Avoiding Plagiarism: Perception of Undergraduates on Referencing When Learning English for Academic Purposes (EAP) at a Private University in Sri Lanka

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Abstract:

This study examines undergraduates' perception on referencing which is taught to them in the course English for Academic Purposes (EAP). The objective of the research is to identify the extent to which awareness of academic referencing is perceived as significant by undergraduates at a private university where they follow EAP as a core module in their first year. The study examines the extent to which these undergraduates are adhering to their institutional academic integrity policy. An online questionnaire was administered among 400 undergraduates, inquiring about their experience in avoiding plagiarism, a form of academic dishonesty, and how much they are aware on overcoming this type of academic deceit. Additionally, attention was focused on examining how plagiarism is avoided with the advancement of technology where online based plagiarism is found to be common among undergraduates. According to the findings of the study, many undergraduates refer online resources when submitting their work and they mention that they follow proper referencing strategies when submitting their work; additionally, they are aware of the plagiarism policy maintained by their institution as well as by their lecturers and the penalties that follow. However, one of the key findings which is significant and should be noted is that, many undergraduates mention that they do not get adequate training or practice on referencing other than the exposure they get during their first year at the university.

Keywords: *Plagiarism, Undergraduates, Referencing, English for Academic Purposes (EAP).*

Introduction

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is a module taught at university level aiming to assist undergraduates in developing their academic language and research skills (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002; Hyland 2006). Similarly, in the Sri Lankan context, EAP is taught as a core subject at tertiary level in Sri Lanka with the aim of teaching first-year undergraduates in processing language skills whilst using them for academic purposes. One such skill is the ability to process bibliographic information accurately while following the proper structure and referencing guidelines (Quality Assurance Council, 2010). This necessity in referring to secondary source

material in academic submissions is also emphasized by the University Charter 2012 (University Grants Commission, 2012), wherein part four explains plagiarism as one of the activities which is not ethically and lawfully allowed to be executed at the university. This is further highlighted by Horowitz (1986) and Moore & Morton (2005); however, it has been discovered that second language learners find it difficult to refer their sources, which might lead to plagiarism (Pecorari & Petrić, 2014).

According to Howard (2000), clearly intentional deception is considered as plagiarism. As stated by the Oxford Dictionary, plagiarism is "the action or practices of taking someone else's work, idea, etc. and passing it off as one's own; literary theft" (Stevenson, 2010). This violation of academic integrity can take place with any academic work commencing from in-class work and ending with research paper publications (Kumar et al., 2014) and to overcome this issue, learners should accurately refer their secondary information (Dhammi and Ul Haq, 2016). The United States Research Integrity Office states that plagiarism is one of the significant academic misbehaviors (Godlee, 2007). This is further endorsed by Gamage et al. (2020) who also conclude that plagiarism is the most affecting offense of dishonesty conducted in the university context. According to Kodikara and Kumara (2015), one of the key causes for this is learners' inadequate knowledge on ways to avoid plagiarism.

The findings of a study by Zhang and Deng (2019) revealed that Chinese postgraduate EFL learners had difficulty identifying implicit plagiarism and inadequate citations. Hence explicit instruction and writing practice are necessary to improve students' ability to cite from sources and avoid plagiarism (Liu & Wu, 2020). Gu and Brooks (2008) are of the view that perceptions of plagiarism and use of citations are closely related to each other; for example, in a study conducted by them, it was found that students lacked knowledge of why referencing was needed and the rules of referencing. The students also found it hard to distinguish between their own original ideas and others' opinions. Kroll (1988) found that American university ESL students viewed plagiarism as unfair to authors and believed that students should be responsible for their work independently. In the Sri Lankan context, almost all state and non-state universities have their own academic integrity policy in accordance with the University Charter (University Grants Commission, 2012).

Even though research has been conducted worldwide on avoiding plagiarism via EAP at tertiary level, it is not commonly examined in the Sri Lankan context, especially among first-year undergraduates. However, as stated by Sharon et al (2020), there remains a gap in examining how undergraduates refer their source material avoiding plagiarism. Thus, this study initiates addressing this gap with the selected sample of this study. Thus, this study would provide the usage and awareness of a representative subset of this undergraduate population in Sri Lanka, which provides their knowledge, experience, perspective, and practice in academic referencing to avoid plagiarism. The significance of this study is highlighted when it discloses a group of Sri Lankan undergraduates' experience on learning EAP and the knowledge gained and being practiced on referencing and plagiarism.

