An Overview of Theories Explaining Plagiaristic Behavior of Students

Nur-E Hafsa

Faculty of Education, Department of Language and Literacy Education, University of Malaya, Malaysia

Abstract

In academic writing, creating own text integrating appropriate sources is one of the troublesome areas for both L1 (for whom English is the first language) and L2 (for whom English is the second language) writers. As a result, to meet the writing demand of the academia an inexperienced writer adopts the technique of using other peoples' language and concepts without acknowledging the source- which is known as "plagiarism", a kind of academic dishonesty. However, there has been an outstanding dichotomy among the researchers regarding the reasons for plagiarism in academic writing committed by students. One group of researchers consider students as solely responsible for committing plagiarism. By this cohort of researchers, students'- lack of knowledge and skill in source acknowledgement, poor time management, busy schedule, procrastination, deficiency in academic writing, absence of ethical reasoning, attaining recognition- are mentioned as primary reasons of plagiarism. On the other hand, the other group of scholars brings forth the issue of responsibility of the educational institutions and academics as well. In this review, standpoints of scholars of both the schools explaining reasons of plagiarism are presented in a brief.

Keywords: Plagiarism, theory, dichotomy, responsibility, educational institutions.

1. Introduction

In academic writing, creating own text integrating appropriate sources is one of the troublesome areas for both L1 (for whom English is the first language) and L2 (for whom English is the second language) writers (Silva, 2014). Usually, for coursework, undergraduate students across different disciplines need to write research papers garnering insights from various sources to present and establish their stances on the respective topic (Braine, 1995). The capability of strengthening one's writing with support from scholarly articles is considered as one of the vital parameters of academic literacy and deficiency of this skill reflects the ineptitude of the writer (Silva, 2014). As a result to meet the writing demand of the academia an inexperienced writer adopts the technique of using other peoples' language and concepts without acknowledging the source- which is known as "plagiarism", a kind of academic dishonesty (Bretag, 2013).

Scholars have cited various reasons for the occurrences of plagiarism. Batane (2010) and De Jager and Brown (2010) have highlighted- the laziness of students, poor academic writing ability, unawareness of source acknowledgment skill, the faulty education system in terms of assessment design, differences of opinion among administrative staffs as regards implementation of rules- as reasons of plagiarism. Difficulty in understanding and extracting important information from scholarly articles, and deficiency in academic writing have been identified as reasons for plagiarism in the study of Naqvi (2018) on EFL learners in Oman. In the study of Muthanna (2016) on the present situation and future actions on plagiarism in Yemen it was found that universities in that country do not provide students with necessary guidelines on plagiarism. Furthermore, procrastination of students, failure of time management, and lack of exemplary punishment in the institution or lack of confidence were found to incite students to plagiarize (Muthanna, 2016).

However, there has been an outstanding dichotomy among the researchers regarding the reasons for plagiarism in academic writing committed by students. One group of researchers consider students as solely responsible for committing plagiarism. By this cohort of researchers, students'- lack of knowledge and skill in source acknowledgement (Newton, Wright, & Newton ,2014; Voelker, Love, & Pentina , 2012), poor time management, busy schedule (Kayaoglu, Erbay, Flitner & Saltas , 2016), procrastination- (Foltynek, Rybicka and Demoliou, 2014), deficiency in academic writing (Batane , 2010; De Jager and Brown, 2010), absence of ethical reasoning Khadilkar (2018), attaining recognition (Wei et al, 2014)- are mentioned as primary reasons of plagiarism.

On the other hand, the other group of scholars brings forth the issue of responsibility of the educational institutions and academics as well. For instance, Pecorari & Petric (2014) emphasizes on equipping students with necessary knowledge and skill to handle academic writing demands of the tertiary level. In the project of Foltynek, Rybicka and Demoliou (2014) which looks into plagiarism policies, procedures, prevention, and penalties at various higher education institutions in EU countries in Europe, it was revealed that some of the universities do not endow students with the required information to avoid plagiarism. Their study recommends that HEI (Higher education institution) teachers should foster a facilitating outlook towards students' academic writing necessities

and endeavor to develop an awareness of plagiarism among learners. Helen MacLennan (2018) also suggests that only holding an antagonistic attitude towards students who committed plagiarism will not resolve the problem. Contrastively, they propose to adopt all-inclusive measures concentrating on the explicit teaching of plagiarism avoidance skill- which may play a vital role in lessening plagiarism tendency among students.

