International students and plagiarism: A review of the literature

Introduction

Plagiarism has become a major issue of concern in Western universities (Walker, 1998 cited Biggs and Burville, 2003). Reasons for plagiarising are varied and include students' beliefs and values, personality, stress, social groups and peer pressure and situational and contextual factors (Park, 2003). In recent years the British Higher Education system has seen a huge rise in the number of international students (McNamara and Harris, 1997). In particular there has been a considerable increase in the numbers of students who are non-native speakers and English is at best their second language (Luzio-Lockett, 1998; Park, 2003). International students have been described as "persistent plagiarisers" by Western Academic Institutions (Park, 2003 p480). It is thought that the incidence of plagiarism among this group of students is particularly high and thus a considerable amount of research has been carried out examining the possible causes (Larkham and Manns, 2002; Yamada, 2003).

A broad distinction is made by Hammond (2002) between two types of plagiarist: students who deliberately set out to plagiarise work with the intention to pass it off as their own, and students who plagiarise as a result of inadequate referencing skills or a poor understanding of what plagiarism is. Burnett (2002 cited Park, 2003) and Larkham and Manns (2002) suggest that most international students who plagiarise fall into the second category of non-intentional or accidental plagiarisers.

Chester (2001 adapted by Hammond, 2002) identified a number of reasons used by students to justify plagiarism. Some of these reasons (those in Italics) are particularly relevant to international students and will be discussed later.

1. *I couldn't keep up with the work*
2. The lecturer/tutor doesn't care so why should I?
3. I have to succeed. Everyone expects me to succeed and I expect it, too.
4. *I don't understand what I'm expected to do to avoid plagiarism*
5. *I can't do this! I will have to copy.*
6. *But you said "Work together"*
7. *But paraphrasing would be disrespectful.*
8. I got desperate at the last moment

The issue of plagiarism among international students is complicated by language difficulties and varying cultural backgrounds (Biggs and Burville, 2003). Two major reasons for

plagiarism among students who speak English as a second language were identified in a study by Youmans and Evans (2000 cited Evans and Youmans, 2000):

1. Some students do not understand Western notions of plagiarism.
2. Some students do understand Western notions of plagiarism but still plagiarise because of attitudes and beliefs brought from cultural background.

Burnett (2002 cited Park, 2003) also makes distinguishes between cultural and competence-based causes.

Cultural influences on the incidence of plagiarism

In the past the issue of plagiarism tended to be discussed in rather narrows terms. Investigations examined whether the plagiarism was intentional and how closely the words used matched that of another academic work (Scollon, 1995). It is only relatively recently that the impact of cultural traditions has been recognised as a contributory factor to plagiarism in international students (Scollon, 1995). Scollon (1995) does not feel that plagiarism can be fully understood without examining the social, cultural and political dynamics surrounding it. In addition to coping with language difficulties international students also have to adapt to a set of academic norms which may be very different to those in the culture where they have previously studied (Park, 2003).

It is strongly advocated that international students do not share the same notions of plagiarism with the Western Academic World (Hyman, 2001). Ryan (2000) argues that international students are not familiar with the concepts of plagiarism and thus do not know that they must acknowledge the ideas and findings of other scholars. The educational backgrounds from which international students have come from may not require attribution. A review by Scollon (1995) identifies misunderstanding the attribution need as a principal reason for plagiarism in this particular group of students. For example, Hong Kong university students were unaware of the concept of plagiarism in a study by Deckert (1993 cited Hyman, 2001).

Cadman (1997) found that international students did not have a good understanding of referencing systems and citations. One student interviewed said that she was unaware that she needed to reference another scholar's work. Furthermore, it may be that set texts used in some countries may themselves not cite source materials (Bloch and Chi, 1995 cited Hyman, 2001). The degree to which a country adheres to intellectual property and copyright laws is variable (Carroll, 2002).

It is evident that definitions of plagiarism may vary across cultures but it does not seem that these differences adequately explain the incidence of plagiarism in international students. It is thought that there are more significant cultural issues which instil strong beliefs and attitudes towards plagiarism in these students (Evans and Youmans, 2000).

Interrelated ethical and moral issues augment the difficulties of tackling and understanding the problems of plagiarism (Hopkin, 1993 cited Park, 2003). A number of these issues that are particularly relevant to international students who have come from different cultures are:

- What are acceptable/unacceptable practices?
- Who decides that plagiarism is wrong and on what basis is the decision made?
- Whose responsibility is it to decide on the behavioural norms of academic referencing and plagiarism?

(Adapted from Hopkin, 1993 cited Park, 2003*)*

There is no doubt that some cultures "do not place the same taboo on plagiarism" as is typical of Western countries (Todd, 1997 p182). An interview-based study by Evans and Youmans (2000) investigated the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours concerning plagiarism among students to who English was a second language. Students indicated that despite very similar definitions of plagiarism in their cultures and academic environments plagiarism had nevertheless become the norm.

