

Mah, F., & Ting, S. H. (2013, June 28-29). *Academic literacy: Plagiarism in pre-university students' academic writing*. Paper presented at International Conference on Learning and Teaching 2013, Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

ACADEMIC LITERACY: PLAGIARISM IN PRE-UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' ACADEMIC WRITING

Florence Sau-Fong Mah
INTI International University
Nilai, Malaysia
fiorencesf.mah@newinti.edu.my

Associate Professor Dr Su-Hie Ting
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak
Malaysia
shting@cls.unimas.my

ABSTRACT

The study examined pre-university students' awareness and practices of plagiarism. The specific aspects examined were (1) perceived necessity to include citations in assignments, (2) preferred penalties for plagiarism, and (3) academic writing practices. Analysis of questionnaire responses of 28 pre-university students in a private university showed that the students were aware of necessity to include citations but had inadequate knowledge of citation conventions. A majority of the students felt that plagiarism should be penalised but preferred resubmission of assignments rather than a fail in the course. The most common academic writing practice is patchwork plagiarism where students combine texts from different sources without proper citation and referencing. The findings suggest that the unintentional plagiarism resulting from lack of awareness on plagiarism needs to be addressed in pre-university education.

KEYWORDS

Plagiarism, academic writing, academic dishonesty, citation, referencing

Introduction

Academic literacy encompasses the ability to incorporate ideas from authoritative sources in academic writing. Not citing sources of information constitutes plagiarism. Citation is often seen as learning rules on the use of punctuation marks and elliptical information to show author's names, title of research article, journal or book, volume, issue and page numbers as well as publisher information. However, proper use of citation conventions needs to be underpinned by a respect for intellectual property of others and, concomitantly, seeing copying as stealing of ideas – which is difficult for students to grasp, especially if they had been taught to memorise model answers for public examinations. Given this scenario, it is important to examine the views of pre-

university students on plagiarism in academic writing so that areas of inadequacy can be addressed.

The study examined pre-university students' awareness and practices of plagiarism. The specific aspects examined were (1) perceived necessity to include citations in assignments, (2) preferred penalties for plagiarism, and (3) academic writing practices.

Methodology

The questionnaire on plagiarism was distributed to 28 pre-university students in the ESL Studies subject of the South Australian Matriculation (SAM) programme in INTI International University, Nilai. All of them were in their first semester of their two-semester matriculation programme and were majoring in Science. At the time of the study, the participants had just been given a brief lecture on plagiarism.

The ESL Studies syllabus was based on the requirements of the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) Board. The students were expected to use in-text referencing in the argumentative essay in the final examination. Although marks were not allocated for referencing, the unspoken understanding among the markers was that a student must demonstrate proper citation and referencing in order to obtain grades higher than B+.

To examine students' academic writing practices and attitudes toward plagiarism, a 36-item questionnaire was employed. Part A elicited students' familiarity with citation conventions and perceived necessity to include citations in assignments. Parts B, C, and D of the questionnaires adapted from Ryan, Bonnano, Krass, Scouller, and Smith (2009) focused on attitudes towards plagiarism, preferred penalties for plagiarism and strategies for completing written assignments. The results were keyed into an Excel sheet to facilitate analysis of frequencies and means.

Results and Discussion

1. Perceived necessity to include citations in written assignments

The results showed a general awareness on the need to include citation in assignments. Only 10.7% reported that they never had to include citations (Table 1).

Table 1: Students responses on necessity to include citations in assignments

Proportion of assignments for which citations are required	Percentage (n=28)
All	35.7%
About three-quarters	17.7%
About half	21.4%
About one-third	14.3%
None	10.7%
Total	100%

Not all the students perceived the need to include citations because in the first few weeks of their matriculation year, the Science students were mainly required to write laboratory reports which do not need citations. The assignments that required citations came mainly from their ESL Studies subject.

The perceived necessity to include citations did not originate from fear of losing marks in assignments. The majority of the students reported that marks were not deducted (50% never; 17.9% sometimes, Table 2). This finding is in line with the marking schemes from the SACE Board that do not deduct marks for omission of citations but reward with high grades for inclusion of citations.

Table 2: Students responses on frequency of mark deductions for omission of citations

Frequency of mark deduction	Percentage (n=28)
Always	10.7%
Most of the time	21.4%
Sometimes	17.9%
Never	50%
Total	100%

Although most of the students knew citations were needed, many of them – according to their teachers – failed to cite. The main reason is lack of knowledge on citation (53.6%, Table 3). A worrying point is that 28.6% of students intentionally omitted citations to mislead their teachers into thinking that the ideas were theirs. This is when students need to be made aware of the counter view that assignments with citations show a well-read person.

Table 3: Students' reasons for omitting citations in assignments

Reasons	Percentage (n=28)
I don't know how to cite	53.6%
My lecturers didn't ask me to cite	32.1%
I want lecturers to think the ideas are mine	28.6%
My lecturers don't minus marks if we don't cite	25%
My friends also didn't cite	7.1%

Table 4 provides support for lack of knowledge as the main reason for omitting citations. Only 17.9% of the students were confident that their citations were correct. These results are expected as the students had just been introduced to citation in their ESL Studies subject.

Table 4: Students' responses on proportion of citations with correct conventions

Proportion of citations	Percentage (n=28)
Mostly correct	17.9%
Half correct, half wrong	21.4%
Mostly wrong	3.6%
Do not know if I got it correctly or wrongly	57.1%
Total	100%

In fact, the ESL Studies subject is the main platform for 67.9% of the students to learn citations (Table 5). Another 14.3% who chose the option “Others” stated they learnt citations from the ESL Studies teacher because the ESL Studies teacher was assigned the responsibility to teach citation to ensure uniformity of conventions.

