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STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF PLAGIARISM

Irina DAVID¹

Abstract

Plagiarism is one of the major concerns in the academic world, including in the field of teaching English as a foreign language. With ESP university teachers trying to raise awareness of this issue, academic writing activities being designed to provide guidelines on how to avoid plagiarism and paper-originality checking software being increasingly used, one would expect students to fully understand the drawbacks of integrating in their assignments information and texts taken from unquoted sources. However, as this paper aims to highlight, there are often significant differences between the teachers' expectations and the students' perception and approach to this practice.

Keywords: plagiarism, ESP, business communication in English.

1. Introduction

The development of technology and the easy and often free access to online materials has had a significant impact on people's approach to writing. To a large extent this impact has been positive, as open access to information posted from researchers all over the world and exposure to a wide variety of ideas can expand people's knowledge and offer them new perspectives. However, we cannot ignore the seemingly negative influence. As access to unsecured online information has become easier and more and more people have got a grasp on using search engines and editing tools, an increasing number of surfers have started to focus less on processing information and providing original content in their work and more on simply taking online data and integrating them in their writing as such, with little or no interpretation and no mentioning of the original source. Whether technology development is one of the elements leading to an increase in the number of plagiarism-related causes or simply one of the tools that has facilitated the discovery of these situations is still a reason for debate.

¹ Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication, The Bucharest University of Economic , Studies ,Bucharest, Romania, irina.david@rei.ase.ro

Unfortunately, plagiarism is not limited to the academic world and it is definitely not a practice applied exclusively by students. In the past few years several international public figures were accused of plagiarism. Depending on their cultural environment, they either faced serious consequences or simply continued keeping their positions with no visible negative impact on their activity. However, it would be safe to say that if plagiarism is to be reduced, awareness of its consequences and of strategies for avoiding it should be raised as early as possible in young people's minds.

In the following section of this article, attention will be paid to several views on plagiarism expressed by practitioners and researchers. Next, the article will provide information about how various groups of undergraduate students from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies perceive plagiarism. The focus will be primarily on the participating students' opinion about the benefits of plagiarism, the reasons why people plagiarize, and the potential negative consequences of plagiarism. There will also be comments about whether the students used this practice to complete their assignments, with mentions regarding their reasons. Finally, there will be a brief presentation of students' suggestions regarding strategies to avoid plagiarism.

2. Plagiarism Viewed by Researchers and Practitioners

Plagiarism is a practice that affects multiple areas of activity and fields of study (Pecorari and Petrić, 2014; Flowerdew and Yongyan, 2008; Guillot Pearson, 2011). Literature in the field of plagiarism is vast and heterogeneous, as researchers have failed to agree on several aspects related to this practice, including the role played by the intention to plagiarize or exactly what types of activities can be defined as plagiarism (Pecorari and Petrić, 2014; Flowerdew and Yongyan, 2008; O'Dwyer et al, 2010). As indicated by Pecorari and Petrić (2014):

Plagiarism has long been used as an umbrella term covering various types of unacceptable behaviour, some of which, but not all, refer to textual activity. Poor referencing, inadequate paraphrase and inaccurate citation are sometimes placed in the same category as commissioning a paper from a commercial service and submitting another student's paper as one's own. Problems arising out of students' lack of knowledge of citing conventions and lack of skills in using sources are thus placed in the context of cheating. As cheating is inherently intentional and deliberate, all the practices to which the term plagiarism traditionally refers, including poor referencing, are therefore seen as dishonest and deceitful behaviour. (Pecorari and Petrić, 2014: 271)

Despite the existence of views that make no difference between various degrees of plagiarism, the two authors emphasize the need to acknowledge that there should be different approaches to unintentional plagiarism, produced when students simply lack the knowledge to include references in their text, compared to intentional plagiarism, when students are fully aware that they are doing something wrong according to academic standards (Pecorari and Petrić, 2014: 275-276).

