Why Do Iranian Postgraduate Students Plagiarize?
A Qualitative Investigation

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Abstract: Students' plagiarism has been recently a topic of research among academic societies. The ways through which academic institutions attempt to deter or minimized the incidence of plagiarism are founded on a thorough understanding of the reasons why students plagiarize. Employing a number of semi-structured interviews, the present qualitative study endeavors to seek a group of Iranian postgraduate students' viewpoints on the reasons of plagiarism. Findings indicated a number of reasons including students' shallow understanding of the concept of plagiarism, poor linguistic abilities, poor research and writing skills, lack of familiarity with and interest in the topic assigned to them and the pressures they feel from family members, as well as the society. Based on the findings of the study, a number of suggestions are offered to reduce the frequency of plagiarism. The implications of these findings can be helpful for universities and academic societies seeking to marginalize plagiarism among their students.

Key words: Plagiarism · Students' perceptions · Students · Perception · Reasons

INTRODUCTION

With the shift from examination-based assessment to the continuous assessment of coursework [1], there exist a variety of assessments including essays, reports, projects, research articles, as well as writing theses and dissertations. An inherent problem with this type of assessment is the high chances of students' committing plagiarism. Although the opportunity to plagiarize from books and other sources has always existed, the extensive use and development of Internet has made it more attractive and readily accomplished [2-5]. An obvious example of plagiarism is submitting someone else's work as one's own. This can include copying someone else's homework, having identical passages in a book, or copying or using material from previous years [6].

The number of students in higher education levels who resort to plagiarism to complete their assignments, tasks and research papers is on a daily increase. Regrettably, many websites are designed to accommodate this need and it is not nowadays hard to buy a research paper online. Despite the serious warnings given to students, more and more students tend to plagiarize [7].

The reasons or justifications expressed for committing plagiarizing include pressure to meet deadlines, being laden by other responsibilities such as working and family commitments, as well as having poor writing skills [8]. Regardless of the reason, students in higher education levels seem not to take the issue seriously enough.

Interestingly, among many of the cases cited on plagiarism, Asian students have been proved to of the largest number of students resorting to plagiarism [9]. A lot of reasons have been stated for such tendency, including students' interest in quoting from a well-known authority as a sign of respect and deep reverence for the authority [10]. Despite the prevalence of plagiarism in Asian countries, there seems to be dearth of research on the concept of plagiarism in higher education in Iran. Such being the case, the present study attempts to fill in such gap by exploring reasons why university students plagiarize. Clearly, academics need to know such reasons in order to be able to control it. Moreover, according to [11], to better prevent and address plagiarism, it is crucial to understand the factors that cause plagiarism among university students. Students, too, need to be made aware of plagiarism and how it can be minimized and prevented

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to the extent possible. The present study aims at exploring the reasons behind plagiarism from the viewpoint of a group of postgraduate students doing their Master's or PhD program.

Literature Review: Different researchers have addressed the issue of plagiarism from different perspectives. [12], for example, compared non-English speaking background students' attitudes perceptions and understandings of plagiarism with those of English speaking background students. Results indicated differences in understanding and the extent of plagiarism among English- and non-English speaking background students. It was shown that non-English speaking background students are significantly more likely to have committed serious forms of plagiarism than English speaking background students. Overall, it was found that plagiarism is a very common phenomenon among students and that it reflects one's uncertainty about what actually constitutes plagiarism as well as disrespect for materials from the Internet.

In another exploratory study, [13] investigated Malaysian students' understanding of plagiarism. Questionnaires consisting of three sections were emailed to students studying in various institutions locally and abroad. Results show that Malaysian students have a shallow understanding of plagiarism and that they are not well aware of the concept of plagiarism. They do not even know that there are different levels of plagiarism. It is thus suggested that educators need to familiarize students with the concept of plagiarism and ways to avoid it.

In a similar study, [14] investigated students' perception of what constitutes plagiarism. A scenario-based questionnaire was given to forty-five undergraduate bioscience students. Results indicated students' uncertainty about different aspects of plagiarism. For example, they did know the distinction between plagiarism and acceptable practice. The study, however, fails to provide how such uncertainty can be removed and how students can be more familiarized with the concept of plagiarism with the goal to reduce its frequency.

