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# What prevents ESL/EFL writers from avoiding plagiarism?: Analyses of 10 North-American college websites

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## Abstract

While previous discussions on plagiarism in ESL/EFL contexts have served to inform researchers and educators how differences in cultural and ideological backgrounds can influence people's understanding of textual appropriation and literacy, little has been discussed as to how inexperienced ESL/EFL writers can be helped to avoid plagiarism. The present study analyzes 10 North-American college websites on plagiarism, which provide a window to understanding how this issue has been problematized and explained in Anglophone academic contexts. First this paper argues that beliefs expressed in these websites are not unique, but resemble those expressed in previously published research, writing manuals, and textbooks on how to help students cope with plagiarism. Particular attention is paid to two ideas that have often been neglected when discussing anti-plagiarism measures: the difficulty of using paraphrases and heavy involvement of using inference in writing unparaphrased work. The present study argues that though documentation and use of paraphrases are two important countermeasures to plagiarism, there needs to be more emphasis on the role of inferential thinking in instructing inexperienced writers to use multiple sources. It concludes that ESL/EFL instructors as well as researchers and materials writers need to highlight this aspect of writing.

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*Keywords:* ESL/EFL writers; Plagiarism; Paraphrases; Inferential thought processes

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Plagiarism in ESL/EFL learning contexts is a topic that has engaged many researchers in a heated debate in recent years. Whereas in the L1 context the focus has been on whether this act should be judged as “stealing” (Kolich, 1983: 143) and “cheating” (Murphy, 1990: 899), in the ESL/EFL literature, it has

been on differences of cultural perceptions of texts and textual borrowing. Some studies have contrasted views of ESL/EFL writers and those of American and North European teachers regarding the practice of copying source texts without acknowledgement (Buranen, 1999; Dryden, 1999; Sherman, 1992). Others have focused on the attitudes of Asian ESL/EFL writers toward Western literary conventions (Currie, 1998; Deckert, 1993; LoCastro and Masuko, 1997). Still others have taken a more ideological approach and have questioned the presence of authorship of texts as well as the relevance of plagiarism (Pennycook, 1996; Scollon, 1994, 1995), especially in connection to writing habits of ESL/EFL writers whose cultural backgrounds do not share a frame of reference valuing textual ownership.

Though this debate on plagiarism with an emphasis on differences in cultural perceptions of textual borrowing has served to provide interesting descriptions for researchers and teachers to better understand the developmental discourse practices and cultural notions that ESL/EFL writers bring to writing in English, it has not made life any easier for the writers themselves (e.g. Currie, 1998; Deckert, 1993; Hyland, 2001). Hyland (2001), for example, reports that writing instructors' oversensitivity to "students' feelings" and "understanding potential cultural differences" (2001: 381) prevents the instructors from efficiently pointing out to students infelicities in their essay that may be judged as plagiarism.

Furthermore, in a case study of how novice L1 and L2 academic writers of English deal with textual appropriation in an Anglophone university, Angéil-Carter (2000) discusses the difficulties faced by novice academic writers in identifying voices within the sources (i.e. identifying interpretations offered in the sources) as well as developing their own voices using such sources (i.e. the novice writers themselves developing their own interpretations of the sources). The insights she offers are different from those in previous research in that, first, rather than denying "the presence of authorial voice" (Angéil-Carter, 2000: 3), as is common in postmodernist views, she acknowledges it and states that while "no writers have their own words. . . they have particular ways of working with those words which are their own" (2002: 29). Second, based on this conviction, she provides suggestions on how novice writers could be taught to work with source texts—and to avoid committing plagiarism—so that they can develop their own voice. The two studies above suggest that it is time researchers and teachers take a fresh look at plagiarism and see it as a developmental problem (Angéil-Carter, 2000) that could be responded to.

One reason why debates on plagiarism have failed to yield substantial and realistic support for novice writers is probably the strong resistance among some researchers to admitting the presence of authorship in texts and their reluctance to make plagiarism an issue in ESL/EFL setting. However, when one turns to the academic reality inexperienced writers face, it is often the case that the word has a distinct meaning in most academic institutions (Buranen, 1999). This fact indicates that researchers and instructors must seriously begin discussing the realities faced by such learners and find means of empowering them to counter realistic problems they face at Anglophone colleges, which expect them to comply with institutional guidelines on plagiarism (Angéil-Carter, 2000).

