Teaching Culturally and Linguistically Diverse International Students in Open and/or Online Learning Environments: A Research Symposium

ESL Student Plagiarism Prevention Challenges and Institutional Interventions

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Abstract

Research has found unintentional plagiarism to be the most common type of university plagiarism, yet what underlies it is not adequately understood. Thus, our study examines ESL student perspectives on academic integrity challenges, especially unintentional plagiarism and university interventions.

The study employed semi-structured individual qualitative interviews with 20 ESL students who had just completed an advanced EAP writing course at a Canadian university in the Winter semester of 2021. The course discussed plagiarism and the APA 7th edition extensively. One interview per participant was conducted online and the data were analyzed qualitatively.

Research findings indicate that the predominant cause of the participants' challenges was their lack of experience using citations before entering the university. The participants had written no formal essays or only opinion-based essays without source requirement. Therefore, the participants found the APA 7th edition hard to observe initially. They all found paraphrasing a challenge. A less serious one was to create a reference list of various types of sources in APA 7. Regarding assistance, the participants felt that the style templates and models were valuable, but, that even more, so were the interactive workshops at the semester's start. Thus, a combination of resources, workshops, and teacher-facilitated practices, along with improved writing are expected to empower ESL students (Khoo, 2021).

Keywords: academic writing, academic integrity, APA 7, plagiarism prevention, ESL student perspectives

Introduction

Plagiarism is "the act of presenting the words, ideas, or images [or work] of another as your own" without giving credit (American Psychological Association [APA], 2020, p. 254) or receiving permission. When students reuse an assignment submitted to one course for another course, in part or whole, without the current instructor's permission, they may commit self-plagiarism (APA, p. 256). If students who commit plagiarism have an intention to cheat or plagiarize knowingly, then it is intentional plagiarism. On the other hand, if students commit plagiarism without an intention to cheat, then plagiarism can be called unintentional. Regardless, plagiarism is considered unethical in Canada and may result in a warning, failing grade, suspension, or even expulsion from the university.

Plagiarism has been rising, especially with online course delivery during the Covid pandemic. For example, at Thompson Rivers University, plagiarism was the most widespread type of academic integrity (AI) offense, accounting for 43% of all the reported AI violation cases in 2019-2020, and reported plagiarism cases skyrocketed by 85% from 278 in 2018-19 to 514 in 2019-20 (Lussier & Anderberg, 2021; see Fig 1).

Figure 1

Types of academic integrity violations reported at Thompson Rivers University (Lussier & Anderberg, 2021)
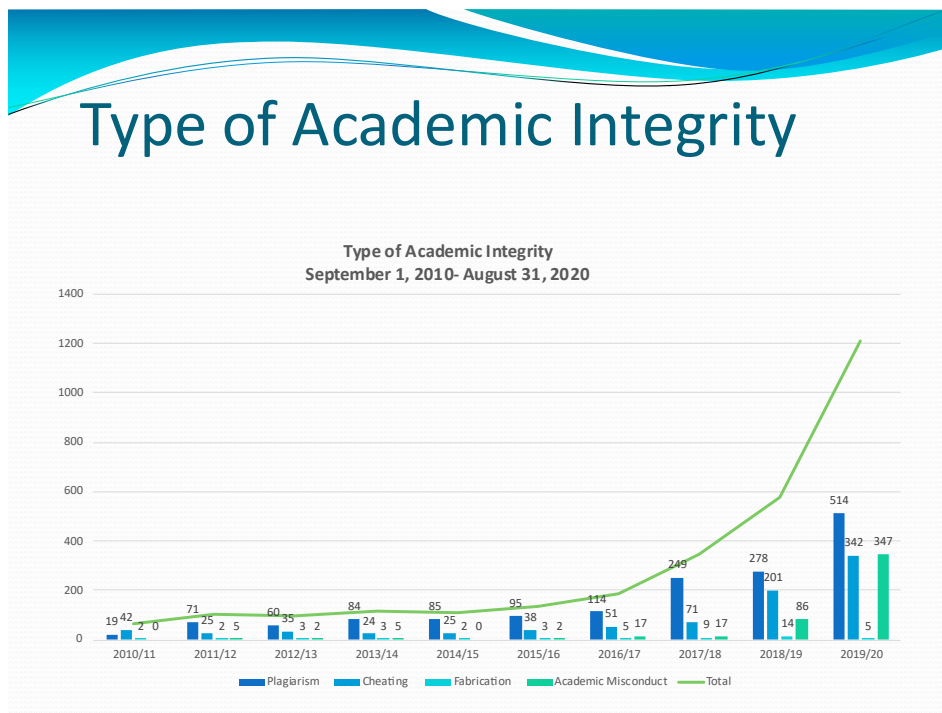
On the other hand, research and beliefs suggest that unintentional plagiarism is the most common type among university students (Langara College Library, 2020; Löfström & Kupila, 2013; pp. 237, 240; Offutt, 2015), but what underlies unintentional plagiarism is not adequately

