

## Students' Strategies and Patterns of Plagiarism: Academic Writing in the Internet Age

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**Abstract:** This study shows the finding of an action research entitled Integrity and Academic Excellence: Combating Plagiarism in Academic Writing. The major concern of this study is to formulate patterns of plagiarism by focusing on students' use of internet materials as a source of references in their writing. This study seeks to identify some patterns and strategies of plagiarism employed by international students taking academic writing class in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia. The subjects were asked to write on a topic the importance of the Internet in education. The 15 texts written by 15 international students at the postgraduate levels are textually analyzed and patterns of plagiarism are deduced from their written assignment. The study finds 3 main patterns of plagiarism; they are patchwriting, borrowing and cut and paste. The patterns are reflect the students level of language fluency as well as confidence in using English in their writings.

**Key words:** Plagiarism, internet materials, academic writing, media literacy, patterns, strategies

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### INTRODUCTION

The main focus of this study is to present result of the investigation of plagiarism in academic writing class among some international students at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (The National University of Malaysia). Identifying possible strategies and patterns of plagiarism among these students is the main objective of this study. This is done so that the problems related to plagiarism can be identified, addressed and subsequently actions can be taken to remedy the situation. This study, however will not cover the remedial actions involved in solving the issue of plagiarism. In embryo, the assumption of this study is that plagiarism is a symptom of a bigger problem relating to the acquisition of information. Suffice to say that it is endemic throughout the world and has increasingly become the overarching concern throughout academia and across fields of study. Many researchers discussed plagiarism from disparate perspectives, informed, generally by their own professional and religion-ethical background. As plagiarism is not limited to only the academic world it is pertinent to state here that this study will constrain itself from moving beyond the parameter of the academia.

Plagiarism is emblematic of the paradox of the Information Technology age (ICT)-an age that is prevalently technologically-driven. One obvious paradox is that on one hand most people talk about plagiarism with the feeling of disgust. On the other hand, plagiarism is

reportedly in the increase. In this light, plagiarism that is triggered by ICT reflects two possible causes. One, plagiarism comes about as a strategy of coping with the salvo of information (but not necessarily knowledge) for users. Two, the depletion of human ethical values in education as the boundaries between authorship and originality are consistently challenged and negotiated, reflecting what Dutton (1992) claims to be postmodernist general indeterminacy of meaning. These two ossify the ideas that the transgression of human acts and values is ineluctable and that information technology, embodied by the internet, facilitates it.

In academia, the increase in plagiarism cases reported has caused a huge concern for instructors and the institutions alike. Braumoeller and Gaines (2001) for example, trace this concern in the availability of online source material and online papers that can be obtained free of charge by students. It is often said that the rise of plagiarism at the university level has repercussions in terms of pedagogical approaches to subject matter. General attitude towards plagiarism, nonetheless, remains rather ambivalent. As an illustration, quite recently in Malaysia, a case of plagiarism was taken up and reported by several mainstream newspapers as it involved junior and senior academicians at a public university. Even though in this case plagiarism involves academicians and their promotion status, the punishment received by them is not clear as the university tried its best to shove the case under its metaphorical carpet.

**Defining plagiarism:** The idea of plagiarism as an ethical or perhaps legal issue is relatively new in social sciences and humanities vis-a-vis the sciences; this stems from the nature of research within the discipline itself. This assumption may run counter with a survey done by Rinnert and Kobayashi on Japanese University students which reveal that humanities and social science students are more aware of the importance of citation rules (Flowerdew and Li, 2007). However, what this survey divulges is the idea that the differences in how plagiarism is viewed among disciplines are informed by their own epistemology. What this essentially means is that the new knowledge of sciences is usually defined by its innovativeness hence, originality and the sense of ownership meanwhile, knowledge in humanities and to some extent the social sciences is defined by its evolution hence, the ambivalence in claiming originality and ownership.

Consequently, the meanings of plagiarism are varied and these allow for different interpretations. The common voice reverberating across the academic world and journal publishers is that plagiarism is a scientific misconduct (Parmley, 2000), unacceptable and unprincipled (Boquiren *et al.*, 2006), a form of duplicity and an unethical practice (Wood, 2008). Abasi and Akbari (2008) use the term transgressive intertextuality to divorce it from plagiarism as deception. These descriptions are considered mild as some even equate plagiarism to stealing i.e., punishable as a crime. However, the disparate ways plagiarism is described to a certain extent, reflect the way an organization views it. An obvious repercussion of these varied views is that its punishment also varies from an institution to another. By the same token, some publishers acknowledged the need to pay more attention to plagiarism in publication. In the editorial section of *Journal of Psychometric Research*, Boquiren, Creed and Shapiro, call for journal publishers as well as academicians to report on plagiarism. This for them is one of the effective ways to help curb plagiarism. It is clear that plagiarism is now considered an academic misconduct though the punishment varies considerably among disciplines or cultures. In short, the varied meanings of plagiarism are not a hindrance but a motivation to further understand its constitution and significance in line with the development of knowledge itself.

