

## James McCrostie

Daito Bunka University

### Ghost-written textbooks

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ELT textbooks, ghostwriting, textbook quality, ELT publishers

Ghostwriters are a common but hidden part of ESL/EFL textbook publishing. This paper gives examples of the many forms ghostwriting takes, outlines how the practice exploits ghostwriters, and discusses whether or not ghostwriting constitutes plagiarism. While often dismissed as a victimless crime, the use of ghostwriters has a negative impact on textbook quality.

ゴーストライターは、隠れた存在ではあるが、ESL/EFL テキスト出版ではありふれた存在である。本論では多くの例を挙げ、ゴーストライター利用の慣例について概説し、盗用にあたるかどうかを検討する。被害者なき犯罪としてしばしば見過ごされがちではあるが、ゴーストライターの利用はテキストブックの質にネガティブな影響を与えている。

**G**HOSTS haunt our English classrooms. Virtually all the major publishers use ghostwriters to produce at least part of many English textbooks. Like shape-shifting spirits, ghostwriting takes many forms. Sometimes a famous name on the cover replaces the name of the actual author who might receive some form of recognition on the inner pages. Another form occurs when one famous author is listed on the cover in large type, with the names of the co-authors who did most of the writing in much smaller type. Famous names also get placed prominently on book covers even when they only worked as editors or consultants.

It is impossible to determine what percentage of English textbooks ghostwriters write. While investigating this topic, I conducted interviews with 11 textbook authors and publishing company employees working in Japan and the United States. The majority of these insiders had ghostwriting experience and while all admitted that ghostwriting is widespread, no one wanted to be quoted by name.

Should teachers and students care who writes the textbooks? The practice should be of concern because it exploits those authors doing the real work, sometimes gives undeserved prestige to a few brand name authors, and because it borders on plagiarism.

#### A common practice

The multi-level textbooks released by major publishers seem to make the most use of ghostwriters. Major companies I found evidence of having published ghostwritten ESL textbooks include: Cambridge University Press, Heinle Cengage, Macmillan, McGraw Hill, Oxford University Press, and Pearson Longman. According to an editor working for one of the companies associated with a famous British university, multi-level courses require armies of editors and freelance writers. A publishing company typically commissions a big name in TESOL to act as the general. He or she designs a syllabus and produces a draft chapter or two. A platoon of privates then writes all the student books, teacher manuals, workbooks, and other materials required for a big textbook series. Of course the famous name gets printed in big type on the cover, even if they only assisted with the project and let others do most of the grunt work.

In other cases, a famous author writes the first book in the series. But due to time constraints the publisher hires freelancers to produce the rest of the series. According to one author with ghostwriting experience, buyers of books have to beware and check the quality of the last book in any series extra carefully.

### Spotting the ghosts

While it is not easy to identify ghostwritten textbooks, it is not always impossible either. Reading the fine print can provide clues. I will discuss four examples – not because they are automatically bad textbooks, but because they show some of ghostwriting's common forms.

Longman's *Worldview* series (Rost et al., 2005) plasters Michael Rost's name on the cover first, followed by the names of the other authors in smaller type. Since Rost's name is printed first and in a larger font size, it would not be unreasonable to assume that he wrote the book. However, he only acted as the series editor and is credited as such on the back cover. In one interview, whenever Rost was asked questions about being the author of *Worldview* he referred to himself as the editor but failed to explicitly correct the misunderstanding (McBennett, 2004).

The fine print in Macmillan's *Synergy* series proves similarly revealing. The books' covers credit five authors with Adrian Tennant and Clyde Fowle listed first. However, the inside back cover lists Tennant and Fowle only as contributors of "additional material" (Tennant et al., 2006).

The fine print on the inside cover does not always indicate the contribution of ghostwriters. For example, the second book in a listening series published by Heinle has only the single name of a famous TESOL textbook author and professor on the cover. Nothing in the fine print gives any indication that this person was not the only author. However, according to a freelance writer I interviewed who is familiar with the textbook, the real author is one of the publisher employees.