The discussion so far indicates that plagiarism should now be reassessed as realistic beliefs supported by colleges where student writers study. To approach this issue in this direction, one must first find out what colleges believe about plagiarism and then think of measures to empower college-level ESL/EFL writers so that their written work may differ from any original sources they used. To investigate these facts, this study analyzes ten North-American college websites giving their beliefs on plagiarism. As will be discussed shortly, these beliefs represent not simply those of these institutions, but also those shared by researchers and writers of writing manuals and textbooks. Though prevalence of such beliefs in Anglophone societies could not have been fully captured in previous research, as most was based on case studies (e.g. Angéil-Carter, 2000; Currie, 1998; Hyland, 2001), it is believed that a more comprehensive picture of what colleges may be telling to students on how to avoid plagiarism will be gained through an analysis of these websites.

## 1. Method, procedures, and data analysis

Ten North-American college websites were chosen for this study (see Appendix). Of the 10, six are from college writing centers, three are from universities' department websites (Dickinson College's English department, Drew University's composition program and the University of British Columbia's biology department) and one is from the University of California, Davis student judicial affairs website. The information in these sites is usually electronic versions of writing manuals or handouts distributed by these colleges. Except for the websites of the University of British Columbia, which was accessed through the JALT (The Japan Association for Language Teaching) official website in 2000, Capital Community College, which was accessed through Ohio State University's ESL website in 2001, the Drew University site and the University of California Davis site, all websites were found at or through *International Writing Centers Association Writing Centers Online* website in fall 2001.

The criteria used for choosing these websites are that they offer more than a mere definition of plagiarism, and provide examples of different types of plagiarism as well as sample texts illustrating what these colleges mean by plagiarism and acceptable non-plagiarized work. In fact, of the 336 college websites in the *International Writing Centers Association Writing Centers Online*, only six, which were chosen for the present study, met these two criteria.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Results and discussion

Analyses of these ten websites have revealed they share four common characteristics. Of these four, three have come under frequent discussion in contexts regarding how to help inexperienced writers avoid plagiarism. These contexts include previous

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<sup>1</sup> Seventy-seven of the 336 sites on this website, namely, <http://iwca.syr.edu/IWCA/IWCAOWLS.html> could not be accessed.

studies (e.g. Angéil-Carter, 2000; Hyland, 2001; MacGregor, 2002), writing manuals (Markham et al., 1994; Silverman et al., 1996; Walker, 1997), and textbooks (e.g. Clabaugh and Rozycki, 1999; Spatt, 1999; Swales and Feak, 1994). The first feature is that they seem to convey an agreed notion of what they mean by it: unacknowledged exploitation of another writer's words or ideas, or both. Second, they devote much space to explaining and illustrating through sample texts how to document sources in academic papers; writers are instructed to put quotation marks around any significant word, phrase, or sentence they directly borrowed from source texts. The third common feature of the websites is that as a means of avoiding plagiarism, they suggest that writers use paraphrases.

### 2.1. Problems with teaching to write paraphrases

Though instructing to write paraphrases is a common strategy used when teaching ESL/EFL writers to write non-plagiarized work, such a practice is problematic for two reasons. First, paraphrases are difficult to write. Though the 10 websites advise students to avoid the plagiarism of writing patchwork paraphrases, which consist of lifting smart phrases and words from the source texts and interspersing them in one's own writing without quotation marks and citations, it is a fact that avoiding such types of paraphrases is not cognitively easy. Saunders (1991), for example, has pointed out that paraphrasing poses difficulty for both native English speaker writers and ESL writers. Moreover, Eng (1995), who studied the mechanism of inadvertent plagiarism among native English speakers engaged in oral tasks, found that both fluent and non-fluent native English speakers were prone to commit plagiarism of frequent words of source materials. Though Eng's study did not investigate whether ESL writers would be prone to similar problems, Campbell's (1990) study seems to lend evidence to this fact.

Second, it is unclear what colleges mean by acceptable paraphrases. To illustrate, all 10 websites provide samples of exemplary paraphrasing, which share the following two features. First, they seem to have been written with such elaboration that at first glance inexperienced writers may not realize how they were generated. In short, these "models are so fully elaborated that the schemata underlying them may be obscured" (Charney and Carson, 1995: 114) whereas it is a fact that novice writers need models that are "most accessible" (Stolarek, 1994: 170) to them. Second, they are, ironically, no longer *paraphrases* in the strictest sense of the word (i.e. a faithful reproduction of the message implied in the source text), but intricate combinations of source text information and the assumptions or points of view writers bring to the text, as will be illustrated below. This second feature will be problematic for inexperienced writers, who may think that writing paraphrases is about reproducing the exact sense of the source text (Hull and Rose, 1989; Sommers, 1980). How would they respond when they discover that writing a faithful account of the source text was not what they were required to do, but integrating different sources as well as imposing their own interpretation of the text? In fact, previous research has stressed the importance of the latter over the former in academic writing (Ballard and Clanchy, 1991; Basham et al., 1993; Leki, 1993). Basham et al. (1993) argue that "[m]ost