Flowerdew and Yongyan (2008) also support the necessity to distinguish between various types of plagiarism, claiming that

There is an increasing consensus among scholars that rather than viewing plagiarism simplistically as dishonest behavior, it is necessary to distinguish between intentional and nonintentional plagiarism, characterized respectively by an intention to cheat, on the one hand, and ignorance of the expected conventions on the part of novices learning the target discourse conventions, on the other. (Flowerdew and Yongyan, 2008: 164)

This article focuses mainly on intentional plagiarism, aiming to identify reasons provided by students to justify their use of unquoted information. Despite the academia trying to raise awareness of the unethical nature of plagiarism and despite the administrative rules implemented by some universities to reduce plagiarism, students all over the world keep plagiarizing. In a study published in 2012, Martin Zimmerman shows that “students will plagiarize just because they can” and adds that in many cases “even students who have been caught plagiarizing will, after dealing with the initial consequences, probably plagiarize again and again” (Zimmerman, 2012: 291). One of the main reasons why students plagiarize is related to their failure to take this practice seriously, either due to the lack of negative consequences or to the fact that they come from a cultural background that doesn’t discourage or penalize plagiarism (Zimmerman, 2012: 292, 294). Insufficient motivation or training about how to paraphrase or use referencing are also mentioned as frequent factors leading to plagiarism (Zimmerman, 2012: 296).

In their analysis of factors leading to plagiarism, Šprajc and her colleagues (2017) refer to how the various pressures that students are exposed to could determine them to plagiarize:

Students are under enormous pressure from family, peers, and instructors to compete for scholarships, admissions, and, of course, place in the job market. They often see education as a rung in the ladder to success, and not an active process valuable in itself. Because of this, students tend to focus on the end results of their research, rather than the skills they learn in doing it. (Šprajc et al, 2017: 33-34)

Based on research² carried out before their study was published, they identify several reasons for plagiarism, ranging from internal factors, as “being lazy”, “poor time management”, “fear of failure”, to external factors as “pressure from other students”, “pressure to receive higher grades”, “gaining easy access to material via the internet” or “taking risks because they think they will not get caught” (Šprajc et al, 2017: 34).

Similar views on the wide range of determining elements are expressed by Kutz, Sutherland and Zamel (2011), who highlight that it is very difficult to identify a specific triggering element leading to plagiarism:

² See Devlin and Gray, 2007; Sutherland-Smith, 2005; Park, 2003; Dordoy, 2002; Errey, 2002; Wilhoit, 1994.

There are many answers: some cultural (as when students' home cultures value the public, expected language over individual voices); some personal (as when students themselves fear that their own words and thoughts are inadequate); some based in a lack of knowledge (about how to paraphrase or cite appropriately); and some based in confusion about documenting collaborative activity. But also some because (as we often fear) an individual student has made a conscious decision to present the words and work of others as his or her own, to get through an assignment without doing the work it requires. (Kutz et al, 2011: 15).

There is also research that focuses on the teachers' role in promoting or reducing plagiarism (Guillot Pearson, 2011; Kashian et al, 2015).

Guillot Pearson (2011) mentions several mistakes that teachers make when designing writing tasks. These mistakes include practices as:

assigning work that lacks technological relevance; reusing old and outdated assignments; having unrealistic expectations; not teaching necessary skills; not adequately checking sources; and accepting work without proper documentation. (Scribner, 2003: 32, qtd. in Guillot Pearson, 2011: 55)

Guillot Pearson (2011) also shows that students “need practice in paraphrasing, quoting, and citing sources”, adding that “it seems contradictory to enforce accountability on students when they have not received the instruction needed to develop an understanding of a concept” (Guillot Pearson, 2011: 54). Even though her study focuses mainly on high-school students, one cannot deny that university students also need exposure to strategies that they can use to ensure their work is not the result of plagiarism.

