

# Plagiarism And Culture: Are They Closely Related To Each Other?

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**Abstract.** Several researchers conclude that plagiarism is culturally approved in non-Western countries. This study is conducted to investigate this claim. Participants of this study are M.A students in the field of Applied linguistics enrolled in the Libyan Academy of Graduate studies in Misurata, Libya. All have had experience in teaching English in Libyan schools for at least 4 years. Six of them work as part-time teachers at Misurata university where they teach Technical English and ESP courses. A survey and semi-structured interviews were conducted to see if their culture encourages or permits plagiarism. Responses reveal that plagiarism is morally and academically unacceptable in Libya. Participants emphasize that they try not to quote without giving credit to the author(s). Meanwhile, they admit that some of their colleagues and students do not commit themselves to the academic integrity of research ethics. However, they do not relate this violation to cultural values. It is, according to them, because of lack of understanding of the act, deficiency in their educational backgrounds, and inability to express themselves freely in English. This study articulates the implications with recommendations to university instructors and education policy makers and future research.

**Keywords:** Plagiarism, Culture, Learning Styles, Research Ethics.

## 1. Background

Some authors (e.g., Sowden 2005; Dryden, 1999; Hu, 2001; Insull and Craig 2003; Pennycook 1996; Scollon 1995, to name just a few) argue that the problem of plagiarism in educational institutes is not a universal phenomenon but it is a culture specific. For example, Hu (2001) claims that plagiarism exists because "In many Asian, Middle Eastern, African, and First Nation cultures,... knowledge is believed to belong to society as a whole, rather than an individual..." (p. 54).

In his article which explores the relationship between plagiarism and culture, Todd (1997) declares that some cultures "do not replace the same taboo on plagiarism" as Western cultures do (p. 82). Sowden (2005), agrees with this conclusion as he, referring to Far East Asian students, asserts that international students enrolled in TESOL programs in English-speaking countries engage in this academic dishonesty because, in their culture of origin, plagiarism does not have the same negative connotation as in the Western cultures. Consequently, according to this author, professional in the field of TESOL should be able to understand and accommodate these students whose culture does not regard plagiarism negatively. He goes on to assert that "The cultural values of multilingual students are sometimes at variance with Western academic practice, in matters such as plagiarism.... we should respect and make use of the students' own traditions of study" (p.228).

However, a weakness of many studies with this finding (e.g., Insull & Craig, 2003) is that they rely heavily on claims made by overseas students who were caught plagiarizing and, therefore, their truthfulness is in doubt. Another problem is the debatable definition of "culture". No clear and precise definition of culture has been given by those authors. 'Culture' as a term, includes different issues to different people. These researchers use 'culture' and 'previous educational background' interchangeably which is disputable by many thinkers in the field of sociology and anthropology.

As other writers explain, (e.g., Chandrasoma et al., 2004), despite the fact that Western universities are often explicit on the issue of plagiarism, they are not aware of the fact that many students, especially international ones, are not competent enough or well-trained, in their home countries, to properly document sources they use in their reports and research papers according to certain English writing styles, such as APA,

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MLA, IEEE or Harvard writing styles. Western educators shouldn't assume that English academic writing style is universal and every international student must have already been familiar with it. My own past experience as a postgraduate student in Canada supports this argument. During my undergraduate studies in Libya, I had very little training in documenting and referencing sources. Although most graduate programs in Canadian universities demand advanced language proficiency level as a condition for admission, writing according to certain style, citing and referencing is not a component of proficiency tests such TOEFL or IELTS. As such, while students have good English competence, they may lack knowledge of writing academically to meet their Western professors' expectations.

## **2. Objectives Of The Study**

The purpose of this study is to further investigate this claim. It examines the relationship, if any, between plagiarism and Culture. Specifically, it explores and describes how a sample of post-graduate students, some of who are in-service English teachers, understand and explain plagiarism in Libyan universities. The study also aims to explore the level of awareness about plagiarism among postgraduate students who will officially enter the profession of teaching at university level after the completion of their postgraduate studies.

