

EFL College Teachers' and Students' Perceptions of the Nature and Causes of Plagiarism

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Abstract

Plagiarism has recently turned into a major concern for academics and academic institutions. The problem seems to have become so widespread that several types of anti-plagiarism software have been developed to check the originality of scholarly papers and students' assignments. Unfortunately, it appears that this unethical strategy is steadily increasing across college and university students in higher education settings and within other groups such as scholarly and scientific communities, political offices, and journalistic groups. Nevertheless, the reasons continue to be obscure. In reality, available statistical findings do not provide a very clear picture of the scale and nature of plagiarism itself and the problems associated with it. Neither do they clarify the extent to which this phenomenon is changing through time or is different from country to country, from subject to subject, or among undergraduate and graduate students. It is assumed that if students are made aware of the consequences of plagiarism, they will exercise some caution in resorting to it while writing an important paper which is going to be published. Despite the great attention paid to this issue in academic journals and settings, plagiarism still occurs at large, and many students, scholars, and even politicians are still accused of committing it. Some may claim ignorance, and some could be breaking the rule to meet deadlines. Accordingly, the present study was carried out to investigate EFL college teachers' and students' perceptions of the nature and causes of plagiarism. The participants consisted of 20 EFL university professors and 40 university students studying TEFL at MA and PhD levels. They received a Likert-Scale 30-item questionnaire enquiring about the nature of plagiarism in the view of the respondents and their attitude in this regard. The results demonstrated that both groups were equally aware of the nature of plagiarism and the related ethical issues, while the students had considerably different standpoints regarding the excuses and punishments for plagiarism.

Keywords: Perception, Plagiarism, Nature, Admission, Academic;

1. Introduction

Raising awareness about and taking preventative measures against academic transgression and scientific misconduct have always been a priority in academic and scientific circles. However, plagiarism still frequently takes place. It is defined as the illegal use of another's work, ideas, methods, or words without citing the original author [1]. While the majority of research in this area has focused on plagiarism in English-speaking contexts, cultural differences and particularities of L2 academic writing in S/FL contexts have been recognized as contributing factors to plagiarism as well. A growing body of literature demonstrates that plagiarism is perceived differently in various cultures due to deeper values that differ among Eastern and Western societies. For example, it is claimed that in Asian societies memorizing and word-for-word copying are considered valued methods of learning [2], while paraphrasing is seen as changing the truth [3]. Perceptions of plagiarism are so different in Eastern academic societies that knowledge is believed to belong to all, and what authors say is accepted as fact and, thus, critical treatment of sources is seen as a disrespectful conduct [4]. Nevertheless, solely focusing on cultural differences as the main factor leading to plagiarism might disguise the complicated nature of this act. Some attribute the reason for committing plagiarism to insufficient language and general study skills in foreign language studies programs [5]. Considering the poverty of research in this field in Iran, the current paper seeks to shed some light on Iranian EFL learners' and teachers' perceptions regarding the nature and causes of plagiarism.

2. Literature Review

Babbie [6] defines plagiarism as "the presentation of another's words or ideas as your own." Howard [7] identifies four types of plagiarism; (1) submission of someone else's written work as one's own, (2) patchwriting i.e. blending others' sentences with one's own, (3) not citing the sources, and (4) not

using quotations while using direct quotes. The second type, patchwriting, is the hardest to prevent as the presentation of the plagiarized work can occur in an alternate scientific community [8]. Another source for plagiarism is the internet, the content of which is often perceived by students to belong to the public and, thus, not in need of acknowledgement when used [7]. While Freedman [8] sees internet as a critical contributor to the rise of plagiarism, DeVoss and Rosati [9] assert that merely blaming the internet is a “failure to recognize and reward originality.”

Plagiarism, in general, and perceptions of students and faculty towards it, in particular, have been widely studied. McCabe [10] conducted an extensive study on the perceptions of over 90,000 participants including students and teachers in US and Canadian universities. He reported a low acceptance of paper-based plagiarism while observing a serious stance against copy-and-paste plagiarism using the internet among participants. Based on a survey of US college student’s perceptions, Fish and Hura [11] reported that the participants thought other students are more likely to commit plagiarism than they are. They also suggested that some types of plagiarism are thought to be more serious than others; indicating that communication of punitive consequences of plagiarism to students leads to an elevated level of awareness. Pritchett [12] compared the perceptions of undergraduate students and faculty members; reporting no significant difference among them while showing a significant difference among male and female members of faculty. She demonstrated that faculty members generally regarded plagiarism as a serious offence more than the students. Roig [13] investigated professors’ ability to detect plagiarism in students’ paraphrased texts. He reported that even experts may make errors distinguishing plagiarism. The findings of a similar study of university instructors’ perceptions of student self-plagiarism revealed that instructors did not have a clear understanding of the issue [14].

