Non-Native University Students' Perception of Plagiarism

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Abstract

Plagiarism is a complex issue especially among non-native students and it has received a lot of attention from researchers and scholars of academic writing. Some scholars attribute this problem to cultural perceptions and different attitudes toward texts. This study evaluates student perception of different aspects of plagiarism. A small group of postgraduate students in a Malaysian university were asked to categorize ten cases of plagiarism instances. They were also asked to identify plagiarized paraphrased versions of five excerpts of different source texts provided. The findings showed that students had misconceptions about different aspects of plagiarism including citation conventions, collusion, using another writer's ideas, and style of writing. Further analysis has shown that students were aware that plagiarism is wrong but they could not correctly identify the multiple forms in which plagiarism could happen. These findings indicate that students need to be taught and exposed to various forms and layers of plagiarism so that they would know how best to avoid it in their own writing.

Background of the study

Multiple cases in the literature have shown that plagiarism is on the rise among university students (Park, 2003; McCabe, 2005; Marshall & Garry, 2006) and therefore needs to receive proper response from instructors and professors. Failure to address this issue would affect students' learning process and their success in academy, or as Vogelsang (1997) noted, it may even end up in serious legal penalties.

Many researchers have pointed out that students of different cultures have different understanding of plagiarism (see Pennycook, 1996; Intronal et al., 2003; Abasi et al., 2006; Abasi & Graves, 2008; McGowan & Lightbody, 2008). These claims were mainly based on observations of practices that are considered as plagiarism in the West but might not be considered as such in some other cultures. Asian students particularly Chinese students have

been the target of many studies on plagiarism because of their different learning and teaching styles which may not always be in accordance with the western academic conventions.

Swoden (2005) discusses that in some Asian cultures, for example China, traditional philosophers' ideas are perceived to be a part of the common knowledge and it is considered appropriate to use their words without citation. He highlights the role of memorization and rote learning in Chinese culture and the way it impacts students' academic practices. He argues that it is a part of the Chinese cultural values that students should accept ideas of the authorities without any argument. Students are encouraged to memorize and reproduce these ideas without change, as to show respect towards the authorities and great scholars. However, memorization and rote learning are not appreciated in Western countries because it is argued that they promote superficial learning (Introna et al., 2003).

Russikoff et al. (2003) also pointed out that verbatim reproduction has long been used as a way to share knowledge of the scholars in many Asian learning traditions and this practice may have resulted into a different perception about borrowing and copying texts of others. Hence Pennycook (1996) stresses that plagiarism should be considered in its specific context regarding the cultural and educational differences and how it can effect students' perception of text and ownership and consequently their textual borrowing strategies.

Based on different learning styles practiced in some Asian countries, it is assumed that non-native students, especially Asian students might have different perceptions of what constitutes plagiarism, and therefore they might unintentionally get involved in unacceptable academic writing practices which can eventually affect their academic success. To address this issue and to find out how Asian students who use English for academic writing perceive plagiarism, we designed this study with the aim of investigating student understanding of multiple layers of plagiarism and whether they are able to identify different forms of plagiarism in practice.

Methodology
We designed a questionnaire following Dawson and Overfield (2006) consisting of ten questions on students' attitudes towards plagiarism and also five scenarios in the form of paraphrased texts, to gauge the students' perception and abilities to recognize issues of plagiarism. The questionnaire was administered to 18 postgraduate students who responded to

our advertisement of a workshop on plagiarism. The students were all non-native speakers of English pursuing their postgraduate degrees in our institution. The majority of students were Malaysians while others were from Sudan, Iran, Indonesia, and Thailand. All students had been studying at our institution for at least two semesters.

The questions addressed different aspects of plagiarism including fraud, collusion, attribution, plagiarism of ideas and words. The students were asked to tick 'Yes', 'No' or 'Not sure' to identify each case as an instance of plagiarism (Appendix A). The paraphrased texts addressed different forms of plagiarism based on Barnbaum's (undated) suggestion of five types of plagiarism including copy and paste, word switch, plagiarism of ideas, metaphor and style. We purposefully chose five excerpts from Encarta Encyclopedia 2008 on different topics and provided three paraphrased versions for each. In each case two versions were plagiarized samples while one version was not plagiarized. As recommended by researchers (Marshal & Garry, 2006) in this study we used scenarios, because they can provide a context of an incident of plagiarism, hence they can be more reliable in understanding students' actual perception of plagiarism.

