

Does educational integrity mean teaching students NOT to ‘use their own words’?

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Abstract

In the face of increasing evidence of plagiarism in higher education the maintenance of educational integrity relies on the capacity of universities to strengthen their systems for consistent detection of and penalties for deliberate plagiarism, cheating and other fraudulent practices. However, there is a danger that the resolve to do so may be weakened if these systems become overloaded by the detection of a high incidence of unintentional plagiarism. The focus of this paper is on international students for whom English is an additional language (EAL) and whose plagiarism is most easily recognised, as many set out on their degree courses with no experience in a Western academic environment, an unsteady command of English grammar and a relatively limited range of vocabulary. The advice to ‘use their own words’ in order to avoid accidental plagiarism may be more confusing than helpful for them. This paper proposes that far from trapping students in their existing repertoire of words, the teaching, assessment and feedback advice provided within university courses should explicitly support their students’ development of the formal language that is valued in academic writing. It is suggested that the basis for doing so is an understanding of the essential differences between informal, spoken language and the more formal style required in written assignments. An educational approach that successfully removes innocent plagiarists from the disciplinary system could become a means for assuring a university’s educational integrity.

Keywords: plagiarism, ‘own words’, spoken and written language, re-usable language, international students, English as an Additional Language (EAL)

Introduction

The characteristics of personal integrity, with a specific focus in the tertiary sector as ‘academic integrity’, are listed on the website of the U.S. based Center for Academic Integrity as comprising ‘honesty, trust, respect, fairness and responsibility’ (CAI, 2005). The principles of academic integrity appear to be well understood and widely proclaimed by academic institutions and in the literature. Procedures for ‘deterring, detecting and dealing with plagiarism’ (JISC, 2000) are spelt out in much detail; in general they call for provision of clear information, suitable warnings and fair sanctions (CAI; Carroll, 2002; Park, 2004; The University of Newcastle, 2005). However, the learning issues for students appear to be less well explained, and details on effective approaches for dealing with them, beyond providing basic ‘information on’ and ‘practice in using’ correct referencing conventions, or recommending ‘remedial teaching’ (Park, p. 301) are rare in university plagiarism statements and in the literature on the topic.

Academic integrity

Many universities spell out the attributes that their graduates are intended to have acquired as part of their studies. Among these there are several that are of particular significance in the support and maintenance of academic integrity: a commitment to social and ethical values, and skills in critical analysis, evidence-based argument, and effective communication. The

idea of providing well referenced evidence to support their opinions will be new to many students in the increasingly diverse cultural populations of Australasian universities, and the question of ethics does not appear to be foremost in students' minds as they come to terms with the demands of their assessments.

There is significant evidence in the literature that cheating is rife in universities and colleges in the English-speaking world. Large percentages have self-confessed to cheating at some time (CAI 2005; Carroll, 2002; Park 2003). Students who deliberately cheat or engage in fraudulent behaviour are characterised as 'threatening the values and beliefs that underpin academic work, angering and discouraging other students who do not use such tactics' (JISC Plagiarism Advisory Service, 2005). But while students who gamble on and succeed in getting away with cheating may gain short-term advantages, they actually deprive themselves of learning opportunities. Research has been done (Sims 1993, cited in Park 2004, p. 474) which showed that "students who cheat often persist in cheating throughout their subsequent career". There clearly are good reasons for supporting a consistent system of preventing and uncovering deliberate plagiarism and other forms of cheating or fraudulent behaviour.

English as an Additional Language (EAL)

