On the Influence of Culture upon Students' Perceptions and Attitudes of Plagiarism

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Abstract

For the past decades, more and more educators and researchers have recognized the complexity of plagiarism. There is an increasing number of researches conducted to inquire what factors affect plagiarism. Among all the factors, the cultural influence has drawn the most attention, especially how cultural beliefs unique to Confucian heritage and education practice contribute to Chinese students' difficulties in understanding the western notion of plagiarism. More studies are needed to shed some light on this issue. Therefore, this study aims to examine the difference between Chinese and American university students in their received writing instruction, understanding of plagiarism, attitude towards plagiarism and perceived causes for plagiarism. Besides this study also tries to provide some insights on how the cultural values shape students' perceptions and attitudes of plagiarism.

Keywords: Plagiarism; Complexity; Cultural influence; Perceptions; Attitude

1.Introduction

Recent years, the complexity of plagiarism and its cultural dependency has received more and more recognition and attention from researchers and educators. As a result, instead of viewing plagiarism as a simple black-and-white issue, most researchers and educators begin to adopt a more inquiring stance with a desire to understand what factors affect such behavior, including different cultural backgrounds (Hafernik et al., 2002). At the center of the discussion is the international students as they are reported to have difficulties in understanding the western concept of plagiarism (Marshall& Garry, 2006; Evans & Youmans, 2000). Within this particular group, East Asian students, especially Chinese students who are nurtured in Confucian culture have attracted attention of researchers as some values and practices among them "contradict established notions of plagiarism in the west, especially in countries with an Anglo-Saxon heritage" (Swoden, 2005, p 226). It is argued that cultural beliefs unique to Confucian heritage and education practice contribute to the difficulties Chinese student may have in understanding the western notion of plagiarism (Curtis & Vardanega, 2008). However, the cultural influence on students' perception and attitudes of plagiarism is far from clear. More studies are needed to provide some insights into this issue. Therefore, this study aims to examine whether culture influences students' perceptions and attitudes by addressing the following four research questions:

1.Do Chinese university students and American university students differ in their received writing instructions related to plagiarism?

2. Do Chinese university students and American university students differ in their understanding of plagiarism?

3. Do Chinese university students and American university students differ in their attitude toward

plagiarism?

4. Do Chinese university students and American university students differ in their perceived causes for plagiarism?

2. Literature Review

The perception of plagiarism have been changing over the last few decades in education. More and more educators have recognized and discussed the complexity of the notion of plagiarism, especially the "potentially contradictory nature of plagiarism across cultures"(Rinner & Kobayashi, 2005). For example, Sowden (2005) discussed the relationship between students' own culture and their understanding of plagiarism. He identified several values and practices of students from Confucian culture which contradict with the "established notions of plagiarism in the west"(p.226): the first one is idea of "communal ownership of knowledge" which conflicts with the appreciation of private intellectual property in western culture(p. 226); second one is that students are encouraged to copy and reproduce authorities rather than challenge them; third one is the emphasis on certainty and correct answer in education practice which discourages the development of inferential thinking; the fourth one is the emphasis on achieving group consensus which contradicts with the emphasis on individual effort in the West. These value and education practice, as Sowden (2005) implied, may lead students to the perception that it is legitimate to plagiarize other people's words or sentences. In addition, Sowden (2005) argued that Confucian culture is "less likely to discourage copying and the appropriation of ideas from other sources without acknowledgement" (p.228). However, Sowden's argument encountered criticism from Liu (2005) for assuming that "cultural conditioning is the major culprit for plagiarism among Asian students, especially among those from the Far East"(P. 234). Liu (2005) argued that Sowden's argument is based on dubious assumption that plagiarism is an acceptable practice in the Far East, especially in China. Drawing on his own personal experience and the emphasis on giving credit to the source by Chinese composition books, he showed that "plagiarism has always been criticized in China"(P.236). What's more, Liu(2005) argued that Sowden conflated "heavy reliance on memorization", "respect for authority", and   "sharing knowledge in group project" in Chinese students' learning with the "practice of copying and appropriating ideas from others"(p.237). He clarified that memorization is only meant to support students' learning and "citing an authority doesn't mean to claim it as one's own"(p.237). In addition, Liu (2005) argued that group work is a practice found in both Chinese and Western Cultures and it is not reasonable to say that it would pose potential problem for plagiarism only in china. Sowden and Liu's views represent two positions on the cultural dependency of plagiarism and the debate is still continuing. However, the role of culture in explaining the phenomenon of plagiarism is far from clear and settled.

