

学生海外調査研究	
A Research on Plagiarism Practices in English Writing	
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## 内容報告

### 1. Purpose of the research

My area of research is the teaching of English writing. I am especially interested in the phenomenon of plagiarism in English writing among Chinese college students. The frequent occurrences of Chinese students' plagiarizing practices in intercultural contexts have attracted the attention of many educators and researchers for a long time. Nowadays in the field of English education, it is common sense that the concept of authorship and the rules of quotation/citation are Western-originated. For example, Currie (1998) summarizes Pennycook and Scollon pointing out that "...the traditional view of plagiarism is ideological: it unjustifiably elevates a Western concept to the status of norm (Pennycook, 1994, 1996; Scollon, 1995) and privileges a 'concept of the person established within the European Enlightenment' (Scollon, 1995)". Currie also suggests that college educators should be "aware of the different cultural attitudes toward textual ownership and textual borrowing" in order to deal with cases of plagiarism "from a perspective of inter-cultural understanding" (Currie, 1998). There is a mainstream opinion that Chinese students have a weaker consciousness about this, and thus are more likely to plagiarize during the English writing process.

The focus of my study is on students' attitude toward plagiarism in Chinese universities. The purpose of my study is to find out whether Chinese college students have the notion of authorship and how they define "plagiarism", and to what extent that they know the rules of text borrowing in real writing practices. The study is being conducted in phases. Currently I am collecting Chinese college students' writing samples in order to reveal the writing habits of my target students and analyze to what extent they understand and are able to apply the rules of text borrowing. Overseas research becomes extremely important at this point since these data can only be collected in China.

Financially supported by the Student Overseas Research Program, I was given the chance of conducting my research at the China University of Petroleum (Beijing) and the Shenyang University of Technology. I was able to collect 105 writing samples from these two universities. These writing samples will provide valuable data for my future study.

### 2. The Chinese context

Since how instructors teach English writing rules and techniques will have a big influence on their students' writing habits, I firstly had talks respectively with the three instructors who taught English classes at the two universities mentioned in Section 1. I also audited their English writing classes before collecting data. My purpose of doing this was to uncover typical teaching styles in the Chinese context. As Pennycook emphasizes in his well-known research on the issue of Chinese students' plagiarism practices, the aim is not to construct an "exotic Other" but to explore "ways of understanding learning in a Chinese context" (Pennycook, 1996).

By interviewing the three instructors and auditing their classes, a summary can be made as follows:

#### 2.1 Current situation of English teaching in Chinese universities

Except for students who major in other languages such as Japanese, basically English is a

required course for all college students.

For English majors, there is a variety of relevant peripheral classes (for example, History of American Literature, English Poetry, and Western Civilization) to choose besides compulsory courses. Compulsory courses are usually those relating to the four basic English skills, like Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking, Comprehensive English, Advanced English, and so on. For third and fourth-year students, more extended courses such as Translation, Linguistics are offered. The course schedule is usually fixed. For instance, Translation course is only offered in the third year (courses and time schedules vary from university to university though the system is true of most universities in China). Students cannot choose when to take them, and students of different years cannot take the same optional course together.

For students of other majors, English course (usually called "College English") is compulsory in the first and second years. After that, students can also take some elective English courses that are offered especially for non-English majors. Usually College English is offered twice a week in most universities, and other elective courses once a week. The four basic English skills, say, Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking are woven into the same College English course, rather than being taught separately.

## **2.2 Textbooks**

Unlike in Japan or many Western countries, textbooks and teaching materials of compulsory English courses cannot be decided by instructors in Chinese universities. In most cases, textbooks are designated by the university and will be used continuously for a period. However, instructors are allowed to introduce some extra teaching materials into their classes provided the teaching of the textbook contents will not be influenced. Instructors of English majors have more freedom in using other teaching materials. On the other hand, instructors are usually allowed to choose their preferred textbooks and/or teaching materials for elective peripheral courses. Nowadays many textbooks have CDs attached.