2. Theories concerning reasons for plagiarism

Plagiarism is referred to as the practice of using someone else's words or concepts as one's own without acknowledging the original author (Ellis et al, 2018). In the realm of theoretical stances on reasons of plagiarism, there is division among the researchers. To one set of scholars- plagiarism takes place in academia solely because of learners' inefficiency in academic literacy, laziness, ineffective time management etc (Newton, Wright, & Newton, 2014; Kayaoglu, Erbay, Flitner & Saltas, 2016). Conversely, the other faction of researchers summons to shift the focus- from the shortcomings of students to the responsibilities of respective education institutions and academics as accountable for plagiaristic behavior of students (Pecorari & Petric, 2014, Foltynek, Rybicka and Demoliou, 2014, Bretag, 2013, and MacLennan, 2018). These scholars advocate that providing rules and regulations and reinforcing those merely cannot ensure deterring students from plagiarism; rather learners need extensive training in academic writing which includes referencing and citation techniques and moral education as well.

2.1 Theories based on scholars' 'problem oriented' perspectives on plagiarism

In the studies on reasons of plagiarism, outlooks of some researchers are 'more problem- oriented than solution or practice- oriented' (Wette, 2010, p.159). Advocates of this group of researchers consider plagiarism as a dreadful act which manifests students' degradation of ethical standards. Moreover, this section of researchers holds students as solely responsible for committing plagiarism. Various ethical theories like- deontology, utilitarianism, rational self-interest, Machiavellianism have been cited as students' pretext to unethical behaviors in studies of McLafferty and Foust (2004); Swinyard et al., (1989); and Webster and Harmon (2002). Some other notable theories which have been used for explaining the reasoning of students' plagiaristic behavior are -social theories, social learning theory, social and behavioral sciences theory, criminological theory, etc.

A brief description of the above-mentioned theories is provided below:

2.1.1 Ethical theories

Granitz and Lowey (2007) investigated the utilization of six ethical theories by students to validate their plagiaristic behaviors. These theories are- deontology, utilitarianism, rational self-interest (social contract theory), cultural relativism, situational or contingent theories, and Machiavellianism.

- *Deontology*:

Deontologists believe "human beings have certain fundamental rights and that should be respected in all decisions" (Cavanagh et al., 1981, pp.366). Deontology may encompass a person's sense of right and wrong, rules and regulations of organizations (business ethics) or religious deontology (one's moral responsibility to follow God). Plagiarism is considered immoral in deontology. If students take resort to this theoretical standing, they can plagiarize only in the case when they are unaware of the theory (e.g. "I did not know what plagiarism was"/ "I didn't know that plagiarism was wrong" (Granitz & Lowey, 2007, pp. 297).

- *Utilitarianism*

Individuals who advocate utilitarianism highlight that one should compare the cost against the gains and work to cater to the benefit for the largest number of people. People who follow utilitarianism could only involve in plagiarism if the outcome of plagiarism results in improved learning or higher grade/ no one is affected (Granitz & Lowey, 2007). Mallinger (1997) mentioned that when American MBAs were assigned to classwork requiring them to work with critical information about an imminent earthquake, they would most probably take refuge to utilitarianism.

- *Rational self-interest*

According to rational self-interest (Social contract theory), people act only to serve one's own interest; one should maintain relationships with other people only if there h/she can gain something (Rand, 1964). Students, who believe in this theory, would validate their plagiarism by pointing out that they were getting involved in a "fair exchange"-for instance, "I'm publicizing the author's work"/ "The teacher doesn't put much effort to this, so why should I?" (Granitz & Lowey, 2007, pp. 297). On the other hand, Ashworth and Bannister (1997) mentioned of rational self-interest in a study in which students who believe in rational self-interest justified plagiarism by complaining that the assigned task was not interesting.

- *Machiavellianism*

Followers of Machiavellianism (ethical egoism) believe in realizing their own interest even at the cost of causing trouble to other people. Students who believe in this philosophy justified their plagiarism if they could not get detected (e.g.: "Look how clever I am, I can plagiarize, do well and not get caught"). If their misdeed is identified they would accuse others (e.g.: "It's the teacher's fault") (Granitz & Lowey, 2007, pp. 297).

- *Cultural relativism*

Ethical standard is a relative concept as it may differ from one culture to another culture (Robertson & Fadill, 1999; Vitell et al, 1993). Students who justify plagiarism relying on cultural relativism would highlight on how plagiarism is viewed in their own culture (e.g.: "It's allowable in the country where I came from") (Granitz & Lowey, 2007, pp. 297).