understood. Therefore, our study examines English-as-a-second-language (ESL) student perspectives on: 1) academic integrity challenges, especially the causes of unintentional plagiarism, and 2) effective university interventions to help students avoid plagiarism. Specifically, the research questions are:

1. What are ESL student challenges in avoiding plagiarism at Canadian universities?
2. How can the universities best help ESL students deal with the challenges?

To address these questions, this report first reviews relevant research, then describes the study methodology, presents the highlights of the findings, and finally discusses the findings and implications for instruction and research.

Literature Review

Research has found student plagiarism to arise for several reasons, such as language incompetence, first culture influence, and time pressure (Hu, 2000; Ma et al, 2008; Shi, 2006). However, there might be other challenges ESL students encounter that we do not yet know, given that the citation conventions like the APA format appear to be straightforward and easy to follow, and that many citation resources are available on the Internet (Hu, 2021). To counter student plagiarism, various software has been developed to help teachers detect plagiarism and punish students, such as Turnitin, Quetext, and Grammarly. However, it would be ideal if teachers understand what students need and how to assist students in avoiding plagiarism. Indeed, a shift is under way among researchers and universities moving from a punitive, or reactive, approach that punishes plagiarism to an educative, preventive, or proactive approach that helps students understand academic integrity and provides them with the tools to use sources properly (e.g., Liang & Maddison, 2021; Razi et al, 2021; Rossi, 2021; Tilley et al, 2021). One of the most impressive intervention programs follows a wrap-around (or multi-touchpoint) model that engages students in academic integrity education from orientation and throughout the student's program, with assistance from student services, faculty, learning centers, the library, and administration (Tilley et al., 2021). The model proved especially successful with international students (Tilley et al., 2021). On the other hand, Khoo (2021) reported on a reading-writing program at the University of Toronto that aims to empower students not only in academic integrity but also in writing skills. As researchers, Pecorari (2015) and Shi (2012), suggest that without adequate writing skills, satisfactory paraphrasing for ESL students is almost impossible.

Despite the findings of previous research, in order to offer effective assistance, more is needed to understand what ESL students consider to be their problems and challenges regarding academic integrity, and what they think universities can do to best help them deal with the challenges. This study fills the gap.

Study Methods

The study employed semi-structured individual in-depth qualitative interviews (Creswell, 2007; Hu, 2009) with 20 ESL students who had just finished an advanced English for academic purposes (EAP) writing course at a western Canadian university in the Winter semester of 2021. The participants were selected based on their willingness to participate and EDI (equity,

diversity, and inclusiveness) principles. Together, they represented 10 countries. As Table 1 shows, some participants had just completed high school, while others had finished undergraduate or graduate studies in part or whole. Each interview was conducted online via Blue Jeans, lasting about an hour, and each transcript underwent member checking. The data were analyzed qualitatively for recurrent themes.