However, there is a danger that the resolve to do so may be weakened if these systems become overloaded by a high incidence of unintentional plagiarism. Students, both native and non-native speakers of English, who are new to the academic environment and the specific language demands placed on them in their various disciplines cannot be expected from the outset to have command of the academic language in which to present an argument or provide evidence from the literature in support of their own views. In attempting to adapt to the academic style of their readings, they readily fall into the trap of taking the easy way by cutting and pasting from their sources, resulting in an uneven style that alerts the assessor to the presence of copied material. However, while this is an issue that to some extent affects most students in transition, the groups whose plagiarism is most easily recognised are international students and others for whom English is an additional language (EAL). The University of Waikato, for example, found "there is a disproportionate number of international students who are facing disciplinary proceedings for plagiarism", citing the fact that a total of 75% of all plagiarism complaints and 79% of all misconduct findings at that university were against Asian students (ACODE 2005). A discussion of possible reasons for this statistic lists a number of factors to be considered including:

whether students may feel that the standard of their English is inferior to that of the author of the material they are using which means they avoid paraphrasing and prefer to copy (but either deliberately or through incompetence get the referencing wrong and thus mislead the marker as to the nature of the material being marked)

and

whether the English language capacity of some international students (and perhaps some domestic students too) is too modest for tertiary study which leads to the heavy use of others' material and unacceptable attempts to disguise this lack of their own input. (ACODE, 2005; from section labelled 'Good ideas')

Another factor that is frequently mentioned in the literature and on university websites is that "as well as coping with language difficulties, these students often have different attitudes towards academic plagiarism", and that such cultural differences "must be taken into account when dealing appropriately with plagiarism by students from different cultural backgrounds, grounded in different notions of respect for authority and different traditions of academic writing" (Park, 2003, p.473). While the sentiment of dealing fairly with visitors to our universities is laudable, in some ways it misses the point. Students who come to an English speaking university generally do so, not only to learn the content of our courses, but also to become linguistically competent and to graduate from their programs, capable of

communicating effectively and performing globally in an English-background academic environment.

Language development

A teaching and assessment approach that labels mistakes as ‘offences’ that in some cases may be ‘forgiven’ or treated with ‘tolerance’ will not help students achieve their language learning goals. A further consequence of branding a student as an ‘offender’ for failing to use academic conventions is to take the innocence out of a learning process that in fact relies on, and supports students in taking risks and learning from making mistakes. Where there is no clear demarcation between mistakes and misconduct, students are left in a vulnerable position. The University of Waikato Science website which provides advice on referencing, together with the explanation that when a plagiarism incident is discovered “teachers will decide whether to treat it as a mistake or as misconduct” is a case in point. Its advice to students is:

You are expected to learn quickly how to acknowledge correctly by using the appropriate style of referencing, and you will be told all about this in your first classes and in handouts you will receive, so don't expect your teachers to tolerate mistakes for very long! (The University of Waikato, 2005)

The same principle underlies the plagiarism policies and advisory guidelines on many of the websites accessed. Although in this case it is expressed in a chatty and apparently friendly style, it must be said that receiving such clearly stated information, together with the promise of being ‘told’ more in class, will probably do little to calm the fears of students who are new to the academic culture and are still struggling with somewhat basic English. The expectation that international students not only need to learn the required skills on their own, but to learn them quickly, places an additional burden on their already heavy learning load, operating as they are in a second, third or later language, and knowing that if their learning does not occur quickly, they stand to lose face by being indicted for lack of integrity.

Students’ own words

One of the most common suggestions given to students to help them avoid plagiarism is to ‘use their own words’. Although well-intended, this advice may not necessarily be perceived by students in the same way that it is probably meant, nor is it likely to produce the desired result of academically literate writing. Added to this is the problem that what constitutes a student’s ‘own words’ is highly ambiguous and does not adequately express the meaning that is intended by the use of the expression. In this paper I draw on the literature of functional linguistics (Eggins, 1994; Halliday, 1985, 1994; Martin, 1992; Ventola, 1996) and in particular on genre theory (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993; Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Halliday & Martin, 1993; Swales, 1990; The New London Group, 2000), and build on my previously argued position (McGowan, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c) to suggest that the student texts that are valued by assessors are not the ones that are written in a student’s own words, but rather those that make proper use of ‘borrowed’ words (Pennycook, 1996).

I propose that, far from trapping students in their existing repertoire of words, the teaching, assessment and feedback advice provided within university courses should explicitly support the extension of their existing word power to encompass the formal language that is valued in academic writing. The suggestion is that when universities achieve a good balance between punitive and educational means to deter deliberate deception on the one hand, and minimise the occurrence of inadvertent plagiarism on the other, this will be a true manifestation of the *university’s educational integrity*.

