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Textual Borrowing in Dissertation Writing: Perceptions of Supervisors and Supervisees

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Abstract

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Keywords

email interviews, situated qualitative research; dissertation writing, source use, textual borrowing, perceptions

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Textual Borrowing in Dissertation Writing: Perceptions of Supervisors and Supervisees

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The existing literature shows issues pertinent to students' inappropriate textual borrowing behaviors require further examination. Our study aims to address two questions: What are the reasons why postgraduate students' misuse their dissertation sources? How do the dissertation supervisors react to students' inappropriate source use, if any? In this situated qualitative study (Atkinson, 2005), we used data collected through in-depth email interviews with two applied linguistics postgraduate students and their dissertation supervisors. Regarding the analytical process, the researchers condensed the provisional themes through techniques suggested by grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The results reveal that causes for postgraduate students' misuse of sources include students' lack of access to literature, poor literature-searching and documenting skills, and lack of instructional support on using literature. Supervisors have neither identified nor addressed the source misuse in their feedback given to students. This finding suggests the university's regulating culture/pedagogical support and cross-culturally variant perception of plagiarism are crucial to our understanding of textual plagiarism among postgraduate students. The commonly suggested language proficiency may not be perceived as a cause of plagiarism in the current study. The discussion includes implication for a need to provide students with a disciplinary appropriate way of citing sources.

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Introduction

The existing literature shows that several issues pertinent to students' inappropriate textual borrowing behaviors require further examination. First, despite attention devoted to plagiarism from the cultural perspective, it is still unclear whether and to what extent cultural variance and cultural permissibility claims of plagiarism are valid for the Chinese culture. Second, although studies have observed developmental and enculturation effects on English-as-a-first-language (L1) and English-as-a-second-language (L2) writers' knowledge, perceptions, and source use, many studies have focused on L1 and L2 students studying in Western contexts (Sun, 2009). There is scant research on the developmental effect observed in these contexts that can be extrapolated to students in mainland China, where a different convention may be in place as compared with that of Western-style convention. Though the literature has suggested the Chinese concept of plagiarism may be subject to constant changes in the wake of globalization of scholarship, little empirical research has been conducted to investigate the causes for postgraduate students' misuse of sources in their dissertations and the dissertation supervisors' reaction to students' inappropriate source use. It is important to examine students' textual borrowing behavior and supervisors' reactions to students'

inappropriate source use so that the university will be able to identify appropriate research and academic development skills support to cater to the needs of postgraduate students. The study contributes to existing textual borrowing research, an important topic in English-as-a-second language writing.

With respect to the empirical discussion on plagiarism from the cultural perspective, a debate has been initiated over cultural acceptability of plagiarism (Hu & Lei, 2011; Lei, 2010; Pecorari, 2006). Due to large variation in research methodology (i.e., survey, text-based analysis, task-based analysis, case study, and interview) and research focus, accurate synthesis of these empirical studies is hard to achieve. Nevertheless, this body of research findings seems to suggest a different point of view that cultural conditioning should not be the sole or at least not the major culprit for plagiarism (Gu & Brooks, 2008; Shi, 2006).

Some studies have shown both English as L1 and L2 students tend to be confused about what constitutes inappropriate textual appropriation. For example, Maxwell, Curtis, and Vardanega (2008) observed both local Australian and international students of Asian backgrounds did not seem to differ significantly in their understanding of plagiarism. However, it should be noted that the study employed Chinese L2 students who have been studying in the Western-based universities. It failed to eliminate the compounding effect of possible enculturation that might take place as a result of their continued immersion within the Western academic culture. Such immersion or training experienced by L2 Chinese students may have assimilated these students' attitudes and practices of plagiarism toward that of Western expectation.

Similarly, in a survey and interview study on 77 Japanese college students' perceptions of plagiarism, Wheeler (2009) suggested his Japanese students shared similar awareness of and unease with plagiarism with their counterparts in Western based universities. Wheeler (2009) rejected the cultural conditioning view on Japanese culture. He speculated a lack of experience or training in source use, rather than the cultural conditioning, should be held responsible for observed Japanese students' source misuse.

Contextually Mediating Factors

Given the multi-dimensional nature of plagiarism, previous studies exploring causes for students' plagiaristic behaviors have identified an array of possible causes for plagiarism, such as educational context (Gebriel & Plakans, 2009), institutional regulation policy or pedagogical culture (Hu & Lei, 2011), exposure to Western-style academic culture, academic training (Lei, 2010), and academic level (Chandrasegaran, 2000), in addition to the broadly-suggested cultural, disciplinary and developmental factors. Among them, educational context in which student writers operate is suggested by Gebriel and Plakans (2009) to be critical in understanding why they use sources improperly.