## **2.3 Writing classes**

### **2.3.1 Non-English majors**

As mentioned in (1), for non-English majors--the majority of college students--the four basic English skills of Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking are usually contained in one textbook. There is no separate English Writing course. A typical textbook structure is as follows:

Lesson 1: United States of Play: The Entertainment Economy  
Text  
Exercises  
Key  
Translation of the Text<sup>1</sup>

Writing is usually dealt with in the Exercises section. Rather than being taught systematically, writing skills are learned by reading, studying and imitating the model text. Then in the Exercises, students are asked to write a composition concerning some relevant topics. The unit design varies from textbook to textbook. However, the basic frames are very similar. For example,

Unit 1  
Part One Vocabulary and Structure  
Part Two Translation  
Part Three Reading Comprehension  
Part Four Writing<sup>2</sup>

Although the sections of every unit are different from the first example, there are no significant differences in that students also need to learn vocabulary (which will appear in the model text), reading skills, and then writing skills by studying and imitating the text.

Some universities use two textbooks in the same College English course. One concentrates on the skills of reading and writing, and the other on listening and speaking. There are also other kinds of textbooks and corresponding curriculum designs. However, for non-English majors, writing is usually

not a separate course in most universities. What instructors can do with writing in a very limited time is only to teach some basic writing skills. Academic Writing is not available.

### 2.3.2 English majors

Throughout the four years, English major students are required to take Basic English Writing or Advanced English Writing classes (the course titles can vary in different universities) according to their academic years. Writing classes are offered twice a week. The classes are more textbook-centered in the first two years, while in the last two years instructors have much more freedom in introducing other complementary materials and various kinds of training methods. The three instructors I interviewed summarized most of the major teaching styles used not only in their own classes, but also in other universities in China:

- Teaching skills of different types of English writing (for example, narration, description, exposition, and argumentation) by asking students to read, analyze and imitate model texts.
- Teaching writing skills for practical use (for example, resume, invitation letter, application letter and so on).
- Analyzing students' writing (usually very good ones and those containing typical problems and structure errors).
- Teaching students how to write drafts and make self-correction.
- Peer reading. This is a method that was introduced not very long ago. Students are asked to read, correct, and give advice on each other's drafts.
- Asking students to write journals and make portfolios. According to my three interviewees, writing journals is not new at all but applying portfolios to teaching and assessing English writing is quite new in Chinese universities.
- Teaching how to write a literature review. This is for advanced learners only.
- Academic writing. Recently there are also some universities that offer an Academic Writing course to undergraduate students once a week. But it is usually included in the Advanced English Writing course in most universities. This means the section of Academic Writing can only be taught in one to two weeks every semester. According to my interviewees, when they teach academic writing skills, more emphasis is put on thesis, theme and structure. References or Bibliography are introduced as a necessary part of the thesis structure. However, citation/quotation rules, how to borrow from other texts, and how to credit sources correctly are seldom taught.

## 2.4 Language Proficiency Tests in China

The College English Test (abbreviated as CET) is a language proficiency test system for Chinese college students. It is similar to the EIKEN Test in Practical English Proficiency in Japan. However, CET is only available and has special meanings to college students in China. For non-English majors, there are two kinds of CET tests--CET-4 and CET-6. CET-6 is of a higher difficulty level and optional, while CET-4 is in effect compulsory in that students cannot obtain their Bachelor's degree without passing the test first. In addition, most companies will also require the CET-4 certificate when recruiting college graduates. If students can pass the CET-6, they are considered to have more chances in job-hunting. As for English majors, there is a similar system called the Test for English Majors (TEM). And similarly, TEM-4 is necessary for obtaining the Bachelor's degree.

The CET-4 and TEM-4 scores, then, become extremely important for all the college students in China. Moreover, students' average CET-4 test scores also have an influence on the evaluation of the instructors. Thus, this system also brings with it some negative influence on the English teaching and learning process. I will only examine the writing part below.

On the CET-4 test, writing is the last part and contributes 15% of the total score. Students have thirty minutes to write a composition on an assigned topic. Word count is limited to around 120 words. In most cases students will be required to comment on the given topics or to write a practical composition such as an announcement or a campaign speech. On the TEM-4 test for English majors, the writing part includes an argumentation of 200 words and a short practical piece (for example, an invitation card) of 50-60 words. The argumentation constitutes 20% of the total score, and the short writing 5%. Time limit is 45 minutes.

As the CET-4 or the TEM-4 test score is a requirement for graduation, it is easy to imagine that

the instructors concentrate on the skills of how to deal with the test more than on writing itself. Non-English major students are especially influenced by this system. They are encouraged to read and imitate sample compositions, practice again and again writing 120 words in thirty minutes, and memorize some fixed writing structures. For English majors, on the other hand, things are better since after passing the TEM-4 test (usually in the second year), there is still time for them to learn English writing for their own sake.