What do academics really mean it when they say ‘use your own words’?

The idea of expressing something in one’s own words is taken to its logical conclusion in a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon: the task is to “Explain Newton’s First law of Motion in your own words.” The cartoon character smiles and then writes: “Yakka Foob Mog. Grug Pubbawup...” and so on, and adds with a grin: “I love loopholes”.

Taken literally, the notion of having words of ‘our own’ is of course an absurdity. Words are a social construct and are shared by the cultural community that devised them (Halliday & Hasan, 1985). Writers do not ‘own’ the words themselves, but rather the particular *choice* of words and word sequences, and more specifically, how these words are combined to express the writer’s own ideas. Even this is not as clear-cut as it may seem. What academics expect their students to develop is a critical stance towards the writings of others. Students need to know that the essential outcomes of a university education are to develop an enquiry-based approach towards learning (Boyer Commission, 1998; McGowan, 2005a) and to become competent in communicating a point of view, supported by, or in contradiction to the published views of others.

Some good advice to students on the purpose and expectations of academic writing was found on University and College websites in the UK, North America and Australasia, many of which also provide links to each other. A library guide at the University of Bath (UK) offers students the following:

When you are writing a piece of academic work, you will need to refer from within your text to material written by other researchers. These references should allow anyone reading your work to identify and find the material to which you have referred. (The University of Bath, 2005)

Similarly, in Australia the University of Melbourne has an excellent section of advice to international students that explains the research based nature of university learning and writing:

...during your time at university in Australia you will be asked not just to become familiar with the ideas of scholars and experts but to examine these ideas closely and to decide how much or how little you agree with them. You will learn to form opinions about ideas and to communicate these opinions verbally and in writing. These opinions must be based on evidence and one common source of evidence is the ideas of others. (The University of Melbourne, 2002)

While such explanations for the reasons for the academic requirements are a vital foundation for students’ understanding, the next important step is to learn just how they can use their language for effectively expressing their own ideas and using their sources as evidence. The advice by Sussex University on using their own words may be comforting to students, but in the long run it is probably misleading:

Don’t fall into the trap of thinking another author can “say it better” than you: your tutors are interested in your ideas and opinions, and are not expecting a perfectly polished writing style. Your writing is good enough. (Sussex University, 2005)

This advice may well be quite appropriate in the particular context of the Science faculty at that university. But the fact is that frequently the students’ writing really is not ‘good enough’, and students who are non-native speakers of English can be acutely aware of this. Each discipline has a language that is valued academically – and many international students sense that unless they can use accepted forms of expression, they remain at a disadvantage.

Sources for students' own words

If staff demand that students draw on their own words, questions must be asked, firstly about the extent of students' existing language resources, and secondly, what the language sources are that learners can access to increase their repertoire.

International students' initial stock of vocabulary and grammar may still draw heavily on that gained in their previous English classes, often taught from textbooks and in their home language environment. The English language proficiency required for university entrance varies considerably across Australasian universities and also in many cases from one faculty to another. The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is used as the major, but by no means only system for setting English entry levels for universities within the Asia-Pacific region. The required IELTS entry score for many courses lies between 6 and 7. The descriptors for these 'band scores', taken from the IELTS Handbook (2005) are as follows:

BAND 6: Competent user. Has generally effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings. Can use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in familiar situations.

BAND 7: Good user. Has operational command of the language, though with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings in some situations. Generally handles complex language well and understands detailed reasoning.

As there is no specific descriptor for a score of 6.5, nor of the individual components of speaking, listening, reading and writing that make up these scores, it needs to be borne in mind that within these band scores the reality is of a large variety of individual capabilities.

The IELTS Handbook (2005) provides a table of interpretations of the scores and advises that "further English study is needed" for students at IELTS Band 6 entering academic study, and while at 6.5 "more English study is needed (for) linguistically demanding courses". The Handbook concedes that for linguistically less demanding courses (and it lists as examples "Agriculture, Pure Mathematics, Technology, Computer-based work and Telecommunications") a band score of 6.5 is "probably acceptable". As Ingram (2005) points out, a language proficiency test is no more than this – a test of English language proficiency – and the usefulness of the test depends on a number of factors including recognition that "if students are accepted at 6.5 or 6 they should be offered on-going English language support"; he adds that "in very few instances is any systematic English language support offered to students enrolled in degree programs" (Ingram, 2005).