Institutional culture (e.g., absence or presence of institutional guidelines or policy) regarding plagiarism is also suggested to have played an important role in accounting for students' inappropriate textual borrowing behaviors (Hu & Lei, 2011). For example, in realizing the important role of severe institutional policy in discouraging students' plagiaristic behaviors, McCabe and Trevino (1995) reiterated the presence or absence of institutional policy on plagiarism was an important intervening factor for their students' plagiaristic behaviors. In alignment with McCabe and Trevino's (1995) position, Aaron (1992) and Nuss (1984) attributed students' plagiaristic behaviors largely to an absence or ineffective implementation of institutional policy in the university. In a survey-based examination of six contributing variables (personal attitudes, pressure, availability of internet facilities, institution specific factor, lack of awareness, lack of competence) to plagiarism among Malaysian undergraduate students in one discipline, Smith, Ghazali, and Noor Minhad (2007) confirmed

institution-specific factors, such as lenient attitudes from lecturers or the institution's low involvement in promoting official anti-plagiarism guidelines, were closely linked to the occurrence of student plagiarism. In another study examining postgraduates' perceived causes for plagiarism and cheating, Love and Simmons (1997) uncovered five key contributing factors to student plagiarism: academic pressure, professors' reaction to plagiarism and cheating, negative personal attributes (e.g., lack of interest in study), laziness, and lack of knowledge of appropriate source citation. Among them, professors' attitudes towards student plagiarism were reported to be an important contextual contributor for plagiarism.

It is clear from the above discussion that institution-specific factors, along with other contextual factors, are significant in the emergence of students' plagiarism. The reasons why Chinese postgraduate students' misuse their dissertation sources and the dissertation supervisors' reactions to students' inappropriate source use have remained relatively unexplored. To fill this gap, the present study investigates supervisors' and supervisees' perceptions on textual borrowing in dissertation writing. This study contributes to writing research by encouraging supervisors to explicitly teach the potential types of source misuse behaviors and raising postgraduate students' awareness of the potential forms of unintentional and intentional plagiarism.

The Study

The two research questions that guided the study were:

1. What are the reasons for postgraduate students' misuse their dissertation sources?
2. How do the dissertation supervisors react to students' inappropriate source use, if any?

In this study, the researchers tried to find the reasons why Chinese postgraduate students misuse their dissertation sources and their supervisors' reactions to their inappropriate source use. The researchers were interested in finding the causes for the problem as the textual borrowing issue comes up in every graduate school with every cohort. Furthermore, it is necessary for postgraduate students to know the potential forms of unintentional and intentional plagiarism in dissertation writing. Dissertation supervisors and writing instructors should also explicitly teach the disciplinary appropriate way of citing sources to postgraduate students.

Research Team

The research team consisted of two co-investigators. The first author is an applied linguist who specializes in academic writing and writing instruction. She has been involved in conducting and supervising qualitative research since 2009. She is particularly interested in teaching graduate students about how to cite sources appropriately and purposefully to develop one's argument. From her experience as a dissertation supervisor, she is curious about dissertation supervisors' reactions on students' inappropriate source use. As a tenured faculty member working primarily with postgraduate students, she is interested in understanding the reasons for misusing dissertation sources among postgraduate students and giving guidance to postgraduate students to better support their dissertation writing.

The second author received her degree as Master of Arts in Applied Linguistics and served as a research assistant examining attitudes and beliefs on a classroom control inventory among beginning teachers. From her own experience as a postgraduate student, she was curious about how postgraduate students learned to use their dissertation sources in writing. She has

always wanted to find out more about why some postgraduate students misuse their dissertation sources and the supervisors' reactions to students' inappropriate source use.

At the time of data collection, the second author was a student-investigator, and the first author provided guidance, advice, and support throughout the entire research process. The co-investigators were interested in academic writing of postgraduate students. The research was an attempt to gain insights into inappropriate textual borrowing behaviors from the perspectives of dissertation supervisees and supervisors. The intention was to uncover ideas to better support current and future postgraduate students and dissertation supervisors in citing sources for the dissertation writing.

In the next section, we will talk about participants involved in the study, as well as procedures in collecting and analyzing the data.

Method

In this section, we present the rationale for conducting situated qualitative research (Atkinson, 2005; Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999). By situated we mean that “qualitative research is maximally grounded in the everyday world of those being studied” (Atkinson, 2005, p. 50). In situated qualitative research, ways of knowing are based on “local knowledge such as individual skills and experience” (Porter, 1995, pp. 7-8) and “phenomenon that cannot be reliably broken into units and counts” (Atkinson, 2005, p. 6). Situated qualitative research reflects “the intricacies and complexities of individuals and the complex nature of the event itself” (Atkinson, 2005, p. 53). To investigate reasons why postgraduate students misuse their dissertation sources and the dissertation supervisors' reactions to students' inappropriate source use, it is impossible to study individuality and particularity by placing individual experience on a standard scale or to detach the individuals from their contexts. To investigate the particularity of a phenomenon, Atkinson (2005) recommends:

One must study how it is situated in its environment—how it relates to other things. In understanding particular human beings in their particular social environments, one must know (to the degree one can) something significant about how they view the world. (p. 14)

In line with that, this current study described how dissertation supervisors and their supervisees perceived the textual borrowing behavior in China.

Participants

Three criteria were considered during our selection of participants. First, we considered their geographical location and cultural backgrounds, as well as their universities which needed to be in Lanzhou, Gansu, China. Second, universities must offer an applied linguistic program at the postgraduate level. Third, our access to each of the acceptable dissertations was also considered. We followed the above three criteria so that we could carry out convenience sampling, mainly through contacting professors working in the second author's former university. The postgraduate student participants came from Lanzhou, China. They all majored in applied linguistics. The participants, consisting of two supervisors and two master's degree students, shared the same cultural background.