## **3. Methodology**

To gain understanding if there is a relationship between plagiarism and culture. Questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were employed to collect the data. Participants are 25 postgraduate students who are completing a Master's Degree in the field of Applied linguistics (known also as TEFL or Teaching of English as a Foreign Language) at the Libyan Academy/Misurata branch. The data were collected through the use of a Likert-scale questionnaire from these students and a follow-up, semi-structured interview technique. The research was conducted throughout the Fall semester 2011. The questionnaire was administered by the researcher who was teaching a graduate course during that semester. All participants were given the same instructions for answering the questionnaire, printed on paper. The instructions explained the research, and briefly defined plagiarism and self-plagiarism. The instructions also directed participants to honestly fill out the questionnaire. The questionnaire, preceded by the instructions, was administered in classroom settings during regular classes. The participants independently completed the questionnaire, which took approximately 20 minutes. Participation was voluntary and completely anonymous.

## **4. Findings**

Based on the questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews, major reasons for plagiarism are:

- Lack of language proficiency
- Poor understanding of plagiarism
- Previous educational practices
- Lack of punitive punishment

## **5. Discussion And Recommendations**

Many of the findings of this study are in harmony with other studies conducted by researchers in the field (e.g., Ramzanm et al., 2012; Wheeler, 2009). Based on participants responses, it is clear that plagiarism exists among university students in Libya. They reported that they know students who deliberately copied others' written research work without giving credit to the writers and were not caught by their teachers. However, all of them stressed that plagiarism of any kind is wrong and it is a sin based on their religion's teachings. They indicated unease with it and were explicit in condemning such academic transgression. They equated plagiarism with deception, robbery, and insulting. According to several participants, some students dare to plagiarise because they believe that academic dishonesty is not punished in their university. A few of them even were not certain about the existence on Libyan campuses of strict punishments for acts of plagiarism. One participant believe that the strongest punishment for plagiarism is rewriting the assignment or research paper. Some of the comments on this issue include:

...plagiarism is a crime, nobody appreciate it

many students commit it hoping that nobody will catch them believe me, they [students] won't admit it [plagiarising]...even to their classmates.. because it is a shameful act even if you are caught [plagiarising]...it is not a big issue, all you have to do is to write the paper again

Findings also revealed that many Libyan students are naive in regard to understanding what plagiarism is. According to several respondents in this study, most of the Libyan students do not distinguish between what is and what isn't considered plagiarism. Some of the believe that If students regard certain forms of knowledge as common and apply this in their writing without acknowledging sources, then this should not be seen immediately as plagiarism. This finding has already been noted by other researchers. Hu (2001), debates the term "common knowledge" and wonders: "How many words count as the phrasing of a source or a quotation?" and "How [are] private words, which require citation, ... to be differentiated from public words, which do not?" (p. 52). Some typical remarks are:

Only in the 4<sup>th</sup> year of my university study when I started writing my graduation project I realized what plagiarism was. Nobody told me about it before.

They [teachers] tell you no problem if you do not document "common knowledge" but how I know if it is common knowledge or not. Really it is confusing and difficult.

Before I used to think that it is enough to list the name of writers in your reference list. I did not think that you have to mention their names in your text whenever you use their ideas or words,

As such, instructors assist students be aware of what plagiarism actually is and how they can avoid it. Students should be informed why plagiarism is unethical and what are the benefit of citing sources. Discussing the issue regularly with students is one way. Course outline, which is given in the first class meeting, should contain detailed information regarding plagiarism and the consequences of committing such academic misconduct. We should make our students explicitly aware of the expectations, procedures, and consequences related to plagiarism.

As other researchers suggest (e.g., Sutherland-Smith, 2010), punitive consequences for plagiarism remain an important element in promoting awareness. University professors do not get pleasure from catching students who have cheated, and definitely students do not enjoy the censure, suspension, or expulsion that might ensure. We, as members in the profession, should collaborate to create a unified method of dealing with academic integrity violation issues. These measures can discourage students from indulging in plagiarism and, thus, we produce skilful and knowledgeable graduates with high standards of honesty, ethics and professionalism.

One noteworthy finding, which was also confirmed by Baruchson-Arbib and Yaari (2004), is that several participants thought that Plagiarism from the Internet resources is generally regarded as less offence as compared to plagiarism by using books and articles (i.e., printed materials). This belief could be because some learners may assume that Internet does not belong to anyone and a public domain to all, so copying from Internet does not require giving credit to the original authors or recognition. These are some of their comments:

I saw one of my friends' research paper and it was great. I immediately knew it wasn't her writing. When I asked her she told me that she got it from the internet. She did not put the name of writer. She told me she couldn't find the name. I told her she should put the web address at least. But she didn't listen to me.