**Contemporary research on plagiarism:** As established earlier, the concern for plagiarism has been more prevalent in the sciences. In social sciences and humanities, concerns over plagiarism are largely expressed as part of second or foreign language learning process. For the

latter, there are two main issues that are often discussed as research in plagiarism gains its momentum in the social sciences. One, according to Pat Currie is that the failures of the traditional and oversimplified view of plagiarism to account for layers, complexities and ambiguities embedded in the production of text. Postmodernism that comes with the attitude that without feign declares the death of the researcher this further complicates the matter. Two, also informed by contemporary critical view of the text is the view of plagiarism as a western construct. Studies such as the one done by Pennycook, reveal that some cultures do uphold the ability to reproduce text verbatimly.

Indeed in a research report, Pennycook (1993) identified that the first of the four identified areas for his investigation is understanding plagiarism as a very particular cultural and ideological concern. Importantly through his research he explores how notions of authorship and ownership of language and ideas developed within a Western academic and literary tradition (ditto). This sentiment is also shared by Hayes and Introna (2005). Introna whose article entitled *Cultural Values, Plagiarism and Fairness: when Plagiarism Gets in the Way of Learning* conclude that plagiarist practices are often the outcome of many complex and culturally situated influences. This idea of having a different academic culture is also explored by East (2006) her study entitled *The Problem of Plagiarism in Academic Study*. East's study of an Australian university setting explores the idea of High Context (HC) culture to argue that framing plagiarism as a problem embedded in the HC of English speaking academic culture helps in understanding the position of new students as outsiders trying to learn new code of rhetoric and of being in danger of being excluded.

The idea that plagiarism can be an influence of the student's cultural background is challenged by Ha (2006) in her article entitled *Plagiarism and Overseas Students: Stereotypes Again?* Le Ha argues that there is a preponderance of academicians in the West [who] have a misconception that overseas students always have academic problems [...] they hold stereotypes about Asian students [which] are even interpreted as cultural characteristics of Asians which legitimise the act of plagiarism in Asian societies. This finding resonates well with Bloch (2007)'s study on the different perception of plagiarism in China and the West in his research *Plagiarism across cultures: is there a difference?* Similarly, the study concludes that there is a condescending attitude towards international students: that they should be treated differently because they do not know better). The West and East divide is further challenged by

Hayes and Introna (2005) who reveal that Greek students are also demanded to memorize for their examination, regurgitating what they learn from textbooks.

Therefore, there is a shift in concern, *inter alia* to the students' literacy development. Pecorari (2008) in her book entitled *Academic Writing and Plagiarism: a linguistic analysis* further suggests that plagiarism can be seen outside of ethical perspective as her investigation zooms in the issue as a linguistic phenomenon. A more recent study done by Klitgard (2009) on both Danish and international students at Roskilde University, Denmark found that the students do not know about the heritage of Western copyright ideas and the legacy of intellectual properties. The question is however not on whether the students should be aware of the origin of plagiarism rather it should be about whether the students can learn or re-learn the widely acceptable convention of doing research in the internet era.

**Types of plagiarism:** The literature on study of plagiarism reveals several common types of plagiarism. However, researchers found that most of them are actually redundant or are labelled differently. Instead, researchers found that Malcolm Coulthard's three categories are useful and operational. The three types of plagiarism are: borrowing of text, collusion and internet plagiarism. It has to be said that Coulthard's categorization points more on the development of plagiarism as marked by technological invention, i.e., information technology and less on the distinct characteristics of plagiarism.

Borrowing of text as suggested by Coulthard is considered by him as a traditional way of labelling the type of plagiarism. This occurs when the students fail to remember or distinguish the original text from their own notes. Often, students jot down passages from the reading text and forget whether the passages have been paraphrased or not. Now-a-days, borrowing of text is less common, especially because students prefer to cut and paste from the internet without making any effort to make notes.