The research design fits with the situated study. The situated study reflects the complexities of the individuals (i.e., dissertation supervisors and supervisees) and the complex social nature of the event (i.e., citing sources during dissertation writing and supervising postgraduate students). As qualitative researchers, we are interested in studying what is

particularizable and unique in the world. The essence of situated study is to research into individual instances in depth (i.e., through in-depth interviews with dissertation supervisors and supervisees). The use of the situated study is justified because nature is made up of instances. In our case, the instances refer to the first-hand experiences shared by dissertation supervisors and supervisees. In order to understand dissertation supervisors and supervisees in their particular social environments, we must understand how they view the world (i.e., how supervisees appropriately/inappropriately cite the sources and how the supervisors feel about the supervisees' citation practices).

A recruitment email and an invitation letter (including a briefing on the study's purpose, duration, and necessary involvement) were emailed to nine potential supervisors in the said Chinese university. Two supervisors agreed to participate. Afterwards, the Participant Information Sheet for Supervisor and Informed Consent Form were sent to both supervisors for their review and signatures. They were also asked for assistance in recommending and furnishing contact information of their supervised M.A. students who were currently doing M.A. dissertations. One supervisor recommended two students who met the criteria. Another recommended three eligible students. The same recruitment email and another invitation letter were forwarded respectively to the five M.A. candidates to seek participation. Two students responded to the invitation and agreed to take part. Then, the Participant Information Sheet for Students and the same consent form were sent to these two students separately. In this paper, we focused on two pairs of Chinese M.A. supervisor-supervisees' discourse-based and semi-structured interview data.

The dissertation supervisors, consisting of one female and one male, all had more than nine years of dissertation supervision experience. They both had at least two students supervised during the time of interviews. The student participants, consisting of two females, each had 12 years of English language learning experience. Their area of study for the bachelor's degree was Linguistics and English Literature respectively.

Procedure

Before moving on to the data collection, approval for the study was obtained through the university Institutional Review Board (IRB) in 2012. Data were collected through email interviews with students and their dissertation supervisors. Semi-structured email interview data was elicited from supervisors and supervisees in the Chinese-based University to advance our understanding in the possible linguistic aspect of plagiarism. It was intended that such in-depth interviews capture first-hand experiences from postgraduate supervisor-supervisees. Semi-structured interviews, as suggested by Dörnyei (2007), have the strength of enabling researchers not only to access meaning effectively from the informant's own perspective but also to explore the issue in depth and ask for further clarifications. Interviewing the participants through emails and an online chatting software was useful for this study in that M.A. supervisor-supervisees involved were all packed in terms of scheduling. Moreover, examining citation behavior through textual analysis only may be limited because some occluded citing behaviors might not be apparent to the researcher without consulting the authors. Since this research is intended to capture meanings placed on citation of sources by authors rather than by textual analysts' interpretation (Cohen et al., 2000), discourse-based interview (Odell et al., 1983) was used. Discourse-based interview enables authors the opportunity to re-read and reflect upon their writings while sharing their comments and views on source use, and thus, was deemed to be appropriate. Researchers could find out genre and linguistic choices writers made by reading their writing, and designed interview questions based on those choices.

Two semi-structured interview guides (see Appendices A and B) were created respectively for supervisors and M.A. students. The interview questions (Appendix A) were

based on the first author's experience as a dissertation supervisor, her observations, and opinions about source use and referencing in M.A. dissertation writing in applied linguistics. The interview questions (Appendix B) were based on the second author's experience as a postgraduate student, her knowledge, and opinions about source use and referencing convention in M.A. dissertation writing in applied linguistics. The interview guides were put into first piloting with 10 first-year M.A. students and teachers in the same Chinese university. On basis of their feedback, some overlapping questions were deleted, and changes were made on the sequence of questions. A Chinese version of the revised interview guides was also available to facilitate comprehension. The content validity of this Chinese version in relation to its English version was checked by three experienced Chinese college English lecturers. The second author of this paper emailed the final interview guides (both Chinese and English versions) to another three M.A. students and their supervisors for second piloting. The interview guides were then finalized.

The collection of email interview data started immediately after the IRB approved letter had been received. Participants were given all the questions at once. Given the written nature of these accessed data, unlimited time was given to participants for their completion. It was made clear to participants that they should send back their response once they finished answering. To encourage free, in-depth expression and avoid problems arising related to English language proficiency, email interview responses were completed in the participants' native language. The written responses from semi-structured interview data were (the parts that were relevant to the research questions) were translated into English for further analysis. We conducted two follow-up conversations. Clarifications on participants' responses were done via email and online chatting software called QQ Messenger. Situated qualitative research entered the decision we have made. The essence of the situated qualitative research is to examine individual instances in depth. To facilitate the data collection, we let the participants respond in Mandarin Chinese, their mother tongue. They could reply to us using their preferred tool – QQ Messenger, a popular tool used by the Chinese from Mainland China. We gave participants unlimited time to respond to our questions, which enabled them to write as freely and detailed as possible.

As suggested by Seliger and Shohamy (1989), interviewees may be prone to provide socially desirable answers instead of truthful responses fearful of consequences that might be imposed upon them for responding truthfully. Aside from rigorous preparation made beforehand for interview guides (e.g., clear instructions and careful ordering of question items), our study has emphasized the importance of truthful answers along with the guarantee of participant confidentiality before each occasion of data collection (e.g., assuring participants that there is no right or wrong answer, and inviting them to freely share their own experience).

