

On Iranian EFL Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of Plagiarism

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Published online: 16 October 2015

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Abstract The fast growing rates of plagiarism among students in higher education has become a serious concern for academics around the world. Collecting data through semi-structured interview, this qualitative study is an attempt to investigate a group of EFL undergraduate students' viewpoints on plagiarism, the extent to which they are informed about it and the reasons triggering them to plagiarize. Responses revealed shallow understanding of plagiarism in its various forms. The findings indicated a range of contributing factors including: instructors' ignorance towards plagiarism, limited writing and research skills, peer pressure, pressure to submit high-quality assignments and ease of plagiarizing. The results highlighted the need for practical policies and cohesive framework to raise students' awareness at initial stages in order to minimize the prevalence of plagiarism at later points. Developing rich writing and referencing skills should be considered seriously by course instructors and the common leniency towards undergraduate students' instances of plagiarism must be replaced by more serious attitude that encourages innovative and genuine research practice. The implications of findings can help academics to take the required steps in decreasing cases of plagiarism among students.

Keywords Plagiarism · Prevalence · EFL undergraduate students · Genuine research · Writing skills

Introduction

The controversial nature of plagiarism has turned it into a complex concept to define. The meaning ranges from failure to include proper citation to cheating (Kasprzak and Nixon 2004).

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Howard (1995) defined it as “representation of a source’s words or ideas as one’s own” (p. 799). It is often associated with phrases such as copying without permission and stealing other’s work (Yeo 2007). According to Park (2003), plagiarism “involves literary theft, stealing (by coping) the words or ideas of someone else and passing them off as one’s own without crediting the source” (p.472). In accordance with Park, Hayes and Introna (2005) has defined it as the inclusion of other people’s word without using a proper citation. In contrast, Briggs (2009) argued that plagiarism cannot be simply regarded as stealing others’ words, it is in fact an indicator of an attempt to master the required skill for writing. Taking a mild position, Fialkoff (2002) describes it as ‘poor scholarship’ ability of the writer.

Regardless of how it is defined, plagiarism has become a serious concern for academics in recent years. In an attempt to compensate for their insufficient skills in handling the formalities of academic writing, novice writers who have not been trained adequately and appropriately will turn to plagiarized data, a situation that can be exacerbated in the absence of a standardized and formal approach against plagiarism in the educational system.

Many factors can trigger students to plagiarize. The existing literature offers various reasons for students’ engagement in plagiarism which can be divided into major and minor factors. The rationale behind this division is the great number of studies that reflect reasons in the major category as sources of plagiarism. The

