

Exploring Chinese L1 Students' Understanding of Plagiarism at an English-Medium University

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英語圏の大学における中国語を母国語とする 学生の盗作に対する理解を探る

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Abstract

Academic literature and anecdotal evidence suggest novice English L2 writers from so-called Confucian Heritage Cultures (CHCs), and Chinese writers in particular, frequently struggle to avoid plagiarizing. After reviewing the literature on plagiarism among Chinese writers of English, I present results from a survey of Chinese-speaking ESL students ($N = 20$) in their first weeks of coursework at an American university. The survey explored student understanding of plagiarism and their first contact with the word in both their home country and the United States. Most students possessed either no understanding or an imprecise understanding of plagiarism. Many students conflated plagiarism with other academically dishonest behaviors such as cheating on exams or copying homework. Pedagogical implications for English-medium universities in Japan are discussed.

Keywords: second language writing, plagiarism, textual appropriation, English medium university (EMI), Chinese L1 students

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抄 録

学術文献や事例証拠からは、いわゆる儒教文化圏出身の英語 L2 初心者、特に中国人はしばしば剽窃を回避しようと努力する姿勢がうかがえる。本稿では、中国人が英語で作文したときの剽窃に関する先行研究を概括した後、アメリカの大学に入学後最初の数週間における中国語圏の ESL 学生 ($N = 20$) を対象とした調査結果を紹介する。この調査は、学生の剽窃についての理解、そして彼らの母国および米国における「剽窃」という言葉との最初の出会いについて探索した。ほとんどの学生は剽窃について全く理解していないか、または不正確な理解をしていた。多くの学生は剽窃を、試験中のカンニングや他人の宿題の答えの丸写しなど、学術的な不正行為と混同していた。このことの英語で授業を実施している日本の大学における教育上の意義について議論した。

キーワード：第二言語による作文、剽窃、著作の領得、英語で学術科目授業（EMI）をしている大学、中国人留学生

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Background

What is Plagiarism?

Perhaps no act in English writing awakens a greater sense of moral outrage than that of plagiarism. Etymologically, the word *plagiarism* stems from the Latin *plagiare*, which means to kidnap. A *plagiarius* in the Ancient Roman world was one who kidnapped a child(ren) or a slave(s) from another. The modern meaning of the word, which alludes to inappropriate textual appropriation, can be traced to a poet named Martial who lived in Ancient Rome circa the second century (Seo, 2009). Exasperated that another poet(s) were reciting his work without compensating him (implying copyright infringement) or even mentioning his name (implying failure to cite), Martial wrote a poem referring to such poets as *plagiarius* for having kidnapped his work. His indignation was justified; while memorization and recitation of master works was a culturally accepted norm in Rome, reference to the original artist was expected.

The concept of plagiarism has evolved since the days of Ancient Rome. According to Pennycook (1996), Pre-Enlightenment Europe held onto-theological texts (such as the Bible) as the primary forces capable of creating meaning. In post-Enlightenment Europe the human imagination had become the world's primary creative force. No longer considered capable of merely reproducing preexisting knowledge, the mind could produce original thought. When coupled with the concept of individual property rights, individuals could now create and own not only ideas, but the words or images used to express them.

Plagiarism, then, can be defined as the act of replicating – in whole or in part – the words and/or ideas of others without crediting the original creator(s). Written plagiarism, which is the focus of this paper, manifests in many forms. Turnitin, perhaps the most widely used textual originality software used worldwide today, describes 10 types of plagiarism in their white paper *The Plagiarism Spectrum* (2015). At the most egregious end of the spectrum is the “clone” — the wholesale submission of another's work as if it were our own. At the other end is the so-called “re-tweet,” which employs proper citation conventions but fails to be different enough from the original work(s) structurally or lexically. This spectrum illustrates there are levels of transgression to plagiaristic acts.

Plagiarism and Chinese Students

Students who are L1 Chinese speakers have become a particularly large demographic at English medium institutions (EMIs) worldwide. As of 2019 there were 369,548 Chinese students studying at U.S. universities, representing over 33% of the international student body in the U.S. (Open Doors, 2019). For comparison, in 2008–2009 just 98,235 Chinese were studying at U.S. institutions (Institute of International Education, 2009). Troublingly, however, is the evidence suggesting Chinese students, as well as those from other so-called Confucian Heritage Cultures (CHCs), have a reputation for plagiarizing.

This reputation might be perpetuated by troubling statistics regarding scientific publication manuscript retraction ratios. While China's influence in academia keeps growing, the country's normalized ratio of retracted documents (NRRD) spanning the years 1996 to 2014 was also an alarmingly high 755. The NRRD was calculated by compiling SCOPUS data regarding publications produced by academics from 25 countries. For each country under consideration, the total number of publications and the number of retracted documents (NRD) was tallied. The NRD was then divided by the total number of publications produced by all countries in the study to produce the ratio of retracted documents (RRD). Finally, the NRRD was calculated by dividing each country's RRD by the minimum RRD value of all countries in the dataset. Of the 3,617,355 articles published out of China during that span, 9,126 articles were retracted (Ataie-Ashtiani, 2017). The country with the second highest NRRD was Iran (99), followed by Taiwan (71), and South Korea and India (both at 20). By comparison, of the 8,626,193 articles published out of the U.S. during that timeframe, 113 were retracted, giving the U.S. an NRRD of 4. Japan's NRRD was 4. Furthermore, as of 2016 China publishes more scientific papers annually than any other country. Recent data suggests 75% of all Chinese-authored retractions are attributed to misconduct, with 41% of such cases classified as plagiarism (Qiu, 2015). Over half of Chinese researchers surveyed in both 2010 and 2015 felt plagiarism was a major concern, and survey responses revealed no improvement over the five years between surveys (Liao, et al., 2017). Plagiarism clearly remains a pervasive challenge within Chinese academia.

