

# Professional Practice Issues

## Our Students Have the Right to Know: Teaching about Plagiarism in the ESL/EFL Classroom<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

The concepts and implications of plagiarism are very complex and thus, avoiding the issue all together can be much easier than examining it in great detail. However, for us, ESL/EFL writing teachers, plagiarism is an issue that we must face and must know how to handle in the context of an ESL/EFL setting. Plagiarism in the ESL/EFL classroom entails a unique set of variables brought to the classroom by our students who come from diverse backgrounds and educational systems around the world.

As a result of our students' culturally diverse upbringings, in this article, I suggest that writing teachers should address plagiarism in the ESL/EFL classroom using a different approach, an approach that not only takes into consideration the students' cultural ideologies but also their culturally influenced understanding of plagiarism. Am I suggesting that we teach plagiarism explicitly in the ESL/EFL classroom? That is exactly what I hope to do in this article. I will illustrate throughout this paper how most ESL/EFL writing students who enter the classroom have different understandings of what it means to plagiarize. Accordingly, these students have the right to know what is expected of them as writing students in the educational system of the United States and as writers for publications appealing to an American audience. Thus, throughout this article, I will show why plagiarism in the ESL/EFL classroom needs to be considered from a culturally sensitive perspective and for our students' sake, brought to the forefront of our teaching.

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## **Traditional Approaches to Plagiarism**

As with any issue in pedagogical theory, many opinions exist, which propose different ways for dealing with a problem. The issue of plagiarism is not any different. Kolich (1983) introduces one of the many ways in which teachers have previously dealt with plagiarism in the classroom. He says, "not surprisingly we try to ignore the subject, if at all possible, both in our classes and in conversations with our colleagues" (p.142). Yet, in saying that Kolich introduces yet another persona that he has taken on when dealing with plagiarism, "like an avenging god I have tracked plagiarists with eagerness and intensity..." (p. 142). For some teachers, monitoring for plagiarism becomes their sole purpose as writing teachers. These are examples of the two ends of the spectrum, but I do not think it is possible to react to plagiarism in an ESL/EFL classroom in such a clear-cut manner.

## **Suggested Combination Approach to Plagiarism**

In this article, I will illustrate how it is in the best interest of not only the international students participating in the writing class but also ESL/EFL writing teachers to approach plagiarism using what I will call a "combination approach" of both preventative and rehabilitating measures.

What I mean by a "combination approach" is to adopt a three-step process that I will describe below. First, as a way of averting students away from plagiarism, the issue should be introduced as major focus in all introductory ESL/EFL writing courses. The subject should be directly introduced in a way so that students become aware of the fact that this concept actually exists and is treated seriously in most writing communities. The second step in dealing with plagiarism should be the negotiation period where ESL/EFL students and their writing teachers work together to develop an understanding of what it means to plagiarize and tease out any problems associated with the implications of it in the classroom. Finally, the third stage of dealing with plagiarism, which will hopefully be prevented by the first two stages introduced above, is the stage in which the instructor issues some form of rehabilitative punishment to counteract continued acts of plagiarism. Since ESL/EFL classrooms are usually diverse, so too must be the way in which we deal with certain issues and topics in the classroom.

I will focus on these three stages throughout this article and compare and contrast how different people in education have chosen to deal with the same exact issue. What I will show is that plagiarism does in fact need to be dealt with in the ESL/EFL classroom rather than ignored. Yet, in saying that, an eclectic approach, one like my three-step process, must be taken into consideration when dealing with ESL/EFL students. These students may not yet be familiar with what Dillon (1988) refers to as a "very Western notion of individualism and propriety . . ." (as cited in Bowden, 1996, p.82). Thus, as ESL/EFL writing teachers, we must be willing to

expend a little more effort in the area of teaching about the problems associated with plagiarism rather than concentrating on the simple act of treating it.

### **The Obstacles our Students Face**

I agree with Thompson and Williams (1995) when they suggest that "students can best be helped by having this topic introduced at the secondary level" (p. 27). ESL/EFL writing teachers should incorporate the topic of plagiarism and its accompanying pitfalls into every ESL/EFL writing course curriculum. Consider this ESL/EFL students frustration with the concept of plagiarism while writing:

"Since I have not been well educated and trained in this aspect, I worry of making an unforgettable mistake by carelessness. To what degree is considered as plagiarizing? Is it suitable to put everything with quotation and in the cited list? I still need time to learn it." (Thompson & Williams, 1995, p. 28)

The first and last sentences of this quotation are key factors in explaining why I suggest some form of introductory training for ESL/EFL students. The first sentence focuses on the student's lack of experience with the concept of plagiarism as a result of either his educational or cultural background. ESL/EFL students may not be equipped with the same schemata regarding plagiarism as native English speakers from the writing classrooms in the United States. Thus, ESL/EFL students may require something more than just a quick reference to the issue at the beginning of the semester or a small blurb at the end of the syllabus.