Table 5: Students’ responses on sources of information on citations

Sources	Percentage (n=28)
An English course	67.9
Internet	32.1
Friends	17.9
Books	17.9
Lecturers (not those teaching English)	14.3
Others, please specify	14.3
Have never learnt	3.6

2. Plagiarism behaviours of pre-university students

In the questionnaire, the students were asked to indicate the frequency of committing a particular plagiarism behavior on a 5-point Likert scale (1=Never; 2=Sometimes; 3=Often, 4=Usually; 5=Always). Table 6 shows that none of the means exceeded 3, indicating that the students exhibited the plagiarism behaviours some of the time.

Table 6: Mean frequency of plagiarism behaviours

Plagiarism behaviours	Mean
1. Borrowing from different sources and connecting them to make a paragraph.	2.86
2. Discussing an individual assignment with friends.	2.64
3. Including someone else’s words in their assignments without citing.	2.28
4. Quoting a paragraph exactly with quotation marks.	2.07
5. Getting somebody to fix up their assignments in order to make it better.	2.03
6. Downloading material from the Web and including it in their assignments without referencing	1.96
7. Translating from another language without citing the source.	1.88
8. Copying another student’s work with his/her knowledge.	1.85
9. Inventing references because they have forgotten to copy down the reference details.	1.82
10. Not contributing your share to a group assignment.	1.22
11. Getting somebody else to write their assignments/part of their assignments.	1.17
12. Copying another student’s work without his/her knowledge.	1.14
13. Submitting an assignment that has already been given marks.	1.07

The results show that the plagiarism behaviours were not outright cheating. The most common plagiarism is borrowing from different sources and connecting them to form a paragraph (mean of 2.86). Lucas (2012) explained that “patchwork plagiarism” happened because many students often did their assignments at the eleventh hour. Second in frequency is discussing an individual assignment with friends, which is not wrong. Third in frequency is including another person’s words into assignments without citing (mean of 2.28), referred to as “incremental plagiarism”

(Lucas 2012). The students almost never cheated in assignments such as not contributing their share to a group assignment, getting others to do their assignments for them, copying other students' work without their knowledge or submitting a marked assignment.

3. Students' choice of penalties for plagiarism

The students knew that plagiarism was wrong and ought to be punished (Table 7). However, the penalty should be "redemptive" rather than "punitive": counselling (69.9%) or warning (82.1%) and resubmitting the assignment (85.7%) rather than failing the assignment (21.4%) or the course (10.7%) or expulsion (7.1%). The students preferred "redemptive" penalties as they might be unwittingly guilty of plagiarism.

Table 7: Students' choice of penalties for plagiarism

Penalties	Percentage of students who agreed
1. Student is asked to resubmit the assignment	85.7
2. Student receives a warning from the lecturer	82.1
3. Student receives counselling	69.9
4. The incident is reported to the faculty	35.7
5. No action taken	25.0
6. Student gets an "F" (fail) for the assignment	21.4
7. The incident is reported to the university	17.9
8. Student gets an "F" (fail) for the course	10.7
9. Student is expelled from the university	7.1

*Students could tick more than one type of penalty

Similar results were found by Ryan et al. (2009) on students not preferring disciplinary action involving students failing the assignment or course or expulsion but only half of the students agreed to resubmitting the assignment or undertaking another form of assessment.

Table 8: Frequency for strategies to complete written assignments

Strategies	Mean
1. I write a paragraph by taking a few words from a few articles and put them together. I add my own words to make the meaning clear and include the source in the reference list.	3.53
2. I show my assignment to a lecturer for guidance	2.89
3. I share articles with a friend who is working on the same assignment topic.	2.61
4. I use information from an article, with a lot of changes in language and organization. I also make changes in the amount of detail, cite the source and include in a reference list.	2.57
5. I copy a sentence from an article into my assignment. I do not cite the source but include it in the reference list.	2.54
6. I quote an important sentence by copying the exact words with quotation marks (" "), cite the source and include in the reference list,	2.46
7. I use some sentences from an article and put them in a different order from the original. I cite the source and include in the reference list.	2.46

8.	I do a key-word web search and cut and paste information in my assignment.	2.39
9.	I get ideas from a friend who did the same assignment in earlier semesters.	2.38

Note: 1=Never; 2=Sometimes; 3=Often, 4=Usually; 5=Always

4. Strategies of completing written assignments

The main strategy used to complete their assignments was patchwork plagiarism (mean of 3.53, Table 8). The students also often showed lecturers their assignments for guidance and shared articles with friends working on the same assignment topic but these are acceptable practices. Other strategies to complete assignments stemmed from inadequate knowledge of citation conventions and can be addressed through instruction.

Conclusion

The study showed that the pre-university students unintentionally plagiarised when they completed written assignments due to lack of knowledge. The most common was patchwork plagiarism where they combined texts from different sources without citing but they only wanted a warning, counseling and resubmission of the assignment as penalties for plagiarism. The findings suggest that students need to learn not only citations conventions but also an understanding of intellectual property.

References

- Lucas, S. E. (2012). *The art of public speaking* (9th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Ryan, G, Bonanno, H, Krass L, Scouller, K., & Smith, L (2009), Undergraduate and postgraduate pharmacy students' perceptions of plagiarism and academic dishonesty, *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, 73(6), 1-8.