Attempts to Explain Chinese Plagiarism

Problems centering around textual appropriation impact not only Chinese L1 writers of English, but their teachers abroad as well. English teachers in particular face the challenge of preparing these students to compose texts which adhere to academic norms. Researchers concerned with understanding plagiaristic acts among Chinese students at EMIs have generally approached the problem in three ways – the first two of which are problematic.

Philosophical Explanations. The first approach is philosophical and distills to an insoluble riddle asking: *What does it mean to be original, anyway?* Such arguments go back

at least as far as the works of John Locke in the 17th century, and more recently by Mikhail Bakhtin (1986) and Alastair Pennycook (1996). Arguing that although the West fixates on the author as an original, creative force, Pennycook (1996) suggests there is, perhaps, nothing new to be said, writing “it is hard not to feel that language use is marked far more by the circulation and recirculation of words and ideas than by a constant process of creativity” (p. 207). This philosophically oriented argument questions the notion of plagiarism as perhaps endemically flawed, and as Scollon (1995) suggests, our “taken-for-granted position of original self-expression” might be untenable (p. 20). Thought-provoking though this argument might be, it is purely academic and pedagogically uninformative. The severity of consequences our novice writers face for plagiarizing are in no way diminished by such philosophical musings. In short, the philosophical argument might be compelling but does not assist language teachers who face the practical challenges presented by Chinese L1 writers attempting to write within accepted academic standards in English.

Cultural Explanations. The second approach is cultural, and frames plagiarism as a uniquely Western concept. Eastern cultures, and particularly CHCs, are framed as advocating open access to knowledge as part of a shared cultural heritage (Shi, 2006). Individuals raised in such cultures supposedly face a deeper *cultural* challenge when adapting to a novel Western norm which has codified rules for respecting individual ownership of words and ideas via citation conventions (Pennycook, 1996; Scollon, 1995; Shi, 2006). Novice writers from CHCs are, so the argument goes, in a precarious position at Anglo-American or EMI universities as they grapple with an unknown, uniquely Western cultural norm. Unfortunately, this argument is culturally misinformed and, like the philosophical argument before it, pedagogically unproductive.

First, arguments that plagiarism is unique to the West are culturally misinformed. According to Dilin Liu (2005) the Chinese language has two words which both mean plagiarism, one of which (*piao qie*) has precisely the same meaning as plagiarism. Moreover, the concept has existed in China for at least a millennia. The etymological origin story behind *piao qie* bears an uncanny similarity to that of Martial and Ancient Rome – an eighth-century poet named Liu Zhongyuan used the word to while lamenting the fact other poets were using his work without crediting him. The argument that the concept of plagiarism is unique to the west is thus inaccurate.

Evidence suggests plagiarism is not considered more permissible in CHCs. In Japan, for example, Wheeler (2009) found students ($N = 77$) both strongly disapproved of plagiarist practices and possessed the ability to distinguish between levels of transgression when plagiarizing. Students were shown three paragraphs about the same topic sequentially. The first paragraph had been submitted as homework by a fictional student. The participants graded this paragraph. They then read a nearly identical paragraph written by a fictional

author named John Smith four years prior to the student paragraph. Participants were then asked to regrade the first paragraph. Over 75% of students dropped the score when regrading, with nearly 60% of those students dropping the score all the way to the minimum grade. Finally, students read a third paragraph which had been composed by another fictional student. This paragraph followed the same structure and chronology of the John Smith paragraph, but used differing vocabulary. Students graded this third paragraph. Their comments indicated they were aware of the similarities between this third paragraph and the Smith paragraph, but that the use of different language merited higher scores than paragraph one.

Additional evidence indicating that the cultural argument is mistaken can be found within Chinese writing manuals (Liu, 2005), institutional plagiarism policies in China (Hu & Sun, 2017), and studies which clearly demonstrate that Chinese students understand plagiarism is unacceptable (Ehrich, et al, 2016; Zhang, 2014). Consulting six Chinese books on composition, Liu (2005) found each book explicitly referred to the need to cite others' works and that failure to do so was immoral. In a study of institutional plagiarism policy at eight Chinese universities of foreign languages and/or international studies, Hu and Sun (2017) found that policy language emphasized the immorality of, and prospect of severe punishment for, plagiaristic acts. In a recent study comparing results from the Plagiarism Attitude Scale (PAS; Harris, 2001) completed by Chinese ($n = 173$) and Australian ($n = 131$) university students studying in Australia, Ehrich, et al (2016) found statistically significant differences for three items (out of 12). In every case the mean responses for both the Chinese students and Australian students on these items indicated that plagiarism was unacceptable. The difference, however, was in the robustness of student endorsement of the unacceptability of certain behaviors. Australian students' responses indicated nearly universal disapproval for all plagiarist practices, whereas the Chinese students' disapproval was still evident but not as universal. For example, slightly more than 20% of Chinese student responses indicated that plagiarism was more acceptable when a student was facing a particularly heavy workload, while only 1% of Australian students endorsed that notion. Additionally, there was significant correlation between the pressure students placed on themselves to succeed and their level of permissibility regarding plagiarist acts, suggesting academic ethics are malleable and contextually informed. Ehrich (2016) concluded the majority of both groups strongly disapproved of plagiarist acts, but the Australians disapproved more vigorously.