Collusion [original italic], meanwhile, occurs when students reproduce partially or totally the original text into their composition. It is also commonly known as patchwriting though patchwriting does not involve borrowing or copying a full text. Indeed, patchwriting is commonly known as textual borrowing by ESL researchers on plagiarism. Abasi and Akbari (2008) argue that plagiarism at patchwriting level can occur at two levels which are at the level of language and also at the level of idea. They call the first localized patchwriting and global patchwriting. According to them, localized patchwriting is a type of close appropriation at the micro

level of lexis and syntax (ibid). Meanwhile, global patchwriting involves appropriation of idea which means the student's voice or argument cannot be heard as the ideas come from the sources and not their own. The idea of the writer's own voice is more prevalent in the social sciences and humanities and not so much in the sciences.

The third type or stage of plagiarism is the internet plagiarism [original italic] which is seen as a progression of plagiarism inspired by the development of information technology. As this study deals with plagiarism during the age of ICT, it attempts to look at the different strategies the students use when plagiarising and the patterns that emerge out of the strategies.

For the purpose of this research, plagiarism is categorised into three types: patchwriting, borrowing, cut and paste. Patchwriting refers to the act of incorporating part of a sentence, a phrase or clause with the students' own. Borrowing, meanwhile is when students incorporate a complete sentence in their own paragraph. On the other hand, cut and paste refers to the act of using more than a sentence in a paragraph. The categories constructed here also indicate the gradual severity of plagiarism as patchwriting is considered the smallest unit plagiarised and cut and paste the largest unit.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The sample of the research consists of 15 international postgraduate students who were doing English proficiency course for one semester at the School of Language and Linguistic Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). This course is a university requirement for all international students embarking on a postgraduate program in UKM. The students are required to sit for the course if they only managed to obtain band 2 and below for their Malaysian University English Test (MUET) which is an entry point into the university's postgraduate courses. However, in this case a student actually possesses a competent level of language ability; the student has to enrol in this course as part of the requirement by the university.

The four language skills are taught in the course and one of them is academic writing. The students are required to sit for 6 h of academic writing a week for 14 weeks. The task is given in week 10 and essays are collected 2 weeks later. By this time, the students have already been taught how to narrow down the topic, write a thesis statement and topic sentences and develop a paragraph. The students are allowed one consultation before the submission but they are not informed of the objective of the assignment. The consultation revolves around the

focus or content of the paper alone. The researchers do not tell the students that this is for a research so that they would think of the task as purely an assignment hence to be graded. They are also asked to only use the Internet for references. This is to test the students on whether they would be tempted to cut and paste or not.

The subjects consist of students from different faculties undergoing either a Master or PhD program. They are students who come from different nationalities such as Indonesian, Iranian and Libyan (Table 1).

The gender and age of the students are not considered as variables in this study. Students are asked to write an essay of about 1500 words on the topic The Importance of the Internet in Education. The topic is chosen as it is more general and can be understood by students from both the sciences and the social sciences and humanities. The students are given 2 weeks to complete their assignment. Content analysis is then carried out by the researchers. The subjects are randomly labelled as S1-S15 for the purpose of analysis. The students are further categorised based on two categories of disciplines: Social Sciences and humanities (SS) and the Sciences (S). Nonetheless, these two categories will not be analysed further as it is a little bit beyond the scope of this research. Figure 1 shows the number of students in the science and the social science and humanities disciplines.

Table 1: The list of students and their nationality

Students	Nationality
S1	Iranian
S2	Iranian
S3	Iraqi
S4	Bangladeshi
S5	Indonesian
S6	Iranian
S7	Iranian
S8	Libyan
S9	Indonesian
S10	Indonesian
S11	Libyan
S12	Iraqi
S13	Indonesian
S14	Indonesian
S15	Palestinian

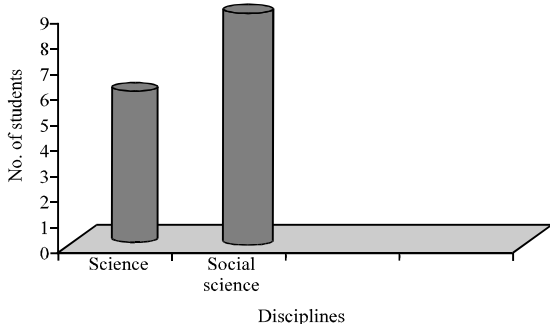


Fig. 1: The students' disciplines

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The writing samples collected from the subjects are analyzed quantitatively. The researchers carried out the textual analysis separately and then notes are compared. This comparison is important in making sure that the evidence found are accurately labelled. In so doing, a procedure of data analysis of the samples is established by looking at: evidence of plagiarism and types of plagiarism. After the evidence is collected, it is then matched with the categories of plagiarism established earlier. The data is then presented as shown in Fig. 2.

