Identifying Plagiarism in Student Academic Writing
Nadezhda Yakovchuk
University of Leicester
n.yakovchuk@hotmail.co.uk

Background
The increasing concern about student plagiarism in UK higher education urgently calls for developing effective solutions to the problem. Whilst institutional anti-plagiarism guidance tends to represent plagiarism as a clear and straightforward phenomenon (Angélil-Carter, 2000; Pecorari, 2001; Yakovchuk, 2005), plagiarism is complex, and this complexity is two-fold: a theoretical complexity, or the complexity of the concept (Pennycook, 1994, 1996; Scollon, 1995; Currie, 1998; Bloch, 2001; Howard, 2001; Pecorari, 2001; Macdonald and Carroll, 2006) and a practical complexity, or the complexity of identifying plagiarism (Pennycook, 1994; Buranen, 1999; Angélil-Carter, 2000; Park, 2003; Pecorari, 2003). This paper reports on a 2006 study of plagiaristic practices of undergraduate non-native speaker students, including the plagiarism identification framework designed for identifying plagiarism in their academic writing.

Sample and Methodology
The participants of this study were ten third-year Chinese students following their BA in English Language, Translation and Cultural Studies at the University of Warwick, and the samples of their writing were taken from the assignments prepared for the core ‘Sociolinguistics’ course. The average length of a sample used for analysis was 1236 words. The ten samples were divided into 548 analysis units (mainly sentences), and the analysis units that were based on sources were coded using the plagiarism identification framework developed specifically for this study. This framework is based on three criteria: 1) presence or absence of a quotation signal, 2) presence or absence of a reference to a source, and 3) a degree of text transformation (Exact Copying (EC), Wording Close to Original (WCO), and Wording Distant from Original (WDO)).

Main Findings, Discussion and Practical Implications
The analysis based on this framework identified a considerable amount of plagiarism in student writing samples (26.5% of all 548 analysis units, or 48.3% of the 298 analysis units identified as based on sources). Interestingly, according to the TurnitinUK plagiarism detection software, the same samples were virtually clear of plagiarism.

67% of the analysis units coded as ‘plagiarism’ did not contain a reference to a source (they were either EC, WCO or WDO). On the one hand, this might signal an intentional motive to disguise somebody else’s work as one’s own; on the other hand, however, this might also be a result of not being aware of proper referencing conventions.

29% of ‘plagiarism units’ constituted WCO with a source reference and without a quotation signal. Since source acknowledgement was present for such units, they perhaps reflect student confusion over what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable paraphrase. This type of plagiarism might also have been caused by language difficulties. Such an explanation would be consistent with the literature on the subject and needs to be addressed pedagogically.

43% of ‘plagiarism units’ constituted WDO without a quotation signal and a source reference. This represents plagiarism of ideas, and it turned out to comprise a substantial part of all the plagiarism identified in the analysed samples. This makes plagiarism of ideas an important point of focus, particularly since this plagiarism type is not identifiable through electronic plagiarism detection software tools that are being increasingly used by higher education institutions worldwide. A major UK survey of academic cheating, the 2006 survey of UK universities commissioned by The Times Higher Education Supplement also pointed to the prominent status of plagiarism of ideas among other kinds of academic misconduct (Shepherd, 2006).

Additionally, inaccuracies of source documentation (e.g. incomplete references to sources, wrong use of quotation marks, inaccuracies in documenting secondary citations, etc.) constituted 20.5% of all the analysis units identified as based on sources. Although this does not constitute plagiarism, it still represents poor academic practice which requires pedagogical attention.

The results suggest that, along with the punitive side, there is a clear need for an appropriate pedagogical response to student plagiarism. It is suggested, therefore, that universities should put emphasis on providing comprehensive input on correct source documentation, and on promoting the development of relevant study skills and good academic practice in general.

References