Results and discussions

To analyze the data the number of the students who answered each question of the questionnaire was calculated and then divided by the total number of the students to identify the percentage (Appendix A). The same procedure was used to determine the percentage of students who identified each plagiarized version of the paraphrased texts (Figures 1 & 2). The data from the questionnaire was then compared with the data from the paraphrased texts to better understand how students reacted in response to questions and texts which addressed various issues surrounding plagiarism.

Some set of questions addressed a similar aspect of plagiarism which is also reflected in the paraphrased texts; for instance, questions 1 and 5 dealt with copy and paste and word switch as forms of plagiarism. Text 1 and text 2 similarly represented these types of plagiarism in form of paraphrases. Findings showed that similar to previous surveys (Marshal & Garry, 2006) majority of students (over 72%) knew that copying is wrong and it is considered as a form of plagiarism (Appendix A). However, when copying was used in the plagiarized versions of text 2 only 33.3% of students identified version A, and 66.6% identified version C correctly. Since version C included a longer sentence which was exactly copied, it is not

surprising that it was identified by a larger number of students. Once the data was reconsidered to calculate the number of students who could identify both plagiarized versions it was revealed that only 4 (22.2%) students met this objective (Figures 1 & 2).
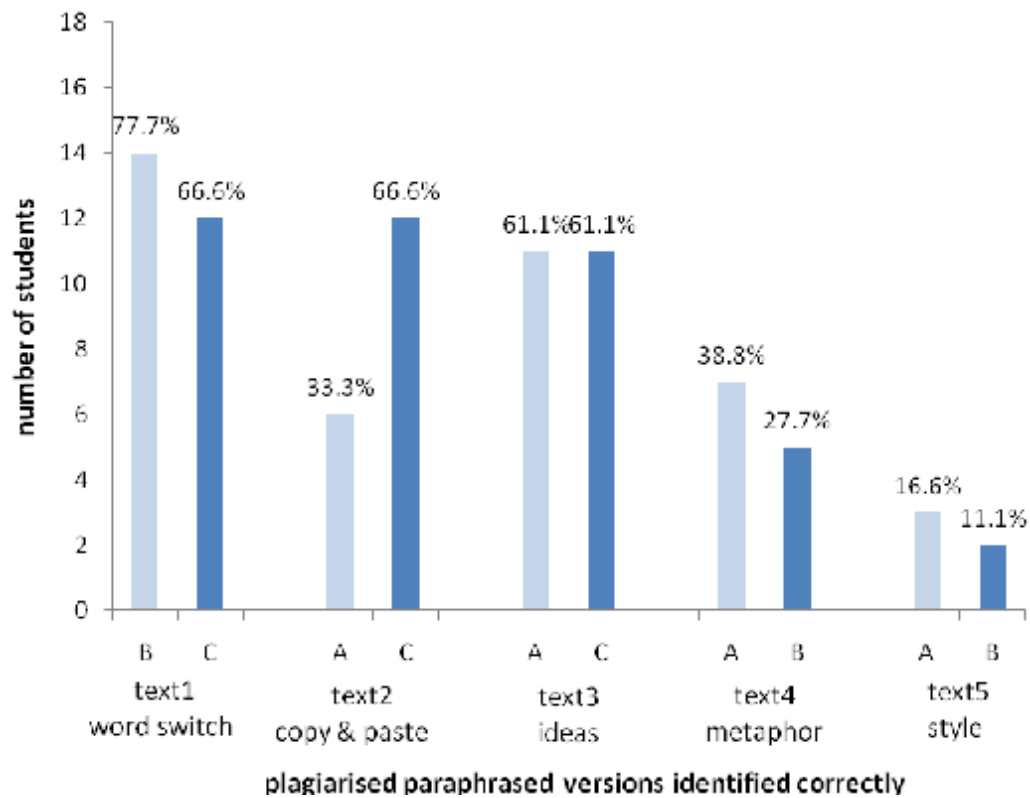
Figure 1: Number and percentage of students who identified each plagiarized version
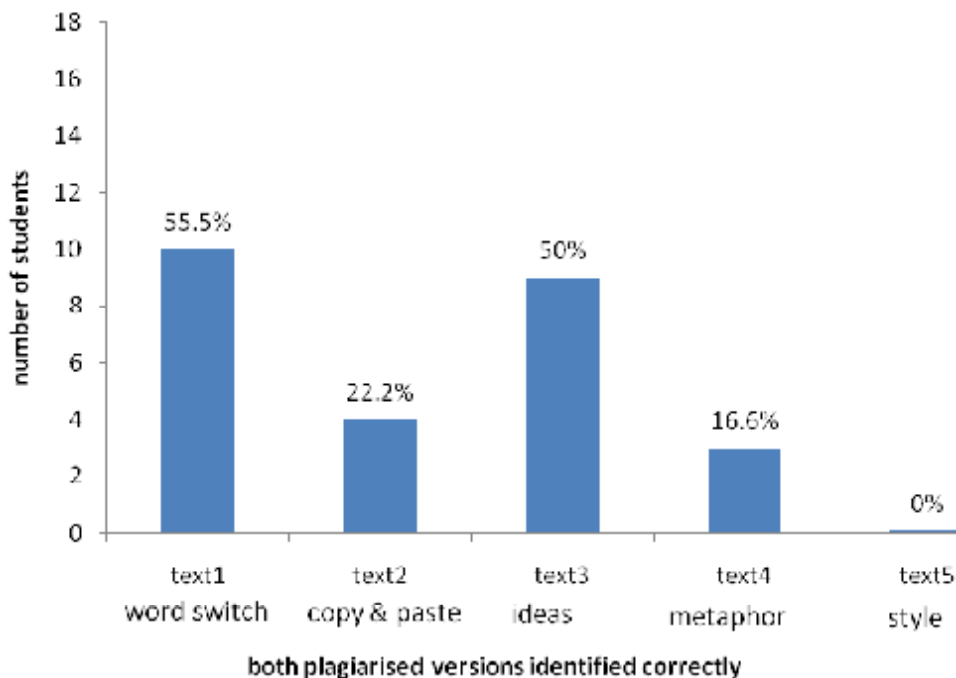
Figure 2: Number and percentage of students who identified both plagiarized versions

