

## ASIAN STUDENTS' CHALLENGES IN WRITING WITH CONFIDENCE

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The increase in international English language learners (ELLs) from East Asia entering American universities has presented challenges in writing classes for both students and faculty. In particular, when ELLs have not reached a level of academic language proficiency to appropriately address academic writing assignments, some resort to various forms of plagiarism. This study explores whether this cohort of ELLs plagiarize intentionally or unintentionally in order to receive insight into their reasoning and to identify specific cross-cultural and developmental challenges they encounter. With this knowledge, as writing instructors we hope to better address their needs in and out of the classroom when writing a college-level paper.

*Keywords: academic writing, cross-cultural differences, ELLs, plagiarism*

**Research** has explained unintentional plagiarism as a necessary pathway toward understanding Western academic writing practices in which ELLs exhibit patchwriting (Howard, 1995; Lund, 2004; Sivell, 2015). Examples include copied phrases that may or may not be attributed and that are integrated with a student's own language (Howard, 1995). This method of writing is apt to reflect a writer's attempt at comprehending information of challenging text and symbolizes a point in an ELL's developmental process (Howard, 1995). While such writing is commonly identified as plagiarism in the United States, the developmental perspective recognizes patchwriting as unintentional, because ELLs are unaware of their "wrongdoing" (Howard, 1995; Sivell, 2015). Sivell (2015) explained that the outcome of patchwriting is sometimes awkward or incomprehensible because, as distinguished by Widdowson (1978), students focus on the "usage" of language, such as utilizing correct syntax or vocabulary, rather than "use," which requires students to "convey a specific meaning in a particular context" (Sivell, p. 33). In other words, in addition to understanding the meanings of new words, ELLs must also learn to select a higher order discourse strategy involving synthesis, evaluation, and creation when attempting to restate an author's intent. While this developmental perspective considers patchwriting as a transitional stage toward acclimating to Western writing standards, Pennycook (1996) asserted a cultural perspective to explain that patchwriting occurs when adhering to different educational practices (pp. 225–226), so that paraphrasing for ELLs, who are often from Asian countries such as China and Korea, is complex. For instance, respect for knowledge and scholarly information is typically learned by students as early as their middle-school years, when they are required to reproduce "large quantities of classic Confucian texts" to prove their academic worth (Maxwell, Curtis, & Vardanega, 2008, p. 26). While admirable, this training in rote memorization comes at a cost. Lund (2004) explained that "Confucian-influenced societies" exhibit knowledge of written work by emulating, and therefore copying, language from superiors (p. 96); however, when ELLs decide to produce previously memorized stock works instead of authentic writing, this strategy choice results in distance or postponement in developing reading skills and avoidance of the opportunity for *use* of

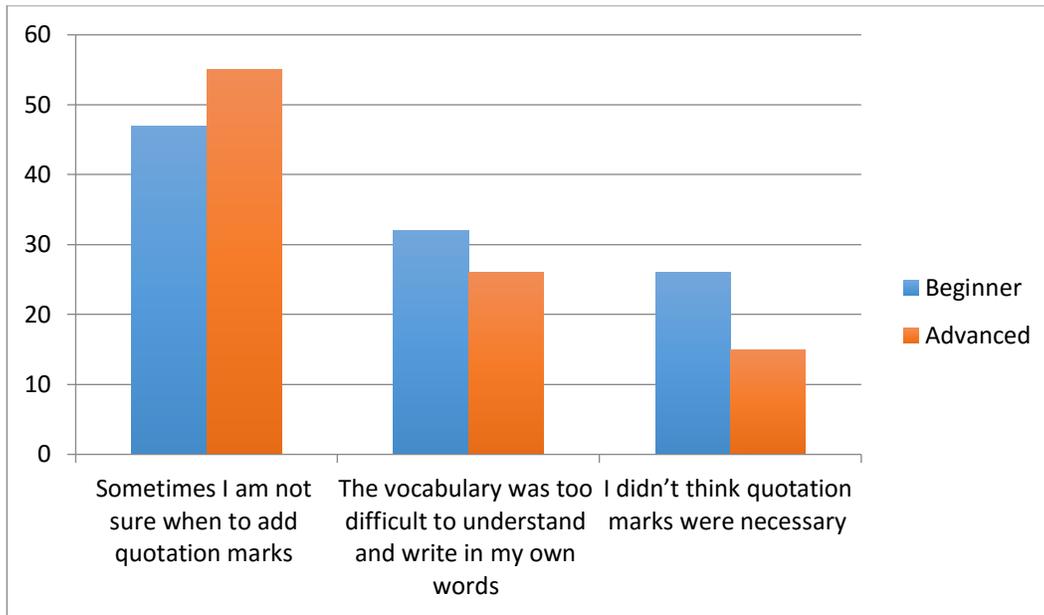
language, ultimately inhibiting the necessary growth for critical thinking required for academic writing in U.S. contexts. Yang and Plakans (2012) classified memorization as a strategy choice for addressing writing tasks that involved reading, writing, and listening as inhibitive to the development of critical thinking. They explained memorization or patchwriting as “test-wiseness strategies,” in which students do not select linguistic or cognitive processes; rather, a “test format” strategy is chosen that avoids the selection of more demanding “discourse synthesis strategies” requiring “identifying, extracting and connecting information” (p. 94). Moreover, when ELLs chose to patchwrite or write memorized passages in response to integrated reading, listening, and writing tasks, performance worsened in all aspects, whereas the “use of discourse synthesis strategies improved the quality of students’ writing [as well as] contributed to better reading and listening comprehension” (p. 95).