Data Analysis

All written responses from semi-structured interviews and follow-up clarifications were compiled separately for each participant. Qualitative situated research entered our decision of analyzing the data separately for each individual because the research approach "focuses on the particular quality of the phenomena being studied, rather than on their frequencies of occurrence" (Atkinson, 2005, p. 50). The goal of the qualitative situated research is to get the "particular quality" of what is being studied from the actors' perspective (Atkinson, 2005, p. 50).

Analysis of the email interview responses enabled us to understand the reasons for postgraduate students' misuse of their dissertation sources as well as dissertation supervisors' reactions to supervisees' inappropriate source use. We analyzed the data using Percy, Kostere, and Kostere's (2015, pp. 80-81) method of inductive analysis. The steps were as follows:

1. We read email responses and highlighted meaningful responses for each participant. For example, if participants (e.g., Supervisor 2, Postgraduate Student 1, and Supervisor 1) believed lack of access of relevant literature in China was a reason for the misuse of the sources, we used the same color highlighter to underline the related texts.
2. We reviewed the highlighted data to check if the data helped answered the research question (i.e., responses were related to reasons for the misuse of sources).
3. We put aside those highlighted data that did not directly address the research questions.
4. We coded the data by identifying and labelling similar phrases (“poor source searching and documenting skills” and “lack of access of sources”), and then clustering the related data to form patterns.
5. We followed the above steps for each participant. We used similar patterns to form the categories (e.g., “reasons why postgraduate students misuse their dissertation sources”). At the same time, when we identified new patterns, we labeled them as well.
6. We read all the identified patterns. The overarching theme (e.g., “textual borrowing in dissertation writing: perceptions of supervisors” emerged as themes are “patterns of patterns”; Percy et al., 2015, p. 81).
7. After we have finished analyzing the data, we explained the results using their corresponding supporting patterns.
8. The themes were synthesized to address the research questions. (RQ1. What are the reasons for postgraduate students’ misuse their dissertation sources?; RQ2. How do the dissertation supervisors react to students’ inappropriate source use, if any?).

We show how we transformed data into meaningful categories and themes. The researchers read through these responses several times to “find codes from data” (Punch, 2005, p. 200). For example, “poor source searching and documenting skills” and “lack of access of sources” were codes from data. Such initial coding was intended to allow the emergence of provisional themes from each participant’s interview response. Based on the provisional themes deriving from this initial coding and considering the focus of such analysis, the researchers then set out to condense these provisional themes into categories through techniques suggested by grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Both the theme and categories will be discussed in more details in the results section. Two main categories were evolved from participants’ responses. These categories were “reasons why postgraduate students misuse their dissertation sources” and “dissertation supervisors’ reactions to students’ source use.” To demonstrate how we created codes, category, and theme, refer to the following exemplar:

Excerpt of interview with Supervisor 1:

Many of my supervisees tend to pile up a lot of irrelevant, unauthoritative, or unknown references in their literature review (code 1) which later I have to ask them to cut out. This is quite an unproductive and time-consuming process. Because of this, these days I have to make explicit my rule with current students before their writing that all their cited sources in the literature review should come from key journal articles and books, less authoritative sources have to be kept as few as possible.

Excerpt of interview with Supervisor 2:

...they [postgraduate students] tend to quite easily forget to attribute online sources. In most cases, even if they have identified the sources, the citation formats are more likely to be incorrect than correct (code 2). To ask them to correct it is also a very headache experience for me. Because they usually do not know themselves where they have copied it.

Two aspects of shortages, according to my observation, are accountable for some of their source misuse, one is short of access to up-to-date literature resources (code 3), which were caused by school and our department's inadequate library resources. As our university or department alike seldom purchase key international magazines in our field (code 4). The other would be students' lack of training and acculturation in the research conduct of their academic discipline (code 4). This has something to do with our school's expanded enrolment.

Code – A phrase which represents a single idea.

Example: code 1. poor source searching; code 2: poor documenting skills; code 3: lack of access of sources; code 4. lack of instructional support.

Category – A phrase to describe a group of codes (refer to codes 1-4 above).

Example: Category - Reasons why postgraduate students misuse their dissertation sources.

Theme – A phrase to describe broader, overarching idea.

Example: Textual borrowing in dissertation writing: perceptions of supervisors

Rigor and Trustworthiness

To ensure rigor and trustworthiness of data analysis as well as to check the reliability of interview data analysis, following Seliger and Shohamy's (1989) recommendations, the second author of this paper re-coded the same data one month after the first coding. The intra-rater reliability was calculated by using SPSS Intraclass correlation coefficients. The intra-rater reliability for two codings was $ICC = 0.95$ (95% CI 0.92 – 0.98). Such a percentage was satisfactory and supported the reliability of interview data analysis. As for the marked discrepancy between two coding results, another M.A. student in Applied Linguistics was invited to help code that part independently. Then the discrepancy among three coding results was dissolved through discussion, which resulted in several minor revisions in category definition.