Many students were also puzzled by word switch since more than 60% of them did not categorize it as a case of plagiarism (question 5). When they were asked to identify the plagiarized paraphrased versions of text 1, which were cases of word switch, only half of the students managed to identify both plagiarized versions. While these cases express obvious aspects of plagiarism the findings showed that some students do not have proper knowledge on these issues. Consistent with Dawson and Overfield's (2006) findings, students also showed uncertainty about the extent of words that can be exactly copied from the source text. For instance, when longer sentences were copied word for word, majority of them identified it as a case of plagiarism but when a short sentence was used verbatim, many of the students failed to identify it as a plagiarized paraphrased version.

Another aspect of plagiarism which is problematic for students and is reflected in this study was plagiarism of ideas which was addressed in several questions (4, 7 & 10) and also in text three as shown below:

Text 3

Humans depend on species diversity and healthy ecosystem to provide food, clean air and water, and fertile soil for agriculture. In addition, we benefit greatly from the many medicines and other biodiversity provides. As many as 40 percent of modern medicine are derived from plants or animals.

("Endangered Species," Microsoft® Encarta® Online Encyclopedia 2008)

Student A

Humans have a lot to benefit from biodiversity. We need a healthy ecosystem for food, clean air and water and also for agricultural purposes. Other than that, biodiversity is also useful for the medical field. About 40 percent of today's modern medicine is said to have come from plants or animals.