Even textbooks that are not part of a series make full use of ghostwriters. The main author of a listening and speaking text explained how the process worked for his book on condition of anonymity. His graduate supervisor (a professor with Dr. before his name and the author of more than 30 textbooks) was hired by a minor American publisher to write a textbook. The professor wrote two chapters and hired his MA student to write the remaining ten. Editors ended up cutting two of the chapters, including one of the professor's. On the cover of the

published book the professor's name was printed first in type four times as large as the graduate student's name.

### Exploiting the ghosts

Ghostwriters must accept not only seeing their name in tiny type on book covers but also paltry paycheques in their bank accounts. Too often the publishing companies exploit ghostwriters as cheap labour. In many cases, however, inexperienced authors readily accept the exploitative nature of their inferior ghostwriter status, and many feel fortunate to have the opportunity for their work to be associated with a famous author.

As one MA student with ghostwriting experience explained, "I was just happy to list a textbook on my CV. If putting my supervisor's name first on the cover sells more books, I can live with that." However, in this grad student's case the professor had convinced the publishing company to give the student an advance and agreed to divide royalties equally. Such deals are atypical. Ghostwriting compensation packages get negotiated on a case-by-case basis; usually ghostwriters only receive a one-time payment. Whether a ghostwriter's name even gets printed on the cover is a point that ghostwriters must negotiate with the publisher. The authors and publishers I talked to said ghostwriters make very little money but allow themselves to be exploited to get a foot in the door of the textbook writing field. According to one publisher employee, "All I can say is that ghosts let themselves be exploited in order to learn the craft of creating a book. They make very, very little money on the deal."

Naturally, not all ghostwriters are satisfied with the experience. One ghostwriter quit writing commercial textbooks explaining, "I suppose if I kept gnawing at the bones the publishers threw me I could work up the ladder. But how can I compete with Dr. Famous who just throws together a syllabus and the publishing company hires a bunch of fresh faces to write the book?"

Teachers should be concerned about ghostwriting because it all too often means the exploitation of the freelance writer. Ghostwriters often fail to receive an entirely fair share of compensation, whether it is paid in cash or praise. Publishers exploit the ghostwriters' willingness to work cheaply. As we shall see, famous authors frequently exploit ghostwriters to build their own reputations. In doing so they hurt the credibility of TESOL as an academic discipline by indulging in a practice verging on plagiarism.

## Is ghostwriting plagiarism?

The use of ghostwriters by commercial English textbook companies is a dark secret shared by other academic disciplines. For example, somewhere between 11% and 50% of the articles on pharmaceuticals published in major medical journals supposedly written by scholars are actually ghostwritten by researchers employed by pharmaceutical companies (Jirik, 2006). Furthermore, several famous scholars have recently had their reputations tarnished by ghostwriting and plagiarism scandals including: Harvard Law school professors Charles Ogletree and Laurence Tribe, Yale Law professor Ian Ayres, and historians Doris Kerns Goodwin and Stephen Ambrose. But, does what one textbook author I interviewed referred to as “the commercial chicanery” of ghostwriting deserve a scarlet letter *P* for plagiarism?

### ***Failing to fully acknowledge contributions***

A number of conditions must be met for ghostwriting to constitute plagiarism. The first condition is the failure to fully acknowledge contributions. A university professor would condemn a student who paid someone to write most of an essay without properly acknowledging the contribution as guilty of one of academia's most heinous crimes. When that same professor uses a ghostwriter to produce a textbook, it is dismissed as an innocent form of marketing.

### ***Benefiting from the deception***

Plagiarism also requires the person claiming authorship to benefit from the deception. In the case of ghostwritten textbooks, the benefits for the famous names involved are clear. In addition to direct monetary gain, they also profit from the prestige of having people assume they wrote the textbook. Placing the famous name first, even when others did most of the writing, helps the big names in ESL secure and maintain their voice of authority as leaders in the field. Several big names in the English teaching field try to cultivate a kind of celebrity status for themselves. An important part of the process is being associated with various textbook series. Thus, ghostwriting can strengthen the authority and prestige of a few leaders in the field of TEFL to the detriment of the lesser-known authors who receive less than their fair share of the credit (Martin, 1994).