During the processes of data collection and data analysis, we kept our bias to a minimum, by reporting on the participants' perceptions of textual borrowing behaviors, rather than formulating an evaluation of them. We did member checking and shared the findings with the participants (Candela, 2019). We had participants reviewed the results of the study.

Results

Reasons Why Postgraduate Students Misuse Their Dissertation Sources

Poor Source Searching and Documenting Skills

A cause for students' source misuse evolved from the interview data is related to their poor source-searching, source-selection, and documenting skills. Supervisors suggested students' uncritical selection of references adversely influenced their writing. As pointed out by Supervisor 1:

My supervisees tend to include a lot of irrelevant, unauthoritative, or unknown references in their literature review. I have to make explicit my rule with current students before their writing that all their cited sources in the literature review should come from key journal articles and books.

Another problem related to students' uncritical selection of references is that, as Supervisor 2 has observed, students presented online sources without proper attributions. Supervisors thought it might be caused by students' poor documentation skills:

They (students) tend to forget to attribute online sources. In most cases, even if they have identified the sources, the citation format is likely to be incorrect. To ask them to correct it is also a headache. They themselves do not know where they have copied the information. (Supervisor 2)

Postgraduate Student 1's own description of source searching and selection experience for her dissertation seems to further confirm the two supervisors' observations:

For my topic, I could not find many relevant studies to write about from key journal articles. Given the word limit, I have to rely on many low-tiered journal articles and online sources (Chinese forum posts or students' PowerPoint slides). Sometimes, I have to think of ways to make less irrelevant studies seem relevant to my topic. (Postgraduate student 1)

The student has drawn on unauthorized sources available online without acknowledgements. Students' poor skills in searching, selecting, and documenting sources might post a negative influence on the quality of sources they used.

Lack of Access of Sources

Students' lack of access to key and up-to-date journal articles is another cause for their source misuse. Supervisor 2 commented that lack of access to sources might have caused the misuse of sources in the dissertations:

Two reasons are accountable for some of their source misuse: one is limited access to up-to-date literature, which was caused by school and our department's inadequate library resources. The other reason is students' lack of training in the research conduct of their academic discipline. This is something to do with our school's expanded enrolment. (Supervisor 2)

Like Supervisor 2's comment on a lack of access of relevant literature in China, Postgraduate Student 1 expressed concern when she was asked about her perceived difficulty in dissertation writing. She commented:

One big problem is that I could not find the original copies of some of journal articles that are crucial to my topic. As a result, I have to draw on a lot of extracts of these books and articles to write my own review. I am unsure whether my patchwork has kept to the original author's idea. Although it sounds inappropriate, I do not have a choice. Actually, many of my seniors and classmates are also doing the same thing. (Postgraduate Student 1)

Like Postgraduate Student 1's reflection, her supervisor (e.g., Supervisor 1) confirmed this problem when she was asked to provide some examples of her current students' problematic sources use. She referred to Postgraduate Student 1's work:

I have just finished reading (Postgraduate Student 1's) draft. One problem in her draft was that she used a lot of sources from secondary account and listed them as if they were first-hand information. (Supervisor 1)

Related to the students' problem in accessing original academic articles, another popular practice, as Supervisor 1 suggested, is students tend to translate many abstracts or reviews of relevant articles from Chinese to English word-for-word in their dissertation without attributing to the authors.

As part of our dissertation requirement, students are required to review relevant local studies as well. One problem arises from such a regulation is that our students tend to translate word-for-word the abstract of Chinese sources or their review of relevant sources into English and use it in their dissertation without acknowledging the authors. (Supervisor 1)

Although unacknowledged translated texts (either direct copying or paraphrasing) are considered as an academic infringement by Western academic conventions, none of these Chinese students seems to realize that such behavior has amounted to plagiarism. The postgraduate students believed they have translated the sources, which included their own words and synthesis. Both students thought, aside from providing Chinese source author and publication date in the reference list, there is no need to provide in-text citation.

Lack of Instructional Support

Both supervisors and students believed the absence of instructional support in referencing convention and dissertation writing was a cause of students' misuse of sources. When it comes to the specific support to students' dissertation writing, both students and supervisors commented that their discipline did not offer instructional support on dissertation writing except a style handbook.

Absence of writing instruction and a discipline-acceptable way of appropriate referencing makes self-learning challenging to students. In this regard, one postgraduate student's account is particularly illuminating in explaining how inconsistency of requirements among disciplinary professors, coupled with absence of relevant instructional support, has made her dissertation writing difficult:

Our department does not provide a course on how to write dissertations. Although we do have a style handbook, it is far from adequate in helping me cope with the difficulty in the writing process... My supervisor and other teachers are quite helpful and offer me many suggestions, but the problem is that they seem to have different standards in that sometimes they gave different suggestions on my same questions. (Postgraduate Student 2)

Supervisor 2, in explaining causes for students' difficulty in properly appropriating the sources, emphasized that instruction on source-based writing is one way to make up Chinese students' limited knowledge and experience in working with source in an academically acceptable way.

Our postgraduate students do not have much experience in research writing. Neither do they receive much training on working with sources. Thus, they are not ready for the dissertation both in terms of writing skills and academic abilities. So, I think direct instruction on dissertation writing seems quite necessary to close the gap. (Supervisor 2)

Supervisors' comments seemed to underscore the relation between Chinese students' inadequate ability of writing using source and plagiarism.