Student B

According to Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia (2008), a total of 40 percent of our modern medicine is said to have come from plants or animals. In fact, humans depend on species diversity for more than just medicine. We need a healthy ecosystem for food, clean air and water and also for agricultural purposes. [not plagiarized]

Student C

Due to biodiversity, a total of approximately 40 percent of modern medicine is said to have come from plants or animals. But humans have more to gain from biodiversity than just medicine. We need a healthy ecosystem for food, clean air and water and also for agricultural purposes.

In response to question 4, majority of the students (77.7%) knew that paraphrasing does not make the work one's own, thus it needs to be attributed. This finding is similar to that of Marshal and Garry's (2006) study in which 73% of students categorized a similar case as plagiarism. However, when our students were asked to identify the plagiarized versions of text 3 in which the same ideas of the source texts were expressed in different words without attribution, 61% of the students were able to identify each plagiarized version and only 50% of the students managed to identify both plagiarized versions. This finding indicates that although most of the students were aware of the need for attribution, still many of them did not identify borrowed text without attribution as an instance of plagiarism.

The use of undocumented conversations and interviews is a more complex form of plagiarism of ideas which was reflected in question number 10. In this case, students showed more confusion as only 16.6% of students categorized it as a case of plagiarism. Another form of plagiarism of ideas is translation from one language to another without attribution. This issue was addressed in question 7 and it was not considered as an instance of plagiarism by more than 30% of students. The reason is that most of the students might not be clear about the distinction between using other people's ideas and other people's words (Currie, 1998).

Students also showed some misunderstanding about cases of collusion which were expressed in questions number 2 and 6. As the results showed, 33.3% of students considered the submission of similar papers for individual assignment acceptable while 22.2% were not clear whether it is acceptable or not. Interestingly over 27% of students also did not consider using a paragraph of their friend's work in their writing as a case of plagiarism. This finding also confirms Dawson and Overfield's (2006) study in which students showed confusion about the concept of collusion and group work.

Our small scale study also revealed that students have some misunderstanding about citation rules. In answer to question eight, almost 55% of students (students who answered 'Yes'

together with those who answered 'Not sure') did not know that a source that is read but not cited in text does not need to be included in the reference list and it is not a case of plagiarism. Similarly some students showed confusion about other features of citation as only 66.6% of students showed knowledge of the need to cite charts and figures which are used from other sources. These findings indicate that some students are not very familiar with paraphrasing and citation rules and they need to receive explicit instruction on this aspect of academic writing (also emphasized by a number of researchers e.g., Carroll, 2004; Mitchell & Carroll, 2008; Edwards & Ran, 2006; Russikoff et al., 2003 among many others).

The last two forms of plagiarism which were addressed in this study were plagiarism of metaphor and style which were presented in the paraphrased versions of text 4 and text 5. We used plagiarism of metaphor to find out whether students know when a specific metaphor is exactly repeated from a source text it needs to be attributed to the author of that text. In the source text 'Blue Whale' was described as 'Volkswagen Beetle' and in the un-plagiarized paraphrased version (C) although the metaphor was used it was clearly attributed to the source. Whereas in the two plagiarized paraphrased versions (A and B) it was not attributed; therefore, it did not clarify whether it is the writer's (the writer of the paraphrases) or the original author's metaphor.

As it can be seen from figures 1 and 2, only 5 (27.7%) students could identify version B and 7 (38.8%) students were able to identify version A which were the plagiarized versions. More surprisingly only 3 (16.6%) students could correctly identify both plagiarized paraphrased versions. This finding indicates that only few students might be aware that using another author's metaphor needs to be attributed and that text should clarify the voice, whether it is the writer's voice or the original author's voice, a necessary condition for a text to be transparent (Pecorari, 2003).

The last type of plagiarism which was expressed in text 5 is plagiarism of style. It is a subtle form of plagiarism which refers to closely following the original author's style and pattern of writing and organization of thoughts. In text 5 the plagiarized versions (A & B) provided simple rephrase of the original text sentence by sentence with the same style and organization while the un-plagiarized version provided a different paraphrased version with substantial changes in organization of ideas.

