



# Plagiarism in Second Language Academic Writing: Causes and Solutions

Ge Xu

Department of Teaching and Education, Gters Education School, Wuhan, 430000, China

100229@yzpc.edu.cn

**Abstract.** This paper first reviews research into the role of culture and authorial identity as causes of plagiarism in L2 writings. Then, the paper surveys solutions for L2 writing plagiarism, including pedagogical assistance and transitional writing methods (i.e., patchwriting and paraphrasing). This research explores how unintentional factors--culture and authorial identity-- inadvertently lead to improper textual borrowings in L2 writers and assist in guiding students away from plagiarism via specific practical strategies. After reviewing previous papers, the main findings are 1) the role of culture may not influence L2 writers as much as many previous researchers believed; 2) the authorial identity determines the manners that L2 writers utilize when writing from academic materials; 3) pedagogical intervention of L2 writing plagiarism and transitional writing methods benefit L2 writers, especially novices. This paper has established the connection between textual plagiarism and authorial identity, encouraging L2 writers to overcome the fear of being accused of plagiarism and develop their voices in their works. In addition, the paper provides practical approaches for writing teachers and students to enhance their writing skills, converting them from novice to experienced writers.

**Keywords:** Plagiarism, Culture, Authorial Identity, Patchwriting, Paraphrasing

## 1 Introduction

For almost three decades, plagiarism has been a recurrent theme in academic writing in the West (e.g., Matalene) [1]. The status of L2 writers provided fresh angles to this problem. Since L2 writers have been accused of improper textual borrowings more often than L1 authors, researchers have explored if cultural differences constitute the underlying cause [2]. In light of the different degrees of textual plagiarism among L2 authors, the developmental phases of the writer have been studied as a factor contributing to or not contributing to plagiarism [3].

Although the previous explanations offer scholars and writing teachers insight into the improper textual borrowings of L2 writers, it has not simplified the writers' life [3]. Increasing numbers of studies with a practical emphasis have emerged to establish which writing approaches may assist L2 or novice writers and writing instructors [4-5].

This study examines the phenomenon of plagiarism in L2 writing in terms of its origins and solutions.

## 2 Causes of L2 Academic Writing Plagiarism

Two factors contribute to L2 academic writing plagiarism: the influence of cultural contexts and the establishment of authorial identity [6].

### 2.1 Culture

In Anglo-American academics, plagiarism is typically linked with immoral behaviors ranging from buying papers to inadequate paraphrasing [2]. Due to the cultural chasm between English-speaking nations and others, particularly eastern-cultured countries, there is little consensus in the academic community about this stance [7-8]. In the test-oriented education systems of several eastern nations (e.g., China and Korea), the learning strategy of extracting useful phrases for later use in writing projects have been encouraged, whereas, in the most popular western study-abroad destinations for eastern students (e.g., the United States and the United Kingdom), this strategy is considered literary theft. Numerous research thus seeks empirical evidence to support the concept that cultural variations might explain textual plagiarism in L2 writing.

Matalene argued that western educators should develop an awareness that logic that differs from western rhetoric is not necessarily illogical. She corroborated this conclusion with writing methods she observed during her teaching time in China, one of which was perceived as imitation by her Chinese students but as plagiarism by her [1]. St John reported a similar observation that in an L2 writing seminar, participants adopted a "jigsaw" approach, in which popular expressions have been lifted and combined, along with a scarcity of the author's ideas, to create a new piece of writing [9]. For these writers, the absence of authorship awareness contributed to their unintentional plagiarism [10-11].

However, a concept other than cultural differences emerged from the limitations of the study conducted by Rinnert and Kobayashi [12]. When comparing American and Japanese university students' views against plagiarism via questionnaires, two researchers discovered that, compared to their American counterparts, Japanese students were more tolerant of the practice when ameliorating them would conflict with other priorities. However, they also observed that American students received more formal writing training than Japanese students due to the educational environment and not a cultural factor.

In addition, the Japanese term for "plagiarism" carries fewer negative connotations than its English equivalent, which may account for the aforementioned comparatively high tolerance. Resemble observations have been reported by Wheeler that rather than tolerating copying from public sources, the study subjects, 72 Japanese undergraduates unequivocally condemned plagiarism [13]. However, owing to a lack of formal writing training, when students were asked to give remedies to plagiarism, the methods they offered still entail some degree of copying. A growing number of researchers, thus,

shifted toward investigating the impact of author identity on improper literary appropriation.

## 2.2 Authorial Identity

Hull and Rose argued that to understand unintentionally inappropriate textual borrowings, researchers need to examine the identities of authors, which have been socially and educationally constructed [14]. The conceptual has also been termed as autobiographical self by Ivanic, which pertains to the writers' earlier life experiences and influence on their current writing practices [15].

