

Plagiarism: Is There a Solution – A Case Study

Amal Abou-Setta

amal.abousetta@gmail.com

Abstract

As the world is increasingly becoming more digitalized, plagiarism is becoming harder to understand. In the literature, a wide variety of causes have been proposed, such as easy access to the Internet, a desire to get higher marks, and poor time management. But could a deep investigation of students' perceptions of their practice give us a clearer picture? This instrumental case study sought to zoom in on the attitude of one higher education student in Egypt in an attempt to gain an insight into the problem with an aim to identifying the real reasons why students plagiarize. Adopting a grounded theory approach, a semi-structured interview was conducted with one graduate student. Based on the data analysis, a Plagiarism Hypothesis Model is proposed to attempt to explain higher education students' behavior and perception regarding plagiarism. Effects of plagiarism on learning and on students' perception of teachers have also been identified.

Keywords: Plagiarism, Writing, Teacher Education, Academic Honesty

Introduction

As the world is increasingly becoming more digitalized, plagiarism has been on the rise, forming a serious academic problem. Along with all the possibilities the Internet provides, it seems that more students are plagiarizing and more teachers are failing to adequately respond to this unethical practice. In Egyptian universities, plagiarism seems to be a thorny issue for a number of reasons. A lot of questions come to mind: Do students plagiarize due to lack of time, ethics, knowledge, or training? Could it be their poor language skills? Do teachers intentionally or inadvertently encourage plagiarism? This instrumental case study will seek to zoom in on the attitude of one Higher Education (HE) student in Egypt in an attempt to gain

an insight into the problem. The goal of the study is to develop a full understanding of the researched case, with the aim to identify the real reasons why students plagiarize.

Research questions

This study will seek to answer the following questions:

1. What are students' perceptions of plagiarism?
2. What are the main causes of the problem?

Literature review

Indiana University defines plagiarism as “using others’ ideas and words without clearly acknowledging the source of that information.” (2004) Recently, the issue of plagiarism has attracted many researchers to investigate the real causes behind the problem. Some researchers such as Fiona Hyland (2001) paid more attention to the technicalities of the teaching process. Researching two EFL classes in New Zealand and using a triangulation of methods, Hyland identified the indirectness of written feedback due to the shared perception of the sensitivity of the situation as one of the main factors leading to plagiarism. She found that teachers’ subtlety or reticence in dealing with plagiarism issues unsuccessfully communicated to the students their problems. Hyland recommended oral feedback to avoid misunderstandings, overcome sensitivity, and communicate realistic expectations of students’ production.

Ursula McGowan (2005), however, takes a more idealistic view. She argues that although everyone is busy with rules of referencing and source-acknowledgement, more attention should be given to the induction of students into the research tradition and the ‘culture of enquiry’, where ‘argument’ and ‘opinion’ are redefined. She contends that helping students develop an appreciation of research and using positive language when referring to their goal of attaining academic honesty rather than the implied negativity of “committing plagiarism” should help change students’ perceptions, and hence their practices. McGowan particularly emphasizes the importance of negotiating the ‘why’ together with the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of avoiding plagiarism.

A study that took a midway position was conducted by Hrasky and Kronenberg (2010). Surveying the teaching staff of five faculties, they concluded that strategies that both educate as well as communicate expectations are vital for plagiarism reduction. They highlighted the literature that suggests that all strategies are effective one way or another. In their discussion, they listed the eight most common reasons why students plagiarize, at the top of which were easy access of the Internet, a desire to get higher marks, and poor time management. In harmony with their study, Razera et al (2010), conducting their study in Sweden, suggested that plagiarism occurs due to a combination of reasons. Lack of training in scientific writing, lack of time, and lack of motivation were identified as the three most important ones.

Research Design

Adopting a grounded theory approach, a semi-structured interview was conducted with one graduate student (referred to as Salma) still on her first semester. Salma graduated from an engineering undergraduate program a few months earlier. Both her undergraduate and postgraduate studies have been in Egyptian universities where instruction takes place in her second language, English.

Salma is thought to be an excellent choice for the current research purposes as she represents an extreme case of a higher education student who has a full understanding of plagiarism, realizes that it is unethical, and believes the practice should be penalized, yet regularly plagiarizes and consistently gets high grades. This case is regarded as an instrument to shed light on the real reasons for the practice in Egypt rather than lack of the necessary knowledge and training. The use of one individual for instrumental case studies was recognized by a number of researchers as an acceptable practice (Cousin, 2005; Tight, 2010).