American college-level reading-to-write tasks require that students move beyond summarization to . . . ‘translation,’ whereby students use their notes and summaries to ‘transform’ the reading, developing an individual purpose and plan for their writing and negotiating their roles as readers and writers” (1993: 304). Ballard and Clanchy (1991) point out that Western academic institutions require a writer “not only to reproduce ideas, evidence, and arguments of other writers, but to reshape these into a new fabric of his own design” (1991: 29). Leki (1993) also reveals that exercises of writing with texts should allow ESL writers to find a relevant but unique interpretation of texts without being dependent on them.

These findings suggest that when discussing plagiarism, overemphasis on unacceptable paraphrases and the conflicting notions of acceptable paraphrases in the college websites may have a detrimental effect on ESL/EFL writers: the former creates a false notion that acceptable writing is all about watching out for unacceptable paraphrases; the latter, an utter confusion as to the whole notion of paraphrases. Clearly, writing instructors, researchers, and textbook writers need to provide more accessible and unambiguous information on paraphrases.

## *2.2. Inferential thought processes in non-plagiarized work*

The fourth common feature of the 10 North-American college websites is that they do not articulate the inferential thought processes that may go into writings of experienced academic writers, whose skills inexperienced writers can learn from. Not only is this information missing from these websites but also from previous research on plagiarism, writing manuals, and textbooks. Research on both textual integration and summary writing (Brown and Day, 1983; Hidi and Anderson, 1986) reveals that use of inferential thought processes is a hallmark of a skilled writer. Whereas inexperienced writers depend on deletion strategies (i.e. eliminating excessive or insignificant information in texts), experienced writers change the organization of the text more drastically and use inferential processes to connect textual information to a new framework when engaging in summarization tasks (Brown and Day, 1983).

Of the different types of human inferential processes, there are two that are well known: deductive inference and “analogical thinking” (Manktelow, 1999: 159). The first type of inference is a process that “involves arriving at conclusions on the basis of statements called premises, whose truth value can be assumed” (Manktelow, 1999: 3). One example of deductive inference is the following: John is introduced to Kate at a party. Kate is holding a Persian cat (i.e. Premise 1). She is wearing a T-shirt with cats printed on (i.e. Premise 2). She is wearing a pair of earrings that have the shape of a cat (i.e. Premise 3). From these three pieces of visual information about Kate (i.e. premises), John arrives at the conclusion (i.e. infers) that Kate is a cat lover. The second type of inference, analogical inference, is about “noticing similarities between one domain and another” (Manktelow, 1999: 159). One example of analogical inference is the following: Birds have long served as a model (i.e. analogy) for humans in their learning the mechanism of flying. Thus, early devices of human flying resembled the functions of birds’ wings.

Turning to exemplary paraphrase samples in the websites, one notices that inferential processes may have gone into their making. Two sample texts will be examined to illustrate this. The first example employs deductive inference and the second, analogical inference.

The first example is from the University of British Columbia's Biology Program Guide website, which is a paraphrase of the following text:

Shortly after the rogues, who pass themselves off as a duke and a king, invade the raft of Huck and Jim, they decide to raise funds by performing scenes from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and *Richard III*. That the presentation of Shakespeare in small Mississippi towns could be conceived of as potentially lucrative tells us much about the position of Shakespeare in the nineteenth century (Levine, 1988: 10).

The exemplary paraphrase of the text above is as follows: "As Lawrence Levine argues, casual references to Shakespeare in popular nineteenth century literature suggests [sic] that the identification of 'highbrow' theatre is a relatively recent phenomenon" (Gordon et al., 2001/2002, Close paraphrasing section, ¶ 5). In this short paraphrase, one finds evidence of the complex deductive inferential processes employed. One such evidence is the opening clause of this paraphrase *As Lawrence Levine argues*. It is likely that this clause may have derived from the writer's deductive inferential process, involving two premises: first, the writer's awareness that it was Levine who wrote the source text and second, the writer's aim of writing this text to make an ideological claim. Because this paraphrase writer was aware that such an ideological claim was being made here, the word *argue* was chosen and the source information was put in a completely new framework. Second, noticing that the source text talks about vagabonds in the nineteenth century staging Shakespearean plays in rural communities in the South and causing a great sensation there (i.e. the first premise) and that this text comes from a book entitled *Highbrow, Lowbrow: The emergence of cultural hierarchy in America*, (i.e. the second premise), the writer of this paraphrase was able to strike a contrast between the information in the source text and the writer's present reality: Though in the 1800s, Shakespearean plays were associated with being lowbrowed, today, they are associated with being highly educated. Using this contrastive information, the writer was able to state: *the identification of "highbrow" theatre is a relatively recent phenomenon*.

