

# Students' Source Misuse in Language Classrooms: Sharing Experiences

*Ismaeil Fazel and Nasrin Kowkabi*

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*In this article we first provide a brief discussion of what is generally referred to as "student plagiarism," which we prefer to call "source misuse" or "inappropriate textual borrowing," and then provide some of the factors that may contribute to this problem in language classes. Moreover, we provide our views and suggestions on how to deal with these causes, drawing mainly on our experiences as students and teachers in both EFL and ESL contexts, but also making references to some conceptual frames and the related literature.*

*Dans cet article, nous présentons d'abord une discussion brève de ce que l'on appelle communément « le plagiat étudiant » et ce que nous préférons nommer « un mauvais emploi des sources » ou « un emprunt textuel inapproprié ». Nous poursuivons en évoquant quelques-uns des facteurs qui pourraient entraîner ce problème dans les cours de langue. De plus, nous offrons nos avis et nos suggestions quant à la façon d'aborder ces causes en puisant surtout dans nos expériences tant comme étudiants qu'enseignants dans des milieux d'ALS et d'ALE, mais également en faisant référence à des cadres conceptuels et à la documentation qui s'y rattache.*

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While this article is devoted to so-called "student plagiarism" in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts, it should be noted that the issue of plagiarism is far more general and not limited to students or to a specific context. Although some of the discussions on plagiarism and in particular on student plagiarism are also relevant to ESL/EFL settings, we think the specific case of ESL/EFL student plagiarism requires specific approaches pertinent to its nature. Although there are differences between EFL and ESL contexts, in this article we aim to discuss the problems common to both EFL and ESL contexts rather than differentiating them. Where English is not one's first language, one has to not only look for ideas and references, but also formulate and express one's thoughts and ideas in a foreign or second language.

Although there is no single, agreed-upon definition for plagiarism, in its most general sense plagiarism involves copying or using someone else's ideas or words and presenting them as one's own without attribution. Plagiarism can cover a range of different inappropriate practices, from buying

or copying whole papers and submitting them as one's own, to copying sections of texts without appropriate acknowledgement (Park, 2003, summarizes different forms of plagiarism). Also, different labels have been used to distinguish intentional plagiarism ("prototypical plagiarism," Pecorari, 2006, 2008) from unintentional misuse of source texts ("textual borrowing," Casanave, 2004; Pennycook, 1996; Shi, 2004, 2006, 2010, 2011, 2012; or "language re-use," Flowerdew & Li, 2007). Hereafter, rather than "plagiarism,"<sup>1</sup> we use the terms "source misuse" or "inappropriate textual borrowing" to refer to using or borrowing someone else's ideas or words in one's own writing—without proper acknowledgement and referencing. We also view students' inappropriate textual borrowing practices primarily as writing problems, not ethical issues. As part of our students' "bill of rights," we believe a student's inappropriate textual borrowing is not intentional unless proven otherwise.

What prompted us to write this article and share some of our experiences with students' source misuse in EFL/ESL settings? Both of us have experienced learning and teaching English in EFL as well as ESL settings. We have also studied at universities in EFL and ESL contexts. Moreover, during years of teaching English, we have observed and witnessed how our colleagues and classmates have dealt with issues surrounding source use. As students, we could see the hesitations and challenges, for us and our classmates, in making decisions regarding textual borrowing, which later on helped us as teachers dealing with cases of inappropriate textual borrowing. In addition, as a result of discussions we have had and consultation of related research literature, we have incorporated instructional measures to deal with some of the factors potentially leading to students' inappropriate textual borrowing. In the sections that follow, we will discuss some of these factors as well as our views and suggestions—which, from our point of view, have helped our students develop a better understanding of proper source use.

## **Likely Causes of Students' Source Misuse**

In this section we discuss some of the main reasons why students may use sources inappropriately in EFL/ESL classes. We have selected these reasons based on (a) our first-hand experiences of cases and causes of inappropriate textual borrowing—which we have experienced as students and teachers in EFL and ESL contexts, and (b) our (selected) review of the related literature. Under each suggested factor we provide a brief discussion of our views and suggestions, together with the way we have addressed the likely causes. To do so we mainly draw from our experiences as EFL/ESL students and teachers. Where applicable we also share some of the online resources we have used. It should be noted that we do not claim, by any means, that the causes of students' inappropriate source use that we touch upon here are the only ones, nor do we claim that our views and suggestions are defin-

itive, or the only possible ways of addressing these issues in EFL/ESL contexts. We should note that our suggestions are mostly related to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes, where there is a greater focus on written assignments.