- *Situational or contingent theory*

Ferrell and Gresham (1985) proposed a "contingency" framework of ethics, pointing out that human beings' reaction to an ethical uncertainty could be influenced by individual (knowledge, values), social (significant others), and organizational (opportunity, rewards, punishment) situational determinants. Students who employ the situational or contingent theory of ethics would present a situational factor to justify his/ her act (e.g.: "My kid was sick") (Granitz & Lowey, 2007, pp. 298).

2.1.2 Criminological theory

Other than the ethical theories, various criminological theories, usually denoted as 'classical' theories have been employed to enlighten students' impulses for plagiaristic behaviors (Klein, 2011). Rational choice perspective (RCP) alternatively recognized as the Rational choice theory (RCT) suggested mainly by Clarke (1997), Clarke and Cornish (1986) and Clarke and Felson (1993), postulates that wrongdoers adopt their course of action after assessing the gains from their deeds against the probable consequences. These authors propose that crime takes place with definite intentions (Awdry & Sarre, 2013). Rational choice theory (RCT) is related to deterrence theory which substantiates that lawbreakers judge the benefits against the punishments they might need to face if they are identified cheating (Akers, 1990). In this case, the best solution to combat plagiarism is to increase the intensity of punishment so much that it offsets the inducement of getting a better outcome with least struggle (Park, 2003; Sergiou, 2004).

- *Situational Crime Prevention (SCP)*

Another theory closely associated with the rational choice theory is Situational Crime Prevention (SCP) expounded by Ron Clarke (Clarke, 1980). This theory proposes that if the punishment cannot outweigh the gains from the misdeed, human beings will always feel the propensity to commit a crime- which is the basic concept of rational choice theory. Tilley (2009) points out that as crimes are taking new forms, all new impetuses, chances, and techniques require investigation and due measures (Hirschi, 2002; Ekblom & Tilley, 2000). The idea- Designing Out Crime best exemplifies situational crime prevention (Awdry & Sarre, 2013). It is based on the notions of RCT and SCP but proclaims greater importance on risk handling and crime investigation. If HEIs (Higher education institutions) were to combat plagiarism based on this concept they would adopt measures which would make committing plagiarism more troublesome- like introducing plagiarism detecting software which elevates the panic of being exposed (Carroll, 2007). A contemporary example in academia is the adoption of text matching software- Turnitin by higher education institutions to ensure the credibility of degrees awarded by them (Awdry & Sarre, 2013).

2.1.3 Social theories

- *Social projection theory*

Social theories such as social projection theory, social identity theory, and self-categorization have been employed to explicate reasons of student plagiarism (Klein, 2011). Social projection theory views people and places based on an individual's own perceptions, ideas or experiences instead of anything objective about the person or place (Cross & Brodt, 2001). In this context learners who plagiarize want to believe that plagiarism is prevailing to a large extent in higher education institutions than the actual situation and want to use this perception to defend their own wrongdoing (Klein, 2011).

Social identity theory and self-categorization have also been employed to highlight the reasons behind the plagiaristic behavior of students. This theory conveys that individual's insights towards their surrounding develop around the ideas they possess of themselves (Haslam, Eggins, & Reynolds, 2003). People following this theory attach themselves to a group of people of similar attitudes and beliefs (Klein, 2011). Young (2001) cites in the Chronicle of Higher Education that students do not consider the copy and paste practice without referencing as something problematic. Learners nowadays download and share free music, articles- therefore, information gathered from the public domain is considered as free and common knowledge to them and consequently, they don't take the pain to acknowledge the source (Klein, 2011).

- *Social learning theory*

Social learning theory by Albert Bandura (1986) has also been applied to explain the plagiaristic motif of learners. This theory postulates that human beings learn through "the influence of example" (Bandura, 1986, pp. 527). Therefore, if learners discover their fellow classmates receiving nominal or no punishment at all for cheating, they will also feel inclined to adopt cheating.

2.1.4 Social and behavioral sciences theory

- *Expectancy-value theory of attitude formation*

Amongst the numerous theories of social and behavioral sciences, the widely known expectancy-value theory of

attitude formation has been deployed to investigate the reasons of plagiarism. This theory suggests that attitudes are the reflection of the beliefs and values fostered around a particular object or action (Fishbein, 1963). Therefore, a student's attitude towards plagiarism will be based upon their beliefs about plagiarism and the values they associate with it. Beliefs about behavior are shaped by linking that behavior to some precise features, events or outcomes (Ajzen, 1991). For example, a student may consider plagiarism as difficult by relating it to the probability of being identified.