Research Questions

The present study aims to answer the following questions:

1.   Do undergraduates at the selected university perceive adequate knowledge in referencing?

2.   How do the selected undergraduates refer their secondary work?

Methodology

The research questions were sent to 400 first year undergraduates at a private university in Sri Lanka, chosen from a purposive sampling mode since these undergraduates have been taught EAP in their first year and they all belong to the same degree program. From them, 200 completed responses were received.

Subsequently, the consent for participation in the study was taken online from the sample. Eventually, data was gathered via an online questionnaire which consisted of both open and close-ended questions. The first section of the survey attempted to gain an understanding on the undergraduates' experience on learning academic English, and how often they referred other sources in their academic work. The second section of the survey focused on measuring their understanding of what methods they followed when referring to secondary sources, differentiating, summarizing and paraphrasing, usage of plagiarism checkers, how much guidance was given to them by the lecturer and institute in accurate referencing, why they should be cautious when citing sources and on academic integrity. The survey also measured their level of awareness on the consequences of plagiarism. Once the data was gathered, they were analyzed using descriptive statistics where figures were used to reach the conclusion of the study.

## Results and Discussion
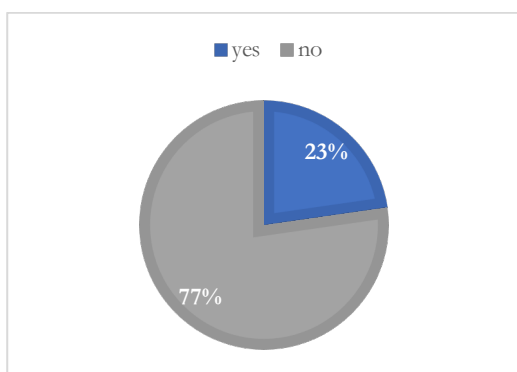
**Figure 1. Perception on Difficulty in Learning EAP**
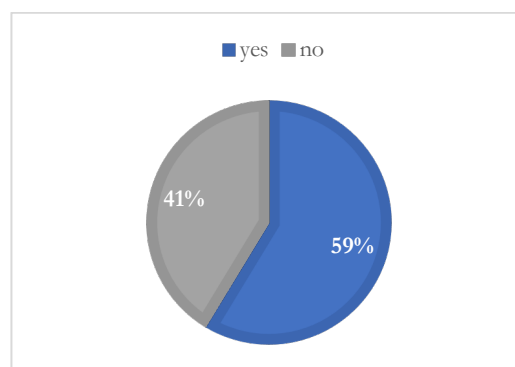
Figure 2. Experience of Academic Writing at School

One of the significant findings of the study is that a majority of these undergraduates have practiced academic writing at school (Figure 2), and they consider it to be not difficult in learning (Figure 1). The hindrance for the minority who believes learning EAP as difficult, is that they believe the main cause for that to be the language difficulty.
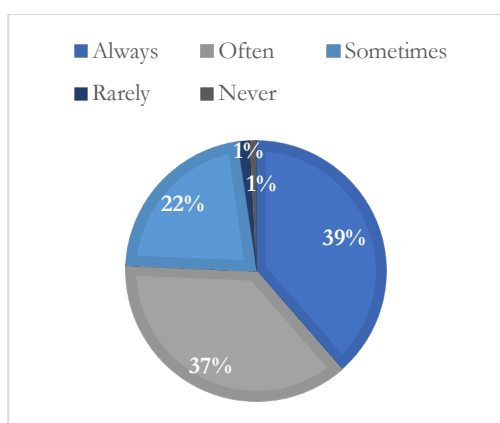

**Figure 3. Frequency of Referring Online Sources**
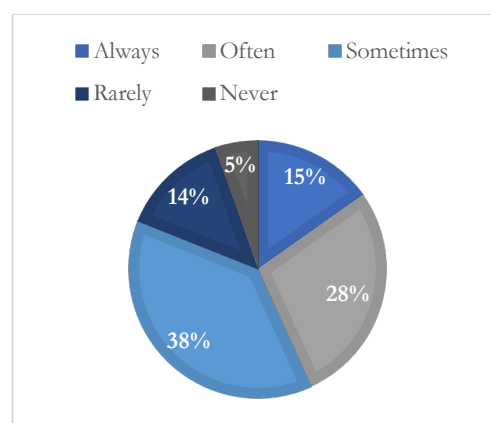
Figure 4. Frequency of Referring Physical Sources