The commentary on this sample text states that this rewritten version is an exemplary paraphrase as it "does not rephrase or repeat the material from the passage...but expands upon it and places it in the context of the student's work" (Gordon et al., 2001/2002, Close paraphrasing section, ¶ 5). It implies that rather than being a faithful reproduction of the ideas in source text, an effective paraphrase is one that expresses the paraphrase writer's ingenuity. Such ingenuity is expressed not simply by combining some textual elements but by combining those textual elements with assumptions the paraphrase writer brings to the interpretation of the passage (Sperber and Wilson, 1995). In the present case, the author of the para-

phrased text seems to have been able to form a link between the information in the text with this writer's reality, which resulted in establishing a contrast between the two.

The second sample text is one from the Indiana University Bloomington web site, which uses analogical inference in creation of the paraphrase of the following original text:

The rise of industry, the growth of cities, and the expansion of the population were the three great developments of late nineteenth century American history. As new, larger, steam-powered factories became a feature of the American landscape in the East, they transformed farm hands into industrial laborers, and provided jobs for a rising tide of immigrants. With industry came urbanization the growth of large cities [sic](like Fall River, Massachusetts, where the Bordens lived) which became the centers of production as well as of commerce and trade (Williams et al., 1980: 1).

The exemplary paraphrase of the passage above is as follows:

Fall River, where the Borden family lived, was typical of northeastern industrial cities of the nineteenth century. Steam-powered production had shifted labor from agriculture to manufacturing, and as immigrants arrived in the US, they found work in these new factories. As a result, populations grew, and large urban areas arose. Fall River was one of these manufacturing and commercial centers (Williams 1). [Writing Tutorial Services (2001) Here's an example of quotation and paraphrase used together, which is also ACCEPTABLE: section, ¶ 1]

Like the paraphrase from the University of British Columbia text, this paraphrase rewrites the original from a new perspective; however, unlike it, this one seems to involve the writer's analogical thought process. That is to say, it appropriates the framework of the original text (i.e. the description of how farmlands in the northeastern part of the U.S. were transformed into industrial cities) to a particular case, namely, Fall River. The reason why this paraphrase is judged to be appropriate is that its writer expresses the information in the original text in his/her own words and that the paraphrased text includes a parenthetical citation; it nowhere mentions that this paraphrase is a product of analogical thinking.

Existing research on analogies in written text has regarded analogy as playing only a minor role in texts. Curtis and Reigeluth (1984), for example, point out that analogies in school science textbooks are found either at the introductory phase or the end of an instruction or embedded inside a text. Similarly, studies by Giora (1993) and Hayes and Tierney (1982), which studied the role analogies play in text comprehension, used analogies embedded in the texts (though in one of Giora's texts the analogy appeared at the end of the text as a digression from the earlier section of the text). On the other hand, the analogy found in the Indiana University Bloomington paraphrase is one in which the entire original text is used as a model of another essay with a new but closely related topic.



This type of analogy is discussed in [Stolarek's \(1994\)](#) study [though [Stolarek](#) does not refer to it as an analogy, but as a “model”(1994: 154)], in which participants of the study wrote a text identical to the original text in organization and style but different in topic. The result of this study suggests: “the use of modeling, and, in this case, very conscious, deliberate, word-by-word modeling, did not detract from this writer’s ability to write in a creative manner” (1994: 169) and that “[p]rose modeling may have caused novices to write more like experts than other novices” (1994: 169). The holistic type of analogies as documented in [Stolarek's](#) study, which appear at a supra-sentence level, whereby a new topic is framed in the framework of an old topic, need to be taught by instructors, researchers and material writers; it must be communicated to ESL/EFL writers that using such types of analogies in their writing will decrease their chances of committing plagiarism as well as develop their own voices.

The two examples above have shown the importance of inferential thought processes in writing non-plagiarized work. Regardless of this fact, none of the websites discussed in the present study, not to mention studies or materials on plagiarism, discuss this fact to a satisfying degree, though [Grinnell College](#) site ([Hunter, 2001](#)) comes close to making a brief reference to it: “Generally, to avoid too close a paraphrase, you should speak about the text at a different level of abstraction—be more general or more specific, rise above or duck below the level at which the source speaks, change the order or the focus” ([Hunter, 2001](#), The Paraphrase section, ¶ 5).

