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The editor dilemma in modern language instruction: Is tutoring out of control?

Maite Correa ^{a,*}

^a *Colorado State University, US*

ABSTRACT

Although academic dishonesty has received considerable attention in recent years, there is little research on how non-serious cheating issues in a discipline such as biology or chemistry can become highly serious offenses in the context of instruction in the modern languages (MLs). One of these *grey areas* is (unauthorized) editing by a tutor and/or a native speaker: Given that a substantial part (if not all) of the grade in a ML assignment is language usage (be it grammar, vocabulary, spelling, or organization), any assistance received that improves linguistic form (and as a consequence the student's grade) should be considered as an act of punishable academic dishonesty. Still, and even if it seems obvious, it is not uncommon for language instructors to come across assignments that contain advanced linguistic forms or colloquialisms that do not belong to the linguistic repertoire of the student who *wrote* it (Correa, 2011).

In this paper I address the following questions: Is the use of a tutor/native speaker accidental plagiarism (Beasley, 2004), pseudonymity (Walker & Townley, 2012), or *contract cheating* (Clarke & Lancaster, 2006)? Who is at fault? How can it be prevented or minimized? Should students be allowed to have tutors at all? Is there a double standard when it comes to graduate students and faculty?

Keywords: cheating; peer editing; unauthorized help; academic integrity; tutoring

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* Corresponding author: Colorado State University, US
Email address: maite.correa@colostate.edu

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Introduction

Recent research reveals that a great majority of students at all levels and in all disciplines have cheated in the past (Anderman & Murdock, 2007; Beasley, 2004; Berry, Thornton, & Baker, 2006; McCabe, 1993; Park, 2003; Staats, Hupp, Wallace, & Gresley, 2009; Sivell, 2013). The percentage of students who report cheating or having cheated ranges anywhere from 50% (Staats et al., 2009) to 90% (Berry et al., 2006), a variation that can be explained by the great disparity of students' and instructors' definitions of *cheating*. In fact, and even though these definitions vary considerably from discipline to discipline (Martin, 2005), instructors within the same subject area also disagree really (Correa, 2011; Higbee, Schultz, & Sanford, 2011).

After many years in the educational system, most college students can provide working definitions of *plagiarism* that typically mention "taking words or ideas that are not one's own" and "failure to attribute sources" (Weldy, 2008, p. 1), which is oftentimes understood as *copying each other's homework* or *essay borrowing*. However, "taking words or ideas that are not one's own" would by definition include *getting help from a tutor or a friend*, which is hardly seen as academic misconduct by most modern language students. If it was, why would legal tutoring services or writing centers be readily available to help with assignments?

In a study surveying students' understanding of the scope of academic integrity violations, Baker, Berry and Thornton (2008, pp. 9-10) found that 90% of the participants did not consider the following as serious cheating: 1) A failure to contribute a fair share to a group project or letting others do a majority of the work; 2) The receiving of unauthorized help on an assignment; and/or 3) Work done on an assignment for others without authorization. A possible explanation for this alarming result might be that students are not really aware that, even if they are not borrowing an essay or copying from each other, unauthorized collaboration is still fraud.

What editing is... or rather is not?

Among the most common types of cheating in the ML are: copying information from a source verbatim, presenting someone else's ideas without attribution, paraphrasing someone else's words, providing false references, cut-and-paste plagiarism and the use of online translators. While all these are usually carried out individually, there are three additional forms of cheating that involve unauthorized help from another person. Their definitions and most common examples are provided below:

- a) *Contract cheating*: "the process of offering the process of completing an assignment for a student out to tender" (Clarke & Lancaster, 2006, p. 2). Contract cheating is different from buying a pre-written paper at a paper mill in that it is personalized for both the occasion and the student (outsourced).

- b) *Pseudepigraphy*: attributing the work of one author to another, like using a paper that was originally written by someone else for another class. In this case, the paper is not personalized.
- c) *Collusion*: “agreement between two or more people to deceive or mislead to gain an unfair advantage” (Mahmood, 2009, p. 1349). An example of this would be to work with a classmate when it is not allowed to work in groups.