Once undergraduates come to university, they engage in all their work in academic English, which is taught to them as a core module in the first year. Apart from the in-class practice, learners are expected to refer secondary sources when writing their academic assignments. Thus, as Figures 3 and 4 illustrate, online resources are the most frequently referred resources by these undergraduates. This indicates how much 'convenience in locating the information' becomes a deciding factor for selection of the type of resource.
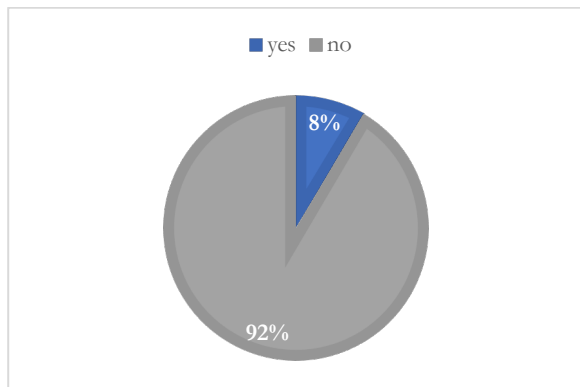

Figure 5. Direct Copying of Secondary Information
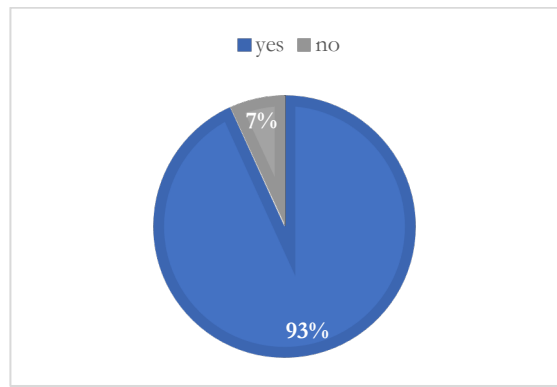
Figure 6. Acknowledging the Original Source

As illustrated in Figures 5 and 6, more than four fifths of the selected undergraduates do not copy this information directly into their academic work and they do practice acknowledging the original author or publisher. However, since there is one in ten of the undergraduate population who either directly incorporate original information into their work or do not acknowledge the original source when referencing, they were asked for the reason as to why they do it.
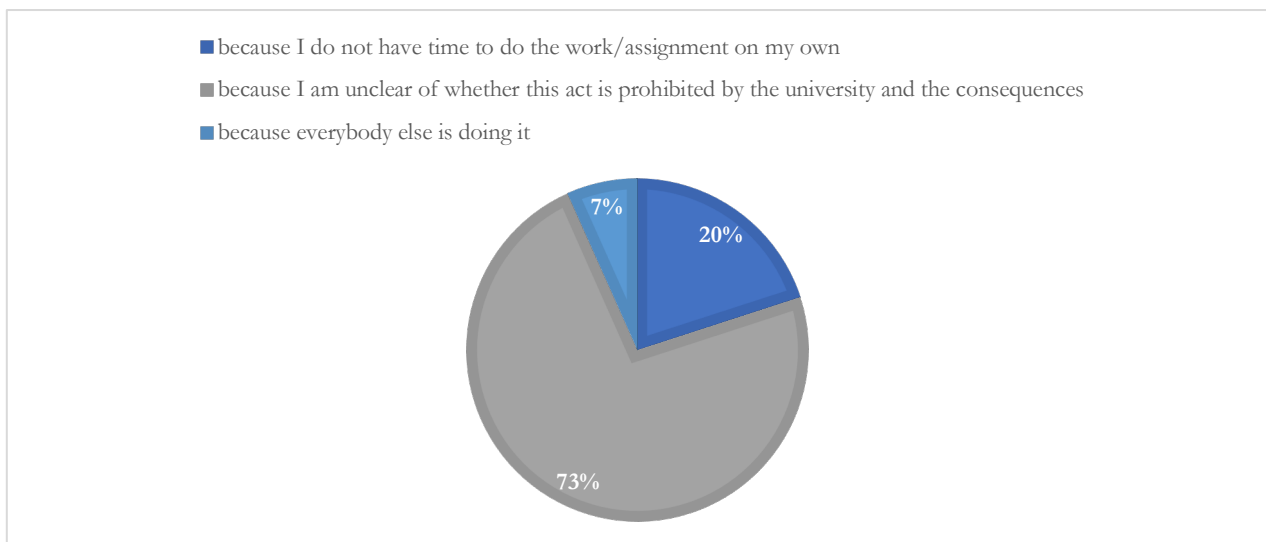