The interview was recorded after taking the participant's consent and reassuring her that it was anonymous. The interview was then transcribed and the data analyzed using an inductive approach. With the literature review and a number of generic questions in mind, I set on a task to scrutinize, code, and interpret the data and try to derive inherent concepts and themes to “develop a framework of the underlying structure” of the raw data and introduce a model

of understanding of the researched topic (Thomas, 2006). Although this study is in no way trying to generalize from the findings, nor is it claiming that the chosen subject is representative of the Higher Education student population in Egypt, it is still contending that it can make logical inferences and arrive at findings that help provide a better understanding of the researched topic. As Mitchell maintains, “The validity of the extrapolation [of a case study] depends not on the typicality or representativeness of the case, but upon the cogency of the theoretical reasoning”(qtd. in Tight, 2010).

Data Analysis

Is knowledge enough?

The problem with plagiarism in Salma’s case is clearly not due to lack of formal instruction or training in academic conventions. She clearly understands what plagiarism means. She knows how to avoid it and did so when she had to. Salma deeply believes plagiarism is wrong as explicitly made clear in the following exchanges:

Researcher (R): Do you think plagiarism is unethical?

Salma (S): Of course, it is.

R: Why is plagiarism unethical?

S: Because it is stealing.

The problem is obviously not one of principle. In fact, Salma would rather see plagiarism policies applied. She was of the opinion that plagiarism should be penalized and even suggested harsh penalties.

What are the real reasons?

Paradoxically, Salma admitted having plagiarized numerous times. She was conscious of some of the reasons for this behavior while other reasons were inferred from the interview:

Reason #1: The reason that was repeatedly highlighted by Salma was the teacher’s “flexibility”. To her, “flexibility” was defined as allowing plagiarism by not penalizing plagiarized work. Salma is confident it is easy to detect plagiarism. Hence, she stresses that teachers who accept plagiarized work know very well what they are doing. Although they do

not explicitly communicate their acceptance of the practice, they tolerate it and even reward it with high grades, which is enough of a signal to Salma to plagiarize.

R: But do they say it explicitly? Do they communicate to you that they allow plagiarism?

S: No, but as long as I'm getting an A or A+, then why not?

In her experience, 90% of the instructors allowed plagiarism. In her work for the other 10%, she abided by the rules.

Salma, "I had to rephrase everything [and] to have proper citation." Having a plagiarism policy in place by the institution is not enough; it depends on the teacher. Enforcing the policy by using plagiarism-detection websites and actually penalizing plagiarizing students is an effective deterrent in Salma's view, stressing that teachers who decide to detect plagiarism cannot be outsmarted.

Salma used the word "expectation" to refer to an unspoken contract between a teacher and her students. The only time she was accused of plagiarism was by a teacher assistant who penalized her by deducting grades from her final paper. Salma thought it was unfair since she was plagiarizing in that course and her teacher was consistently giving her A+. He had even given her A+ for this final paper before the teacher assistant interfered.

R: How did you react to this?

S: I was frustrated because I am used to this and I knew what the professor was expecting. I got him what he was expecting and I got the A+ [from him]. So I thought it was none of her business.

So obviously Salma knew the practice was wrong, but thought it was unfair to be inconsistent. Although Salma believes plagiarism should be penalized, she did not take it lightly on that occasion because it clashed with what she believed her teacher's expectations were.

Reason #2: If teachers allow it, then there is no reason why Salma would not resort to plagiarism simply because it is *easy*. Salma, "As long as I get the data I want, it is easier for me to finish the work this way." Salma relies mainly on the Internet where information is

readily accessible, indicating that technology has aggravated the problem as “copy and paste” was common practice in her case.

Reason #3: Lack of time was mentioned by Salma as one of the driving forces. Salma, “I’m doing it for the sake of finishing the job ... not to be perfect, but to have something done and meet the deadline.” The desire to pass the course was clearly of more importance to Salma than learning. It was noticeably a matter of meeting the course requirements rather than gaining something out of the exerted effort.

Reason #4: The latter attitude was evident in another reason mentioned by Salma. She said she was more likely to commit plagiarism, thus adding smaller percentages to the course overall grade. However, this was not among the most popular reasons in her interview. She came up with it when she was asked to think of more reasons.

