



The Misuse of Source Material in Academic Writing by Iraqi EFL Postgraduate Students

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Introduction

Using sources is essential in any academic writing; for it is the only way researchers can document and verify what they are trying to study. Misuse of such sources can lead to a number of problems for the researcher. Thus, any academic writer should keep in mind a number of techniques that could be used when dealing with any source (Lunsford & Connors, 2000; Maimon, 2008; Moore, 1999, 2008; Pecorari, 2003). It is obvious that writing as a productive skill is a difficult and challenging skill to master and what makes it harder and more challenging is writing in a foreign language. Writing a research paper is a tough task for any EFL student. It demands proficiency in both the English language and methods of research. Although Iraqi EFL students in English departments throughout Iraqi universities receive a sufficient number of lectures in writing and research methods both in their graduate and postgraduate studies, still most MA students have difficulty in using certain techniques like summarizing and paraphrasing when writing from sources. Most of them tend to copy directly from their sources (plagiarism) rather than using quotation marks or block quotations. Others try to “patchwrite” (stitching one sentence together with another in order to piece together a paragraph) rather than to summarize or paraphrase using their own words. This, the researcher believes, is due to a number of reasons, one of which is the absence of academic censorship throughout Iraqi universities, a thing that encourages students to copy directly from the source or to stitch sentences together rather than use the most popular academic writing techniques which are paraphrasing and summarizing. Hussein (2014, p. 123) states that Iraqi institutional policies often seem to address plagiarism cases in academic writing in a very mild way. He adds that the major reason behind this is that we are in the midst of a plagiarism epidemic in academic writing throughout the Iraqi university community and there is an absence of a clear active policy on plagiarism. Plagiarism as a phenomenon requires special attention within the Iraqi educational context.

Besides what is mentioned above, the researcher claims that other essential reasons of source misuse are the lack of knowledge about what it takes to be proficient in English writing as well as a lack of knowledge about research methods. These reasons combine with the easiness on the part of the students to just copy from sources and the very difficult topics that demanding supervisors assign all play an important role in not dealing with the plagiarism issue appropriately.

To test the hypothesis of the study a questionnaire was administered by the researcher to 20 Iraqi EFL MA students all in the final stages of their studies at three Iraqi universities. In the questionnaire the students were told to select two reasons out of eight which they thought were behind making them misuse their academic sources. Results showed that most students chose the first reason (copying directly from

the source because ‘I cannot express the idea in my own words’) with 88%, while the second reason (the lack of knowledge in the techniques that could be used in research writing) came next with 75% (as shown in Table 2).

It is important to mention that the reason behind not analysing any M.A thesis in this study is because no permission was given to the researchers to do so. The participants and their supervisors refused to get their writing analysed and accepted to take part in only the questionnaire administration.

Results of the study show a very serious problem which needs pedagogical solutions and special attention by EFL instructors dealing with methods of research. Also, further research should be conducted in this area in order to reach applicable solutions concerning EFL research writing and academic writing.

Finally, it is necessary to mention that the researcher had previously carried out a similar study concerning plagiarism and patchwriting detection in graduate research writing by Iraqi EFL fourth stage university students. After taking permission from the students and their supervisors to analyse their graduation papers, only (5) students accepted to have their work analysed (Hussein & Ali, 2015). Results showed many cases of plagiarism and patchwriting, along with many incorrect ways of citation and documentation of sources. A questionnaire was also distributed to 20 fourth-year EFL university students in order to see the factors behind their plagiarism and misuse of sources. The results showed that most students do not know what plagiarism actually is nor are they familiar with the techniques that could be used while writing a research paper. Results also revealed that students tend to copy from their sources because they lack the proficiency to rephrase them. Thus, the researcher finds it important to take a further step in this type of research and try detecting plagiarism and source misuse in postgraduate research writing in order to compare the two studies and try to find pedagogical remedies to such serious academic problems.