### *Lack of Awareness of Appropriate Practices*

One of the main difficulties for students is that they may not have a practical understanding of what exactly constitutes inappropriate source use. In our experience, based on occasional discussions we have had with some students, it is quite conceivable that some students do not realize that what they are doing could count as inappropriate, and may therefore not know exactly what to avoid. And until they do realize this, they may continue with writing and borrowing practices they deem appropriate without really intending to violate academic integrity. Research (e.g., Roig, 1997; Shi, 2010, 2011) has also shown that many students have insufficient or even different understandings of what counts as improper textual borrowing.

### *Pedagogical response*

Not only at the start of every term, but also throughout the term—especially while giving assignment instructions—we discuss the issue of inappropriate source use with students. In addition we make students aware of the related institutional policies and penalties as well as available help and resources. Moreover, to make sure students have a practical understanding of appropriate and inappropriate source use, we give them tasks and quizzes, mostly in the form of scenarios that they first discuss in pairs and groups, and then with the whole class. We prepare these scenarios based on the textbook we use as well as online sources, which often need to be modified and simplified to suit the level of our students. Two sample scenarios as well as some helpful websites we have used are provided in Appendices A and B, respectively.

### *Diverse Backgrounds*

Related to the discussion above is the fact that in both EFL and ESL contexts the student population is growing, and with this growth comes greater student diversity. It has been argued (e.g., Shi, 2004, 2006) that students coming from diverse backgrounds may have a diverse range of perspectives on source use. However, no tailored instructions have been designed for students with different backgrounds. In many cases, what students have practiced and considered to be acceptable in their home countries is at odds with the academic expectations of host countries. This has also been pointed out by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, who assert that “academicians and scholars may define plagiarism *differently* or more *stringently* than have instructors or administrators in students’ earlier education or in other writing situations” (<http://wpacouncil.org/positions/WPAplagiarism>).

pdf; emphasis added). The question becomes: what can we do in dealing with student diversity?

### *Pedagogical response*

We start every term with the assumption that our classes are bound to be heterogeneous and diverse, rather than homogeneous. An EFL/ESL class can be diverse in terms of students' educational, cultural, and contextual backgrounds, such as age, individual differences, and linguistic ability. However, it is often only the latter—typically tested by proficiency tests—that is used in placement decisions. We think that besides considering students' language ability, the teacher should attend to other nonlinguistic heterogeneities—educational, cultural, contextual backgrounds, and individual differences. However, care should be taken not to essentialize and label students based on their backgrounds, as cautioned by scholars (e.g., Kubota, 2004, 2012; Taylor, 2006). Attending to students' diverse backgrounds can generally lead to a better understanding of students' individual yet different problems, which can help the teacher diagnose potential areas of difficulty in students' writing. More importantly, when it comes to analyzing cases of inappropriate source use, we have noticed that such an understanding helps the teacher to contextualize the problem and better identify the underlying causes of such problems.

To get to know our students' diverse backgrounds, depending on the class size, we meet with them individually or give them each a background information sheet to complete, so that we have a general idea of their background, language learning experiences, and, more specifically, their areas of concern in writing assignments. Even in larger classes, where we feel a student may need special attention and further scaffolding, we arrange one-on-one meetings early on so that we can take steps to prevent potential problems rather than waiting for them to develop and addressing them after the fact. Last term one of us had a student who had issues with providing support for her arguments, and would at times improperly bring in support from similar essays that she found on the Internet. Because the student's potential areas of weakness had been previously noted, the student was accordingly offered some help and advice, which seemed to help the student. Without knowing that student's specific problems, the case of inappropriate source use could not have been properly analyzed and attended to. This was but one instance among many other similar cases.

### *To Cite or Not to Cite: That Is the Question*

Oftentimes the problem is that the student is not certain as to what exactly needs to be cited. It is conceivable that students look at the definitions of appropriate and inappropriate source use and do the aforementioned quizzes, yet when it comes to using sources and consulting others' thoughts and writing, they have uncertainties as to what is considered "common knowledge" and what exactly needs to be acknowledged and what does not (Shi, 2011).

### *Pedagogical response*

To address this issue we provide actual cases and examples of what is intellectual property and what is common knowledge and let students discuss and distinguish between them. We found the use of illustrations—especially from recent news or from the course material—an effective and useful way to help students distinguish intellectual property—facts, ideas, and language that are the distinct and unique products of others—from common knowledge—the facts, ideas, and language that are generally known to an educated reader, according to Harvard University’s *Writing with Internet Sources* ([http://www15.uta.fi/FAST/PK6/REF/writing\\_with\\_internet\\_sources.pdf](http://www15.uta.fi/FAST/PK6/REF/writing_with_internet_sources.pdf)).

The fourth URL in Appendix B (*University of Alberta Library Guides*) will lead to a helpful handout on this topic. We should note that in some cases the border between common knowledge and intellectual property may be fuzzy, which is why we ask our students to cite the source, if in doubt.