### Study and Methodology

With a noticeable increase in plagiarism cases and a shift to teaching primarily international ELLs, in 2015, we conducted a survey among the beginner ( $n = 59$ ) and advanced ( $n = 199$ ) ELLs in the ESL program at Stony Brook University to probe into students’ theoretical and practical knowledge of plagiarism. The population was mostly Asian, consisting of 209 Chinese, 29 Korean, and six Taiwanese, and 13 students from India, Indonesia, Vietnam, Qatar, Thailand, Brazil, Ecuador, and Slovakia. An anonymous questionnaire was distributed to students during class or sent as a link for them to complete at their leisure. Questions were constructed to align with the institutional academic integrity statement on syllabi and specific examples of plagiarism noted in the *Program in Writing and Rhetoric Staff Manual* (2004) (also used by students), such as “copying without quotation marks, paraphrasing without acknowledgement from someone else’s writing and using someone else’s facts or ideas without acknowledgement” (pp. 20–21). Anonymity was emphasized, as was the researchers’ main purpose: to better instruct students in future writing classes. In order to receive the most honest responses possible, students were not required to answer one question before proceeding to the next. The overall response rate for beginner ELLs (henceforth noted as **B**) was 58% ( $n = 34$ ) and for advanced ELLs (henceforth noted as **A**) it was 64% ( $n = 127$ ).