Literature Review

Plagiarism and Misuse of Sources

In the world of research and scholarship, it is inappropriate (and illegal) to make unauthorized copies of people's ideas, written work, lectures and website contents. The ideas that others copy or fail to document belong to people who think them up making their living trading on these ideas (Greene, 2008, p. 5). Yet, at the same time, it is important to scholars that they make ideas available for others to use. Sharing and using ideas (not plagiarizing them) increases everyone's knowledge. That is why there are certain conventions and rules that are developed by researchers and scholars in the field of research writing that allow academic writers to use each other's ideas, while ensuring that the owner of an idea gets credit for having conceived of it (Greene, 2008, p. 5). Quotations, citations and references are techniques that can be used by researchers and students to give credit when they write from sources they need (MLA, 2009, p. 66).

According to the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA) (2003), in order to avoid misuse of sources, you must give credit to the author whenever you:

- Quote spoken, written or printed words from another source
- Present another person's idea, theory or opinion
- Paraphrase spoken, written or printed words from another source
- Quote any statistics, graphs or other images, pictures or facts that are not common knowledge.

It does not matter whether the source is a printed book, a website, a lecture, movie or conversation. Any time you present another person's ideas or work in your own writing, you must cite your source.

Neglecting these important facts and not using the source properly can lead the writer to commit plagiarism- the academically dishonest practice of using another's words or ideas as your own (Carroll &

Appleton, 2001). As a violation of the academic honesty code, academic institutions take plagiarism very seriously. In order to understand and avoid plagiarism, students should be familiar with the definition and causes of plagiarism, personal responsibility when it comes to citing outside sources, and best practices for avoiding plagiarism (Full Sail University, 2012). The definition of plagiarism is highly nuanced and has evolved over time. It is the cultural and institutional differences that made the concept of plagiarism often misinterpreted (Full Sail University, 2012). The Council of Writing Program Administration (2003, p. 1) states that, "In an instructional setting, plagiarism occurs when a writer deliberately uses someone else's language, ideas, or other original (not common-knowledge) material without giving acknowledgment to its source. This definition applies to texts published in print or online, to manuscripts, and to the work of other student writers."

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, "plagiarism" means:

1. to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own
2. to use (another's production) without crediting the source
3. to commit literary theft
4. to present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source

In other words, plagiarism is an act of fraud. It involves both stealing someone else's work and lying about it afterward.

However, students sometimes are not guilty of plagiarism when they try in good faith to acknowledge others' work but fail to do so accurately or fully. These failures are largely the results of prior teaching and learning. They simply lack the knowledge of and the ability to use the conventions of authorship attribution (CWPA, 2003). Thus, as university EFL teachers and instructors we must try to engage our students in different writing activities and research tasks. The definition of plagiarism and source use must be made clear to students in their early years of education or in their early stages of writing. Also, as college instructors, we must try to support students as they attempt to learn how to research and document sources by assigning writing that requires research and documentation.

Methodology

The Participants and Settings

In total, 20 MA EFL students participated in the study. The students were in the second year of their M.A study and they had finished their source gathering and had been writing their thesis for six months. The participants are all students from the English Department's College of Education in three universities in Iraq: Al- Qadissiya, Baghdad and Thi-Qar. Students were told about the nature of the study and its aim concerning the misuse of academic sources in their research writing and what kinds of techniques they should use when writing about them so as to avoid plagiarism. What is and is not considered plagiarism in academic writing was also made clear to the students. The participants were very excited and supportive, aware of the importance of such cases and were willing to be honest about their practices. However, both the participants and their supervisors refused to have their work analysed and accepted to take part only in answering the questionnaire. The participants were also told that their names would not be revealed and their answers to the questionnaire were anonymously analysed.

The Questionnaire and Data Analysis

The questionnaire contains two parts: in the first part the participants were told to write down in not more than 3 sentences what they think plagiarism is and what techniques they think could be used to

avoid the misuse of sources. While in the second part the participants were asked to identify 2 factors out of 8 which they think make them plagiarize or misuse their sources.

The eight factors mentioned in Part 2 of the questionnaire were as follows:

1. Lack of knowledge in English writing proficiency
2. Lack of knowledge in research writing techniques especially summarizing or paraphrasing
3. Absence of academic censorship, no one will discover the plagiarism.
4. Time limit
5. My subject is available on the internet.
6. My supervisor demands a high level of writing.
7. Easiness in copying directly from the source
8. Other reasons

The two tables below show the results of the two parts of the questionnaire.