Figure 7. Reason for Duplicating the Original Information without Acknowledgement

As displayed in Figure 7, the main reason for copying the original information without acknowledging from where the information was obtained is due to the doubtfulness as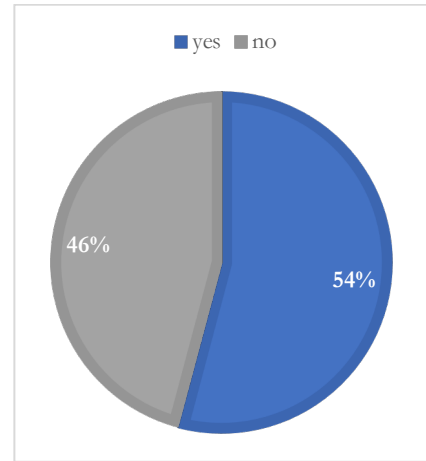 to whether plagiarism or such activities are prohibited by the institute and whether there are any penalties for such action. This incomprehensiveness can lead to academic dishonesty.
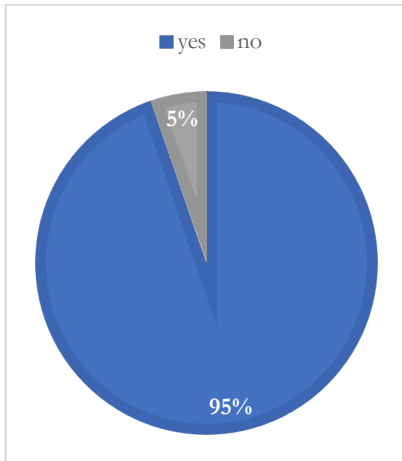

Figure 8. Awareness on Summarizing
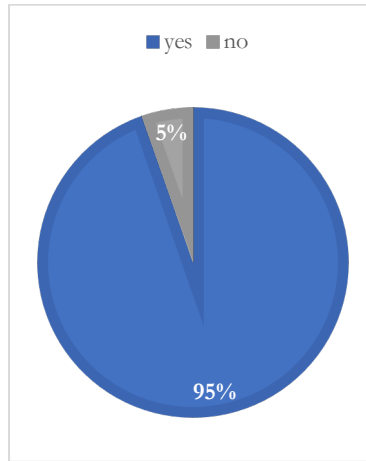
**Figure 9. Awareness on Paraphrasing**

Figure 10. Finding Paraphrasing/Summarizing as Challenging

Thus, this study inquires whether these undergraduates are aware of summarizing and paraphrasing techniques. In fact, these two language skills are compulsory when quoting secondary sources into their work. As stated by Tran and Nguyen (2022), these skills are essential when integrating source texts into learners' own writing retaining the meaning of the original sources. As Figures 8 and 9 illustrate, it is significantly noted that a majority of the students are aware about summarizing and paraphrasing skills though among them, nearly half find these skills challenging (Figure 10).
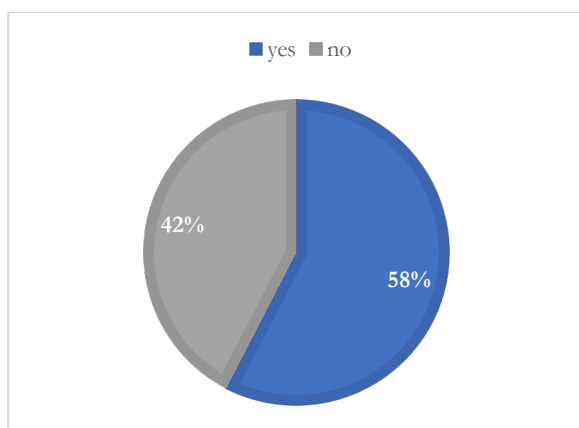

Figure 11. Using Software to Detect Plagiarism
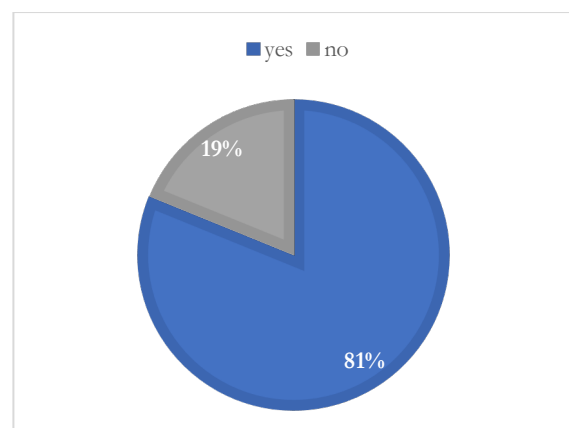
Figure 12. Finding the Paligiarism Detective Software Effective