In a qualitative study, [11] sought fifty-six Australian university students' views on the possible reasons for plagiarism in their institution. Interview findings revealed a number of reasons why students plagiarize. Such reasons include inadequate admission criteria, poor understanding of plagiarism, poor academic skills, teaching/learning issues, laziness/convenience, pride in

plagiarism, pressures and education costs. Based on the findings, the researchers suggest academics to work dialogically with students to tackle the issue of plagiarism with the goal to help them avoid plagiarism in their academic work.

[15]studied the causes of plagiarism among Turkish students and proposed some solutions. To this end, six Turkish students participated insemi–structured interviews. The two most common causes of plagiarism the interview respondents referred to were their poor understanding of plagiarism and lack of knowledge on how to write research papers. Students' lack of motivation to do research, their lack of freedom to express their opinions and the instructors' negative attitude towards writing as well as their low expectations from students were found to be other causes of plagiarism among the participants of the study. The researcher finally offers some solutions to prevent the incidence of plagiarism, including familiarizing students with the consequences of plagiarism and the encouragement of using softwares that detect plagiarism.

In a comparative study, [16] sought to investigate the differences between university faculty and their undergraduate students in terms of their perceptions of plagiarism. An on-line survey questionnaire was administered to college undergraduate students and faculty members in four institutions. Results demonstrated that there were no significant differences in perception of plagiarism between the two groups, i.e. faculty members and students. In terms of the gender of faculty members, it was found that there is a significant difference between males and females in their perception of plagiarism. However, as for students, no difference was detected. With regard to seriousness of plagiarism, faculty perceived plagiarism to be a more serious issue than students. Based on the findings, the researcher concludes that it is necessary to build students' awareness of plagiarism and advance the use of technology in order to promote academic integrity.

In an exploration of undergraduate and postgraduate pharmacy students' perception of plagiarism and academic honesty, [17] administered a questionnaire to a group of University of Sydney students to probe their attitudes toward plagiarism. It was found that the majority of the respondents were aware of the existence of a policy adopted by their university against plagiarism yet did not know what the policy exactly is. Further, what was is commonly considered unethical in academic settings was regarded as acceptable by the students. The researchers

finally conclude that in order to reduce the incidence of plagiarism and promote academic honesty among university students, it is necessary to adopt an approach that covers not only detention but also prevention and deterrence.

With this in mind, there seems to be dearth of research on plagiarism in Asian settings. However, as noted by [9] Asian students are more prone to committing plagiarism. The gap that can be noticed in the literature reviewed is that in studies which were conducted in Asian countries, little attention, if any, has been devoted to plagiarism in Iran educational setting, which is home to many postgraduate students in different disciplines. Such being the case, the present investigation attempts to address this issue in this setting by asking a group of postgraduate students to describe in their own words the reasons why they plagiarize.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven Master's and PhD students studying at two different universities in Shiraz, Iran. The number of interviewees could not be determined in advance. However, an attempt was made to gather asmuch data as possible in order to reach the saturation point, that is when it is seen that no new data is coming. [18] suggests a researcher to gather as much data as reaching the point when he or she sees no new data is coming. The specific students were asked to take part in the study because of their willingness to participate in the study. The participants were doing their Master's or PhD either in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) or English Language and Literature. Four of the participants were PhD candidates, while the rest were doing their Master's program.

Interviews were conducted to gather the required data. As one of the most widely used means of collecting qualitative data, an interview is used to find out what others think of a certain issue or situation in their own words [19]. For the purpose of the present study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a number of individuals. Semi-structured interview is the most favored type of interview in educational research. The privilege of a semi-structured interview is that, unlike a questionnaire or a structured interview, it is not necessary to ask all participants the same number of questions. What is important, however, is that the questions asked relate to or address the objectives of the study [20]. When it is not possible to accurately see what

individuals think of a certain phenomenon, interview comes to the researcher's aid. Semi-structured interview is a popular data collection technique since it is flexible enough and provides detailed, accurate and clear conceptions of what the participants think of the phenomenon under scrutiny.

The overall purpose of each interview was to gather students' views on plagiarism, in their own words. [21]argue strongly for this type of research, for "the elucidation of what the student means plagiarism to be, in the context of their lived and felt experience, without imposing an external conceptual framework" (p.264). The interviews included questions on participants' understandings of plagiarism and their views on why students at their university plagiarize. To prepare interview questions, a group of questions related to the present study were selected based onDelvin and Gray's (2007) study.