In addition to the debate, some empirical studies focusing on students' perception may provide some implication for potential cultural difference in the concept of plagiarism. Deckert (1993) administered a questionnaire survey among 170 science students at a college in Hong Kong in order to obtain their opinions about plagiarism(The British or American Kind of definitions of plagiarism are adopted by universities and colleges in Hong Kong and are written into the codes of conduct for students). Deckert (1993) reported that the Hong Kong Chinese students had "little ability to detect plagiarism"(p.138). Even a passage containing many verbatim reproduction of the given source was recognized by less than half (45.6%). And he pointed out that Hong Kong Chinese students' unfamiliarity with the western concept of plagiarism may contribute to their poor performance in identifying plagiarism. However, the findings of limited ability require caution for the following two reasons: the first is whether the results would have been different if humanities and social science students had been included; the second is whether the complexity of the data collection instrument prevented it from

giving a true picture of students' ability to identify plagiarism. Besides, it was found that Hong Kong Chinese students in this study understand plagiarism differently than do the American students in Kroll's study (1988). "Whereas the American freshman registered concern for authors, fellow students, ownership rights, and responsibility for doing independent work, the first year Hong Kong students seemed to approach only the latter concern and then only with a pronounced egocentric emphasis"(Deckert, 1993, p.142). This difference in their attitudes towards plagiarism may suggest that Chinese students had not been exposed to "a Western conception of the broader consequences of misusing source materials" in their past educational experience(Deckert, 1993, p.142). It may also imply that students from Confucian culture do not have the same internal conceptualization of plagiarism as that of the American students in Kroll's (1988) study. Similarly, Chandrasegaran (2000) administered a questionnaire to 35 Singaporean students in a university in Singapore. She reported that "while verbatim lifting of strings from sources was readily regarded as dishonest, unacknowledged paraphrase was not so regarded by most of the students participating in this study"(p.108).This finding reveals the "disparity between the students' understanding of plagiarism and that of the Western academic community"(p.91). However, the findings of this study need to be interpreted with caution because of its limited sample size. Although both Deckert's (1993) study and Chandrasegaran's (2000) study highlighted some issues related to the cultural variation in the perceptions of plagiarism, they failed to provide a comprehensive picture of how different cultures view plagiarism differently as they only focus on students from Asian countries.

Some studies have been conducted to compare the perceptions of students from Confucian culture and Western culture. For example, Rinnert and Kobayash (2005) administered a questionnaire to Japanese students and American students (questionnaire for Japanese students is written in Japanese and that for American students is in English) and reported that there was difference in knowledge and attitudes regarding citations convention and plagiarism between the two groups. It was found that Japanese students received less amount of writing instruction about how to paraphrase and how to quote correctly than American students in their previous learning experience. what's more, American students were reported to be more careful about references than Japanese students. The most notable finding was that "Japanese students considered using someone else's words or ideas as their own to be not entirely negative"(Rinner & Kobayash, 2005, p.39), on the contrary, 88% of the American participants regarded plagiarism as wrong and unethical. Rinner and Kobayash (2005) pointed out that Japanese students' previous learning experience and their confusion over the concept of plagiarism, including the concept of individual ownership of words or ideas can explain their limited knowledge and tolerate attitude of plagiarism. This study is valuable for providing some insight into the different perceptions on plagiarism held by Japanese students and American students, but it only addresses students' attitudes towards plagiarism generally and didn't explore their understanding of plagiarism fully.

A more recent cross-cultural study (Curtis & Vardanega, 2008) of plagiarism investigated the perceived understanding and seriousness of plagiarism by Asian international and local students in Australia. It was reported that Asian and local students showed remarkable similarity in their ability to recognize plagiarism and in their perceptions of seriousness of various forms of plagiarism. Curtis and Vardanega (2008) suggests that " adaptation to the cultural context is a possible explanation for the similarity in perceptions of seriousness among local and Asian students" in this study (p.31). That is to say Asian students "may alter their belief systems considerably during their time studying abroad, resulting in similar attitudes to those local students after sometime in the country"(Curtis & Vardanega, 2008, p.32). However, Curtis and Vardanega (2008) points out that the it remains likely that the unique educational and cultural experience of Asian students do affect their perceptions and understanding of plagiarism, particularly when they study within their own country. Therefore, in order to provide a true and comprehensive picture of the cultural influence on the notions of plagiarism, more cross-cultural studies are needed, especially studies to compare the perceptions of plagiarism of Chinese

students studying in China with those of American students.