Reason #5: Talking about her post-graduate experience, Salma mentioned one of her courses where she started with avoiding plagiarism; then, she shifted back to her old practice after two papers because she had lost interest in the material and was considering withdrawing from the whole program. It is worth mentioning, however, that Salma could not work out what to expect from the course teacher because he never gave her feedback.

Effects of plagiarism

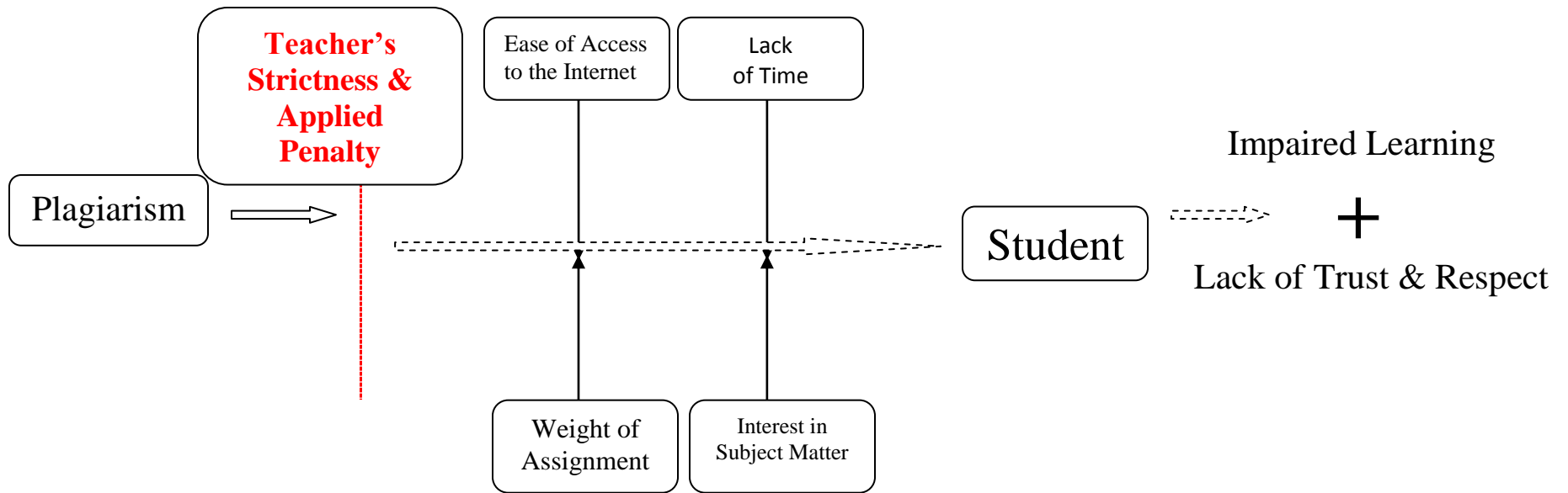
Two main effects were identified based on the interview analysis:

Effect on learning: It was quite interesting that Salma was aware of the fact that plagiarism is an obstacle to learning. She realizes that the time and effort she puts in non-plagiarized work pays off: “I learn the words that I include.” More interestingly, she even admitted having included chunks of material that she never read. She recommended the practice of teachers who require students to submit handwritten assignments or use illustrations to make a point as it forces students to read and learn.

Effect on Students' Perception of the Teacher: A remarkable finding of this study was the effect of allowing plagiarism on students' perception of 'flexible' teachers. Salma confirmed that there was a negative correlation between allowing plagiarism and how fair she finds the teacher. Teachers who do not allow plagiarism are more likely to gain trust and respect and become points of reference to their students: "Whenever I'm asked to do a paper or prepare something official, I'm going to head up to them. I'm certainly not going to refer to the other 90%." She regarded those who accept plagiarized work as teachers who prefer to take a shortcut and avoid the hassle.