Finally, in a small comparative study of U.S. students ($n = 17$) and Chinese ESL students ($n = 27$), Zhang (2014) found there was minimal difference between the groups in terms of their assessment of the moral permissibility of plagiarism. Both groups indicated intentional plagiarism should not be tolerated. While Chinese student responses generally revealed incomplete understanding of what constitutes plagiarism when asked to define the term,

Zhang concludes the primary factor in Chinese students' lack of understanding is lack of formative instruction. Of the 27 Chinese students surveyed, 22 graduated high school in China and five did so in the U.S. These five students' knowledge of plagiarism far surpassed that of their peers who graduated high school in China, indicating that greater exposure to U.S. norms for writing benefited these university level students – a finding which aligns with that of Abasi, Akbari, and Graves (2006) indicating that student awareness of (in)appropriate source text borrowing practices is heavily influenced by how they are socialized or enculturated into academic writing practice over time. Rinnert and Kobayashi's (2005) findings in Japan also suggest that awareness of (in)appropriate textual borrowing is directly influenced by both pedagogy and (in)consistent institutional policy. In composite, it seems clear that plagiarism awareness among students is directly linked to pedagogy.

Attempts to explain Chinese plagiarism through cultural apologetics are ultimately not just misguided but also pedagogically uninformative. Even if Chinese culture found using the words and ideas of others without attribution permissible it would be a moot point; Writing in English requires adherence to a different ethical standard. While inconclusive, the literature suggests this standard is being promoted in China, where there is support for incorporating stronger ethics training modeled upon Anglo-American examples (Qiu, 2015).

Practical Explanations. There are at least two practical explanations for why Chinese students might plagiarize more than their English L2 peers. The first is top-down. In a forum of six experts, five of whom worked within Chinese academia, both the potential for material gains and the lack of oversight were identified as root causes for research misconduct such as plagiarism. Lucrative financial incentive structures for Chinese researchers who publish in marquee international journals (The Economist, 2018), combined with the primary national funding/grant body in China requiring no ethics training, establishes an incentive structure with limited downside for getting caught plagiarizing and potentially massive upside in terms of financial or professional gain for those who get away with it (Gray et al, 2019). Troublingly, the younger generation of Chinese researchers (under age 35) appear more tolerant of acts of research misconduct (55.3%) compared to those older than 35 years (45.8%) (Qiu, 2015).

The second explanation is bottom-up and impacts undergraduates more directly. They simply might not know how to avoid plagiarism in their English writing, due either to a lack in linguistic proficiency or because they have never been given clear instruction on the issue. They may know plagiarism is wrong yet lack an understanding of how to avoid it. Additionally, this linguistic or instructional shortcoming, along with the prospect of material gain (passing the course, earning a higher grade, etc.) might lead some writers to knowingly flout conventions or cheat (Liu, 2005). Policy studies conducted at Chinese universities have also found plagiarism is not stressed until the postgraduate level (Hu & Sun, 2017). So, when Chinese undergraduates abroad are caught plagiarizing, they might save face by feigning

ignorance of the convention or even the entire concept, or blame their ignorance on cultural conditioning. "Unfortunately, their stories have sometimes been innocently believed by some of our kind-hearted teachers and researchers" (Liu, 2005, p. 237). With little institutional guidance, limited linguistic proficiency, and a culture in which such transgressions are a concern primarily at the postgraduate level, Chinese undergraduates arriving abroad unprepared to write in accordance with ethical standards is unsurprising.

Research Questions

Given the empirical literature reviewed above, EMI university educators cannot presume inbound students from Chinese-speaking countries are prepared to follow the ethical writing standards of English. To help these students meet those standards it is imperative to first understand their level of plagiarism awareness. To see for myself what an incoming group of Chinese undergraduates understood about plagiarism, I conducted a survey asking students what the word *plagiarism* means, where they first heard it, and if explanations had varied if they heard it both at home and in the U.S. The following research questions are offered.

1. What is the current understanding of *plagiarism* among 20 incoming Chinese L1 freshmen in a U.S. university's composition program for multilingual students?
2. Have these students heard the word *plagiarism* prior to arriving in the U.S.? If so, in what way(s) were the explanations of what constituted plagiarism similar or different?

Methods

Participants and Context

All participants in this study were just a few weeks into their first semester at a public university in the Western U.S. They were drawn from a compulsory undergraduate grammar for writing course which is a component of the composition program (CP) curriculum designed for multilingual students at this university. These students will eventually be streamed into the general university curriculum upon completing a year of intensive English curriculum and earning a satisfactory TOEFL iBT or IELTS score of 61 or 6.0, respectively. This grammar-focused course requires students compose three essays in primarily narrative style over the semester. Source texts to be used when producing these compositions are provided by the curriculum. Citation conventions are not taught in this course, and the word *plagiarism* was mentioned only on the first day of class as the instructor reviewed the university-mandated academic honesty policy included in the syllabus.

Participants were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary, did not influence their course grade, and that their responses would remain anonymous. Twenty-one

students (out of 25 students in the class) provided their informed consent to participate in the survey and completed the questionnaire. One participant was eliminated from this study as they were from Ecuador, leaving a final set of participants ($N = 20$; 55% female) who were native speakers of either Mandarin or Cantonese, and came from China ($n = 16$), Taiwan ($n = 2$), and Hong Kong ($n = 2$). Two participants from China had immigrated to the U.S. 12 and 18 months earlier, respectively. These two students graduated from high school in the U.S. All other participants had arrived in the U.S. between two and six weeks prior to data collection.

Instrumentation

Respondents were provided 15 minutes to respond to the following questions:

1. What does the word *plagiarism* mean to you? Can you provide an example?
2. When did you first hear the word *plagiarism*, in your home country or in America? If you heard the word in both places, were the explanations the same? If they were different, please explain the difference(s).
3. What do you think about *plagiarism*? Do you have any questions or concerns about how to avoid it? If so, please share them.