Kashian and her colleagues (2015) show that “instructors need to understand the influences of student motivations, morality, and peer interactions on plagiarism to address plagiarism in the classroom through appropriate instructional activities” (Kashian et al, 2015: 242). Furthermore, they

must overcome the fact that many students who plagiarize do not know what constitutes plagiarism, much less how to prevent it by way of paraphrasing, quotations, and using common style guides, such as APA style. By recognizing that many students plagiarize unintentionally, instructors can take a proactive approach to address plagiarism in the classroom so that students avoid plagiarizing in the first place. (Kashian et al, 2015: 242-243)

Instructors are also expected to raise students' awareness of the negative impact of plagiarism on their academic record by informing them about university policies regarding this practice. They should also penalize plagiarism whenever it occurs to prevent it from being used again by the student who was caught plagiarizing or by his/ her colleagues who see that consequences do exist (Kashian et al, 2015: 243).

3. Students' Perception of Plagiarism

3.1. Data-Gathering Methodology

To assess how students perceive plagiarism, a questionnaire was distributed to several groups of undergraduate students from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Faculty of International Business and Economics. The students were selected from all three years of study, to check whether there are significant differences in their attitudes to plagiarism based on their various levels of academic experience. The participants in the survey were distributed as follows:

- 18 students from the Modern Applied Languages study program, 1st year of study – 10 forms completed;
- 32 students from the International Business and Economics (in English) study program, 2nd year of study – 15 forms completed;
- 30 students from the International Business and Economics study program, 3rd year of study – 12 forms completed.

As a rule, students were asked to work in small teams of two-three people to encourage them to share their ideas on the questions before writing their answers down. To ensure the answers and additional comments were as honest as possible, students were told they do not have to indicate their names on the completed forms.

There were six questions that the participants were invited to answer. This article will analyse students' answers to only four of them:

- Why do people plagiarise? What are the benefits of plagiarism?
- What are the dangers of plagiarism?
- Have you ever plagiarised/ copy-pasted information for an assignment? Why?/ Why not?
- What can people do to avoid plagiarism?

3.2. Students' Views on the Benefits of Plagiarism and the Reasons Why People Plagiarise

The main advantages of plagiarism identified by the respondents are the following:

- It is easier to copy-paste information than to create their own text – 22 forms;
- They spend less time completing the assignment – 20 forms;
- Using information taken from good sources helps them create a better assignment and make a better impression – 9 forms;
- They can learn something new from the sources they use – 3 forms.

Regarding the reasons why people plagiarize, the participants indicated the following aspects:

- People are lazy and want to invest little time and energy in the assignment – 12 forms;
- People do not have the knowledge they need to complete the assignment, they do not know how to combine information from various sources, or they feel uninspired – 11 forms;
- People lack self-confidence and have little trust in their own knowledge and ability to express their ideas – 5 forms;
- People are not motivated to be creative or they have no interest in the topic of the assignment – 2 forms;
- People are not responsible enough to take the assignment seriously – 1 form.

3.3. Students' Opinions Regarding the Dangers of Plagiarism

Most of the dangers identified by the participants are related to external factors, involving administrative penalties or the negative impact on people's reputation if plagiarism is discovered. The majority of the respondents seem to consider plagiarism is a practice with potentially negative consequences only if it is proven. Thus, the main drawbacks of plagiarism presented in the completed forms are:

- Suffering administrative consequences, including being criminally charged if the owner of the copyright rights decides to press charges – 15 forms;
- Being caught – 14 forms;
- Completing an assignment that will not be graded or will be given a low grade, failing exams – 11 forms;
- Getting expelled or dismissed – 10 forms;
- Getting a bad reputation – 6 forms.

There were several respondents who also indicated that plagiarism has personal consequences. In five of the completed forms there were references to the ways in which long-term plagiarism can affect people's personal development (e.g. developing their critical thinking skills, being creative, gaining trust in their ability to process information), as well as to how plagiarism prevents the creation and spread of new ideas, leading to a culture in which there is little variation.

3.4. Students' Comments about Their Personal Approach to Plagiarism

Despite their acknowledgement of the various disadvantages of plagiarism, a significant majority of the respondents admitted that they have used this practice. Only one of the 37 forms contained both a positive and a negative response, probably due to the fact that the members of the team had different experiences with copy-pasting information.