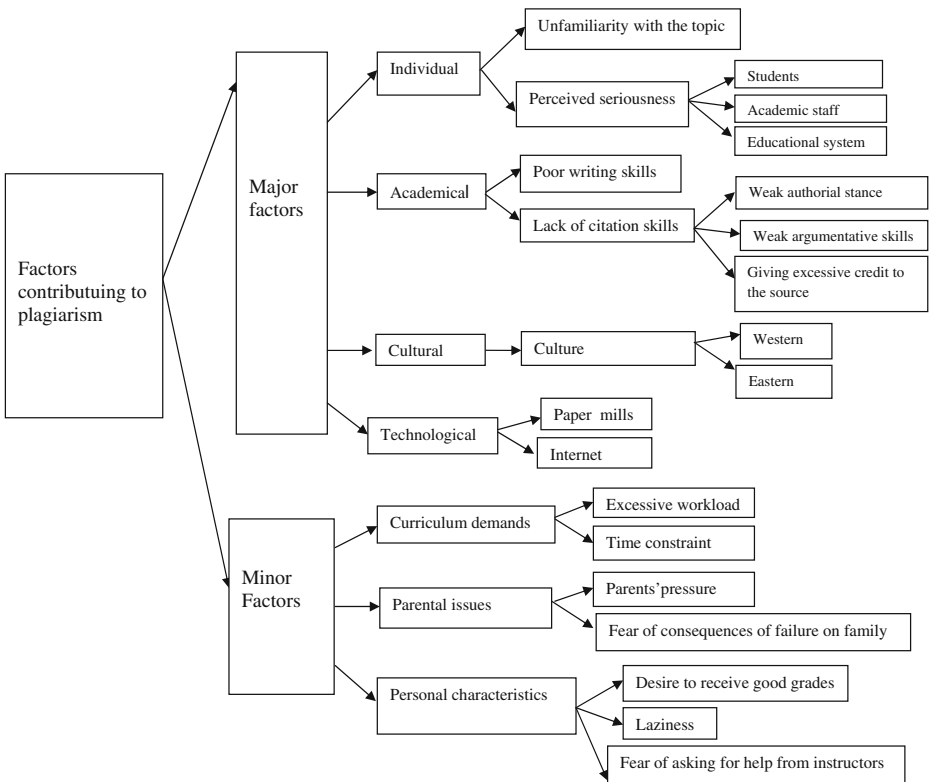


Fig. 1 Theoretical framework for underlying reasons behind plagiarism

following framework is a pictorial description of the most influential aspects of this phenomenon which will be discussed briefly (Fig. 1).

Major Factors-Individual

Some researchers suggested unfamiliarity with the concept as the major cause (Briggs 2009; Erkaya 2009; Zobel and Hamilton 2002; Mahdavi-Zafarghandi et al. 2012; Park 2003; Ahmadi 2014). Data collected from 48 Malaysian students studying at tertiary level by Yosuf and Masrom (2011) indicated that students have only basic knowledge of plagiarism and referencing tools. Similarly, interviewing 56 Australian university students by Devlin and Gray (2007) revealed poor understanding of the concept as the main factor in causing students to plagiarize.

Some researchers have focused on perceived seriousness of plagiarism among students as an important contributing factor. Maxwell et al. (2008) have pointed out that underestimating plagiarism will result in increasing rate of it. In their study of 267 undergraduate students from two Australian universities, both Asian international students and their local counterparts regarded plagiarism as minor offense. In a similar study by Lim and See (2001), it was found that a large number of participants did not have strong negative feelings for committing plagiarism and regarded paraphrasing without citation as the least serious activity for completing their assignments. On the other hand, some studies indicated that compared to students, academic staff perceive plagiarism as a more critical issue to deal with (Higbee and Thomas 2000; Hyland 2001). In analyzing the education system of UK, Ashworth and Bannister (1997) concluded that plagiarism is perceived much less seriously among students than their instructors. In contrast, Orim et al. (2013) stated that Nigerian universities do not consider plagiarism as an important issue. There is no penalty for those who plagiarize and students are quite free to use materials without acknowledging the sources. In either of the cases, certain actions are needed to be taken to raise students' awareness about the seriousness of the issue.

Major Factors-Academical

Academic writing standards are mostly borrowed from the west. Asian students usually face confusion in implying the same rules and regulations into their writing (Yosuf and Masrom 2011; Maxwell et al. 2008). Pecorari (2003) studied seventeen international postgraduate students and found out that students' direct copying from the text is the result of their inability to produce cohesive written text. Students' lack of understanding of academic writing might involve them in plagiarism that is sometimes regarded as unintentional. This is what Howard (1995) refers to as "patchwriting" which is copying a text from a source to change the grammatical structure or find synonyms for the key words while maintaining the original structure. According to her, patchwriting is a developmental stage for learners and shall not be regarded as plagiarism. Additionally Pecorari (2003) stated that patchwriting practicing will help learner acquire necessary skills to become proficient writer. In accordance with Howard's assumption, some researchers made a direct link between copying and learning (Sherman 1992; Shi 2010).

Being part of academic writing, lack of citation skills might involve students in unintentional plagiarism as well (Larkham and Manns 2002; Howard 1995; Shi 2010; Ha 2006; Gullifer and Tyson 2010). Conducting a case study with five Japanese postgraduate students regarding source use in their Pre-Mater's dissertations, McCulloch (2012) found out that

students' inappropriate use of sources is an indicator of their weak authorial stance and argumentation skills rather than intention for plagiarism. Second language writers usually give too much credit to the sources they use and consequently fail to voice their own opinion (Park 2004; Pecorari 2003).