Plagiarism Hypothesis Model

Based on the above analysis, a Plagiarism Hypothesis Model is proposed to attempt to explain higher education students' behavior and perception regarding plagiarism. The Model pre-supposes knowledge and training on the rules of academic honesty. They are regarded as pre-requisites that do not deter most students from committing plagiarism. The Model then argues that among all the *reasons* that affect a student's decision to plagiarize there is only one factor which acts as a filter that might either allow or prevent the majority of students from making that decision, namely the teacher's strictness and seriousness in applying plagiarism policies. The effect of the rest of the factors is regarded as minor or of limited impact when the filter is up. In the case in which the filter is down, so the argument goes, other factors come into play, leading to a decision to plagiarize, which is likely to result in impairing the learning process and distorting the teacher's image. The idea of the filter in the Model is inspired by Stephen Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis Model of second language learning.



Plagiarism Hypothesis Model

Conclusion

This study is seeking to have a realistic understanding of Higher Education students' practices and perceptions of plagiarism away from any romantic notions, such as that the students' goal to learn precedes their desire to pass their courses and acquire a degree. The study has hopefully provided an insight into human nature and that there is a constant need for regulating the laws of punishment and reward. The study has clearly revealed that it was the strictness of the teacher and the existence of a penalty that clearly deterred the undesired practice of plagiarism. This conclusion might be in conflict with Mc Gowan's (2005) argument that the induction of students into the research culture might be the answer. The researched case knew the 'what', 'how', and 'why' of plagiarism, yet this did not stop her from plagiarizing.

The findings of this study agree to a great extent with much of the reviewed literature. Agreeing with Hyland (2001) and Hrasky & Kronenberg (2010), this study proposes that the problem is primarily one of communication of expectations. It argues that when clear expectations are combined with the teacher's integrity, plagiarism is controlled to a great extent.

While researchers such as Hrasky and Kronenberg (2010) and Razera et al (2010) shared possible factors causing plagiarism, this study is emphasizing the most crucial factor of them all without eliminating the importance of the other factors. In fact, the proposed Model is not claiming an exclusive list of factors causing plagiarism. Other students might be functioning as a result of other factors. But the claim remains that all the other factors play a minor role when compared to the teacher's position and persistence in enforcing the rules.

Suggestions for future research

It is recommended, therefore, that future research do the following:

1. Test the hypothesized Model using a triangulation of methods.
2. Examine the claim that the majority of teachers do not make an effort to enforce plagiarism policies, and if so, look at the reasons behind this practice.

Reflections

This research required an interactive role on the researcher's part (as opposed to acting at a distance); hence, controllability and researcher-independence of the results, highlighted by Verschuren (2003), were a concern. To increase the study's internal validity and minimize any effect of the researcher's personality, a semi-structured interview was adopted and summaries of the participant's input were regularly offered during the interview for comprehension check. In addition, a lot of probing questions, asking "why" and "how" and requesting examples, were put forward in an attempt to dig deeply enough into the participant's experience. External validity was maintained through emphasizing that the study results are only valid for theoretical propositions and are not generalizable to larger populations.

References

- Cousin, G. (2005). Case study research. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 29 (3), 421–427.
- Hrasky, S. and Kronenberg, D. (2010). Curriculum redesign as a faculty-centered approach to plagiarism reduction. *Proceedings of 4th International Plagiarism Conference*. Retrieved April 23, 2011 from <http://www.plagiarismadvice.org/conference>
- Hyland, F (2001). Dealing with plagiarism when giving feedback. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 55 (4) 375-382.
- Indiana University: Writing Tutorial Services. (2004). Plagiarism: What it is and how to recognize and avoid it. Retrieved from <http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/plagiarism.shtml>
- Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- McGowan, U. (2005). Plagiarism detection and prevention: Are we putting the cart before the horse? *Higher Education in a Changing World. Proceedings of Herdsa Conference*.
- Australia: Herdsa. Retrieved April 23, 2011, http://conference.hersda.org.au/2005/pdf/refereed/paper_412.pdf
- Razera, D., Verhagen, H., Pargman, T., & Ramberg, R. (2010). Plagiarism awareness, perception, and attitudes among students and teachers in Swedish higher education. A case study. *Proceedings of 4th International Plagiarism Conference*. Retrieved April 24, 2010, from <http://www.plagiarismadvice.org/conference>
- Thomas, D. R. (2006). A general inductive approach for analysing qualitative evaluation data. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 27 (2), 237-246.
- Tight, M. (2010). The curious case of case study: A viewpoint. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 13 (4), 329–339.
- Verschuren, P. J. M. (2003). Case study as a research strategy: Some ambiguities and opportunities. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 6 (2), 121-139.