But some institutions like the one introduced below argue that some brief exposure to the notion of plagiarism is enough to educate ESL/EFL students. Thompson and Williams present one university's response to the pleas of innocence by one plagiarizing ESL/EFL student (p. 27). The university's response was that "...she had, after all, spent two years of high school in the states" (p.27). The university went on to say "this student was expected to know better..." (p.27). I do not believe simple exposure is enough for ESL/EFL students who have been born, raised and educated in societies, where Pennycock (1996) describes have different values for text, memory and learning.

This leads me to the last sentences of the quotation presented above in which the student states that "I still need time to learn it" (Thompson & Williams, p. 28). Rather than simply being understood, this ESL/EFL student seems to suggest in this quote that the avoidance of plagiarism is an acquired skill, one which needs to be earned, and thus, taught by ESL/EFL writing teachers. Students from other countries may also feel the same way. Bowden points out that traditionally "other cultures (for example Middle Eastern, Asian and African) cannot own words or ideas: languages belong to all" (p. 83). Thus, in the best interest of those students who come from all around the world, ESL/EFL writing teachers should be obligated to give students an

extensive explanation of what it means to plagiarize by the strict standards upheld around the world.

### **Plagiarism as a Topic in the Writing Classroom**

So, how do we explain the concept of plagiarism to our ESL/EFL students? This may be the hardest part since as Whitaker (1993) describes "plagiarism means different things to different people" (p. 509). Nonetheless as writing teachers we must provide ESL/EFL students with a good description of the different forms and types of plagiarism that exist in writing and explain in detail the implications of each style. By simply asking the students to look the word up in the dictionary will not serve the purpose of educating ESL/EFL students about the issue, because what they will find is a definition like this one from the Oxford Dictionary used by Scollon (1995) to define plagiarism:

plagiarize: 1. take and use (the thoughts, writings, inventions, etc. of another person) as one's own. 2. pass off the thoughts etc. of (another person) as one's own. (as cited in Scollon 1995, p. 3)

By looking at this definition, ESL/EFL students will gain only an oversimplified explanation of what it means to plagiarize. I stress the fact that ESL/EFL students need much more than just a definition of plagiarism and that is why I agree with Whitaker when she suggests "A Pedagogy to Address Plagiarism" (p. 509). Once ESL/EFL students have developed a better understanding of what it means to plagiarize, then and only then can they begin to test what they have learned in their own personal writing.

### **Trial and Error Stage**

This brings me to stage two in my three-step model, which I referred to above as the negotiation stage. What I see as necessary in the ESL/EFL classroom is a less reflexive attitude towards plagiarism and rather a more flexible approach. Some writing teachers may not quite agree with this attitude. Kolich says, "the mere hint that a student may have cribbed an essay transforms us from caring, sympathetic teachers into single minded guardians of honor and truth-roles that saints and presidents seem better suited to play" (p. 142). In addition, Murphy (1990) describes how his own obsession with what he refers to as the "cheating disorder" lead to him to accuse and punish an absolutely innocent student (as cited in Bowden, 1996, p. 82). These types of reactions will only further alienate our ESL/EFL students from unfamiliar environment and that is why I propose that ESL/EFL teachers should negotiate with their students regarding the elements of plagiarism.

ESL/EFL students who have a slightly different understanding or interpretation of what it means to plagiarize are bound to do it when they begin writing. In

the quote below, this ESL/EFL student tries to explain that the act of plagiarism is committed more out of habit than the intent to deceive:

One of the reasons for this kind of situation is inevitable-the lack of self-confidence, since the author is more a "English-user" than you are. For a person who has relied on imitation more than creation for a long time, the skill of avoiding plagiarism (use of your own words to describe the same idea) is really a hard job. (Thompson & Williams, 1995, p. 28)

An ESL/EFL student's acts of plagiarism may not be what Howard (1995, p. 799) refers to as:

**Cheating**-borrowing, purchasing, or otherwise obtaining work composed by someone else and submitting it under one's own name.