Major Factors-Cultural

Non-western cultures are commonly considered to be engaged in plagiarism more than students coming from western societies (Ha 2006; Sowden 2005). Although a number of studies stated Asian students' culture and lack of critical thinking skills as the major cause for the prevalence of plagiarism (Pennycook 1996; Leask 2006; Sowden 2005), other studies done in European and Australian contexts revealed high rate of academic dishonesty among students as well (Ashworth and Bannister 1997; Maxwell et al. 2008; Park 2003; Larkham and Manns 2002). In Amsberry's (2009) words "if cultural differences were in fact a heart of plagiarism, no one would expect that American students, who do not face cultural hurdles in their own country would have deeper grasp of plagiarism than their international peers" (p.34). Nevertheless, copying can be seen as cultural specific matter. In China, for example, rote learning and memorization is highly valued (Liu 2005). Ability to rewrite a memorized essay is an indicator of deeper understanding and appreciation of the text (Pennycook 1996). In other words, the dominant text-based testing approach that requires students to reproduce the material covered in the books values noncritical view of the texts. The educational background of eastern learners prevents them from stating their own words in relation to the written texts (Sowden 2005; Kumaravadivelu 2003). Pennycook (1996) further maintained that in contrast to eastern countries like China, western educational system emphasized originality and proper citation.

Major Factors-Technological

The rapid advancement in the world of technology and internet has taken the problem of plagiarism to a critical point. With increase ease of access to internet and online sources, it seems that the problem has grown into more serious issue in higher education than ever (Walker 1998; Park 2003; Ashworth and Bannister 1997; Finn and Frone 2004). It makes plagiarizing into an easier task for students (Kasprzak and Nixon 2004; Park 2003). The vast amount of information exists on databases affects academic work tremendously (Mundava and Chaudhuri 2007) and provide students with opportunities to "cut and paste" the material and present it as their own work (Auer and Krupar 2001).

There are many paper writing websites known as "paper mills" that offer readymade articles to their customers. Students are only required to have enough knowledge about the topic to order the right paper which is to make sure that the purchased paper fits their requirements. To make the act of buying the paper eligible to students, some of these websites described the opportunity to access such materials as learners' own right (Loutzenhiser et al. 2006). One of the major driving sources behind excessive use of online sources is poor writing skills of students (Ashworth and Bannister 1997; Marshall and Garry 2006). Clearly, inadequate skills prevent students from producing connected piece of writing and inappropriate use of online material seems to be the easiest way for students to complete their written works.

Minor Factors-Curricular Demands/Parental Issues/Personal Characteristics

Other reasons for students engagement with plagiarism include time constraints (Devlin and Gray 2007; Wilkinson 2009; Lim and See 2001), excessive workload (Lim and See 2001; Love and Simmons 1998; Barrett and Cox 2005), feeling parents' pressure to succeed (Devlin and Gray 2007), fear of failure and its consequential impact on family (Walker 1998), strong desire for receiving good marks (Wilkinson 2009; Love and Simmons 1998; Mundava and Chaudhuri 2007), laziness (Devlin and Gray 2007) and fear of asking for help from professors for various reasons (Love and Simmons 1998).

While plagiarism is dealt with a provisional and casual basis in Iranian context, it is not surprising to see that a large amount of materials submitted as term papers or course work projects are direct copies from online sources. Understanding the reasons beyond students' plagiarism will put authorities in better position to conduct effective avoidance strategies that can be implemented through proper educational and applicable policies. Such strategies are not limited to students, rather it is a mutual understanding between all the active members of a system that leads to a common conceptualization of plagiarism. As argued by Flint et al. (2006), the perspective of students, staff and institution on plagiarism should not be viewed as a separate or private matter and authorities need to strike a balance among all these units to reduce instances of plagiarism.

Despite common practice of plagiarism, it seems that this issue has not been scrutinized in Iran's higher education level. Apart from a few number of studies that have addressed plagiarism among medicine students (Habibzadeh 2009; Bahadori et al. 2012) and Iranian EFL Masters students (Sabbaghan 2010; Mahdavi-Zafarghandi et al. 2012), no particular study has exclusively focused on this issue among undergraduate students. Studying the bachelor years is the foundation for pursuing higher education and it is critical to familiarize students with plagiarism in their early years of studying. Hence, this study is conducted to fill the gap and give undergraduate students the opportunity to voice their opinion and discuss their reasons for engagement in plagiarism. As such, the study focuses on the following questions:

1. What are Iranian undergraduate EFL students' perceptions of plagiarism?
2. What are the major causes for committing plagiarism?