### ***Creating brand names***

Publishers support the creation of big name authors because they view many of them as brands that make selling the textbooks that much easier (Scheme, 2006). Publishing companies spend a

great deal of money and effort to help make a good textbook writer a brand name to use as a marketing tool. It is no coincidence that the most famous authors are often the best salespeople, effective public speakers who can travel the conference circuit and sell books. You can see some of them in action in Japan at the annual national JALT conference. However, as one publishing company employee pointed out to me, often the famous author does not have the time to write all the books the publisher can sell. If publishers are lucky, the big name might have time to write an outline and hopefully polish the finished text produced by ghostwriters.

Harry Lewis, the former Dean of Harvard College, labels this tendency for famous authors to rely on ghostwriters the “atelier phenomenon,” after Renaissance painters who had assistants imitate their style to allow the famous artists to increase output and income. Lewis points out when academics try to become celebrities it means “establishing a personal reputation and denying it, to the extent possible, to rivals and even to assistants” (Russell, 2007). The use of ghostwriters thus helps foster a star status for a select number of famous names involved in TESOL.

### ***Conventions of the academic discipline***

Definitions of plagiarism also depend on the conventions of different academic disciplines. A university history professor who attempted what so many in the TESOL profession regularly do would be forced to stand blindfolded with their back to the nearest ivy covered wall. Historians assume that the person listed as author on a book's cover actually wrote the text. The English textbook industry and its brand name authors appear to assume that the conventions of the discipline sanction ghostwriting.

When it became known that Martin Luther King Jr. plagiarized parts of his dissertation some tried to defend him by arguing that preachers had a tradition of borrowing from others (Hexham, 2004). Perhaps publishing companies feel the tradition of sharing ideas among teachers sanctions the use of ghostwriters. Then again, none of the people involved in textbook publishing interviewed for this article would go on the record, which suggests that publishing companies would rather teachers never know how widespread the use of ghostwriters has become.

### ***The harm of ghost writing***

A final consideration when deciding if the plagiarism charge sticks is whether readers are deceived to their detriment. Some might argue that ghostwriting remains a victimless crime because (apart

from the exploited freelance ghostwriters) nobody is harmed by the fact the famous name on the cover did not write the entire book. However, ghostwriting does have a pernicious impact and teachers should not insouciantly accept such textbook trickery.

For one, the quality of textbooks likely suffers from ghostwriting. One textbook author informed me that she stopped using ghostwriters to write books according to her syllabus because publishers could not find anyone who could write to her specifications. Another related the tale of how a publisher made terrible changes to the text he wrote, but as a mere ghost they were powerless to prevent the edits. The ghostwriter went on to complain that the big name listed as the main author failed to insist on any improvements, if they even noticed anything wrong.

Famous authors, too busy to properly write the book in the first place, will have problems ensuring the quality of the final product. If you have experience teaching from a textbook authored by a big name you have almost certainly come across a unit or activity that caused you to wonder: *why did Dr. X include such a terrible task/listening passage/reading/vocabulary item/grammar explanation?* You now have a likely explanation – blame it on ghosts.

Although a strong argument can be made that ghostwriting represents a form of plagiarism, most authors, publishers, and teachers who know about it ignore the problem. As a result, ghostwriting has become a form of institutional plagiarism; something technically against the rules but ignored by all the parties concerned to that point that it becomes institutionalised.

## Conclusion

Textbook authors, teachers, and students all end up suffering from the process of using ghostwriters to support brand name authors. While a textbook may become popular because of its high quality, unfortunately many can be compared to the most cynically manufactured pop albums. Too many books become bestsellers because of a publishing company's highly efficient sales push, of which star authors form a key part. Branding books with the name of a celebrity author draws teachers away from what might otherwise be better texts written by relative unknowns. Or worse, the books written by unknowns never see the light of day.

Unfortunately, there is not much that individual teachers can do to stamp out ghostwriting. However, when selecting textbooks for their classrooms, teachers should be aware that ghosts haunt the pages of many books. Read the fine print on the

inside pages to see if the famous name on the cover is listed as a series editor, consultant, or contributor. Most importantly, ignore the big name on the cover and concentrate solely on the quality of the textbook's syllabus and tasks.

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**James McCrostie** is an Assistant Professor in Daito Bunka University's Department of Business Administration. His teaching and research interests include academic and professional writing, vocabulary acquisition, and the commercialization of language teaching.