important in writing essays here, because otherwise, we may find that we have nothing to write. Making references was something new to me. ...

At the beginning, I thought it was too complicated and too much effort to write bibliography and make detailed references. When we first

started writing essays for theory courses, we all kind of copied ideas from books and website and then added with our own comments and ideas. But after a lot of practice and writing assignments, we began to have our own ideas and views and making references had become a habit. ... Originality and creativity is of crucial importance to someone working in my subject. We learn from and build on classic works, from which we then develop our own ideas.

The following quote from Bao, the male postgraduate student in Social Policy, provides further evidence of students' change and development, suggesting that change at the deepest level may occur in the way that they construct their thinking as a result of negotiation, mediation and reflection in an academic environment that, at one time, they found overwhelming and beyond their reach.

I think that I am more used to the Western approaches to teaching. I also feel that the way I think has also changed, or been changed by the system. This is because I must think in a very logical way, in other words, thinking very hard to find a kind of causal relations in my arguments. ... I don't think that I wrote in such a strict manner when I was in China. ...

...

I think the biggest change for me is that my way of thinking has changed drastically. I begin to feel that my personal views are equally importantly. I seem to have developed a stronger personality. ... I wouldn't take someone's views for granted any more.

(Bao, the male student in Social Policy)

In addition to change in his authorial self, the student also went through a personal identity change, refining and modifying his “ideological” (values that he acquired from his social and cultural background) and “logical” identities (the “natural” way he used to organize and express his thoughts in Chinese writing) (Shen, 1989: 459; see also Scollon, 1994, Abasi *et al.*, 2006). Chandrasoma *et al.* (2004: 189) argue that

We need to understand what resources students bring and what resources are made available for autobiographical, discursal, and authorial selves. Because of the discursive and identificatory pulls that construct these selves, furthermore, they will rarely be simple accommodatory selves; rather they are about struggle and negotiation.

The outcomes of struggle and negotiation are adaptation and holistic development.

5. Conclusion

The paper investigates the complexity of the notion of plagiarism, arguing that in a cross-cultural context plagiarism needs to be understood in relation to the specific context of academic conventions and environments. The ten Chinese students’ initial frustration in writing and the misunderstandings which arose between them and their English tutors strongly suggest that learning to write in an unfamiliar academic discourse involves far more than learning how to prepare bibliographies according to the rules of any given system or the technical organisation of an essay. Rather, the learning process requires the students’ cultural appropriation of their conceptual

understanding of the way of writing, and the meaning of using previous scholarship to develop their argumentation in relation to the subject that they are writing about.

Taking Sowden's (2005) and Pennycook's (1996) observations further, it can be argued that because perceptions of plagiarism are culturally conditioned, plagiarism's meaning will unavoidably be challenged and brought to the surface for examination in the intercultural context where international students operate. Change in their perceptions, under such circumstances, is consequently unavoidable. Nevertheless, the extent of change made by international students in terms of their understanding of plagiarist behaviour may vary, depending on their individual educational backgrounds and experiences, and perhaps the length of stay in the host country and the degree of their overall adaptation to the host culture. It is a process that involves the students in on-going self adjustment, consciously or subconsciously, to the values and beliefs of teaching and learning that are anchored in the local context.

Beyond the accusation that Chinese students plagiarise lies a more complex picture. Analysis of the ten Chinese students' learning experiences and their adaptation, when writing, to the requirements of a UK academic community suggests that this learning process spans a developmental continuum involving the students in overcoming emotional tensions arising from changes in cognition, in their sense of identities and in their sociocultural values. A holistic perspective is, therefore, required to understand the dynamic nature of this change, and a culturally-sensitive stance is of essence in teaching notions of ownership of ideas and plagiarism to students from differing academic cultures. Faculty need to understand the sociocultural sources of their students' initial frustration, their self-reflection and examination of contrasting

Gu, Qing & Brooks, Jane

Published in: *System* 36 (3) 337-352 [<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2008.01.004>]

cultural values and educational practices, their endeavour to master a different lens through which to view authorship and the ownership of knowledge, and ultimately their “renaissance” through adaptation and development in the Western academic community.