Method

Participants

Participants of the present study are twelve undergraduate English translation students at Marvdasht Azad University. Bachelor of Arts requires 140–146 credits at a university or other institution of higher education and a minimum of four years to complete the study. Undergraduate programs offer a wide range of general education and specialized courses with the latter presented to students particularly in the last two years of the program.

Students who enter the field of English Translation are assumed to have reasonable command of English, since the curriculum does not focus on teaching the main four skills of the language. Four major courses of this field are Translating Audio & Video Tapes, Interpreting 1, Interpreting 2 and Interpreting 3, which are considered as a prerequisite for

each other and are required to be passed in the 4th, 6th, 7th, and 8th semesters respectively. Other courses involved in the curriculum include theories of translation (Translation Techniques, Contrastive Linguistics, Theories & Principles of Translation, etc.) and practicing different translation genres (Translating Journalistic Texts, Translating Political Texts, Translating Simple Texts, Translating Literary Texts, etc.). To obtain a degree in the field, students must achieve a minimum grade point average of 12 out of 20.

All twelve Persian native speakers participants come from the same socio-economic backgrounds and are ranged in age from 23–28 years old, seven were female and five were male. Furthermore, they were all senior students in their last year of study who took part in the interview voluntarily and willingly. As the final-semester English students, they are assumed to master general writing ability by their fourth year of study. Therefore, as part of the requirements for completing their course on ‘Research Methodology’, students are asked to complete a written assignment and a term paper which are used as sources of evaluation during the semester. The course specifically focus on students’ writing ability in handling academic research and it is assumed that learners turn to plagiarism in completing tasks relating to this particular course.

Instruments

The more-probing and less structured nature of qualitative interview made it as one of the most widely used techniques for collecting data (Ary et al. 2010). To explore the participants’ perceptions regarding plagiarism, semi-structured interview are conducted with each of the students. According to Ashworth, Freewood, and Ronald (cited in Devlin and Gray 2007), this form of interview enables students to discuss plagiarism from their own perspectives without imposing any external conceptual framework. The questions mainly focus on students’ understanding of the issue as well as their reasons for committing plagiarism with regard to the written work submitted as a partial requirement of fulfilling the course on ‘Research Methodology’.

Data Collection and Analysis

The participants were interviewed using an adapted version of Devlin and Gray interview (2007) (see Appendix). Each interview lasted about 50 min and students were interviewed separately. Although senior students are assumed to have reasonable command over English, to gain deeper insight of the topic, participants were allowed to answer the questions in either English or Persian. After gaining permissions from students, all interviews were tape-recorded and respondents were assured for anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. After a brief introduction of the topic and the purpose of the study, to provide interviewees with opportunity to reflect on the issue in their own words and pursue more details, no personal comments were given to the participants during the interview. Since no pre-determined number of the interviewees could have been set for the study, the researcher stopped interviewing students until no new themes gained from responses. The data reached saturation point and it was unlikely that new findings emerged from further interviews.

The data obtained from the interview were analyzed based on the qualitative conventional data analysis procedure of organizing, coding and interpreting (Ary et al. 2010). Once transcriptions have been completed, the researchers read them several times to find

the recurring themes. Responses were put into categories that emerged from the data. To arrive at certain discrete number of categories, answers were reviewed and reread many times. The categories emerged based on the data explained respondents' reasons for engaging in plagiarism. Certain quotations from the reviewed summary were selected to illustrate each category. To increase credibility, participants were requested not to give personal accounts or details about their own instances of plagiarism (Devlin and Gray 2007). This was to ensure that socially desirable responses will be avoided during the interview. Furthermore, through member checking, transcripts were given to participants for reviewing and checking the extent to which their comments have been reflected and portrayed in the study.

Results

To answer question number one, participants were specifically asked about their perceptions about plagiarism and the degree to which they are familiar with the term. Analysis of the responses revealed superficial understanding of the concept among undergraduate students. They could not come up with sound definition of plagiarism and were mostly unsure about different types of it:

“I suppose once you copy something directly from an internet source then you might engage in some sort of plagiarism.”

“Some of our professors explained plagiarism to us, though not in detail.”

Checking students' perceptions indicated general grasp of the concept among them, however, further questions revealed their lack of understanding. At some point, some of the participants did not know when copying actually turns into plagiarism:

“I always copy from internet sources and paste it in my written material; I follow the same process every time. I didn't know that there are different types of plagiarism.”