### *Assessment Practices*

We need to bear in mind that “poor assessment practices invite plagiarism” (Knight, 2001, p. 21). Sometimes the assignment design is such that it allows—and perhaps encourages—inappropriate source use. According to the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the inappropriate designing of assignments can potentially lead to improper source use by students (<http://wpacouncil.org/positions/WPAplagiarism.pdf>).

### *Pedagogical response*

We think that teachers need to “design out” plagiarism in their assessment practices. Teachers should design assessments in such a way that there are no slippery slopes—such as using the same tasks every term—toward improper source use. The structure of the assessment task and modification of the amount and timing of the assessment items can serve to deter plagiarism (Carroll, 2002; Carroll & Appleton, 2001).

We try to break assignments down into stages and ask students to provide drafts in the process. In addition to the feedback we give on their drafts, we include peer feedback sessions in which students, using a checklist, carefully read and comment on—and sometimes grade—their peers’ work. The grade constitutes a small portion of the overall assessment. We have seen distinct benefits in breaking down assignments. Not only can we better guide and monitor students this way (and see evidence of their original work in the writing process), but we can also make formative, rather than summative, assessments of their writing performance. Besides, it benefits our students in that it helps them manage their progress and mitigates the end-of-term pressure, which might be a cause for resorting to improper source use.

Another point to be considered is the difficulty level of assignments. An inability to deal with tasks beyond the writer’s linguistic level can lead to frustration, and perhaps inappropriate easy solutions. In deciding about as-

signments, we try to design the assignments at the appropriate difficulty level to the extent possible. The question arises as to how to deal with students who may like more challenging tasks. This can be solved by giving those students more leeway regarding the degree of difficulty of assignments.

In our classes, to the extent possible, we tend to give students some freedom to choose the topic for their assignments or make it relevant to their future employment or research—which we also have experienced in our own graduate classes as students. Relevant here are notions of identity and investment (Norton, 2000). For Norton (2000), identity is “how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future” (p. 5). Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1977) notion of cultural capital, Norton introduced the concept of investment, and argued that “if learners invest in a second language, they do so with the understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital” (p. 17). Following Norton (2000), we argue that where students can perceive the relevance of a topic to their own dispositions and interests, they will be more invested in writing the assignment in accordance with the academic conventions—including appropriate source use. Students in language classes appropriate the genres along with their discursive conventions—including how to properly borrow from texts—to the extent that they find them useful for further involvement with their target real or “imagined” communities (Kanno & Norton, 2003). It has been shown that giving students more authorial roles in their writing and thus improving their authorial identity help students avoid plagiarism (Elander, Pittam, Lusher, Fox, & Payne, 2010).

As an instance of helping students write with more investment and engagement, a colleague of ours assigns students an autobiographical writing task for which each student has to compose four short sections on set themes, published—in installments throughout the term—on the course website. And his students, according to him, approach the task with alacrity and stick to proper conventions of source use, perhaps since they not only find the task relevant to their lives, but also see their work being publicly viewed by their peers, which may instill a sense of healthy competition. It should be acknowledged, though, that when we let students pick a topic related to their personal lives and post it for their classmates to see, as in this example, we are in a way encouraging them to venture beyond their existing repertoire of words and structural patterns, which means they may need extra support from us.

### *Issues of Writer Identity and Socialization*

“My words are not worthy ... I am not confident in using my own sentences ... so I use someone else’s words to express my ideas.” This is a narrative we have more than once heard, as both students and teachers. We once thought such narratives were just another excuse to copy and paste as a shortcut.

However, as we eventually became familiar with sociocultural notions, such as “identity” (Norton, 2000), “socialization” (Duff, 2010), and “learning as participation,” and analyzed our own past and present experiences of becoming writers, we started to see the above narratives not as excuses to plagiarize, but rather as indications of a fragile and fledgling writer identity, as the writer tries to become socialized into the discourse of a new community. Learning to write is a process of becoming, identity formation, and socialization. Understandably, especially in the early stages, writers have to wrestle with issues and challenges affecting their identity and “authorial self” (Ivanic, 1998), which might be fragile, since their identities are in the process of being transformed.

### *Pedagogical response*

The way teachers conceptualize second and foreign language writing, and learning to write, affects how they view and treat students’ problems in writing, including problems with textual borrowing. Writing is not a single and simple skill, learned once and for all—as the autonomous view of literacy would have it—but rather a “social practice” (Lea & Street, 1998).

We consider learning how to use source texts properly to be part of socialization into the second or foreign language discourse community, and being inducted into the norms and rules of the second or foreign language discourse community (Duff, 2010). From this perspective, in order for such learning to take place, we need to provide students with enough scaffolding, support, and opportunities for meaningful practice, in addition to explicitly teaching and preaching to students about the issues of intellectual property, and the reasons for citing and referencing.