Several empirical studies have examined the effect of author identification on unauthorized literary appropriation. Abasi et al. performed naturalistic multiple case research at a large Canadian university's writing center using text-based interviews to determine how authorial identities of ESL (English as a Second Language) students explained textual borrowings in their compositions [16]. The findings revealed that the more experienced writers exhibited a substantial awareness of authorial identities, as evidenced by their reliance on extensive citation and references to demonstrate that they had researched their sources, their concern for their professors' interests and particular research areas by incorporating the views and perspectives of authors that they believed were aligned with their professors, and their reluctance to over-reference due to a desire to communicate.

In contrast, the less experienced participants provided scant evidence that the authorial consciousness affected their textual practices, as evidenced by labeling the published sources as indisputable knowledge or truth rather than persuasive discourses against which an argument could be proposed. The cognition forestalled the interactions between the inexperienced writers and published sources, prevented writers from generating their ideas, and eventually undermined their authority regarding having anything to say. The basis underlying the cognition was that inexperienced writers could not construct an argument and analyze it critically, particularly L2 authors whose prior writing instruction centered on memorization rather than analysis. Professional academic writing distinguishes itself by modifying rather than modeling knowledge [17]. Although Abasi's investigation was persuasive, we cannot dismiss its limitations. Given that the five participants came from different cultural contexts, it is impossible to ignore the impact of cultural variations on their perception of improper textual borrowings. Bikowski and Gui addressed this issue in a comparative study with a more nuanced approach. Participants of the study are 172 native-born Chinese L1 undergraduates, 100 of them studying in China and others studying in the United States, which means there is no significant cultural divide between participants [18]. Another division bridged is the various connotations imparted from different languages, even when participants described the same phenomenon. Since participants in the study employed their L1 words to characterize source use practices shown in videos, researchers could attach minimal weight to factors provided by the connotations of various languages. The findings showed that participants studying in the United States were more likely than those looking in China to characterize stigmatized behaviors in Chinese as either plagiarized or improper.

Also, participants studying in China used a Chinese term called *yinyong* 引用 (citation/quote/extract) more frequently than did counterparts studying in the US to describe various source use situations. Furthermore, participants in the United States tended to identify unattributed copying and copying with a citation or quotation marks as plagiarism. However, their Chinese counterparts tended to use neutral phrases like copy-paste. Those findings suggested that due to the twin influences of western culture and education, such as writing courses, students' perceptions of plagiarism shifted closer to the Western perspective as they were more exposed to writing instruction according to the standards of American colleges. In other words, culture and educational settings play a role in students' understanding of source usage practices. Still, individual experiences and academic writing growth are equally crucial to their comprehension.

### 3 Solutions to L2 Academic Writing Plagiarism

As Wette noted, inexperienced writers would have more practical value in focusing on approaches or solutions to avoid copying [19]. Related proposals can be categorized into two groups: 1). direct pedagogical interaction; 2). transitional writing methods for beginning to advanced writers.

#### 3.1 Pedagogical Intervention of L2 Plagiarism

Many English-speaking colleges assume that students may learn how to prevent plagiarism via abstract regulations or rules about what constitutes plagiarism [19]. Abasi and Graves argue that knowing plagiarism is morally and institutionally unacceptable, but not how to prevent or resolve this problem effectively has not made life easier, especially for L2 writers, and has increased students' anxieties about accidentally plagiarizing [20]. Bloch proposed several explicit techniques of teaching about plagiarism, including the debate of academic articles on plagiarism, the creation and copyrighting of a digital tale, and a ten-week academic writing course with plagiarism as the central focus [21]. These activities would be more effective if instructors selected course materials based on the academic fields of their students.

Wette and Ellery conducted empirical research on the effectiveness of the activities mentioned above [19,22]. In Wette's study, 72 undergraduates participated in an eight-hour training on utilizing content from publications without being accused of plagiarism; participants learned practical tasks for paraphrasing, quoting, and citing. Researchers employed a pre-test and a post-test to evaluate the training's efficacy on students' declarative and procedural knowledge [19]. Although occasional difficulties such as failing to distinguish perspectives and facts, omitting to cite secondary sources, and incomplete paraphrases have resurfaced, improper textual borrowings have reduced significantly [19]. Similarly, in Ellery's research, several first-year students from a South African university attended tutorials where they learned how to combat plagiarism. Findings of the study revealed that students benefit from the pedagogical intervention [22].

Interestingly, two groups of aforementioned studies found that through discussion during training or tutorials, students' awareness of paraphrasing, quotation, and summarizing development has been significantly boosted. A similar conclusion has been reached by Angéilil-Carter, who argued that in addition to teaching students how to cite, the subject of why authors note, which is intimately related to students' awareness of future academic writing, should be paid greater attention to [23]. When students understand the rationale for quotes or references, they begin to discern voices within literary works, ultimately developing their voices utilizing such sources. The underlying premise of the conclusion is that beginning writers may be trained to interact with source materials to establish their voices.

