

University students' understandings, attitudes and experiences on plagiarism

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Abstract

With the speeding spread of the Internet, plagiarism is an emerging issue not only for the academic community but also for all educational and training institutions and organizations. However, this issue has not yet been considered comprehensively and seriously in Vietnam. To raise awareness of plagiarism and improve academic integrity, this study conducted a case study exploring this issue at a private international university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Questionnaires were sent to 120 students in the Department of English Language. Results show that students lack appropriate understanding of plagiarism as well as skills to avoid it. The study also points out students' attitudes towards plagiarism which has not been addressed before.

Keywords: plagiarism, ghost-writing, copyright

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1. Introduction

According to Liddell (2003), plagiarism is copying others' work, even by expressing it using one's own words without proper citation. In other words, plagiarism means using someone else's intellectual product as their work (Helgesson & Eriksson, 2015). Therefore, it is considered as the theft of intellectual property (Fusch, Ness, Booker & Fusch, 2017). Also, plagiarism includes text-recycling or self-plagiarism (Burdine, de Castro Maymone & Vashi 2019; Horbach & Halffman, 2019). Not only copying or taking others' work and recycling texts, using ghostwriting, a service offering essay trading, is also plagiarism (Curtis & Tremayne, 2019; Dougherty, 2020; Lines, 2016; Singh & Remenyi, 2016). From the definitions above, the term 'plagiarism' is relatively broad which can confuse both readers and writers. When investigating the understanding of students towards plagiarism, 119 students admitted that they had heard about plagiarism, but they did not know the exact meaning (Sarlauskiene & Stabingis, 2014). Bamford and Sergiou (2005) also reported that Asian students stated that they had an unclear understanding of plagiarism, even before going overseas for studying. This confusion can be found in the study of Irina and Ali (2018). Since not understanding fully and not being trained systematically from schools and universities, students were found to admit plagiarism at relatively high rates. In 2017, Phan and Nguyen (2018) conducted an online survey among students and young lecturers at a university in Vietnam. The study stated that although the majority of the participants were aware of plagiarism, they admitted they plagiarised at least once.

Similarly, Tran, Huynh and Nguyen (2018) utilised the software *Turnitin* to check the original rates of students' work, and the results showed that 61.7% out of 977 exam papers was plagiarised. The rise of plagiarism among students can be found in several countries worldwide including Croatia (Basic, Kruzic, Jerkovic, Buljan & Marusic, 2019), Spain (Olivia-Dumitrina, Casanovas, & Capdevila, 2019; Pamies, Valverde & Cross, 2020), Indonesia (Akbar, 2018), Iran (Zarfsaz & Ahmadi, 2017), Ecuador (Díaz, Montoliu & Becerra, 2018), Canada (Bokosmaty, Ehrich, Eady & Bell, 2019; Eaton, 2017), Turkey (Uzun & Kilis, 2020), Australia (Jereb, Urh, Jerebic & Sprajc, 2018), Germany and Slovenia (Jereb et al., 2018).

Wager (2014) states that to address a complete definition of plagiarism, it is necessary to take into account factors impacting plagiarism. In Sweden, Razera, Verhagen, Pargman and Ramberg (2010) surveyed 47 students and found that the main factors of plagiarising were lacking learning motivation as well as facing time pressure. Stress and time pressure were also the main reasons for plagiarism in several other studies (Abbasi, Yoosefi-Lebni, 2020; Fatima, Abbas, Ming, Hosseini & Zhu, 2019). A study by Tran (2012) revealed that international students from China, Vietnam, Thailand, Japan, Oman and Saudi Arabia, who were studying at La Trobe University, plagiarised due to low English language competency. However, Internet access or stress is not a reason for plagiarism, but limited knowledge of plagiarism and poor learning attitude (Aasheim, Rutner, Li & Williams, 2019). Other factors included the pressure for good grades, poor writing skills and time management (Selemani, Chawinga & Dube, 2018), working pressure and unfair competition (Santoso & Cahaya, 2019), gender, productivity benefit and easy Internet access (Elshafei & Jahangir, 2020).