Procedures

Student responses were transcribed and coded to highlight emergent themes in the data. Responses to questions one and three were combined and analyzed in a complementary fashion to explore understanding of plagiarism and answer research question one. Responses to question two were analyzed separately in order to explore research question two.

After an initial review of the data, students were classified as belonging to one of three categories: *those who understand plagiarism*, *those with an unclear understanding of plagiarism*, and *those who do not know what plagiarism means*. I classified *understanding* as those responses which indicated awareness of plagiarism as taking the written work or thoughts of another as one's own. I classified *unclear understanding* as responses which failed to clearly distinguish plagiarism as a form of academic dishonesty separate from generally dishonest academic behaviors such as cheating on a test. Responses which said something like "I don't know" or simply failed to provide any remote awareness of the meaning of the word plagiarism were classified as *do not know what plagiarism means*.

All data regarding nationality, understanding of plagiarism, where students first heard the word plagiarism, where the student graduate high school (China, Hong Kong, U.S., or Taiwan) was entered into a Google Sheet. For those who heard the word both at home and in the U.S., I also classified the explanations of plagiarism heard in both countries as either the *same* or *different*. See Table 1 for a breakdown of respondent understanding of plagiarism

Table 1 *Understanding of plagiarism, by nationality*

Country	Understanding of Plagiarism		
	Don't know	Know	Unclear
China	3	3	10
Hong Kong	-	1	1
Taiwan	-	2	-
Total	3	6	11

broken down by nationality.

Results and Discussion

Upon review of participant responses, it was clear there were three general groups of students:

Research Question 1

Those who understand plagiarism. Six participants (4, 7, 9, 13, 14, 18; three Chinese, one Hong Konger, two Taiwanese) demonstrated an understanding of plagiarism. They specifically mentioned keywords such as *writing*, *articles*, *ideas*, *thinking*, *quotes*, *your own words*, *research*, and *author's name*. Additionally, their responses did not conflate plagiarism with other academically dishonest behaviors such as cheating on an exam or copying a classmate's homework, indicating they were able to distinguish plagiarism as a specific type of academic transgression. See Table 2 for the full set of responses from those who grasped plagiarism adequately.

Two trends within these responses clearly emerged. First, it appears there may be a difference in the level of plagiarism awareness and avoidance in students coming from different Chinese-speaking countries. Both Taiwanese respondents, as well as one of the two Hong Kongers, provided perhaps the most cogent responses in the entire dataset. Participant 14's response even questioned the notion of *plagiarism* philosophically, perhaps indicating a significantly deeper level of thought or familiarity with the issue than their peer respondents. Second, two of the three Chinese participants classified as having a strong grasp on what constituted plagiarism had been in the U.S. for 12 months (participant 18) and 18 months (participant 7), graduating from local high schools in the U.S. prior to enrolling at the university. Their understanding of plagiarism supports the findings of Zhang (2014) and Abasi, Akbari, and Graves (2006). The remaining Chinese participant (13) provided perhaps the weakest understanding of plagiarism yet was clear that it was a writing-specific act.

Unclear understanding of plagiarism. The majority of respondents (11) were placed in this category (participants 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 10, 11, 12, 15, 17, 19). See Table 3 for these

responses.

When asked to provide an example of *plagiarism*, eight participants referred to cheating on a test within their response. This is not the prevailing notion of plagiarism as conceptualized in U.S. academic institutions, so these students were classified as having an *unclear* understanding. While cheating on a test or copying answers from a classmate are subsumed under the larger umbrella of *academic integrity*, which also covers plagiarism, plagiarism is distinct from these behaviors.

Additionally, two participants (5, 12) provided responses that were too vague to confidently classify them as having a clear understanding of what constituted plagiarism. They used words such as “*Plagiarism means you don’t want to work hard but still want to get good results*” (12) and “*I think it means to lie, or copy someone*” (5). Such responses were too vague to be certain the students truly grasped the concept. One participant (11) had a borderline understanding of plagiarism, making them challenging to classify. I ultimately

Table 2 Responses from students who demonstrate an adequate understanding of plagiarism

Participant # (Country)	Response to Question 1	Response to Question 3
4 (Taiwan)	<i>Copy some other’s writing, it’s a negative word. For example: The student doesn’t write his or her essay on his/her own, he/she copies the essay from the book or internet.</i>	<i>I think it’s a common thing and sometimes happens to students. It’s really not good. Students should understand why we should learn, not just do for a grade.</i>
7 ¹ (China)	<i>1. plagiarism means copying someone’s study or articles. 2. If we do some research online and copy someone’s ideas, but we say these are our ideas, it can be called plagiarism.</i>	<i>I think plagiarism is a bad thing for a student. I think the best way to avoid it is to tell ourselves “don’t do it”, “don’t do it”. It will cause you a big problem in your grade.</i>
9 (Hong Kong)	<i>Plagiarism means to copy something that is not from one’s thinking. For example, copying homework assignments from others.</i>	<i>Plagiarism violates other people’s rights because you copy something from others and use it to pretend it’s from your own thinking.</i>
13 (China)	<i>Copy more than 3 words from other articles without quotes.</i>	<i>I think plagiarism is that you copy other articles without changing anything. To avoid it just never copy other articles and paste on your essay.</i>
14 (Taiwan)	<i>Copying someone’s work into your own. When writing a report paper, instead of using your own idea and in your own words, you copy from someone else’s, that’s plagiarism.</i>	<i>I think plagiarism is somehow necessary because when you’re researching something, there already have tons of information that exist, you can use some but changing it into your own words.</i>
18 ² (China)	<i>Cheat, dishonest. Sometimes you use some research in your own article, but you do not write the author’s name. Do not quote it. It’s kind of plagiarism.</i>	<i>It’s a very serious problem in America. Sometimes you use some research in your own article, but you do not write the author’s name. Do not quote it. It’s kind of plagiarism.</i>

¹ Had been in U.S. for 18 months and graduated from a local high school.