In the absence of systematic programs for their concurrent English language development, international students must generally rely on their own initiative. The usual fallback position is that students who are identified as having 'problems', or who recognise their own needs, may access individual and group support in university Learning Centres. However, their more immediate sources for language learning are their lectures and tutorials for oral language, and their prescribed or recommended course readings for written language. Of these, the spoken language often predominates, while the development of students' written language may lag behind. Inadequate attempts to raise their writing standards on their own by the "heavy use of others' materials" puts these students at a double disadvantage, as it then also becomes an issue of plagiarism.

Overcoming that disadvantage by mastering appropriate forms of the written language is a challenge for many. The following section examines what that challenge may consist of by describing some of the basic differences between formal and informal, or spoken and written language, and ways of converting one form into the other and back again.

Spoken and written language

Spoken and written language can be represented on a 'continuum' that to some extent corresponds to the move from informal to formal language, with the former being much more 'wordy' while the latter is generally more densely 'packed' (Halliday, 1985, 1994; Hammond 1990). Informal language is the 'common sense' language of conversations and consists of actions and events that can often be readily visualised. Formal language, on the other hand, often uses abstractions that 'package up' the information in a way that can obscure the events to which it refers. For example, a television or newspaper report that "the road toll for this year stands at 123" is presented as a formal expression. To unpack this into a less formal mode of everyday speech we might say, "So far this year 123 people have been killed on the roads". The first thing to notice is the length: the informal version required 12 words, the formal one only 9. Another difference is in the key words used: in the informal sentence these are 'people' and 'killed', while the formal version packs them into the abstraction of a 'road toll'. The events alluded to are easy to visualise in the spoken version which introduces people and a verb, 'killed', that tells what *happened*, while in the formal version the events have been *solidified*, as it were. The verb 'stands at' is basically empty of meaning, or suggests perhaps a table or graph, showing numbers rather than people (see also Eggins, 1994; Halliday & Martin, 1993).

Unpacking densely packed written texts

A written text that is very formal is likely to have many abstractions such as 'road toll' in the passage above. In unpacking written language to make sense of it, students need to convert abstract nouns back into something that is less tightly packed and becomes visible in everyday terms: thus 'road toll' becomes 'numbers of *deaths* on the roads'; 'deaths' becomes '*people* die (or are killed)'. In general, the more densely packed a text is with information, the more difficult it becomes to read (Ventola, 1996). To work out the meaning of a difficult, formal text, the reader must unpack the abstractions and convert them into something that can be visualised.

A short text taken from Swales, defending the use of genres in teaching EAL research students, serves as a further example:

A final way in which *potential strictures* of a *genre-based approach* can be moderated is to use simple *structural models*. The first advantage of these is that they are fallible; indeed, because of their *simplicity* they have the *propensity* to fail to map directly on the chosen texts (Swales, 2004, p. 251- *my emphasis*). [48 words]

To understand this passage a reader will not only need to have some understanding of the context (of teaching EAL students to write research reports), and the particular jargon used within it ('genre-based', 'moderated', 'structural models', 'map directly on'), but will also need to unpack the nouns (or groups called 'nominal groups') that have been italicised in this passage. These are examples of a process called 'nominalisation' by which verbs and other parts of speech are converted or combined into nominal groups (as in the first example, where people who "are killed on the roads" became the "road toll"). If the short text by Swales (above) is unpacked and presented as a spoken version, it might look like this:

We can teach students to write by reading and examining how other writers have written similar texts (or genres) when they write up their research (*genre-based approach*). It is possible to criticise this way of teaching (*potential strictures*), but the problems that are mentioned can be made less severe (can be moderated) if we look at simple examples of how the texts are structured (*structural models*). The first advantage is that they are not perfect (are fallible). In fact it is because they are so simple (*simplicity*) that they will usually (have the *propensity*) not match the chosen text exactly (fail to map directly on). [82 words]

The immediately obvious difference here is, as in the road toll example, the increased length of the unpacked version. Another is the number and types of verbs used. The formal passage has very few verbs, most of which are 'empty' or 'relational' processes (such as *is, are, have*) which do not carry any information in their own right. This contrasts with the spoken version which contains a much larger number of verbs, many of which are processes that are observable in the 'material' world (such as *teach, write, criticise, look, match*).