When we talk about Chinese students' attitudes and writing habits, and the process of teaching and learning English writing in Chinese universities, its unique features as summarized above should also be taken into consideration.

### 3. The significance of my overseas study

By interviewing the three instructors who teach English at Chinese universities and observing their classes, I was able to become acquainted with the Chinese context of teaching and learning English writing. For most undergraduate students, there is a high possibility that they have not received any academic training in writing English. Criticizing them for improper citation might be unfair if writing rules were not taught clearly beforehand. Even if they know that plagiarism is bad, they may have no idea to what extent using sources can become plagiarism. This may have important implications for teaching English writing in intercultural contexts.

This overseas study also gave me a valuable chance to collect some actual compositions of Chinese college students. Through this, I have obtained a basic knowledge of the current situation and some detailed cases of plagiarism in English writing classes in China.

As mentioned in Section 1, the main topic of my doctoral project is about Chinese students' plagiarizing practices in university contexts. In the last three years, I have conducted a survey in order to investigate whether there are so-called "cultural differences" that are big enough to contribute to the frequent occurrences of Chinese students' plagiarizing practices in English writing classes. A questionnaire consisting of ten multiple-choice and free answer questions was used to research Chinese students' experiences of, attitudes toward, and knowledge of plagiarism. More than 500 responses were collected. This overseas study serves as a link between my past effort and further research on the same topic. It grants a positive prospect to show some down-to-earth cases of plagiarism in Chinese universities and the possibility of revealing some of the pedagogical origins of plagiarism. The interviews, class observations, and the writing samples I collected will no doubt be very meaningful in that these data can answer the question of whether there any deviations between the students' beliefs and the their actual performance and why. My primary aim in the coming academic year is to finish analyzing the writing samples and organize them into my dissertation. The data will be summarized and analyzed in a statistical way in order to obtain scientific and significant results. In summary, this overseas study helped me greatly in advancing my doctoral research.

### Notes

1. Xie, Y. (2009). *College English, Vol.4*. University of International Business and Economics Press. This series of English textbooks are used in many Chinese universities.
2. Zheng, S. (2008). *New Horizon College English, Vol 3*. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. A widely used series of English textbooks for non-English major students.

### References

- Currie, P. (1998). Out of Trouble: Apparent Plagiarism and Academic Survival. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 7 (1), 1-18.
- Pennycook, A. (1996). Borrowing Other's Words: Text, Ownership, Memory, and Plagiarism. *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol 30. No. 2, 201-230

### 指導教員によるコメント

This report describes the author's recent overseas study trip to China to collect data towards her doctoral dissertation. Her area of research is Chinese university students' plagiarism in their EFL (English as a Foreign Language) compositions. This has become a compelling topic in recent years, as there have been numerous reported cases of plagiarism by Chinese students. Although, as Yao notes, the very concept of plagiarism has been challenged by poststructuralist researchers such as Pennycook as a "Western" construct, it is still considered ethically unacceptable in most academic contexts. Several years ago, ETS even ceased allowing students in China to take the computer adaptive TOEFL test. Yao's research, therefore, promises to shed light on a very important topic.

After describing the purpose of her study, Yao's report then gives an account of the current state of English education at Chinese universities. This provides edifying background information necessary for the understanding of the potential causes of Chinese plagiarism practices. We learn of the constraints imposed on English instructors by the university curriculum, and also of the flexibility given instructors within those constraints. We also learn that even for English majors, who receive a much more thorough course of writing instruction than non-English majors, the skills of citation and quotation, and crediting sources, are not taught. One of the techniques of writing instruction in China also involves having students imitate models of good writing. The above factors all could potentially contribute to inadvertent plagiarism.

Yao's overseas trip also gave her the opportunity to collect the data necessary to complete her dissertation. Based on this data, she is now in a position to conduct her analysis on Chinese students' attitudes towards plagiarism, which should provide deep insights into the nature of this phenomenon, and hopefully suggest ways of dealing with it. China sends large numbers of students to study overseas, and this number is likely to increase in the future. Studies such as this one are necessary towards both intercultural understanding and pedagogical improvements in English writing instruction.

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