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Plagiarism in Formal University Exams: Third-year LMD students of English

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Abstract :

It is rather a truism that with the advent of modern communication technologies students have gained access to numerous databases which contain thousands of books and articles. However, such a positive aspect has led also to the rise of plagiarism. The current research endeavors to shed light on the phenomenon and relates it with difficulties university students face with writing skills. First, through a literature review, the paper examines the relationship between academic writing and plagiarism. Furthermore, it ponders on the notion of the curse of

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knowledge and why most students fail to yield satisfactory written production. The work makes use of a mix-methods approach of investigation: the quantitative analysis and the qualitative data interpretation. The sample comprises of 20 exam papers of approaches to teaching module by third-year LMD students. The results indicate that most of the answers provided in the exam are not students' own words but they often rely on others' writing. An alarming situation that teachers and the whole university system need to align to raise awareness about academic dishonesty

- ✓ *Academic Writing ;*
- ✓ *The Curse of Knowledge*
- ✓ *Exams*

1. Introduction

There is no question that plagiarism is rather a misconduct that has been increasingly plaguing academic writing. Accordingly, the literature on the subject often focuses on ways how to prevent and also detect plagiarism. However, this paper starts from a captivating comment made by a second-year master student on his plagiarized assignment. He said, "How can I learn to write if I do not use other's writing? After all, it is the idea that matters?" The statement raises three issues. First, the fact that the student takes the conduct of plagiarism lightly is troublesome. Second, he fails to understand that, at this level, improving his writing style is important. Instead, he erroneously believes that the idea conveyed is a priority and reaching such an aim justifies the use of any means necessary. Thirdly, he sees

that learning writing can only be done by copying what others have written.

Despite the simplicity of the student's answer, it provokes a growing debate. In fact, the points raised by the student should not be ignored but rather a detailed insight have to be given. Consequently, through a literature review, the current research endeavors to tackle each point mentioned above in an attempt to scrutinize the subject systematically to arrive at answers of the following questions:

- 1- What is academic writing and how it differs from personal writing?
- 2- What are the causes and consequences of plagiarism?
- 3- How can students avoid plagiarism and improve their writing skills?

2. Academic Writing

Writing in Academia stands as a different type of writing in which the main purpose is to establish a meaningful and proper conversation. The latter has to satisfy certain criteria in order to be deemed worthy of reading. First, it has to be stimulating by contributing to something new. Nevertheless, advancing new ideas

has to be done on firm ground. Therefore, claims and evidence have to be intertwined¹. In the same regard, a writer should give credibility to his / her ideas through the use of the works of others. Thus, such a genre of writing is characterized by the use of references and citations. Second, it has to be formal as similar to any kind of conversation, the involvement of people we do not know requires a great deal of formality. In short, in this type of writing, the reader is given considerable importance through the use of very formal language which often needs to be concise and precise.²

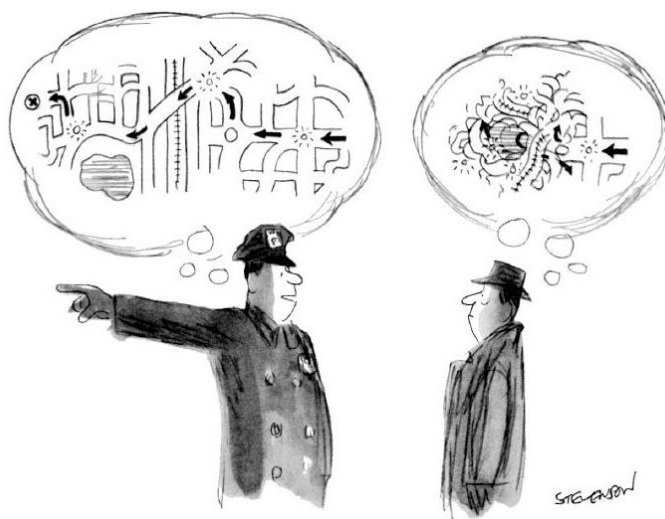
Yet, all that has been referred to above does hardly benefit any curious writer to being his / her journey in academic writing. Indeed, research shows that most young scholars jump to books on the subject to improve their writing skills but only to get frustrated. The primary reason is that while often those books start with the promise to make the process of writing easier, researchers end up reading about grammatical rules, vocabulary, and forming sentences. Indeed, a well academic essay requires accurate language and clear ideas. However, the language itself is not sufficient as the logic that binds ideas to achieve satisfactory coherence and cohesion is of paramount importance.