Appendix I Example of The Student Interview Guide

Student: Zhu, a female student in International Relations

The investigators should elicit information on the following three areas:

Personal History

- Academic/personal histories of the student
 - *Prompt*: Factors, as perceived by the student, that are significant in his/her backgrounds to their motivation for learning, attitudes towards learning English whilst in their home country, and the formation of their intercultural attitudes, aptitudes and dispositions

Generic Information about study and student life in the UK

- Main purpose(s) of study in the UK
- Motivation: original decision to study in the UK
- Length of stay in the UK

Experiences in Writing

- On pre-sessional course: interviews were carried out with reference to three of her written assignments and her tutors' comments on these assignments, focussing upon key challenges that she had experienced in writing and her understanding and experiences of referencing and citation

The first assignment: completed in her first week in UK (beginning of August)

The second assignment: completed the following week

The third assignment: completed one month later

Example questions and responses:

I was very impressed with your work (talking about the first assignment). I understood that your tutor gave you a topic and asked you to write about it. Was it based on some texts that your tutor introduced to you?

Z: My tutor gave us some reading tasks, some articles about ... the aims of academic writing and how to achieve them. ... They were based on some research. ... She asked us to use some sources based on these articles.

Did she introduce something about referencing? For example, how to use references during your writing?

Z: No. The first week she didn't.

Do you know what bibliography is?

Z: Now I know. This month I know. But last month I didn't know anything about that. ... She just asked us to write a 500-word essay about this topic. She didn't require any referencing.

- Second semester of her Master's course: the interview questions focussing upon
 - key challenges experienced in study and in practices of writing in particular in the first and second semester and how she had managed
 - the strategies that she adopted to prepare for her writing assignment and how she used the literature to develop her thinking
 - the ways that she perceived herself as an author self and the extent of change over time

References

Abasi, A., Akbari, N. and Graves, B., 2006. Discourse appropriation, construction of identities, and the complex issue of plagiarism: ESL students writing in graduate school. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 15: 102-117.

Angélil-Carter, S., 2000. *Stolen Language? Plagiarism in Writing*. Pearson Education, Essex, England.

Briggs, R., 2003., Shameless! Reconceiving the problem of plagiarism. *Australian Universities Review*, 46, 19-23.

Bruner, J., 2003. *The Culture of Education*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Carroll, J., 2004. Deterring, detecting and dealing with plagiarism. Retrieved on 16th February 2006 from www.oxfordbrooks.ac.uk

The Centre for Academic Integrity (CAI), 1999. The Fundamental Values of Academic Integrity. Retrieved on 9th July 2006 from <http://www.academicintegrity.org/pdf/FVProject.pdf>

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

China Economic Review 2007. 60,000 Chinese Students in UK (1st November 2007).

Retrieved on 4th November 2007 from

<http://www.chinaeconomicreview.com/mba/2007/11/01/60000-chinese-students-in-uk/>

Connell, W. F., 1987. History of teaching methods. In Dunkin, M. J. (Ed.), *The International Encyclopaedia of Teaching and Teacher Education*. Oxford: Pergamon Press, pp. 201-214

Currie, P., 1998. Staying out of trouble: Apparent plagiarism and academic survival. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 7 (1): 1-18.

Cushner, K. and Karim, A., 2004. Study abroad at the university level. In: Landis, D., Bennett, J., and Bennett, M. (Eds.), *Handbook of Intercultural Training*, (3rd ed.) Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp.289-308.

Deckert, G. D., 1993. Perspectives on plagiarism from ESL students in Hong Kong. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 2 (2), 131-148.

Decoo, W., 2002. *Crisis on Campus: Confronting academic misconduct*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Ding, Y., 2007. Text memorization and imitation: The practices of successful Chinese learners of English. *System*, 35: 271-280.

Galt, H. S., 1951. *A History of Chinese Educational Institutions*. London: Probsthain.

Gee, J. P., 1996. *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses* (2nd ed.). London: The Falmer Press.

Gu, Q., 2004. *In-Service Teacher Education in Cross-Cultural Settings: An Investigation into Sino-British Institutional Development Projects in the People's Republic of China*. Unpublished PhD thesis. Birmingham: The University of Birmingham.

Gu, Q. and Schweisfurth, M., 2006. Who adapts? Beyond cultural models of 'the' Chinese learner. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 19 (1), 74-89.

Gu, Q. and Maley, A., 2008. Changing Places: a study of Chinese students in the UK. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, Vol.8.

Hall, E., 1976. *Beyond Culture*. Anchor Books, New York.

Hayes, N. and Introna, L. D., 2005. Cultural values, plagiarism and fairness: when plagiarism gets in the way of learning. *Ethics and Behaviour*, 15 (3), 213-231.

Howard, R. M., 1993. A plagiarism pentimento. *Journal of Teaching Writing*, 11, 233-246.