Dissertation Supervisors' Reactions to Student's Source Use

During the time of our email interview, the two supervisors mentioned further revisions of dissertation drafts were necessary, although students' source-use qualities were generally acceptable. No supervisors indicated or implied in any way that these samples contained issues that might put writers at risk of failing. As Supervisor 1 noted:

Postgraduate Student 1 has conducted a replicated study based on a Ph.D. thesis. Since it is a master's dissertation, replication study is still acceptable. Areas requiring further revisions: Firstly, grammatical errors are extensive. Hypotheses are very redundantly formulated. Regarding the effectiveness of source use, she has done an acceptable job despite occasional appearances of unacknowledged secondary sources and inconsistent use of citation format and style. (Supervisor 1)

As indicated by the excerpt above, Supervisor 1 has identified several problematic areas in the student's drafts that required revisions. Regarding the student's source use, Supervisor 1 believed her student needed to do some slight adjustments. This not only seems to suggest Supervisor 1 might not find a big problem in the student's source use, but also the student's source use problem does not seem to influence her evaluation of the student's work. This finding may suggest the supervisor's evaluation focus may influence the way the student uses the sources. Compared with Supervisor 1, Supervisor 2 did not find any big issue with student's source use. In his opinion, the student's mistake with the source use was due to carelessness. This problem can easily be solved by consulting a stylebook:

Postgraduate Student 2's draft did not have many grammatical problems. Although she has done a very thorough review of studies within her investigated topic, reviews are generally short of her own critical evaluation. Moreover, a number of citations she used in the main text were not included in the

references. Further, the inconsistent and inaccurate use of citation style was also quite prevalent, despite the fact that I have provided her with a style guide. (Supervisor 2)

The above excerpts indicated that supervisors did not find students' source use a big issue in dissertation writing. From what they have seen, these students' writing samples are generally acceptable. These supervisors' reported approach toward suspected student plagiarism were elicited before asking them to specifically comment on the opaque source use in students' samples.

Reported Approach to Inappropriate Textual Borrowing

When they were asked to describe their approach towards inappropriate textual borrowing, both supervisors agreed that they held zero-tolerance with intentional plagiarism. They all stated that intentional plagiarism should be severely punished. For example, Supervisor 1 commented: "I hate intentional plagiarism. I will not tolerate it when I detect it" (Supervisor 1). As the above comment reflects, Supervisor 1 held a condemnatory attitude towards plagiarism. This view contradicts previous literature's suggestion that Chinese students or scholars' observed tolerance of plagiarism is a result of their cultural conditioning (Sowden, 2005). When asked about their experience of detecting intentional plagiarism among postgraduate students in their discipline, the supervisors all said they never experienced such a case. Supervisor 2 commented: "I think that students' plagiaristic behaviors are mostly related to their insufficient academic abilities or insufficient knowledge about academic conventions. Therefore, students should be taught how to cite the sources appropriately in order to be better writers" (Supervisor 2). Both supervisors tend to be hesitant to make a plagiarism-related judgment about their respective student's writing. Supervisor 2 appears to be more sympathetic and tolerant towards plagiarism because they are fully aware of the Chinese students' limited competence in English language and their limited knowledge in both discipline content and academic conventions. In giving their evaluation of student writing, supervisors tend to draw on several external factors, such as their familiarity with the students and the efforts students have put in their writing.

Reaction to Identified Opaque Source Use

When Supervisor 2 was asked to comment on the appropriateness of the source use in his student's work, he pointed out that copying the original sources was unacceptable in the final draft, even though the student has slightly modified the sentence structures: "This is unacceptable, though she [the student] had adjusted some of the sentence structures when compared to Matsumura's sources, most words are obviously lifted directly from Matsumura's sources. She definitely needs to rewrite this passage..." (Supervisor 2).

When the researcher further asked Supervisor 2 to elucidate on what disturbed him most in this case (unacknowledged copying or unacknowledged secondary citation), he replied unacknowledged copying annoyed him the most. The student made no attempt to use her own words to report the secondary source but rather effortlessly copied from it verbatim without acknowledgement was unacceptable. When asked about the possible cause for this observed plagiarized behavior, Supervisor 2 said: "Postgraduate student 2 is quite engaged with her topic and very hardworking. Drawing on my knowledge of her, I don't believe that she did it on purpose" (Supervisor 2).

The response made by Supervisor 2 seems to imply that, although unacknowledged citation is unacceptable, with his knowledge of the student, he still believes that it is caused by

other factors other than the student's deceptive intention. Supervisor 1 suggested a variety of other factors (ignorance of convention, lack of access to sources, time pressure, poor source searching, selecting and documenting skills) in accounting for the student's unacknowledged citation. To sum up, supervisors' reactions provide counterevidence on the claim of Chinese students' permissibility of plagiarism. Their reaction identifies a variety of contextual-specific factors that are prominent in explaining Chinese students' practice of source misuse.

Limitations of The Study

The small number of respondents could be a limitation. Participants were restricted to those who were affiliated with the Applied Linguistics programs in Lanzhou, China. However, despite its limitation, this study has generated useful information and insights into the reasons for postgraduate students' misuse of dissertation sources, and the reactions of dissertation supervisors towards students' inappropriate source use.