Getting help editing a paper cannot be considered *contract cheating* or *pseudepigraphy* because, in our case, the paper is still technically and primarily written by the student who is getting assessed (the ideas, content, and first draft are the student’s). It could be an example of collusion, however, if the student’s intention is to deceive to gain an unfair advantage and/or if the editor is aware of the ethical ramifications of such an edition. I will come back to this point in the next section.

Editing: the Roommate Problem vs. the Writing Center

Writing centers and tutors as legal unauthorized help

Writing centers are widespread in colleges and universities. There, undergraduate and graduate students can find *writing consultants* (tutors) who can help them become more effective and more confident writers free of charge. Among their services, we usually find:

- Talking through ideas for a project or brainstorming.
- Discussing course readings.
- Providing research strategies.
- Helping with documentation.
- Helping with proper citation and formatting of sources.
- Helping improving editing and proofreading skills.

Still, it has been noted (Harris, 1992; Matthews, 2010) that many students perceive these centers as car shops where they can leave their paper to be “fixed while they passively watch” (Conway, 1997, p. 2). Far from the truth, these centers are learning resources designed to generate better writers and not better papers (North, 1984). In fact, some writing centers specifically warn the students (and their instructors) that they will not:

- Write a paper for the person seeking help.
- Edit, correct or proofread the paper.
- Correct conceptual matters.
- Dispute or question grades.
- Provide instruction in ESL.

In addition to this list of non-allowed practices (usually available on their website), most centers provide their tutors with a training manual that emphasizes the tutor's role in guiding the student to find her own answers (Harris, 1992). Still, research examining (regulated) tutoring sessions at these centers shows that, although some tutors make an effort to "broaden the focus of the question and present language rules and additional examples" (Matthews, 2010, p. 631), most tutors find it faster and easier to serve the function of "dictionary" and corrector (Williams, 2004), both of which fail to improve the tutee's language skills (albeit not their grades).

Private Tutors and the 'Roommate problem'

Although writing centers are usually available for non-native speakers of English who are mostly evaluated for content (and not form), few institutions offer a similar service for modern language students. For this reason, struggling ML students tend to end up hiring a private tutor, which creates additional ethical issues. In essence, the two most important differences between tutors at a writing center and a private tutor are that: 1) the private tutor gets paid directly by the student, and 2) what private tutors and tutees do is not regulated by anyone outside of this relationship (no instruction manual or list of rules is provided to tutors/tutees). As a consequence, what a tutor can or cannot do (proofreading, editing, etc.) is often regulated by the tutee, who, after all, is the paying client.

Another concern about hiring private tutors is that, for students, anyone who speaks the language is qualified to be a tutor (or an *editor*). As a result, tutoring/editing services are more than often provided by friends or family members willing to *help free of charge*, which means that an alarming percentage of our students are getting help from tutors/people who are not only unaware of the ethical ramifications associated with providing tutoring services, but also untrained to teach the language (what I call the *roommate problem*):

Her mother "reworks" her papers, leaving ideas alone but inserting words and altering punctuation. In other words, she is acting as [her]*editor* rather than her *responder*, giving [her] assistance beyond what her fellow students could expect from fellow classmates and even from writing tutors, should they take the same assignment to [the] Academic Resource Center (Martin, 2005, p. 63).

Of course, in cases like this one, the tutor (and sometimes the tutee) might indeed not be aware that *inserting words*, *altering punctuation* or *proofreading* are not acceptable practices when it comes to language assignments, a point that I discuss in the next section.

Where is the Line (What is allowed) and Why?

Previous research divides plagiarists into three types: accidental, opportunistic and committed (Beasley, 2004). While committed and opportunistic plagiarism are deliberate and should be harshly punished, accidental plagiarism is the responsibility of both instructors and students alike (Correa, 2011). In fact, in my experience as a professor, I have had a substantial number of ex-students of mine who have come to my office and asked me to help them with *editing* a paper for another class, which makes me believe not only that many cases of unauthorized collaboration are accidental in nature but also that they could have been prevented by giving students the appropriate information at the appropriate time.

The first logical step towards minimizing accidental occurrences, then, is making students aware of the reasons why having someone edit their assignments is unethical for them and their peers (Sivell, 2013). According to the website of the Student Judicial Affairs of the University of California–Davis (<http://sja.ucdavis.edu/FILES/collab.html>), unauthorized collaboration:

- Misrepresents joint work as the work of an individual.
- Gives those who break the rules an unjust advantage and results in unfair competition.
- Makes students unaware of gaps in their own knowledge and skills preventing them from learning all they can or should from their assignments.