Ya many of my students resort to the net to copy and paste, they do it because it is not easy to discover it by teachers. I catch it because I know the writing level of my students

I think the reason for taking from the net is that because sometimes you get material without the name of the writer. It is not like books and articles where the names are written

University professors need to change this belief. One of the learning skills and models we should teach is how and when to observe the academic integrity. Research Methods and Academic Writing courses, if redesigned, can provide professors with great opportunities in helping students to identify, understand and characterize what is considered plagiarism, and such courses are suitable for highlighting academic dishonesty and misconduct.

Like other studies on the topic, there are limitations to how much new we can conclude from these surveys and interviews. However, based on the views of these particular students, one can conclude that plagiarism should be regarded as a language and writing development rather than a cultural problem, as some writers suggest (e.g., Liu, 2005). Participants in this study referred to difficulties associated with technical writing skills. They talked about their language challenges in terms of idiomatic ways of expression, word choices, sentence structures, and grammar.

Pecorari (2003) dismisses culture as a reason to explain why second-language students plagiarize. Based on findings from her study, she believes that international students plagiarize because they have not fully developed as writers. Pecorari concludes that the students in her survey who failed to cite sources were not meaning to engage in academic dishonesty, and suggests that given time and practice, “today’s patchwriter is tomorrow’s competent academic writer” (p. 338). The following statements are their explanation for plagiarism:

I do not think Libyan students like to plagiarize.....they do it because they do not know how to paraphrase or quote. Nobody taught them. You know..... you do not write in your own language.....it is really difficult. You need to have a lot of English vocabulary and expressions. My problem is that I understand the ideas in English I can not express them in English using different words. No...no....believe me nobody approve of plagiarism in my country.....it is disrespect to knowledge. It does not mean that it is acceptable if many people do it [plagiarism].....some Libyan people drink alcohol, although it is prohibited in Islam

As many authors suggest, educational background can be seen as a possible cause of plagiarizing temptations. Arabic learning styles may have an emphasis on rote learning and memorization. As some participants explain, classes in Libya are highly authoritarian, and use expository teaching methods focused on preparing the students for their examinations. The examinations are highly competitive, The emphasis on examinations has led to a strong reliance on memorization and rote learning. It is not hard to see how being taught in such an educational environment may hinder an easy transition to acceptance of Western anti-plagiarism values and practices. According to participants, Libyan university students have little or no formal writing training in high school, and thus lack the necessary experience to incorporate the ideas of others into their own projects. Some of their comments on their previous education are:

We were not taught how to write according to an academic style. In high school, We were taught composition which is different from writing. In composition classes they teach you how to describe or talk about something.....very simple indeed and it has nothing to do with paraphrasing, summarizing, criticizing or referencing  
I think teachers prepare us for exams and not to be creative.....we spend hours and hours cramming for exams.....we memorize the textbook for cover to cover and reproduce it in exams.  
I really hate “summary and critique” and our teachers assign this kind of assignment in almost every course at the graduate school. It is true I am here to learn but I am not used to that. I have never done that in all of my schooling. For the first time I had no clue what the teacher wanted exactly.

One of the objectives of university studies is to help students develop critical thinking and acquire good writing and communicative skills. Therefore, all courses, core and elective, should give the opportunities to enhance their writing and presentation skills, even beyond the core Writing and Research Methods courses. At least one individual writing paper should be assigned in every graduate course, in addition to presenting

on a certain topic relevant to the course. Courses should teach techniques to avoid plagiarism, such as summarizing and paraphrasing, appropriate quoting and citation.

## 6. Conclusion

The question of the study was: Are plagiarism and culture closely related? The answer, as in many other studies, is NO. Authors should be careful about claiming that plagiarism is inherent in any culture. If teachers take this conclusion for granted, they would reserve no time or effort to explain how the act should and can be avoided. Differences in educational philosophies, students' previous scholastic training, language proficiency, lack or uncertainty of ethical codes at universities and ignorance of what constitutes plagiarism are all factors that must be considered before jumping to a debatable conclusion.

Although the above mentioned strategies may not totally eradicate plagiarism in our classes, perhaps we can make it so hard for students who search for an easy alternative that they resort to depending on themselves and writing their papers, properly citing references and to communicate correctly in their own words using their ideas.

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