Since plagiarism is a broad term and essential for learning, teaching and doing research, it needs to be addressed properly, especially in Vietnam where this problem has been still ignored. Furthermore, students' perceptions towards plagiarism have not yet been investigated. At international universities, the need to comprehend the terms, as well as training skills, for students to avoid plagiarism is extremely essential. Therefore, this study covered those gaps and expanded the scopes of research by exploring students' experiences on plagiarism, as well as factors affecting plagiarism.

This study addressed four research questions:

- To what extent are students aware of plagiarism?
- How are students' attitudes towards plagiarism?
- What are students' experiences of plagiarism?
- What factors influence students' plagiarism?

2. Method

2.1. Research design

This study employed a mix-method approach to achieve triangulation data for strengthening the validity of the study (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). The research utilised questionnaires and interviews to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. The study was conducted in the first academic semester among students of English in the Faculty of Social Sciences and International Languages at a private international university in 2020. This university is located in Ho Chi Minh city, Vietnam, with about 3000 students who are following 63 programmes. All the participants are in their third and final year of the English language programme. There were 120 students who participated in this study. They are from 21 to 23 years old. There were 66 females and 32 males among the 98 participants who responded to the study.

2.2. Data collection and analysis

This study used a questionnaire and interviews. To collect data for the study, the draft questionnaire was piloted by 18 students from random departments at the university. Feedback was collected and the questionnaire was revised based on the pilot results. There was no big change in terms of the content of the questionnaire, except the word choice in some questions. Next, the questionnaire was sent to 120 students directly in the classrooms. Lecturers in the Department of English and leaders in each class helped to deliver and collect the questionnaires, and returned the forms to the researcher. Students finished the questionnaire in about 10 minutes. 98 responses were collected. Follow-up interviews were conducted among six students randomly in six classes. Each interview lasted 20 minutes in a staff room at the university. After data were collected, data from the questionnaire were synthesised and categorised into charts and tables for comparing and contrasting. Data from the interviews were transcribed, thoroughly read, noted and selected. Significant results were selected, compared, contrasted and reported in this paper.

3. Results

3.1. Students' awareness of plagiarism

The first section of the survey explored students' awareness of plagiarism. This part has nine items with two options to answer: *Agree/Not agree*.

Table 1. Students' awareness of plagiarism

No.	Content	Agree	Not Agree
1	Using texts, information, data, images in your work without proper citation	57.4%	42.6%
6	Stealing others' work	57.4%	42.6%
9	Using your published work to make over 30% of the content of a new work	43.6%	56.4%

Data in Table 1 show that there is a significant difference among students' understanding of plagiarism. In every item, students are divided clearly into two groups with nearly the same numbers. This result confirms that students are quite confused in understanding and defying the term plagiarism. Among 9 items, students have the highest agreement (57.4%) with items 1 (*Using texts, information, data, images in your work without proper citation*) and 6 (*Stealing others' work*).

However, most of them (56.4%) have a disagreement with item 9 (*Using your published work to make over 30% the content of new work*), which means students lack the knowledge of self-plagiarism.

3.2. Students' attitudes towards plagiarism

The second part of the survey investigated students' attitudes towards plagiarism. This part has nine items with 5-point Likert options. Students were surveyed if they accepted each of the following acts among plagiarism: 1: absolutely accepted; 2: plagiarised but accepted; 3: not decided; 4: not accepted and 5: absolutely not accepted.

Table 2. Students' attitudes towards plagiarism

No.	Content	1	2	3	4	5
1	Copying someone's homework	0.9%	34%	12.7%	9.5%	35.1%
2	Copying someone's work while taking tests	24.4%	11.7%	12.7%	19.1%	22.3%
3	Letting someone copy your work while taking tests	14.8%	15.9%	24.4%	29.7%	14.8%
4	Doing assignments for someone	12.7%	26.5%	26.5%	18%	15.9%
5	Asking someone to do your assignments	24.4%	14.8%	19.1%	27.6%	13.8%
6	Changing details in someone's work and making it your own	12.7%	25.5%	29.7%	17%	14.8%
7	Using ghostwriting services	35.1%	0%	11.7%	19.1%	34%
8	Buying assignments on websites	20.2%	11.7%	15.9%	17%	35.1%
9	Copying Internet sources and making it your own work	0%	37.2%	26.5%	19.1%	17%

3.3. Students' experiences on plagiarism

The third part of the survey explored to what extent students had committed plagiarism. This part has the same nine items with 4-point Likert options. Students were surveyed if they experienced any kind of the following acts of plagiarism: 1: never; 2: rarely; 3: sometimes; 4: often.