The reasons presented by the respondents to justify their choice to plagiarise include the following aspects:

- They had insufficient time to complete the assignment due to bad time management or tight deadlines – 15 forms;
- They didn't know what to write – 10 forms;
- It was easier to copy-paste information than to write the assignment on their own – 7 forms;
- They lacked interest in specific subjects or perceived them as useless on the long-term – 7 forms;
- They knew that there will be no negative consequences, because nobody would care about or check the authenticity of the assignment – 6 forms;
- They really wanted to get a good grade – 2 forms;
- They didn't know how to process the available information – 2 forms;
- They thought the source-texts were better structured than their own texts would be – 2 forms.

The responses summarized above clearly emphasize the fact that teachers need to get involved more before asking students to do written assignments. Firstly, they should provide input about methods to combine sources of information, extract important data and integrate the acquired information in written work. Secondly, they should increase students' awareness of the risk of plagiarism and not allow such cases to remain unobserved and undiscussed. Finally, they should help students understand that writing is an important skill to possess and to motivate them to take this activity seriously, even if the topic of the assignment does not match some of the students' preferences.

3.5. Students' Suggestions to Avoid Plagiarism

There were two forms which stated that plagiarism cannot be avoided due to the increasingly easy access to online sources. However, most of the students who participated in the survey indicated several ways in which plagiarism can be avoided. The ones referred to in their forms are:

- People should try to be creative and use their own knowledge – 16 forms;
- People should do more research, study and read more – 12 forms;
- People should learn how to process information, rephrase and use their own words – 7 forms;
- People should learn how to manage their time better – 6 forms;
- People should get information about the risks of plagiarism – 4 forms;
- People should use antiplagiarism software to check their own, as well as other persons' work – 3 forms (all completed by 3rd year students);
- People should have more confidence in their own knowledge – 2 forms.

Strategies mentioned in only one form each include: not criticizing others when they have the courage to express their own ideas, getting information about ways of boosting creativity, educating people to improve their manners, developing academic vocabulary, or securing online materials to prevent copy-pasting. Only one form, belonging to a 3rd year team of students, mentioned quoting and referencing as

a method to avoid plagiarism. It is relevant to mention that from the three programs of undergraduate study that students participating in the survey were selected from, only the Applied Modern Languages program has academic writing and research skills subjects included in the curriculum. It would therefore be interesting to repeat the survey with the now 1st year students in Applied Modern Languages when they are in their 2nd and 3rd year of study to check whether their approach to plagiarism will change significantly.

4. Conclusions

The analysis of the participating students' reveals that they are aware that plagiarism is a practice that could lead to negative consequences. However, most of the respondents seem to be concerned with the external consequences and to think that as long as they do not get caught it is an acceptable practice. Furthermore, almost all the participants admitted they have plagiarized when completing their assignments. When asked to make suggestions for avoiding plagiarism, they have provided general recommendations that can be applied to all academic activities, not necessarily to plagiarism. Only one form included information about how indicating references appropriately can eliminate the threat of plagiarism. There were no significant differences between responses provided by students from various years of study, which proves that in many cases the experience of being a university student has not changed the respondents' perception of the practice of plagiarizing.

All this highlights the need to increase students' exposure to activities meant to draw their attention to writing ethics. It is important to familiarize students with methods and strategies that they can implement to create assignments that reveal their personal opinions on the subject, as well as their ability to process information and use sources according to academic writing criteria.

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The author

Irina David is a Lecturer with the Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. She has a BA in English and French language and literature from the University of Bucharest, an MS in Business Communication in English and one in English Language Education and Research Communication in Business and Economics, both from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. In 2012 she received her degree of Doctor in Philology from the University of Bucharest. She co-authored textbooks on business communication in English and on cultural studies. She is also the author and co-author of books and articles which focus on cultural and methodological topics. Her main areas of interest include applied linguistics, the methodology of teaching business communication in English, cultural issues related to language training, or developing critical thinking skills. She has participated in research projects on multilingualism and designing tools for the (self)-assessment of language proficiency, the development of academic and research skills, as well as in projects on socioeconomic issues.