3.Method

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study will comprise 50 Chinese university students of 4th year who are randomly selected from English department of Si Chuan Normal University and 50 American exchange students from Si Chuan Normal University and Si Chuan University. All the American students are majored in liberal arts.

3.2 Questionnaire

A questionnaire will be administered to all the participants. The questionnaire will be written in English. it consists of 5 main sections. section 1, adapted from Rinnert and Kobayashi (2005), attempts to elicit information about students' past learning experience related to plagiarism. It contains questions about the type and amount of writing instructions related to plagiarism they have received and frequency of using correct citation in their own writing, both based on 4-point Likert scales. With an objective to examine students' awareness of what constitutes plagiarism, section 2 asks students to judge whether each of the scenarios provided is a form of plagiarism . Seven scenarios which represent seven types of plagiarism in section 2 are based on Curtis and Vardanega (2008). Section 3 aims to examine the students' views on the negative consequences of plagiarism. This section draws upon Deckert (1993) and it comprises 7 statements which are different explanations of why plagiarism is wrong. Students are asked to indicate their extent of agreement on each of those statements on a five-point Likert scale. Section 4 include only one open-ended question which ask students to list possible reasons for plagiarism.(see sample items in each section in appendix 1). For this open-ended question, Chinese students are allowed to use Chinese in order to express their idea clearly. Any of the participants who don't understand the questions on the questionnaire can ask the researcher for clarification.

4. Data Analysis

The author will tabulate all the students' replies to all questions. Then the author will use SPSS to compare the two groups' frequency and percentage on each item to see if there is difference between them in the general distribution of their responses. To get a more detail view, the author will use t-tests to compare the two groups' mean scores on each item (except section 2 and 4) to see if they differ significantly in their response to it.

With regard to the last question on the questionnaire, the author will first translate the Chinese students' answer into English and then read all the students' answer iteratively to identify repeated themes. The categories of possible reasons will be presented in table, with the percentage of responses by category indicated for each group.

4.1 Brief analysis of a small sample of data

with the limited time, the author can only pilot the last question of the questionnaire to three Chinese students. Their answers are as following:

student 1:

Sometimes I have several assignments to finish within a very short time. In order to hand in the assignment on time, the author has no choice but to copy from internet and books. Sometimes, I have no idea about the certain topic and I don't know what to write, so I can only download some articles from the internet.

student 2:

I don't know how to cite. I want to get a better score for assignments. I am unconscious act. Some of the assignments are too difficult.

student 3:

I have no idea about certain topic. I don't know how to incorporate others' idea. I don't know how to cite. I am unaware of plagiarism.

Following the proposed analytical method, despite the small sample of data, several themes seems to emerge: survival strategy, lack of knowledge of correct citation, unconscious act, lack of writing skill. If all the responses to this question are obtained, the categories of possible reasons can be identified for both of the two groups. By comparing the categories and the frequencies of them between two groups of students, some difference may be found. The most common reason reported by Chinese students may be different by those reported by American students. Some reasons mentioned by Chinese students may not be reported by American students. Some interpretation will be made and possible explanation will be suggested and discussed. For example, these difference may be caused by their different perception of plagiarism, and these different perception may be influenced by their educational and cultural experience.

5.Conclusion

If the whole study can be carried out, a more comprehensive picture of the difference in perceptions of plagiarism between Chinese and American students may be provided and it can echo some previous researcher's argument that different cultures view plagiarism in different ways.(e.g. Deckert, 1993; Pennycook, 1996; Swoden, 2005). what's more, despite the small scale of the study, it can contribute to better understanding of plagiarism from the cultural perspective and provide some implications for teachers as to how to raise students' awareness of what constitute plagiarism and how to facilitate students' acquisition of academic literacy and citation conventions in their L2.

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Biography

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