**Patchwriting:** As shown in Fig. 2 7 (47%) out of 15 subjects employed patchwriting in completing their task. Indeed, S1, S2, S3, S8, S10, S11 and S13 are found to have used patchwriting in order to communicate their intended meanings. Out of 7, 2 (S2 and S8) did not cut and paste. The data shows that these subjects did attempt to provide some writings of their own. None the less, they use patchwriting to strengthen their sentences. Indeed, 4 out of 7 subjects did make an attempt to provide some form of reference in the text. However, it has to be said that patchwriting mostly appeared in the introduction and conclusion of the writing samples indicating that the subjects framed the more serious type of plagiarism i.e., Cut and paste within their own language. This strategy of hoodwinking the researcher backfired as their individual writing style as well as level of proficiency are more evident against the body of the composition that is of native fluency.

For students with higher level of writing competency, patchwriting is usually employed to strengthen their sentence. Original phrases or clauses are written by the subjects as a way of introducing a new idea. Such examples are (student's work is in italic):

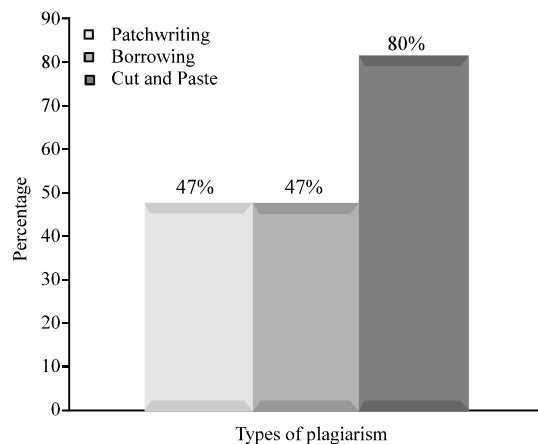


Fig. 2: Types and percentage of subjects involved in plagiarism

S1: W.R. Hambrecht's researchers shows that the biggest benefit of E-learning is that it eliminates the expense and inconvenience of getting the instructor and students in the same place

S2: According to Alan Pritchard's opinion, internet has many developments such as: extending ideas exchanging and sharing information which vastly helps the students, and reviewing, modifying and evaluating works at it progresses

S3: Areas benefit from the Internet are numerous and can be summarized in these lines but the truth is to benefit from [the] availability of appropriate educational content on the web, accompanied by the development of teaching and learning methods to achieve optimum use of the Internet in the educational process

From the point of view of language instructor, it is easy to detect patchwriting as the students' level of proficiency which is manifested by the inaccuracy of grammar use is glaringly different from that of the original text. The subject's language literally collapses against the accuracy of the original text. It has to be added here that the subjects who employed patchwriting did make an effort to construct their study based on the topic given.

**Borrowing:** As shown in Fig. 2, 7 (47%) out of 15 subjects employed borrowing in their writing. The subjects are S1, S2, S3, S8, S10, S11 and S14. Borrowing is used as a strategy to complete the paragraph without any attempt to include their own writing or any effort to paraphrase a borrowed sentence. Since, almost all subjects who used patchwriting also used borrowing, it shows that the subjects did attempt to think about their own points or ideas.

When compared to patchwriting, borrowing involves the use of the whole sentence inserted as part of the subjects' paragraph. In many instances, borrowing occurs when the subjects struggle to communicate their own ideas. There is a sense however that the subjects tried to make connection between their own ideas and the sentence borrowed. Some of the examples of borrowing can be seen below (subject's own is in italic):

S8: I would like to write about the importance of the internet in education. The Internet is the most modern educational technology, developed in recent years and has become an open book to all the world and approach for knowledge and information exchange

S10: This study attempt to describe the importance or the function of the internet in education. Somewhat unusual for the author to write about the benefits of the internet or the function of the internet for education. Access to the source of information. Before the internet, the main problems faced by the education (in the whole world) is access to sources of information

The two samples above show that the subjects tried to construct the thesis statement of their compositions. Their use of personal I for S8 and the researcher reflects their effort to also learn to have a voice. This is relevant to what ESL researchers on plagiarism such as Pennycook (1993), Ha (2006) and Pecorari (2008) have been arguing about that is plagiarism is inevitable while ESL students are still learning to master the language. The same situation is experienced by S11 who tried to construct his/her own sentence albeit grammatical inaccuracy as exemplified below. The different quality of the two sentences as illustrated below is also an indication that the subject not only tried to use his/her own word, importantly the act of borrowing is for the subject is not maliciously or even mendaciously done.