Table 1
Student participant profiles

Student Participant	Country of Origin	Prior Education
1	China	Bachelor's
2	China	Bachelor's
3	China	Bachelor's
4	China	S High
5	China	S High (Gr 11-12 in Canada)
6	China	S High (Gr 12 in Canada)
7	Iran	Bachelor's
8	Iran	Master's
9	Iran	Bachelor's
10	Bangladesh	3-year diploma
11	Bangladesh	S High
12	India	Bachelor's
13	India	S High
14	South Korea	S High (Gr 9-12 in Canada)
15	Japan	S High
16	Indonesian	S High

17	France	Year 2 of univ
18	Brazil	S High (Gr 10-12 in Canada)
19	Russia	S High
20	Sri Lanka	S High

Results

Student Challenges in Avoiding Plagiarism

Understanding Plagiarism

Study findings suggest that the predominant challenge of the participants is their lack of experience using citations before studying at the Canadian university. The participants generally had written either no formal essays, or only opinion-based essays, with no source requirements. They had limited, or no knowledge, of plagiarism. The following quotes illustrate this observation:

S8: "Honestly, before coming here, I did not face this word, 'plagiarism.' I studied [English] for four years in my country [Iran]; I never learned about it."

S12: …coming from India, it was a totally different system. We did not learn about plagiarism or academic integrity.… In India, it was normal to copy others. They appreciate exact reproduction and not changing the original…. I just did exams and short answer question[s], but did not write essays.

S4: English class [in China] is more to test students' vocabulary and whether there are grammatical errors. Before university, the school [student] only needs to write 100 words in writing of English class…We just write based on our understanding in general, rather than on specific sources.

S18: I wrote a lot of essays both as [a] university undergrad and in high school [in France], but I am not sure why the teachers did not ask me to use citations; they did not teach me how to cite… I did a lot of essays, but mostly based on opinions.

Not only international students coming directly from other countries, but even some who attended Canadian high schools also found plagiarism a new concept. For example:

S15 [grades 10-12 in Canada]: "I did not know self-plagiarism is not allowed."

S5 [grades 11-12 in Canada]: "I knew [that]copying others is wrong, so I did not copy, but [I] did not know [that] using APA form {in the] wrong [way] is also plagiarism."

Apparently, failing to provide quotation marks in a direct quote, forgetting to document the source, presenting a paraphrase too similar to the source, or misplacing the source can all be considered forms of plagiarism.

Paraphrasing and Citing
      Paraphrasing means rephrasing the - content of the source using one's own words, but keeping the same meaning. Almost all the participants found paraphrasing difficult, even almost impossible. For example:

S2: "For paraphrasing, it is difficult, because the wording from the source is perfect. If I change [it]... I am not sure if I can keep the meaning with different words, but I have to use different words."

S9: "Sometimes I want to paraphrase a sentence, such as changing some words or [the] whole sentence for paraphrasing, but to what extent to change?"

S15: [Indirect citation] is hard for me. When there is a bunch of sentences, you have to summarize or paraphrase, because you have to understand the whole original part, then make it shorter, and then write [it] in [your] own words with correct grammar and vocabulary and logic and academic style."

S15: "You cannot use more than 10% [of your essay] for direct quotes and 30% for all quotes."

Unlike other citation skills, such as documenting sources, paraphrasing demands accurate reading comprehension and a considerable mastery of vocabulary and sentence structures, as well as competent writing skills. That is why paraphrasing is an academic skill to be developed over years, although short-term (e.g., one semester) efforts by advanced ESL students can lead to some success.

Reference List
         Creating a reference list in APA 7th edition presents challenges to all participants in the beginning, especially since different types of sources require different formats in terms of information order, upper/lower case letters, italics, and punctuation. For example, two participants complained:

S16: "I struggled. APA 7 always likes author, date, title, [and URL] address. Some [sources] have no author, no title, no date. For me, [it is] very confusing.... In Introduction to University Writing [ENGL 1100], some [of the] research I read is confusing."

S13: "Format was hard, for example: last name, year, title—all the little details. How to organize the format? The different types of sources are confusing, but after a few times of practice, we should be fine."