An important difference from the point of view of academic writing is that the second version no longer sounds like an academic text. Eggins (1994) describes a similar result in relation to an unpacked text of her own:

Significantly, the unpacked text has lost much of its 'prestigious' sound: it now seems much more ordinary (and perhaps more accessible) than the original text. (Eggins 1994 p.62)

For students the advantages of learning to pattern their written styles on the texts that are valued in academic writing are not limited to sounding 'more prestigious', although for assessment purposes this may be a strong consideration. Other advantages are the compactness that can be achieved through nominalisation as well as the capacity they give the writer for controlling the place where the emphasis should be put. Abstract nouns can be given emphasis by placing them in the theme position at the beginning of a clause, and additional information can be packed into the same sentence simply by augmenting the nominal group and adding a range of further descriptors (Eggins, 1994, p.60; see also Cope & Kalantzis, 1993; Halliday and Martin, 1993; The New London Group, 2000).

Of course, there may be many other ways of converting the written text above to a spoken one, and indeed, the interpretation provided here may not match the original intent in every detail. However, the exercise is designed to indicate something of the process that the reader undertakes in making meaning from a dense text, and to demonstrate the complexity of that task.

Re-packing information: Converting spoken to written text

It is an even more complex task for students to learn to use the reverse of this process, and write an academic text of their own that converts information and ideas from an informal to a more formal style, by using nominalisations that are appropriate and common within their field of study. International students can, however, be guided to learn how this is done. Once they have become aware of what is involved in the conversion from one style to the other and back, they can be encouraged to "consciously practise packing and unpacking of information in their texts" (Ventola 1996, p. 157).

To do so effectively, students need to build up a repertoire of their own discipline-specific nominalisations. Initially, examples of these can be derived from their readings, when students lack the breadth of experience in reading in English to be confident to construct acceptable and meaningful nominalisations of their own. They can also be encouraged to use the tool of 'genre analysis' (McGowan, 2005a) to glean from their reading *other* language items that are common and therefore 're-usable' in their own writing. Genre analysis is:

a means for empowering students to acquire the structure and language of the academic genres they need to master...[and] involves the students in actively developing an awareness of the typical structures and language patterns required in a particular discipline and for specific assignments...Students are encouraged to examine a variety of examples of the written genres they need to produce, and to identify mandatory and optional elements in both the overall structure and the language features that are typical for specific genres. In particular, they are

encouraged to build up a stock of commonly used phrases that may be re-used to good effect in their own writing. (McGowan, 2005a, pp. 290-291)

In applying these strategies and giving students encouraging feedback on their attempts to convert their writing style to the more 'prestigious' one by legitimately 'borrowing' the words of others, academic teaching staff can be instrumental in reducing the confusion that surrounds the concept of plagiarism for many international and other EAL students, thereby also minimising the incidence of plagiarism that is unintentional.

A pre-emptive strategy to avert innocent plagiarism

The two factors that are now generally cited as responsible for the perceived rise in plagiarism, the advent of the Internet, and the increasing presence of international students, may in fact become the key to reducing the incidence of plagiarism across all sectors of the Australian student population. The sheer number of students involved has drawn attention in the literature and in the media, with challenges to the institutions to be tough on cheating on the one hand and to review existing understandings and practices in tertiary teaching and assessment on the other (Hunt, 2002). By recognising that the nature of the issues faced by international students in entering an Australian University degree is a cultural and linguistic one, and importantly, as I have argued elsewhere, by treating this as a mainstream issue rather than a remedial one (McGowan 2005a, b, c), all students stand to benefit.