Some cultures do not regard plagiarism as a sin (Cammish, 1997) and in fact often reward it (Larkham and Manns, 2002). A study by Sherman (1992 cited Hyman, 2001) found that Italian students viewed copying from information sources as acceptable and also as a mark of respect to the original author. This idea that "citing verbatim signifies respect" for the author is also seen in other cultures (Ryan, 2000; Carroll, 2002 p20). Furthermore, it may be that skilful plagiarism is in some cultures highly valued (Bloch and Chi, 1995 cited Todd, 1997). Todd (1997) details the opinions of an African Masters student who felt that copying from sources was acceptable if the ideas expressed were the same as that of the student. In many cultures the ability to piece together the words of others is regarded as good academic practice (Cammish, 1997).

Ballard and Clanchy (1997 cited Ryan 2000 p54) describe how the idea of academia may be completely different in some cultures to that of the western world.

> *In a Confucian, Buddhist, Hindu or Islamic society, for example, the ability to quote from sacred writings, from the sayings of the ages, from the words of leading scholars, is the essence of scholarship.*

Making changes to a text may therefore be seen as disrespectful (Ryan, 2000).

The cultural-deficit approach suggests that international students do not possess the learning tools needed within the Western academic environment (Ninnes et al. 1999). It is suggested that past successful learning experiences have depended upon rote learning and have not required critical analysis of source material. In contrast, Western universities place a strong emphasis on applying and manipulating information from a variety of sources (Ballard, 1989 cited Ninnes et al. 1999). It is proposed that postgraduate students are more likely to plagiarise than undergraduates due to the greater need for critical analysis at this level of study (Schevyns et al. 2003). Luzio-Lockett (1998) describes the need for international students to disregard standards and norms developed in their home country and adopt those of the host country. This process is clearly complex and does not happen instantly if at all. Angelil Carter (2000 cited Carroll, 2002) explains how cultural norms and beliefs are embedded into the student and thus putting these aside is difficult.

Considerable cultural differences exist in the student-teacher relationship. The degree of respect shown to the teacher and how this respect is shown varies enormously from culture to culture (Ninnes et al. 1999). International students tend to be more reluctant to question the opinions of a teacher/lecture as this is a position of authority. Robertson et al. (2000) suggest that this reluctance is stronger in particular groups e.g. Japanese students and female international students. Furthermore, these students often take the opinions of a book or lecturer as the truth without question as the knowledge has come from someone of superior authority. It is therefore unsurprising that this information is then reproduced word for word.

Students coming from cultures where study is very much teacher-led may find the transition to an academic environment with a strong emphasis on independent learning difficult (Schevyns et al. 2003). Some cultures would believe it impolite for students to reference cited material for teachers as this indicates that the teacher does not know that that the text exists (Ryan, 2000).

In a collectivist culture the teacher usually adopts the role of mentor and provides students with all the guidance and information they need to succeed. Another feature found in a collectivist culture is one of ownership. Knowledge tends to be regarded as communal

property and thus can be used by anybody (Ryan, 2000; Carroll, 2002). What's more some international students actually report that their cultural norms required them to share information as part of an "assisting a friend in need" tradition (Walker, 1998 cited Carroll, 2002 p20).

Access to educational resources particularly in poorer countries can be extremely limited (Ninnes et al. 1999). A study by Ninnes et al. (1999) investigating the approaches to learning of Indian postgraduate students at an Australian university found that library resources were often out of date. More interestingly students stated that they did not need to use additional information sources as everything they needed to pass the examination was available in lecture notes or set texts. Earlier research by Zachariah (1993 cited Ninnes et al. 1999) also suggests that Indian students were only required to read the set text and past examination papers and memorise them in order to pass their examination. However, it is probably unfair to suggest that all Indian students typically rely on rote learning alone. One student demonstrated that in some subjects it was necessary to locate and understand additional material. Research by Kember and Gow (1991) and Biggs (1996) also suggests that the anecdotal stereotype of Hong Kong and Chinese students being surface learners may be misplaced.

Competence-based causes of plagiarism

A study by Evans and Youmans (2000) suggests that the understanding of plagiarism by international students is in fact similar to that originating from Western beliefs. Students interviewed displayed only minor differences when describing their comprehension of plagiarism indicating that definitions are similar across the world. If it is the case that international students understand the Western definition of plagiarism, why is that academic work suggests otherwise?

Leki and Carson (1997 cited Hyland, 2001) found that non-native students studying at a university in the United States of America had a good understanding of the concept of plagiarism and what was expected of them. Their research suggests that the primary reason for such students plagiarising is because they find it very difficult to cite source materials along with their own opinions. Scollon (1994 cited Hyman, 2001) highlights the complex nature of plagiarism and the consequential problem for non-native speakers. The need to separate ownership of text, personal thoughts and interpretation of the facts and the facts themselves is in itself an intricate procedure.