Table 3. Students' experiences on plagiarism

No.	Content	1	2	3	4
1	Copying someone's homework	11.7%	21.2%	24.4%	42.5%
4	Doing assignments for someone	17.2%	21.2%	50%	11.7%
7	Using ghostwriting services	36.1%	26.5%	24.4%	12.7%
8	Buying assignments on websites	87.2%	0%	0%	12.7%
9	Copying internet sources and making it your work	36.1%	20.2%	20.2%	23.4%

In Table 3, data show that 100% of the students admitted plagiarising. Their most common act is copying someone's homework (66.9%), followed by doing assignments for others (61.7%) and copying

sources from the Internet (43.4%). The least act that students have not done is buying assignments on websites (87.2%).

3.4. Factors affecting students' plagiarism

The last section of the survey investigated factors affecting students' plagiarism. It has 11 items with two options: *Yes/No*. This part has 11 items with two options to answer: *Agree/Not agree*.

Table 4. Factors affecting students' plagiarism

No.	Content	Yes	No
1	Time pressure	91.4%	0.8%
2	Weak possibility of sanction	59.5%	40.4%
3	Weak possibility of being reported	55.3%	44.6%
4	Good grades	63.8%	36.1%
5	A very common act today	56.3%	43.6%
6	Lack of lesson comprehension	81.9%	18%
7	Lack of training	54.2%	45.7%
8	Difficulties in avoiding plagiarism	50%	50%
9	Original terminologies are too good to be replaced	74.4%	24.4%
10	Lack of paraphrasing skills	86.1%	13.8%
11	Lack of learning motivation	63.8%	36.1%

Data from Table 4 show that most students (91.4%) reveal that they plagiarise due to *time pressure*. Surprisingly, the second number belongs to item 10 (*lack of paraphrasing skills*) (86.1%). The other most common factors affecting students' plagiarism are *lacking lesson comprehension* (81.9%) and *the original terminologies are too good to be replaced* (74.4%).

4. Discussions

From the results, firstly, the study shows that there is a significant difference among students' understanding of plagiarism, which means students are quite confused in understanding and defying the term plagiarism. This result aligns with a number of previous studies (Bamford & Sergiou, 2005; Irina & Ali, 2018; Sarlauskiene & Stabingis, 2014). The finding raises the need to train university students about the scope and skills to avoid plagiarism in Vietnam.

Secondly, this study contributes to the field by expanding on investing students' attitudes towards plagiarism, which have not been explored yet. Students in this study accept the act of copying someone's homework, copying sources from the Internet and making it their work, but they do not accept using ghostwriting services and buying assignments on websites. The findings of not accepting using ghostwriting services or buying assignments on websites can be explained by the impact of low incomes in Vietnam.

Moreover, this study also finds that all of the students who participated in the study admitted plagiarising. This finding supports many authors, including Pamies et al. (2020), Uzun and Kilis (2020),

Basic et al. (2019), Hoang and Nguyen (2018) and Phan and Nguyen (2017). This result again highlights the emerging issue of plagiarism in the world, particularly in Vietnam now.

Finally, this study reveals that time pressure is the most popular reason for students to plagiarise. This finding is the same as that in many other studies (Abbasi et al., 2020; Fatima et al., 2019; Phan & Nguyen, 2017; Razera, Verhagen, Pargman & Ramberg, 2009; Tindal & Curtis, 2020). Other factors including lacking learning motivation (Fatima et al., 2019), low English language competency (Tran, 2012), Internet access (Aasheim et al., 2019; Elshafei & Jahangir, 2020), the pressure for good grades, poor writing skills and time management (Selemani et al., 2018), working pressure and unfair competition (Santoso & Cahaya, 2019), gender, productivity benefit and easy Internet access are not found in this study.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

This study has reported an investigation of plagiarism in higher education in a comprehensive scope: understanding, attitudes, experiences and factors impacting plagiarism. Hopefully, these latest findings can give insights for teachers and language educators in finding suitable strategies in avoiding plagiarism at their workplace. It also emphasises the need for training students in both knowledge and skills to deal with plagiarism. The limitation of this study is the relatively small number of participants. Further study should be expanded to other subjects and departments rather than English majors only.

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