All interviews were carried out in English by the researcher himself. Before each interview, the researcher asked the participants the permission to have the interview audiotaped. All interviews were tape-recorded as an accurate reference. The respondents were assured that their responses would be kept confidential.

The qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed following the typical and conventional qualitative data analysis procedures [22, 19]. The researcher transcribed the MP3 recordings of individual interviews verbatim to familiarize himself with the data at hand. Once transcriptions have been completed, the researcher read the transcripts several times, looking for salient and recurring ideas emerging from the data. Moreover, while analyzing the data, the researcher looked for the important themes and categories related to reasons for plagiarism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Having analyzed the interview data, the researcher came up with eight categories of reasons expressed by the interview respondents. These categories are described below in detail.

Poor Understanding of Plagiarism: One of the key factors the interview respondents stated as leading to their plagiarism is their poor understanding of the concept of plagiarism and their unawareness of it. Some of the respondents did not even know the meaning of plagiarism or had not heard it before. One of the participants noted:

"I didn't know the meaning of plagiarism and I'm sure some of my friends are like me. Nobody has told us about it. We don't have any information about it".

Clearly, when students are not informed about plagiarism and have poor understanding of it, they will naturally commit it without knowing the fact that it considered academically inappropriate. In [23], too, it was shown that first-year college students in Hong Kong had no idea about plagiarism. Some of the participants in [11]also stated that they plagiarized because of their lack of understanding about plagiarism. [24], too, note that few of the ethical misconduct behaviors committed by students and researchers are intentional, but most of them arise from lack of appropriate knowledge.As such, it can be concluded that students' poor understanding or lack of awareness of plagiarism is a major factor causing plagiarism.

Poor Research/writing Skills: Some of the respondents of the present study stated that they plagiarized because they did not possess the necessary skills for writing and carrying out research. They were in fact poor in their research and writing abilities. This was identified as major cause of plagiarism. Below are some of the responses they offered:

"Nobody has explained to us how to write research articles."

"I have written some papers for several courses but I didn't know if I was right or not".

"I think my writing is not good because our teachers did not teach us the rules of writing".

"The teachers just give us a topic and then we have some time to write about it. They do not explain how to write".

"I think some teachers themselves do not know how to do research so they tell us to do it for them".

As can be seen from the students' remarks, their poor writing and research skills is a major factor that makes them plagiarize. It is clear from the responses that majority of students do not even know the basic writing rules and the process of carrying out a piece of research. As such,

they resort to plagiarism. Similar studies [25, 11, 15] have also found out that students' poor knowledge of the necessary skills to write research papers encourages them to plagiarize.

Poor Linguistic Competence: In addition to students' poor academic skills, their language ability was also identified by some of the respondents as a cause of plagiarism. They stated that their English is not good enough and as such they have to resort to plagiarism as a quick and safe way to run their projects and assignments.

"Unfortunately my English is not good so I have to copy some materials from internet or other sources".

"My English is weak and if for example I want to read and understand a paper I have to spend many hours and maybe finally I don't understand it".

It can be concluded that some of the students attribute their desire to plagiarize to their poor linguistic competence and the fact that their English knowledge is not that good to be able to comprehend an article well and then write a paper. The problem is more serious when it comes to gathering some materials from several sources whose language is English and thus difficult for the students to understand.

Poor Knowledge of the Topic: Students' poor knowledge of the topic or the subject matter they are supposed to write about is another major cause of plagiarism. The respondents believed that their weak and superficial knowledge of the subject matter leads them to plagiarism. Regrettably, some of the students blamed their teacher and his/her teaching skills to their poor knowledge of the subject matter.

Sometimes I prefer to get some ready materials quickly from the internet because I know what to write; I have little knowledge about my field.

I think some students do plagiarism because they do not understand the subject well. I think this is because the teacher couldn't teach well in class and the students didn't understand the lesson well. So they have to plagiarize to help them write their assignments.

Clearly, students need to possess adequate knowledge of the subject matter they are supposed to write about. Without such proper knowledge, they will get lost in what they are doing. Some students have attributed their lack of knowledge of the subject matter to their teacher and his/her teaching style. This could be to some extent true since some teachers may be highly knowledgeable but unable to convey their knowledge to their students. As such, students will have difficulty understanding the points the teacher is trying to put across. Ultimately, students' shallow understanding the subject matter leads them to plagiarism.