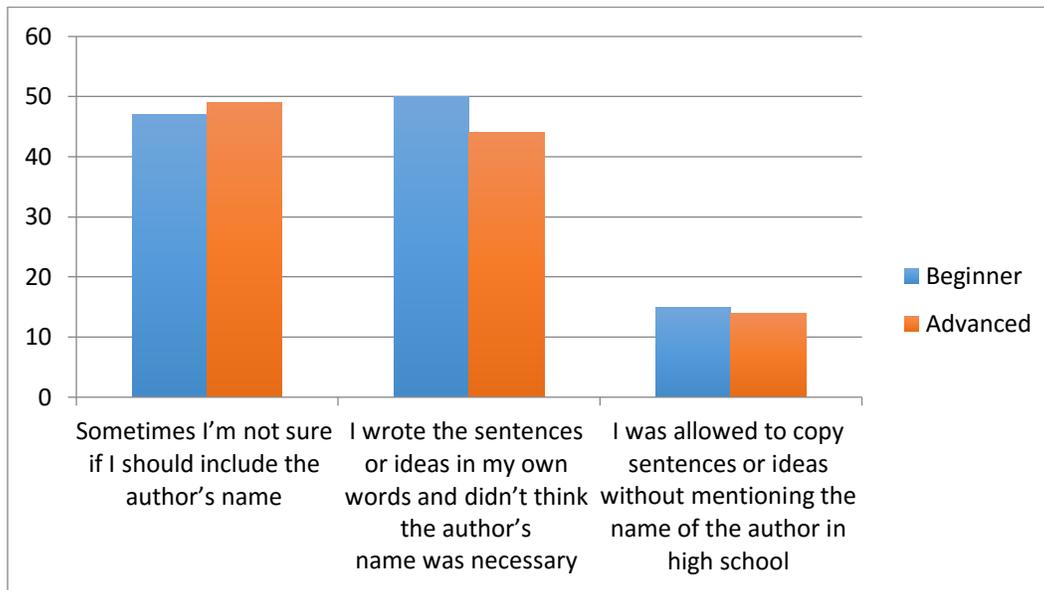
## Findings

### 1. Have you copied sentences from a text or website without putting them in quotation marks?



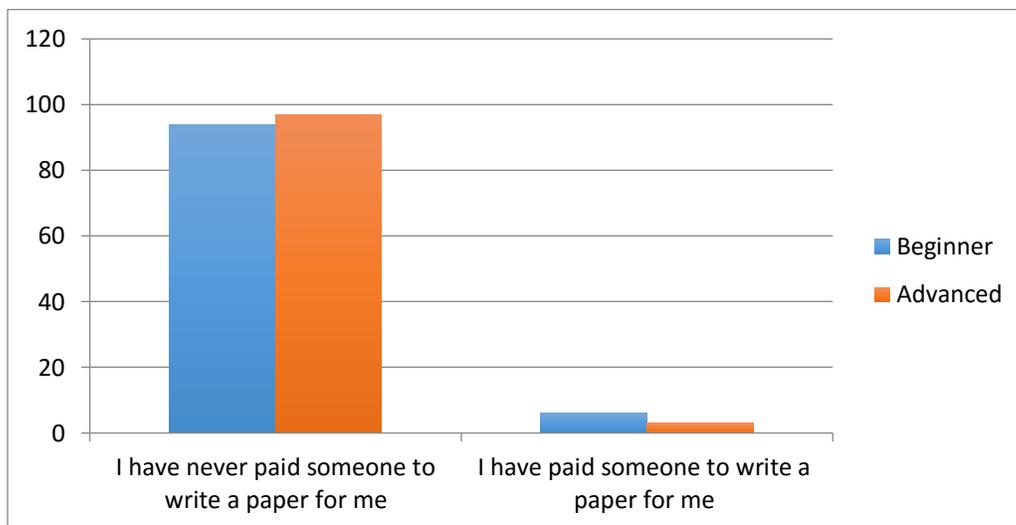
*The majority of the respondents indicated they have copied sentences without quotation marks because they were uncertain whether quotation marks were needed. As students advance in their writing, more complex reading, analysis, paraphrasing, and referencing are required, resulting in increased opportunities for error and possibly a higher rate of confusion about the mechanics and rules when attempting to quote others' words (B: 47%–A: 55%). Understanding the meaning of new vocabulary seemingly results in the abandonment of using mechanics correctly and possibly of appropriate strategy selection in completing writing assignments; the result is copying incorrectly, albeit less so for more advanced writers (B: 32%–A: 26%). A portion of ELLs (B: 26%–A: 15%) did not realize that quotation marks are needed when copying exact words, highlighting that a difference exists in educational training regarding documentation standards.*

## 2. Have you copied sentences from a text or website without mentioning the author's name?



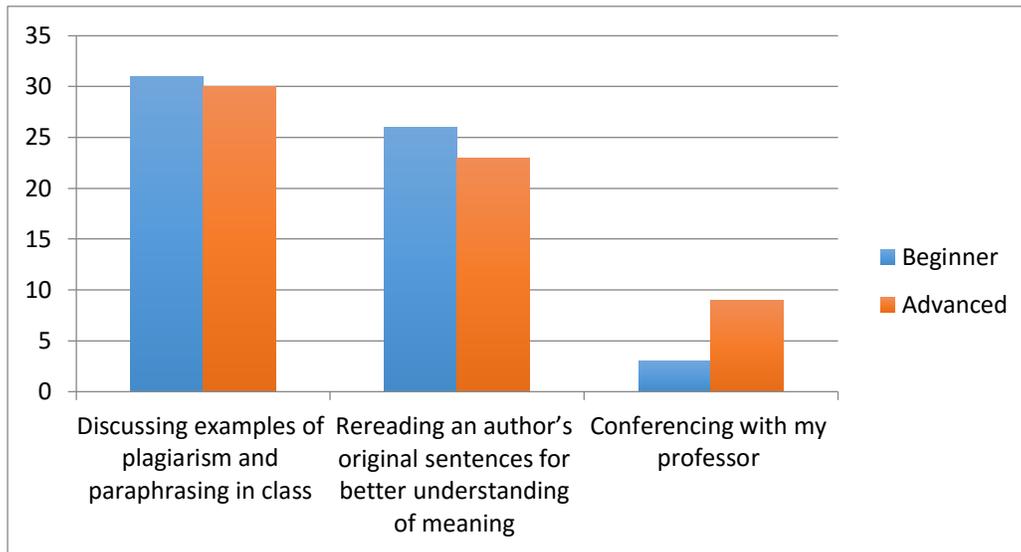
The majority of the respondents in the advanced level indicated they have copied sentences or ideas without mentioning the name of the author because of uncertainty whether the author's name was needed, while beginners primarily thought as long as words were paraphrased, the author need not be mentioned. Similar to the previous question and responses, nearly half of the ELLs surveyed (B: 47%–A: 49%) also lack confidence in attributing properly. The high response in believing that including the author's name is not necessary when paraphrasing (B: 50%–A: 44%) highlights the challenges of transitioning to adhering to documentation standards in an American university. ELLs surveyed also reported that copying in high school and excluding the author's name was permitted (B: 15%–A: 14%), supporting the claim that cross-cultural challenges exist.