### 3.2 Transitional Writing Methods

**Patchwriting.** Howard suggested that beginning writers need assistance when learning to write, prompting them to rely significantly on the language of their sources [24]. That tight dependence on sources in the development of students' academic writing has been termed patchwriting, which means copying a source text and removing certain words, modifying grammatical structures, or inserting one-for-one synonym substitutions. Pecorari and Petrić emphasized that patchwriting indicated the novice writers' attempts to employ the target discourse rather than intentions of copying as a developmental strategy. With the instructions of educators, beginning writers were supposed to transcend the transitional stage and develop their authorial voices [6].

Pecorari conducted an empirical study to see if patchwriting occurred in the works of inexperienced writers and whether it was distinct from deliberate plagiarism [4]. In the study, researchers analyzed 17 L2 graduates' writings, who could be termed novice writers, comparing the original and student-composed sources. Interviews with students and their supervisors revealed no evidence of the intention of plagiarism. Still, the students writing indeed involved a certain degree of textual appropriation. The study provided empirical verification of the existence of patchwriting in the context of writers' development. Although researchers meticulously examined and contrasted the students' sources with the original sources, writing samples from 17 participants from various academic subjects rarely represent the common issues encountered by starting L2 writers.

A similar conclusion was reached by Li and Casanave, who ran a case study of two first-year students at a Hong Kong university who completed an identical writing assignment requiring the usage of sources, which had been thoroughly compared and scored with the help of Turnitin (i.e., a plagiarism detection tool) [25]. The findings revealed that both students' writings had obvious indications of patchwriting, although their scores varied wildly. Compared to Pecorari's study, Li and Casanave assigned identical writing tasks to participants, enhancing the reliability of the findings. Also, participants' varied scores suggested the necessity of some pedagogical activities in university writing.

Pecorari's and Li & Casanave's studies, as mentioned earlier, echoed Howard's spirit that patchwriting was intended to be a transitional writing approach for L2 authors

since learning to write from sources takes years of practice without bearing the negative connotation of plagiarism [26].

**Paraphrasing.** Yamada evaluated ten North American college websites on plagiarism, recommending paraphrasing as a technique for enhancing writing skills and preventing plagiarism for inexperienced authors [5]. Novice writers rely on deletion tactics (i.e., deleting superfluous) in academic writing, which exhibits minimal authorial identity. In contrast, experienced writers utilize inferential procedures to link textual material to a new framework, which expresses the writer's original ideas and perspectives [27].

Yamada introduced two inferential processes: deductive inference and analogical inference [5]. The former enables novice writers to demonstrate a degree of originality without explicitly quoting textual material but by blending assumptions derived from the sources with textual components. Using similarity mapping of one concept onto another, the latter inference allows beginners to write more like experts than other novices. The study emphasized the significance of teaching inferential thinking processes to L2 writers, as the development of speculative thought patterns would assist them in meeting the standards and objectives of Anglo-American collegiate writing.

Marr conducted an empirical study to verify the positive impact of a paraphrasing pedagogy on novice L2 writers [27]. Using Halliday's concept of Grammatical Metaphor, the depiction of meaning through altering grammatical forms, for example, "due to X" can be changed into "as a result of X", researchers showed that rather than remaining an elusive one, the process of paraphrasing could be divided into straightforward steps for training purposes with the use of specific functional languages, exhorting EAP teaching materials to show the essential meaning components and the specific grammatical alterations that occur throughout the process of paraphrasing [27–28].

Furthermore, Liu and Lin designed a rating scale for paraphrasing [29]. Applying the rating scale to evaluate the paraphrase tasks of 143 participants and analyzing the ratings based on generalizability and multifaceted Rash techniques confirmed the validity of the rating scale. The findings demonstrated that the rating scale was relevant for evaluating paraphrase, making it easier for writing teachers to assess the work of inexperienced L2 writers.

## 4 Conclusion

Although plagiarism in L2 writing has often been discussed under the perspective of cultural hiatus between L1 and L2 writers, this study mainly reviewed the limitations of this approach. The casual relationship between the authorial identity and unintentional improper textual borrowings in L2 writing means incompetence in composing original articles is a provisional phase in L2 writers and can be transcended with the pedagogical intervention and transitional and non-punished writing methods (e.g., patchwriting and paraphrasing). The impact of plagiarism policies of western universities on L2 writers and the influence of electronic media has not been discussed. L2 students' and EAP practitioners' attitudes toward transitional writing methods are given little attention. Further research may consider these aspects.

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