Task Type: Students also mentioned that the type of task they are given to do has a dramatic impact on the probability of committing plagiarism. They argue that sometimes the task is so challenging and heavy that they cannot manage to do it on their own. As such, they have to seek help from other sources. This will lead to plagiarism as a kind of resource.

Sometimes the teachers give us very heavy and difficult topics that I think I cannot do it alone. So I go to internet to find something to help me.

Another aspect of the task type concerns students' lack of motivation and interest in the topic they are given.

Sometimes the topics are very boring; I don't like them, but I have to do them because the teacher has given the topic and I cannot change it.

Some students also mentioned that they have little motivation to carry out their assignments because they feel their teacher does not read them.

I think out teachers do not read out writings completely. They just have a short look. So why should I try hard and spend a lot of time to write something? I can easily get a lot of useful information from internet as use them in my writings.

"De–motivating task" is one of the factors found in [25]. According to her, this category is related to students' lack of interest in the topic which is assigned to them. This can be attributed to the students' lack of freedom in choosing the topics that appeal to them. It can be concluded that whether the students are interests in a

certain topic or not is not taken into account by the teachers. Such being the case, students lose their motivation in their assignments, which will lead to plagiarism.

Convenience: Another factor the interview respondents identified as motivating them to plagiarize is the convenience with which it can be done. They stated that it is a very easy, quick and convenient way of accessing a lot of reliable information.

It is very easy to find a lot of information quickly on the internet.

When everything is available on the internet, why should I spend a lot of time looking for something that I don't know if I can find or not?

It is very easy to do; you just copy and paste.

There is no barrier; it is very easy to do and it saves a lot of time.

Based on the statements mentioned above, it can be concluded that students see plagiarism as a quick and convenient way of finding a lot of information and in this case they do not need to bother themselves reading lots of materials and spending a lot of time in order to come up with an original piece of writing. Many people blame technology for making it easier for students to plagiarize than ever before [26]. In fact, the internet search engines, online journals, article databases and other electronic sources have made everything accessible to students. It is now very easy to capture a lot of information on a wide range of topics and copy and paste or even buy materials [27]. Given such convenience in finding information, students feel it is a waste of time to try to come up with a novel piece of writing.

Pressures: Another influential factors leading to student plagiarism was different types of pressures students feel from different sources. In this regard, students stated that the pressures from their family, society, as well as time pressure, are the key factors contributing to plagiarism. In terms of family pressure, one of the respondents stated:

These days all families force like their children to go to university and continue their studies up to the highest level. This pressure is really bad, especially if the children are not interested in this.

Another type of pressure the students referred to was pressure from society. In this regard, one of the students noted:

I also feel pressure from society; I know if I don't continue my studies and if I don't get good grades, maybe I cannot find a job.

Time pressure was also mentioned as a contributing factor. Some of the respondents argued that since their teacher does not give them ample time to fulfill their assignments, they have to resort to plagiarism as it is a shortcut to getting lots of information. In their study, [28]identify time pressure as a "situational factor" that can encourage students to cheat.Feeling of time pressure is a factor that can lead people to find a quick way of carrying out a certain task.

Sometimes we don't have much time for our papers, so we have to find something quickly, so getting information from internet is the best and fastest.

Clearly, students seem to feel the pressure to do well. What matters is the end result. Rather than concentrating on their learning, they are more concerned with getting an acceptable score at the end of the course since they know the end result is more important than the process. As such, it is natural that those who seek their desired mark may cheat to achieve their goal.

High Cost of Studying: Some of the responses the interviewees offered as to why students plagiarize concerned high costs associated with studying. One of the students noted:

For many students it's very expensive to study; they are afraid of failing a course and then pay a lot of money to repeat the course. So they prefer to plagiarize to get a good score and pass.

The high cost of education was also identified by [11] as a major cause of plagiarism. It was mentioned that some students plagiarize because they have too much money and that they receive a lot of money from their parents and spend it on other people doing their work. Moreover, it was shown that the stigma of failing leads many students to plagiarism. The high cost of a university degree was also illustrated as an influential factor in this regard.

What can be concluded from the factors mentioned above is that plagiarism is a phenomenon that is caused by a range of factors. It is thus unwise to attribute plagiarism to one single factor. As such, in order to detect and prevent plagiarism, it is first necessary to figure out why students plagiarize. Only with this knowledge, can educationalists detect and deter plagiarism.