There is no question that academic writing is a very tedious activity and rather a different approach needs to be taken since telling readers about rules alone is not enough³. Thus, Rowena Murray and Sarah Moore insist that “Academic writing is not the printed display of one’s fully formed thoughts. It starts with flawed, incomplete, vague hunches, ideas and concepts”⁴. They further add that by embracing this “revisability” in thinking, a writer can come to a full circle, contemplating the same idea differently by revising, reconceptualizing, and repeating. Consequently, one might advance that idea of revisability is synonymous with the notion of drafting. There is no question that it is the case indeed. Yet, in the current paper, the matter is looked at from a different perspective.

3. Drafting and the Curse of Knowledge

The notion of the curse of knowledge is best illustrated through picture 1 that shows an everyday conversation that can occur anytime. It displays how a simple answer to direct someone to the right destination can be troublesome. The main reason is that people simply cannot escape that curse of having knowledge as they unknowingly assume that addressees possess the same background information. For instance, in picture 1, it is clear that the person

giving direction has a clear conceptual picture of the map of the area, while the other struggles to deploy information received. Even if the language is accurate, the communication can fail critically because of a detail missed or wrongly assumed to be obvious, thus, leaving readers or listeners bewildered and frustrated.⁵



Picture 1.

Giving

Direction

Source : Pinker, S. (2015). The sense of style: The thinking person's guide to writing in the 21st century

The picture holds true also if we look at it from the perspective of a teacher correcting his / her students' assignments. The issue is that most students and young researchers, in particular, those using a second language, lay heavy emphasis on correcting language in the drafting process ignoring the idea of knowledge transfer. In fact,

students often argue that “it is obvious” when they are directed towards an unclear sentence in their essays. Furthermore, teachers even find it most of the time difficult to convince students that what they have written is not clear. On this, Pinker goes to an extreme point by stating that people’s overconfidence in attempting to infer what others think can reach the point of delusion. While some can overcome these difficulties, they prove very frustrating for others or even devastating to young researchers’ self-esteem.⁶

4. Plagiarism and Student’s Writing Performance

Lost between a high expectation and low confidence, some find their way out by using others’ writing whether by copying the exact content or simply by stealing and passing off ideas without proper citations. Compounding the matter further, recently, with the advent of artificial intelligence, the problem is even getting worse. For instance, the internet is not short of websites that offer text generators that can paraphrase any piece of writing yielding often excellent results that can trick any reader on its originality. Then, if a student puts proper references, it will be very difficult to spot plagiarism even by detectors. Consequently, plagiarism like any kind of fraud is continuously evolving in an attempt to outsmart scholars.

By restricting the subject to the context of universities, teachers can end up in a wild goose chase in which often some students will find clever ways to cheat. In this paper, we argue that teachers should try to take advantage of these ways of plagiarizing to help students instead of fighting the phenomenon. After all, if one to ponder on the matter, the difference usually between a plagiarized text and a proper one lies in the utilization of accurate citations. Indeed, students write acceptable essays that only lack proper references often because they think too many citations will render their work inferior.⁷

The bright side of plagiarism is that students devote considerable efforts to find good texts to alter and exploit. In the endeavor to make use of their efforts, the focus has to be on mimicking a piece of writing by understanding and analyzing the different aspects of an author's style. These aspects range from language structure related such as word choice, sentence length, tenses used, and punctuations to higher-order cognition ones like the organization of ideas, the logic deployed to link thoughts, and how writers engage in reflective and independent thinking.⁸

5. Methodology

The work makes use of a mix-methods approach of investigation: the quantitative analysis and the qualitative data

interpretation. The sample comprises 20 exam papers of approaches to teaching module by third-year LMD students. The university name is deliberately not disclosed for privacy reasons. The exam papers were selected randomly from 63 papers in total. The difficulty in scrutinizing texts in the exam papers is the primary reason behind limiting the number of papers investigated. As stated earlier, it is rather an arduous task to detect plagiarism as there are many ways to conceal the altered texts. However, it is not difficult for a teacher to recognize style changes when reading his/ her students' papers.

Furthermore, using advanced technology, the exam papers are scanned and run through parsing software which will render handwriting to texts. Then, the latter will be put into plagiarism detection websites. The application used to convert handwriting is “Omnipage tool” while the main website used for plagiarism is “www.smallseotools.com/plagiarism-checker”. The results will be put in a table to compare the qualitative interpretation of the corrector with the percentage of plagiarism detected.