Some students claimed that their lack of awareness resulted in unintentional plagiarism. They further stated that they have not been informed about the issue.

“The term has not been explained to us clearly. I guess once you have limited knowledge about it, then you might involved in unintended act of plagiarism.”

Clearly, students could not distinguish between various forms of plagiarism. Even those who had general grasp of the term were not able to make any connection between the definition and different instances of plagiarism. Interviewees were uncertain of what is considered as acceptable practice. Almost all of them thought that once they change some words or structures, they do not need to mention the source:

“I thought if I change some words and structure, then it will be perfectly ok to use it in my own writing. I didn't know the necessity of acknowledging sources in writing.”

“I didn't copy the exact words or phrases...therefore, I assumed that there is no need to mention the source.”

Analysis of the data gathered from the second question during the interview revealed nine categories for involvement in plagiarism.

Instructors' Ignorance Toward Plagiarism

Ignoring students' cases of plagiarism will encourage them to copy others' works and use it as common practice in their writing. Participants believed that their instructors did not regard plagiarism as important. One of them stated:

“Professors don't care about cases of plagiarism...they are usually too busy to read our paper carefully and provide us with constructive feedback.”

Usually at undergraduate level, classrooms are filled with large number of students which makes it hard for instructors to analyze the assignments carefully. The lenient approach toward undergraduate students reinforces the cheating behavior and turns plagiarism into an approved way of doing academic research. One of the interviewees particularly mentioned:

“I have noticed no matter how much percent of my work is filled with direct copying, there will be no reaction on part of my instructors. They will not go through the time-consuming process of checking every written work that is submitted to them.”

Limited Writing Skills

Almost all participants mentioned their poor writing skills as one of the major causes of plagiarism. Overcoming these linguistic hurdles seems challenging for some of them:

“It is hard for me to paraphrase because I often lose the main idea of the original text.”

“The idea of developing a topic into a fine writing piece is so demanding...it needs proper knowledge of writing...unfortunately, when you lack certain writing skills then you will be forced to turn into plagiarism.”

Students need to be provided with proper instruction to learn the necessary writing skills. This can surely act as a preventive tool. Some of the participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the writing courses that had been offered to them:

“Writing is a laborious process which requires lots of practice. Regrettably, the courses that I had didn't give me much insight as to how to write academically.”

“Such courses are not practical; they just offer some general theoretical guidelines which are not applicable in completing term papers or written assignments.”

Inadequate Research Skills

Some of the responses indicated students' poor research skills as a deterrent factor in completing assignments and term papers. Clearly, students must be familiarized with basic process of carrying out academic research:

“The complicated skills of academic research haven't been practiced substantially in our courses. Completing a piece of research needs thorough understanding of the process involved in it which only exists at theoretical level in our class.”

Absence of the required skills can increase instances of plagiarism among students:

“Not being able to understand research properly, I make use of internet to finalize my work.”

Another student commented:

It is difficult to follow different stages of academic research when you have not been adequately trained for it. The research courses are not that much beneficial and as an easy option, I turn to online sources.”

Pressure to Submit High-Quality Assignments

Undue pressure on students to submit excellent assignments will present them with the idea of plagiarism to help their amateur writing style seem more coherent. The high expectation on the part of course instructors made some students plagiarize intentionally:

“When my professor expects me to write perfect term paper or assignment, I will left with no other way but to plagiarize...it looks much better that way.”

It seems that the idea of appropriate writing style has been overemphasized from instructors which in turn created a lot of tension for students:

“As a senior student, I am expected to write well...it is unbelievably stressful...I never feel confident enough to submit my own work...I believe a quick glance at it reveals the weaknesses easily, therefore, to be on the safe side, I always mix it with some materials that I receive from internet.”

Another student commented:

“Even if you want to submit your own work, you cannot resist questions such as ‘what if those who plagiarized achieve better marks?’ or ‘will the teacher think better of the plagiarized papers?’ I think it inevitably drives you to do it.”

Lack of Citation Skills

Students' unawareness of appropriate referencing techniques can easily prompt them into plagiarism. This will inevitably results in violation of proper source use:

“Referencing rules are confusing to me...I don't know whether I should include all the sources in my writing.”

Providing students with adequate study skills and citation techniques is of outmost important. As one participant noted:

“If we are familiar with such rules, it will be much easier to cite different sources.”