² Had been in U.S. for a year and graduated from a local high school.

Table 3 Responses from students who demonstrate an inadequate understanding of plagiarism

Participant # (Country)	Response to Question 1	Response to Question 3
1 (China)	<i>I think there are some different meaning about the word plagiarism</i> 1. <i>copy others information</i> 2. <i>steal others something</i> <i>For example: When we take an exam. Someone copies others' answers. We can say plagiarism</i>	<i>It's not a good word. No.</i>
2 (China)	<i>Stole, cheat (e.g.: somebody plagiarism something)</i>	<i>It's a negative word. We should study be careful and avoid plagiarism in the exam</i>
3 (China)	<i>I think that any cheating behaviors are plagiarism. It could be any paragraph which someone copies from the Internet in his homework.</i>	<i>Do not plagiarize anything whenever you do the homework or exams</i>
5 (China)	<i>I think the meaning of plagiarism is to lie, or copy someone.</i>	<i>I think it is not a good habit.</i>
8 (China)	<i>Cheat. For example: copy someone else's answer in an exam.</i>	<i>Really bad behavior. Be careful when you want to use information from other people. Don't copy others' and think it won't be found! God knows it!</i>
10 (Hong Kong)	<i>Plagiarism means the behavior of a person who on purpose cheat in the public assignments or examination and without permission to copy a certain amount of work from another person or group of research by any method.</i>	<i>Plagiarism is a serious behavior that affects the victim and person who commit plagiarism at the same time. Victims will lose their own work from themselves and that person will lose credit from working with each other.</i>
11 (China)	<i>Plagiarism is copy other's work. For example, you copy your classmate's homework or copy some information from the internet.</i>	<i>Plagiarism is illegal for academic students. That is the most serious problem for college students. Stop borrow classmate's homework or search idea from the Internet</i>
12 (China)	<i>Plagiarism means you don't want to work hard but still want to get good results. Someone asks his or her classmate to do homework or paper for him/her.</i>	<i>Plagiarism should not be promoted.</i>
15 (China)	<i>Something like copying others' work without permission or cheating during exams.</i>	<i>Plagiarism is not a good way to learn something. If you always copy what others have done, you will never improve, and it also has harmful effects on other people.</i>
17 (China)	<i>Cheating. Copy. For example: Copy another student's homework or quiz.</i>	<i>I think plagiarism is a bad activity although it can help us get good grades. However, we didn't learn anything if we cheat on tests or homework. To avoid it, all you need to do is study hard.</i>
19 (China)	<i>Plagiarism means no score to me Cheating while having a final test, etc.</i>	<i>Plagiarism is in-responsible to yourself and other people. Don't make plagiarism a popular tendency and teach people. When they are just kids. Enhance the supervisory control as well.</i>

determined the lack of reference to writing and repeated mention of copying homework from classmates was too vague to presume they fully understood the term.

There are at least two potential explanations for respondents' conflation of plagiarism with generally dishonest academic behavior. First, it is possible students were told plagiarism is indistinguishable from cheating prior to leaving their home countries, which is supported by previous studies (Hu & Sun, 2017; Qiu, 2015; Zhang, 2014). Second, all first semester students take the CP placement test (CPPT) upon arrival at the university at which this research was conducted. The content of this test changes each semester. This semester, one of the readings on the test was an adapted version of Novotney's (2011) "*Beat the Cheat*," which alludes to plagiarism, cheating, and academic dishonesty in general. Written for academics, no explicit definition of *plagiarism* was provided and no straightforward allusion to it being particular to writing was made. Therefore, study participants students who did not know the word might have mistakenly concluded from the reading that plagiarism was a type of academically dishonest practice along the lines of cheating on a test or other school assignment.

No understanding of plagiarism. Three respondents (6, 16, 21), all from mainland China, conceded not knowing or being very unsure about what plagiarism means. See Table 4 for their responses.

Table 4 Responses from students who have no understanding of plagiarism

Participant # (Country)	Response to Question 1	Response to Question 3
6 (China)	<i>I think it is an academic word. A noun. I am not pretty sure. Is it a kind of theft action?</i>	<i>I totally have no idea, to be honest.</i>
16 (China)	<i>I am not sure of this word's meaning, but I guess, this word means some mistakes in grammar or paragraphs.</i>	<i>... I think...</i>
20 (China)	<i>Honestly, I don't know the meaning. But I'm sure it's a noun word which shows a kind of activity to categorize a group of people.</i>	<i>Plagiarism is a strange work. Maybe it shows a kind of bad behavior. That's all.</i>

These respondents tried to guess (participant 6 even accessed his dictionary), but ultimately admitted not knowing the meaning of the word.

Research Question 2

Research question two asked if students had heard the term plagiarism in both their home country and in the U.S. and, if they had heard the term in both places, whether the explanation had been the same or different. To explore research question two, the student

classifications described in the methods section were used to parse where they first heard the word plagiarism, as well as the similarities or differences in explanations between their home country and the U.S.

As Table 5 indicates, the majority of participants ($n = 14$) responded that they had encountered the word plagiarism prior to arriving in the U.S. Of the eight respondents who thought cheating on an exam was plagiarism, four said they had heard the word in their home country, and four (2, 3, 4, 9) said they heard the word for the first time on the CPPT, which is taken on their first day of classes at the university. Four participants (1, 15, 17, 19), all Chinese, indicated not only that cheating or copying on exams considered plagiarism, but that they had heard the term in both China and America and that the explanation was the same.