6. The Findings

Paper	Style Changes	Plagiarism Detected (%)
1	True	60 %

2	True	36 %
3	False	5 %
4	True	45 %
5	False	11 %
6	True	9 %
7	False	6 %
8	True	78 %
9	False	10 %
10	True	45 %
11	True	36 %
12	True	41 %
13	True	78 %
14	False	5 %
15	True	12 %
16	True	49 %
17	False	8 %
18	False	11 %
19	True	77 %
20	True	42 %

Table 1. Students' Exam Papers Analysis

Table 1 displays two types of data. First, qualitative findings are designated as “true” in case the corrector detects that the style in the exam paper shifts markedly. The second column divulges the

plagiarism checker website results, thus, quantitative data. Out of 20 exam papers, considerable style fluctuation was noticed in 13. Thus, according to these numbers, 65 % of the students were deemed to have plagiarized. On the other hand, the second column indicates that the mean average of plagiarism perceived is 33.2 % with a minimum value of 5 % and a peak of 78 %. A high standard deviation of 26.01 is recorded.

On the extent to which the two variables are linearly related, the Pearson correlation value is 0.729, indicating a strong relationship between the teacher's judgment and the website results. Looking closer at the cases where "false" is marked in Figure 1 (3,5,7,9,14,17, 8), it is clear that plagiarism percentage did not pass 11 %. However, papers 6 and 15 are exceptions as both cases are deemed to be plagiarized, yet the results from the website contradict these findings. Even after reexamining the same papers again, the same conclusion can be drawn on the fluctuation in writing style.

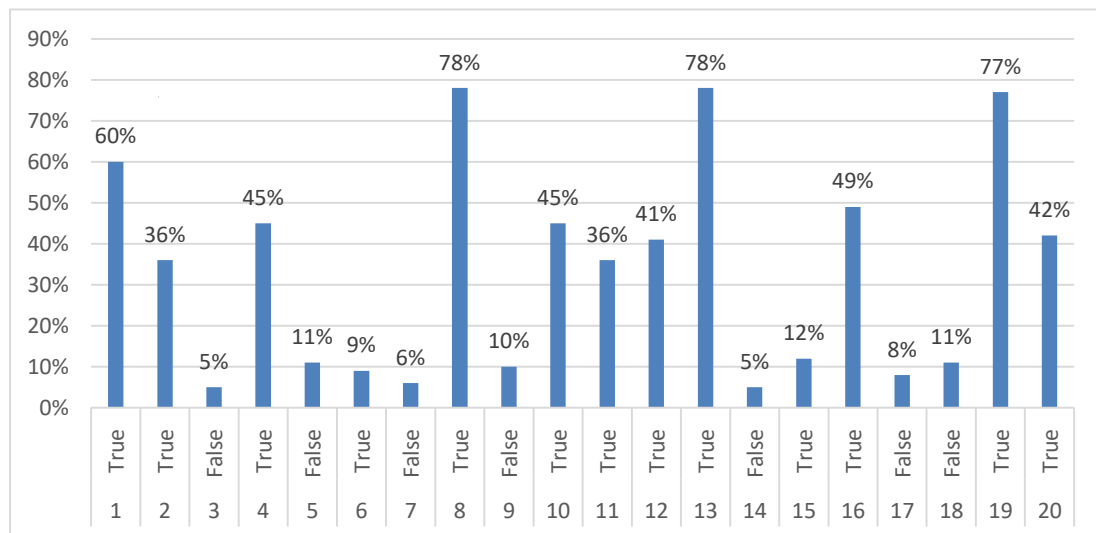


Figure 1. Plagiarism Detected

7. Conclusion

The numbers charted further confirm what has been discussed above on students' struggle with academic writing. Both table 1 and figure 1 indicate that most of the answers provided in the exam are not students' own words but they often rely on others' writing. Plagiarism recognized is divided into two types. Direct plagiarism, word-for-word copying without quotation marks nor any kind of reference to the source. Students often take such kind of behavior as acceptable and they claim that plagiarizing in an exam is not a mistake. After all, some teachers do encourage implicitly their

students to produce exactly what they studied. On the other hand, some students attempt to paraphrase but fail to mention the source.

Of course, students assert that some teachers do not take plagiarism lightly and stress the importance of paraphrasing and referencing which do improve grades considerably. However, the issue is that students complain that writing skills remain difficult to master. Furthermore, students interviewed claim that despite that written expression is an important module in their curriculum, they feel lessons are not designed to help them to write their proper essays in exams or their dissertations. All-in-all, the numbers charted and students' comments are aligned on what has been discussed earlier that while students are constantly reminded about plagiarism, students often feel that they are granted little help to improve their writing skills.

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