In Table 1, the results reveal that 40% of the students know what plagiarism is but do not know the possible techniques that could be used to avoid it. This reflects a serious problem concerning teaching methods of research in Iraqi universities especially to EFL students in English departments. 30% of them knew what plagiarism means and techniques to avoid source misuse, which means that the concept of plagiarism and source misuse are becoming familiar issues in academic contexts. Also, it is shown that only 10% of the students did not know the meaning of plagiarism, while they knew the techniques to avoid source misuse. Finally, only 20% of the MA students did not know what plagiarism is nor the techniques that could be used to avoid source misuse. This indicates a very serious problem among academic writers which needs an immediate remedy. Plagiarism as a forbidden technique should become more familiar among university students in Iraq and they should be more aware of its consequences.

In Table 2, the results reveal a very important issue concerning the reason behind students' misuse of their sources. It is shown that 75% of the students plagiarize and misuse their sources because of the absence of academic censorship throughout Iraqi universities. This reveals a very important fact concerning academic integrity and Iraqi university policies concerning plagiarism in academic writing. The results show that 50% of the participants chose the second choice (lack of knowledge in the techniques that could be used in academic writing) indicating a very important problem faced by MA students in methods of research and techniques of research writing. Twenty-five percent (25%) of the students chose that the reason behind their misuse of sources is the fact that they lack proficiency in the English language for their writing which makes it easy to plagiarize and patchwrite. Both (my supervisor demands a high level of writing) and (it is easy to copy directly from the source) had the same percentage of 15%. Finally, only 10% of the students chose the reasons (time limit) and (my research is available on the internet) as their reasons for plagiarism and source misuse.

TABLE 1

Results of Part 1 of the Questionnaire Concerning Students' Understanding of the Meaning of Plagiarism and Source Use

Types of student answers	<i>N. of students' choices</i>	<i>Percentage of choices</i>
Students who knew plagiarism & techniques to avoid source misuse.	6	30%
Students who knew plagiarism & do not know what techniques to avoid source misuse.	8	40%
Students who do not know plagiarism but know techniques used to avoid source misuse.	2	10%
Students who do not know plagiarism nor techniques used to avoid source misuse	4	20%
Total	20	100%

TABLE 2

Results of Part 2 of the Questionnaire: Factors that Students Think Made Them Misuse Their Sources

Reasons	N. of students' choices	Percentage of choices
Lack of knowledge in English writing proficiency.	5	25%
Lack of knowledge in research writing techniques especially summarizing or paraphrasing.	10	50%
Absence of academic censorship, no one will discover the plagiarism.	15	75%
Time limit.	2	10%
My subject is available on the internet	2	10%
My supervisor demands a high level of writing	3	15%
Easiness in copying directly from the source.	3	15%
Other reasons.	0	0%
Total	40	200%

Results and Discussions

The results of the study prove the researcher's initial belief regarding the fact that although MA students receive a sufficient amount of teaching in methods of research, most of them tend to plagiarize and misuse their sources intentionally because of the absence of academic censorship in Iraqi universities. A questionnaire administered by the researcher indicates that most students struggle when trying to write from their sources despite the fact that they understand them, leading them to plagiarize, i.e., committing direct copying from sources or patchwriting. This, the researcher believes, is due to the lack of knowledge students have about the possible techniques that could be used in academic writing. Although writing proficiency is a very important skill in language teaching, writing from sources is an essential sub-skill that every academic writer must master. Thus, in order to promote the teaching situation of writing from sources, it is urgent to develop new materials and resources suitable for teaching academic writing, source use and the possible techniques that could be used to avoid plagiarism. It has also been found that some Iraqi MA students are not even familiar with the concept of plagiarism. Twenty percent (20%) of the participants declared not having heard of the concept before. While the rest only knew it without knowing how to avoid it. This, the researcher thinks, is because students are not educated enough about source use and plagiarism during their academic studies. Teachers should show students what plagiarism and patchwriting look like. EFL students need to practice different ways of incorporating source text starting from copying to patchwriting to more complete paraphrasing and summarizing so that they can distinguish between them.

In sum, it is necessary to conduct further studies concerning Iraqi EFL students' misuse of sources and the techniques that could be used to avoid plagiarism. Students should be educated about plagiarism by providing explicit definitions and examples making it clear to them that copying papers or parts of papers can actually stand against their learning experiences and opportunities for skill development.

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