The present study has underlined the necessity of introducing inferential thought processes in an ESL/EFL learning context, which has been neglected to date ([Wolf, 1999](#)). In particular, it has called for its implementation in helping inexperienced writers avoid plagiarism. Such a revision would be welcome for three reasons. First, it would help ESL/EFL writers meet the goals set by most Anglophone college writing, that is, developing speculative thought processes ([Ballard and Clanchy, 1991](#)). However, to date, research on writing using source materials has offered ESL/EFL writers hardly any help in meeting such a requirement. If writing instruction could place more emphasis on the role of inferential thinking in writing, ESL/EFL writers would be able to better prepare for such academic exercises. One simple way to do this is to provide ESL/EFL writers hands-on experience of thinking and writing from a point of view not obvious in the source text ([Kramsch, 1993](#)) and “varying text time in which students re-write a story starting at another point in time” ([Wolf, 1999](#): 106). Such exercises will prove to be effective not only in teaching how to cope with textual appropriation but also in giving novice writers freedom to explore various textual interpretations, which would serve to cultivate their own voices ([Angélil-Carter, 2000](#)).

Second, an emphasis on inferential skills means giving more opportunities for some ESL/EFL students who are used to reading between the lines in their L1 (e.g. [Hinds, 1987](#); [Matalene, 1985](#); [Mok, 1993](#)). Once these learners come to realize similarities between their L1 reading practice and inferential processes required in their L2, the latter would seem more relevant to them ([Sperber and Wilson, 1995](#)) and offer motivation for these learners to adopt such processes in their L2 learning processes.



Third, not only will an emphasis on inferential skills help students cope with writing academic texts, it will also help them prepare for writing in the non-academic world, including journalistic writing, where textual borrowing is done less by use of quotation marks and acknowledgment of sources (Angélil-Carter, 2000), but more subtly through inferential processes. Instructors could raise students' awareness of this matter by encouraging comparison and contrast of two journalistic texts on the same topic as Reah (1998) attempts to do. Such an experience will help ESL/EFL writers come to understand that more drastic revisions of source texts are required not just in academic writing but even in non-academic writing.

### 3. Conclusion

Though plagiarism has often been discussed as cultural and ideological issues, this study has discussed the limitation to such approaches. In particular, it has argued that oversensitivity to such issues prevents effective teaching of the skills ESL/EFL writers need to avoid committing plagiarism. It has also identified four characteristics in North American college websites' treatment of plagiarism: (a) the agreed notion of plagiarism as unacknowledged exploitation of another writers' words, ideas, or both; (b) an emphasis on teaching documentation techniques; (c) an emphasis on teaching how to write paraphrases; and (d) a lack of emphasis on inferential processes in writing. It was pointed out that the first three of the four features are also prevalent in previous research, writing manuals, and textbooks. The present paper has argued that emphasis on the third (i.e. the use of paraphrases) may be unhelpful for ESL/EFL writers. It has also argued that the fourth feature (i.e. the use of inferential thought processes), which is apparent in the sample texts, but is not explicitly mentioned in them, be brought to ESL/EFL writers' awareness.

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### Appendix

Bellevue Community College Writing Lab  
<http://www.bcc.ctc.edu/writinglab/plagiarism.html>

- Capital Community College: A statement on plagiarism  
<http://www.ccc.commnet.edu/mla/plagiarism.shtml>
- Dickenson College Writing Center OWL <http://www.Dickinson.edu/departments/engl/writguides.htm>
- Drew University College of Liberal Arts Plagiarism—and how to avoid it!  
[http://www.depts.drew.edu/composition/Avoiding\\_plagiarism.htm](http://www.depts.drew.edu/composition/Avoiding_plagiarism.htm)
- Grinnell College Writing Lab  
<http://webserver.grinnell.edu/academic/writinglab/forum/advice.pdf>
- Indiana University Bloomington Writing Tutorial Service <http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/wts/plagiarism.html>
- University of British Columbia Biology Program Guide 2001/2002 <http://www.zoology.ubc.ca/bpg/plagiarism.htm>
- University of California at Davis Student judicial affairs web site  
<http://sja.ucdavis.edu/avoid.htm>
- University of Delaware Writing Center  
<http://odin.english.udel.edu/wc/handouts/plagiarism.html>
- Washington University in St. Louis Writing Center  
<http://www.artsci.wustl.edu/~writing/plagiarism.htm>

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