Burnett (2002 cited Park, 2003) suggests that a number of international students do not enter British Higher Education Institutions with adequate study skills e.g. essay writing, referencing, note-taking. Biggs and Burville (2003) also highlight the difficulties faced by all students to whom English is a second language of putting source material into "*their own words*". Ryan (2000) also notes the problems faced by these students in understanding the differences between:

- Quoting
- Embedding sources
- Plagiarism

A number of reasons were suggested by staff in a study by Roberston et al. (2000) to explain why international students may be tempted to plagiarise:

- Difficulties comprehending the content of lectures
- Difficulties understanding subject-specific terminology
- High speed of delivery in lectures and seminars
- Difficulties in interpreting the English language.

Hull and Rose (1989 cited Hyland, 2001) suggest that poor linguistic skills and the need to produce academic work of a high quality drives international students to plagiarise.

Despite understanding the need to reference source materials one student interviewed by Hyland (2001) used a formula of 'author said' before copying the exact phrase or sentence from the source. Another student did not understand why she needed to change the words used as they were already in an "acceptable" format.

This suggestion is supported by Carroll (2002) who explains that non-native speakers often use verbatim quotes due to a lack of confidence in their own linguistic abilities. Furthermore they feel that they may confuse its meaning by putting source material into their own words. A fear of making mistakes may prevent non-native speakers from paraphrasing source material and expressing their own thoughts (Cammish, 1997). The view that plagiarism is used as a "compensatory strategy for difficulties in language" was also highlighted by Bloor (1991 cited Todd, 1997).

These students find it difficult to understand why they need to rewrite a source which is already written in perfect flowing prose. Watkins and Biggs (1996 cited Carroll, 2002 p59) illustrate an example of this when describing the actions of Chinese students.

> *Students who want to make a point particularly clearly see paraphrasing the source as a strange thing to do when the source itself makes the point better than they ever could reword it in an imperfectly mastered language.*

> *Occasionally the plagiarism is brilliant: one essay I marked some years ago was composed entirely of individual sentences and phrases lifted from a great variety of sources but stitched together seamlessly. (Cammish, 1997 p154)*

Implications

Although our understanding of the cultural factors influencing plagiarism in international students is now better it does not seem that this increased understanding has been applied to help these students (Yamada, 2003). It may be that institutions are reticent to tackle the issues of plagiarism among international students because they do not want to affect their positions in the lucrative overseas market (Luzio-Lockett, 1998; Yamada, 2003).

A study that evaluated an English proficiency course at a university in New Zealand by Hyland et al. (2001) found that teachers tended to rely on indirect or oblique methods of deterring plagiarism among students. This reluctance of teachers to tackle the issue directly led to many misunderstandings and perhaps indicates that plagiarism is a "shameful topic" (Hyland et al. 2001 p380). Teachers explained that they felt uncomfortable bringing up acts of plagiarism with individuals. It is essential that those teaching international students are aware of cultural reasons behind such plagiarism (Grey, 2002) but an over sensitivity to cultural differences should not prevent teachers raising the issue with students (Hyland, 2001).

Improved communication seems to be key in the construction of new academic principles and thus student to student and student to lecturer discussions about plagiarism should be encouraged (Evans and Youmans, 2000).

An 'evaluation of an integrated bridging course on academic writing for overseas postgraduate students' by Felix and Lawson (1995) found that such courses are worthwhile for both students and staff. The specific course examined looked at approaches to academic writing, critical thinking, incorporating sources, word processing and seminar presentations.

Ryan (2000 p56) suggests that the following should be included in any programme aimed at reducing plagiarism among international students:

- *Discuss what is meant by plagiarism and give real examples*

- *Explain the difference between paraphrasing and plagiarism*
- *Demonstrate to students how to paraphrase, synthesise and weave other sources into their own work*
- *Show students how they are supposed to meet referencing requirements and why they are required*
- *State where syndication is not permitted, describing what it is and why it is unacceptable*
- *Explicitly state the consequences of not complying with rules against plagiarism and syndication.*

Conclusions

Differences in cultural perceptions of the importance of acknowledging information sources may explain the elevated rates of plagiarism among international students (Yamada, 2003). However, there is a worrying tendency to put all international students into one homogenous group regardless of cultural background (Carroll, 2002). It is important that the learning and teaching differences between countries are recognised as generalisations across cultures may be incorrect (Boonyanate and Simkin, 1996; Ninnes et al. 1999). Burns (1991 cited Ninnes et al. 1999) found that student willingness to ask for learning support was different in students from Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong.

It may be that a combination of inadequate language competence or confidence and cultural beliefs result in this type of plagiarism which lacks a real intention to deceive readers into thinking that the work is their own (Cammish, 1997).

It is important to note that plagiarism is also common among native speakers. The higher incidence of cases reported in overseas students might purely be a result of their lower ability to disguise the plagiarism (Ryan, 2000; Carroll, 2002). It is no surprise that native speakers show greater skills of using different words or phrases to cover up direct copying of source material (Ryan, 2000). For example, a change in the style of writing tends to be easier to spot if the writer is using a language they are not fluent in (Carroll, 2002).

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