Table 5 *First encounter with the word “plagiarism,” by nationality*

Country	1st Heard		
	Home	Never	US
China	12	3	1
Hong Kong	1	-	1
Taiwan	1	-	1
Total	14	3	3

As Table 6 illustrates, 10 students (50% of the respondents) reported having heard the word plagiarism both in their home country and the U.S., yet they still possessed an unclear understanding of what it meant. Only two participants who had heard the term in both places possessed a clear understanding of the concept and said that the explanation was the same in both countries. One was participant 13 (China) who, while possessing arguably an overly simplistic understanding of plagiarism among those who *know* what it is (refer to Table 2 for her response), had a cogent explanation about where she first heard the term and how she could avoid the problem.

Table 6 *Explanation of “plagiarism” as same or different among those exposed to the term in home country and the US, by nationality*

Country	Same/Different	Understanding	
		Know	Unclear
China	Same	1	8
	Different	1	1
Hong Kong	Same	-	-
	Different	-	1
Taiwan	Same	1	-
	Different	-	-
Total		3	10

I first heard about plagiarism in my home country when I took the course 'Academic Communication' in university. My explanations of plagiarism are what teachers in my home country told me. I guess I just never copy others' writing to prevent plagiarism.

The other was participant 14, from Taiwan, who, as discussed earlier, appeared to have perhaps the most developed understanding of plagiarism, to the point of being able to challenge its merits philosophically.

I think plagiarism is somehow necessary because when you're researching something, there already have tons of information that exist, you can use some but changing it into your own words.

In total, 15% of the response sample claimed to have either never seen the word plagiarism until they read the questionnaire (participants 16, 20), or that they first heard the word “*in my home country I think... I am not sure about the difference [between China and U.S. explanation] ...*” This indicates a certain percentage of Chinese students probably arrive at universities abroad completely ignorant of the word plagiarism. While ignorance of the word does not necessarily equate to ignorance of the concept, without recognizing the word students might not realize how seriously academic institutions take plagiaristic acts. Many universities have a policy requiring a statement about plagiarism be included on every course syllabus. The syllabus for the course in which these students were participating contained such a policy statement.

Four respondents indicated they heard the word *plagiarism* for the first time when they took the CPPT on their first day at the university. These students' working definition of plagiarism appeared to be a definition they developed during the CPPT. Given the “*Beat the Cheat*” reading on the CPPT did explicitly differentiate plagiarism from other academically dishonest behaviors, these respondents' current understanding of *plagiarism* was insufficient.

Four respondents indicated that not only was cheating on an exam *plagiarism*, but that they had heard this same explanation both at home and in the U.S. This could be true; however, it is also possible the explanations differed but they lacked the linguistic proficiency to grasp the differences. Moreover, these respondents might have perceived no clear distinction between plagiarism and other types of academic dishonesty in the CPPT reading. Were that the case, these students might have felt that the explanation(s) they heard in their home country (e.g. plagiarism is just cheating) was the same as the explanation in the U.S..

Finally, four participants (5, 8, 7, 18), all from China, emphasized that plagiarism was taken more seriously in the U.S..

Participant 7: *I heard this word in my home country. In China, it has some differences. In China, plagiarism is not a big problem, but in America, this is a big problem.*

Participant 18: *[I heard the word in] China & America. I don't remember what situation, but the word is familiar to me; In America, when I first wrote an essay, teachers always noticed that.*

Participant 5: *I hear it in both places. I think the explanations are the same. And I think it is more serious in America.*

Participant 8: *In China: [I first heard it in] Middle School. In America: [I heard it] The first class at [university name]. The plagiarism behavior is regarded worse in America than in China as well as the punishment of it.*

Participant 7 and 18 had graduated from U.S. high schools, bringing this study's findings in-line with those of Zhang (2014) and Abasi, et al (2006) that duration of exposure to academic standards is highly impactful. In fact, when the data is presented in the form of an alluvial chart, as shown in Figure 1, a clear pattern supporting this notion emerges. As Figure 1 illustrates, five of the six students who had a clear understanding of plagiarism graduated high school in either Hong Kong, Taiwan, or the U.S. Of the 13 students who graduated high school in China, only one exhibited a clear understanding of plagiarism. Both the student responses indicating that plagiarism is understood in China but taken more seriously in the U.S., and the