Pedagogical Implications: The present study revealed a number of reasons why Iranian university students plagiarize. Based on the findings of the study, the following suggestions are offered in order to decrease the incidence of plagiarism:

- One of the reasons the interview respondents noted as leading to plagiarism is their poor understanding of this concept. Many of the students do not even hear the word "plagiarism" unless they are accused of it. Instructors are thus recommended to inform students about plagiarism and the severe punishments the plagiarists may be given. Students need to know about the consequences of plagiarism and that it may bring about harmful effects. Teachers can spend some class time defining plagiarism, explaining its use and how to avoid it. When students see how important plagiarism is for their instructors, they will take it seriously too. Moreover, students can be informed about the use of softwares and search engines that can detect plagiarism. They can utilize such technology while working on their paper to ensure the originality of their work.

- Another factor identified was students' poor research and writing skills. The responses revealed that students do not have the necessary skills to write a research paper. One way students can avoid plagiarism is for instructors to strengthen their writing and research skills. Students need to be told how to paraphrase, summarize and synthesize information as well as how to cite articles. According to [29, 30], teaching skills such as paraphrasing, summarizing and quoting would help students learn how to integrate ideas in their work. Teachers should also supervise their students while they are busy writing something. A research paper that is done step by step under the close supervision of an instructor reduces the frequency of plagiarism to a great extent. This will reduce students' writing anxiety and boosts their self-confidence significantly [15].

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- Results of the present study revealed that the type of task students are expected to as well as the topic they are given have a dramatic impact on their degree of plagiarism. It was found that some students plagiarize because they do not possess adequate knowledge of the subject matter, or the topic they are supposed to write about does not appeal to them and is too heavy for them to manage. This could be a clear message to educators to take such points into consideration when assigning a certain topic to students. Therefore, teachers are advised to select topics about which students have adequate knowledge. They should also assign tasks that are reasonably challenging so that they can manage it effectively. It is also advisable that teacher get to know their students' area of interest so that they can choose topics that are within their interest domain.
- Time pressure was also identified as a factor causing plagiarism. Students noted that they have to resort to plagiarism as a result of time pressure imposed on them by their instructors. When faced with rapidly closing deadlines, even honest students prefer to plagiarize to meet the deadline. Interestingly, [31] reported that in one year, over half the undergraduate plagiarism cases at their institution took place during exam time. By employing some time management techniques, instructors can help students avoid plagiarism. One approach is to give students ample time to manage an assignment and give them the right amount of pressure. Moreover, instructors are recommended to divide large assignments into pairs or groups, so that the burden can be shared among individuals. This will help the students avoid the last minute pressure of an end-of-the-term assignment, which is caused by being unable to find a suitable topic or not knowing how to conduct the research and thus asking somebody to do a piece of research for them.
- Literature has also proved that some students plagiarize because they do not know how it can be avoided. As such, the responsibility lies on the instructors to familiarize the students with plagiarism-prevention techniques. Students need to know that in order to battle against plagiarism, they need to seek help from other sources such as library. If students are familiar with library references services, they will not feel overwhelmed by the research (s)he has to undertake and opt to plagiarize

instead. As [32] write, "as librarians, we support not only information retrieval but the whole process of research and development of information literacy skills….[including] teaching students about plagiarism" (p. 109).

CONCLUSION

The present study delved into reasons why Iranian students plagiarize. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a number of postgraduate students and they were asked to describe the reasons they plagiarized. As the sample of students selected was rather small, the findings are basically the respondents' perceptions for the possible reasons students plagiarized. As such, caution needs to be taken into account while generalizing the finding of the study. Despite its limitations, the present study provides a range of reasons for plagiarism in postgraduate students' own words. The reasons emerged can be helpful to other universities and institutions who aim to minimize or prevent the occurrence of plagiarism.

The study has shed some light on the concept of plagiarism, the reasons why it occurs and what techniques and strategies can be adopted in order to battle to prevent it. Clearly, through an understanding of plagiarism and why it occurs and taking measures to prevent it, either by the techniques suggested in the present study or any other prevention strategy, instructors and educators can be in a better position to reduce the chances of plagiarism taking place. Consequently, a better and more effective learning environment is created not only for the students and instructors, but also for the institution or the university.

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