

STUDENTS' AWARENESS TOWARDS THE ACT OF PLAGIARISM IN ACADEMIC WRITING AMONG ESL UNDERGRADUATES IN A MALAYSIAN PRIVATE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

The act of plagiarism is commonly exercised among students especially in the tertiary education scene. With the current advancement of technology, the act of plagiarism is quite evident as students are able to acquire someone's work and claiming it as theirs easily. The long-term effect of this issue is quite worrying as it will affect the quality of the graduates we are producing specifically when it comes to their academic integrity. Hence, the purpose of this study is to investigate ESL undergraduates' awareness towards the act of plagiarism in their academic writing. A questionnaire on student's plagiarism awareness was adopted to elicit data in order to explore this matter further in the context of Malaysian private university's students. A total of 104 undergraduates underwent academic writing class participated in the survey. The results showed that in general, the students were aware and did have knowledge regarding both concepts of plagiarism and the characteristics of such act. Due to the awareness, the results also showed that more than half of the respondents claimed to not commit plagiarism when they write for their academic materials. The current study also looked into the relationship between gender and the frequency of plagiarism act and the findings revealed that the relationship was not statistically significant. The implication of this study could be used to help the university in getting better insight to prevent plagiarism hence promoting zero plagiarism culture among the undergraduates.

Keywords: plagiarism, academic writing, perception, ESL undergraduates, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Background of Study

The cases of plagiarism specifically among students already existed back in the decades and it is considered a crime in academia. To date, plagiarism are still present, and it could be around for a while if there are no preventive measures be taken upon it. The act of stealing someone else's ideas or work without proper acknowledgement could make the students to be penalized as it is unethical and overrule the academic integrity that every higher institution practices.

In the academia world, plagiarism is considered an academic crime because it is totally inconsiderate and disrespectful when the process and continues effort made by an author to write a book, paper, poem, or a scientific passage were disregarded, only to be stolen by the plagiarist and they actually had the audacity to claim all that as theirs (Beheshti, 2011). Undergraduates appeared to like taking shortcuts in getting their assignment done. The advancement of technology appeared to have made the cases worse as students are able to access the materials and the tools provided on the internet easily, allowing them to copy and paste information freely without properly citing the author(s) (McCabe, 2005).

Few studies have been conducted in identifying the reasons why undergraduates commit the act of plagiarism. One of the most reported reasons is the lack of awareness and exposure towards the concept of plagiarism (Singh, 2015). Unable to master the correct writing mechanism and to know the skill of paraphrasing and citing correctly could be one of the reasons why students resorted to plagiarising other people's ideas.

Problem Statement

The case of plagiarism is one of the issues that still remained unsolved among the undergraduates. The situation appeared to have worsen as involvement of the technology open for accessibility and aid the undergraduates to freely conduct such dishonesty. According to Ma *et al* (2008), the technology, specifically the Internet, have been easing our life with its accessible to vast amounts of information. However, due to the increasing deterioration of academic integrity among the students, they took this opportunity to carry out the copying and pasting of other people's work freely. Students did not correctly utilize the facilities provided these days as information are just a click away, which led them to manipulate the facilities wrongly and abused them for their own benefits.

Almost all sources that are available online are written in the English language and Malaysia being the country that used English as a second language, students here seemed to prefer taking the easy way around when it comes to writing up their assignments (Ting, 2013). For instance, instead of trying to understand the contents of a piece they were referring to, they straight away resort to copying and pasting the information from the sources without paraphrasing or properly citing the owner of the original work. As long as they get the job done. Fulfilling the requirement of the university appeared to be their main priority and any shortcuts available are straight away taken especially when the time is pressing for them to submit their work. Bahadori *et al* (2012) stated that one of the factors the students plagiarise was for their own efficiency gain. They cited what Straw (2002) referred to as 'the GPA thing' and cheating is deemed necessary for 'the price of an A' (Whiteman & Gordon, 2001).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition

University of Oxford (2020) defined plagiarism as an action of presenting someone else's work or ideas as your own, with or without their consent by incorporating it into your work without full acknowledgement. The word plagiarism originated from the word "plagiarius" which carries the meaning of kidnapper, robber, misleader and literary thief (Barnhart & Steinmetz, 1988). Fialkoff (1993) referred plagiarism as the act of stealing ideas or words that are higher than the level of public knowledge, meanwhile Pyer (2000) defined plagiarism as the act of

using other people's ideas, words or work and claiming and spreading the idea as if they were your own without crediting them to the rightful sources.