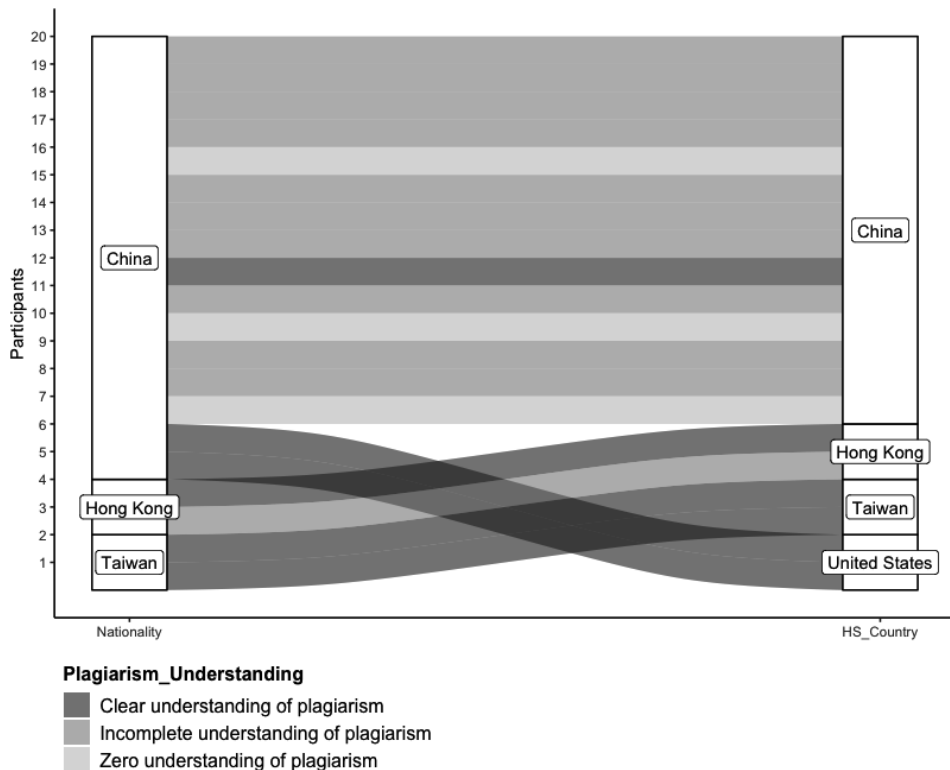


Figure 1 Understanding of plagiarism, by nationality and country of high school graduation

data shown in Figure 1, clearly support previous findings from researchers who contend that students are aware of, and adapt to, contextual norms and expectations (Ehrich, et al, 2016; Zhang, 2014; Abasi, Akbari, & Graves, 2006).

Summary of Findings

In regard to the first research question, which asked what these first-semester Chinese L1 students' understanding of plagiarism was, it was found that the majority of students (14 out of 20) possessed either zero understanding ($n = 3$) or an imprecise understanding ($n = 11$) of plagiarism – frequently drawing no distinction between it and other copying or exam-based cheating. The students who understood plagiarism ($n = 6$) demonstrated the understanding that it was a transgressive act particular to the writing process. The primary distinction between these students and their peers who did not demonstrate a clear understanding of plagiarism appears to be that they graduated high school in Taiwan ($n = 2$), the U.S. ($n = 2$), and Hong Kong ($n = 1$) – as opposed to mainland China.

In regard to the second research question, which investigated both where respondents first heard the term *plagiarism* and, if they had heard it both at home and in the U.S., the similarities or differences in the respective explanations. Most students ($n = 14$) had heard the term *plagiarism* before arriving in the U.S. yet lacked a clear understanding. Troublingly, and perhaps due to a well-intentioned reading on their placement test, eight of the 10 students who had heard the term in both countries and had an incorrect understanding also said the explanation of what constituted plagiarism had been the same both at home and in the U.S.. Finally, four of the 20 participants clearly indicated the understanding that punishment of inappropriate textual appropriation was taken more seriously in the U.S. than in their home country, though two of these participants had spent considerably more time in the U.S. than the rest of the participants.

Pedagogical Implications

The majority of participants illustrated a lack of comprehension when it came to the notion of plagiarism. The single biggest implication, then, is that many students who have just arrived at this EMI university from Chinese-speaking countries would benefit from explicit instruction addressing plagiarism. Building a more comprehensive understanding of academic expectations is crucial for these learners. The question becomes: How is an ESL/EFL instructor to handle the subject of plagiarism with these learners?

First, Teachers must not oversimplify the term plagiarism (Abasi et al., 2006; Howard, 1995; Pennycook, 1996). Teachers need to understand that plagiarism exists not as an ethical binary but along a continuum that can include anything from the wholesale copying of

another's work, to an overreliance on paraphrasing which fails to adequately distinguish the student's work from the original authors' work (patchwriting), to the failure to adequately cite references (Howard, 1995). Framing plagiarism as an ethical binary presents students with "two fixed identities with which to negotiate: unethical plagiarist or ethical author" (Ouellette, 2008, p. 269). This false dichotomy lacks the appropriate nuance and is particularly unfair to students who require growing room as their capacity to meet second language academic norms evolves over time. Suggestions from Abasi, et al. (2006) and Pecorari (2003) argue that what is often deemed plagiarism should be interpreted "as an issue of learning and development rather than one of moral transgression" (Abasi, et al., p. 114).

Next, hypersensitivity to the transcultural influences on student perceptions of plagiarism is not pedagogically formative (Hyland, 2001; Yamada, 2003). Such sensitivity might be counterproductive insofar as it discourages teachers drawing attention to inappropriate writing practices (Pecorari, 2003). Hyland (2001) analyzed how two teachers provided feedback in two separate instances of plagiarism by Asian ELLs. These instructors provided indirect, written feedback that attempted to raise the issue with their students, however the students showed little evidence of understanding what they had done wrong or how they could have avoided the problem to begin with.

Finally, teachers must teach the standards. As Schuemann (2008) points out, the notion that "teaching citation is someone else's job" is a myth. Teaching citation is everybody's job, but the ESL/EFL instructors who often act as institutional gatekeepers, are well-positioned to take charge on this front. Hyland (2001) advocates directly addressing the issue in class discussions, suggesting that ESL/EFL instructors can remain sensitive to cultural backgrounds while also providing clear guidance and feedback. Open class discussion exposing learners to the ethical standards by which they are expected to abide should prove beneficial. Creating the formative space in which our Chinese L1 writers of English can write without being unduly afraid of being punished for transgressions attributable to linguistic proficiency and lack of experience writing to this standard is simply good pedagogy. It is crucial that they be allowed to write not "under the fear of being accused of plagiarism" (Polio & Shi, 2012, p. 99), but within classrooms and with instructors supportive of their quests to develop comprehensive academic writing skills. Teachers can support and provide instructional cover as such students occupy that liminal space between a novice writer and a writer capable of writing within the accepted conventions.