Referencing is a critical part of academic writing and students must be trained to write appropriate citation for the references that they have used.

Tight Deadlines

Meeting deadline was identified as another contributing factor to plagiarism. Responses indicated students' inability to manage their time efficiently:

“Completing lots of tasks simultaneously requires ample time. Fixed deadlines are really stressful and make me think of plagiarism as quickest way to finish my work”.

Excessive emphasis for submission on due date will force students to finalize their written work without considering the quality of it:

“How am I supposed to enjoy working on my term paper when I have to do multiple tasks at the same time?”

“Tight deadlines will put me in a position to focus on submission, rather than my work...I wish my professors had more flexible attitude towards deadlines.”

Treating Plagiarizers Like Other Students

Instructors must be supportive of learners' original works and creativity. High grades for plagiarized assignments can be increasingly demotivating. One participant explained:

“After seeing my classmates who submitted copy works received better marks than me, I didn't hesitate to make use of plagiarism in my future assignment...after all, why would I bother? This way, I can easily secure a good mark”

While undergraduate students rely heavily on instructors' feedback on their work, such attitudes demotivate learners:

“I regret the effort that I put in completing my written work...awarding equal marks to plagiarized papers is not fair.”

This is the point where tension can arise in the relationship between a teacher and a student as the latter feels that his attempts have not been appreciated and valued:

“Good work is not valued... It is clear that quality does not matter.”

“Not all my classmate put in same amount of effort...appreciating their work does not make sense at all.”

Influence of Peers

Peer pressure can influence students' attitudes and decision making to a great extent. It is natural for students to compare themselves with their classmates in almost all instances of their academic performance:

“I perfectly know that most of my classmates use plagiarizing techniques to complete their assignments. They even recommended me to do so.”

Once students realize that their classmates are involved in plagiarism, they will think of it as an acceptable norm and try to model the same behavior. Peer pressure might negatively influence individuals in internalizing certain unacceptable behaviors:

“Plagiarism is a common strategy in writing among students. I guess I lost my sense of motivation and commitment after seeing many instances of it among my peers.”

“Plagiarism is perfectly acceptable among my classmates. It is certainly tempting to keep up with the rest and mix your own work with plagiarized data.”

Ease of Plagiarizing

The comfort in using web pages triggers some students to take the easy option and copy materials directly from online sources:

“I can easily access loads of materials by simple click.”

“While required information can be obtained effortlessly, I don't have to spend hours studying the books and rewrite it.”

“Plagiarizing materials from internet is easy and quick, there is no apparent obstruction.”

Internet has provided students with unlimited sources of data in different fields of study. Nevertheless, familiarizing students with modern plagiarism detection tools such as Turnitin and EVE can minimize their chances of using internet pages conveniently. Such tools will use document source analysis to find instances of similarity between the submitted work and online sources. Some students mentioned inadequate library sources as the major reason for turning into internet material. Universities must provide learners with opportunities to access online databases to lower the probability of plagiarism:

“Unfortunately the university's library does not provide us with enough resources. Accessing materials through university website can be a great incentive to do the job on our own.”

The findings are summarized in Table 1.

Discussion

This study aimed at investigating the status of plagiarism in Iranian academic context. The analysis of the first research question revealed that students have shallow understanding of the concept which is in line with previous research studies on undergraduate students that have been discussed earlier in this paper (Ashworth and Bannister 1997; Maxwell et al. 2008). Some of the participants were familiar with the term in its broadest sense; however, they were not able to distinguish between different forms of plagiarism. Students need concrete and clear-cut examples to understand what is actually regarded as plagiarism in an academic writing. If academic communities provide students with specific guidelines that define plagiarism, the integrity and reputation of the institutions will be maintained and the movement against it will become a value that encourages students towards novelty, creativity and originality. According to types of plagiarism by Walker (1998, p.103), students' responses indicated that they were mostly involved in “Illicit Paraphrasing” (material paraphrased without in-line acknowledgement of source), “Other Plagiarism” (material copied from another student's assignment with the knowledge of the other student) and “Verbatim Copying” (material copied verbatim from text without in-line acknowledgement of the source).