Based on the definitions presented above, the concept of plagiarism basically lies on the notion of stealing other people's ideas or works and claiming them as theirs without proper acknowledgement to the original author.

Characteristics of Plagiarism

The act of plagiarism is an unethical act in which has happened up until now. It is common for students to plagiarise works that they got access to and claiming as theirs especially in fulfilling their tasks for their university courses. With the advancement of the new innovations and technologies in this 21st century learning, the accessibility to information and written materials are higher, making it easier for students to commit the act of plagiarism without being caught. This advancement of technology leads to students acquiring new and different methods in committing the act of plagiarism compared to the past (Bahadori & Izadi, 2012).

Devoss & Rosati (2002) characterised plagiarism as useless, meaningless, unethical and thus forbidden as cited in an article by Bahadori et al (2012) (p.168). The audacity of claiming someone else's work as theirs and submitting them as their own should not be a norm especially in the tertiary education scene. Originality of works are important when fulfilling the requirement of university courses to ensure the validity of their submitted assignments are of their own thoughts, viewpoints and judgments. However, the reality is that plagiarism is still happening as if students could not care less about the work they are producing as long as they get the grade that they wanted. In an online article titled "What is Plagiarism?" (2017), plagiarism is characterized as follows:

- i. The act of accrediting someone else's work as yourself without giving proper credit to the author.
- ii. The act of copy and pasting someone else's ideas without giving proper credits to the sources
- iii. The act of not following the correct procedure of citing the ideas by not putting the quotation in the quotation marks.
- iv. The act of giving the wrong information about a reference
- v. The act of changing the words but using the same sentence structure from another source without proper acknowledgement
- vi. The act of using a large number of words or ideas from other sources with or without due acknowledgement.

(What is Plagiarism?, 2017)

Students' Awareness of Plagiarism in Malaysia Context

In this 21st century of teaching and learning, the cases of plagiarism among the undergraduates are one of the issues that needs to be addressed immediately. There are few studies that investigated on students' awareness of plagiarism in Malaysia context were carried out.

A study conducted by Yusof and Masrom (2011) on "Malaysian students' understanding of plagiarism" found that, the students were still unclear about the real concept of plagiarism itself. It was noted that many students misunderstood the correct writing mechanism for academic writing as they were often confused about how to summarize and cite the work of others. They

were aware that submitting the entire work and claiming as theirs are considered plagiarism but the process of paraphrasing and citing other people works were still foreign to them. This could be due to the fact that they were only being exposed to this concept upon entering higher learning institutions. From the findings of their study, Yusof and Masrom (2011) proposed that longer training should be provided for the Malaysian students to help them be exposed to the correct writing mechanism and understand the concept thoroughly.

Another recent study on plagiarism in the Malaysian context found that the students were likely to engage with plagiarism as they were unable to relate to their actions as academic crimes (Singh, 2015). It is the responsibility of the institutions to make sure that all the information regarding academic integrity is to be communicated to the students via the right channel. Disseminating the information effectively could help to overcome the issues surrounding plagiarism with proper policies and guidelines presented. Singh (2015) summarized her findings by stating that Malaysian university students' attitude towards plagiarism was yet to be generalized as proper exposure to the concept was yet to be achieved.

Gender and Plagiarism

There are several factors affecting students' act of plagiarism in the tertiary education and one of them is related to gender. A dated study conducted by Whitley et al. (1999) revealed that it was highly likely that male students would commit plagiarism compared to the females. The study reported that moral reasons appeared to be the main factor why females tend to not commit such academic dishonesty act. Interestingly, a much-dated study by McCabe and Trevino (1996) reported that tendency for the females to cheat had increased relatively similar to the males however the reasons attributed to such act were different. Females attempted to plagiarise when they become the third party such as allowing friends to copy their works, but males plagiarized for their own benefits.