In addition to helping students better understand authorship and increasing their confidence in writing, we can act as socializing agents (Duff, 2010) by being role models, such as by providing references to our lecture notes and slides. As part of the writing socialization process, students need to learn about proper practices used in source use (quoting, summarizing, and paraphrasing). Through exercises—teacher-made or modified from web resources—we try to build and reinforce the skill of appropriately incorporating sources. We provide a text along with two or three samples of appropriate and inappropriate cases of quoting and paraphrasing and ask students to discuss, in pairs and groups, and distinguish as well as explain the appropriate and inappropriate cases. In addition to understanding appropriate and inappropriate source use, students also need to be able to apply, analyze, and evaluate their understanding, so that they can consult necessary sources and create their texts properly, in line with Bloom’s revised taxonomy of cognitive skills: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Some helpful online resources are included in Appendix B.

In addition, in discussing proper source use with our students, we point out its main benefits. We explain that it indicates that the writer has read a lot and thus knows about the subject, that his or her views are demonstrably tied to those of established experts, and that it helps the audience locate the sources.

## Conclusion

The views and suggestions we provided above are primarily informed by reflecting on our own learning and teaching experiences, as well as consulting the related literature and theories of second language pedagogy. In general we have had a positive experience of changing our perspective on students' inappropriate source use and using the above-mentioned measures. However, we know we do need to keep reflecting on and developing them. Understandably, some of the suggestions may not be applicable to all settings.

It is our contention that in discussing students' improper source use, we should also look critically at our own practices—including our assessment practices. In our opinion, the way teachers conceptualize writing and learning to write affects how they treat students' problems in writing, including problems with textual borrowing. We argue that language is a social practice, and learning to properly use sources is part of learning how to write, which we view as a process of socialization. As teachers, we can mediate students' socialization into the genres of writing by making their writing experiences relevant to their interests and dispositions as far as possible, so that they will invest further in their writing practices. When students come to identify with their real or imagined communities and are motivated and invested to learn to write new genres related to their target communities, they begin writing out of some motive beyond the grade.

We call on our colleagues in EFL and ESL settings to further share, discuss, and exchange their experiences on students' source use. Such discussions can be informative and worthwhile, and perhaps conducive to a more unified approach in dealing with students' inappropriate textual borrowing. While it can be argued that every class and context is different and perhaps unique in some ways, and thus requires its own set of policies and strategies, we think that source misuse is a concern and issue common to all EFL/ESL classes. When it comes to dealing with students' inappropriate source use, we both have noticed that EFL and ESL teachers each make their own recipes in addressing the problem. These recipes should be aligned, to the extent possible, with the related research and scholarship.

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## Note

1 The reason we are using these terms rather than the term “plagiarism” is that we think plagiarism connotes intentional improper using of sources.

## The Authors

*Ismaeil Fazel* is a PhD student in TESL at the University of British Columbia. His main research interests are graduate-level academic writing, academic discourse socialization, identity and investment, and language assessment.

*Nasrin Kowkabi* is a PhD candidate in TESL in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia. Her main research interests are English as a second/foreign language, second/foreign language writing, ethical dimensions of literacy, socio-cultural theories of literacy, language assessment, and mixed-methods research methodology.

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## Appendix A Sample Scenarios

Discuss the following scenarios. Are they right or wrong? Why?

1. You downloaded an essay from the Internet and made a few changes to it before submitting it as your assignment.
2. You find a paragraph in a source text that expresses your idea, but not in your own words.

## Appendix B Helpful Websites

- *Graduate Skills Courses (Oxford University)*  
<https://www.indiana.edu/~istd/>
- *Test Your Understanding of Plagiarism (the University of Guelph)*  
[http://www.academicintegrity.uoguelph.ca/plagiarism\\_quiz.cfm](http://www.academicintegrity.uoguelph.ca/plagiarism_quiz.cfm)
- *Self-test (funded by the Center for Educational Technology and developed by Colby College, Bates College and Bowdoin College)*  
<http://abacus.bates.edu/cbb/quiz/>
- *University of Alberta Library Guides*  
<http://guides.library.ualberta.ca/content.php?pid=62200&sid=3012983>
- *Authorship and Plagiarism (University of Essex)*  
<http://www.essex.ac.uk/plagiarism/test1.html>
- *The Proper Use of Sources Tutorial (Mount Holyoke College)*  
<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/lits/ris/Plagiarism/test1.htm>
- *Plagiarism Tutorial (University of Southern Mississippi)*  
<http://www.lib.usm.edu/legacy/plag/plagiarismtutorial.php>