Table 1 summary of codified results

Themes	Category	Sample
Educational	Instructors' ignorance toward plagiarism	Professors do not care about cases of plagiarism. They are usually too busy to read our paper carefully and provide us with constructive feedback.
	Limited writing skills	It is hard for me to paraphrase because I often lose the main idea of the original text.
	Inadequate research skills	It is difficult to follow different stages of academic research when you have not been adequately trained for it. The research courses are not that much beneficial. Therefore, I turn to online sources.
	Pressure to submit high-quality assignments	As a senior student, I am expected to write well. It is unbelievably stressful. I never feel confident enough to submit my own work. I believe a quick glance at it reveals the weaknesses easily, therefore, to be on the safe side, I always mix it with some materials that I receive from internet.
	Lack of citation skills	Referencing rules are confusing to me. I do not know whether I should include all the sources in my writing.
	Tight deadlines	Tight deadlines will put me in a position to focus on submission, rather than my work. I wish my professors had more flexible attitude towards deadlines.
Interpersonal	Influence of peers	I perfectly know that all my classmates use plagiarizing techniques to complete their assignments. They even recommended me to do so.
	Treating plagiarizers like other students	I regret the effort that I put in completing my written work. Awarding equal marks to plagiarized papers is not fair.
Personal	Ease of plagiarizing	While required information can be obtained effortlessly, I do not have to spend hours studying the books and rewrite it. Plagiarizing materials from internet is easy and quick, there is no apparent obstruction.

Nine categories related to the causes of plagiarism emerged in participants' responses to the second question and it was found that educational factors are the most influential ones. Whether intentional or unintentional, university authorities must consider combating plagiarism in its various forms seriously. Unfortunately, results of the study signified that instructors' leniency towards B.A. students influences their perceptions negatively and leads to excessive cases of plagiarism in their submitted works. This finding is in line with Davis and Ludvigson (1995), who indicated that students will engage in plagiarism if they think that there is little chance of getting caught or being punished. Furthermore, Park (2004) asserted that unless appropriate instruction and punishment put into practice, students are less likely to be deterred.

A change in instructors' attitudes toward trivialization of undergraduate students' plagiarism is absolutely necessary to make novice writers reflect their own ideas in their writing while making appropriate use of online sources. Facing with no serious consequences or penalties, students will use more of online material without acknowledging the sources properly. They must become aware of the fact that their instructors are sensitive to cases of intentional copying and that plagiarism is not the easy option to follow for completion of a written work. In such cases, university authorities have a significant role in helping instructors who report allegations of students' cheating behaviour by employing sanctions that has notable disincentive value (McCabe et al. 2001). Sensitivity to academic research and written work must not be limited to postgraduate students. The usual underestimation of undergraduate

students' ability to carry out academic research should be replaced by positive instruction, guidance and feedback. Instructors must consider the fact that students at this level need support, time, practice and encouragement to learn and apply principles of academic writing in their works. As the most influential element in educational chain, instructors must create conducive learning environment that promotes originality and innovation (Pennycook 1996).

In addition to instructors' ignorance, students' comments suggested insufficient writing, research and citation skills as significant hindrances in completing their works successfully. As an area which deserves special attention, effective and practical writing instruction is critical for tackling plagiarism at early stages. In congruence with the finding, Liu (2005) concluded that lack of language proficiency and writing skills is perhaps the major reason among ESOL students' cases of plagiarism. Iran's undergraduate education system suffers from lack of critical thinking skills among students. Depending heavily on the text, learners usually demonstrate inability to make a firm stand and articulate their ideas appropriately, and therefore large percentages of copying existing in submitted written works is not of much astonishment. Relevant literature provides evidence for this finding. Wilkinson (2009) stated that students face increasing difficulty in modifying the original sources and using the quotation marks. Mastering disciplinary academic writing might seem overwhelming to undergraduate students. Fundamental skills of paraphrasing, summarizing and quoting and referencing must be practiced extensively in writing classes. Meanwhile, identifying writing difficulties of students before it drives them to plagiarism and cheating behavior is an effective approach.

As the two remaining debilitating factors in educational classification, pressurizing students to submit high-quality written work under tight deadlines must be reconsidered by instructors. Students are not provided with proper instruction or reasonable amount of time, yet they are expected to present their works in high standard academic style. Instructors can demonstrate more flexibility on time restrictions for term paper submission with the goal of providing students with ample time to work on their writing skills appropriately. This would undoubtedly reduce unhealthy competition over grades among students and inspires them to be competitive in non-destructive way.