Previous research unanimously agrees that “the teaching role is crossed when a skilled writer helps a less skilled student *write* a paper that would be well beyond the student’s ability to do alone” (Lathrop & Foss, 2000, p. 120). For this reason, tutors should help the student correct or improve herself instead of making the corrections for her (Harris, 1992; Harris & Silva, 1993; Hafernick, 1984; Harwood, Austin, & Macaulay, 2011; Williams, 2004). This way, as the student plays an active role in the edition of her paper, she will learn to be able to do it alone in the future. In Vygotsky’s terms (1978), the tutor would scaffold the student’s learning (always within the student’s zone of proximal development or ZPD) by making connections to what the student already knows and providing opportunities for her to expand to the next level. This process, though, is not free of frustration for both parties, as students need to be aware that their questions will be met with more questions and tutors need to make an effort to resist the temptation of *just* giving the right answer.

However, when a student hires a private tutor or asks a friend for help, setting the parameters of the session becomes mainly the responsibility of the student (as in any other client-contractor

relationship). Consequently, and as private-tutor training is not possible, individual class instructors need to make it clear that the students are the ones to set the terms in which the private session is to be carried out. With this purpose, I recommend the use of a printed set of guidelines that both the student and the tutor can have at all times.

Prevention and Monitoring: Guidelines for tutors

Although general guidelines for tutors and tutees should be designed, codified and implemented at the departmental level –a rather utopian goal –it is each instructor’s duty to tailor them to their specific needs. Nevertheless, these guidelines should answer, at least, the following overarching questions:

- How much grammar, editing, and writing assistance is allowed?
- Can the tutor act as a *spell checker*?
- Can the tutor act as a “dictionary” for isolated words?
- Can the tutor answer specific questions about words, expressions or idiomatic usage?
- Can the tutor read the paper and point general grammatical weaknesses? If so, how?
- Can the tutor suggest or change sentence structure?
- What are the limits of help with organization and outlining?
- How is the help given by tutors to be monitored?

As a rule of thumb, guidelines should specify very clearly that:

- The students should acknowledge in written form whether the work is strictly and entirely their own or whether they have received any kind of help in the writing process (to avoid *deception* and prevent *collusion*).
- The student should go to the tutoring session with an almost-finished version of the paper and a set of *specific questions* for the tutor.
- Under no circumstances should the tutor *go over the paper*.
- The tutor should lead the student to her own solutions by asking more questions, and not by providing answers.

- The tutor's guidance should not go beyond the student's ZPD (for example, if the student wants to use a structure beyond his capabilities, the tutor should say 'you have not seen that structure yet, so you need to think of another way of saying it using what you know').
- A tutoring session should be focused on the *process* of writing and not on the final product.
- Students should provide their instructor with the *almost-finished version* they completed on their own before the tutoring session and all subsequent versions of the paper where the help provided by the tutor is clearly marked (in another color, for example).

These guidelines can be attached to the syllabus and made available for the student to share with their tutor. In the case of personal friends or family members, the responsibility of adhering to the guidelines would fall exclusively on the student: they should know how much and how to ask for help as well as know their own linguistic limitations.

Graduate Students and Faculty: A Double Standard?

In the previous sections, I have addressed the reasons why having someone else edit an assignment is unethical for undergraduate students in ML. However, is it also unethical for graduate students and faculty?

While it is not within the limits of this paper to explore ethical issues in disciplines other than those related to ML, it is important to take into account that graduate students and faculty in *all* disciplines are encouraged to use the services of an editor, especially if the language they are writing in is not their native one. In contrast, it may seem a double standard *within our discipline* to ask our students not to use a proofreader when we consistently use one (or several).