In a Canadian study [15], interviews with international graduate students and disciplinary professors on the role of student-professor relationship dynamics on student text production showed that it is, ultimately, the graduate students’ responsibility to develop practical research skills and to learn to abide by plagiarism policies. Another study [16] examined Indonesian international students’ understanding of plagiarism and reported that for the majority of the participants the concept was a “completely unknown” and foreign notion. Two other Australian studies [17] indicate that providing students with in-class and online training modules on the subject leads to significantly lower levels of plagiarism. While Hu [18] reported that, not only in China but also in Italy, patch-writing is encouraged among students of disciplines such as history and science, Rinnert and Kobayashi [19] stated that Japanese students across a variety of disciplines lack proper training on plagiarism and authorship. Studies on the use of anti-plagiarism software report significant decreases in student plagiarism after introduction of such software into the grading process [20].

The findings of a study of the perceptions of faculty members towards plagiarism and self-plagiarism at a medical school in Iran [21] indicated that there is a need for clear warnings against plagiarism and a need for the use of plagiarism detection software. Another study of the roots and consequences of academic cheating among Iranian Medical students [22] concluded that both individual and communal factors lead to student plagiarism. In a study of the motives behind academic dishonesty in Iran, Darouian and Faghihi [23] identified the following major factors: (1) credentialism, (2) preferring quantity over quality in academic writing, and (3) lack of preventative measures. Moreover, an extensive survey of 500 EFL master’s students in 28 universities across Iran [24] demonstrated that plagiarism was prevalent among the participants, and that their perceptions of the seriousness of plagiarism predicted their rates of plagiarism. Finally, in his study of nearly 100 undergraduate and graduate TEFL students Sabbaghan [25] reported that, while the participants discerned direct copying as plagiarism, they tolerated paraphrased statements. The current study has sought to further this line of inquiry.

3. The Study

3.1. Research Questions

1. What are EFL college students’ perceptions of the nature and causes of plagiarism?
2. What are EFL college teachers’ perceptions of the nature and causes of plagiarism?

3.2. Participants

Twenty EFL university professors and 40 Iranian MA and PhD students (both male and female) in the field of TEFL participated in the study.



3.3. Instruments

An English questionnaire addressing the nature and concept of plagiarism was used to collect the required data. The questionnaire consisted of 30 statements with which the participants agreed or disagreed on a Likert-scale basis. Each statement was followed by five choices, as follows: (1) Strongly Disagree (SD=1), (2) Disagree (D=2), (3) Neutral (NS=3), (4) Agree (A=4), and (5) Strongly Agree (SA=5). The Cronbach's Alpha reliability of the questionnaire was equal to .847.

3.4. Procedure

After the random selection of the participants, the purposes and premises of the study were clarified for them in order to obtain unbiased responses. Then they were asked to fill out the plagiarism questionnaire. The participants were assured about the confidentiality of their data.

4. Data collection and results

In processing the results, the questionnaire items were grouped into four categories: (1) knowledge of the concept of plagiarism, (2) excuses for justification of plagiarism, (3) punishments for plagiarism, and (4) academic ethics. Table 1 illustrates the average percentage scores per question category for both teachers and students.

Table 1. Percentages for both Groups, Total and per Question Category

	Knowledge %	Excuses %	Punishment %	Ethics %	Total %
Teachers	67.08	75.83	76.88	74.06	73.75
Students	63.33	58.75	61.88	70.63	63.33

As Table 1 shows, teachers did not show an in-depth understanding of all aspects of plagiarism. About 75% of them believed in accepting some excuses for justifying plagiarism, and they seemed to agree with punishing plagiarism and observing ethical codes in academic writing. Surprisingly enough, the students scored as low as teachers on their knowledge of plagiarism; however, they did not seem to agree strongly regarding acceptance of excuses for plagiarism. Their scores on the necessity of punishing plagiarism was lower than teachers, while they followed their teachers regarding ethics.

5. Discussion

The results of this study are similar to what other researchers have found in studies on plagiarism in both EFL contexts and Eastern cultures in that both teachers and students seem to lack a solid understanding of the nature of plagiarism and the ways to treat it. This finding might be attributed to the Eastern values of knowledge preservation and dissemination. However, as acknowledged previously, cultural roots alone cannot justify this issue. The participants' average score on the knowledge category can be clearly explained by referring to their teachers' lack of a solid grounding regarding plagiarism. Nevertheless, the teachers' improper perceptions towards plagiarism might have stemmed from lack of training, contextual disincentives, and a general departure from taking the issue seriously in an environment where their cohorts show little to no effort in doing the same, which demands appropriate remedy. One step in this regard is to develop policies in academic environments that require taking serious disciplinary actions against violators of academic codes of conduct. These policies might exist on paper, but they are rarely exercised fully and practically. Another positive measure is to organize related events, workshops, and training courses for both teachers and students to provide them with a more profound of plagiarism and the strategies used to avoid it.

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