

Gradients of plagiarism: a slippery slope? And what to do at the bottom of the cliff?

Full abstract

Language teachers are often confronted with writings that are clearly not their students' own work. However, how 'clearly' is clearly and are their *alarm bells* (Ellis, 2012) justified? The rise of internet plagiarism gives teachers the impression that more and more students 'cut-and-paste' chunks of online texts into their assignments (Howard, 2007). Textual plagiarism is a problem and can manifest itself in many forms that challenge the best detection tools. Yet, there are clear methodologies to distinguish an honest mistake from misconduct and successful strategies to approach plagiarising students. NESB students in particular have a reputation of plagiarising, be it through cultural differences regarding textual ownership or academic and linguistic reasons (Howard, 1995). However, this explanation could be oversimplified and ethnocentric (Ha, 2006). To explore these issues further, a study was conducted into policies and practices regarding plagiarism at a New Zealand tertiary institution, involving a thorough document analysis, environmental scans and interviews with key stakeholders.

This talk reports on the causes of plagiarism among NESB students and methods tertiary educators can apply to bridge the gap between their expectations regarding academic integrity and students' attitude toward plagiarising. I argue that the gap between native and NESB speakers is much narrower than we assume but NESB students' are just easier 'caught' because of the chequered quality of their work (Pecorari, 2003). Educators can bridge the gap between their expectations regarding academic integrity and their students' approach toward plagiarising. Teachers need different approaches to classroom and curriculum management as well as a consistent plagiarism policy instead of having to rely on their own judgement. Students need not only clarity regarding their institution-wide's approach toward plagiarism but also improved organisational skills and better designed assignments.

Short abstract

Language teachers are often confronted with writings that are clearly not their students' own work. Textual plagiarism can display itself in many forms but there are ways to distinguish an honest mistake from misconduct. NESB students in particular have a reputation of plagiarising but research suggests that the gap between native and NESB speakers is much narrower than we assume and NESB students are just easier 'caught'. I argue that educators can bridge the gap between their expectations regarding academic integrity and their students' approach toward plagiarising. Teachers need different approaches to classroom and curriculum management and a consistent plagiarism policy instead of relying on their own judgement. Students need clarity about their institution's approach toward plagiarism, better designed assignments and improved logistic skills but research at a New Zealand tertiary institution shows that this a difficult process.