This was later supported by a recent study conducted by Surenda-Negre et al (2015) on "Academic plagiarism among secondary and high school students: Differences in terms of gender and procrastination". In the study, it was reported that boys tend to plagiarize more compared to girls. It appeared that gender play quite a significant role in determining students' act of plagiarism which needed to be explored further. Therefore, this current study was carried out to investigate the relationship between students' gender and the frequency of committing plagiarism among Malaysian undergraduates in the tertiary education. This study also explored students' level of awareness regarding plagiarism specifically among ESL undergraduates in a private university setting.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative design where questionnaire was used to elicit data. The questionnaire consists of three sections namely Demographic Section, Section A and Section B. The Demographic Section contains basic questions on the respondent's demographic details. Meanwhile, Section A contains questions related to respondents' knowledge on plagiarism. The items of this section were adopted from a study on "ESL Undergraduates' Perception of Plagiarism in Academic Writing" by Zangenehmadar and Tan (2014). There are 15 items using three-point likert scale (1=Agree, 2=Not Sure and 3=Disagree) in this section. Section B consists of items used to identify the existence of plagiarism practice among the respondents.

Three items with Yes or No options which were adopted from a study by Hosny & Fatima (2014) were used for this section.

The respondents chosen for this study consisted of 104 students who undertook academic writing class for the semester. These ESL learners were bachelor degree students who came from different programmes in a private university in Malaysia. The sampling method used for this study was purposive sampling whereby specific ESL learners who undertook academic writing classes were selected in order to achieve the objectives of the study.

Few studies (Zangenehmadar & Tan, 2014; Hosny & Fatima, 2014) were referred to in preparing the questionnaire for this study in order to identify the aspects of plagiarism starting from their general knowledge towards the concept of the plagiarism and the existence of such act among the respondents. The questionnaire was distributed using an online platform, Google Form. The responses were recorded and a total of 104 responses were analysed using SPSS version 26.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Respondents' Demographic

106 questionnaires were distributed electronically to the respondents as the classes were conducted online due to the sudden global pandemic, Covid-19. All questionnaires were recorded, returned and analysed. All of the respondents were degree students. Out of 106 respondents, 37 (35.6%) were male students and the remaining 67 (64.4%) were female students. The details were tabulated in Table 4.1.1 as follows:

Table 1 : Students' Demographic (Gender)

	Frequency	Percentage
Female	67	64.4
Male	37	35.6
Total	104	100

Item Ranking for Students' Awareness Towards Plagiarism

Table 2 below showed the item ranking for students' awareness towards plagiarism. The mean score for each item was calculated and was ranked in ascending manner. The lowest value indicated students' tendency to agree with the items and the highest value showed the respondents' proneness to disagree with the statements.

Table 2 : Item Ranking for Students' Awareness Towards Plagiarism

Items	N	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation
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Q1 Plagiarism is deliberately using other people's words as one's own	104	1.08	.302	Top 5 Items
Q2 Plagiarism is deliberately using other people's ideas as one's own	104	1.13	.360	
Q14 Plagiarism is handing in an essay taken completely from the Internet	104	1.17	.471	
Q3 Plagiarism is using other people's words without acknowledgment.	104	1.22	.539	
Q4 Plagiarism is using other people's ideas without acknowledgment	104	1.22	.521	
Q15 Plagiarism is handing in an essay bought from Internet sites	104	1.52	.682	Bottom 5 Items
Q8 Plagiarism is failing to cite sources of reference completely and accurately	104	1.53	.737	
Q7 Plagiarism is handing in work that is written by someone else	104	1.56	.722	
Q13 Plagiarism is copying and pasting a paragraph from the Internet with small changes	104	1.63	.791	
Q12 Plagiarism is using material from the Internet without clear indication of its origin	104	1.63	.738	
Q6 Plagiarism is copying a paragraph making only small changes with synonyms	104	1.64	.762	
Q5 Plagiarism is paraphrasing paragraphs without due acknowledgment	104	1.68	.728	
Q11 Plagiarism is submitting work that I have already submitted for grading in another subject	104	2.12	.741	
Q9 Plagiarism is allowing someone else to copy from one's own work	104	2.24	.794	
Q10 Plagiarism is helping someone else write a paper that should be his/her own independent work	104	2.24	.865	