As it was expected only a few students could identify the plagiarized versions. Only 16.6% identified version A and 11.1% identified version B and none of the students was able to identify both versions of the plagiarized texts. Other students just left this part unanswered and provided a sentence that all the paraphrased texts are acceptable. This finding reveals that compared to other types, plagiarism of style is very complex and the least understood form of plagiarism. Students are not aware that plagiarism goes beyond copying and shuffling sentences. They need to be informed that for a paraphrase to be acceptable it should express substantial differences from the original text not only in words but also in style and organization.

The results of this study show the extent to which students do not understand plagiarism. This is shown by some students who even wrongly identified the acceptable paraphrased versions as plagiarized versions and also the students who did not choose any of the versions as plagiarized paraphrases. The most surprising thing was that question 3 which presented a case of fraud or blatant cheating, that is, paying someone to write an assignment, was not considered wrong by 33.3% of the students and was doubted by 22.2%.

The findings demonstrate that students know that plagiarism is wrong, but they are only aware of superficial levels of plagiarism. When it comes to complex and sophisticated layers and forms of plagiarism, they are not capable of identifying it. Such a lack of awareness raises issues of low levels of academic literacy practices and indicates that they are not adequately prepared for academic writing at graduate levels. We insist that not only do we need to educate students on the moral issues surrounding plagiarism, but we need to educate them the proper practices of text borrowing and documentation. These practices need to be included in academic writing classes beginning at undergraduate levels since the lack of understanding becomes more glaring and more apparent in their writing when they reach graduate levels. Definitely if these students want to meet the high expectations of the academia, their academic writing literacy needs to be raised so that in future they can safely embark on their professional career.

Conclusion

Since plagiarism is a complex issue with different forms and layers, we carried out this study to find out how university students in a non-native context perceive different aspects of plagiarism and what aspects seem to be more problematic for them. We found out that many

of the students had misconception about complicated areas of plagiarism such as borrowing ideas, understanding collusion and also citation rules. Moreover, they struggled in identifying plagiarized texts especially when plagiarism of style and metaphor were used. In addition when one sentence of the source text was lifted and exactly copied many of them did not identify the excerpt as a plagiarized text perhaps with the wrong assumption that copying one or two sentences are not problematic.

Thus, our small scale study has indicated that students might be confused about acceptable writing practices in an academic setting especially when sophisticated levels of writing are involved. They need to receive explicit instruction on how to provide accurate documentation and un-plagiarized paraphrases, how to work in groups and avoid plagiarism and how to use other people's ideas and words appropriately. Though the number of students in our study is small, we could safely surmise that many institutions including ours might not have sufficiently provided support for writing at graduate levels.

Based on our experience with these students and the feedback we got from them after conducting the workshop on plagiarism, we believe that workshops can benefit students in raising their understanding of plagiarism. However, workshops can only raise students' awareness of these problematic issues, but writing needs long-term guidance and practice. Perhaps this is the role of supervisors to make up for these needs by conducting one to one basis discussion with their graduate students on their writing. This way in addition to raising students' understanding of plagiarism, they can enhance their students' writing literacy by involving them in their actual writing practices in their own field and consequently prepare them for their academic writing career.

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Appendix A: Number and percentage of students who chose each answer

Is this plagiarism?	Yes	%	No	%	Not sure	%
1. Using an author's exact words without putting them in quotation marks (" ")	13	72.2	4	22.2	1	5
2. Researching with a friend and submitting similar papers for an individual assignment.	8	44.4	6	33.3	4	22.2
3. Paying someone to write an assignment for you.	8	44.4	6	33.3	4	22.2
4. Paraphrasing an author's work without attribution.	14	77.7	3	16.6	1	5
5. Changing a few words of the source text without documentation.	7	38.8	5	27.7	6	33.3
6. Using a paragraph of your friend's written work in your own assignment.	13	72.2	5	27.7	0	0
7. Translating a specific work into another language, but not citing the author.	12	66.6	4	22.2	2	11.1
8. Not including a journal article you have read (but did not cite) in your reference list.	4	22.2	8	44.4	6	33.3
9. Using charts and images in your work without stating their origins.	12	66.6	5	27.7	1	5
10. Using data from interviews and conversations conducted by you, but without documentation.	3	16.6	11	61.1	4	22.2

Total number of students: 18