Advice to staff on university websites frequently includes the use of educative approaches. For example:

The principal methods that should be used to reduce plagiarism are educative and involve ensuring that students are aware of the expectations and standards associated with assessment work for a particular discipline. It is important that students see examples of accepted academic conventions for acknowledging another person's work. (The University of Adelaide, 2004)

It is sometimes suggested that students should be required to sign a declaration on their assignment cover sheets, stating that it is their own work or that all quotes from other works have been acknowledged; but in the general confusion of what is common knowledge, or common language, and what is not, it is doubtful whether this strategy would have much effect in reducing unintentional plagiarism.

A more effective approach might be to add to the cover sheets some detailed assessment criteria. These could include items such as the *variety of resources* to be cited, or the *number* of sources, or the requirement to *judge the relative merits* of the sources, or the presence of an *argument* based on *evidence*, or even (provided it has been part of the learning program) the use of *academically appropriate language* to introduce quotations, and so on (see also McGowan, 2005c). Including the relative weighting of the items listed would also indicate the specific priorities set for that particular assignment. The prominent display of assessment criteria on cover sheets would serve a threefold purpose: firstly, they would be a reminder for the lecturer and assignment markers to teach the class, and to assess the assignments, in relation to these stated priorities; secondly, it would be useful, in giving formative feedback, to have the criteria ready to hand in order to refer students back to them; thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the criteria would be of use to students during the writing of their papers, to help them focus on the expectations of the task and so avoid mindlessly downloading information that has no merit assigned to it in the criteria.

Assessors should also give due recognition to the efforts made by students to change their style from a spoken to a more condensed academic one. International students would thrive on receiving constructive feedback on their use of language, particularly where a student is struggling with the language for re-phrasing, summarising or acknowledging the work of

others. Receiving such guidance would be effective in promoting their English language development, particularly if lecturers could avoid blocking this process by a fear-engendering focus on the penalties of plagiarism.

Conclusion: Achieving educational integrity

The contentious issue, advocated and used by some academics, of according special status to international students and to treat their lapses into plagiarism more leniently until they become familiar with the customs and requirements of their Australian university, is periodically raised and attacked in the Australian media; but international students themselves do not necessarily wish to be seen as being given “favourable treatment” (President of an Overseas Students Association, personal communication, 2002).

This paper has attempted to show that what is needed is neither leniency nor remediation. What is needed is that academic teaching staff develop an understanding of the difference between spoken and written language and to explore with students examples of well written texts within their discipline. Advising students to *use their own words* is not only an imprecise way of describing what lecturers really want students to do, such as for instance, to present a well reasoned, well supported argument of their own. It also means that students are not helped towards developing the language that characterises the genres of their disciplines. International and other EAL students will sense that they are disadvantaged when ‘their own words’ appear simplistic because they are awkward transcriptions of their spoken words or culturally inappropriate translations from their first language, and in their own estimation simply ‘not good enough’ as academic English. It takes little imagination to see how, left to their own devices, they may ‘borrow’ chunks from their readings and inadvertently plagiarise these in their attempts at upgrading their language to more appropriately academic styles.

The reality is that, in borrowing language from their readings, they are already on the right track for improving the level of their academic writing. But it is at this point that careful guidance is needed. Interventions by academics should be aimed at helping students to move from spoken to written language. Once international students know how to extend their personal language resources in this way, they can become empowered to develop an argument, to draw on the arguments of other writers, to subject them to critical evaluation and express their own opinions in a language that is valued by making use of an extended range of words that *have become their own*.

The strategy outlined in this paper will need to be implemented and subjected to research. However, it is to be expected that an educational approach that successfully promotes such understandings, and actively fosters the development of communication skills in written English, will be effective in removing from the disciplinary system many of those students for whom plagiarism is no more than unsuccessful or developing attempts to master new levels of academically valued language. This educational approach should improve the balance between promoting student learning on the one hand, and dealing decisively with incidents of premeditated plagiarism, cheating and academic fraud on the other. With its implementation, universities would be seen to be genuinely upholding the integrity of the learning outcomes of their graduates.

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