As depicted in Table 2, the item ranking indicated from the most agreed statements on plagiarism from students' perspectives to the least agreed statements on plagiarism. The top five items illustrated above showed that four items were related to the usage of other people's words and ideas in which they claimed as their owns and without proper acknowledgement to the sources. This showed that the respondents were aware that deliberately using sources either in a form of ideas or words, both were considered as plagiarism if acknowledgements were not given. This matched with the description of plagiarism by Starovoytova and Namango (2016) who described "plagiarism as practice of taking in either both original or slightly changed form of someone else's intellectual property such as work, ideas, data, graphs, spoken word and others and passes them off as one's own, with no-proper and sufficient- acknowledgement or citation" (p 48).

Based on the ranking in Table 2, it can be seen that students were also aware that handing in essay taken completely from the Internet is considered as plagiarism and this item was ranked third. Copying and pasting everything from the Internet and submitting them as one's own work are deemed as 'cardinal sin' in the academic writing scene. The usage of technology has played a vital role in this emerging scene of plagiarism in academic writing. There is no doubt that due to soaring advancement of technology, many software were developed which created easy accessibility for students to commit plagiarism. According to Ma, Wan and Lu (2008), "The Internet has brought wonderful opportunities for improving teaching and learning, but at the same time, it has also brought challenges to academic integrity." (p. 197 & 198). Hassan et al. (2018) stated that the students are using the Internet for research work, assignments, project work, etc however they do not spend their time creating new ideas. Instead, they obtained the access to the "readymade" or "cooked" materials available online with ease and without efforts to even acknowledge the sources.

The result of this study however contradicted with the researcher's own experience as a lecturer where majority of the students did not even try to write their own ideas. Instead, they copied and pasted every single words from the Internet without proper acknowledgement of the sources. This was reflected in their Turnitin scores when their assessments were run through the systems. Hence, it can be inferred that students were aware of the concept of plagiarism however they still resort to copy and paste when writing that could be attributed from certain reasons and factors which need further exploration.

The bottom five ranking consists of five items deemed as the least agreed statements by the respondents. Bottom two items were related to the involvement of third party in the writing process (Item 10 and Item 9). It is interesting to note here that the respondents seemed to disagree that helping someone else to write a paper when it should be his/her own independent work is considered as plagiarism. This showed that the respondents were of the opinion that lending ideas or words in structuring contents for academic paper is not considered as plagiarism. The result was parallel to the study by McCabe and Trevino (1996) who reported that male students plagiarized when they allowed their friends to copy their answers. Students inferred such act as merely helping to get the contents linked together but it is still deemed as academic dishonesty. The respondents also seemed to think that submitting work that has already been submitted for another work is not plagiarism as it was ranked 13th in the ranking. Copying and pasting the same ideas and works for another graded work is still considered as academic dishonesty despite it being the author's original works. Wilhoit (1994) stated that students who viewing this manner as just merely help-seeking behaviour from peers and "saw nothing wrong with their action" (p. 16). According to Learning Support Network Curtin University of Technology (2005, p.4), resubmitting the work that had been assessed and credited is considered as plagiarism which falls under the category of self-plagiarism.

The respondents also seemed to have indefinite view when involving the techniques of paraphrasing when the results reported that they tend to be unsure whether they were required to give acknowledgement if they paraphrased a paragraph when writing their papers. This was also reflected in item 6 (Plagiarism is copying a paragraph making only small changes with synonyms) which ranked 10th in the ranking. This indicated that the respondents were still lacking in the technicality and techniques of writing academic materials. Lack of exposure could be one of the factors of why they are having doubtful attitude towards the statements. This was parallel with the study by Yusof and Masrom (2011) where it was reported that students are still lacking in both techniques as well as the exposure of the technicality of the correct writing styles for academic materials, hence, the high rate of plagiarism.