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

Howard, R. M., 1999. The new abolitionism comes to plagiarism. In: Buranen, L. and Roy, A. (Eds.), *Perspectives on Plagiarism and Intellectual Property in a Postmodern World*. Stage University of New York Press, Albany, pp. 87-95.

Howard, R. M., 2000. Sexuality, textuality: The cultural work of plagiarism. *College English*, 62 (4), 473-391.

Hunt, R., 2003. Four Reasons to be Happy about Internet Plagiarism. Retrieved on 17th April 2007 from <http://stu.ca/~hunt/4reasons.htm>.

Kolich, A., 1983. Plagiarism: The worm of reason. *College English*, 45 (2), 141-148.

Kracke, E. A. (1953) *Civil Service in Early Song China*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Liu, D., 2005. Plagiarism in ESOL students: is cultural conditioning truly the major culprit? *ELT Journal*, 59 (3), 234-241.

Marton, F., Dall'Alba, G. and Kun, T. L., 1996. Memorizing and understanding: the keys to the paradox. In: Watkins, D. and Biggs, J. B. (Eds.), *The Chinese Learner: Cultural, Psychological and Contextual Influences*. CERC and ACER, Hong Kong and Victoria, Australia, pp.69-84.

Matalene, C., 1985. Contrastive rhetoric: an American writing teaching in China. *College English*, 47 (8), 789-808.

McKay, P., 2001. Literature on non-deliberate plagiarism: Current directions. Retrieved on 20th September 2006 from <http://clb.ed.qut.edu.au/events/projects/ndp/literaturereview2.jsp>.

Moloughney, B., 2002. Derivation, intertextuality and authority: narrative and the problem of historical coherence. *East Asian History*, 23: 129-148.

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

Pecorari, D., 2006. Visible and occluded citation features in postgraduate second-language writing. *English for Specific Purposes*, 25: 4-29.

Pennycook, A., 1994. The complex contexts for plagiarism: A reply to Deckert. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 3 (3), 277-284.

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

Pennycook, A., 2001. *Critical Applied Linguistics: A Critical Introduction*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc, Mahwah, NJ.

Gu, Qing & Brooks, Jane
Published in: *System* 36 (3) 337-352 [<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2008.01.004>]

Phan Le Ha, 2006. Plagiarism and overseas students: stereotypes again? *ELT Journal*, 60 (1), 76-78.

Price, M., 2002. Beyond “gotcha!”: Situating plagiarism in policy and pedagogy. *College Composition and Communication*, 54, 88-114.

Russikoff, K., Fucaloro, L. and Salkauskiene, D., 2003. Plagiarism as a cross-cultural phenomenon. *The CAL Poly Pomona Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 16, 109-120. Available online at
<http://www.csupomona.edu/~jis/2003/RussikoffFucaloroSalkaus.pdf>

Scollon, R., 1994. As a matter of fact: The changing ideology of authorship and responsibility in discourse. *World Englishes*, 13 (1): 33-46.

Shei, C., 2004. Plagiarism, Chinese Learners and Western Convention. Retrieved on 9th April, 2007 from <http://www.swan.ac.uk/cals/staff/shei/publication/Plagiarism.pdf>

Shei, C., 2006. Chinese Learners and Plagiarism: Westernisation or Easternisation? *Northumbrialearning: Digital Education Services Newsletter*, Issue (1), February.
Available online at
<http://www.northumbrialearning.co.uk/newsletters/issue1/Chinese%20Learners%20and%20Plagiarism%20-%20Issue%201.pdf>

Shen, F., 1989. The classroom and the wider culture: identity as a key to learning English composition. *College Composition and Communication*, 40 (4), 459-466.

Shi, L., 2004. Textual borrowing in second-language writing. *Written Communication*, 21 (2): 171-200.

Shi, L., 2006. Cultural backgrounds and textual appropriation. *Language Awareness*, 15 (4): 264-282.

Soanes, C and Stevenson, A., 2006. "plagiarize v." *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, Eleventh edition revised. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Retrieved on 13 November 2007 from Oxford Reference Online
<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t23.e43>
[211](#)

Sowden, C., 2005. Plagiarism and the culture of multilingual students in higher education abroad. *ELT Journal*, 59 (3), 226-233.

Sullivan, J., 2002. (December 19) Plagiarism hysteria lacks original thought. *The Age, Opinion*, p.13.

Sunderland-Smith, W., 2005. Pandora's box: academic perceptions of student plagiarism in writing. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 4, 83-95.

Zobel, J., and Hamilton, M., 2002. Managing Student Plagiarism in Large Academic Departments. *Australian University Review*, 45(2), 23-30.