## 3. Have you ever paid someone to write a paper for you?



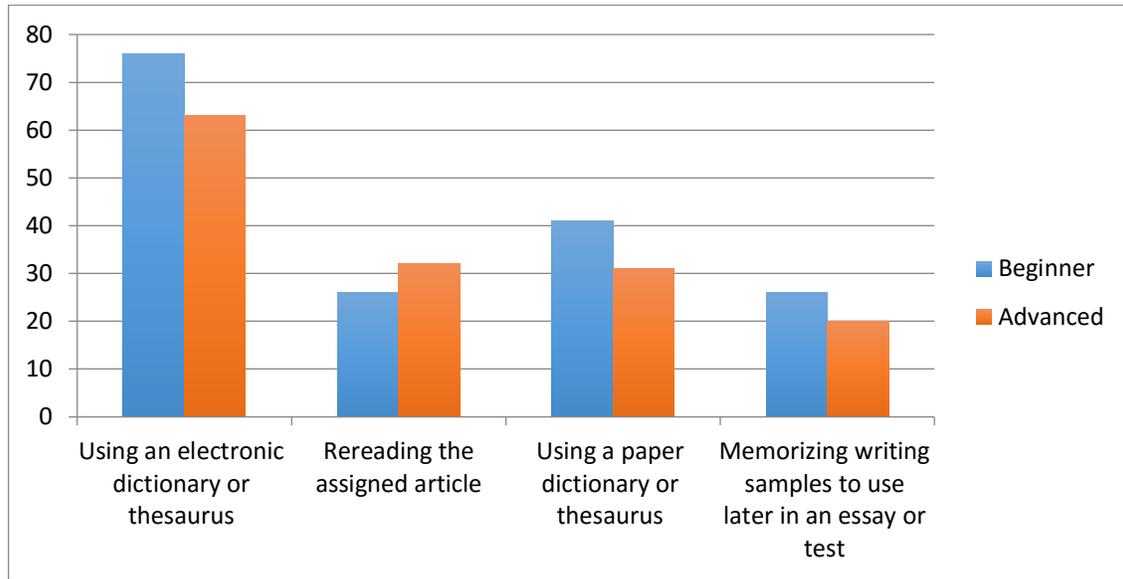
The majority of the respondents indicated that they do not seek to plagiarize intentionally. Advanced ELLs seem to be less compelled to pay someone for a paper (B: 94%–A: 97%), perhaps because they have had more experience writing successfully in English. Worth noting is a small minority of ELLs who reported plagiarizing intentionally (B: 6%–A: 3%).