Students' Act on Plagiarism

Section B of the questionnaire focuses on investigating the students' act of plagiarism. Three items were presented in the questionnaire and the result is tabulated as follows:

Table 3 : Students' Act on Plagiarism

Items	Yes		No	
	F	%	F	%
Q1 Have you ever copied and submitted as your own all or parts of another person's work without citing the source?	33	31.7	71	68.3

Q2 Have you ever copied and submitted as your own another person's work by replacing their words with other words having the same meaning, without citing the source	35	33.7	69	66.3
Q3 Have you ever used in your work exact words of another person without surrounding them with quotations and citing the source?	42	40.4	62	59.6

It was reported that 31.7% answered Yes and confessed to Item 1 asking whether they ever copied all or parts of another person's work as their own without citing the source. Surprisingly more than half of the respondents (68.3%) answered No. Besides, it was also reported that 66.3% of the respondents claimed to not commit the act of copying and submitting someone else's work as their own by replacing the author's work with other words having the same meaning without citing the source accordingly. The results also showed that only 40.4% confessed to the act of using exact words of another person in their work without using quotation and citation of the source. More than half of the respondents (59.6%) did not commit such action. In general, based on the findings of this study, majority of the respondents did not commit the act of plagiarism when it comes to academic writing. This may be due to their high awareness towards the concept of plagiarism and the unethical of such act in academic writing scene.

Statistical Significance between Gender and Act of Plagiarism

The current study also investigated the relationship between gender and the act of plagiarism. The objective was to see whether gender plays a significant role in students' act of plagiarism. The descriptive statistics according to the gender was tabulated as follows:

Table 4 : Students' Act on Plagiarism According to Gender

Items	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	p-value
Have you ever copied and submitted as your own all or parts of another person's work without citing the source?	Male	37	1.73	.450	.449
	Female	67	1.66	.478	
Have you ever copied and submitted as your own another person's work by replacing their words with other words having the same meaning, without citing the source	Male	37	1.70	.463	.534
	Female	67	1.64	.483	
Have you ever used in your work exact words of another person without surrounding them with quotations and citing the source?	Male	37	1.68	.475	.223
	Female	67	1.55	.501	

In order to identify the relationship between gender and the frequency of plagiarism act (male coded as 1 and female coded as 2) and the study variables which are the frequency of act for each item (coded as 1 for "yes" and 2 for "no"). It showed that the mean values for each item for the male students were slightly higher compared to the female students. This showed that the female students tend to plagiarise more than the male students for this sample of study. This contradicted with the reported findings pertaining to gender by abovementioned studies where it was found that the males appeared to commit the plagiarism act more than the females (McCabe & Trevino, 1996; Whitley et al. 1999; Fa'iezah, 2009; Sureda-Negre et al. 2015).

Based on the results above, it was reported that the p-values for each item was more than .05 ($p > 0.05$). Hence, there was no significant difference between gender and the frequency of plagiarism act.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Plagiarism cases in the tertiary education are indeed worrying as the rate of such act is still high among the undergraduates. The tendency to resort to commit such academic dishonesty are still present as they were not being exposed enough to the consequences that they could face if being caught cheating. Crediting the ideas and words of the sources are important in ensuring that the authors are acknowledged for both their efforts and their ideas.

Based on the findings of the study, it could be assumed that students are indeed aware of the concept of plagiarism and what underlies behind the term. However, the results also showed that the students were still unsure with the technicality parts in avoiding plagiarism such as paraphrasing, summarizing and etc. Therefore, a proper exposure to the techniques on how to write academic papers properly should be conducted especially for the final year students who are preparing to write their own project papers or dissertations. The University should take immediate measures in ensuring zero-plagiarism environment is inculcated among the students since the beginning of their study years in the higher education. It should be nurtured as early as possible to ensure that students do not turn to cheating in fulfilling their university's requirement. Besides, the results of this study also reported that there were no significant differences between genders and their acts in committing plagiarism. Thus, it can be assumed that in the context of this study, gender may not be a strong aspect in determining the frequency of plagiarism act.

Future study could investigate the relationship between the students' proficiency level and their frequency in plagiarizing as it is important to see whether which level of students tend to resort to cheating. Considering the issues being addressed, it is important for future studies relating to plagiarism are carried out in order to ensure that this problem can be solved.

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