While the results of the research presented here come from an American university context, there are implications for EMI universities and English programs in Japan which might be experiencing an influx of Chinese students. First, we cannot presume that our incoming Chinese students are adequately aware of the concept of plagiarism. As the results of this research indicate, it might be instructive to loosely classify students into three groups

that *understand, are unclear about, and don't know about* plagiarism. A quick survey of all newly matriculated students could greatly assist in understanding how prepared they are to follow English writing conventions. It would also provide the opportunity to track a particular aspect of their academic growth during their time at the university.

Second, the results of this study strongly support a more robust, integrated, and cross-curricular support system for educating our Chinese students about incorporating source texts within writing appropriately. During my time teaching in Japan I have found student ability to incorporate source texts appropriately varies widely, which leads me to suspect many writing teachers currently operate under the myth that “teaching citation is someone else’s job” (Schuemann, 2008, p. 18). Hu & Sun (2017) found that Chinese universities’ plagiarism policies contained little detail specifying what constituted plagiarism. What’s more, there was a troubling tendency within the policies to fail to distinguish plagiarism from copying, revealing “the authors of these policy texts had very limited understanding of plagiarism” (p. 65). Development of a top-down, cross-curricular approach to teaching students about proper writing conventions would empower them to avoid committing plagiaristic acts. If we wish to produce students capable of writing within an internationally accepted ethical norm, we must check our institutional policies for clarity and our pedagogy for quality. Failing to do so makes enforcement of standards mystifying for students.

Finally, it is an unfortunate fact that the English writing Chinese students and scholars produce is looked upon with skepticism by some. While there clearly is a problem, as Chinese scholars themselves have attested, it is also important to note that Chinese writers of English are far from the only perpetrators. In this paper, I have focused on them simply because I am a teacher of English as a second and foreign language who encounters almost exclusively non-native English-speaking writers – many of whom are Chinese L1.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size makes drawing definitive conclusions problematic. Results should be interpreted with caution so as to avoid overgeneralizing about Chinese L1 students who write in English. The nature of the survey itself might have been a limitation for three reasons: data collection was cross-sectional, purely qualitative and potentially subject to researcher bias during interpretation, and the final survey question might have been somewhat leading insofar as it asked if participants had any concerns about how to “avoid” plagiarism. Finally, the fact that the reading portion of the CPPT had included an adapted version of Novotney’s (2011) “Beat the Cheat” article from *Monitor on Psychology*, which touched on plagiarism and cheating in higher education, might have influenced participant understanding of plagiarism.

Future research exploring approaches taken to educate novice English writers about plagiarism at EMI or partial EMI universities in CHCs is necessary. Examining institutional policies and level of explicitness in institutional and/or curricular guidance might also prove illuminating. Additionally, understanding EFL teachers' perceptions of what constitutes plagiarism and how they educate and enforce standards in writing classes seems a worthy pursuit. Finally, developing instruments suited to the measurement of student attitudes toward plagiarism and their sense of self-efficacy in avoiding plagiarist acts is advisable.

Conclusion

The research presented here explored the understanding of the word *plagiarism* among 20 first-year students from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan who were studying at a public university in the Western U.S. Most of the students possessed an unclear understanding of the word plagiarism and failed to distinguish it from other generally dishonest academic behaviors. Of the six students who demonstrated a clear understanding of plagiarism, five of them graduated from high school in Hong Kong, Taiwan, or the U.S., meaning most of the Chinese students did not arrive in the U.S. with adequate awareness of plagiarism. While nearly all students had heard the term both at home and in the U.S., for the most part they still possessed an unclear understanding of what it meant.

While Chinese writers of English might present a certain challenge, we must remain aware that they emerge from, and can adapt to, their educational contexts (Ehrich, et al, 2016; Zhang, 2014; Abasi, Akbari, & Graves, 2006). Plagiarism attitudes and behaviors are no exception; they are developed in, and adaptive to, specific academic contexts. That is to say, Chinese students in China might hold attitudes towards plagiarism that are contextually appropriate to the academic environment in China. Those same Chinese students, were they to migrate to a new context, would probably shift their attitudes towards plagiarism to align with academic expectations in their new environment so long as they are made aware of those expectations.

Researchers of textual appropriation consistently appeal for more robust educational practices to help students understand, and then meet, writing standards. Such practices include clear institutional policies (Ehrich, et al, 2016; Hu & Sun, 2017), appeals to ethics and morality (Gray, et al, 2019), and assisting students in mastering acceptable standards of incorporating source texts within their writing (Liu, 2005). Though emanating from research focused on Chinese writers, these appeals are contextually relevant to English teachers everywhere. In the Japanese university context, Rinnert and Kobayashi (2005) concluded that widespread confusion among Japanese undergraduates and graduate students regarding how and when to credit outside sources is at least partially an indictment of university failure

to teach citation conventions or discuss plagiarism-related problems. Additional research from Wheeler (2009) concedes this institutional failure on behalf of Japanese universities, yet also reveals Japanese students are capable of recognizing plagiarism when they see it and do not approve of the practice. Clearly the issue is remedied from both the top-down (via clear institutional policies) and the bottom-up (developing student skills). English teachers must be concerned with both processes. Administratively, we must advocate for specific, coherent policy which supports teachers and students. Pedagogically, we must teach English writing conventions. I echo Zhang's (2014) calls for greater curricular intervention, both in China and at EMI universities where Chinese students are enrolling in increasing numbers. We must do a better job educating about writing conventions instead of rushing to stereotype, stigmatize, and punish students who have not been adequately taught how to write to the expected standard(s). If the students lack the skill to write within standard ethical conventions upon entering our courses, allowing them to exit our courses without addressing that shortcoming is our failure, not theirs.

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