Discussion

Our study shows the causes for postgraduate students' identified source misuse include students' lack of access to sources, their poor source-searching and documenting skills, and lack of instructional support. Li and Casanave (2012) and Stapleton (2010) commented that uncritical selection of sources adversely affects student's source use and writing quality. Such observation of postgraduate students' difficulties in selecting relevant references is consistent with findings of Borg's (2000) and Gu and Brooks' (2008) studies. These studies indicate both undergraduate and postgraduate students, especially those with limited content knowledge (Chandrasoma et al., 2004; Dong, 1996), might not know how to search relevant sources. Dong's (2009) study suggests Chinese university students' limited access to key journals might account for their source misuse. Students in our study thought that, apart from providing a Chinese source author and a publication date in the reference list, there was no need to provide in-text citation. This finding is consistent with Dong's (2009) study of Chinese undergraduates' defense on their unattributed appropriation of translated text. When students are under the pressure to finish their dissertations, if they are struggling with their writing in English, then they may be more prone to inappropriately borrow texts from other sources without proper attributions (Campbell, 1990; Shi, 2006).

A surprising finding is that the widely suggested language proficiency is not perceived as a cause of plagiarism. The study suggests important implications—cross-culturally variant perception of plagiarism and university's regulating culture/pedagogical support are crucial to our understanding of textual borrowing among postgraduate students. Supervisors' evaluation towards students' actual source misuse is mainly conditioned by Chinese culture's acceptability of plagiarism as suggested by previous studies (Sowden, 2005; Zobel & Hamilton, 2002).

Even though a growing number of universities there have adopted and enforced anti-plagiarism guidelines, most of these guidelines still reflect an ethical-absolute view on plagiarism. In view of the findings of this paper, we suggest universities or relevant administration bodies from both cultural backgrounds should know inappropriate textual borrowing in students' source-based writing may not necessarily be induced by intended deception, but rather caused by the writer's underdeveloped textual skills when they are making or designing relevant policies or pedagogical curriculum. Patchwriting, as Pecorari (2003) argued, should be viewed as a "neutral rather stigmatizing error" (p. 342). We suggest pedagogical efforts should be directed more on how to help writers develop out of a patchwriting phase rather than on how to punish them, in their process of learning to write their dissertations.

Since academic training at the postgraduate level is arguably the first and most crucial phase for a novice writer's development, more informed institutional policy and pedagogical support need to be in place in guiding and helping them grow out of patchwriting and source misuse. Based on the findings of this study, it seems that students' little exposure to the Western notion of appropriate citation behaviors, cultural-specific rhetorical tradition, and absence of systematic instruction on source-based writing are fundamentally attributable to their source misuse. To address such inadequacy, it is imperative to raise students' awareness of the potential forms of unintentional and intentional plagiarism that may occur in their dissertation-writing. In particular, raising students' awareness of potential cultural difference in attribution practice (explicit versus implicit attribution) between Western and Chinese writing is indispensable.

Supervisors and writing instructors are advised to explicitly teach the potential types of sources misuse behaviors (including cultural-specific or cross-cultural forms of source misuse) to students, and to lead discussions with students on why certain source use behaviors could be classified as plagiarism in their disciplinary practice. With this practice in place, writing instructors are encouraged to introduce students to the concept of transparency, and urge students to make and reflect their citation decisions based on this concept. Writing instructors may ask students to compare effective and ineffective sample writings in terms of the source-use transparency (Petrić, 2012; Polio & Shi, 2012), to raise their awareness of different forms of inappropriate source use. Concerning the latter, writing instructors can also ask students to identify the sample's source misuses and ask them to share their rationales with classmates. Writing instructors should provide students with disciplinary appropriate ways of citing sources and openly discuss issues pertinent to textual borrowing with students. In this study, we only analyzed in-depth two pairs of Chinese supervisor-supervisee's interview data. Thus, the results generated are still restricted to data in which interview data was capable of yielding. Future studies that draw on more supervisor-supervisee pairs' discourse-based and semi-structured interview data or adopted other methodological triangulations on a longitudinal basis may generate more insights.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide for Supervisors

Firstly, thank you very much for participating in this research project. The following interview will concentrate on soliciting your experience, observation, and opinion about source use and referencing in MA dissertation writing in applied linguistics. Please read each question carefully and answer in a way that most closely reflects your situation. Thank you very much for your cooperation!

Name: **Age:** **Research Interest:**

Prompt Questions

1. How many years have you been supervising MA candidates in their writings of MA dissertation? How many students do you usually supervise each year?
2. How many students do you currently supervise?
3. Are there any kinds of academic writing courses, workshops, or handbooks in your discipline to guide MA students on how to write up their graduation dissertation? Does your department teach the specific writing skills such as referencing? If so, what does it do?
4. What do you think is the role and function of the reference in MA students' dissertation writing in your discipline? In light of the disciplinary culture of your department, is the referencing or source using evenly or disproportionately encouraged in the various sections of MA dissertation? Can you specify?

Prompts: If disproportionately encouraged, which sections do you think are the referencing or source using more important? Why?