#### 4. What helps you most in learning how to paraphrase?



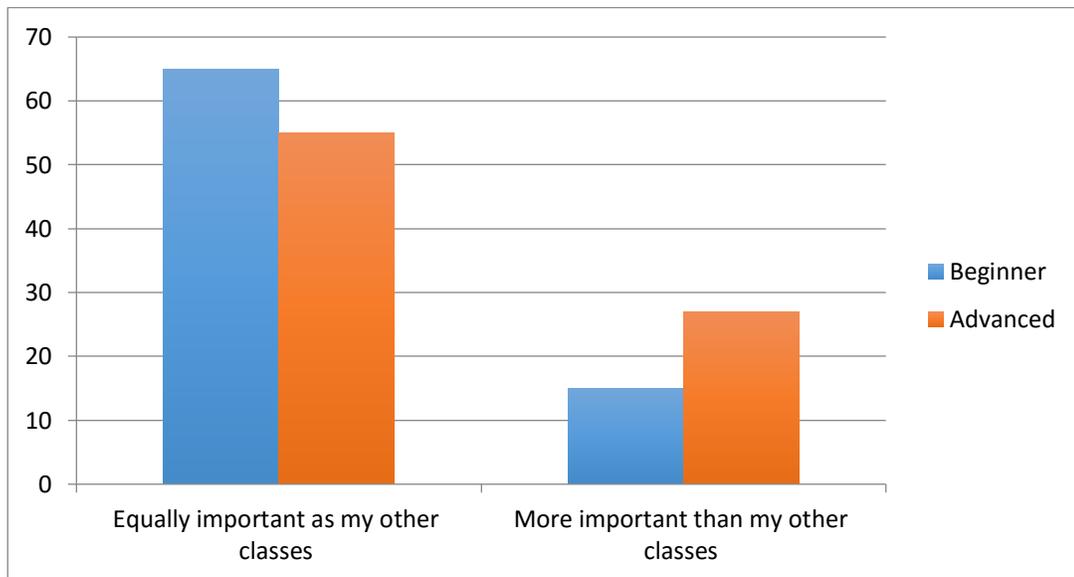
Both levels of respondents indicated that their improvement in understanding how to paraphrase involved collaborative learning in class. Collaborative learning as the top response (B: 31%–A: 30%) is promising; however, less than half of the students surveyed selected this choice. It is also encouraging to see that some ELLs view rereading for comprehension as a helpful strategy for synthesis and creating new sentences (B: 26%–A: 23%); rereading for better understanding, however, should be recognized as fundamental to academic success by all students. Thus, a clearer understanding of students' perception of learning goals may be in order. While beginner ELLs do not conference as often as advanced ELLs do with their professors, this option is rated quite low overall (B: 3%–A: 9%), perhaps indicating another cross-cultural challenge in requesting help from an established scholar. It is also possible that writing teachers deem other aspects of writing, such as content, organization, and/or grammar, as more important in producing an essay than in acquiring paraphrasing skills.

### 5. What is most helpful in writing a paper?



The majority of the respondents agreed that convenient access to an electronic dictionary is most helpful in writing papers. Rating an electronic dictionary as more helpful than rereading text when writing papers (B: 76%–A: 63%) indicates the value ELLs place on the *usage* of language over *use*. Rather than rereading to discern context clues, ELLs opt for a quicker route to learn new words. One interesting discovery is that some students memorize writing samples to complete college-level writing assignments (B: 26%–A: 20%); moreover, this strategy was rated by beginners as equally as helpful as rereading text, revealing clear cross-cultural challenges. On a positive note, the decrease in choosing memorization as students advance indicates more successful strategizing as their developmental skills level improves.

### 6. How important is your ESL class compared to your other classes?



*The majority of respondents regarded their ESL class favorably.* We were pleasantly surprised to discover that more than half of both groups valued their academic writing class as equally important as their other courses (B: 65%–A: 55%), while some even valued their academic writing class more so (B: 15%–A: 27%). These encouraging responses illustrate the desire ELLs have to improve their academic writing skills and afford us a rationale and an opportunity to teach to their needs. The higher value placed on academic writing by advanced ELLs may indicate their clearer understanding of the value of authentic writing as they experience more opportunity, instruction, and potential success in expressing their unique thoughts and ideas.

## Conclusion

Recognizing the existence of both cultural and developmental crossroads in teaching international ELLs, particularly from East Asia, is the first step in effectively addressing their unique challenges with academic writing. Openly discussing the various strategies they may choose when writing an academic paper, including memorization and patchwriting, can validate students' knowledge and help them better understand the unfamiliar goals of an American university writing course. The uncertainty this cohort of ELLs has expressed about attribution and purpose of mechanics requires more teacher guidance as well as integration of practice exercises, with paraphrasing and attribution being consistently implemented in teaching practices. Collaborative learning is crucial in helping international students from East Asia acclimate to American university standards, as working through the complexities of paraphrasing with peers affords them opportunities for discussion and debate and helps to shift emphasis from the *usage* of language as a primary indicator of success to emphasis on the learning goals of the course and better *use* of language. In contrast, reliance on an electronic dictionary and apps such as Google Translate, though very convenient for quick translation, compromises learning, especially in developing the higher order discourse synthesis strategies needed for competent use of language. Further research into ramifications on academic language proficiency can be helpful in developing a better understanding of how to guide students in transitioning and becoming less reliant on such resources. Given that college writing courses require employing multiple functions of language and skills such as questioning, brainstorming/discussion, and debate, regularly incorporating oral/aural language skills in a writing curriculum will maximize communicative opportunities for overcoming cross-cultural and developmental challenges that could impede student success. ELLs from East Asia primarily plagiarize unintentionally; encouraging them to recognize that their original thoughts and words are valued more than repeating another's ideas will empower them to write with confidence, ultimately producing more authentic writing.

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