To deal with interpersonal factors, instructors are required to be more supportive of those who submit their original work. Treating plagiarizers softly discourages those who attempt to submit their work using minimal level of copying from other sources. Furthermore, having open dialogue and interactive sessions with students regarding the values of appropriate uses of online sources will decrease the possibility of negative peer influence. Under such circumstances, peers motivate and assist each other to write critically and the classroom becomes a place where every student has the opportunity to learn and develop.

Finally, by implementing certain prevention strategies, the ease of plagiarizing as a personal factor can be decreased to a great extent. Park (2004) suggested that employing electronic detection tools can be an effective deterrent to decrease the much practiced 'copy and paste' phenomenon. Plagiarism detecting technologies have been emphasized in other studies as well (Kasprzak and Nixon 2004; Price 2002; Mundava and Chaudhuri 2007; Park 2004; Hughes and McCabe 2006; Auer and Krupar 2001).

Overall, it can be argued that a relative overlap exists between Iranian students' reasons for being indulged in plagiarism and their western counterparts. This will put academics in a better position to implement the strategies used by other academic institutions to manage and decrease instances of plagiarism. A note of caution, however, is to consider contextual factors and situational variables.

Conclusion

The present study indicated that plagiarism is prevalent among undergraduate students. The contributing reasons range from personal and interpersonal factors to educational ones. Current status of plagiarism calls for due attention and highlights the need for immediate action on the part of universities' authorities. The results pointed out that present condition of our undergraduate classes do not support the requirements of plagiarism-free educational environment and it is not possible to expect drastic changes within a short period of time in such a system. Familiarizing students with related policies and effective deterrent tolls is a process that requires support and skillful planning. Nevertheless, as a point of departure, undergraduate students are among the first to receive explicit avoidance instruction on plagiarism which can specifically benefit them in their subsequent written works.

As mentioned by Auer and Krupar (2001) preventing plagiarism from the beginning is better than detecting it at later stages. Early intervention and education is important (Marshall and Garry 2005) and must be followed in a fair and consistent manner (Loutzenhiser et al. 2006; Price 2002). What truly matters is generating students' awareness about ethical and appropriate use of data sources. If students do not recognize their mistake at initial stages, it is highly probable that the same strategies for completing written work will be pursued in higher academic levels. In this case, it will be difficult to discourage the use of what has been substantialized as a common strategy in writing. Therefore, designing appropriate policies that are administered consistently can minimize students' rate of plagiarism and alter the grade-oriented environment in undergraduate classrooms with nurturing atmosphere where students are inspired to work individually and come up with ideas that reflect their own thinking and understanding.

Undoubtedly, the small sample size of the study reflects the perceptions of the students involved and generalizations must be made cautiously. In spite of the limited scope, it presents various reasons for students' plagiarism along with possible solutions to tackle it at higher education stages. Further research which implements a larger sample size might be more revealing and conclusive. Still further studies may focus on undergraduate students' viewpoints from different faculties. It is possible that interviewing learners from various fields of study leads to different findings regarding this issue. It is also probable that at postgraduate levels, students become engaged with plagiarism for different reasons. A comparative study of perceived seriousness of plagiarism among B.A., M.A. and PhD. students is a ripe area for further research that can capture students' impressions and sensitivities over time. In addition, analyzing the divergent attitudes of staffs and students toward plagiarism might help authorities to address the issue in a more productive way.

It is hoped that through integrating effective prevention strategies, the educational policy makers reconstruct the attitudes and revise the approaches toward plagiarism and make it more compatible with the recent developments against this phenomenon that is taking place in prominent institutions around the world.

Appendix: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

This study aims to gather your views on plagiarism and different reasons that contributes to it. No question on personal account will be asked and your responses will remain anonymous. No comments will be given to individuals. The interview will be tape recorded (for easy retrieval)

and notes written during it will be kept confidential. It will take you about an hour. Your responses can provide academics with information to minimize instances of plagiarism.

Demographics

- Age
- Gender
- Years of studying English

Base Questions (follow up question will depend on responses)

1. How do you interpret and define plagiarism?
2. Are you familiar with different types of plagiarism? (prompt if necessary: mention different forms of plagiarism)
3. Do you think of plagiarism as a common strategy used by students in your course?
4. In your view, what are reasons for plagiarizing?

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