5. According to your previous supervising experiences, what do you observe are the common features and problems that MA students have had when making use of sources in their dissertation writing, such as insufficient use of references, source misuses (insufficient source acknowledgement and attribution). Can you elucidate?
6. Why do you think students exhibit those features and problems?
7. Among the above-mentioned problems, what kind or degree of source-misuse can be classified as plagiarism according to your discipline's regulation? Is there any discrepancy between your discipline's regulation and your own perception in terms of the identification of plagiarism? And what do you usually do when you have detected instances of plagiarism? What factors influence your specific way of handling?

For example:

- a. Copying word for word some lines or passages from published books, articles, or coursework material without acknowledgement and then presenting it as their own.
- b. Expressing someone else' ideas into one's own language and incorporating them into one's own writing without mentioning the sources.
- c. Listing useful secondary citations as primary citations in one's writing without having consulted the cited material oneself.

- d. Incorrect citation form, whether they are direct or indirect citation.
8. Now I would like to invite your comments about some specific points of source use in a particular student's draft dissertation that you have recently reviewed? You may skip this question if inapplicable.
9. Can you summarize your comment on this draft dissertation? What are the features and problems that you want to highlight regarding this writing sample's source-use? Additional prompt: does the student cover appropriate citation and refer to the appropriate source for them?
10. Conclusion: now that you have a clearer idea what the research is about, is there anything that I should have asked but did not, do you have anything that you want to add on?

Appendix B

Interview Guide for Student Participants

Firstly, thank you very much for participating in this research project. The following interview will mainly concentrate on soliciting your experience, knowledge, and opinion about source use and referencing convention in MA dissertation writing in applied linguistics. Please read each question carefully and answer in a way that most closely reflects your situation. Finally, thank you very much for your cooperation!

Name: **Age:** **Research Topic:**

Prompt Questions

Background information:

1. When did you begin to learn English? What is the specific area of study for your BA degree?
2. Could you please give me a brief introduction of your MA dissertation topic?
3. When did you begin to work on your MA dissertation? What is the schedule of this MA dissertation writing?

Questions on the writing process of MA dissertation

1. How are you doing with your MA dissertation? Does it progress smoothly? Do you encounter any problems currently?
2. How did you find your proposed topic? Could you please recall the difficulties that you have experienced during this phase?

Prompts: Have you found the topic with the help of your supervisor/your senior schoolmates/others' specific suggestions or solely your own reading of the literature that you are interested?

3. Prior to the MA dissertation writing, have you had any academic writing experience involving the use of citation?

Prompts:

- a) Have you ever received any kind of instruction or guidance (in the form of writing courses, workshops, or handbooks) on academic writing in general, MA dissertation in particular from your previous education? If yes, what are they? Does your department teach the specific academic writing skills such as referencing, abstract writing? If so, what does it do? If not, do you think it is necessary?
 - b) If you have received formal guidance, do you have any problem in making sense of and applying this guidance in your dissertation writing?
4. What do you think is the role and function of the reference in your MA dissertation writing?
 5. Are you familiar with the citation convention? What do you remember exactly? How do you learn these conventions? Under which circumstances, do you choose to learn these

- citation conventions? Do you have any tips on where to cite, how to cite, and why to cite after so many experiences of citing?
6. Considering the disciplinary culture of your department (including your supervisor's preference) and your own dissertation writing process, have you had any ideas about the importance of referencing with regards to the various sections of the MA dissertation? Which section do you think referencing is more important? Which section is less important? Can you elucidate?
 7. What are the difficulties or problems that you have faced regarding the source-use in this dissertation writing? Can you elaborate or show me some examples?
 8. What do you think are the appropriate source uses?
 9. What kind or degree of source-misuse can be classified as plagiarism according to your discipline's regulation? Please evaluate the following behaviors one by one.

For example,

- a) a. Copying word for word some lines or passages from published books, articles, or coursework material without acknowledgement and presenting them as one's own.
 - b) b. Expressing other's ideas into one's own language and incorporating them into one's writing without mentioning the sources
 - c) c. Listing useful secondary citations as primary citations in one's writing without having consulted the cited material oneself (if the interviewee does not know the difference between the secondary citations and primary citation, please explain their difference first)
 - d) d. Incorrect citation form, whether they are direct or indirect citation
10. What do you usually do to avoid plagiarism in your source use? Does the concern of avoiding plagiarism influence your strategy of source use?
 11. Now I would like to ask for your account on the writing process of your draft dissertation.
 - a) How did you locate the necessary literature?
- Probes: are you starting with a reading list given by your supervisor or with a specific RA or something else?
- b) How did you read the literature? Did you have any personal strategy or method regarding literature reading or managing? Did you take notes while reading? If so, can you elucidate?
 - c) How have you written up the draft dissertation?

Prompts: What is your writing sequence? Have you spared time for reading references and then writing up some portions or do you do them simultaneously or other ways? Can you elucidate?

12. Now I want to ask for your comments on some specific points that I have highlighted on your writing sample. As you may see, I have highlighted and labeled the passages with references in your writing sample, and I have prepared a copy of the original content of relevant sources as well (*Note: Prompts regarding this section will be formulated with reference to the quantitative textual analysis of source use in the specific writing sample*).
13. Can you summarize your supervisor's comments on this draft dissertation? What are the difficulties or problems that you have faced regarding the source-use in this writing sample? Can you show me some examples?

Conclusion: now that you have a clearer idea what the research is about, is there anything that I should have asked but did not, do you have anything to add on?

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