Challenging the Traditional Notion of Plagiarism:

Understanding my Experiences as an International Student

In my proposal to Grad Symposium 2014, three questions related to cultural differences in L2 academic writing were raised, which are: why does my English writing sound Chinese, why does my writing seem to reflect elements of plagiarism, and why do not I have a voice in what I write. However, due to the time limitation, only the first question was addressed last year. Therefore, in this year's proposal, I will focus on the second question, looking into the intricate issue of plagiarism. As Pecorari (2006) points out, academic writing, a key activity at post-secondary level of studies in North American countries, has long been sabotaged by the Western philosophy around plagiarism. As newcomers to their academic discourse communities, ESL students have to face the challenge of learning to write in acceptable ways under the judgment of the host communities (Pecorari, 2006). Since much of the thinking relating to academic writing is largely Western, Chinese ESL students who have little realization of the incongruence between their way of writing and the way they are expected to write often find themselves involved in the trouble of academic misconduct (Deckert, 1993).

To help understand what makes plagiarism an inevitable issue for my fellow students, I decide to investigate this issue through writing, and then inquiring into my own lived experiences. By doing so, I wish to facilitate Chinese ESL students, particularly the novice academic writers, to comprehensively understand plagiarism, so as to help mitigate their problems in academic writing. To achieve this goal, the definition of plagiarism will be re-examined, the historical development of plagiarism will be reviewed,
and the traditional concept of plagiarism will be challenged in my paper. Furthermore, the issue of plagiarism will be looked into via a dynamic perspective, which explores the difference between intentional and unintentional academic misconducts. Accordingly, it is worth pointing out that rather than being regarded as something immoral hence punishable, unintentional plagiarism is more of a way Chinese ESL students employ to negotiate their writing identity, or it is a means the students use to learn how to write appropriate academic papers. A fine line therefore needs to be drawn between the two completely different behaviors (Hu & Lei, 2012).

Being regarded as a unitary act, rather than a collection of disparate activities, academic plagiarism is often masked by the Western ideological arrogance which jeopardizes the learning process of culturally-distanced students (Currie, 1998). How plagiarism is conceived in other cultures is never included in or accepted by the Western writing conventions (Smith, 2005). In this light, Chinese ESL students need to be absolved from the stereotype of being regular plagiarizers. If they do not intend to deceive, they should not be punished, but educated with patience (Li & Casanave, 2012). By all means, they deserve a second or even third chance in their process of learning. Not to mention that severe penalty is hardly the way that can help the students resolve their challenges in L2 academic writing.
References:


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Deckert, G. D. (1993), Perspectives on plagiarism from ESL students in Hong Kong.


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