But instead may be characteristic of the other two types of plagiarism that Howard (p. 799) describes:

**Non-attribution**-Writing one's own paper but including passages copied exactly from the work of another...

**Patchwriting**- writing passages that are not copied exactly but that have nevertheless been borrowed from another source...

Of course, no form of plagiarism is good but on the other hand, not all instances of plagiarism are intentional acts to lie and cheat either.

Thus, I agree with Kolich who supports my call for a negotiation stage. Kolich has this to say in regards to dealing with plagiarism:

I can only talk to the student, try to analyze the circumstances surrounding the incident, and judge the evidence. Then I must act, and the range of my actions must reflect my moral standards, which cannot or should not be controlled by college or university committees. Ultimately we are the ones who must explain to students the moral responsibilities of learning and thinking. (p. 148)

That is why I believe that is pertinent for an ESL/EFL writing teacher to be willing to negotiate the meaning of plagiarism while taking into consideration the background of his/her ESL/EFL students before any actions are taken on the matter. When teaching students from so many different cultures and countries, all instances of plagiarism can not be interpreted in the same clear-cut manner, and thus, the ESL/EFL teacher must deal with the issue from a broader perspective than the ones used

in the past. Lindey (1952) says, "plagiarism is a drama of human beings—adversaries, witnesses, lawyers and judges" (p. 257). With that being said, ESL/EFL teachers must consider the human aspect of what may lead some students to commit plagiarism and somehow negotiate that into their understanding of the complex concept of plagiarism.

### **What is an Appropriate Reaction to Acts of Plagiarism in the Classroom?**

This is a very important question. What should ESL/EFL teachers do when a student continues to "cheat" as defined by Howard (1995) even after having been extensively briefed on the implications of the act? That brings me to stage three of my three-step model. Do we give these students what Howard refers to as "the Academic Death Penalty" or expulsion (p. 789). Do we fail, suspend, or even attempt to eradicate these students from the academy of learning? Howard says, "Indeed, punishing plagiarists is not infrequently described as an essential academic obligation" (p. 793). Many institutions like the one presented in Thompson and Williams (p. 27) have taken the extreme stance on plagiarism, which is expulsion.

As I have emphasized throughout this paper, I believe in education, negotiation, and flexibility when it comes to dealing with plagiarism in the EFL/ESL classroom. Yet, I do feel that there are instances after all of the circumstances have been reviewed and all avenues have been exhausted that continual and intentional plagiarizers need to be issued some type of rehabilitative penalty yet not as harsh as the ones proposed in the previous paragraph. Even though these types of plagiarizers may have what Drum (1986) refers to as "a disease that plagues college students everywhere"(as cited in Bowden, 1996, p. 82), I still believe that these students have the potential for creating what is known in the United States as original thoughts and ideas.

As a result, these students should be required to participate in an additional training program separate from their university classes, which focuses solely on the issues of plagiarism. The elements of this type of program could take on the characteristics of the curriculum for plagiarism presented in both Whitaker (1993) and Thompson and Williams (p. 27). If these students are aware of the fact that their plagiarizing infractions are unacceptable, and yet still refuse to partake in a rehabilitative course like the one I suggested above, ESL/EFL writing instructors have no other choice than turn the case over to the institution. I see as a last resort, however, one in which some ESL/EFL writing teachers may be forced to choose unfortunately.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, at the onset of writing this article, I knew that plagiarism was a difficult concept to understand but felt that it was my duty as a future ESL/EFL writing instructor to investigate the issue further. Thompson and Williams report that "an increasing number of students find their papers being challenged in university classes throughout the United States" (p.27). I wanted to know what was the best way to deal with these instances of plagiarism in my future classrooms, and I realized through this research that traditionally there were two ways to deal with plagiarism, either ignore the situation or attack it.

Throughout this article, I have analyzed and explained those two ends of the spectrum and juxtaposed those attitudes with my own personal philosophy regarding the issue. I have illustrated that a model similar to the three-stage process presented in the beginning of this article may be a better solution to the problem. This model takes into consideration the different backgrounds of each individual student and provides room for negotiation of meaning and understanding between the teacher and students on the subject of plagiarism.

Although this type of approach may require more time and extra work on the part of ESL/EFL teachers, it is an issue that we can not ignore. If we do, we are not only cheating our students who yearn for more information about plagiarism but we are also contributing to the problem. I recommend that ESL/EFL teachers take a stance on the issue of plagiarism but one in the middle. A strategy, which deals with plagiarism in a realistic and fair manner, is the best approach towards plagiarism for an ESL/EFL writing teacher to adopt.

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