In order to address this apparent incongruence, we need to establish the main difference between faculty and undergraduate work: while faculty work is, in essence, collaborative (even when there is only one author), most student work is expected to be carried out individually. Published research is collaborative work in the sense that it is "a product of the publishing industry, as well as a product of, and for, a particular discourse community" (Burrough-Boenisch, 2003, p. 224) in which a number of people (copy editors, proofreaders, correctors, anonymous reviewers...) are expected to have contributed. Nonetheless, the fact that articles go through several revisions in order to meet publication standards does not necessarily involve unethical re-writing of the paper:

A further factor affecting the corrector's work has to do with the ethics of improving a text which, once published, enhances the author's standing in the academic community [...] [T]his poses a moral dilemma to correctors of [native speakers] texts as well as to correctors of [non-native speakers] texts [...] This view ignores the ethical implications of altering texts that are to be

published under another person's name [...]But should editors do this for the authors, or should they merely tell authors what needs to be done, thereby devolving full responsibility for the text on the author? (Burrough-Boenisch, 2003, p. 232)

As we see here, faculty should also take ownership of their writing by engaging in consistent, thorough self-editing and not by just letting editors *fix* their paper. With this purpose, it is common practice for editors to suggest changes and ask questions instead of re-writing the paper for the author.

Following this logic, and given that theses and dissertations are filed and made open to the public, they should fall in the same category as published papers:

[I]f universities require error-free texts to sit on their shelves [...] it is perfectly understandable for non-native writers in particular to turn to proofreaders for help" (Harwood, Austin, & Macaulay, 2010, p. 56).

In the case of graduate students' graded work, however, we find ourselves in a grey area: on the one hand, these students are enrolled in a ML department where a good command of the language is expected (and where some of them get assistantships to teach the language in question), but on the other, and especially at this level, most assignments are evaluated for content and not for form. Would it then still be ethical to ask/allow them to get a proofreader before submitting their work?

Given that graduate students in MLs are getting a degree in the language (be it with a concentration in linguistics, literature or both), it would seem appropriate and fair that the ones who are not highly proficient in its academic register do not get the same grade as students who are (on equal content terms). In other words, if it is *only content* that is being graded, would they be allowed to write the assignments in their first language instead? Following the same rationale as with undergraduate students, if a prospective employer is entitled to assume that a graduate student with a high GPA is highly proficient in the language, the use of an editor for graduate work should be considered fraud.

As we can see, although it seems logical that texts for publication (be they written by faculty or graduate students) and theses be measured by different standards than regular assignments when it comes to the use of editors, class work by graduate students should not be considered of a different nature than undergraduate work (even if form is a minimal part of the assessment).

Conclusion and Limitations

Tutoring is a very valuable service that should not be discarded or, by any means, forbidden by (ML) instructors. However, tutors are supposed to be educators and not personal editors (Harris & Silva, 1993, p. 531). In this paper, I propose the use of clear guidelines in order to:

- Make students accountable for their decisions by informing them (and their tutors) of the ethical ramifications of unauthorized editing.
- Help the students and their tutors understand the ethical expectations for each assignment.
- Highlight that writing is a *process* and not a final product.
- Emphasize the importance of getting help from a knowledgeable tutor who understands second language development and who can lead the student to their own answers through the use of appropriate guidance.

The main pedagogical implication of this paper, therefore, is that students should not be prevented from getting help at writing centers. Quite on the contrary, in this paper I emphasize the value of having students discuss writing strategies with *trained* tutors and see this interaction as an additional opportunity for them to become better writers.

The suggestions offered in this paper are not without limitations. For example, while it seems reasonable to implement a department-wide policy on what constitutes academic dishonesty in the ML classroom, this might prove to be a rather utopian goal. First, such an implementation could be considered to go against academic freedom, since each faculty member should be able to have their own definition of what cheating is in their class. Second, and also as part of academic freedom, faculty members could have different ideas on the penalties to be imposed should a case arise. Third, would there be any consequence for those who decide to ignore it? How would such a department-wide policy be enforced?

Another limitation is that, although the suggestions offered in this paper might mitigate cheating from those who do it unintentionally, they do not solve the problem at hand: committed and a good portion of opportunistic cheaters will still try to get away with it. It will be, then, the instructor's (moral) duty to put in place the appropriate detection measures and to take action when needed.

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Maite Correa is Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics in the Foreign Languages, Literatures and Cultures Department at Colorado State University. She has a BA in English Linguistics and Literature (2000) from University of Deusto and an MA in Hispanic Linguistics (2003) and a PhD in Second Language Acquisition and Teaching (2008) from the University of Arizona. She has published on critical pedagogy, metalinguistic awareness, heritage language learning and academic integrity. Other research interests include psycholinguistics, instructional technology, multilingualism and forensic linguistics.