Adding to the confusion among the different types of sources requiring different formats, the English Department adopts the Modern Language Association (MLA) format, which is different

from APA 7. Learning one format is hard enough, but navigating between two (and sometimes three) citation formats for different courses is doubly challenging. Fortunately, this challenge can be overcome with guided practice and appropriate samples.

Suggestions for Teacher Intervention

As plagiarism, academic integrity, and citations are new concepts for nearly all ESL students, universities and teachers should provide explanations, style templates, models, samples, interactive workshops, and practice in the beginning of an advanced writing course or during orientation. If such intervention happens too late, students may have committed plagiarism and been punished. The following suggestions seem reasonable:

S7: "It would be better for ESL students to learn how to cite properly from the beginning before [or when] they take courses that have writing that requires citations."

S12: "Instructors need to find out if there are students who are unfamiliar with APA 7."

Clearly, intervention in the beginning is not adequate, but should continue to be available throughout the students' studies, as suggested by the wrap-around or multi-touchpoint model mentioned above. As to what assistance they preferred, some participants recommended:

S15: "Take a class out and go to a workshop. That is the only way [some] students can be aware of plagiarism and how to avoid plagiarism. [This would be] better than just give [sic] students the info. I did not know [that] if I copied, I would get zero….Orientation and [instructors should] explain plagiarism and self-plagiarism. When I went to the workshop, I realized a lot: OK, OK; that is how I should do [it]. Explanations and examples [would be helpful]….Video workshops are helpful but not good enough because they're not interactive."

S18: "Practice APA through exercises and essay writing. We learn through practice."

Hopefully, a variety of resources and teacher interventions, along with guided practice, will help the students learn the new rules, appreciate the value of academic integrity, and avoid plagiarism.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study finds that the major challenges for the ESL students in achieving academic integrity are the students' lack of experience writing essays requiring citations or source documentation, and, in this connection, limited or no knowledge of plagiarism. This is a major factor contributing to potential plagiarism, whereas other factors identified in earlier research, such as second language incompetence, first culture influence, poor time management, and pressure to succeed (Cleary, 2017; Hu 2000; Ma et al, 2007) seem secondary. One reason that the students did not write source-referenced essays is the result of an education system driven by examinations, and the most influential international exams are TOEFL and IELTS, whose writing components, even in the academic version, assess students' ability to write opinion-based essays or essays to describe a given table or figure. Such writing does not require reference to external sources or allow the use of cell phones or websites. To truly test international students'

ability to write for academic purposes, maybe the next test innovation is to include citation skills.

Another major challenge for ESL students is paraphrasing, which requires highly competent writing skills to rephrase the original in one's own words. Understandably, to develop this skill will take persistent efforts over the long term, especially for EAP students. However, with guidance and practice, EAP students can feel more confident (see Pecorari, 2015; Rossi, 2021; Shi, 2012).

The third challenge for almost all the participants is creating a reference list in APA 7, which requires different formats for books, journal articles, and online articles. Fortunately, with practice, advanced ESL students can generally become comfortable in one to two semesters.

The participants suggested that to help them overcome the above challenges, they need universities and teachers to provide a combination of style templates, models, samples, videos, and interactive workshops with explanations, examples, and even anti-plagiarism games (Bradley, 2015). In addition, they need opportunities to practice citations and essay-writing that requires sources. A final step for teacher intervention is feedback, which is critical for ESL students, as the latter may not realize their mistakes. For this purpose, I recommend a simultaneous oral-written feedback approach (SOWFA), whereby the teacher dialogues with the student while offering verbal and written feedback (Hu, 2019).

Future Research

The student sample size is limited, so future research should expand the participant number and country representation. Further research may also explore teacher perspectives on plagiarism, and the extent of intentional versus unintentional plagiarism in reported AI violation cases among EAP students and among university 1000-level ESL students who bypassed EAP studies. Thus, the university can provide effective interventions.

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