Since many undergraduates are aware about paraphrasing and summarizing skills, the present study examines whether they use any online plagiarism detection software and if so, whether they find such skills as beneficial. As mentioned by them, more than half of the number of undergraduates use such plagiarism detection software and from them more than four fifths find it as effective (Figures 11 and 12). They have also mentioned that they are aware that their lecturers also use this software and one such known tool is Turnitin. However, it should also be noted that less than half the number of undergraduates do not use this software.
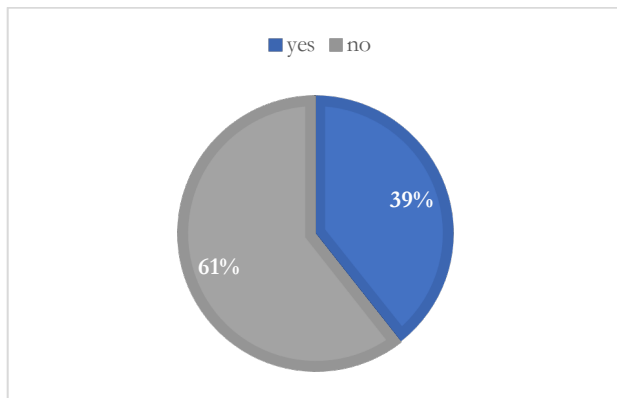
Figure 13. Institute's Arrangement on Seminars/Workshops for Referencing
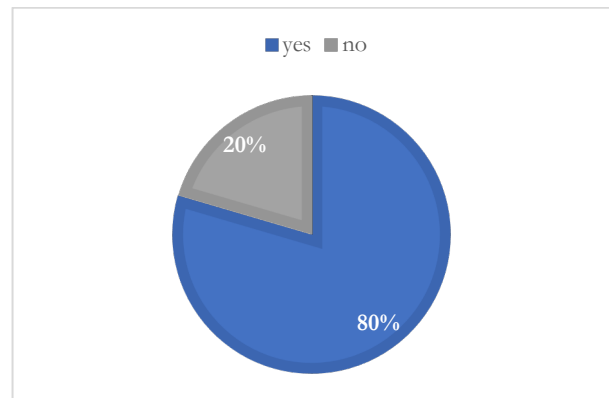
Figure 14. Awareness on University's Academic Intergrity Policy

However, it is significantly noted that a majority of the undergraduates have mentioned that they do not receive any guidance for referencing by the institute such as arranging seminars or workshops so as to provide undergraduates more exposure to EAP, outside the classroom as well. However, many of these undergraduates are aware of the University Academic Integrity Policy, unlike those who mentioned previously as illustrated in Figure 7 that they are not aware whether plagiarism is prohibited by the university. In fact, those were the undergraduates who directly incorporate secondary information into their writing without acknowledging the original source. Nevertheless, a majority of the selected population of this study is aware about this policy and according to them, one of the most common penalties that are imposed for plagiarism is the deduction marks from the work submitted by the respective undergraduate/s.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, the research findings revealed that most of the undergraduates selected for this study have stated that they do not find EAP as a difficult subject, and they do refer sources, mostly online. In addition, these undergraduates are aware of and use plagiarism detecting tools when they submit their academic work. However, it is evident that these undergraduates require the institute to facilitate and guide them more in developing their paraphrasing and summarizing skills, which is an indication of their preference to learn while avoiding plagiarism. Thus, it is imperative that undergraduates are given more exposure by their institute to practice referencing, since they will be publishing research papers and many other academic publications after graduating.

In brief, this study concludes that many of the selected undergraduates believe that referencing is important to avoid plagiarism and believe that they need to learn more on this skill. Thus, an urge is highlighted from this study in guiding

these undergraduates further in maintaining academic integrity throughout the duration of their studies with training and assistance provided continuously to inculcate a culture of integrity and objectivity.

Moreover, future research can proceed from here and expand this to a larger population representing various disciplines and, can incorporate the views of the academics at the university as well.

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