

Book Review

Investigating Plagiarism in Second Language Writing

By Jun Lei and Guangwei Hu.

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Plagiarism (from Latin *plagiarius*, which means “kidnapper”) is a form of intellectual theft where students present others’ works or ideas in academic discourses without proper acknowledgement. Within today’s twenty-first-century higher education contexts, plagiarism has persisted despite the efforts of English for academic purposes (EAP) teachers (Şık Keser & Razi, 2024). Notably, plagiarism is often much more frequent and severe among second language (L2) students, though the reasons remain blurred and require investigation. As the latest part of the *Elements in Applied Linguistics series*, co-edited by Li Wei and Zhu Hua, published by the Cambridge University Press, the book *Investigating Plagiarism in Second Language Writing*, co-authored by Jun Lei and Guangwei Hu in 2024, explores plagiarism in L2 writing from an applied linguistic perspective and discusses various approaches to its study.

This book contains six chapters. Chapter 1 provides the background of plagiarism in higher education, particularly within Asian contexts, and discusses the negative emotions of stakeholders and the need for more dimensional and scrutinous approaches to L2 plagiarism. Chapter 2 surveys definitions of “plagiarism” based on discursal conceptualization (e.g., “theft” in moral discourses, “violation of rules” in regulatory discourses, and “transitional stage” in developmental discourses). Chapter 3 reviews previous studies on student perceptions of plagiarism

in L2 writing, whose main findings showed an ineffective understanding of plagiarism or cognitive-behavioral discrepancies among L2 students, being compounded by variables including sex and academic major. Chapter 4 identifies key factors contributing to plagiarism: morals (e.g., peer influence), culture (e.g., cultural variations), practicality (e.g., the amount of workload), and development (e.g., lack of familiarity). Chapter 5 characterizes three approaches to handling plagiarism: (1) The punitive approach posits that plagiarism must be “caught and punished.” (2) The disciplinary approach communicates rules and conventions to students. (3) The educative approach advocates using pedagogical alternatives. Chapter 6 reiterates the need for a multidimensional approach to understanding and handling L2 plagiarism. It recommends devising clearer policies and providing students and teachers with more relevant training and support and calls for further applied linguistics research on student plagiarism.

Lei and Hu (2024) offer an effective introduction to plagiarism in L2 writing for higher education institutions and teachers. The book reviews an extensive number of scholarly and practical resources on student plagiarism, which helps the reader learn more about the diverse viewpoints and controversies in academia over the past decades. More specifically, it emphasizes the need for institutions to review and update existing regulations and policies for better alignment of academic integrity standards. The book also meets its aim to explain the issue of plagiarism on multiple dimensions, including morals, culture, and development, to help institutions and teachers in higher education handle such incidents in a holistic and appropriate manner. However, the book places too much emphasis on institutions and students, as evidenced by it having one chapter that surveys institutional definitions and practices in Asian contexts and another chapter exclusively on student perceptions of and stances on plagiarism. On the other hand, not much has been discussed concerning the perspectives or behavior of teachers, who are in the front line dealing with actual cases, be they suspected or confirmed. As is stated in the Introduction chapter, it is vital to offer a comprehensive account of student plagiarism from diverse stakeholders' viewpoints. To this end, it is necessary and helpful to learn how (L2) teachers from or in Asia would determine and handle plagiarism and whether inconsistencies arise across teachers' disciplines and individual differences.

As for implications in research, this book explains the distinctions between concepts such as “intentional plagiarism” and “unintentional plagiarism,” as well as “unacknowledged copying” and “unattributed paraphrasing,” for more systematic and finer classification of student plagiarism in L2 writing. In addition to students’ intention and behavior, the discursive conceptualization of plagiarism can potentially inform applied linguistic research on ideologies behind higher education institutions’ regulations and policies on plagiarism. Despite the intensive discussions on linguistic and cultural aspects of student plagiarism in academic writing, the book could have addressed the theoretical approaches to L2 writing itself and the pedagogical foci of L2 writing instruction more extensively in the relevant chapters, particularly Chapter 3 and Chapter 4. As reflected by its title, this book is expected to situate the study of plagiarism within contexts of L2 writing, rather than any contexts of writing in general. As Hyland (2019) suggested, L2 writing is a multidimensional and highly complex L2 productive skill that involves an array of approaches (e.g., product-based, process writing, and social approaches) and areas of analytical focus (e.g., focus on content, focus on text functions, and focus on genre). For this critical reason, it would be incomplete and flawed for applied linguists to investigate incidents of plagiarism and to discuss pedagogical implications for institutions and teachers without considering these essential aspects of L2 writing adequately.

In terms of practical applications, this book excels in describing and showcasing multiple approaches to examining plagiarism in L2 writing. As remarked in the book, the Anglo-American notion of plagiarism was deeply rooted in Western cultures and native English-speaking contexts for centuries, which differ greatly from their Eastern and English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) counterparts and result in criticism of its rationale and applicability to the latter. Thus, the book’s final suggestions for further applied linguistics research in specific contexts are timely and practical, as they call for the need to consider variations across teaching contexts and avoid comparative fallacies between native and non-native English-speaking students in higher education. It would have been even more timely and more practical if the book had explored the technological aspects of plagiarism investigation further. As the book is the newest element of the Cambridge applied linguistics series in today’s twenty-first-century digital era, the professional readership in the

field would most likely expect to read more content of relevance to digital literacies in academic contexts, as well as the fundamental concepts and applications of forensic linguistics in detecting and identifying plagiarism. The abovementioned themes in applied linguistics could have been, at least, minimally addressed in the Conclusion chapter for suggestions of further research directions. As the existing literature points out, the use of GenAI tools, such as ChatGPT and DeepSeek, renders it increasingly difficult for instructors to detect plagiarism (e.g., Baron, 2024; Shaw, 2025; Song, 2024). It would, therefore, be beneficial to provide a more up-to-date discussion on the detection and conceptualization of GenAI-assisted plagiarism and to suggest how frontline teachers in the higher education sector should approach the phenomenon accordingly.

In conclusion, the book *Investigating Plagiarism in Second Language Writing* is a practical resource for applied linguists and higher education teaching practitioners in Asian and other ESOL contexts. The book lays a good foundation for the reader to understand the controversial definitions of plagiarism in academia and the key discursal representations of such a persisting phenomenon on several dimensions. Additionally, the book offers a typology of plagiarism in academic writing and presents existing empirical findings on different types of factors contributing to such behavior among L2 English students, as well as describes the rationale for and the strengths and limitations of each mainstream approach to coping with plagiarism within higher education ESOL contexts. It would have been more comprehensive had the book addressed in greater depth the teachers' and institutions' perspectives of the issue, the key theoretical aspects of L2 writing concerning the topic, and the digital aspects of plagiarism in academic writing from an applied linguistic point of view.

References

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