S11: In traditional methods we need for analysis to the simple elements because those are easily to understand scattered. In contrast, Internet is helping to provide more than one way of education

**Cut and paste:** As shown in Fig. 2 also 12 or (80%) of the subjects employed cut and paste in their research. Of these, 4 subjects totally cut and paste from the internet with very minimal modification. Even though some attempted to modify the structure of the original, the rest are all mere cut and paste. What is interesting about this is that a number of subjects who relied heavily on cut and paste did not intend to cheat as they provided accurate referencing that allows researchers to check the original texts. The examples of cut and paste are presented:

S4: Specifically, this study reports some benefits that students at the UKM have gained via the Internet English Interactive classroom that used features of the Internet Classroom Assistant (ICA), provided by NICENET in enhancing English language learning using this special web-based classroom

In S4 case, the subject actually changed the name of the university that the study was originally about. Upon the researchers' investigation, the original study was

actually done at UUM (or Universiti Utara Malaysia) and not UKM (University Kebangsaan Malaysia). Therefore, as section the the UKM is used in lieu of the university, the sentence becomes ungrammatical. As the subject copy the whole paragraph with only one modification, this act of plagiarism falls under the category of cutting and pasting:

S5: Now-a-days non one fantasy of if individual somebody easily can access to come into a library in all the world to various target of like getting research picking, improving foreign language ability and change over the information by various people

Vs:

S5: With the global economy relying more than ever on brainpower and innovation rather than raw materials and manual labour as generators of wealth, a good education has become the key factor determining who will succeed and who will be left behind

The examples taken from sample S5 show a dramatic difference in the language while the one in italic is written by the subject, the second one below it is a product of cut and paste.

The native level of language fluency of the study indeed is a giveaway of the fact that it has been taken from another source. The first example was actually in the introduction where the subject did try to put his idea forward. The cut and paste is evidence that the subject cannot cope with the original material i.e., its inability to paraphrase.

**Attempt to cite:** One important point that is showed by the graphic representation in Fig. 3 is that some subjects

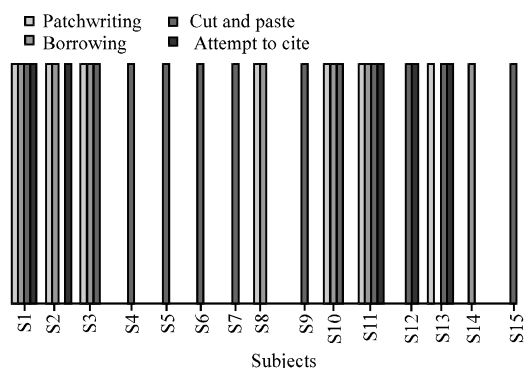


Fig. 3: Subjects, categories of plagiarism and attempt to cite

do make an effort to provide proper (albeit inaccurate) reference or citation within the text. S1, S2, S11, S12 and S13 provided citation within the text that evinces the idea that they did try to write a proper academic study. Nonetheless, it has to be said that even though S4 also included citations in his/her study it was not taken into account as the whole text as a cut and paste hence, it is not shown in the Fig. 3.

### CONCLUSION

The analysis of the data gathered from the papers written by the students reveals that the patterns of plagiarism committed by the students in academic writing class organised by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia are commonly noted in the literature. Since, it is apparent that these students attended the course to improve their English language proficiency level, their starting point is that of from low to intermediate level. The analysis reaffirms the strategies and patterns that are employed in previous studies that have been done on second language learners or learners learning in a second or foreign language environment. It can be said that most subjects in this study plagiarise unintentionally and what appears on study is an indication of their strategy to cope with their low language proficiency. Some subjects do attempt to quote from the original texts to the extent that their own writing is almost non-existent in the text. There are also subjects who purposely altered their study in what otherwise can be a total cut and paste.

It is crucial to reiterate here that this study also reveals that research on plagiarism, especially from the social sciences and humanities' perspective has moved away from its ethical dimension. Indeed, more research are interested in looking at plagiarism as a language learning process in which non-English speaking students are seen as gradually finding their writing style and eventually their authorial voice. In this study, the three strategies used which are patchwriting, borrowing and cut and paste, reflect both the students' language proficiency and confident level.

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