- *Theory of planned behavior*

Once the student's attitude to plagiarism is specified, it is crucial to explore the connection between a student's attitude, and their plagiaristic activities. The nexus among attitude, intentions, and behavior can be illuminated by means of Ajzen's (1991) - theory of planned behavior. However, the theory of planned behavior is originated from- the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). This theory hypothesizes that intentions to behave in a particular manner come from- attitudes towards that behavior and from subjective norms (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) which denotes- the way in which one's behavior is evaluated by people surrounding him/her.

2.2 Theories based on scholars' 'solution oriented' perspectives on plagiarism

In contrary to the standpoints focused on shortcomings of students, some scholars put forward- a rational interpretation and consider plagiaristic behavior of students' as pedagogical shortcomings of the education institutions (Pecorari & Petric, 2014). In contrary to the traditional 'problem- oriented' (Wette, 2010, p. 259) viewpoints, Pecorari and Petric (2014) notify of the emerging consciousness in academia towards adopting educative measures instead of exercising retributive actions to fight plagiarism. Based on the contemporary pedagogy of academic writing, two broad perspectives have been identified by Pecorari and Petric (2014) such as- (i) teaching students clearly about plagiarism and (ii) educating students comprehensively with the knowledge of source using and citation. And these two measures should be launched jointly not exclusively (Barks & Watts, 2001; Bloch, 2012).

In the literature on plagiarism, examples abound where the implementation of neither of the above- mentioned measures are being observed. For example, a study in Malaysia by Zangenehmadar and Hoon (2014) on ESL undergraduates' insights of plagiarism in academic writing demanded to employ similar pedagogic interventions in response to the poor source acknowledgment skills of the respective students. The authors also advocated for including the topic-plagiarism and its deterrence in the academic writing courses. In another study by Permana and Santosa (2018) on EFL students in Singaraja University, Indonesia, adoption of similar pedagogical measures was suggested as a way to reduce the amount of plagiarism in that university. They suggested for educating students with the consciousness of plagiarism and teaching students with necessary academic writing skills to avoid plagiarism. Akter's (2016) study in two private universities in Bangladesh portrays a similar situation. Findings from the study indicated that respective cohorts of the study required explicit training on academic writing and plagiarism consciousness.

Muthanna (2016) in his study on contemporary higher education scenario of Yemen focusing on the existence of plagiarism policies in Yemen higher education institutions, reflected that the majority of the universities did not furnish students with any guiding principle on avoiding plagiarism. However, Louw (2017) in his attempt to develop a definition of plagiarism afresh on the basis of perceptions of 17000 students and 810 staff members in a North-West University, articulates that merely informing students about the plagiarism policy of the university cannot bring fruitful result in fighting plagiarism. The students used as the sample in the study demonstrated a deficiency of knowledge and skill in citation. Louw (2017) also recommended a dedicated, comprehensive course designed to cater to students' need for training in the source using literacy.

Even though the common university approach to plagiarism includes providing students with academic integrity policies targeting behavioral changes through information, actions, and retributions, there is a developing urge among the academics to uphold an all-encompassing outlook combining policies, enforcement, information delivering and imparting learning techniques to approach the gravity and intricate nature of the phenomenon (Bretag et al, 2011). Bretag (2013, p.5) in the article "Challenges in addressing plagiarism in Education" emphasizes that educational institutions should nurture the outlook to believe handling plagiarism as a "holistic and multi- stakeholder approach" targeting to develop an academic community on the basis of collective knowledge and observance of ethics and academic integrity. Dawson and Overfield (2015) suggest that as the consequences of plagiarism may be ruining for a student's academic life and future career, necessary knowledge on source using should be provided by the educational institution since the beginning of the academic course.

3.   Conclusion

If the reasons behind plagiaristic behavior of students could be found and could be aligned to any specific theoretical stances, then suggesting realistic, preventive measures would be easier (Granitz & Lowey, 2007). For instance, if theory of social learning (i.e. human beings learn by experience) is cited by students as the reason of plagiarism in an institution- then a change in the administrative outlook of the respective institution needs to be

undertaken. Again, if theory of rational choice theory surfaces in any investigation as the reason of plagiarism, then designing out prevention policy which makes plagiarism more difficult for students would be a suitable option. Moreover, in studies of Brubaker (2003) and Sims (1993), it has been revealed that unethical practices in academia may encourage unethical practices in business. Therefore, detecting traits of unethical conduct in academia and rectifying immoral practices therein, can help to prepare future citizens induced with constructive, moral outlooks to corporate ethics. On the other hand, if academic institutions are found to have deficiencies in teaching necessary literacy skills to their students then an overhauling is needed in their overall teaching mechanism to curb plagiarism in their institutions.

Acknowledgement

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